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Unheard Voices of Afghan Women: A Study of Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows*

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Abstract

Afghanistan and its people have been exquisitely depicted in English literature and evolved as a distinctive genre lately. Afghanistan as an Islamic nation has remained controversial in the contemporary world for many decades now; be it for their political construction, social turmoil, or cultural hybridity. Years of war and terrorism, resulting in a plethora of social conflicts have put Afghan women in a precarious state where the women have been left the most defenseless and the worst suffering entities in the whole scenario. The fact that men have since ages, subjugated women according to their will and hence made social norms favorable to one gender, is a concrete fact. Keeping that in view, the powerlessness, muffled voices, and dreamless eyes of women in Afghanistan have been skilfully captured by Hashimi's in her novel considered for this study. The paper seeks to depict the suffering of Afghan women, their struggles and unheard voices for justice and freedom through a close textual analysis of Nadia Hashimi's *A House without windows*. The study aims to discuss the difficulties that the women in the novel undergo, keeping the bold and impactful backdrop of the horrible gender issues, the representations of the struggles of the female characters, and their forced subordination. The irony in the protagonist's journey from a traditional Afghan wife to that of an inmate in a prison where imprisoned women feel safer than their homes, which are typical of the patriarchal social constructs, is critically as well as philosophically significant.

Keywords: Patriarchy, marginalisation, colonialism, subaltern, gender inequality, culture

Introduction

In an Islamic nation like Afghanistan, war-torn by the Soviets and terror-stricken by the Taliban, which is oppressed by patriarchal culture and orthodox religious norms, women have been the worst suffering entities in the whole scenario. For almost three decades social conflicts have put Afghan women in a precarious state, left to struggle with basic rights; still voiceless and faceless. Afghan society is drenched with patriarchy, where women have forever been struggling to raise their voices for the hardships they have to undergo daily for the bare minimum and basic survival. The predicament of women and the suggestive empowerment has been a topic of global concern. In the context of the Afghan society, several reasons set back women's economic, social, and political participation.

Afghanistan is a low-income patriarchal Islamic nation that is heavily reliant on foreign aid, the country remains one of the poorest in the world and suffers from chronic poverty, unemployment, and a low literacy rate. Internalised sexism, marginalisation of women, and subjugation of women in the name of cultural and religious demands are common practices in the country. The patriarchy runs deep in the veins of the Afghan society and its legal and judicial system is highly biased in the same context. The belief in women's inferiority is so engraved in the bones of this male-chauvinistic population that the voices of Afghan women have been deliberately silenced.

Social taboos in Third World countries like Afghanistan are so rigid and widespread that crimes like domestic violence, forced marriages, brutal sexual abuse, treatment of women as slaves, public lynching, and death by stone-pelting, and other forms of women subjugation have become cultural and social normalcy which surprises none. Women are forced into marriages with no provision for divorce, with an expectation of total submissiveness to the husband and his family. Moreover, they are restricted from getting access to any formal education or social awareness.

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They are mandatorily ordered to stay in the domestic confines, to observe the veil and to remain silent in whatever be the circumstances. The objectification of women is such a household concept that it is almost flaunted proudly, without shame or fear in such patriarchal societies. Nadia Hashimi's, born in New York in the year 1977 to Afghan parents who immigrated to the United States in the early 1970s, is a pediatrician-turned-novelist, who draws on her Afghan culture to craft internationally bestselling books. Her parents initially intended to return to their home in Afghanistan after spending a few years in the US, but unfortunately, the situation therein became a lot more unsafe and even fatal as a result of the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Hashimi's draws heavily from her modern and forward understanding of the developed world as an American citizen as well as the orthodox, conflicted, and underdeveloped notions of her cultural belonging to Afghanistan. Her literary creations greatly contribute to the enrichment of Afghan literature. Her novels are based on themes like misogyny, internalized sexism, oppression of women, migration, conflict, poverty, patriarchy, and colonialism.

Hashimi's reality-inspired stories drew heavily from her culture and heritage, showcasing the complex and chaotic experiences of Afghan people. Her visit to Afghanistan with her parents in 2003, when she collected all her personal experiences, perceptions, and encounters with real-life Afghan women, is eventually reflected in her powerful novels. Her bestseller novels are *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014), *When the Moon Is Low* (2015) and *A House without Windows* (2016), which have brought her recognition and appreciation from all across the globe.

"Her always engaging multigenerational tale is a portrait of Afghanistan in all of its perplexing, enigmatic glory, and a mirror into the still ongoing struggles of Afghan women."

- Khaled Hosseini

The fact that men have since ages, subjugated women according to their will and hence made social norms favourable to one gender, is a concrete fact. Keeping that in view, the powerlessness, muffled voices, and dreamless eyes of women in Afghanistan have been skillfully captured by Hashimi's in her novel considered for this study. It is an attempt to portray the suffering of Afghan women, their struggles and unheard voices for justice and freedom through a close textual analysis of Nadia Hashimi's *A House without Windows*.

Analysis

Hashimi's *A House without Windows* is an engrossing novel whose title itself signifies a prison which is a house without any windows; depicting the Chil Mehtab prison of Afghanistan and whose focus is on the personification of Afghan women's journey as prisoners in their home country as well as their own bodies. The author paints a gripping tale of Zeba, the protagonist, and her ironic journey from a traditional Afghan wife to that of an inmate in a prison where imprisoned women feel safer than their homes, which are typical of the patriarchal social constructs, is critically as well as philosophically significant. It is a very powerful story of strong and resilient Afghan women, dreadful narratives of murder, maternal love, and survival in the most

hostile conditions. Hashimi's draws a vivid image of Afghan women which flaunts an unforgettable and unlikely bond of sisterhood among women who all suffer from similar ordeals and oppression.

The women characters of the novel are drawn with such attention and meticulous detailing, that they take the readers into an emotionally powerful and horrifying reality of female friendship which helps to underline the precarious condition of Afghan women in an orthodox, traditional, and patriarchal society. The protagonist sketched by Hashimi's being in a physically acrimonious marriage and never for once enunciating a word regarding the misery and oppression she undergoes, is disturbing and speaks volumes about the intensity of the situation and about the helplessness as well as the powerlessness of Afghan women who were unable to restrain and resist the misery thrown their way. Zeba's life turns upside down and all hell breaks loose after she is found accused in the murder of her husband and then meets three other women who seem to have been fighting similar personal battles, forming a haunting tale of Afghan women's suffering and their fight for justice. The blending of the individual stories of Zeba, Nafisa, Latifa and Meghzan into eventually one single disturbing tale of women's oppression. Like other women, Zeba feels safe in the walls of Chil Mehtab,

"For a house with no windows, Chil Mehtab is not that bad. Sometimes I breathe easier here than I ever did at home."

The prison indicated by Hashimi's in the book, title as well as the theme are both the real and spatial prison along with the temporal prison created for women by patriarchy and internalised sexism in Afghanistan. The strong imagery that Hashimi's intends to create comes with dual hues; the dialogically situated story inside the confines of a prison for women in Afghanistan; the Chil Mahtab and the suggestive prison inside which women have been locked up and tortured by the male-dominated society since ages. The analogy that the author tries to draw is between the prison being a symbol of punishment but meanwhile being a safe haven like home; in contrast to their husbands' houses which were master's houses where the women stayed and served like slaves, gains much significance in the text.

Hashimi's novel is a fresh breath to the stifled women's voices in the major patriarchal set-up in the current world, especially Afghanistan. Zeba the protagonist; mother of three, is accused of murder of her husband. During her imprisonment in Chil Mahtab, she comes to know that like her, her fellow inmates are also staying there, not only for their mistakes but also due to the faulty justice system of the patriarchal and sexist Afghan society. The irony in it all is that the society is so oppressive, subjugating, phallogocentric and manipulative that a jail seems more of a safe shelter for women, than the outside world, quite contrary to the popular expectation. Adding to all this is the prevalent undertone of violence against women that shatters the sense of self, autonomy, and mental well-being of women in these Islamic nations.

Hashimi's *A House without Windows* is a tale of suffering, ill-fate and injustice faced by Afghan women who are victims of the patriarchy. The novel portrays bold female characters who fight against all the odds and oppression, which sets a standard against the pre-decided destiny of

women in the phallogocentric Afghan society. Although the world of Hashimi's is fictional, the meticulous detailing of it and the realism with which the lives of women characters have been portrayed, make it seem like a portrayal of live images showing the horrifying realities of women who undergo cruel societal scrutiny and norms in Afghanistan. The title of the novel has been very carefully sourced and is inspired by the thirteen-century Persian poet Rumi's work *Masnavi*. The word 'window' from the title is equally significant and symbolic, hinting at the light, hope, gateway to freedom, optimism, and a connection with the free world outside. Technically, it shows in a very beautiful manner how the houses that lack windows are nothing else than prisons. For women, houses in Afghanistan are no different from jails as the guarding agent there is patriarchy and the punishment for the same is oppression, subjugation, torture, sexual torment, violence etc. Without the presence of windows, any house is just fortified walls of confinement, with no outlet for the individuals residing; caged up as a prisoner and no scope for escaping. The imprisoned women and their tormenting stories individually, portray a series of revelations of how even basic human rights are denied to women in the Islamic nations in the name of religious and cultural values. Women fight battles for survival and basic amenities which men are so inherently entitled to that they shamelessly flaunt their sexism and chauvinism.

The novel focuses on the faulty and gender-biased judicial system of Afghanistan; the flawed cultural norms, religious rules and regulations which make it a mandate to oppress women, keeping them away from accessing basic rights and a fair chance to take their stand or fight for their well-being. This study attempts to discuss the complicated and struggle-filled life of the protagonist Zeba. Like any maternal and feminine Islamic woman; she is very innocent, simple, and naive, residing in a small Afghan village and is simultaneously an obedient and loyal wife as well as a loving and caring mother as portrayed by the author. But contrasting to her innocence and docile nature, the events that take place in her life, through the course of the plot in the novel, are very disturbing and harrowing. In a particular instance, something very shocking happens in Zeba's tiny village home. In their courtyard, the neighbours find Zeba with a hatched and blooded hand; along with her husband, Kamal's dead body sprawled on the floor. Even more than the neighbours, it is Zeba who is even more shocked, panic-stricken, horrified and almost paralysed by fear of the events that had unfolded in the premises of her own house. To add to this event, the neighbors, and her in-laws, all point their fingers at Zeba, accusing her of being the murderer. Zeba is in such a fit of these events that out of shock, she doesn't even speak a single sentence in her defence when everyone around her points their fingers at her to be the murderer. After all this, she is harassed by the police and is taken to prison under the accusation of murder. Her life takes a different turn after being locked up in the women's prison in Afghanistan. She comes across a whole new set of women characters who are so different yet so similar to herself, with different survival and struggle stories.

We find a typical representation of the male-dominated Afghan society in the character of Kamal, Zeba's husband. He is not a good father and not even a decent husband to his wife. "Kamal stumbled about the house, shouted at the children to keep out of his way, and grumbled about needing his medicine. With each time, Kamal was spotted drunk in

the town, he further condemned Zeba to a life of ignominy. She begged him to consider their family and their reputation. For that, Kamal had broken her nose, her rib, and half their dishes" (Hashimi's 71).

Zeba, as a loyal wife, a responsible mother and, also as an empathetic woman, sacrificed herself to protect the young girl, Laylee whom Kamal tried to rape, since it was all about honor. Honor was a boulder that men placed on the shoulders of their daughters, their sisters, and their wives" (p. 197). The honor of that little girl was strangled and stripped off in Zeba's very own courtyard and by her beast of a husband. She took her space to banish the fallacy of killing her husband while she did not. Instead, she told her mother what had happened that day. When Zeba saw the little girl Laylee hidden beneath Kamal, who attempted to violate her modesty and raped her, she managed to knock him over but slipped on Kareema's plastic doll and fell to the ground. Within these minutes, Kamal leapt onto Zeba, trying to suffocate her, and that was when Laylee struck the fatal hit to the back of his head to rescue the woman who wanted to save her. And in this brave act of fighting for herself and trying to save both women, ended up in the fatal act of Kamal's murder. It was almost an act of self-defense or accident, but such safety judicial brackets don't exist for women in Islamic nations like Afghanistan where patriarchy reigns. These nations give shameless freedom to men to commit any crime they feel like, but women can't even fight for their safety.

Zeba's mother, Gulnaz delineates a typical Afghan woman whose voices remain unheard. She initially protests against the early marriage of her daughter but seems helpless in this regard later on. Later, she requests her husband to reconsider the marriage as she is young, but her request seems useless in front of her father's decision, she is young and it is a bad time for a marriage, Gulnaz insisted. Let us wait a bit more" (p. 55). Women are helpless in front of the masculine order. They are not allowed to challenge a man's decision. Hashimi's very prudently portrays the helplessness and voicelessness of women in the toxic patriarchal culture of Afghanistan. Later in the story, Gulnaz also convinces her loving daughter to speak about what happened at the murder scene. Even when Gulnaz knows nothing about the actual sequence of events, she declares to Zeba, You're my blood. Your soul talks to me even when your mouth doesn't" (p. 230). The bonding between the mother and daughter is portrayed by Hashimi's in a very subtle way as even she, being a victim and submissive towards oppression in her own life, empathises with her daughter's condition and encourages her to speak up. She takes a stand for her daughter in front of a patriarchal society.

The character Yusuf is portrayed to be the mouthpiece of Zeba along with all other women who are suffering under the pressure of the unjust and gender-biased judicial system of Afghanistan. Having lived in Afghanistan as a child, Yusuf becomes a lawyer in America. His desire to make a change, to accomplish something real in the world, however, draws him back to his birthplace. Upon his return to Afghanistan, his first case is Zeba's, and it seems cut and dry. He works diligently, despite the obstacles placed in his path, to discover why a seemingly average woman, a caring mother who is well-liked by neighbors, would suddenly take a hatchet to her husband's head. As Yusuf slowly begins to learn the truth, his struggles become a synecdoche for the struggles Afghan women face, their voices silenced against

the injustice that the legal system and the patriarchal nation rain down upon them daily.

The women's voices are never paid attention to while they are simultaneously expected to be silenced eventually. Scared of society, its judgement and ostracization, many families and their girls choose silence over coming out and speaking the truth in front of everyone; not opening their mouths against sexual abuse, and mental harassment. Yusuf only knows how badly Zeba wants to tell something, but she prefers silence only for the fact that the patriarchal society never supports a woman's case however legitimate her case is. Yusuf found that Zeba and other women were willing to fight for themselves, but no one listened to them. Everyone knows about the system and the biased and partial nature of the Afghan judicial system. Voices of women are controlled by the men and by the system keeping in view what they learn from their sisters, mothers, and aunts. Women prefer silence because they know their sacrifices are never important for the Afghan patriarchal society. Zeba would not prefer to talk about the case to reveal the truth because even if she spoke against the injustice that happened in her backyard, there is no proof for her statement. In one of her couplets, she says.

“What good is a woman's telling of truth when nothing she says will be taken as proof?”

After an intense struggle and a painful journey Zeba went through, the judge acquitted her of the crime of murdering her husband. She is released from prison and eventually, returns to her children. She starts to recover and live her life again, in search of mental peace and the healing that every woman deserves after going through so many ordeals.

The novel is deliberately made to be loud with metaphors, imagery, and symbolism of prison, windows, and walls. Hashimi's in a unique style, has very brilliantly employed these figurative devices in conveying the dark state of Afghan women and their twisted realities in a gender-biased world. She quotes Rumi in her epilogue, very poignantly playing with the symbolisms of windows and light. It is applied as a means of light rays to penetrate a house without windows which is also referred to as a hell. Hell, therefore, is symbolised as a woman who allows no light (or knowledge) to come out of her or ever cross the assigned boundaries and limitations of society. Rumi speaks of the creation of a window as a gateway or more specifically a true religion, and Hashimi's uses it to showcase the true reality of women in Afghanistan as well as praying for their eventual empowerment.

Conclusion

Zeba and her case become a metaphor for every woman facing punishment for an act she did not commit, and whose shrieks for justice and freedom are unheard by the gender-biased judicial system of Afghanistan. Zeba's time at the Chil Mehtab exposes her to other women, many of whom are imprisoned for acts of self-defence: lashing out at husbands who beat them, stabbed them, and sold them into prostitution, and other heinous acts the women are exposed to. The hurdles Yusuf and Zeba face as they try to save her from the death sentence include patriarchy, honour, and a biased justice system in the country. Zeba and other women in the novel choose silence over justification as their words are futile in the eyes of the law, and hence, they feel that

they are better off as silent spectators of their fate. Gayatri Spivak's idea of 'can the subaltern speak?' also finds relevance in this context, and Hashimi's seems to assert that the subaltern does not need to speak when silence is a choice. Thus, Nadia Hashimi's *A House without Windows* is a powerful narrative that gives a magnified look into the plight of Afghan women; their voices, already faint and hushed by the patriarchal norms of the society, and simultaneously, examines the social evils and cultural mandates that account for the marginalization of the Afghan women.

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