



Windows to Resilience: Afghan Women's Voices and Cultural Reflections in Nadia Hashimi's A House Without Windows

Kanchan¹

Abstract: Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows* vividly depicts the complex reality of Afghanistan and its people, exploring themes of identity, culture, and resilience within the framework of English literature. The novel reflects Afghanistan's fraught identity as an Islamic nation grappling with political instability, social upheaval, and cultural intersections. These realities are brought to life through the experiences of Afghan women, whose vulnerability and suffering underscore the profound impact of war and societal unrest. The female characters navigate a world dominated by patriarchal norms, which have long silenced their voices and stifled their aspirations.

The protagonist's journey from the constraints of a traditional marriage to the unlikely refuge of prison—illuminates the oppressive structures women endure, even within their own homes. The irony of finding solace in incarceration reveals the stark realities of domestic life for many women. Hashimi's narrative resonates with broader cultural discussions about female oppression and resilience, drawing meaningful connections to other texts that similarly explore struggles for justice and freedom.

Key words: Forced subordination, Patriarchal norms, Vulnerability, Silenced voices, Irony, Societal Constructs, Popular Culture

Introduction

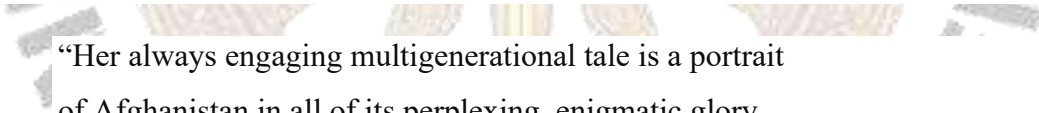
In Afghanistan, an Islamic nation plagued by Soviet invasions and Taliban-led terror, the pervasive influence of patriarchal culture and orthodox religious norms has disproportionately affected women, making them the most vulnerable in this tumultuous environment. Over nearly three decades of social conflict, Afghan women have been trapped in a precarious situation, facing the denial of basic rights while remaining voiceless and obscured. The entrenched patriarchy in Afghan society has perpetuated their struggle, as women continually confront difficulties in securing even their most fundamental needs.

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Centre for Distance and Online Education, Punjabi University, Patiala

The deeply ingrained patriarchy extends to the legal and judicial systems, contributing to biases against women. The belief in women's inferiority is so entrenched in the male-centric Afghan society that women's voices are systematically suppressed. Strict social taboos perpetuate crimes such as domestic violence, forced marriages, sexual abuse, and public forms of female subjugation, all normalized within the cultural framework. Forced marriages, with no provisions for divorce, along with expectations of total submission to husbands and their families, further restrict women from accessing formal education or achieving social awareness in this challenging and oppressive environment.

Women in patriarchal societies like Afghanistan are compelled to adhere to strict mandates, confined within domestic spaces, veiled, and expected to maintain silence regardless of the circumstances. The pervasive objectification of women becomes a norm proudly flaunted without shame or fear in such societies. Nadia Hashimi, born in New York in 1977 to Afghan parents who immigrated to the U.S. in the early 1970s, experienced a distinct cultural upbringing. Her parents had originally planned to return to Afghanistan but were forced to reconsider due to the dangerous circumstances brought on by the Soviet invasion and subsequent occupation.

Titles like *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014), *When the Moon Is Low* (2015), and *A House Without Windows* (2016) are inspired by her personal experiences, including a pivotal trip to Afghanistan in 2003. These works offer profound insights into the struggles faced by Afghan women and have garnered her widespread acclaim and recognition.

A decorative horizontal band with a pattern of colorful, abstract shapes in shades of blue, green, and yellow.

“Her always engaging multigenerational tale is a portrait of Afghanistan in all of its perplexing, enigmatic glory, and a mirror into the still ongoing struggles of Afghan women.” - Khaled Hosseini

The historical reality of men subjugating women to conform to their will and subsequently shaping social norms in favor of one gender is an undeniable truth that has persisted through the ages. Nadia Hashimi, in the novel examined for this study, masterfully conveys the feelings of powerlessness, silenced voices, and the distant stares of Afghan women. Her aim is to portray their suffering, explore their struggles, and give voice to those yearning for justice and freedom. By closely analysing *A House Without Windows*, this study aims to highlight the difficulties Afghan women face, uncovering the layers of forced subjugation and the complex social structures that maintain their oppression.



Analysis

Hashimi's *A House without Windows* is an engrossing novel whose title itself signifies 'a prison' which is a house without any windows; depicting the Chil Mehtab prison of Afghanistan and whose focus is on the personification of Afghan women's journey as prisoners in their home country as well as their own bodies. The author paints a gripping tale of Zeba, the protagonist, and her ironic journey from a traditional Afghan wife to that of an inmate in a prison where imprisoned women feel safer than their homes, which are typical of the patriarchal social constructs, is critically as well as philosophically significant. It is a very powerful story of strong and resilient Afghan women, dreadful narratives of murder, maternal love, and survival in the most hostile conditions. Hashimi's draws a vivid image of Afghan women which flaunts an unforgettable and unlikely bond of sisterhood among women who all suffer from similar ordeals and oppression. The women characters of the novel are drawn with such attention and meticulous detailing, that they take the readers into an emotionally powerful and horrifying reality of female friendship which helps to underline the precarious condition of Afghan women in an orthodox, traditional, and patriarchal society.

The protagonist sketched by Hashimi's being in a physically acrimonious marriage and never for once enunciating a word regarding the misery and oppression she undergoes, is disturbing and speaks volumes about the intensity of the situation and about the helplessness as well as the powerlessness of Afghan women who were unable to restrain and resist the misery thrown their way. Zeba's life turns upside down and all hell breaks loose after she is found accused in the murder of her husband and then meets three other women who seem to have been fighting similar personal battles, forming a haunting tale of Afghan women's suffering and their fight for justice. The blending of the individual stories of Zeba, Nafisa, Latifa and Meghzan into eventually one single disturbing tale of women's oppression. Like other women, Zeba feels safe in the walls of Chil Mehtab, "For a house with no windows, Chil Mehtab is not that bad. Sometimes I breathe easier here than I ever did at home." The prison indicated by Hashimi's in the book, title as well as the theme are both the real and spatial prison along with the temporal prison created for women by patriarchy and internalised sexism in Afghanistan. Hashimi's novel is a fresh breath to the stifled women's voices in the major patriarchal set-up in the current world, especially Afghanistan. Zeba the protagonist; mother of three, is accused of murder of her husband.

During her imprisonment in Chil Mahtab, she comes to know that like her, her fellow inmates are also staying there, not only for their mistakes but also due to the faulty justice system of the patriarchal and sexist Afghan society. The irony in it all is that the society is so oppressive, subjugating, phallogocentric and manipulative that a jail seems more of a safe shelter for women, than the outside world, quite contrary to



the popular expectation. Adding to all this is the prevalent undertone of violence against women that shatters the sense of self, autonomy, and mental well-being of women in these Islamic nations. Hashimi's *A House without Windows* is a tale of suffering, ill-fate and injustice faced by Afghan women who are victims of the patriarchy.

The novel portrays bold female characters who fight against all the odds and oppression, which sets a standard against the pre-decided destiny of women in the phallogocentric Afghan society. Although the world of Hashimi's is fictional, the meticulous detailing of it and the realism with which the lives of women characters have been portrayed, make it seem like a portrayal of live images showing the horrifying realities of women who undergo cruel societal scrutiny and norms in Afghanistan. The title of the novel has been very carefully sourced and is inspired by the thirteen-century Persian poet Rumi's work *Masnavi*. The word 'window' from the title is equally significant and symbolic, hinting at the light, hope, gateway to freedom, optimism, and a connection with the free world outside. Technically, it shows in a very beautiful manner how the houses that lack windows are nothing else than prisons. For women, houses in Afghanistan are no different from jails as the guarding agent there is patriarchy and the punishment for the same is oppression, subjugation, torture, sexual torment, violence etc. Without the presence of windows, any house is just fortified walls of confinement, with no outlet for the individuals residing; caged up as a prisoner and no scope for escaping. Women fight battles for survival and basic amenities which men are so inherently entitled to that they shamelessly flaunt their sexism and chauvinism.

The novel focuses on the faulty and gender-biased judicial system of Afghanistan; the flawed cultural norms, religious rules and regulations which make it a mandate to oppress women, keeping them away from accessing basic rights and a fair chance to take their stand or fight for their well-being. But contrasting to her innocence and docile nature, the events that take place in her life, through the course of the plot in the novel, are very disturbing and harrowing. In a particular instance, something very shocking happens in Zeba's tiny village home. In their courtyard, the neighbours find Zeba with a hatched and blooded hand; along with her husband, Kamal's dead body sprawled on the floor. Even more than the neighbours, it is Zeba who is even more shocked, panic-stricken, horrified and almost paralysed by fear of the events that had unfolded in the premises of her own house.

To add to this event, the neighbours, and her in-laws, all point their fingers at Zeba, accusing her of being the murderer. Zeba is in such a fit of these events that out of shock, she doesn't even speak a single sentence in her defence when everyone around her points their fingers at her to be the murderer. After all this, she is harassed by the police and is taken to prison under the accusation of murder. Her life takes a different turn



after being locked up in the women's prison in Afghanistan. She comes across a whole new set of women characters who are so different yet so similar to herself, with different survival and struggle stories.

We find a typical representation of the male-dominated Afghan society in the character of Kamal, Zeba's husband. He is not a good father and not even a decent husband to his wife. "Kamal stumbled about the house, shouted at the children to keep out of his way, and grumbled about needing his medicine. With each time, Kamal was spotted drunk in the town, he further condemned Zeba to a life of ignominy. She begged him to consider their family and their reputation. For that, Kamal had broken her nose, her rib, and half their dishes" (Hashimi's 71). Zeba, portrayed as a devoted wife, caring mother, and compassionate woman, sacrifices herself to protect Laylee, a young girl whom Kamal attempted to assault, all in the name of honor. As Hashimi writes, "Honor was a burden men placed on the shoulders of their daughters, sisters, and wives" (p. 197). The honor of that innocent girl was shattered in Zeba's own yard, by none other than her monstrous husband. Zeba's mother, Gulnaz, represents the voiceless Afghan women whose protests often go unheard. She initially resisted Zeba's early marriage, pleading with her husband to delay it due to her daughter's young age. However, her efforts were ultimately in vain against the authority of her husband, as she pleaded, "Let us wait a bit more" (p. 55).

In the face of a deeply entrenched patriarchal system, women are powerless and unable to defy the authority of men. Hashimi effectively captures the silenced and oppressed status of women in Afghanistan's rigid, male-dominated society. As the narrative unfolds, Gulnaz urges her daughter to reveal what truly happened during the murder. Though Gulnaz is unaware of the actual events, she reassures Zeba by saying, "You're my blood. Your soul speaks to me, even when your words don't" (p. 230). The bonding between the mother and daughter is portrayed by Hashimi's in a very subtle way as even she, being a victim and submissive towards oppression in her own life, empathises with her daughter's condition and encourages her to speak up. She takes a stand for her daughter in front of a patriarchal society.

The character Yusuf is portrayed to be the mouthpiece of Zeba along with all other women who are suffering under the pressure of the unjust and gender-biased judicial system of Afghanistan. Yusuf, having spent part of his childhood in Afghanistan, becomes a lawyer in America. Driven by a desire to create meaningful change, he returns to his homeland, where his first case involves Zeba. On the surface, it seems straightforward why would an ordinary woman, a loving mother, and a respected neighbour, suddenly murder her husband with a hatchet? Yusuf works tirelessly to uncover the truth, despite facing numerous challenges. His journey mirrors the struggles Afghan women endure, their voices stifled by an unjust legal system and a patriarchal society. Women prefer silence because they know their sacrifices are never



important for the Afghan patriarchal society. Zeba would not prefer to talk about the case to reveal the truth because even if she spoke against the injustice that happened in her backyard, there is no proof for her statement. In one of her couplets, she says. “What good is a woman’s telling of truth when nothing she says will be taken as proof?” After an intense struggle and a painful journey Zeba went through, the judge acquitted her of the crime of murdering her husband.

She is released from prison and eventually returns to her children. She starts to recover and live her life again, in search of mental peace and the healing that every woman deserves after going through so many ordeals. The novel is deliberately made to be loud with metaphors, imagery, and symbolism of prison, windows, and walls. Hashimi in a unique style, has very brilliantly employed these figurative devices in conveying the dark state of Afghan women and their twisted realities in a gender-biased world. She quotes Rumi in her epilogue, very poignantly playing with the symbolisms of windows and light. It is applied as a means of light rays to penetrate a house without windows which is also referred to as a hell. Hell, therefore, is symbolised as a woman who allows no light (or knowledge) to come out of her or ever cross the assigned boundaries and limitations of society. Rumi speaks of the creation of a window as a gateway or more specifically a true religion, and Hashimi’s uses it to showcase the true reality of women in Afghanistan as well as praying for their eventual empowerment.

Conclusion

Zeba and her case become a metaphor for every woman facing punishment for an act she did not commit, and whose shrieks for justice and freedom are unheard by the gender-biased judicial system of Afghanistan. Zeba’s time in Chil Mehtab introduces her to other women who, like her, are imprisoned for defending themselves whether it was striking back against abusive husbands, resisting being sold into prostitution, or other horrific acts they endured.

The novel explores the complexities of Zeba's life as she faces accusations of murdering her husband. Her imprisonment reveals the haunting suffering of Afghan women and their struggle for justice. The juxtaposition of the prison as both a spatial and temporal confinement, imposed by patriarchy and internalized sexism, adds depth to the narrative. The title, inspired by Rumi's work, symbolizes the imprisonment both literal and metaphorical that Afghan women face.

Hashimi’s novel serves as a poignant depiction of the stifled voices of women within a patriarchal system, highlighting the harsh realities of their lives. Zeba’s case becomes a metaphor for countless women punished for crimes they did not commit, echoing the calls for justice and freedom within Afghanistan’s



gender-biased judicial system. The challenges faced by Zeba and her lawyer, Yusuf, underscore the difficulties imposed by patriarchy, honour, and a biased justice system. The use of metaphors, imagery, and symbolism in the novel enhances its impact, offering a stark portrayal of Afghan women's harsh realities.

A House Without Windows shines a spotlight on the resilience and hardships faced by Afghan women, questioning societal conventions and advocating for change. In Hashimi's portrayal, the idea of women choosing silence as a form of survival is strikingly emphasized. Gayatri Spivak's concept of "Can the subaltern speak?" is relevant here, as Hashimi suggests that Afghan women, as subalterns, might not need to speak when their silence is an intentional act. The novel offers a revealing look at the difficult realities confronting Afghan women, whose voices are often stifled by deep-rooted patriarchal systems. Hashimi critically explores the societal and cultural forces that lead to the marginalization of Afghan women, implying that their silence, in some cases, can be a calculated form of resistance against oppression.

References:

- Ekka, A. (2022). Afghan women's voices: An impasse: Patriarchy's autocracy in the select Afghan novels. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 4(6).
- Hashimi, N. (2016). *A house without windows*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Hasrat, M. H., & Pfefferle, A. (2013). *Violence against women in Afghanistan*. Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.
- Moghadam, V. M. (1992). Patriarchy and politics of gender in modernizing societies: Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- Rasheed, T. (2022). Women in Afghanistan: The ambivalence of the prison in Nadia Hashimi's *A house without windows*. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 24(6), 17.
- Reddy, C. S. (2014). Women in Afghanistan: Their role in the political future. *World Affairs*, 18(2), 124–143.

Citation in APA 7th Edition: Kanchan. (2025). Windows to Resilience: Afghan Women's Voices and Cultural Reflections in Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows*. *Lyceum India Journal of Social Sciences*, 2(4), 83–89. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17222755>

Publisher's Note: *The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the publisher or editorial board. The publisher assumes no responsibility for any consequences arising from the use of information contained herein.*