



## **Ancestral Echoes: A Critical Study of Family Dynamics in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The paper entitled "Ancestral Echoes: A Critical Study of Family Dynamics in Nadia Hashimi's The Pearl That Broke Its Shell explores how ancestry plays a vital role in shaping a family both physically and psychologically. Familial relationships are very predominant in affecting an individual's life to a higher level. One can achieve greater heights with the help of a supportive family as well as lose their lives when their emotions are subjugated. If the family is reassuring and considerate then there is progression in an individual's life. Societal norms often mirror the individual habits cultivated within homes. Thinking capacity, emotional connections, and inherent humanity are deeply influenced by the family dynamics within which individuals are raised. Individuals from prominent families can leverage their connections to achieve success. As a result the whole system of subjugation, inequality and dominance can be eradicated. Through the intergenerational stories of both Rahima and her great grandmother Shekiba, this paper analyses how familial relationships shape an individual's identity and destiny across generations. The paper also examines the role of mothers, sisters, and female solidarity in traversing tyrannical family structures and societal expectations. It also offers a nuanced portrayal of family dynamics in Afghanistan, revealing both the restrictive nature of traditional familial roles and the potential for resilience and change within these ancestral resonances. This paper endeavours to justify how family is essential in shaping an individual's life that too in a patriarchal Afghan nation.*

**Keywords:** *afghan, family, patriarchy, resilience, trauma*

### **Introduction**

Nadia Hashimi is a pediatrician, novelist and also a former democratic congressional candidate for the United States House of Representatives. She was born on December 12, 1977, in Queens, New York to Afghan parents. Her parents immigrated to the United States in the early 70's. She is an Afghan-American novelist. She is best known for her debut novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, a story connecting the lives of two women even after centuries apart. This novel published in 2014 was an international best seller and was translated into multiple languages. Hashimi always intended her novel to be empowering for

women. In an interview with Girls' Globe- the global feminist media platform for gender equality, human rights, social justice and sustainability, Hashimi says, 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. (Girls' Globe)

### **Sisters' Rapport**

The novel opens with the story of Rahima, a nine years old girl who lives with two elder sisters, Shala and Parwin and two younger sisters, Rohila and Sitara. Shala, the first born is average looking and takes extra effort in beautifying herself. She speaks maturely and is well spoken to people around her. Hashimi describes "People looked at her and couldn't help but smile. Polite and proper, she was a favourite in school. She had a way of looking at you and making you feel important" (6). On the other hand, Parwin is just the exact opposite of Shala. She lacks social skills but is good at artistic skills. "She had a gift, an ability to show you what you did not see, even though your eyes graced the same sights as hers. She could sketch a masterpiece in minutes but washing the dishes could take hours" (7). Unfortunately, she is born with a bad hip and a limp. Meanwhile, Khala Shaima is also born with a crooked spine. She is the eldest aunt of Rahima and she is a savior to the family. Due to her physical deformity, her parents couldn't find her a suitor.

People made fun of her disability for having a hunched back and one raised shoulder. This is the reason why Khala Shaima did not make any efforts to beautify her or even dream about her marriage. She is seen taking high responsibilities of everything around her. She looked after her old parents, supervised every single thing around her. She is one among the strongest women characters in this novel who is very optimistic about life and also stood for her own rights as well as voiced for the rights of her loved ones. Rahima comments, "She was a safety net for anything our parents might not have been able to do for us and she was one of the few people who could stand being around *Padar-jan*" (9). She is so strong willed to let her nephews and nieces get a better education. Shaima couldn't digest the fact that the girls will no longer be sent to school. She comments, "If you hold these girls back for that, you're no better than the Taliban who closed their schools" (11). These women truly represent the traditional as well as modern Afghan familial situations in an understandable way.

This story traces back the lives of two women, Rahima and her great-great grandmother Shekiba, who becomes a prey undergoing humiliations and sufferings due to

their family situations. Shekiba's story inspired Rahima to become a bacha posh. As a boy, Rahima got the opportunities that were usually denied to girls in Afghan rural society then, foremost of which was the opportunity to be educated. Both of them struggle to overcome oppression and male domination that is all too commonly faced by women in patriarchal society. The two protagonists of the novel, Rahima and Shekiba live in Afghanistan some hundred years apart. Shekiba is Rahima's great-great-grandmother, yet they are bound by similar fates and destiny that entangle them as they live a century apart. Both women had adopted the custom of bacha posh, which gave them a respite from the oppressiveness of the Afghan society.

### **Father – a Major Figure**

In Afghan families, the father is the major figure and plays a huge role in taking any decisions in their daughter's life whereas the mother is seen voiceless under her husband. This story uncovers how decisions undertaken by parents or husbands without the consideration of their children, especially daughters, collapse their future and their lives as a whole. It also reveals their longingness to get back their single life. A father's role is an essential part in the development of a healthier family. A father must be able to see the futuristic view of their children before stepping into any decision. Asif, Rahima's father works under a warlord. Being an opium addict he always behaves rough at home. "It made him do funny things, behave in funny ways. Mostly he wanted to lie about the house and sleep. Sometimes he said things that didn't make sense. And he never remembered anything we said. It was worse when he didn't take his medicine" (24).

In the initial stage, Asif is unable to tolerate the fact that his girls are being chased by the local boys in the streets. He denies allowing his daughters to school thinking about the problems caused by the boys in the streets on their way back home. He fails to think about the future of all his daughters. As a result of his stubborn decision he denies their education and makes them stay at home helping their mother with household works.

Later he forces his daughters to marry at a young age to men who are five times his daughter's age. He is a typical example of an Afghan father with a patriarchal mindset. A mother is equally important to a child like that of their father. But in Afghanistan, a wife or a mother is considered to have the most pathetic situation in a family life. She doesn't even have rights to give suggestions in important family matters. A wife is considered as a voiceless person, a woman who is suppressed by her husband. Rahima's mother is seen as a mouthpiece of contemporary women in Afghanistan, who wholeheartedly dislikes all of their husband's decisions but was left in a terrible state to suffer for their daughters' lives.

Rahima is married to her father's warlord, Abdul Khaliq and Shala and Parwin are married to Abdul Khaliq's cousins. The internal traumas of these three young girls coping up to forcefully marry older men cause psychological traumas inside them. After all, they are not even adults to think of marrying at a young age. They aren't psychologically prepared to step out of their house to get into a new phase of life. They are still young girls who are in need of a mother's love as a strong pillar of support to mould them. Without any other choices left, they enter into marriage and get shifted to their husbands place. They long to be with each other the very next second they moved out of their house. Their longingness to visit their parents, know about their health, about their siblings and their surroundings are like a dream to them. Nothing smoothens their ways to fulfill their desires.

### **Marital Life**

A good marriage is based on mutual understanding and the trust the partners have on each other. Rahima did not have a happy married life, nor did Parwin and Shala. She did all the household chores and everything the family wanted her to do. She was literally treated like a servant in her husband's place. Her husband physically abused her and she felt absolutely powerless and voiceless under him. Rahima says, "I hated that I was powerless under him. I was supposed to be this man's wife and that changed everything. I wasn't supposed to fight back. And the look on his face told me that fighting back would only make matters worse" (174).

A child brings so much happiness into a family. In Afghan society, a male child is considered as a source of pride. The inability of Rahima's mother in bearing a male child sucks her father's mind. Whereas in Rahima's case, she is blessed with a baby boy. She is relieved as bearing a boy adds value to married women. Rahima's internal traumas change to some extent when her focus shifts on her child. She describes, "Jahangir was my salvation-his face became my escape. He gave me reason to rise in the morning and to hope for tomorrow" (212). On the other hand, Parwin suffers a lot with her physical deformity. She undergoes mental traumas and is left helpless without even having a person to share her emotions. Parwin ends her life not being able to cope with the people around her. The whole family is shattered by the death of Parwin. Finally this death has only made the family unite once again after they left their home. The pathetic plight of the family takes its shape with that of the selfish decision of their father to marry them in return for excessive opium. As an opium addict he considered opium to be far superior to that of his daughter's lives.

Rahima and Shekiba might have adopted similar techniques to deal with their lives, but they were oppressed in different ways. Ultimately though, the two women also had

different approaches to life. Rahima was definitely the stronger of two, as she refuses to accept oppression even in the face of danger. On the other hand, Shekiba allows herself to be the part of the system for survival. Though it could be the fact that Rahima lived a hundred years after Shekiba, or that she had Khala Shaima fighting in her corner, while Shekiba had no one. However, the fact remains that even a hundred years later, women are oppressed.

Towards the end, Rahima gets the courage she needed and longs for a transition in her life. She remembers the lifestyle of women in Kabul's parliament. This gave her a choice to change her life. She longs for freedom like the women in Kabul. Rahima comments, "They were independent and happy, something I'd tasted only as a young boy" (308). Rahima wishes to get back her past life as a young girl disguised as a bacha-posh wandering carefree in the streets. She finally thinks of an escape from the oppressed life she has been witnessing all these years. "An escape. I need to find an escape" (411).

### **Conclusion**

As mentioned in the article by Jibin Monish V & Dr M. Kannadhasan titled, "The Struggle of Women against Oppression – A Study of Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*: The bravery of Rahima inspires others to resist persecution. She finds a safer haven by fleeing to a shelter. She is free to live her own life without being oppressed. She is saved from male dominance since she can do it independently of her husband. In the end, she will be able to free herself from men's dominance. When she is at the shelter, she discovers that anyone can save her life from oppression by getting an education. She understands that education can be a weapon in her fight against the patriarchal society that oppresses her. (1214).

Afghanistan is seen as a nation with various familial norms and stereotypical family dynamics. The female characters presented by Nadia Hashimi are victimized by their own circumstances, thus undergoing transition in life and remain suppressive in a patriarchal society. It's in the hands of men to consider women as a part of the family rather than treating them like domestics. Daughters must be provided proper education like that of a son in Afghan society. The stereotypical mindset of Afghan people must be reformed in order to bring out an enhanced society. Thus the paper instills in us a proper view of the familial lives of Afghan people and how women are powerless and victimized within their own families.

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