

Veils Away for a While: A Cultural Scrutiny of Nadia Hashimi's

The Pearl that Broke its Shell

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Abstract:

Nadia Hashimi is an accomplished Afghan-American novelist of the recent times. She has authored five novels. Though Hashimi is the citizen of America, she is very concerned about her Afghan origin. Her novels chiefly concentrate on her Afghan origin, as she is very much interested in her native culture. Hashimi's works furnish magnitude to the affluent culture of the Afghan society. Afghanistan is celebrated for its thriving culture. Hashimi pinpoints the profuse cultural practices of Afghanistan in the novel, *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*. Among them, the most fascinating is, *Bacha Posh*.

Bacha Posh is a gender twisting custom, in which the family without the sons would make one of the daughters dress and behave like a boy. The family without sons will be looked down upon in Afghanistan. *Bacha Posh* is practiced with the belief that it will bring good luck to the family and it also brings a son in the subsequent pregnancy. By becoming a *Bacha Posh*, the girl is treated like a boy and enjoys autonomy. But the status of interim liberty is snatched away from her once she enters puberty. All of a

sudden, she is expected to behave like a young woman just to get married at a tender age. In a male-dominated Afghan society, a *Bacha Posh* girl can enjoy the privileges and independence of being a boy at least for a certain period. Women suffer a lot at the hands of men in the country. This paper endeavours to envision the inimitable culture of Afghanistan and how Afghan women find solace in the custom of *Bacha Posh* for a short span of their lives with reference to Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*.

Key Words:

Bacha Posh, Afghan Culture, Interim Liberty, Afghan Women, Solace for Short Span.

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The Pearl that Broke its Shell

Afghanistan is a multi-cultural country. Afghanistan is celebrated for its thriving culture. The Afghans are a fusion of diverse ethnicity. Though Afghanistan is called as graveyard of empires, lab mouse for various regimes, safe haven for terrorist groups, Talibanism and opium, the country is also known for its affluent culture. The Afghans are well-known for their amiability, and their culture is inimitable. Afghanistan is also the land of poetry, storytelling, fables, folktales, and proverbs. The popular writers of Afghanistan are Khaled Hosseini, Nadia Anjuman, Nancy Dupree, Nadia Hashimi, Nadeem Aslam, etc. Among them, Nadia Hashimi occupies a prominent place in Afghan Literature.

Nadia Hashimi is a well renowned Afghan-American novelist in the recent times. She was born and raised in New York and New Jersey. Both her parents were

born in Afghanistan and left the country in the early 1970s, before the Soviet invasion. Her mother has obtained a Master's degree in civil engineering and her father has gone to the United States, where he has worked hard to fulfill his American dream and has built a new, brighter life for his immediate and extended family. Hashimi is providential to be encircled by a large family of aunts, uncles and cousins, keeping the Afghan culture an imperative part of their daily lives. In 2002, she has made her first trip to Afghanistan with her parents who have not returned to their homeland since leaving in the 1970s. Hashimi reminds it to be a bittersweet experience for everyone, finding relics of childhood homes and reuniting with loved ones.

Nadia Hashimi becomes active with an Afghan-American community organization that promoted cultural events and awareness, especially in the dark days after September 11, 2001. With her accurate medical training completed, Hashimi has turned to her passion for writing. Her upbringing, experiences and passions come together in the form of stories based in the country of her parents and grandparents. Hashimi likes to expose the reality of Afghanistan to the entire world. Her works explicit the unique culture of the country. Hashimi pinpoints the profuse cultural practices of Afghanistan in the novel, *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*. Among them, the most fascinating is, *Bacha Posh*. This paper endeavours to envision the inimitable culture of Afghanistan and it also aims to portray the pathetic predicament of women due to the unique cultural practices.

In a country like Afghanistan, where religion and tradition dictate every walk of life, it becomes thorny for the women to go on. Even today, the womenfolk of Afghanistan continue to undergo a lot of oppression and subjugation. The substandard

treatment of women is justified by the gender discrimination which prevails in the country. Their individuality is crushed under the burden of tribal traditions. They still remain as anonymous beings without any desire or authority of their own. The society, in which a woman is considered to be second class citizen, cannot be expected to treat them well under any circumstance. The women are already expected to stay hidden at their homes and obey their *mahrms*, the male partners. Violence against women has never been a big issue in Afghanistan, whether in public or in the precincts of homes. The Afghan women live in the shadow of persistent fear of patriarchal violence for decades. The words like freedom, equality, and identity have different connotations for the women living in Afghanistan. Even in the recent era of liberty and equality, they are flogged and stoned to death in public for crimes like love and affection.

The pre-eminence of boys over girls is still prevalent in some of the countries including Afghanistan. The family without a son is looked down upon and to be pitied too. The birth of boys is a much celebrated event in Afghanistan. It is considered to be pride of the father to have more sons. The mother of many sons is highly praised. The Afghans believe that boys carry the family name and also inherit the father's property. Hence, the families without sons would make a daughter dress and behave like a boy. This peculiar custom is called, *Bacha Posh*. By being a *Bacha Posh*, a girl can attend school, run errands, guard her sisters and can work part time to earn money. Because of this gender-twisting custom, the girl who is changed can act as a boy for a certain period, and she can enjoy the freedom of a boy. But this interim status is valid until the girl's puberty. Immediately after that, she is changed to her real self and expected to behave like a young woman. As a young woman, she should be ready for marriage. The Afghans

believe that the custom of *Bacha Posh* brings good luck to the family and the boy in the subsequent pregnancy.

Hashimi exhibits the custom of *Bacha Posh* through her characters Rahima and Shekiba in her novel, *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*. Shekiba is the great great grandmother of Rahima. Their stories are separated by at least a century. But the tribulations they face are the same. Shekiba is known as a daughter-son, because she is a daughter by birth, but she works like a man. Her father also treats her like a son. “She worked beside him day and night. The more she did, the easier it was for him to forget that she was a girl. He began to think of her as a son, sometimes even slipping and calling her by her brother’s names.” (20)

Death embraces all her siblings and parents in the form of cholera, leaving her behind. She is taken care of by her father’s family and they sell her off to a wealthy man to clear their debt. The wealthy man gifts her to the King’s palace where she is made a *harem* guard. *Harem* is the place where the King’s concubines are kept in the palace. The king Habibullah has no belief in men guarding women. Hence he makes the women dress as men and makes them guard the *harem*. Shekiba remains a good guard keeper. By hearing about the story of *Bibi Shekiba*, told by *Khala Shaima* Rahima accepts to become a *Bacha Posh*.

Raisa, Rahima’s mother has five daughters. The elder sisters are chased by some boys in the street. So, their father does not send them to school. In anger and frustration he yells, “If I had a son this would not happening!” (5) *Khala Shaima*, Raisa’s sister comes up with the idea of *Bacha Posh* to send the girls again to school. Raisa suggests Rahima, “We could change your clothes and we’ll give you a new name. You’ll be able

to run to the store anytime we need anything. You could go to school without worrying about the boys bothering you. You could play games.” (23) Rahima likes the idea of independence and autonomy. As a *Bacha Posh*, Rahima becomes Rahim and she goes to school with her sisters, run errands for her mother, and even works at an electrical shop in the evenings.

Being a boy, Rahima is much privileged among her disadvantaged sisters. She becomes free from all the household chores and her sisters are burdened with those works too. She is expected to stay away from home and play with boys. She can come home late. Rahima proudly boasts, “I go all around town and no one bothers me. I can do anything!” (74) If Rahima comes home early, her mother would raise an eyebrow and tells her to be out with the boys playing. Even at home, when the father feels hungry, he tells Rahima, “*Bachem*, ask your sister to bring me a cup of tea. And tell her to fix me something to eat too.” (49) This immediate freedom gives wings to Rahima to fly on freely. She exercises autonomy and breathes the air of freedom right from her home. Her parents treat her as a real boy and the rest of the family members also expect to treat her, the same.

A woman is expected to be extremely compassionate, incalculably appealing, and quite magnanimous. In the context of Afghan society, men and boys are only meant to eat any special food. For instance, if there is chicken soup, the men get the chunks of meat and the leftover soup with unwanted vegetables becomes the feast for women. As Virginia Woolf points out in her *A Room of One's Own* that if there was chicken, she took leg, if there was a draught, she sat on it, in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the

minds and wishes of others. The women are considered as least wanted and man occupies the front. In the novel, Hashimi stresses the priority of the boys through Rahima, the *Bacha Posh*. When Rahima gets the soup without the meat, she argues with her mother. Her father interrupts saying, “Is there nothing for my son to eat? Find him something to eat or you’ll be going hungry for a month! He struck again.” (88)

In Afghanistan, the worst thing ever is to be born as a girl. The girls are treated as puppets in the hands of men. They are seen as an object of pleasure and a reproduction machine. And the machine is expected to produce only boy babies. If it fails to do so, it will be replaced. Hence, some girls consider the opportunity of turning into boys at least for a short span of their lives. They enjoy freedom by wearing pants, while the rest are suffocated by their veils. Shekiba enjoys her duty as a *harem* guard, because she guards the palace in the guise of a man. She wears pants and feels liberated. Hashimi writes about Shekiba, “And yet there was something liberating about her new clothes. She lifted her right leg and then her left. She thought of her brothers and how they would run about the fields in their flowing pants.” (156)

After a certain period of time, there comes a time for the disguised girls to turn to their real self. They are allowed to be a boy till their puberty. Immediately after that, the girl is expected to behave like a woman and she must be ready for her marriage. But in some cases, like Rahima are exceptions. Rahima says,

Most children who were made *bacha posh* were changed back into girls when their monthly bleeding started but Madar-*jan* had let me go on, bleeding but looking like a boy. My grandmother warned her it was wrong. Next month, my mother would promise. But I was too useful to her, to my sisters, to the whole

family. She couldn't bear to give up having someone who could do for her what my father wouldn't. And I was happy to continue playing soccer and practicing taekwon do with Abdullah and the boys (84).

When it is the time to go back to the real self, the girls undergo a lot of trauma. They do not want to lose their freedom. They are aware of the mistreatment of women in the Afghan society and they do not want to undergo such ordeal. But they cannot continue their lives by disguising. When Rahima is not changed back, even after her puberty, her grandmother warns her mother that it is a sin and she must undo her. When a warlord comes to marry Rahima, without her consent, her father is ready to get her married off. Abdul Khaliq, the warlord is thrice her age while Rahima is barely thirteen. But her father decides to give her to him, in exchange for a larger bride price. He argues with his wife angrily, "And he's right. She shouldn't be a *Bacha Posh* any longer. She's a young woman and it's shameful to have her out on the streets and working with Agha Barakzai at this age. You have given no thought to her decency, have you? Do you know how this looks for my family's name?" (122) Rahima, the *Bacha Posh* pathetically accounts, "Turning me into a boy hadn't protected me at all. In fact, it had put me right in front of this warlord who now demanded my hand in marriage. Barely a teenager, I was to be wed to this gray-haired fighter with bags of money." (133)

This ancient custom of *Bacha Posh* is still prevalent in the country, hoping good luck for the families. Though fate of the Afghan women is sealed, they can breathe freely only for a while, out of their veil, through *Bacha Posh*, the gender twisting custom. Hashimi, as a woman activist hopes for the autonomy of Afghan women. She dreams for the Afghan women to choose their education and their career by their own. And she also

anticipates the women to have the right to choose her spouse and decide on how many children to bear. Hashimi optimistically opines in an interview, “I think that the *Bacha Posh* custom is probably going to die out as women take on different roles in society and it becomes less needed. But that will take a while”. Hashimi hopes for the veils away for the Afghan women not only for a while, but forever.

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