



Oppression And Resistance In Nadia Hashimi's Novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*

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Date of Submission: 24-11-2022

Date of Acceptance: 08-12-2022

ABSTRACT: Afghanistan is one of the most conflict-ridden countries of the world. The greatest of the challenges for the common Afghan people has been the Taliban regime, during which women were especially marginalized. Nadia Hashimi's novel *The Pearl That Broke its Shell* is a magnificent account of the struggles of women who have been living on the outskirts of the mainstream for centuries. This research explores the common approaches to oppression in mainstream literature and society and the part resistance literature plays against this oppression. The present research paper is divided in two parts. The first part deals with the theme of oppression in the novel and the second part elaborates on resistance of these women to the hostile situations they are bound to.

KEYWORDS: resistance, feminism, oppression, cultural dominance, bacha posh

I. INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has the most complicated history in all of South Asia. The country has undergone multiple leadership and political ideological changes. Historically, the most eventful tragedy of Afghanistan was being the object of the contest between the Russian and the British Empires to establish their rule over. This struggle for power over Afghanistan is famously known as The Great Game. On the other hand, humanistic atrocities increased when Taliban and Mujahedeen came to power. Women in Afghanistan were the greatest victims of these atrocities.

Afghan American writer Nadia Hashimi's fiction focuses on the struggle of these marginalized Afghani women. An American by birth, Hashimi's parents were immigrants from Afghanistan. Her debut novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* was a great success. It follows the story of two women- Rahima and Shekiba, who struggle to overcome oppression

and male domination that is all too commonly faced by women in patriarchal society.

The two protagonists of the novel, Rahima and Shekiba live in Afghanistan some hundred years apart. Shekiba is Rahima's great-great-grandmother, yet they are bound by similar fates and destiny that entangle them as they live a century apart. Both women had adopted the custom of bacha posh, which gave them a respite from the oppressiveness of the Afghan society.

II. GENDER-BASED OPPRESSION

In her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), Iris Marion Young has proposed five forms of oppression such as, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural domination and violence. Both Shekiba and Rahima are victims of all these types of oppression. Disfigured by an accident in childhood, Shekiba loses her immediate family when she is young. She is passed on to her extended family, then to a debt collector and finally gifted to royalty as a servant. Shekiba is a gift (her name too means gift from God) that nobody wants to keep yet everyone wants to exploit. In a family of five daughters, Rahima is the third child to a drug addicted father and a weak mother. With no brothers to carry on the family's mantle, Rahima and her sisters are considered a burden to be relieved only through marriage at a very young age.

As a woman, Shekiba could not inherit her father's land. Throughout her life, she was a victim of exploitation and cultural dominance. Rahima, on the other hand faced marginalization since the day she was born for not being a son, by her father and the rest of his family. Violence and abuse were a part of her life after being married into warlord Abdul Khaliq's family. Rahima had no way out of this situation for often these things are normalized in



societies as backward as the one in Afghanistan. Young explains her theory of violence as:

What makes violence a face of oppression is less the particular acts themselves, though these are often utterly horrible, than the social context surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable. What makes violence a phenomenon of social injustice, and not merely an individual moral wrong, is its systemic character, its existence as a social practice(Young 61).

This normalizing of violence as a mode of oppression affected not only Rahima and Shekiba, but also other characters like Rahima's mother and sisters, Benafsha, Gulnaz, Abdul Khaliq's wives, etc. Even in Parliament reforms and bills were rarely passed by women. Women members of the Parliament were forced to be puppets of men like Abdul Khaliq, and women like Zamarud, who raised their voice against such practices, pay a very steep price indeed.

III. RESISTANCE IN THE PEARL THAT BROKE ITS SHELL

Delving deeper into the novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* however, we realize that Nadia Hashimi intended the novel to be more than the story of female victimization. The struggle of Rahima and Shekiba inspires the virtues of strength, bravery, determination and most importantly resistance in the face of trauma, conflict, violence and subjugation. While the theory of resistance was initially developed as an argument against violent political and religious practices of medieval law and canon, it didn't take the modernists to take it to another level. In feminism, resistance is considered an important tool in the fight against oppression. Resistance literature includes works which actively resist against oppression and oppressive systems in a creative manner. According to Satya Sharma,

One of the central aims of Resistance literature is to speak for the historically oppressed and to record the injustices heaped. It demands justice for those whose rights were usurped and reattributed against the oppressor. Resistance literature can also be seen as an oral narrative of History. A version that might have been hidden in the mainstream by the powerful. It can be seen as an alternative version of events and can inform future generations of the course of events that have led to present socio-political situations. (Sharma)

The struggle against powerlessness and fate in a society like Afghanistan that normalizes oppression and violence against women is subtly depicted in the novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*.

Nadia Hashimi starts her novel with lines from Persian poet Rumi: "Seawater begs the pearl To break its Shell." Hashimi always intended her novel to be empowering for women. In an interview with Girls' Globe- the global feminist media platform for gender equality, human rights, social justice and sustainability, Hashimi says,

I see Rahima and Shekiba as every woman. When I read Rumi's lines, the sea is Rahima's inner voice, expansive and powerful, beckoning her to break free and realize her potential. We all need to mind that voice that lives within, that tells us to want better for ourselves to not throw up our hands in defeat.(Girls' Globe)

The village that Rahima lives in is dominated by a local warlord. Rahima's father used to fight for this warlord and the constant war made him even more unpleasant about having all girls. Rahima's mother couldn't fight for a better life for her daughters, not even for their education. It seemed that it was in Rahima and her sister's fate to be married to older men and become their second, third or fourth wives, until Rahima's aunt intervened. Khala Shaima was the one person in Rahima's life who always fought for the girl. Her resistance gave Rahima the opportunity to change her terrible destiny. Shaima brought together the fate of two women separated by generations, as she told Rahima and her sisters the story of their great-great-grandmother, who used to wear men's clothes in the King's palace. Bibi Shekiba had been a guard for the harem of King Habibullah, the job required that she dress as a man. Shekiba, who had faced immense pain and loss in her life, found freedom in living dressed as a man.

This inspired Rahima to embrace the Afghan tradition of bacha posh. Many families without male child favoured this. Khodai explains the term *bacha posh* as,

The term bacha posh means 'dressed as a boy' and is a cultural practice found predominantly in Afghanistan whereby a girl is raised as a boy, usually for part of her childhood before puberty. Girls who are dressed and treated as boys enjoy mobility and opportunities, such as education, that girls are generally not afforded. Although community members often know that bacha posh children were born as girls, they acknowledge the child as male and 'play along' with the inversion of gender identity(Khodai).

Bacha posh is not a tradition that can be adopted permanently, and neither Rahima nor Shekiba disguised themselves as men for long. It helped both women. Shekiba who was always passed along as an unwanted gift, got herself a permanent family when



an unfortunate incident at the palace got her into an unwanted marriage. It gave Shekiba a chance to escape a lonely life and filled her new home with laughter and shrieks of children. By the end of the novel, the unwelcome orphan became part of Afghan aristocracy and was listening to King Amanullah and Queen Soraya as they brought modern revolutionary changes to Afghanistan. As Shekiba witnessed the progressive changes brought on for women's education in Kabul, Shekiba wished for a better future for any daughters she might have.

Shekiba's story inspired Rahima to become a *bacha posh*. As a boy, Rahima got the opportunities that were usually denied to girls in Afghan rural society then, foremost of which was opportunity to be educated. Being a *bacha posh* however, also invited danger to her life, as the warlord Abdul Khaliq sent her marriage proposal when he saw her in the streets. Rahima was returned to her guise of girl and married off, after which she face abuse from her husband, mother-in-law and Khaliq's eldest wife. The only respite Rahima got was when she became a young mother of a baby boy until his untimely death. By this time Rahima had lost her belief in Khala Shaima's teaching that education makes life better. But it is education that allowed Rahima her ultimate escape from her violent husband. The trauma and oppression in Rahima's life changes her identity. As Hashimi describes it in Rahima's words,

I was a little world, and then I wasn't.

I was a Bach posh and then I wasn't.

I was a daughter and then I wasn't.

I was a mother and then I wasn't. (Hashimi 384)

But her bravery and her reasonable education finally allows her to escape the patriarchal regime in her village to woman's shelter in Kabul.

IV. CONCLUSION

Rahima and Shekiba might have adopted similar techniques to deal with their lives, but they were oppressed in different ways. Ultimately though, the two women also had different approaches to life. Rahima was definitely the stronger of two, as she refuses to accept oppression even in the face of danger. On the other hand, Shekiba allows herself to be the part of the system for survival. Though it could be the fact that Rahima lived a hundred years after Shekiba, or that she had Khala Shaima fighting in her corner, while Shekiba had no one. However, the fact remains that even a hundred years later, women are oppressed.

Nadia Hashimi has given spirit to the two protagonists in her novel. The resistance shown by the characters in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* also allows Hashimi to end the novel on a positive note.

Shekiba accepted her fate which allowed her life to be a bit better but she would never have the freedom she did when she was a guard. A hundred years later, her resistance did inspire a young girl to escape from a terrible fate. And Rahima, as she grows and learns will be an inspiration to many others, at the very least she will inculcate the value of education in them.

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