



REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND POLITICS OF IDENTITY CRISIS IN NADIA HASHIMI'S *PEARL THAT BROKE ITS SHELL*

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ABSTRACT

We are accustomed to a world where we are favoured with an upbringing and a domain that provides us endless opportunities and freedom. So we have never thought about breaking our comfort shell to see the real world outside. Afghan American author Nadia Hashimi's debut novel Pearl that Broke its Shell is a heartbreaking account of the silenced lives of women in the Afghan patriarchal society. Her writing is reminiscent of Khalid Hosseini. Through this article I have tried to explore the issue of identity, throwing light on the Afghan customs and traditions like bacha posh and the laws which favour men and how the men totally neglect the multitudinous roles played by women and how Rahima and Shekiba could overcome these perils and find a meaning to their existence in this chaotic world.

Keywords- Victimization, Identity Crisis, Spiritual Strength

INTRODUCTION

*"There is some kiss we want with our whole lives,
The touch of spirit on the body.
Seawater begs the pearl to break its shell"
Some Kiss we Want-Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi*

Through her debut novel Nadia Hashimi depicts the plight of Afghan women who are mere puppets in the patriarchal Afghan society. She brings out the protagonist's struggle to escape from this and shows how she was successful to certain extent. It is not just the story of victimization but about the spiritual strength shown by Rahima and Shekiba who always craved for a better life; to impart meaning to their lives rather than surrendering themselves.

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It is a story that has got the power to transport you to their world and it is somewhat painful to read about their experiences. Women in the Western society possess the freedom to follow their own heart and they have the right to do many things like education, decide on their career and they are in total control of their own lives which is a different scenario for many rural Afghan women even now. They are bound by the shackles of tradition and culture which prevents them from even moving out of their house unescorted.

We are presented with the lives of Rahima and her great great grandmother Shekiba, the two tales being separated by a hundred years. Eventhough Rahima's story is set in the contemporary times, things have not much changed in Afghanistan. The title too seems to be a perfect fit for the novel as it is about a girl trying to break out from her shell and toiling hard to find her own identity in the midst of adversities. There have been many events where she cursed herself for being a girl, but her mother always comforted by saying that she is precious like a pearl. Rahima finally realises that she too is precious like a pearl and needn't take life for granted. She possess relentless spirit and energy which helped her find a shelter from her husband unlike other women who just give up believing that it is their Naseeb.

We can say that Rahima's story is a modernized version of Shakiba's. Both Rahima and Shekiba wanted freedom and the right to do things as they wished, but since they were girls they didn't have the access to do anything as they wished. Eventhough we talk about the modern era as one where both men and women enjoy equal status, it is not so in the Afghan society and many parts of the world. As Rahima puts it "... men can do whatever they want with women". We definitely have advanced a lot in science and technology but the position of women hasn't changed over the centuries. Rahima and Shekiba lacks place in their society and were treated as burden by their family members.

Like a thing Rahima is being handed over to her husband Abdul Khaliq who considers her nothing more than a maid who is bound to all the household chores. She is expected to live for her husband and kids completely neglecting her preferences in life. It seems she doesn't have an existence without them. In such a chaotic world Rahima and Shekiba didn't have a plave to escape. They were forced to face everything and accept these harsh realities as their Naseeb.

..... What am I supposed to do? Clearly, this is what Allah has chosen as their naseeb-Oh, the hell with naseeb! Naseeb is what people blame for everything they cant fix.(Hashimi,139)

The two women proved that it is not just Naseeb that determines everything. People in Afghan culture tend to associate Naseeb with misfortune. The above quote depicts the

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helplessness of Rahima's mother and she leaves everything in the hands of Allah and prays that he takes care of her daughters. But KhalaShaima can be considered a bold woman as she openly speaks up for everyone and everything and she is a character who finds it difficult to fit in to the very society that she is a part of. Her perspectives of life is different from other women and was always a driving force for Rahima till her end. It is evident through the letter that Rahima sends her. She was the only one who depicted courage to visit Rahima and consoled her. Rahima has mentioned that it was KhalaShaima who transformed her by narrating BibiShekiba's story. Rahima and Shekiba were bold enough to realize that Naseeb is what you make out of your life and that you are not brought into this world to suffer. They too were like the precious pearl that breaks off at the right moment.

The storyline jumps back and forth in time over a period of hundred years juxtaposing the tales Rahima and Shakiba which makes it really interesting and readable even though at times you tend to think about the other plot while reading a different one. Rahima and her four sisters were denied education because they were girls. Her father always longed for a son who will bring about a change in their lives. It drove him into depression and he sought refuge in opium. For his monetary benefits Rahima's father just sells his daughters off not even taking into account how young they were.

*"Why do we have a house full of girls.
Not one, not two ; but five of them."*

This is not just Rahima's father's attitude but that of the whole Afghan society's. Though they expect women to be escorted by males throughout their lives it seems strange that the very society gives girls the privilege of becoming boys (bacha posh)

"I think it would be best if we let you be a son to your father"

This was what her mother told her hoping that Rahima being a bacha posh will change her father's attitude even though it is only for a few years before he sinks into deep despair. Rahima's mother was totally numb and didn't have the courage to speak up for her daughters. She really wished that her daughters be educated. After the marriage of her daughters she was heartbroken and depressed and she even thought of taking her own life before finally finding relief in opium. There was nothing that she could do for her daughters and when come across her later in the novel she is a totally changed person deprived of any feelings or emotions. Rahima later recounts that she was the only one who had a childhood because she was a bacha posh. Even today in many parts of Afghanistan this custom is accepted and tolerated. But they never have thought about the plight of the girl who is to be turned back to her real self after a few years. We see Rahima enjoying her freedom to go to

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school, run around the streets, playing with her classmates hoping that her sisters would be allowed to go to school if she becomes a bacha posh. After Rahima's marriage she is even restricted to step out of the house.

If you think you will see your sisters, though, don't get your hopes up. Neither of them brings their wives when they come by. The women of this family don't travel much. Get used to these walls. They're going to be all what you see. (165)

This is not just the tale of Rahima but many Afghan girls who are treated as an instrument for bearing descendants (male only) Rahima has no one to neither help her nor question the domestic violence that she is subjected to. No law provides a refuge for women. She was brave enough to make use of her opportunity to get out of her husband's house and seek shelter in Kabul. She could have taken her son too with her and later she curses for leaving him.

I was a little girl and then I wasn't.

I was a bacha 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, 385)

Rahima was taken away by surprise seeing the women in Kabul and wondered how women can become politicians. She hoped that the situation in Afghanistan would change and laws will be implemented in favour of women. But soon she realised that women like Hamida and Sufia even though their outlook is modern have got no voice and it is the men who control everything in the parliament. They are just instruments that men have chosen to make things in their favour. Everything happens in the parliament according to their wish and the women too are forced to vote for them. Badriya is a typical example for this. She doesn't know what is happening around and blindly follows what Abdul Khaliq says her to do. Zamarund boldly raised her voice against the injustices done and she had to pay for it. It seems Allah spared her life so that she can boldly fight for her cause which she seems to be doing when the novel ends. She can be thought of as a real fighter. Rahima's struggle too turned out to be successful as she was able to find a women's shelter home with the help of Ms. Franklin where she found women like her or even more pathetic. They all had stories to tell, wounds so deep that the scars will never heal.

Parwin's life was a miserable one, born with a lame leg she was always calm and composed. Her talents went unnoticed and buried because of her circumstances. Her life becomes unbearable, so is the plight of many Afghan women. Only once did Rahima get a chance to meet her after her wedding. Things were not working well but all she told Rahima was that

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the people were treating her well and that she was doing alright. She couldn't do anything and she finally thought of moving to a safer place by taking her own life. Shahla's life is the only one that is being pictured as somewhat satisfying. She maintains a good relationship with her mother and sister in law and they gave her the freedom to name her daughter Parwin. After reading the novel it draws our attention that it was mainly because Rahima and Shekiba were able to give birth to sons that changed their life. If Shekiba had given birth to a daughter she would have been thrown out by Asif; who married her just because of her telling him that every woman in her family conceived boys. It is really heart melting to read Shekiba's experiences, how she had to live alone when all her family members perished from a cholera epidemic and the domestic violence that she had to face. The laws of the land too seem to be in favour of men since they were made by men in their own favour.

"I have no place in this world Khanum Marjan". (Hashimi, 143)

She tolerates the physical abuse from her father's mother and Azizullah hoping that one day she could win back her home and land and lead a better life. The pain that she goes through to get to Habib's house is all in vein when Azizullah tears the deed right in front of her own eyes. Even though things didn't happen as she wished, she never gave up. We witness her transformation from Shekiba to the palace guard Shekib. She herself says that sometimes you need to take chances if you want something badly enough. She was able to transform herself from her pitiable plight to being the wife of Asif, a respectable man in the society though he didn't love her. And thus she found her life complete and felt that she couldn't ask anything more now that she has a man who provides her food and who doesn't beat her. She knows that her son will be safe since his father loves him so much.

Ask for too much and it might actually turn out worse. But I can pray for small things, like fertile fields, a mother's love, a child's smile- a life that is less bitter than sweet. (Hashimi, 436)

The novel ends on somewhat a positive note. We can hope that the energy and courage that Rahima and Shekiba depicted give courage to the young girls in Afghanistan who have been toiling hard to make their own identity in a patriarchal society. Through the book Nadia Hashimi has definitely tried to deal with many major issues in Afghanistan, hoping that if not today some time later it may bring about a positive change in the attitude of the people. Each and every female character in this novel has dealt with hardships. Madarjan, Rahima, Shekiba, Parwin Kala Shaima, Benafsha and many others. The environment is really tough for any woman to survive. Today there are many organisations that work for the issues of women like trying to promote education, creative skills, empowering them and making them impart meaning to their lives. As Nadia Hashimi puts it:

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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. (Interview, July 29, 2014)

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