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Undoing Subalternity in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*[*]

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Abstract: *Modern Afghan author Khaled Hosseini addresses social, political, and cultural issues, especially those affecting women, in his fiction. Hosseini's novels have been translated into over 70 languages and sold over 40 million copies worldwide. Hosseini grew up in Afghanistan, so his fascination with the country and its women is probably grounded in his experiences there. A Thousand Splendid Suns has been the subject of many critical examinations. The Pearl That Broke Its Shell by Nadia Hashimi is similar to works by Khalid Hosseini in style and subject matter. Hashimi and Hosseini experienced the bitterness of migration, although Hashimi left for the West first and lived there for the bulk of her life. Their writings are significant because they combine the tales and sorrows of women with patriarchal violence, and the imposition of unsavoury cultures on women can be found in both books. In these contexts, both novels are analysed in this paper through the lens of subaltern theory.*

Keywords: *Khaled Hosseini, Nadia Hashimi, A Thousand Splendid Suns, The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, Subaltern.*

Introduction

Mainly, this paper examines whether the voices of subalterns can be accurately reflected in the critical discourse of history, sociology, culture, and literature. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak addresses this issue in one of the most seminal writings of the humanities in the second half of the 20th century. Since "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) was published, a diverse range of literary theorists, including Spivak herself, have investigated the consequences and shadow presence of this question in literary criticism, especially comparative studies of world literature. Subalternity in Afghanistan is a complicated topic with many causes. Nonetheless, the subalternity examined here has nothing to do with post-colonial theory and is instead grounded

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in an attempt to provide a dynamic interpretation of the lives of Afghan women. In contrast to earlier studies, this study examines the word "subaltern" from various angles, including its historical, cultural, and religious connotations, as well as its consequences on the lives of Afghan women.

Two books written on Afghan women have been selected to analyse the research question: *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) by Khaled Hosseini and *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) by Nadia Hashimi. This paper compares the male and female narratives of Afghan women by considering how the two sexes interpret the lives of Afghan women. Because most of their works focus on cultural and social concerns, patriarchy, and violence against women in Afghan culture, these two writers may be regarded as two of the most prominent authors who explore women's lives in various eras of history through diverse lenses. Relationships between spouses, lovers, children, grandchildren, and siblings are common themes in the works of Nadia Hashimi and Khaled Hosseini. Most of the protagonists in these two writers' works are women who face some kind of oppression.

Spivak's idea of subalternity is the theoretical lens through which this study seeks to examine the subaltern social and religious status of Afghan women. It also shows how women may overcome oppression and utilize their subjugated bodies to create a vision of women's liberation. The two tales' female protagonists are used as case studies to examine the idea of subalternity. It is important to notice that the narrative scenes in both tales switch personalities midway through. However, the central concern is the unresolved question of whether or not the stories' protagonists ever feel inferior.

This article consists of three sections. It first analyses the issue of being a woman in Afghanistan by focusing on patriarchy, forced marriage, bacha posh, domestic violence, and Pashtunwali. Secondly, Spivak’s subaltern theory is applied to the books in the Afghan context. Lastly, it discusses both novels, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns,* in terms of subaltern theory by referring to subsections mentioned in the first section.

This paper becomes significant as it discusses the intertwining of Afghan history, politics, and the patriarchal cultural norms and customs evident in the two novels. These books are narrated from a female perspective, covering a wide range of issues and hardships experienced by Afghan women throughout the country's history. Moreover, the importance of this study also lies in the fact that the selected novels are multi-dimensional and multi-voiced narratives. Although the female characters in both stories live inside four walls and a closed environment, the narratives are entirely open, and the space is vast. Important events that happened outside are narrated and linked with the inner space where women live. For this reason, the feeling of being limited by

time, place, and characters does not arise, and a general study of women's lives in Afghanistan is obtained on the path of history. The novels are unique because they feature women's perspectives on social, cultural, and political oppressions. Therefore, this study can shed some light on discovering hidden truths behind the ruling traditions in Afghanistan, which have kept women in complete darkness.

Application of Subaltern Theory into the Afghan Context

The term 'subaltern' was first used by the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci to describe social groups that are under the domination or hegemony of the ruling class (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 246). The word has been popularized as a critical concept to describe subordinates in politics and culture. Similarly, Thomas argues that, from Gramsci's point of view, this concept refers to societies that are suffering under the hegemonic rule of the elite classes and whose fundamental rights, which are participation in the development of local history and culture, are being trampled upon (Thomas, 2018, p. 865). In a part of his prison notebooks, Gramsci emphasizes the necessity of theoretical study of the lower classes, focusing on several key issues:

- The basis of the formation of these social classes
- Their dependence on the political processes of the ruling class
- Their active participation in politics and after
- The formation of social relations that indicates the autonomy and potential independence of the lower classes. (Hoare & Smith, 1971, p. 47)

Gramsci's theories about subaltern otherness inspired a group of South Asian historians to founded the Subaltern Studies Group. The members of this group, especially Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Arnold, and Gayatri Spivak, while researching the Indian peasant resistance in the 1980s, sought to present a new narrative of Indian and South Asian history (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 246).

Although the subject of the subaltern has always been the focus of post-colonial thinkers, it seems that Spivak and Homi Bhabha have shown more interest in the issue. In her controversial essay "Can the Subaltern Speak," Spivak questions the history of the writers of the subaltern studies due to the one-dimensional use of this concept and raises the question of whether the subaltern, especially women, can achieve a single voice and the right to express their opinions. Spivak kept pushing the boundaries of subaltern studies by centring her research on the lives of women who had been written out of official Indian history. Spivak contends that Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver", written in the Bengali language, powerfully articulates the history of female subalterns through the female protagonist Jashoda. The story describes the decay of Jashoda's mother's body after she is adopted as a professional mother in a wealthy Brahmin family. For Spivak, Jashoda's maternal body powerfully highlights the non-success of Indian nationalism in emancipating

lower-class, subaltern women and also challenges the presupposition, predominant in Western society and culture, that women's reproductive labour is undesired and offensive domestic work.

Another key offering of the subaltern feminist thought is a social critique of Western feminism, especially its universalizing claim to talk for all women regardless of differences in class, culture, language, or nationality (Morton, 2003, p. 8-9). Spivak also emphasizes that the subaltern can never resist or oppose the dominant discourse - a discourse that creates the language and conceptual divisions through which the subaltern can speak. From Spivak's point of view, the way that defines the colonizer or the inferior ruling class is an elitist act itself (1988, p. 273). Based on this reason, even if the ruling power claims that it allows the subordinates to speak, in practice, they cannot express themselves and their identity is inevitably defined and distorted by the elites, which call them the "signifier of oriental Other" (İşçi, 2021, p. 273).

Spivak's critical approach is a reaction to the tendency of radical political movements to heroize the "sub" and exaggerate the "intrinsic role of the Third-World people in advancing the battle against global and multinational capitalism. Obviously, this problem stems from the fundamental deconstruction of the most specific violent structures in the language of critique and theory. However, it does not make Spivak consider herself a different species. Spivak uses the suicide of an ordinary woman to illustrate the impact of the dominant culture on the subaltern:

> A young woman of sixteen or seventeen, Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, hanged herself in her father's modest apartment in North Calcutta in 1926. The suicide was a puzzle since, as Bhuvaneswari was menstruating at the time, it was clearly not a case of illicit pregnancy. Nearly a decade later, it was discovered that she was a member of one of the many groups involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence. She had finally been entrusted with a political assassination. Unable to confront the task and yet aware of the practical need for trust, she killed herself. (1988, p. 307)

The analysis of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri's suicide and Spivak's critical reading of the Indian society's reaction to this event are among the memorable phrases of the article. Bhuvaneswari, who was aware of the possibility of her death being associated with uninitiated sexual relations in public opinion, had consciously chosen her monthly period as the date of her suicide and, in Spivak's words, "while waiting, Bhuvanesari, the Brahmacharini who was no doubt looking forward to good wifehood, perhaps rewrote the social text of sati-suicide in an interventionist way" (1988, p. 307). She rewrote her life. The fact that, according to the custom of Sati, a widow should wait until the end of her menstrual period to sacrifice herself and that Bhuvaneswari had chosen precisely this period of time to end her life is a sign of her effort (Principe, 2013, p. 239). However, the thing that bothers Spivak more than anything is the superficial confrontation of the people around this woman and also the Indian elite with the complicated political and social conditions of her life. The short answer of Spivak to the question "Can the subaltern speak?" is

no because the subjugated, under the rule of colonialism, has a multifaceted identity and belongs to heterogeneous societies.

History as a narrative conflict is the primary epistemology in subaltern studies. It proves that various factors and imposed cultures have usually robbed the subalterns, especially women, brutally stripped off their rights and subjeed them to violence. For the reason that violence is the oppressive side of power, there are inevitably superior and subaltern sides in a violent relationship. By combining philosophical concepts and everyday life, Spivak has been able to draw different dimensions of the violence against women in third-world countries. Intending to explain the different layers of violence caused by a patriarchal society, this section uses Spivak's theory to show how Afghan writers have represented different aspects of subalternity in the events of the stories and used the issue of women as a narrative theme.

Gender discrimination in the third-world literature is an issue that is given a different direction. For instance, Indian feminist Chandra Mohanty has criticized the discrimination between Western women and third-world women in her article “Under Western Eyes”. She argues that Western feminists ignore the concept of race in the representation of women of the third world. Mohanty elaborates that the typical image of third-world women is more religious, dependent, and pious than that of first-world women, who are liberal, independent, and secular. For her, Western feminists characterize third-world women as backward, illiterate, non-progressive and religious (1984, p. 341-342). Similarly, Kimberle Crenshaw claims that third-world women are victims of double discrimination. This means that women are discriminated against firstly based on their race and colour and secondly as being women (1991, p. 1244). Unlike other writers of subjugated women, Spivak ignores all discussions of the distinction between Western and non-Western women. Instead, she focuses on the causes that deaden the sound of the subaltern women. She explains that subalterns can speak if they retrieve and restore history and question their identity to find out the cause of their persecution (1988, p. 307). To Spivak, the best way to pull down the oppression from society is to give a voice to marginalized or subaltern communities in discourse and legislative issues. The literary structure of the two books studied here is a way to express the concerns of subalterns, but at the same time, in the novels, the power of seeing is available to the woman, who reflects a picture of the feminine world as a result. Both novels rely on the representation of voice, agency, and the reconstruction of common mentalities or structures around women.

In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, Nadia Hashimi attempts to link the female characters with contemporary trends by defying the paternal standards and traditional customs upon which

Afghan traditions are based. Hashimi's protagonist, Rahima, finally comes out of her shell when she agrees to the traditional role of the bacha posh and begins to live her life following her own desires. In consequence, she becomes a pearl that breaks its shell. Hashimi depicts the expedition of Afghan women and their struggle for survival in difficult political conditions. Hashimi narrates the history of Afghanistan, the Soviet and American invasions and the consequences that have affected the lives of Afghan women. Cruelty, humiliation, patriarchy, and one-sided policies in a male context are all issues that are discussed.

Women in Afghanistan have not only struggled with many challenges caused by the imperial powers of the Western organized wars but also suffered from the traditional, religious and social norms imposed by their own patriarchy. Although the reasons for the exclusion of women from the stage of history are multifaceted, in underdeveloped countries that are under the rule of Islamic regimes, the inclusion of religion for women is inevitable. In Islamic countries, religion contributes greatly to society's culture and creates specific moral roles in everyday life. As for Afghanistan, Islamic rulings have woven the entire face of the country, especially since the late 1990s. Although there are no formal laws, the regulation of local traditions in the country is mandatory. New restrictions imposed by the Taliban have made life difficult for Afghan women, but the country's history shows that they have always been subject to severe limitations since the 1990s. In recent times, women in Afghanistan have not enjoyed much freedom, and freedom had no meaning in other areas except in the capital cities. The women's liberation movement is believed to have culminated as the United States positioned itself as the sole protector of the East and an advocate for women's rights worldwide, transitioning from "the traditional role of the women was identified as a typical homemaker and conservative nest builder to her husband and her family" (İşçi, 2022, p. 327).

The book by Khaled Hosseini has also lifted the veil on the fact that, particularly for women, this has never been the case in Afghanistan. The women of Afghanistan have suffered the most from the devastation, poverty, identity crises, and sexism created by the wars between Russia and the United States in that country. Khaled Hosseini also tries to bring the voice of Afghan women to the world's ears. Hosseini shows how the war in Afghanistan takes away the freedom that women used to enjoy. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini depicts Afghan women whose inferiority is always interwoven with patriarchy and the governing forces. Unavoidably, millions of Afghans have been subjected to different crimes and horrible deeds committed by oppressors and patriarchy. They are girls who are forced to get married at a very early age. They are the wives who serve their husbands like a slave. They are mothers who sacrifice themselves to protect their children during war and give them a better future. "Although they are also the subjects of

colonization and politics, subaltern women have always been an inspiration for writers and photographers because their voice needs to be heard" (Karaman, 2022, p. 6).

Undoing Subalternity in The Novels

Patriarchy

Being a woman, being black, and being poor are actually three layers of being a subaltern. The fourth part of the subaltern studies is a semi-specialized study about the subaltern woman and the epistemic violence inflicted on her in India. This means that the issue of women's awareness as a subordinate co-existed with her racial and class consciousness. Spivak rewrites Freud's statement, "A child is being beaten," in this way "white men save brown women from brown men" (1988, p. 296). Perhaps this is the most important proposition of Spivak, who offers a critical study of women, race and the lower class in a mixed manner that examines the topic of the identity of humans and takes two fundamental parts of identity, specifically gender and race, as its subjects of interest (Pourjafari, 2022, p. 22). Spivak considers this repression to be a type of collective history of sadomasochistic repression in collective imperialist action, which is worth studying in the framework of wild psychoanalysis. The history of suppressing the child lies in her forgetfulness, and the history of suppressing subjugation lies in India's ancient past. By connecting Freud to Marx, Spivak seeks to explain the ideological deception of the imperialist political economy and outline the history of repression. The history of repression has two roots: The abolition of the sacrifice of widows by Britain in 1829, and the past is tied to the texts of Dharmaśāstra and Rigveda.

Khaled Hosseini's novel also narrates the subject of women's subalternity in the form of story characters in different ways. Being a woman, being alone, being impoverished, and being a widow are actually the layers of subalternity in Khaled Hossein's novel. Mariam's mother commits suicide by hanging herself when her daughter abandons her and goes to live with her father:

> "Nay, nay, nay." Mullah Faizullah put his hand on her knee. "Your mother, may Allah forgive her, was a troubled and unhappy woman, Mariam jo. She did a terrible thing to herself. To herself, to you, and also to Allah. He will forgive her, for He is all-forgiving, but Allah is saddened by what she did. He does not approve of the taking of life, be it another's or one's own, for He says that life is sacred. You see—" He pulled his chair closer, took Mariam's hand in both of his own. "You see, I knew your mother before you were born, when she was a little girl, and I tell you that she was unhappy then. The seed for what she did was planted long ago, I'm afraid. What I mean to say is that this was not your fault. It wasn't your fault, my girl." (2007, p. 40)

By addressing the scene of Mariam's mother's suicide, Khaled Hosseini reveals the secrets hidden in Afghan society, which makes women look inferior, and their words are not heard by anyone and die in complete silence. Looking at the character Nana or the woman who committed suicide,

it can be seen that this woman is the one who has an illegitimate child from a well-known capitalist man in society. Although the illegitimate child is the result of the relationship of both parties, and both men and women are responsible for this, all the responsibilities fall only on the woman who gave birth to the child. This, like Spivak's theory, describes two significant causes in a different format. Abolition of the victimization of women by a capitalist group and second, the victimization and inferiority of women due to male domination and traditional norms.

At the beginning of the story, Nana's mother is introduced as a poor servant who is rejected by society for having sexual relations with Jalil Khan, the rich man and capitalist man who defends himself by putting all the blame on a woman. Nana is actually a woman who is condemned to endure patriarchal pressures and also being rejected by society. For, in Afghanistan, the finger of criticism is always towards women than men as Nana says to Mariam: “Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man’s accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam” (Hosseini, 2007, p. 7).

In the patriarchal society of Afghanistan, it is a common custom to call a child born before the marriage of her parents ‘harami’ or illegitimate child and the woman who gives birth to the child is also called misguided and evil, and women who have an illegitimate child are dragged to death by the men of the society. However, men do not experience any harassment due to the gender superiority given to them by society. Mariam is no exception, but five-year-old Mariam does not actually figure out the denotative and demonstrative importance of harami. Indeed, even her mother does not stop torturing her by calling her harami (Wahedi, 2021, p. 43).

Spivak criticizes the patriarchal system and calls it a deceptive strategy. She criticizes patriarchy by dealing with the lives of Hindu widows who climb up from the pile of firewood to burn their dead husbands and sacrifice themselves for it. Widow was called sati in Sanskrit, but the early British colonists translated it as suttee. To Spivak, imperialism presents itself as the founder of the desirable society by supporting women as the object of their protection from the oppression of its own kind. However, the strategy of patriarchy with a deceptive appearance is a gift of free choice for the female subject. Spivak, in her analysis of Dharmaśāstra and Rigveda, considers them as origins of her homology of Freud (1988, p. 299). This is the analysis of a post-colonial woman whose “readings are, rather, an interested and inexpert examination, by a postcolonial woman, of the fabrication of repression, a constructed counternarrative of woman's consciousness, thus woman's being, thus woman's being good, thus the good woman's desire, thus woman's desire” (Spivak, 1988, p. 299). This is a study about the fate of a loyal widow and how suicide is allowed, as well as the manner of issuing a legal permit for the suicide of a widow,

and the nature of female etiquette and mourning that is honourable. According to Spivak, the appeal of sati was that it was ideologically rewarding and motivating. Just as the attraction of imperialism was that from an ideological point of view, it was a compelling and stimulating social mission. Today, Sati has become an ideology and is a common name for girls, meaning good wife. Between patriarchy and imperialism, subjectification, and objectification, the female face disappears; it does not fall into the abyss of the first era but turns into a wandering and violent pendulum, which is the displaced image of the third-world woman caught between tradition and modernization. Therefore, As Spivak suggests: "The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (1988, p. 308). Khaled Hosseini clearly shows that women in Afghanistan are a subaltern group, that the patriarchal society ignores the majority of the violence inflicted on them, and that women are also not able to erase this violence.

Nadia Hashimi addresses the representation of subaltern women in her novel, which is a significant aspect of South Asian literature. Her work explores the profound connection between two Afghan women from different generations, both of whom yearn for freedom. The story also explores the themes of sexism, gender subalternity, and the fight of Afghan women against patriarchal standards in the most explicit manner. The experiences of the female characters in the story of their position in the patriarchal society clearly show the social status, disability, violence against women's class, and gender oppression (Siber, 2022, p. 265). As Corboz writes, the male-centred fabric of Afghan society is especially visible when we look at the family structure. In Afghanistan, a country where women are only responsible for the production of male children, the birth of boys is celebrated with grandeur (Corboz et al., 2020, p. 590). Nadia Hashimi critiques and examines Rahima's mother's part in her novel to demonstrate the extent of male-centered patriarchy in Afghanistan:

> "If I had a son this would not be happening! Goddamn it! Why do we have a house full of girls! Not one, not two—but five of them!" he would yell. Madar-jan would busy herself with housework, feeling the weight of disappointment on her shoulders. (2014, p. 5)

The author analyses the abstract patriarchal structures from two separate perspectives: masculinity, which comprises patriarchy in the concept of family, and patriarchy in society or system. The author vividly portrays how the patriarchal system suppressed women and devastated the condition of women in Afghanistan. Regarding the hierarchy of the roots of patriarchy, Nadia shows that the authority of a man is based on the family framework. Most of the scenes in her book show the negative aspects of the fact that the men of the family, in the role of father, brother or husband, do not value the women of the family and make all their life decisions. For instance, in one part of the story, when the girls want to go to school, they are

prevented by the father because he thinks that the man of the family has the authority to interfere in the life of the women in the family much more than anyone else:

> … I wasn't a very brave nine-year-old when it came time to face Padar-jan. I kept my thoughts bottled behind my pursed lips. In the end, Padar-jan decided to pull us out of school again.
>
> We begged and pleaded with Padar-jan to let us return to school. One of Parwin's teachers, a childhood friend of Madar-jan, even showed up at the house and tried to reason with our parents. Padar-jan had relented in the past but this time was different. He wanted us to go to school but struggled with how to make that happen safely. How would it look for his daughters to be chased by local boys for all to see? Awful.
>
> "If I had a son this would not be happening! Goddamn it! Why do we have a house full of girls! Not one, not two—but five of them!" he would yell. Madar-jan would busy herself with housework, feeling the weight of disappointment on her shoulders.
>
> His temper was worse these days. Madar-jan would tell us to hush and be respectful. She told us too many bad things had happened to Padar-jan and it had made him an angry man. She said if we all behaved then he would go back to being his normal self soon. But it was getting harder and harder to remember a time when Padar-jan wasn't angry and loud. (2014, p. 5)

Hashimi goes on to criticize the social, cultural and historical constructions that present patriarchy, which are evident and natural things in Afghanistan. Hashimi sees girls who are prevented from leaving the house at the same time as they reach puberty because the social order in Afghanistan is designed in such a way that the space outside the house is reserved for men, and women are not imagined in public space:

> Now that we were home, I was given the extra chore of bringing the groceries from the store. My older sisters were quarantined since they were older and noticeable. I was, thus far, invisible to boys and not a risk. … Two weeks into our expulsion from school, the shop owners had gotten to know me. There were not many nine-year-old girls who would walk determinedly from shop to shop. (2014, p. 5-6)

Now, we can look for an answer to the question raised by Spivak in the texts of both authors, Hashimi and Hosseini. The study's outcome shows that women are always at the forefront of every struggle for women's rights and fight for change. According to the structural analysis of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns,* it can be seen that Khaled Hosseini wants to portray and convey his idea about how women are subordinated and exploited in the patriarchal culture and how they speak against patriarchy. Hosseini creates the paradigm that women are not always silent, weak, incapable, and dependent on men. The female characters in this novel can break the status, rights, roles, and participation of women classified by patriarchal culture. Although they face problems and even become victims in some cases, they never stop fighting. Therefore, the ability of women to speak out against patriarchy is classified under the feminist attitude. In the novel, Khaled Hosseini portrays two types of female characters in the role of several women. The persona of Nana reveals a woman who is in between passive acceptance and revelation. Despite her constant criticism of Afghan society's rigid patriarchal system, she accepts the

position society places her in and the discrimination she faces. For example, in a part of the book, it is said that when her daughter Mariam dreams about going to school and getting an education, Nana says that they do not teach the skill of 'tahammul' at school:

> "What's the sense schooling a girl like you? It's like shining a spittoon. And you'll learn nothing of value in those schools. There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school. Look at me."
>
> "Only one skill. And it's this: tahamul. Endure." (2007, p. 17)

Nana's personality constantly talks about his disappointment with men and life. A woman who is angry most of the time curses the children and considers men to be the cause of women's misery: "Nana yelled at the boys as she carried bags of rice inside, and called them names Mariam didn't understand. She cursed their mothers, made hateful faces at them. The boys never returned the insults" (2007, p. 14). However, the answer to the question of whether this height of anger in front of men will rescue her and her daughter is no. She even restricts her social circle and desires nothing but solitude:

> Nana made no secret of her dislike for visitors—and, in fact, people in general—but she made exceptions for a select few. And so there was Gul Daman's leader, the village arbab, Habib Khan, a small-headed, bearded man with a large belly who came by once a month or so, tailed by a servant, who carried a chicken, sometimes a pot of kichiri rice, or a basket of dyed eggs, for Mariam. (2007, p. 15)

This is what Downing and Roush name Stage I, the passive acceptance of their five-stage feminist identity model. A woman in this stage "carefully selects associates and experiences so as to avoid contact with ideas that may upset her sense of equilibrium as a woman" (1985, p. 698). Mariam is the only one whom Nana can depend on and share her life with. Unlike Mariam, Laila comes from a modern, relatively liberal background and has a spirit of freedom. Unlike Nana, who detested male society and never left the house, she loves the outdoors and school and being in society: "For Laila, being out in the streets had become an exercise in avoiding injury" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 208).

Nevertheless, where does this spirit of Laila's desire for freedom come from? It goes back to Laila's family system. Laila was brought up in a setting that valued gender equality. Thanks to her educated parents, she has a strong feminist identity and can recognize the advantages of being a woman and never accept unfair treatment. This means that conservative men's oppression of women in Afghanistan starts from within the families, which, in some cases, prohibits women from struggle and self-awareness. On the other hand, if this oppression comes from the outside, it can go beyond the traditional gender roles; although this point in Khaled Hosseini's novel has not evolved to the final stage (V), an active commitment of the five-stage feminist identity model

which "involves the translation of the newly developed consolidated identity into meaningful and effective action" (Downing & Roush, 1985, p. 702).

Hashimi's books represent the battle of Afghan women against the patriarchal system and explore the tensions between feminists and the Afghan patriarchy, as well as how women use language to contest the monopoly and rules imposed by patriarchy (Monish & Kannadhasan, 2021, p. 1210). The most important aspect of women's struggle is building their self-consciousness. After all the domination of men, discrimination and mistreatment, oppression and violence that destroys the rights of women, women start to understand that these attitudes are unfair (Fauzia & Rahayu, 2019, p. 2). The first female character of the novel who has self-awareness is Parvin:

> Parwin was another story. She was striking. Her eyes were not the mud-brown color the rest of us had. Instead, hers were a hazel-gray blend that made you forget what it was that you were going to say. Her hair hung around her face in wavy locks with a natural luster. She was undeniably the best-looking girl in our whole extended family. (Hosseini, 2007, p. 7)

Hamida is another example of braveness in the story, and she actually shows the level of strength of Afghan women who, even the explosion of war and many rockets in the sky, could not stop them from fighting. The author portrays Hamida's character in such a way that she does not move when she hears the explosion and instead tries to help the American woman who is Hamida's teacher and calm her down so that she will not be afraid of the explosion:

> Sufia had a hand on the door when a large explosion startled us all. We dropped to the ground, out of the way of windows. Nervous stares.
>
> "What was that?"
>
> "Something. Couldn't have been too far. But it didn't sound like a rocket."
>
> We were a people of war; explosions were familiar to our senses. But not for Ms. Franklin. Her face drained of color and she was shaking. Hamida put an arm around her young teacher, trying to reassure her. Sufia squeezed my hand. No other sounds came. Sufia got up cautiously and went to the door. People in the street were yelling, pointing. Her driver and guard jogged over to the door. They looked frustrated. They were panting. (2007, p. 313)

Hashimi depicts Parwin as a woman who lacks household skills but is passionate about painting and teaching. Even though the local boys harass her on the way to school, she still does not stop going to school. Parwin's father stops her from going to school because she is too young, but she never gives up and keeps painting in her small room; she realizes that, unlike Shekiba, she does not want to have her life controlled by others. Parwin paints the wounded face of a dog in the ruins, which represents her understanding of the conditions of Afghanistan and the civil wars in the country,

> She was completely lacking in social skills. If Madar-jan's friends stopped by, Parwin would shrink into a corner, busying herself with folding and refolding a tablecloth. If she could manage to escape before company made it into the room, even better. Nothing was more of a relief to her than avoiding

> the traditional three-kiss greeting. She kept her answers brief and all the while kept her eyes on the nearest escape route.
>
> …
>
> What Parwin lacked in social skill, she more than made up for in artistic ability. She was masterful with pencil and paper. Graphite turned into visual energy in her hands. Wrinkled faces, an injured dog, a house too damaged to repair. 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. (2104, p. 7)

The quotation reflects how women try to control the fear they have to cope with difficulties, as well as show a strong determination in how they deal with a challenging situation. The next character who struggles against patriarchy in Afghanistan is a woman living in the royal period. Zamarud, a woman who, contrary to the Afghan customs and traditions that limit women, becomes a parliamentarian and fights for the rights and freedom of women alongside other men. She faces several dangers, including death threats from males, yet she never gives up fighting for women's rights:

> Zamarud? Maybe, but probably not. Too many people disliked her, enough to try to kill her. If they tried once, they would likely try again and maybe succeed. Then it would be the name of a murdered parliamentarian. No, I thought. That wouldn't do.
>
> …
>
> The attack on Zamarud had frightened Badriya, as it had many other female parliamentarians. Hamida told me two women had decided not to return, afraid that they would be in danger as well. Zamarud was badly hurt, she said. Her wounds had gotten infected and she'd been hospitalized. She was not expected to survive. (2014, p. 330-332)

Hashimi shows that one woman's bravery can open the way for other women; for instance, Rahima's courage encourages others to fight against oppression. She runs to a shelter and finds safety there. She is not subjected to any restrictions and may live her own life. She is shielded and saved from male dominance since she can accomplish anything without her husband's help.

Forced Marriage

For women in developing countries like Afghanistan, marriage is a cause of physical and emotional suffering. Women are mistreated in the name of marriage and sold, traded, and exploited as a means of conflict resolution. The real-life incidents described in empirical investigations lend credibility to the fictitious shards of evidence gathered from both works. In Hosseini's works, women are subjected to violence, forced marriages, and other forms of sex discrimination, all of which are reflections of Afghan society (Asif et al., 2020, p. 7). Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* expresses the unspoken narratives and hidden layers that exist in the family, social and individual life of each person in Afghan society. Violence, authoritarianism, coercion, mistrust, polygamy, and insults and humiliations against women are expressed in this book in a fluent language. In this novel, Mariam and Laila are the two women

who marry Rasheed, an unwanted suitor. Mariam is forced to marry Rasheed at the age of fifteen (before puberty) by the order of her illegitimate father, Jalil's family. Laila is another woman who is forced to marry Rasheed because she is an orphan and pregnant lady who carries another man's child in her womb. Mariam and Laila are two different characters from two different cities and two completely different families. Mariam, the first character of this story, lives in Herat, the third largest town in the west of Afghanistan. From Mariam's perspective, Hosseini describes a lady who is compelled to marry a guy of the same age as her father. Mariam has no role or physical presence in this marriage and no right to decision-making. The man of the family makes all the decisions, and Mariam appears as the bride in the last moments:

> "Actually, your father has already given Rasheed his answer," Afsoon said. "Rasheed is here, in Herat; he has come all the way from Kabul. The nikka will be tomorrow morning, and then there is a bus leaving for Kabul at noon."
>
> ...
>
> In the morning, Mariam was given a long-sleeved, dark green dress to wear over white cotton trousers. Afsoon gave her a green hijab and a pair of matching sandals.
>
> She was taken to the room with the long, brown table, except now there was a bowl of sugar-coated almond candy in the middle of the table, a Koran, a green veil, and a mirror. Two men Mariam had never seen before—witnesses, she presumed—and a mullah she did not recognize were already seated at the table.
>
> Jalil showed her to a chair. He was wearing a light brown suit and a red tie. His hair was washed. When he pulled out the chair for her, he tried to smile encouragingly. Khadija and Afsoon sat on Mariam's side of the table this time. (2007, p. 45-47)

The staging of Mariam's traditional marriage by Khaled Hosseini is also a criticism of the process of traditional marriage in Afghanistan, where the role and satisfaction of a woman are less than that of the mullah of the region. One can only conjecture about the predicament of ladies in a country like Afghanistan, whose male-centric customs are sometimes as unmistakable and cruel as the nation's landscape. From studying any civilization's history, it is clear that the clergy is an integral part of that society and that individuals of all backgrounds and beliefs adhere to this social stratum to varying degrees. Undoubtedly, the social life of any society depends on the spread of spiritual values and perfections, and its death depends on the spread of vices and the loss of spirituality. The clergy's influence on individuals' spiritual lives is a significant matter and a mechanism for cultivating societal moral values. A look at the duties of clerics shows that they, as the guiding group of society, explaining and promoting moral virtues, have been the most important part of the society, and peace and encouraging people to human perfection have been at the top of their work.

In Afghanistan, spirituality has a different definition, and the mission of this sacred duty has been entrusted to those who, according to anthropologist Louis Dupree, have the lowest level of

education and "often function as part time religious leaders" (1973, p. 107). However, in Afghan society, preaching and guiding the people is done by those who do not have any formal religious training. Sometimes, advertisements are made for the benefit of the mullahs, which is nothing but falsehood (Barez, 2010). However, the truth is that in this land, it is enough for a person to have a pulpit in his possession to preach against women through its microphone. The group calls themselves clerics and flag bearers of religion in this country, but unfortunately, they have been the source of many intellectual deviations and anti-women propaganda in the history of this country. On Fridays, which are usually a holiday in Afghanistan, groups of men spend most of their precious time listening to this group's advice and words. At the end of the day, these men go back to their homes with harsher and more complex faces and tell women about the anti-feminist propaganda of the mullahs and criticize the women because there is not a day in the calendar of the gathering of this group when women are not targeted.

In addition to their religious and spiritual functions in propagating and promoting religious affairs, the mullahs play an important role in governance - especially in rural areas. Moreover, because of their reputation for piety and faith, they enjoy this role to the best of their ability in society. Therefore, they always express their policy towards women as clearly as possible, and no group has the right to reject it; they always deal with more issues that pit men against women than expressing opinions, and rulings such as value concepts, the colour of women's clothes, the sound of women's booties, and the shape and hair of women have always been the subject of their critical discussion. The published and unpublished narrations of women always talk about a woman's life who, regardless of her wishes, mullahs recite her marriage sermon. They arbitrarily write the fate of women with their pens and make them keep a woman in the dark forever. There are cases that show that this group has repeatedly ordered the stoning of women who allegedly had a romantic relationship with a man. In some cases, women's crimes have not yet been proven, and their stoning verdicts are read from the microphones of the same people. This means that mullahs not only fulfil the duty of propagating their moral human mission but also have a hand in promoting misogyny.

Similarly, in the novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, all the sisters have experienced forced marriage. However, what makes the subject of forced marriage in this story different from all the stories written on this subject is the forced marriage of underage girls or child abuse. Hashimi talks about the forced marriage of an eight-year-old girl and a ten-year-old boy who are forced to marry based on the decision of their families:

> "Zalmai, your girls are the right age. Maybe one of them. The older one. She's eight, isn't she?" Kaka Freidun's voice was unmistakable.

> "Sheeragha's daughter is the same age. And your daughter is the same age as Azizullah's son. She would be a good match as well and would settle our debts sufficiently." (2014, p. 38)

This marriage takes place because the father is in debt. A father who is unable to pay his debt gives his daughter in return for a loan. Although the man does not want to do this at first, when he sees that he cannot pay his debt, he forces his daughter to marry in an unpleasant custom:

> "Zalmai, I want you to speak to Azizullah and tell him that his son is still young. God willing, he and his father have long lives ahead of them with plenty of time to arrange for a suitable marriage. Tell him it would be more useful for them to have someone who can help them at home now. Tell him a happy wife bears more sons. Then you can offer Shekiba."
>
> "But what if he says no?"
>
> "He won't. Just be sure to tell him that she is very capable. That she has the back of a young man and can manage a household. She is a reasonable cook and she keeps quiet, now that she's been tamed. Tell him that it is an honorable thing to take in an orphan and that Allah will reward him for bringing her into his home. She will be like a second wife without the price." (2014, p. 38-39)

One of the worst traditions in Afghanistan is that most people look at marriage not as a bond of love and respect but as a matter of buying and selling girls. In these types of marriages, the fathers or heads of the family force the girls to marry in exchange for money or land. This custom has its roots in poverty and local tradition. It usually happens in remote areas and villages where women do not have any knowledge of their rights, and only the men of the family make decisions related to them. As mentioned in *An Account of The Kingdom of Caubul*, "to get a wife, Afghans only need to pay money. The common custom of selling girls in Afghanistan is done in two ways" (Elphinstone, 1815, p. 143). If the girls are adults, that means they have reached the age of at least 14 or 15, and they go to their husband's houses after being sold. If the sold girls are under 15 years old, they stay in their father's house until they reach 15 years of age, and after they turn 15, they go to their husband's house. This custom is more common in southern Afghanistan. The report from Tolo shows that women have been sold since the distant past, especially in the border areas of Nangarhar Province ('Trading of Women Rife in East Afghanistan, Report Claims', 2013).

The process of selling girls for money and goods has increased after the Taliban militants entered Afghanistan. After the arrival of this group in Kabul, the World Bank blocked millions of dollars related to Afghanistan, and this group also dismissed all the government employees who were performing duties in the previous regime. It was reported that a man sold his eight-year-old daughter to save her from poverty and hunger. This man chose the highest offer among suitors and sold his eight-year-old daughter to him for around 2,300 euros (Huang, 2022). Rehana Mirzaei, a ten-year-old girl from the ancient city of Herat, is another example of this obnoxious custom that has been occurring in recent years. Her family sold her so that her brother's accident-

related blindness could be treated. Hazaras who have come back to Afghanistan from neighbouring countries such as Iran and Pakistan and live in camps have also recorded cases of girl trafficking. In the meantime, the girls who are adults and are aware of the fate of the girls who are sold oppose this unpleasant custom in the villages of Afghanistan and commit suicide in some cases.

Both authors have their own unique narratives and criticisms regarding the forced marriage of girls. Khaled Hosseini narrates three women who are married to the same man. Besides, they are not dissatisfied with the existing situation, but they also cause the stepdaughter to experience forced marriage:

> They sat across from her, Jalil and his wives, at a long, dark brown table. Between them, in the center of the table, was a crystal vase of fresh marigolds and a sweating pitcher of water. The red-haired woman who had introduced herself as Niloufar's mother, Afsoon, was sitting on Jalil's right. The other two, Khadija and Nargis, were on his left. The wives each had on a flimsy black scarf, which they wore not on their heads but tied loosely around the neck like an afterthought. Mariam, who could not imagine that they would wear black for Nana, pictured one of them suggesting it, or maybe Jalil, just before she'd been summoned.
>
> …
>
> "Now he is a little older than you," Afsoon chimed in. "But he can't be more than…forty. Forty-five at the most. Wouldn't you say, Nargis?"
>
> "Yes. But I've seen nine-year-old girls given to men twenty years older than your suitor, Mariam. We all have. What are you, fifteen? That's a good, solid marrying age for a girl." There was enthusiastic nodding at this. It did not escape Mariam that no mention was made of her half sisters Saideh or Naheed, both her own age, both students in the Mehri School in Herat, both with plans to enroll in Kabul University. Fifteen, evidently, was not a good, solid marrying age for them. (2007, p. 42-43)

In contrast to Khaled Hosseini, the sensitivity of the protagonist in Nadia Hashimi's work towards forced marriage is noteworthy.

Domestic Violence

Gender-based domestic violence stems from a patriarchal system dependent on male supremacy in which women are considered "sub-humans" (Awitor, 2022, p. 40). In Afghanistan, men and boys are considered to be the head of the family and the breadwinner. Women and girls are mainly related to housework and play only one role, which is the role of childbearing, the ideological construction of gender. Limiting women to the home and not giving a role in any social life causes violence against them to penetrate all areas of society. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini shows how decisions regarding women are made without their consent in a male-dominated society. Various forms of violence, such as forced marriage, domestic violence, physical violence and sexual abuse of women, are presented in this novel (Fatma, 2022, p. 1106). Hosseini tells the story of Mariam, who is busy cooking food for her husband in the

kitchen, and her hands are shaking for fear that the food might be salty or low in oil, and this may mean another reason for women to be beaten:

> LATER IN THE DAY, Rasheed was still trying the radio as Mariam made rice with spinach sauce in the kitchen. Mariam remembered a time when she had enjoyed, even looked forward to, cooking for Rasheed. Now cooking was an exercise in heightened anxiety. The qurmas were always too salty or too bland for his taste. The rice was judged either too greasy or too dry, the bread declared too doughy or too crispy. Rasheed's faultfinding left her stricken in the kitchen with self-doubt.
>
> When she brought him his plate, the national anthem was playing on the radio.
>
> "I made sabzi," she said.
>
> "Put it down and be quiet."
>
> ....
>
> RASHEED MADE a ball of rice with his fingers. He put it in his mouth, chewed once, then twice, before grimacing and spitting it out on the sofrah.
>
> "What's the matter?" Mariam asked, hating the apologetic tone of her voice. She could feel her pulse quickening, her skin shrinking.
>
> "What's the matter?" he mewled, mimicking her. "What's the matter is that you've done it again."
>
> "But I boiled it five minutes more than usual."
>
> "That's a bold lie."
>
> "I swear—"
>
> He shook the rice angrily from his fingers and pushed the plate away, spilling sauce and rice on the sofrah. Mariam watched as he stormed out of the living room, then out of the house, slamming the door on his way out. (2007, p. 91-92)

In the rest of the story, it can be seen that Mariam is tortured just because the taste of the rice is not according to her husband's desire, and because he finds pebbles in the rice, he throws a handful of pebbles into Mariam's mouth and breaks her teeth:

> Mariam kneeled to the ground and tried to pick up the grains of rice and put them back on the plate, but her hands were shaking badly, and she had to wait for them to stop. Dread pressed down on her chest. She tried taking a few deep breaths. She caught her pale reflection in the darkened living-room window and looked away.
>
> Then she heard the front door opening, and Rasheed was back in the living room.
>
> "Get up," he said. "Come here. Get up."
>
> He snatched her hand, opened it, and dropped a handful of pebbles into it.
>
> "Put these in your mouth."
>
> "What?"
>
> "Put. These. In your mouth."
>
> "Stop it, Rasheed, I'm—"

> His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it. Mariam struggled against him, mumbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles in, his upper lip curled in a sneer.
>
> "Now chew," he said.
>
> Through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes.
>
> "CHEW!" he bellowed. A gust of his smoky breath slammed against her face.
>
> Mariam chewed. Something in the back of her mouth cracked.
>
> "Good," Rasheed said. His cheeks were quivering. "Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you've given me in this marriage. Bad food, and nothing else."
>
> Then he was gone, leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars. (2007, p. 93-94)

From the narration and conversation above, it can be seen that the violence happens when Mariam serves her husband. Mariam brings him the punishment he wants. A sentence such as "his powerful hands closed his jaw" proves that Rasheed physically abused his wife, and the sentence "he forcefully put hard and cold pebbles into her mouth" also expresses physical violence (Fadhilah & Handayani, 2022, p. 18). Rasheed's behaviour and beating of Mariam clearly show that Rasheed is a husband who considers himself the owner of his wife, and whenever Mariam makes a small mistake unintentionally, Rasheed's behaviour resorts to violence. Because Rasheed considers herself the owner of the house and Mariam an enslaved person, he can easily give her orders. From the point of view of men like Rasheed, wives are only for cooking, and if women's cooking is not suitable for men, they can be punished. From the point of view of men like Rasheed, men have the right to punish women whom they see as their subordinates. The narrative also reveals that Mariam is not the only victim of domestic abuse. As the head of the house and the primary provider for his family, Rasheed often mistreats Laila because of her gender. His son is the only member of the family he does not mistreat physically or emotionally since, being a guy, he is given more respect than his sisters.

When it comes to sexual violence, it can be seen that Nana is the first victim in the story to experience sexual harassment and marital rape. In other cases, Mariam and Laila are also subjected to physical violence and rape (Shihada, 2019, p. 27). Laila is a girl who was born into an enlightened family. She can read and write. She lost her parents and her entire family due to the civil wars in Afghanistan and the rocket that hit her home. She gets out from under the rubble alive, and Rasheed takes her home because he has no one to take care of her. When he goes to Rasheed's house, Rasheed's first wife, Mariam, takes care of her. While she is on the sick bed, Rasheed wants to make her his second wife. When Laila is in a sick bed, and her wounds have

not yet healed, Rasheed proposes to her and asks her to put a wedding ring on her finger because she is a lonely and homeless woman, and Rasheed considers himself her owner:

> The next day, Laila stayed in bed. She was under the blanket in the morning when Rasheed poked his head in and said he was going to the barber. She was still in bed when he came home late in the afternoon, when he showed her his new haircut, his new used suit, blue with cream pinstripes, and the wedding band he'd bought her.
>
> Rasheed sat on the bed beside her, made a great show of slowly undoing the ribbon, of opening the box and plucking out the ring delicately. He let on that he'd traded in Mariam's old wedding ring for it.
>
> "She doesn't care. Believe me. She won't even notice."
>
> Laila pulled away to the far end of the bed. She could hear Mariam downstairs, the hissing of her iron.
>
> "She never wore it anyway," Rasheed said.
>
> "I don't want it," Laila said, weakly. "Not like this. You have to take it back." (2007, 9. 194)

It can be seen that Rasheed gives his first wife's wedding ring to Laila and tells him that Mariam never puts this ring on his finger. This scene shows that Rasheed married both women without their wishes and exposed them to rape. Khaled Hosseini draws the scenes of the married life of Laila and Rasheed, which clearly shows that Rasheed rapes Laila many times, and every time Rasheed sleeps with Laila, she feels disgusted: "He ate, smoked, went to bed, sometimes came back in the middle of the night for a brief and, of late, quite rough session of coupling" (2007, p. 85).

In the following, it can be seen that Rasheed, as the head of the family, not only subjects women to sexual violence but also experiences mental violence. Verbal violence constitutes the articulation of derogatory remarks made by an individual. Many people who commit sexual harassment verbally create verbal harassment by asking for sexual relations with unknown people and using rude words in a joking manner. And hurt a person emotionally or psychologically:

> Rasheed chortled and shook his head, but Mariam thought she saw uncertainty in the way he crossed his arms, the way his eyes shifted. "You know nothing, do you? You're like a child. Your brain is empty. There is no information in it."
>
> "I ask because—"
>
> "Chup ko. Shut up."
>
> Mariam did.
>
> It wasn't easy tolerating him talking this way to her, to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat. But after four years of marriage, Mariam saw clearly how much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid. And Mariam was afraid. She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament, his insistence on steering even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path that, on occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes try to make amends for with polluted apologies and sometimes not. (2007, p. 89)

In the same fashion, we see violence, stoning of a woman, in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*:

> When Shekib had been a girl, she'd heard about a woman in a nearby village condemned to stoning. It was the talk of their town as well as the neighboring towns.
>
> The woman had been buried shoulder-deep in the earth and encircled by a crowd of onlookers. When it was time, her father had thrown the first stone, striking her squarely in her temple. The line continued until she slumped over in atonement.
>
> Shekiba had listened to the story being recounted by her uncle's wife. Her mouth gaped at the horror of such a punishment and the grains of rice she was sifting fell through her drifting fingers and missed the bowl. An anthill of rice collected on the floor.
>
> "What had she done?"
>
> Her uncles' wives turned around and paused their conversation, surprised. They often forgot she was there. (2014, p. 323)

Feminist theories consider violence as a single phenomenon, and instead of classifying it based on types, an effort is made to classify it based on the amount and degree to which violent behaviour helps the survival of the men's surveillance epidemic system. The basic argument in this point of view can be expressed from the perspective of Martin Albrow, who has worked in the field of violence for many years. He believes that today's societies' economic and social structure is formed based on the devaluing, inferiority and exploitation of women. Concepts such as battered women or wife abuse should not be considered only at the level of the individual or relationships between individuals, but variables beyond the characteristics of individuals such as the economy, legislators, supervisory institutions and how social services are provided should be considered (Albrow, 2003, p. 8). The feminist theory proves that violence against women can be in any form, be it in the form of sexual assault, beating, sexual harassment or in the form of pornography. It is pervasive and a product of a patriarchal culture where men control both social institutions and women's bodies (Humm, 1995, p. 293). Nadia Hashimi writes about the peak of violence against women in such a way that the violence starts from within the family and reflects outside the society.

The selected novels reveal that women face domestic, physical and sexual violence, harassment, and property rights. However, they are aware of it and fight against it. The two authors describe how female characters respond to violence, whether they fight back during persecution or choose to remain silent, and what kind of freedom they gain after surviving and fighting for their rights as women and mothers. In Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam always tries not to make mistakes that might make Rasheed mad when he gets home from work. Rasheed's violence made her feel like she was dominating their home life. Rasheed is a strong man, and Mariam becomes a docile wife to protect herself from Rasheed's violent attacks. Mariam never goes

against Rasheed's wishes. In fact, she always tries to prepare everything in the house perfectly for her husband. Since the first time her husband abuses Mariam, she never fights back, but she looks inward and wonders: "Where did she go wrong when she was abused by Rasheed?" Until the day a bomb falls near her house, killing two parents and injuring a daughter, that is Laila. Laila's arrival at Mariam's home is like a breath of fresh air for Mariam. Mariam, a woman who never speaks out in the face of the brutality she has to endure, speaks up this time for her own sex, Laila, and saves her life:

> They crashed to the ground, Rasheed and Laila, thrashing about. He ended up on top, his hands already wrapped around Laila's neck.
>
> Mariam clawed at him. She beat at his chest. She hurled herself against him. She struggled to uncurl his fingers from Laila's neck. She bit them. But they remained tightly clamped around Laila's wind-pipe, and Mariam saw that he meant to carry this through.
>
> He meant to suffocate her, and there was nothing either of them could do about it.
>
> Mariam backed away and left the room. She was aware of a thumping sound from upstairs, aware that tiny palms were slapping against a locked door. She ran down the hallway. She burst through the front door. Crossed the yard.
>
> In the toolshed, Mariam grabbed the shovel.
>
> Rasheed didn't notice her coming back into the room. He was still on top of Laila, his eyes wide and crazy, his hands wrapped around her neck. Laila's face was turning blue now, and her eyes had rolled back. Mariam saw that she was no longer struggling. He's going to kill her, she thought. He really means to. And Mariam could not, would not, allow that to happen. He'd taken so much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage. She would not watch him take Laila too. (2007, p. 310)

A Thousand Splendid Suns demonstrates the innate power of sisterhood (Yeasmin, 2020, p. 388). In the beginning, these two women have a very impersonal and unfriendly relationship; Mariam never hides her hostility towards Laila, who is her husband's second wife. So, Laila does not share her secrets with Mariam either. Although Mariam accepts traditional gender roles in her marriage, the newcomer serves as another catalyst in her critical sense of feminist identity. Her strong feminist identity and values motivated her to protect another woman from their common husband's abuse. She proves that she is willing to fight for the values she already grew up with and believes in it. From now on, the relationship between the two women takes a significant turn, and during the usual evening tea in the garden, they become not only friends but also allies. They create a sisterhood relationship, which they both need. With time, this relationship becomes so strong that Mariam kills her husband to save Laila and accepts the fate of prison. For her, defending a woman is equal to freedom, more than death and prison.

Bacha Posh

Nadia Hashimi portrays bacha posh through one of the main female characters. Rahima is a smart girl who goes to school with her four sisters, but her father, who is a traditional Afghan man, is

unhappy with this situation because many boys from the neighbourhood always follow them on the way to school and cause trouble. However, when the Taliban dominate Afghanistan, women are denied access to school and other sectors, told to remain at home, and forbidden to leave the house unless accompanied by a male relative known as a mahram. This is when the concept of bacha posh arises. So, bacha posh is a quick fix for girls to gain freedom and access to education.

The idea of Rahima becoming a bacha posh is also suggested by a woman who plays the role of an aunt in this novel. She is a single, intelligent and critical woman who supports girls. In some cases, she is insulted and humiliated even for supporting these girls by the father of these girls:

> "Damn you, Shaima! Get out of my house! They're my daughters and I don't need to listen to a cripple tell me what I should do with them!"
>
> "Well, this cripple has an idea that may solve your problem—let you keep your precious pride while the girls can get back into school."
>
> "Forget it. Just get out so I don't have to look at your face anymore. Raisa! Where the hell is my food?"
>
> "What is your idea, Shaima?" Madar-jan jumped in, eager to hear what she had to say. She did respect her sister, ultimately. More often than not, Shaima was right. She hurriedly fixed a plate of food and brought it over to Padar-jan, who was now staring out the window blankly.
>
> "Raisa, don't you remember the story our grandmother told to us? Remember Bibi Shekiba?"
>
> "Oh, her! Yes, but how does that help the girls?"
>
> "She became what her family needed. She became what the king needed."
>
> "The king." Padar-jan scoffed. "Your stories get crazier every time you open your ugly mouth."
>
> Khala Shaima ignored his comment. She had heard much worse.
>
> "Do you really think that would work for us too?"
>
> "The girls need a brother."
>
> Madar-jan looked away and sighed with disappointment. Her failure to bear a son had been a sore spot since Shahla's birth. She had not anticipated that it would be brought to everyone's attention again tonight. She avoided Padar-jan's eyes.
>
> "That's what you've come here to tell me! That we need a son? Don't you think I know that? If your sister were a better wife, then maybe I would have one!"
>
> "Quit jabbering and let me finish."
>
> But she didn't finish. She only started. That night Khala Shaima started a story of my great-great-grandmother Shekiba, a story that my sisters and I had never before heard. A story that transformed me. (2014, p. 12)

In the following quotation, it can be seen that all the family members, including the father, agree on the issue of Rahima wearing male clothes, and the mother tries to make her happy with this decision:

> "We could change your clothes and we'll give you a new name. You'll be able to run to the store any time we need anything. You could go to school without worrying about the boys bothering you. You could play games. How does that sound?"
>
> It sounded like a dream to me! I thought of the neighbors' sons. Jameel. Faheem. Bashir. My eyes widened at the thought of being able to kick a ball around in the street as they did.
>
> Madar-jan wasn't thinking of the boys in the street. She was thinking of our empty cupboard. She was thinking of Padar-jan and how much he had changed. We were lucky when he brought home some money from an odd job here or there. Every once in a while, his mind focused enough that he was able to tinker with an old engine and breathe life back into it. His small earnings were spent, unevenly, on his medicine and keeping us clothed and fed. The more Madar-jan thought about it, the more she realized how desperate our situation was becoming. (2014, p. 23-24)

Hashimi deals with the issue of the transformation of a girl into a boy, a shocking scene that many girls have experienced. The scene of Rahima's long hair falling on the ground and his grief over losing his hair added to her girlish beauty. In the scene, she wears her uncle's clothes instead of the girls' coloured clothes. Everything shows that Rahima is not satisfied with this situation, but at the same time, she is forced to accept it (Abbady, 2022, p. 248):

> Madar-jan cut and trimmed, bending my ear forward to trim around it. She cut my bangs short and straight across my forehead. I looked at the ground around me and saw hair everywhere. She brushed the loose strands from my shoulders, blew at my neck and dusted off my back. My neck felt bare, exposed. I giggled with nervous excitement. Only Shahla noticed the single tear that trickled down Madar-jan's cheek.
>
> The next step was my clothing. Madar-jan asked my uncle's wife for a shirt and pair of pants. My cousin had outgrown them, as had his older brother and my other cousin before him. She sent me inside to get dressed while she and my sisters swept my girl hair from the courtyard.
>
> I slipped one leg in and then the other. They were slimmer and heavier than the usual balloon pants I wore under my dresses. I cinched the strings at the waist and made a knot. I pulled the tunic over my head and realized there was no ponytail to pull through after it. I let my hand run against the back of my head, feeling the short ends.
>
> I looked down and saw my knobby knees through the pantaloons. I folded my arms across my chest and cocked my head, as I'd seen my cousin Siddiq do so many times. I kicked my foot, pretending there was a ball in front of me. Was that it? Was I a boy already? (2014, p. 35-36)

According to all the facts presented, it can be seen that the choice of men's clothing is not the choice of the girls themselves. Instead, they are forced to choose men's identities by their families. However, in the same cases, the girls also get used to this new way of life very quickly because they get the freedoms they did not have before. This means that since they dress like boys and engage in boyish activities during the bacha posh period, girls find it challenging to reclaim their authentic girl selves. Some girls prefer the bacha posh because they get to experience all the freedoms. Therefore, when they transform back into girls, all of their freedom is taken away, and they struggle mightily to adopt womanly traits. For example, in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, Rahima wants to have the right to ride a bicycle: "I liked feeling the breeze on my face. I liked feeling my legs stretch, trying to catch the others, trying to race ahead of them. My arms swung by my sides, free" (2014, p. 52).

The use of transportation by women in Afghanistan has always been taboo. Apart from the issue of the strict laws of the governments of the time, even in these years of the republic, women could not drive on the roads of Kabul, which is the centre of the city. This means that while the criterion for any issue is the prohibition of the law, and there is no provision in the Afghan constitution to prohibit women from riding bicycles, and the legislator has not explicitly criminalized women's bicycle riding in any of the legal articles, but women cyclists are always ridiculed by men in society (Cahall, 2015). Furthermore, in some cases, the news of dealing with women cyclists becomes news on social networks. They contend that the bicycle, as an open vehicle, draws male attention to women's cycling, which they argue fosters societal corruption and jeopardizes moral integrity and general chastity. In some cities of Afghanistan, the opposition to women's cycling has become such a topical issue that it has been repeatedly raised in official forums and by the traditional spectrum of society, and even some imams of mosques have taken rigorous positions in this regard.

The ban and negative view of women's cycling is not a new thing. There have been restrictions on women cycling in Afghanistan for four decades. Men have a cold look at women cyclists, and children sometimes ridicule women and throw stones at their bicycles. In the case of urban drivers, they also limit the way for female cyclists and do not allow them to pass. In the case of the views of the traditional spectrum of society with a discriminatory and sexist perspective, women's cycling is considered against public modesty, and the position and manner of sitting on a bicycle saddle is the same as riding and sitting on a horse. From their point of view, this type of sitting is forbidden for chaste women and has no moral aspect. Meanwhile, in many remote districts of Afghanistan, where people do not have access to vehicles, women use horses like bicycles to get around, and they do not notice any obstacles from men. If they use a bicycle, they will clearly experience the duality of views.

In this part of the paper, the discussion returns to the exact first point and the key question: whether women remain passive against gender discrimination or take the way to fight it. There are two answers to this question: one is that choosing men's clothing is the choice of women themselves; this means the type of struggle or a change of appearance to stand against oppression. If choosing men's clothing for women is forced and imposed, women will be oppressed. For instance, in Homaira Qadri’s novel *Dancing In The Mosque* (2020), bacha posh is an imposed culture, and Afghan families who do not have male children use this technique to show their neighbours that they have male children because not having sons is considered a defect: “She cleaned her father’s store, ran errands to the market, and prayed beside her father at the mosque.

The neighbours all thanked God that Omar had at least one son to keep his household bathed in light" (2020, p. 37).

The topic of bacha posh in Nadia Hashimi's novel is utterly different from all the novels written on this topic. In the novel, both characters have complicated lives under patriarchy; however, by choosing bacha posh, they strive to change their destiny and gain freedom. This situation occurred when Afghanistan was under the Taliban regime (Al-wazedi, 2023, p. 81). The Taliban system restricts women's access. They are not allowed to go to school and are asked to stay at home. As a result, Rahima and her sisters have to give up their studies; therefore, bacha posh can be considered as a resilience against patriarchy. From the perspective of feminist psychology, the term resiliency is essentially tangible because resilience is the act of coping in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threat, or compelling sources of power such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or financial stress. It gives the meaning of bouncing back from a problematic situation; so, according to the choice of men's clothing in this novel, it is a sort of bouncing back struggle: the struggle against women's illiteracy, the struggle for education, which women could not do openly,. The purpose of choosing bacha posh in the character of Nadia Hashimi's story is not to show her desire and enthusiasm for male identity, but choosing bacha posh is more like a gender masculinity to fight against patriarchy. It would not be wrong to argue that Shekiba's masculinity is nurtured rather than innate because it was not ingrained in her from birth but rather developed as a result of a number of other factors. Shekiba demonstrates masculinity by being tough, independent, brave, and strong, and she has a masculine appearance that makes her appear more like a man.

Pashtunwali

Khaled Hosseini depicts the issue of women and Pashtunwali in his novel via Rasheed and Mariam. Mariam is a Tajik girl from an enlightened family. Her father constantly reads the books of the contemporary Afghan poet Qahar Asi, and her mother is a schoolteacher and an enlightened woman who encourages Mariam to study. After Mariam is forced to marry Rasheed and live in a Pashtun family, her life changes completely. Like thousands of Pashtun women, she wears a burqa and constantly sees oppression. In the culture of Pashtuns, the wife is the husband's honour, and no one has the right to see the woman's face except the husband (Jahan, 2018, p. 54):

> Mariam had never before worn a burqa. Rasheed had to help her put it on. The padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen. She practiced walking around her room in it and kept stepping on the hem and stumbling. The loss of peripheral vision was unnerving, and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth.
>
> "You'll get used to it," Rasheed said. "With time, I bet you'll even like it." (2007, p. 65)

In another part of the book, when the Pashtun Taliban order the women to follow the laws of Pashtunwali, the issue of the burqa, which is a culture imposed by the Pashtuns on women, is mentioned again:

> Attention women:
>
> You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative. If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home.
>
> You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten.
>
> Cosmetics are forbidden.
>
> Jewelry is forbidden.
>
> You will not wear charming clothes.
>
> You will not speak unless spoken to.
>
> You will not make eye contact with men.
>
> You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten.
>
> You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will lose a finger.
>
> Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately.
>
> Women are forbidden from working.
>
> If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death.
>
> Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-akbar. (2007, p. 248)

In another part of the book, the author divides the Pashtunwali women of Afghanistan into two parts: liberal and tribal. In this section, Hosseini reflects their views and motivations to the extent of the patterns and cultural values of the Pashtuns' social environment. He shows that supremacy, the myth of nervousness and the Pashtun principles of the governor are among the important Pashtun components that have influenced the Taliban and its process of emergence:

> Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they're probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before, Babi said, always lowering his voice, aware of how intolerant Mammy was of even remotely positive talk of the communists. But it's true, Babi said, it's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan. And you can take advantage of that, Laila. Of course, women's freedom— here, he shook his head ruefully—is also one of the reasons people out there took up arms in the first place.
>
> By "out there," he didn't mean Kabul, which had always been relatively liberal and progressive. Here in Kabul, women taught at the university, ran schools, held office in the government. No, Babi meant the tribal areas, especially the Pashtun regions in the south or in the east near the Pakistani border, where women were rarely seen on the streets and only then in burqa and accompanied by men. He meant those regions where men who lived by ancient tribal laws had rebelled against the communists and their decrees to liberate women, to abolish forced marriage, to raise the minimum marriage age to sixteen for girls. There, men saw it as an insult to their centuries-old tradition, Babi said, to be told

> by the government—and a godless one at that—that their daughters had to leave home, attend school, and work alongside men. (2007, p. 121)

Nadia Hashimi also expresses the concept of Pashtunwali differently in the novel. Hashimi discusses the time when the royal government ruled Afghanistan and the king provided women with freedoms, one of which was the candidacy of women in parliament. However, the tribal factions of authentic Afghan traditions, or Pashtunwali, are against the king's command and order, and they consider it a shame:

> "They've got five more open seats for the province. The seat from our region needs to be filled. There are a few other powerful men who will be looking to step in and challenge you, Abdul Khaliq, but a woman candidate would be a sure thing. She would take the seat without question because of these stupid rules they've created."
>
> "I don't like this idea. Why should we put a woman in a man's place? And even worse, you're asking me to put my wife in my place? Since when do we have a woman do a man's job?"
>
> "I understand that, sahib, truly. And, believe me, I don't like it any more than you do, but these are the rules. I'm simply suggesting we find a way to work around the system so that we don't lose all control over this area. The elections are coming up soon. We must plan for this."
>
> "Damn whoever decided on these shameful rules! Telling us we have to have women representatives? They have no business there! Who do they think is going to look after the children then?" (2014, p. 222)

In another part of the novel, she mentions the Pashtun understanding of honour. This means that if a woman acts against Pashtunwali laws and traditions, she will be stoned and killed because the woman is considered to be responsible for protecting the honour of Pashtuns:

> May Allah have mercy on you, Khanum Benafsha!
>
> Her body jerked with each stone that hit her. The soldiers took turns. Picking, hurling, and moving to the back of the half circle. Ten minutes passed, a hundred stones. Benafsha's voice grew weaker; she slumped forward, her burqa stained in a dozen places, dark circles bleeding toward one another. The earth around her grew dark as well, blood soaking into the soil. Two stones had ripped through the blue fabric, gashed flesh showed through the holes. (2014, p. 320)

Several factors are evident in the marginalization of Afghan women in the novels of Hosseini and Hashimi. For example, Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays elements such as honouring women and Pashtunwali oppression at home and in governmental and religious institutions. It also shows how the Pashtunwali code of honour is embedded in other factors that marginalize Afghan women. Nadia Hashimi also narrates the institutions of strict honour laws that are related to the Pashtuns and the Taliban. The marginalization of women and opposition to women's being candidates for parliament in the Shahi government, which Pashtuns ruled, and the wearing of burqas and honour stoning are all indicated in her novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*.

Undoubtedly, the female characters in both novels are aware of what is imposed on them in the name of Pashtunwali culture, and sometimes, they raise their voices to fight against gender equality. For instance, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, when Rasheed's second wife, Laila hears the new orders and rules for women from the Pashtun Taliban on the radio, she expresses her displeasure to her husband. Rasheed tells her that this is the tradition that people have followed for years in South-East Afghanistan, where the Pashtun tribes live. Rasheed's purpose is to follow the traditions of the ruling Pashtunwali:

> "They can't make half the population stay home and do nothing," Laila said.
>
> "Why not?" Rasheed said. For once, Mariam agreed with him. He'd done the same to her and Laila, in effect, had he not? Surely Laila saw that.
>
> "This isn't some village. This is Kabul. Women here used to practice law and medicine; they held office in the government—"
>
> Rasheed grinned. "Spoken like the arrogant daughter of a poetry-reading university man that you are. How urbane, how Tajik, of you. You think this is some new, radical idea the Taliban are bringing? Have you ever lived outside of your precious little shell in Kabul, my gul? Ever cared to visit the real Afghanistan, the south, the east, along the tribal border with Pakistan? No? I have. And I can tell you that there are many places in this country that have always lived this way, or close enough anyhow. Not that you would know." (2007, p. 249)

This quote conveys the meaning that some of the cultures ruling women in Afghanistan, despite long-term struggles, have been placed on the margins of all decisions due to the same patriarchal approach existing in the country in recent centuries. Since those distant periods, many intellectual and militant women in the country have protested either in groups or individually and have demanded the strong presence of women in society as another essential and central pillar of the society and the country. However, the big obstacle that has always been there for all these women is the strong opposition of religious scholars and the downright hostile attitude of the majority of men to issues such as the right to education and the work of women. The second reason for the lack of success of Afghan women's struggles is the lack of extensive and systematic international support for Afghan women. History has shown that international support is related to the political uses of different countries that support these movements. Nevertheless, what is certain is that even with this point of view, Afghan women have taken advantage of every opportunity to raise their voices from behind the international podiums, but this has not helped much in justifying their struggles. It seems that the Afghanistan issue has lost its importance in the world arena. Many countries are not interested in Afghanistan and the situation of women in this country because it does not bring anything to their benefit.

Over two years of arduous and remarkable struggle, women within the paramilitary society and the trenches have independently confronted an armed and violent faction such as the Taliban.

The forces opposing the Taliban have subjected them to mistreatment and physical violence. Over the past two years, numerous Afghan women have been apprehended and inexplicably killed by Taliban forces, yet there remains a lack of widespread advocacy for this emerging movement for justice. The plight of women in Afghanistan is more intricate than portrayed by global media. In this nation, women advocate for essential rights, including the right to employment, education, personal attire, and unobstructed access to healthcare services. Women, with all the threats that exist in a militant society, go to the streets full of terrorists without the support of men or international support, and they chant "bread, work, freedom" (Limaye & Thapar, 2021). Occupying the streets by protesting women in the last year is a sign of a significant change in women's vision and policy towards the Taliban, which no media talks about and no institution supports.

Conclusion

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini and *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* by Nadi Hashimi rely on the representation of the voice, agency and deconstruction of common mentalities or structures around women. Both authors describe the lives of female characters in matters such as employment and social activities, financial independence, the right to choose a spouse, and common stereotypes about the relationship between daughter and father, husband and wife, and brother and sister. Both novelists reconstruct the common mentalities of women of the third world. In these novels, the female characters are gender-subordinated by issues such as forced marriage and loss of female identity, being oppressed by the men of the family and patriarchy ruling in Afghanistan. In these novels, gender is brought up against the duality of oriental men and women. Mariam and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Shakiba and Rahima in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* represent an oriental woman who is not oppressed when she lives in her father's house and lives under oppression in her husband's house. The novels also represent the ideology of the Taliban group and describe the psychological and physical violence against women during the rule of this group.

All the characters in both stories are present in Afghanistan; unlike the female characters in the stories, none of the male characters act as agents but reproduce the tradition and ideology that prevails in the society. The contrast between urban and rural women is one of the other binary contrasts in these novels. Women are portrayed as victims and oppressed throughout Hosseini and Hashimi's novels because they live in a culture where the laws that control them are patriarchal ideas. Afghan women during the tumultuous period of political instability in Afghanistan are depicted as compliant, male-centric, and subservient. Nonetheless, the novels' portrayals of Afghan women offer readers novel perspectives. Some of these female characters

challenge the expectation that women should endure and accept male exploitation in a patriarchal society, courageously advocating for their rights in oppressive conditions.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that female connections and bonding inspire women to challenge patriarchal control and dominance. For instance, in Hossaini's novel, Mariam is depicted as a traditional Afghan woman who is passive, obedient, uneducated and unaware of subordination and equality before knowing Laila. However, Mariam learns about the possibility of gender equality as a result of Laila imparting her education and knowledge to her. Additionally, Laila and Mariam's willingness to express their thoughts, feelings, compassion, and moral support helps to forge their bond and sense of unity over time. At this stage, Mariam's character development can be seen in both her steadfast determination to end the oppression and her very conventional personality of being submissive and obedient. Laila and Mariam's friendship demonstrates that women are always in the position to fight against patriarchal power and end women's oppression; despite the chaos and critical time in Afghanistan, they are especially willing to protect themselves and assist in saving others from harm. Finally, the portrayal of both authors' female characters as strong, independent women challenges the widespread misconception that Afghan women are weak, obedient, victimized, and oppressed.

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