Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific
Issue 51, November 2024
http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue51/pourgharib-asl-esmaili.pdf
doi: https://doi.org/10.25911/5ZAF-5Y20

Muslim Women's Sisterhood and Resistance in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*

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Abstract

Sisterhood in the context of Islamic society under Taliban rule emerges as a crucial bond of solidarity and resistance against patriarchal dominance. This study explores the concept of sisterhood in Nadia Hashimi's novel, *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell*. Drawing upon bell hooks's feminist theoretical framework, it investigates how Muslim female characters navigate their lives under oppressive Afghan patriarchal norms through instances of cooperation and support. Conversely, the study examines the detrimental effects of envy, jealousy, and lack of solidarity among Muslim women that would exacerbate their challenges. The analysis highlights manifestations of sisterhood, such as Rahima's quest for change through solidarity with her sisters and Khala Shima. It also underscores the consequences of non-cooperation, as seen in Shahnaz's divisive actions towards Rahima. Tragic outcomes for characters like Shekiba and Benafsha underscore the critical need for unity, where silence among other Muslim women perpetuates injustice. Ultimately, this study argues that genuine empowerment of Muslim women necessitates transcending envy and fostering a shared commitment to challenge oppressive patriarchal structures through the power of sisterhood and collective resistance.

Keywords. Afghanistan, non-cooperation, patriarchy, sisterhood, solidarity

Introduction

Under the oppressive regime of the Taliban, Muslim women in Afghanistan have endured severe constraints, particularly in areas of education, movement, and personal liberties.[1] This environment of suppression necessitates the cultivation of solidarity, sisterhood, and resistance among Muslim women as essential pillars for their empowerment and perseverance. In the context of Muslim women, their religious identity often plays a critical

[1] Farkondeh Akbari and Jacqui True, 'One Year on from the Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan: Re-Instituting Gender Apartheid,' *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 76, no. 6 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2022.2107172; Rangita de Silva de Alwis, 'Holding the Taliban Accountable for Gender Persecution: The Search for New Accountability Paradigms under International Human Rights Law, International Criminal Law and Women, Peace, and Security,' *German Law Journal* 25, no. 2 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2023.113.

role in shaping and strengthening their sisterhood. Islamic teachings on justice, compassion, and mutual support further reinforce these bonds and enables them to find solidarity not only as women but also through their shared faith. The collective struggle against oppression, guided by principles of equality within Islam, becomes a unique facet of their sisterhood, which distinguishes it from broader feminist movements. By sisterhood, we refer to the feminist concept that, as Kelli Zaytoun and Judith Ezekiel observe, indicates solidarity among women and challenges gender norms.[2]

Over time, the concept has been developed to reflect a collective bond among women that emphasises shared experiences and common goal.[3] In recent years, the importance of these bonds has been profoundly depicted in the narratives of Muslim women authors, who often draw from their lived experiences to illustrate the resilience and collective strength of women in the face of adversity.[4] The literary works of these women not only reflect their personal struggles but also serve as a beacon of hope and a call to action. Such narratives about Muslim women underscore the dynamic nature of human rights within Afghan society, as described by Maryam Jami, who notes the evolution of Afghan women's conception of human rights from one period of Taliban rule to another.[5]

The plight of Muslim women under Taliban rule and the significance of these bonds among women are poignantly captured in the literary works of writers like Nadia Hashimi. Her novel, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, set against the backdrop of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan,[6] explores the intricate dynamics of Muslim women's cooperation and non-cooperation, and the profound impact these relationships have on their lives. The novel indicates female relationships, solidarity, oppression, and resistance, and it examines the two protagonists, Rahima and Shekiba, to navigate sisterhood within a patriarchal Afghan society. This paper analyses these contrasting dynamics of cooperation and non-cooperation through the theoretical lens of sisterhood, arguing that Muslim women's solidarity has consistently acted as a source of resilience and empowerment, whereas lack of solidarity and prevalence of envy and jealousy exacerbate their struggles. We employ a feminist literary approach guided by bell hooks's theory of sisterhood and solidarity among women. Moreover, hooks's

[2] Kelli Zaytoun and Judith Ezekiel, 'Sisterhood in Movement: Feminist Solidarity in France and the United States,' *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 37, no. 1 (2016), 196.

[3] Prudence Chamberlain, *The Feminist Fourth Wave: Affective Temporality*, Cham: Springer, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53682-8; Lidia Rodak, 'Sisterhood and the 4th Wave of Feminism: An Analysis of Circles of Women in Poland,' *Oñati Socio-Legal Series* 10, no. 1S (2020), https://doi.org/10.35295/OSLS.IISL/0000-0000-0000-1163.

[4] Erika Biagini, 'Islamist Women's Feminist Subjectivities in (R)evolution: The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood in the Aftermath of the Arab Uprisings,' *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22, no. 3 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2019.1680304; Elisa Orofino, *Rethinking Islamism Beyond Jihadi Violence: Fighting Ideas Leaving the Sword Aside,* Vernon Press, 2023; Xin Yan Chew and Moussa Pourya Asl, 'The Poetics of Identity Making: Precarity and Agency in Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim*,' *Journal for Cultural Research* 28, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2023.2291711; Moussa Pourya Asl and Syaidatul Asyiqin binti Mohd Hanafiah, 'Mapping Violence against Women in Pakistan: A Galtungian Reading of Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*,' *South Asian Review*, January (2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2024.2304994.

[5] Maryam Jami, 'Testing the Limits of Human Rights' Dynamism: A Comparative Study of Afghan Women's Rights Under the Taliban Regimes (1996, 2021),' *India Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284221127786.

[6] Nadia Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2014).

key concepts, such as internalised sexism, competition for patriarchal approval, intersections of race/class/culture, rejection of victim narratives, and embracing diversity, will guide the analysis.

Hashimi's work not only portrays the plight of Afghan women but also aims to bring about a revolution in patriarchal customs through her narratives. Her novels stand as significant literary contributions that reflect her deep connection to her Afghan heritage and her commitment to highlighting and challenging the socio-cultural issues within Afghan society. According to Halil Kumar, 'the novel is mostly concerned with the challenges of Afghan women. The characters Rahima and Shekiba, created by Hashimi, are a pair of strong female characters that are presented with seemingly insurmountable hurdles in their life.'[7] Simran Bhatia adds, 'Hashimi's diligent study of Afghanistan's socio-cultural aspects gives a bit indication of her belongingness, whereas her intentions reflect to bring a revolution in Afghan patrilineal customs via her writings.[8] In her *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, as Muhammad Imran, Sahrish, and Mubasher Hussain state, Hashmi, depicted 'the social conventions of Afghan society.'[9]

Hashimi published her first novel in the tradition of bacha posh, where girls are temporarily raised as boys in Muslim Afghan and Pakistani cultures. This convention remains undocumented mainly in terms of its prevalence due to its discreet nature within families. It is a stark indicator of the pervasive gender inequality and misogyny that Muslim women face, particularly in Afghanistan. Hashimi highlights this issue in her interview, stating:

> Taliban regime made a name for themselves in their remarkably cruel subjugation of women. Though the Taliban have been ousted for the most part and schools are open to girls, the situation is far from perfect. [It is important to note that since the Taliban regained control in 2021, girls' schools have been closed once again, exacerbating the challenges faced by Afghan women.] There are many crises in Afghanistan today: drug addiction, child 'brides', political corruption, education inequality, depression and suicide. I wanted to tell a story that would show how these issues affected the life of one Afghan girl because the impact of these issues is often lost in daunting statistics. *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* is not the story of all Afghan girls, thankfully, but it is the story of too many.[10]

Hashimi's novel is relevant as readers and critics have often praised her ability to depict the struggles and resilience of Muslim women across generations. This acknowledgment highlights the novel's profound exploration of gender dynamics, tradition, and societal expectations. As Seswita Seswita notes, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* is one of Hashimi's novels reflecting the burden of Muslim women's life under a fundamentalist Islamic and patriarchal society. The novel depicts Muslim 'women of two generations who struggle

[7] Halil Amad Kumar, 'Explicating Violence and Suffering in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*,' *International Journal of English and Studies* 4, no. 2 (2022), 156.

[8] Simran Bhatia, 'Quest for Identity in Afghan Women Illustrated by Nadia Hashimi in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*,' *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies* 9, no. 2 (April–June 2022), 2, http://www.ijelr.in.

[9] Muhammad Imran, Sahrish, and Mubasher Hussain, 'Ideological Construction of Gender Representation in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*: A Critical Discourse Analysis,' *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review* 8, no. 1 (2024), 350.

[10] Nadia Hashimi, 'Inspiring Woman Leader Spotlight: Nadia Hashimi,' Interview by Megan Foo. *Women LEAD, Nepal,* 2015, https://womenleadnepal.wordpress.com/2015/02/27/inspiring-woman-leader-spotlight-nadia-hashimi/.

for their lives in a patriarchal society.'[11] The resistance and struggle experienced by women compel them to assert themselves in the face of patriarchal and oppressive societal structures, ultimately striving for autonomy and liberation. In what follows, we explore the portrayal of sisterhood and women's solidarity as a powerful force against patriarchal oppression in various cultural contexts in order to highlight how different authors depict the dynamics of female relationships and the impact of gender norms on women's lives.

Contextualising sisterhood in Muslim literature and in bell hooks's framework

The literature on Muslim women's solidarity, resistance, and sisterhood, as depicted in various novels by Muslim writers, not only sheds light on the challenges Muslim female characters face under patriarchal and oppressive regimes but also emphasises both the empowering potential and constraints of collective action and cultural contexts. Focusing on the feminist perspective of 'sisterhood' and 'envy,' Muhammad Asif et al. have demonstrated how the unity and cooperation of women (sisterhood) enables female characters to overcome male dominance. In contrast, feelings of jealousy and lack of cooperation between women lead to their destruction.[12] In a similar study, Su-Lin Yu examined how cultural differences in race and ethnicity impact the portrayal of sisterhood. She found that despite these differences, the female characters were able to overcome them and find solace in their sisterhood.[13] Jayant Cherekar draws a similar conclusion that female friendship and sisterhood give women power to fight polygamy, colonialism, racism and prejudice. She argues that sisterhood plays a crucial liberating role for women across societies.[14]

Previous studies show that sisterhood among Muslim women serves as a powerful tool for resistance and empowerment.[15] Sisterhood enables women to navigate and challenge patriarchal constraints and intersecting oppressions. Suci Suryani critiques representations of violence against women in the Arab and Muslim world and highlights the ways that sisterhood functions as a form of feminist resistance against patriarchal

[11] Seswita Seswita, 'Bacha Posh: A Cultural Practice in Afghanistan as Seen in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*: Resilience Against Patriarchy,' in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Green Computing and Sustainable Energy,* 3 August 2021 (European Union Digital Library, 2022), 3, https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.30-8-2021.2316269.

[12] Muhammad Asif et al., 'Sisterhood as a Saviour of Afghan Women: An Analysis of Khaled Hosseini's Ideology,' *English Language and Literature Studies* 10, no. 4 (2020), https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v10n4p78.

[13] Su-Lin Yu, 'Sisterhood as Cultural Difference in Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* and Cristina Garcia's *The Aguero Sisters*,' *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 47, no. 4 (2006), https://doi.org/10.3200/CRIT.47.4.345-361.

[14] Jayant Cherekar, 'Sisterhood, a Tool to Bring Women Together: A Study of Mariama Bâ's Novel *So Long a Letter*,' *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 25, no. 3 (2020), https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-2503083438.

[15] Kamran Ahmadgoli and Liath Faroug Raoof, 'An Examination of Sisterhood as an Emancipative Concept in Alice Walker's Novels: *Meridian* and *The Color Purple*,' *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews* 7, no. 6 (2019), https://doi.org/10.18510/hssr.2019.76139; Moussa Pourya Asl, ed., *Urban Poetics and Politics in Contemporary South Asia and the Middle East* (IGI Global: Publishing Tomorrow's Research Today, 2023), https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-6650-6; Iulia Rascanu, 'Bangladeshi Women and the Concept of Agency in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*: Patriarchy, Love and "Sisterhood,"' *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 10, no. 1 (2016), https://doi.org/10.31436/asiatic.v10i1.741; Suci Suryani, 'The Sisterhood to the Women's Survival in Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone*,' *Journal of English Education, Linguistics and Literature* 5, no. 1 (2018), https://doi.org/10.32682/jeell.v5i1.945.

oppression.[16] Kamran Ahmadgoli and Liath Raoof assert that sisterhood aids marginalised women in achieving identity, self-realisation, and liberation.[17] Iulia Rascanu uses an intersectional Third World feminist perspective to argue that Muslim women negotiate agency through bonds of sisterhood and thus challenge universalising western feminist narratives.[18] Elizabeth Saylor points out that cross-cultural sisterhood transcends nationality, class, religion, and race, and proposes a vision of universal sisterhood that resonates with Muslim women's struggles for equality.[19] Feminist critiques of Afghan society reveal the complex interplay of cultural practices and internalised sexism.[20]

A renowned feminist theorist, bell hooks, asserts that women are the most victimized group by sexist oppression.[21] This oppression arises from social structures and individuals who dominate or exploit. Hooks emphasises solidarity among women and the need to understand the true value of sisterhood as a survival mechanism.[22] She argues that sisterhood emerges from women's victimisation by male domination. If women unite against domination and exploitation through sex, class, and race, sisterhood can become a powerful force. Hooks states, 'Feminist sisterhood is rooted in shared commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice, no matter the form that injustice takes.'[23] However, she notes that competition and hostility among women can hinder empathy and solidarity and reinforce patriarchal values. Internalised sexism, hooks highlights, leads women to judge each other harshly and foster jealousy and fear.[24] This illustrates the transformative potential of feminist thinking to combat internalised oppression.

Thus, patriarchal society prevents women from acting in solidarity to appeal for equal rights and freedom. In emphasizing solidarity among women to combat sexism and other forms of oppression, bell hooks notes, 'We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of sisterhood.'[25] Therefore, the idea of sisterhood as a revolutionary concept, especially by female libertarians, arose based on the everyday

[16] Suryani, 'The Sisterhood to the Women's Survival,' 72.

[17] Ahmadgoli and Raoof, 'An Examination of Sisterhood,' 932.

[18] Rascanu, 'Bangladeshi Women,' 30.

[19] Elizabeth Claire Saylor, 'Subversive Sisterhood: Gender, Hybridity, and Transnationalism in Afifa Karma's *Fatima Al-Badawiyya* (Fatima the Bedouin, 1909),' *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 15, no. 1 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-7273678.

[20] Moussa Pourya Asl, ed., *Gender, Place, and Identity of South Asian Women* (IGI Global: Publishing Tomorrow's Research Today, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-3626-4; Amrita Ekka, 'Afghan Women's Voices; An Impasse: Patriarchy's Autocracy in the Select Afghan Novels,' *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* 4, no. 6 (2022), https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2022.v04i06.1189; Jibin Monish and Kannadhasan Manimurasu, 'The Struggle of Women Against Oppression – A Study of Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*,' *Journal of University of Shanghai for Science and Technology* 23, no. 9 (2021), https://doi.org/10.51201/JUSST/21/09675.

[21] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Routledge, 2015, 16, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743172.

[22] bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (Routledge, 2003), 3.

[23] hooks, *Feminist Theory,* 16.

[24] hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 15.

[25] hooks, *Feminist Theory,* 43.

experience of oppression. By highlighting the ways that patriarchal surveillance contributes to the absence of attachment and solidarity among women, bell hooks argues that it enables men to subjugate women through unfair and arbitrary exercise of authority and force.

She also emphasises the need for an intersectional approach to feminist solidarity, acknowledging that women's experiences of oppression are shaped by multiple intersecting identities. This challenge for sisterhood arises from the disparities in cultural backgrounds, social class, and race, which intersect to alienate certain women from the group. In this sense, hooks points out that 'bonding among a chosen circle of women who strengthen their ties by excluding and devaluing women outside their group closely resembles the type of personal bonding among women that has always occurred under patriarchy.'[26] Hooks proposed that true sisterhood among women can only be achieved if individual women are willing to divest themselves of their power to dominate and exploit other subordinated groups of women based on race or class.[27] She suggests that women should acknowledge their variances in terms of colour and social status yet come together in opposition to the prevalent issue of male animosity towards women and, hooks argues, 'We must renew our efforts to help women unlearn sexism if we are to develop affirming personal relationships as well as political unity.'[28] According to hooks, the concept of sisterhood retains its strength and will continue to be a challenging force against the chauvinistic principles ingrained in society.[29]

Shared victimisation serves as a form of sisterhood and solidarity that not only reinforces men's political ideology but also hinders genuine sisterhood. This concept, hooks notes, reflects male supremacist thinking and equates femininity with victimhood, an equation that bourgeois women's liberationists embraced rather than rejected.[30] By adopting a victim identity, women evaded responsibility for confronting their oppressive attitudes and privileges. This model of sisterhood, rooted in victim mentality, dictated unconditional acceptance, conflict avoidance, and criticism suppression, and creates an illusion of unity while perpetuating exclusion.[31] As splinter groups bonded within chosen circles, they devalued outsiders, mirroring the divisive nature of patriarchy. Women must sacrifice privilege, engage in self-critique, and actively challenge sexism, racism, and classism, hooks emphasises.[32] She offers a vision of women uniting as 'sisters' based on shared interests and a collective struggle against oppression.[33]

The present study examines bell hooks's conceptualisation of feminist sisterhood as a revolutionary solidarity. It is rooted in the shared commitment to dismantle patriarchal injustice. The analysis explores the barriers that prevent women from empathy and solidarity including internalised sexism, competition for patriarchal approval, and different classes. Devoted to the acceptance of diversity and rejecting shared victimization, hooks's vision of political solidarity transcends race, class, and cultural differences. This study illuminates the

[26] hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 48.

[27] hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 16.

[28] hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 50.

[29] hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 57.

[30] hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 45.

[31] hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 46–47.

[32] hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 46.

[33] hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 67.

transformative potential of feminist consciousness in self-critique, overcoming domination within and among women, and making provision for collective liberation from sexist oppression across all spheres of society.

Sisterhood and solidarity in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell features two distinct narratives centred around Shekiba and Rahima, each set in different time periods. Shekiba's story unfolds in the early twentieth century, an era of social transformation and shifting power dynamics, while Rahima's narrative takes place in 2007 which contrasts sharply with Shekiba's historical context. Shekiba grows up as the third child in a remote village. After losing all her siblings during the war in 1903, she assumes responsibility for her brothers and manages her father's estate following his death. Under her grandmother's guardianship, Shekiba endures mistreatment and is denied inheritance rights due to rigid gender norms. Despite these challenges, she demonstrates resilience by adopting the role of a bacha posh (dressing as a man). In parallel, Rahima, the third of five daughters, also becomes a bacha posh at her mother's consent to safeguard her family. This transformation grants her access to opportunities typically denied to women, such as education and business. However, at age thirteen, Rahima marries an older man due to her family's financial struggles, and faces further difficulties, including an adversarial mother-in-law. Together, the stories of Shekiba and Rahima illustrate the transformative impact of tradition on family dynamics within Afghan society.

The novel effectively portrays the concept of sisterhood through the stories of two Muslim women, Rahima and Shekiba, who grapple with patriarchal societal challenges. Rahima resides in a household with her father, mother, and five sisters. The patriarchal structure of their family places undue blame on the daughters and their mother for not bearing a son, disregarding the emotional well-being and needs of the entire family. Another central character in the narrative is Shekiba, Rahima's maternal grandmother, whose story unfolds alongside Rahima's journey. Rahima's father humiliated the daughters and the mother of the family for not having a son. As 'men are considered as superior in patriarchal systems because they have more authority than women, whereas women are seen as inferior.'[34] Rahima's mother, feeling inferior and inadequate for not bearing a son, blamed herself and her daughters. As demonstrated in the subsequent excerpt: '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!'[35]

Father Rahima's logic resonates with hooks's assumption that the male ideology portrays women as worthless unless they are associated with men. The father's misery stems from having daughters instead of sons, and he constantly reminds the girls that if they had brothers, they would have more power, freedom, and access to education and the outside world. Rahima was chosen to go out to help her mother and sisters. However, her newfound privilege, as a bacha posh, likely incited hostility and jealousy among her sisters. As Rahima states:

> It wasn't so much that I wanted my sisters to be envious. It was more that I wanted to celebrate my new privileges to come and go, to wander through the shops without my sister's supervision. If I had a

[34] Monish and Manimurasu, 'The Struggle of Women Against Oppression,' 1209.

[35] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 5.

> little more tact, I would have found another way to express myself. But my loud mouth caught Khala Shaima's attention. Maybe there was a higher purpose to my insensitivity.[36]

Though insensitive, Rahima's desire to celebrate her new privileges openly is a subconscious rebellion against the constraints imposed on her and her sisters by the male-dominated ideology. However, she wonders if there was a 'higher purpose'[37] to her insensitivity, hinting at a more profound yearning for change and a challenge to the current status. That male ideology presents women as enemies and discourages them from showing solidarity with one another is an example of hooks's belief being proven true. The patriarchal ideology denies the girls autonomy and equal rights.[38]

In her exploration of identity, Rahima reflects on her transition and recalls that her mother prepared her for a new role 'for a couple of weeks, wanting me to get used to the idea of being a boy before she let me test the waters outside of our home.'[39] She corrects her sisters when they call her Rahima and does the same with her younger cousins who had never before seen a bacha posh. The reaction from their mothers reveals societal expectations. 'Each had given her husband at least two sons to carry on the family name'[40] and felt no 'need to make any of their daughters a bacha posh.'[41] Yet, Madar-jan ignores their looks and reflects the resilience of women in the face of societal pressure. Bibijan, on the other hand, resents that anyone in her family is forced to resort to the bacha posh tradition.

Rahima grapples with attempts to free herself from patriarchy. Her family, particularly women like her mother and aunt, demand educational opportunities for their daughters. Anik Cahyaning Rahayua, Ali Romadania, and Sudarwati Sudarwati assert that education in a patriarchal society typically prioritises boys, and limits women's freedom to pursue their desired paths.[42] Rahima's mother, facing social pressure to provide a male offspring, endures sacrifice and oppression from both men and women. Hashimi notes that the bacha posh custom, where Rahima temporarily adopts a male identity, disrupts social norms and highlights gender biases.[43] Ahmadgoli and Raoof explain how marginalised women reject mainstream feminism for overlooking the complexities of intersectionality.[44] This critique aligns with hooks's argument that traditional feminist teachings obscure women's real-life experiences.[45] In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, sisterhood represents solidarity that defies patriarchal standards, and allows women to confront shared barriers and inequalities, ultimately fostering collective empowerment against divisive influences.

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[36] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 9.

[37] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 45.

[38] bell hooks, 'Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women,' *Feminist Review*, no. 23 (1986), https://doi.org/10.2307/1394725

[39] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 45.

[40] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 45.

[41] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 45.

[42] Anik Cahyaning Rahayua, Ali Romadania, and Sudarwati Sudarwati, 'Gender Intervention through Toxic Masculinity in Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*,' *Anaphora: Journal of Language, Literary, and Cultural Studies* 5, no. 1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.30996/anaphora.v5i1.6638.

[43] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 21.

[44] Ahmadgoli and Raoof, 'An Examination of Sisterhood,' 931.

[45] hooks, *Feminist Theory*.

Shekiba is another character who grapples with the oppressive constraints of patriarchal society. She is Rahima's great-great-grandmother, who lived a century before Rahima and had a traumatic childhood experience. Shekiba lost most of her family in a cholera outbreak, and her father a few years later as well. Due to a burn accident as a child, she had lost half of her face, leaving her facially disfigured and perceived as ugly. Her unsightly appearance led to her ostracisation and caused people to view her as monstrous. After her father's death, her strict grandmother took her in to assist with household chores. However, Shekiba found no refuge in this new home as a lonely and marginalised woman. Everyone treated her like an unfeeling, robotic worker, ruthlessly exploiting her for work. The depiction of Shekiba as a utilitarian tool reveals her gender-based objectification. She is portrayed as a machine valued solely for her labour, with no other purpose. As depicted in the following passage:

> Shekiba kept to herself, did the work assigned to her, and tried to avoid eye contact. She did nothing to invite conversation, although she did provide a good topic for discussions in the house. Summer was a few weeks away when Bobo Shahgul interrupted her scrubbing the floor. Kaka Freidun stood beside her, arms crossed.[46]

According to hooks, 'Sexism, racism, and classism divide women from one another.'[47] These differences, dictated within a male-dominated society, compelled even Shekiba's grandmother to reject her because she lacked conventional feminine beauty and had to be separated from their group, relegated to menial and demeaning work. Shekiba's role in her grandmother's family was utterly demeaning, and she was even sold like a chattel, being traded as a servant to another family named Azizullah to pay off debts, In this regard, Kumar notes, 'Shekiba confronts similar challenges as a woman living in a patriarchal culture where women's roles are limited to bearing sons and performing household chores.'[48] Thus, patriarchal cultures severely restrict women's identities, opportunities, and societal contributions to merely childbearing and housework. Additionally, religious norms often intersect with these patriarchal structures and further complicate Shekiba's struggle for agency and autonomy. Shekiba confronts these same oppressive limitations imposed on women in her patriarchal context. Her value and purpose are diminished to utilitarian functions dictated by the dominant male perspective.

After Shekiba's marriage to Aasif, she, as his second wife, realized that he expected her to give birth to a son. Aasif made it clear that if Shekiba did not meet his expectations, he would evict her from their home. Following this threat, Gulnaz, Aasif's first wife, approached Shekiba with empathy, acknowledging the shared pain and injustice they both experienced as women in a society that values sons over daughters. They both found themselves trapped in a cycle of fulfilling traditional gender roles to please their husbands, ultimately sacrificing their own desires and well-being. This situation highlights the oppressive nature of Afghan traditions that prioritise male offspring and perpetuate inequality between men and women. As Hashimi illustrated in the subsequent excerpt:

[46] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 54.

[47] hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 63.

[48] Kumar, 'Explicating Violence and Suffering,' 155.

> Gulnaz slipped quietly into Shekiba's room a few moments later. Through the open door, a sliver of moonlight lit the floor of the hallway. The two wives stared at it, Aasif's rant still echoing through the house. The first wife finally spoke. 'We have been married for one year, and I have been unable to bear him a child ... He thought you would be different, but I suspect now that Allah may have cursed him, and no matter what woman or how many women he beds, a son is not his Naseeb [destiny or fate].[49]

Shekiba's heart ached for Gulnaz, understanding the immense pressure they faced to produce a male heir, a burden rooted in Afghan traditions that placed a woman's worth on her ability to bear sons. As Azhar notes, 'In Asian countries, there is community pressure for families to have a son to carry on the family legacy and inherit the father's property.'[50] Despite this oppressive weight, Aasif's two wives could not afford to see themselves solely as victims, for their survival depended on recognising and exercising their personal power and strength. In the face of such adversity, they bonded not over their shared victimisation but over their shared resilience and determination to endure. As bell hooks wrote, 'Women who are exploited and oppressed daily cannot afford to relinquish the belief that they exercise some measure of control, however relative, over their lives ... They bond with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources.'[51] Gulnaz and Shekiba demonstrate the essence of sisterhood as described by bell hooks. Sharing experiences indicates solidarity in suffering; it becomes a source of empowerment and resilience in the face of adversity.

Envy and non-cooperation in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*

In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell,* jealousy and lack of cooperation among women are presented as obstacles to achieving true feminist friendship. The characters' challenges, with jealousy and competition, emphasise the problems women may face when they compete instead of supporting each other. This narrative efficiently emphasises the importance of women's solidarity and support in their efforts for gender equality and empowerment. 'As long as women are using class or race power to dominate other women, feminist sisterhood cannot be fully realised.'[52]

The lack of sisterhood and support among women reinforces patriarchal norms and power dynamics. Delia Damayanti and Tri Pramesti argue a 'strong relationship between women can solve all problems that cannot be resolved by any part except [where] the part is also a woman.'[53] Shahnaz undermines Rahima's position and portrays her as an unsuitable wife to meet societal expectations. Hashimi notes Shahnaz's actions: 'No, Khala-jan, I did not. She insisted on making lunch.'[54] This lack of solidarity creates a hostile environment, which leads to distrust and dissatisfaction. Shahnaz exhibits contradictory behaviour, feeling both anger and loneliness about their shared circumstances: 'Shahnaz was a ball of

[49] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 383.

[50] Darkhasha Azhar, 'A Sojourn into the Afghani Customs and Beliefs through the Lens of Religiosity in Nadia Hashimi's 'The Pearl That Broke Its Shell',' *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 8, no. 6 (Nov–Dec 2023), 173, https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.86.26.

[51] hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 46.

[52] Asif et al., 'Sisterhood as a Saviour of Afghan Women.'

[53] Delia Cesar Damayanti and Tri Pramesti, 'Sisterhood in Ann M. Martin's *Belle Teal*,' *Anaphora: Journal of Language, Literary and Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020), 47, https://doi.org/10.30996/anaphora.v3i1.3552.

[54] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 172.

contradictions.'[55] Such inconsistency fosters a toxic dynamic and complicates Rahima's ability to bond with her co-wife. Bibi Gulalai, Rahima's mother-in-law, takes pleasure in Shahnaz's accusations, as reflected in Hashimi's words: 'Shahnaz blamed everything on me.'[56] This dynamic perpetuates oppression and hinders collective resistance.

Women themselves exhibit behaviours and attitudes influenced by feminist thought. Bibi Gul, Rahima's mother-in-law, traditionally occupies a superior position in Afghan society compared to the bride, Rahima—financially and socially. This entrenched class disparity perpetuates patriarchal ideologies among women of higher social standing and undermines solidarity among them. When Bibi Gulalai slaps Rahima and derogatorily refers to her as a 'hare dog,' she reinforces her sense of superiority while diminishing Rahima's worth. This instance highlights the complexities of gender dynamics and power struggles within Afghan society, even among women affected by feminist ideas. This is portrayed in the following segment:

> Forgive me, Khala-Jan, but I wanted to speak with you before you left. Good morning. How are you feeling?' I asked, not really caring but trying to show her that I did have some manners … 'You came running across the yard like a rabid dog to ask me that?'[57]

This interaction not only highlights the power imbalance and class divide between the two women but also underscores the internalisation of patriarchal attitudes by Bibi Gulalai, who occupies a higher socioeconomic status and perceives herself as superior to Rahima. As hooks argues: 'Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices. Sustained woman bonding can occur only when these divisions are confronted and the necessary steps are taken to eliminate them.'[58] The lack of solidarity between Rahima and Bibi Gulalai exemplifies how these divisions, rooted in class and internalised sexism, undermine the potential for a unified front against the oppression faced by women in Afghan society. Amrita Ekka further elaborates on this notion, stating, 'The oppression, sexual offenses, torture, public humiliations, and executions, were practiced in the façade of maintaining an "order" in the mental image of men's perception of how women should be.'[59] The suffering of Rahima's tolerance by her mother-in-law reflects the enduring presence of patriarchal norms and the acceptance of these repressive beliefs by women themselves, thereby perpetuating the lack of unity and cooperation between them. This lack of sisterhood underscores the importance of addressing and eradicating discrepancies arising from classification, internal gender bias, and compliance with conventional gender expectations to strengthen true solidarity and build collective resistance by systematic submissive women.

One of the direst consequences of male-dominated thinking on women is the tragic fate that often awaits them. For instance, there is a moment when Shekiba assumes the role of a male guard in the palace, but a small mistake leads to her demise. Similarly, Benafsha is condemned to death by stoning on charges of treason, orchestrated by one of the king's most

[55] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 173.

[56] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 174.

[57] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 178.

[58] hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 44.

[59] Ekka, 'Afghan Women's Voices,' 3.

respected wives. Shockingly, even though the other women in the king's circle are well aware of the severity of Benafsha's supposed betrayal, they opt to safeguard their positions by informing the guards who report the matter to the Shah. Hashimi describes it:

> Well, if it is Habibullah's hat, then we can just take it to him and ask him to confirm it. That's easy enough,' she said sweetly. She pushed the hat into Benafsha's face and then tossed it to Ghafoor. Ghafoor looked at the gray hat with almost as much trepidation as Benafsha. Her mind scrambled, knowing nothing good came from bringing bad news to the palace.[60]

Unfortunately, the character Benafsha suffers a horrific fate, being publicly stoned to death, in part due to the other women's failure to unite against such barbaric injustice. As Ella's analysis notes, 'It is such a common act that people are okay with it, and the women, who can understand the pain, have no option than staying silent.'[61] Rather than coming together to condemn this atrocity, the other women remain complicit through their silence. Through these powerful examples, Hashimi's novel functions as a searing indictment of how patriarchal oppression is perpetuated not just by male dominance but by the failure of women to resist and support one another collectively. The lack of solidarity, envy, and non-cooperation portrayed have disastrous, even lethal, consequences for the women characters. The harsh justice system and cultural practices that condone brutal treatment of women are alarming. The lack of intervention by women witnessing Benafsha's death and the cruel domestic abuse inflicted by Rahima's mother-in-law both perpetuate the oppression of women in this society.

Conclusion

This study has explored the concept of sisterhood and solidarity among Afghan women in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*. Through the characters of Rahima and Shekiba, the novel illustrates where cooperation and support empower women to navigate the challenges posed by the patriarchal societal structures they inhabit. Simultaneously, it depicts the detrimental consequences of envy, non-cooperation, and the failure to stand united. The significance of sisterhood and solidarity is encapsulated in Rahima's profound realisation: 'If I had a little more tact, I would have found another way to express myself. But my loud mouth caught Khala Shaima's attention. Maybe there was a higher purpose to my insensitivity.'[62] This moment of self-awareness signifies Rahima's subtle rebellion against the male-dominated ideology and her yearning for change through solidarity with her sisters, thereby deepening the novel's exploration of the theme. However, the novel also starkly portrays the devastating consequences of envy and non-cooperation, as evidenced in Shahnaz's actions towards Rahima: 'No, Khala-jan, I did not. She insisted on making lunch so I let her. Otherwise, I would have been happy to prepare something for you…' 'That's not true! She told me I should make lunch. And she just fed the baby! You did this on purpose!'[63] This dialogue demonstrates a poignant reminder of the lack of understanding and proper support among women, which fosters a hostile and divisive environment, thereby reinforcing the novel's theme. The tragic fate of characters like Benafsha further emphasises the importance of solidarity. Regarding Benafsha's public stoning, the story illustrates such acts are so routine

[60] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 283.

[61] Ekka, 'Afghan Women's Voices,' 1.

[62] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 9.

[63] Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, 172.

that people have grown indifferent, and the women, who can truly grasp the suffering, feel powerless to speak out, leaving them in silence. The failure of women to unite against such injustice perpetuates the oppression imposed by the patriarchal system. Hashimi's novel serves as a potent reminder that 'as long as women are using class or race power to dominate other women, feminist sisterhood cannot be fully realized.'[64] Cooperation and solidarity empower women, while envy and non-cooperation exacerbate their hardships, reinforcing that true empowerment and liberation can only be achieved through a shared commitment to challenge injustice and support one another.

[64] Asif et al., 'Sisterhood as a Saviour of Afghan Women,' 80.

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