



Internalised Sexism and Shackled Dreams in *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell*: A Study on the Privileges and Hazards of a Bacha Posh

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Abstract:

Whether chauvinism is the brainchild of internalised sexism or it is the vice versa, cannot exactly be pinned down. But 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 established fact and has no doubts about it. Keeping that in view; the powerlessness and dreamless eyes of women in Afghanistan have been skilfully captured by Nadia Hashimi's 2014 debut novel, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*. Hashimi's Afghan-American roots visibly dictate the images; oppression and subjugation of women with the will to break free from all the shackles that bind their wings, in a very subtle blending of the contrasting hues. This study shows the cultural significance, perks, and hazards of the social practice of Afghan society called 'Bacha Posh' and the various sexist elements that have led to the existence of such a practice in the first place. Internalised sexism, marginalisation of women, subjugation of women in the name of cultural and religious demands, and sexual violence in the lives of the women protagonists in Hashimi's novel, are a few of the plethora of social evils which dictate the oppression of women. Therefore, the study focuses on the characters; Rahima and Shekiba, who undergo multiple toxic transformations throughout the plot, and each time the causal event is, without doubt, a patriarchal norm. Included in all this chaos is the cultural practice of Bacha Posh, driving the plot and constructing the arch of retaliation of some Afghan women, the relationship between religion-cultural practices and the cosplay of gender, and ultimately women's fight against oppression.

Keywords: Afghan Women, Bacha Posh, Gender Inequality, Hazard, Marginalisation, Sexism, Shackled Dreams.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Internalised sexism is both a result and causative factor in the oppression and the subjugation of women in the patriarchal society. Women as a gender have always been treated as the secondary and hence social luxuries like equal treatment and freedom, seem to be a dream in South Asian nations like Afghanistan. Muslim woman as "a backward individual who living within the four walls of the house, veiled, crippled and ignorant who lacked the ability to accomplish the social roles" (Said, 1979, p.136). The survival of women in such areas is based on striving for the bare minimum, while social evils exploit them in the name of religious mandates like Islamic fundamentalist and radical ruler, the Taliban. Keeping such socially chaotic matters in view, this research aims at analysing the humanitarian grounds in which women in the Afghan nation are making a fight back against the oppression while being forced to submit to the socio-cultural patriarchal practices. The practice of 'Bacha Posh' is officially stated to be just a century old but according to the oral records, this gender-biased cultural practice date back century. (Suraya,10) Its roots and present practice can be traced to South Asian Nations like Afghanistan and some parts of Pakistan. The need for such a practice to originate and still exist in the 21st century is primarily sexist and chauvinistic from multiple aspects. The lack of social security and equality for the female sex is the primordial contributing factor to the same. The contributors to these complicated issues are not only selfish men but also women who are equal participators in harassing and curtailing the freedom of other women.

The objectification of women is such a household concept that it is almost visibly tattooed and flaunted proudly, without shame or fear in such patriarchal societies. The birth of a girl child is considered a headache especially when there are no sons in a family. Hence, for upholding the social image and for some twisted reason regarding women's safety in such nations, a specific daughter is chosen to disguise and cross-dress as a male child. To show to society that the family has one son in the least to support the cause of the family. This girl disguised as a son; the Bacha Poshis allowed to do all the things that a male child gets the privilege to perform; attend school, access to formal education, learn survival skills, wrestle, play sports, go anywhere he wishes, etc. But the real challenge in all this is the conversion back to a girl child, once the purpose is fulfilled and the girl attains puberty. In most of these Islamic nations, attaining of puberty makes a girl eligible for marriage. The logic behind the same is disturbing and so are the practices related to the same. A marriage in such cases is not fixed because of generally expected emotional or nuptial reasons, rather, irrespective of the groom's age, a girl is almost sold in the name of marriage.

The word Feminism being rich with jargon, covers a lot of terminologies, few of which are completely applicable in this case. The patriarchy that runs deep in the veins of Afghan society is pumped by internalised sexism. The belief in women's inferiority is so engraved in the bones of this patriarchal and chauvinistic population that it has silently become the part of each and everyone's part of worldview and their self-concept. When sexism runs deep in the belief system of an entire population then domestic violence, forced marriages, brutal sexual abuse, treatment of women as slaves, public lynching, and death by stone-pelting, ultimately become household terms. In cultures like these men think it to be their right to practice sexual and physical violence on men while living in denial of the existence of something like that marital 'rape' they believe marriage means an automatic consent to every desire or orgy of the husband). A women's public execution by 'stoning' for a wide range of absurd reasons is common practice in Afghanistan. And by the same logic, is Bacha Posh a safety measure and socio-cultural practice. To study these social conflicts and hazards for women, the novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*(2014) by Nadia Hashimi has been singled out, whose American writing style is perfectly impregnated with the honest elements of her Afghan descent.

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell: Background:

Nadia Hashimi's debut novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*(2014) is a powerful interweaving of fiction and reality sourced from real-life incidents from the third-world nations and the disturbing status of women there. It revolves around the life journey of two Afghan families, focusing on the personal journeys of the two female protagonists; Rahima and Shekiba. The tales of both are separated by almost a century but the graph of their experiences almost runs parallel with a politically chaotic backdrop of the Islamic extremist group; The Taliban. For polar reasons and circumstances, Rahima and Shekiba take on male roles, disguise as men; Shekiba as a guard to the female-only harem of the king and Rahima as a son to fulfil the duties of the family and also as a security measure. In Afghanistan, it is considered risky to have an all-female-only family, like in the case of Rahima. So, she is turned into a Bacha Posh and lives the initial years of life as a boy child, having access to school learning and everything else reserved as a male privilege. Both of their lives are similar on the base that both find this second identity in a male's disguise in a patriarchal society that believes in suppressing and limiting the scope of progress for women. But sadly, even after tasting the pie of a man's freedom, they are forced into marriages that did not consent to and are subjected to heinous acts like domestic violence and marital rape. In the 1900s Shekiba struggled for the basic human rights as her family dies of cholera and her relatives sold her away.

The very fact that a family faces the mandate of having a son for its social image is outrageous in itself. But the background circumstances described in the novel prove the ultimate need for the same safety measure keeping in mind, the rule of the Taliban. A nation where the Taliban rules and forcibly kidnapping of women for marriage is a common practice shows how the need for a woman to step out of the house only if a male relative accompanies her came into being. There is a widely agreed view of some feminist researchers that Islamic societies are patriarchal in general and are instrumental in establishing gender inequality as a norm. In fact, it's been a widely accepted concept, that God is a man and hence deserves a place in heaven while Eve is considered sinful (Hibri, 1981, p.176). Pre-existing ideas and religious notions like these, scream of the sown seeds of patriarchy and sexism already.

Hence, this research focuses on the study of this novel looked through the feministic lens. To be precise, from multiple facets this focus can be used to establish the existence of concepts like internalised sexism, chauvinism, exploitation of women, domestic violence, marital rape, and oppression of women, in a patriarchal Afghan society with an extremely orthodox backdrop. This section also includes incidents from the novel which are the bone-chilling detailed narration of torture of various forms practiced on women rooted in complex issues like gender-biased prejudices, female subjugation, marital control, abuse and gender inequality which helped to lay the base of this research.

Hashimi's Web of Stinging Tales; Women's Oppression and Abuse as an Afghan Reality:

Hashimi's novel is a sweltering narration of powerlessness, torture, uncomfortable transitions, marital rape, and the abuse of women, drenched with the perspiration of dreams eyeing the luxury of freedom and choice, which constructs the spine of the plot. The combination of cultural marginalization and emotional sonority to create an impactful and unique storytelling process compels the readers to think deeply about these disturbing realities.

The narrative arch of this novel can be divided into two very vague halves of the dual tones maintained in constructing the plot. Both Rahima and Shekiba undergo through these two dualities in their lives. The first is when the Shekiba is powerless in her initial years when she loses her parents and is traded for money. But later on, she musters up the courage to find out and make her own 'naseeb'. But then in a contrast, Rahima is made to live like a boy, is fearless and educated, and has an opinion about everything. Still, when she comes of age, she is married off to a man twice her age for money. The male chauvinistic characters like Asif and Azzizulla are the very example of prototyped tortuous men who chew the freedom and will of women for their own selfish purposes. Asif physically abuses Rahima and sexually torments her to fulfil his lust, even when she is having health concerns and while she is menstruating.

The stories of inspiration are no doubt from women again, owing to Hashimi's unique style of making polarities co-exist. Women like Queen Soroya, whose speech inspires Shekiba to dream of exploring cities like Kabul and the bravery of Shekiba in turn, inspiring Rahima to take fearless decisions regarding her life is the most constructive plot twist in this novel. But again, in contrast to this, the fact that all these plot-lines ultimately signify the fact that wherever there is a free license given to one gender with a biased conscience that one can subjugate the other gender only because it has been an age-old practice, is clearly disturbing by itself. For ages men have internalised sexism to the optimal level where everyone has considered it their right to oppress women. As women are categorized as the secondary sex, they are not allowed to have school learning, can't access formal education, can't go out of the house without a male, etc.

An ironic event is when the men go to official places or places of emergency like the parliament and the hospital, and search for a lady officer or a lady doctor whenever it's a case of a woman to be treated. But they are the same men who don't allow women to go out and work. If a woman is not allowed to get a proper education or work outside, how are these men, fools enough to expect lady officers or doctors. Sexual violence and public 'stoning' is a totally different story. The character Benafsha who is killed by stone-pelting publicly is Asif's first wife. After whose death Shekiba marries Asif. Even after such a gruesome death of a woman for a simple reason; where soldiers take turns to hurl stones at her ruthlessly, till she dies, nobody flinches. It is such a common act that people are okay with it, and the women, who can understand the pain, have no option than staying silent. This animalistic justice system of such a brutal culture is absolutely bone-chilling. The silence of these women during Benafsha's death and the cruel domestic torture practiced by 'Maadar-jaan' (Rahima's mother-in-law) are equal contributors to the upholding of the oppression of women.

II. CONCLUSION:

The looking up of discourse through a feministic lens gives a certain sense of liberty to the women writers who are making an unmatched contribution in foregrounding these issues concerning the welfare of women in third-world nations. These harrowing tales from South Asian Nations reach global ears through the writings and efforts of many such authors who are making constructive use of their art. The issues like sexism, patriarchy, gender inequality, violence against women, and chauvinism are so deeply rooted in the system of the culturally biased society that it's tough to single out one strand of rot. The rotting is spread so violently and widely that they all have become intertwined and co-dependent. Internalised sexism gives a thumbs up to the prejudice that women should be stopped from getting formal education and are only existing to marry, give sexual satisfaction, produce kids, and do domestic work. Even the women who torture other women just because they are the mother-in-law of a girl are equal contributors to curtailing the freedom of women. The flesh traders like Azzizulla are social demons who subjugate young women and ill-treat them for their own satisfaction and gain. Cultural practices like Bacha Posh are both the wound and the medicine simultaneously. Had it not been for the practice of Bacha Posh, women would never get the taste of how freedom feels like or never get aware of what wrong is happening with women in society. But again, the fact that women have to disguise themselves as men, to live freely is a dangerous thing in itself. It's a never-ending loop of injustice towards women which has no scope for self-cancellation. A lot has to be done in this direction to help make the situation better for women. To kill all these evils from society is a humungous task and writing about it is the primary step in a ten-fold effort procedure.

In contrast to all these evils are characters like Queen Soroya and the ladies like brave Shekiba who don't fall behind when it comes to inspiring women to be a pearl that breaks their shell. To break free from all limitations to make their own 'naseeb' and to find their own purpose in their life. The constructive and inspirational plot twists can be considered a little relief in this cascade of ongoing injustice against women. Be it

stone-pelting death, marital rape, domestic violence, Bacha Posh, oppression in general or forced marriages; the social evils are, many like Satan's angels, and the only hope to kill these evils for one and for all, is to educate women and make them muster up the courage to see dreams and make effort to work against the oppressing society.

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