



# From Silence to Voice: Reclaiming Identity in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*

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Manuscript ID:  
BIJ-SPL3-Nov25-ES-032

Subject: English

Received : 30.07.2025

Accepted : 08.10.2025

Published : 27.11.2025

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si3.25.Nov032

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## Abstract

*This paper looks at the issues of marginality, cultural displacement, and identity reclamation in Nadia Hashimi's novel The Pearl That Broke Its Shell. In the interwoven stories of Rahima and her great-great-grandmother Shekiba, the novel shows Afghan women negotiate with a very large-scale patriarchy that has made them invisible and voiceless. Both main characters present with cultural and social exclusion, which is a result of gender roles and traditional practices like bacha posh, which puts girls out as boys at times in which they may not otherwise have those freedoms. The novel does a great job at presenting the internal and external displacements, which in turn form the broken sense of self for the characters. Their journey is that of a struggle to restore identity in a culture that is dominated by sociocultural systems and systemic forces that undermine women. Using a postcolonial feminist lens, the study analyzes the role of storytelling and memory in empowerment and acts of defiance. It also illustrates the process of defiance and survival of the act of reclaiming identity in the context of collective and personal identity. Hashimi narrates a dissenting story portraying the socially dead women's lives and the routes they can take toward womanhood, which profoundly highlights resistance, self-determination, and identity reclamation.*

**Keywords:** marginality, identity, cultural displacement, Afghan women, postcolonial feminism.

In the current discourse on marginality and inclusion, literature gives an important lens to look at the frequently disregarded experiences of those silenced with the aid of sociocultural and political hierarchies. Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* emerges as an effective narrative that delves into the lived realities of Afghan ladies grappling with gender oppression, systemic exclusion, and the warfare for identity (Hashimi 9, 42). By weaving collectively the memories of two girls—Rahima and Shekiba—who

are separated with the aid of generations yet linked by a not unusual thread of subjugation and resistance, Hashimi creates a textured portrayal of resilience, memory, and voice (Hashimi 156, 157). Their tales remove darkness from the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that govern Afghan society while additionally offering a blueprint for resistance and identification reclamation. Through an important engagement with feminist, postcolonial, and trauma theories, this paper explores how the



novel contributes to the wider conversation on marginality and social inclusion, in particular as it relates to girls's lives in postcolonial, patriarchal contexts.

Rahima's story unfolds within the early 21st century, throughout a period of sociopolitical unrest in Afghanistan, while Shekiba's narrative dates back to a century earlier, at some point of King Habibullah's rule (Hashimi 10, 79). Despite the temporal hole, each girl comes upon parallel forms of gender-based total marginalization that pressure them into silence, subservience, and, in the long run, transformation (Hashimi 122, 184). Rahima, to begin with, allowed to stay as a *bacha posh*—a girl who temporarily assumes a male identification—is, in short, afforded privileges commonly denied to women: schooling, mobility, and voice (Hashimi 33-34). However, her freedom is fleeting. She is quickly married off as a toddler bride to a powerful warlord, where her voice is once more muted and her autonomy stripped (Hashimi 48-49, 95-96). In assessment, Shekiba, scarred both bodily and emotionally, unearths a not-going route to enterprise while she turns into a guard on the king's harem—a function that demands situations, traditional gender expectations, and redefines her sense of self (Hashimi 137-138, 175).

The culture of *bacha posh* stands at the heart of the radical's exploration of gender and identity. While it to begin with seems as a modern custom that permits women a few semblances of equality, it's ultimately a bandage over a deep societal wound (Hashimi 25-26, 120). The temporary nature of this identification underscores the stress of gender norms in Afghan society; women are allowed to exist as boys only until puberty, at which point they may be returned to their 'herbal' roles as other halves and moms. In this milieu, *bacha posh* is both a subversive act and a reminder of systemic failure—it affords freedom but in no way permanence (Hashimi 67). Hashimi does not romanticize this exercise; instead, she makes use of it to critique a society that may handiest believe female empowerment with the aid of temporarily erasing femininity itself.

Shekiba's transformation from a disfigured outcast to a royal protect challenges deeply held notions of beauty, femininity, and social worth (Hashimi 142-143). Her disfigurement, resulting from a coincidence in her formative years, results in her rejection by way of her own family and network. Yet it is exactly this rejection that sets her on a direction of independence (Hashimi 88, 149). In a society in which a woman's price is so tightly bound to her appearance and marriageability, Shekiba's exclusion turns into satirical freedom. Her role inside the palace—though nevertheless constrained inside a patriarchal gadget—allows her to exist outside conventional woman roles, giving her a degree of autonomy in any other case impossible for women of her time (Hashimi 176-177).

Rahima's and Shekiba's narratives are emblematic of what Chandra Talpade Mohanty phrases "the politics of place," in which girls's experiences of oppression are shaped by using intersecting forces along with gender, lifestyle, elegance, and colonial records (Mohanty 74-75). The novel is famous for how those forces do not function in isolation but rather make each different, producing a multi-layered shape of marginality. Rahima's subjugation is not just an end result of her gender but additionally of her socio-economic fame and the instability of a postwar society (Hashimi 36-38). Shekiba's marginalization, further, stems from an aggregate of personal tragedy, patriarchal expectancies, and cultural ostracism (Hashimi 91-159). Yet in each case, marginality also turns into a site of resistance—a paradoxical area in which identification is contested, redefined, and reclaimed.

Postcolonial feminist theory, especially as expressed through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is critical for expertise in the consequences of voice and silence within the novel. Spivak's well-known question—"Can the subaltern communicate?"—is embodied in each Rahima and Shekiba, who start the radical as silenced figures stuck in what Spivak describes as the "double colonization" of gender and imperialism (Spivak 90). Still, via private resistance and oral histories, they begin to construct counter-narratives that assign their silencing. In this way, the



radical gives a compelling reaction to Spivak—now not an easy “sure,” but rather a nuanced statement that the subaltern can talk, albeit via pain, resistance, and reclamation (Spivak ninety-one; Hashimi 185–186).

The act of storytelling itself becomes a radical tool for survival and agency. Rahima draws strength and meaning from the stories mentioned by the aunt, Khala Shaima—a story that not only inspires her but also provides a blueprint to navigate her own challenges (Hashimi 31, 110). This intergenerational link affirms the feminist axiom that “the personal is political”—that individual stories can lead to collective awareness (Hooks 62–63). Bell Hooks emphasizes the importance of “talking back” in feminist praxis—the act by which marginalized voices reclaim agency through articulation. Rahima and Shekiba both participate in this form of “talking back”—not always through speech, but through actions that resist submission and affirm subjectivity (Hooks 67; Hashimi 206).

The novel also engages with trauma—now not simply personal trauma, but collective and inherited trauma. The private wounds of Rahima and Shekiba are embedded within a countrywide context of warfare, occupation, and cultural upheaval (Hashimi 96, 160). The violence they endure is both personal and systemic, reflective of what theorists describe as “cultural trauma,” wherein complete communities convey the mental scars of ancient injustice (Alexander 1-2). The trauma they experience does not render them passive; alternatively, it compels them toward acts of resilience. Their survival, despite the silencing effects of violence, becomes a political announcement—a defiance of the structures that sought to erase them (Hashimi 217-218).

Homi K. Bhabha’s idea of hybridity similarly illuminates the fluid and contested nature of identification within the novel. Both Rahima and Shekiba occupy hybrid areas—they may be neither entirely conformist nor outright rebels, neither entirely within the device nor fully outside of it (Bhabha 112). Their identities are negotiated through a consistent interplay of cultural expectation, private

preference, and social constraint. This hybridity is not a weakness but an energy, bearing in mind the emergence of complicated, multifaceted selves that withstand binary definitions of gender, strength, and identity. Bhabha’s “third area”—the distance of negotiation and in-betweenness—will become obtrusive in the way each girl navigates their roles as daughters, wives, outcasts, and eventually, storytellers in their own lives (Bhabha 113-114).

Hashimi’s work is not merely a narrative of individual empowerment; it’s miles a statement at the broader social structures that determine who gets to talk and who’s silenced. The political instability of Afghanistan, the long-lasting impact of colonial legacies, and the grip of fundamentalist ideologies all converge to shape an antagonistic environment for women (Hashimi 219-220). Yet inside these surroundings, the radical gives moments of rupture—times when organization is declared, even supposing briefly. These moments remind us that marginality is not a fixed position but a dynamic method shaped by using powerful members of the family, resistance, and the will to narrate one’s life.

By centering female experience within a specific cultural and historical framework, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* makes a giant contribution to feminist and postcolonial literature. It refuses to universalize women’s studies as an alternative, grounding them within the particularities of Afghan society at the same time as drawing connections to broader issues of oppression, survival, and transformation (Hashimi 210-211). In doing so, it aligns with the desires of multicultural literary grievance, which seeks to encompass various voices inside the canon and to undertake dominant narratives that marginalize or erase them.

In addition, the radical acts as a powerful instructional tool, which promotes cross-cultural sympathy and knowledge. For readers strange with Afghan women’s sociopolitical realities, it gives a lens into lives marked with the aid of voice and silence, presence and erasure (Hashimi 223). Through the emotionally reflective story and richly characterized characters, it invites readers to bear



witness to the experiences presented, invisible in the mainstream discourse. This forces them to listen—to really listen—to the sounds that are quiet, and by doing so, to participate in the process of social inclusion.

Finally, Pearl broke his shell. In the front of the margins is a literary will for the permanent electricity of voice, reminiscence, and resistance. Through the parallel tales of Rahima and Shekiba, Nadia Hashimi no longer only criticizes the structural forces pursuing women but also celebrates the quiet revolutions in the margins—the records, the courage, and the uncontrolled hunt for the self—advanced gasoline. The novel emphasizes the reality that identification isn't given as something but as something gridded, regularly in ache, in the war pass. This confirms that literature may be more than a reflection of society—it is able to be a catalyst for alternate places, a place in which silence isn't handily heard but remembered. When we convert silence to voice, Hashimi invites us to acknowledge the unconventional potential of narrative in restoring

collective wounds and imagining an extra-inclusive global (Hashimi 229–230).

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