

Afghan Women's Voices; an Impasse: Patriarchy's Autocracy in the Select Afghan Novels

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ABSTRACT:

Addressing various complexities; the social and cultural mandates imposed by a patriarchal and religiously blinded society act like hot iron jabs on bare skin for women is the unequivocal and expected focal point of any feministic author. However fatally dominant the atrocities against women all over the world are, it cannot be denied that the deadly and unbearable conditions in which women survive with difficult access to the bare minimum have become the foregrounded element in South Asian Literature. This research attempts to put a spotlight on the certitude of the revolutionary Afghan-American writers; Nadia Hashimi and Khaled Hosseini, on how the strangled voices of struggling and suffering Afghan women need to be heard and paid attention to. As the victim of extreme marginalization and the internalized sexism of Afghan society, these women undergo harrowing experiences of oppression in a Nation where religious and cultural dominance forcefully drills in the concept of 'othering' and subalternity of women. The prevalent phallogocentric hegemonic society evidently corrodes the possibility of gender equality and women's prosperity.

The aim of this literary analysis is to depict the impasse of the muffled voices of women from Third World Nations like Afghanistan, through selected female characters of Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, *A House Without Windows*, and Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Three of the novels in scrutiny are absolute page-turners. These strong narratives, give a magnified look into the plight of Afghan women and lead the way to the mapping of the cultural and social representation of women by cautious application of feminist theory. The rituals, beliefs, and cultural structures are additives to the impasse of the Afghan women's voices; already faint and hushed by the patriarchal norms that the deluded society forcefully exercises. The study aims at discussing the difficulties that the women of these three novels undergo; keeping the strong and impactful backdrop of the horrible gender issues; the representations of the struggles of female characters, gender inequality, and forced subordination. These complicated and entangled issues have been sketched in many such South Asian literary works which prominently depict the predicament or impasse of Afghan women whose voices have been deliberately silenced. The cultural practice of 'Bacha Posh' is the only exception among these clearly designated social menaces. The 'reflex mechanism' of Afghan families who are lacking a son, compels them to disguise a female child into a male one. There are many instances from all three novels showcasing the brevity of the female protagonists, shown in a powerful light, which highlights the various ways in which the women make efforts to break free from the shackles of the oppressive manipulation of the patriarchal society. These tiny acts of courage that women muster up to show and defy the oppression, might seem to be the bare minimum at the surface level but concludes that the subaltern can speak.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender bias, Sexism, Oppression, Marginalisation, Subaltern

INTRODUCTION:

Biased cultures across the South Asian Nations have proved themselves to be brutal for the subalterns; women, curtailing access to basic human rights. The seemingly best way to burn down this collection of 'social malice' is by providing the marginalised community with a voice, in various discourses and legislative issues. According to the theoretical paradigms of Spivak; women are wrongly treated as the 'subaltern', there are various toxic social and cultural institutions that influence the threats towards women. Besides the patriarchal norms and mandates, manipulation of women for selfish and lustful needs, religious fundamentalists flaunting their internalised sexism, and curtailing the freedom of women; there are many other factors that venomously contribute to the social persecution of the subaltern. The deliberate marginalization of women in these Nations is so conspicuous that it has become the nucleus of South Asian literature, specifically in post-colonial times.

Writers like Khaled Hosseini and Nadia Hashimi are both American writers having Afghan roots and descent. Hashimi addresses the sensitive topics of women's fate, cultural gender bias, struggle, and access to basic human rights while narrating the story of two Afghan women Rahima and Shekiba in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, who are separated by a century in the timeline but equally struggle to find their purpose, with a background score from the radical and terror organisation; The Taliban. In *A House Without Windows*, the character Zeba is a seemingly ordinary housewife whose fate is pseudo-controlled by Yusuf, only to discover later that like Afghanistan itself, his client might be the exact opposite of what he predicts and perceives. Khaled Hosseini also portrays the same trajectory of women's struggle and the ordeals faced by the two female protagonists; Mariam and Laila. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, one of the two victimised female characters, Mariam; an illegitimate teenager and a resident of Herat, is forcefully made to marry a shoemaker from Kabul after a tragedy takes place in the family. In all of these novels in consideration, the mess that Afghanistan is and the nightmare named Taliban are highlighted through fictional narration in such a heart-wrenching manner, that it seems as if the events are directly taking place in front of one's own eye, live in action. The heavy influence of Rushdie's writing technique clearly pops out through Hosseini's blending of Afghanistan's political history with the personal journeys of the characters and the geographical arch that their experiences speak of. Hashimi's blending in, of the early twentieth century's political timeline to that of the present times is almost identical to Hosseini's location of Afghan history from the late twentieth century till the present times, subtly through the narration of significant events in the lives of the life-like fictional characters. The meticulous detailing of the cultural, demographic, and social base of the patriarchal Afghan society, along with the ethno-religious demarcations that equally contribute to the triggers that charge the forever running current of women's suppression and subjugation, is evidently unique to both the authors and their works.

On an elementary level, this research aims at underlining the struggle that women undergo in order to get access to or even dream of the luxuries of freedom and gender equality. Keeping aside the cliché quest of the modern-day feminists to exhibit the women of Third World Nations, by back-relating them to their historical, religious and cultural hegemonic display manual, there are real-life daily battles that the women of these Nations fight to survive in the most non-hostile conditions. There is a dire need to analyse the role of patriarchal norms and internalised sexism, in the oppression and subjugation of women by overlooking questions of race, sex, class, and ignoring the social, historical, and cultural contexts while making a literary effort by these authors to give a voice to these eternally suffering

women. Even after the characters like Rahima, Shekiba, Zeba, Mariam and Laila are portrayed as victims of the inhumane cultural and religious prejudices, there is a certain sense of power and will to fight back, that Hashimi and Hosseini seem to grant. There is an obvious tone of disapproval to how both the authors recognise the failures of the western feminists on grounds of providing a solution to the helpless condition of Afghan women. The oppression, sexual offences, torture, public humiliations and executions, were practised in the façade of maintaining an ‘order’ in the mental image of men’s perception of how women ‘should be. This in turn has always varied according to socio-cultural norms, and geopolitical, and ethnic conditions of different political times of the patriarchal Nation. Women are considered as the subaltern; treated as slaves who are expected to be childbearing machines. Hosseini painstakingly points out, through his unique narration of the troublesome fate of Afghan women; how the most appreciated quality in them is ‘silence’, ‘submission’ and obedience. In addition to all these turmoil-filled scenarios, is the existence and dominance of the Islamic fundamentalist and radical organisation, the Taliban; which knows no boundaries to its terror spreading and oppressing women. The discussion of these issues crops up in various events from the novels in consideration for this research.

1. A critical background to *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*:

The debut novel by Nadia Hashimi’s from 2014; is an impactful and heart-wrenching work of feminist narration influenced by a real-life, harrowing episode of women from third-world nations. It revolves around the life stories of two Afghan women, who are almost separated by two centuries and their personal journey is filled with hurdles. The arches of their personal journeys are almost parallel as shown by Hashimi, set in different socio-political timelines. Focusing on the personal journeys of the two female protagonists; Rahima and Shekiba. The harrowing tales of these two female protagonists are centred around the cultural practice and survival reflex of ‘Bacha Posh’ with a backdrop of Taliban rule. Incidents of human trafficking and public execution of women by ‘stone pelting’ are seasoned over the plot recipe of social injustices that women are already subjected to, since their birth. Afghan society doesn’t fundamentally recognise the survival of any family which has no son or male member. Both of the women in the focus of this novel discover a different sense of freedom and identity, in the disguise of a male, at a certain phase of their lives. But unfortunately, even after getting a taste of how a man’s freedom feels like, they are forcefully thrown into marriages that ensure their exposure to domestic violence and marital rape.

1.1 The strangled women voices in the novel and *Bacha Posh*:

Social evils like chauvinism and internalised sexism categorically restrict women from getting proper education or having basic human rights, let alone being respected. The mandate of having a son for its social security and image is outrageous in itself but is a reflex cultural practice by the victim to evade trouble while simultaneously being triggered by the crimes that harbingers of patriarchy uphold. It is a safety measure taken by Afghan people for survival disguised as a cultural practice. This is a passive retaliation practice of the people who struggle to survive with the bare minimum in an Islamic nation where the Taliban exercises no limits on barbarous acts of kidnapping young girls for marriage and rape, while openly endorsing human trafficking for sexual purposes. This compels the people to take basic safety measures of letting women be confined to the four walls of the house and coming out only in extreme emergency cases, and that too with a male member only.

Rahima and Shekiba are both products of such a prototyped patriarchal society where having a daughter seems like an unbearable burden. Events like trading off young adolescent daughters for marriage, in exchange for money and business deals are quite normal in their culture. Islam already has a polygynous history and roots, which is gender biased and allows men to take multiple wives, be it with consent or by force. Some feminist researchers have the widespread belief of Islam is patriarchal and of encouraging gender inequality. That Islamic societies are patriarchal in general and are instrumental in establishing gender inequality as a norm. Hashimi's novel establishes the bothersome realities of Afghan society while carefully driving home the concepts like internalised sexism, chauvinism, exploitation of women, domestic violence, marital rape and oppression of women, with an orthodox backdrop.

2. Phallogocentric reality and silenced women in *A House Without Windows*;

Afghanistan has eternally been struggling to survive under extremely politically unstable timelines, especially since the times of Soviet invasions, which has led to major issues of social instability. The status of women in Afghanistan has either way been that of a suppressed subaltern which has always been denied access to freedom of speech, education or free will. This has been further instigated by the inflammatory dominance of the Taliban since the twentieth century. The curtailing of women's rights and forcing them to live a life of slaves has been instrumental in undermining their position in society as humans. Hashimi focuses the spotlight on the oppressive circumstances which have gaslighted gender inequality and gendered injustice.

This study essentially focuses on the analysis of the female characters of *A House Without Windows* who deal with oppression on a daily basis while trying their best to progress with the act of solving the unfair treatment. Zeba, Gulnaz, Latifa, Mezghan, Bibi Shireen, Sitara, Meena, Aneesa and the wife of judge Najeeb; all characteristically struggle to survive in an orthodox society which actively endorses gender inequality and subjugation of women. Afghan women face difficulties at all levels but have never been allowed to voice out their pain and suffering. Male dominance and superiority act as fuel to the fire of women being burned with injustice, torture and violence. The character Gulnaz is self-aware and has had feeble access to education and knows basic reading and writing. Her understanding of the economic condition against a backdrop of civil war makes her acutely aware of her autonomy to have a lesser number of children than usually expected by Islamic culture. She acknowledges her thoughts, about how only men cannot handle society and women play a pivotal role in shaping a society's equilibrium. The protagonist Zeba, who deals with a drunkard, poor, inhuman, rude and ruthless husband, recognises how she doesn't deserve to be treated so badly in her marriage. The torture she faces in Kamal's hands makes her distinguish between what is wrong and right for her. All these women gradually build self-awareness, acknowledge their autonomy in decision-making, resist male dominance and fight for basic human rights such as free will, education and freedom of speech.

3. Unescapable patriarchal dominance in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*;

Afghan American writer, Khaled Hosseini's 2007 novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is an emotionally powerful tale that addresses the importance of women's rights, especially while the rule of the Taliban is at large. The style maintains the severity of the narration, for an intense story that takes futile shelter under a brutal and mercurial rubble of political mess imposed upon two Afghan women. Hosseini creates a piercing tale which carries the strength and resilience of two women who brave through physical and psychological oppression in a patriarchal society. There is a very subtle undertone which magnifies the strategy of the Taliban; to use fear and violence as a weapon to manipulate the Afghan population; women being the worst sufferer of it. The plot chronologically addresses the cultural

mandates, customs, patriarchal, and religious norms which enforce and ensure the silent suffering of women. The plot revolves around the routine struggle of two women; Mariam and Laila, who struggle for their lives in the Taliban regime. The protagonist Mariam is a poor villager who lives in a remote area in Afghanistan, in contrast to Laila who is a smart, educated daughter of a schoolteacher. They are forced to endure a marriage that turns out to be an unending loop of ruthlessness and brutality. The character Rasheed, employs violence, misogyny and chauvinism openly and shamelessly, whose monstrous and inhumane behaviour compels them to murder him.

4. Afghan women's may-day calls for help, an impasse:

Amongst the various problems of a phallogocentric Afghan society, that Hosseini calls attention to; there is a certain dominance of social conditions, cultural institutions, rituals, gender roles, and ethnicities that are characteristic of each of Hosseini's three novels. The heart-wrenching plot of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* itself, demands a review of the fundamental and factual knowledge that concerns Afghan women to create a better analysis of why the voice of the women who want to break free, goes unheard or is intentionally silenced by force. The power play of internalised sexism, male-dominated society, family structure, marriage, and polygamy are some of the central themes that hold the central focus of this study as they underline the tumultuous experience of the female characters of Hosseini; keeping in view, their differing lives in Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION:

The feminisation of literary texts has essentially provided women from Third World nations a scope to voice out their pain and suffering, as a ray of hope in the darkest of nights imposed by sexism and patriarchy. The obsessive affinity towards phallogocentric customs of Afghan society curtails the itsy-bitsy possibility of a chance to escape, that women have. The cultural, traditional, religious and political scenarios of South Asian nations like Afghanistan and Pakistan cause a heavy casualty of the moral and ethical rights, of their own female population. This research provides a magnified look into the socio-economic and cultural circumstances that shape the identity of Muslim women, certainly defined by conflicting ideologies of the harbingers of patriarchy. The female characters of both Hashimi and Hosseini are powerful and capable of drawing sympathy from readers as well as postcolonial feminists while establishing the gendered subaltern's helpless condition in Third World Nations. Hashimi quotes in her *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*; "I will not be silenced! I have had enough of their nonsense! Which of you will speak up if I do not? Call me what you like but you know I speak the truth and it is you all that are damned for what you are doing!" (Hashimi, 2014, p.299). Active participation of women and their quest to attain freedom in these novels present that the woman as the subaltern can speak and can defy the patriarchs of the society.

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