
The Intersection of Gender, Disability and Social Status in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*

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Nadia Hashimi's novel *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* (2014) reveals the utility of contemporary discourses on disability theory, intersectionality, feminist theory and race theory. The notion of intersectionality was put forward by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination" (1989). In this groundbreaking text, she argues that intersectionality challenges "a single axis framework" (139) and integrates both gender and race to examine situations in which African American women are discriminated against or oppressed. She also highlights the possibilities offered by intersectionality to expand both feminist theory and anti-racist discourse. In "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," Crenshaw claims that the existence of "multiple grounds of identity" (1245) requires opening intersectionality to other categories such as "class and gender oppression" (1246) or "race and class" (1260). The concept is expanded to other categories where power dynamics prevail, thanks to its role as "a gathering place for open-ended investigations of overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities" (Lykke 2011, cited in Cho et. al. 788).

Among the other inequalities mentioned by Lykke, I cite those caused by disability. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has moved a step further using intersectionality to argue for the integration of disability into feminist theory. In "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminism" (2002), she claims that disability constitutes "a category of analysis"¹ similar to other identity categories, "the representational systems of gender, race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality and class . . . intersect to produce and sustain ascribed, achieved and acquired identities" (3). Garland-Thomson focuses on the intersection of disability and gender, but underlines its intersections with other categories like class.

Because of “an ongoing Eurocentricity in intersectional productions of knowledge” (Patil 853), intersectionality is stretched to other spaces of identity beyond the West. This leads to the emergence of another trend called “transnational feminism.” Vrushali Patil connects intersectionality to transnational feminism because the “categories of race, ethnicity, culture, nation and gender not only intersect but are mutually constituted, formed, and transformed within transnational power-laden processes such as European imperialism and colonialism, neoliberal globalization” (848). She argues that intersectionality entails the “need to think of the multiple processes ... that contribute to the emergence of particular local dynamics having to do with gender” (863). Such processes as colonization and globalization shed light on “indigenous aspects of patriarchy” and “Western-style” patriarchy (857, 852).² They belong to the ideo-geographic entities of the “global North” (848) and the “global South” (851).³ Patil relates the transnational outlook to intersectionality through the distinction between Western and indigenous patriarchies. This distinction is steeped in racial images about Oriental inferiority and Western superiority. Thus, Patil aims at deconstructing these images as well as revealing the transformative effects of cross-border processes on systems like patriarchy and class.

Applying these current theories, I analyze the intersection of gender, disability and social status in Hashimi’s *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*. Hashimi can be classified among post-9/11 Afghan American authors about Afghanistan. In *Imagining Afghanistan: Global Fiction and Film of the 9/11 Wars*, Alla Ivanchikova contends that Afghanistan’s media visibility in the West has shifted from the condition of a “[d]im object” of interest before 9/11 to that of a “[b]right object” (1) in the aftermath of the “American invasion” of the country. Afghanistan has become the basic focus of “not only mass media but also other forms of cultural production, birthing an array of cultural texts set in the country” (2). In “‘To Veil the Threat of Terror’: Afghan Women and the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ in the Imagery of the U.S. War on Terrorism,” Dana L. Cloud points out that this post-9/11 Afghan visibility in the West has put Afghan women’s condition in the spotlight. Print and visual media “construct the viewer as a paternalistic savior of women and posit images of modern civilization against depictions of Afghanistan as backward and pre-modern” (286).

Due to this reductive outlook on Afghanistan and Afghan women in post-9/11 cultural texts, several Afghan diasporic authors have turned to writing to create a more authentic representation of the country and its women. Khaled Hosseini, Atiq Rahimi and Nadia Hashimi, among others, have attracted particular scholarly attention, and the condition of Afghan women is scrutinized. In “Domestic Violence against Women in Atiq Rahimi’s *The Patience Stone*,” Seyedehrobabeh Zabihzadeh, Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Gabriel Clement Chua Chen Wei argue that domestic violence against women is deeply rooted in Afghan society. Analyzing Rahimi’s *The Patience Stone* (2011), they explain that strict Afghan patriarchal rules permit the most heinous acts of violence against women, categorized as “physical,” “emotional” and “sexual.” Most Afghan women, represented by the novella’s heroine, are subjected to physical chastisement by men. This affects them emotionally and constitutes a further form of abuse suffered by women before and after marriage. Violence caused by “forced sex” (62) is another manifestation of abuse. The victim is blamed because the Afghan woman is traditionally “vilified as a source of dishonour for her family and community upon exposure to sexual violence of any form” (62). Systematic violence against Afghan women is an aspect of their plight due to strict patriarchal norms. Some critics have turned their attention to how Hosseini represents this plight and women’s continuous struggle against the rules set by Afghan patriarchy. For instance, in “Giving Voice to Afghan Women’s Struggle for Survival: Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*,” Loveleen Kaur Sindhu and Fatehgarh Sahib study the struggle of Afghan women against patriarchal laws. The authors argue that women’s freedom in Afghanistan is limited by the Taliban, as well as “the Mujahideens and their feudal lords” (303). In Sindhu and Sahib’s view, the Taliban put an end to an era of relative emancipation for women under the Communists, and they regard the US-led war against the Taliban in 2001 as a hopeful event for women. They tend to see foreign interference in Afghanistan as a blessing for women, but a transnational feminist analysis can reveal that there is more to this interference than meets the eye, given the effects of cross-border processes on pre-contact social structures.

In “Subalternity in *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell: An Alternative Feminist Analysis*,” Shahzadi Sumra and Mehroz Taseer’s use Gayatri

Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and Chandra Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" to examine the subaltern condition of Afghan women. According to the authors, Afghan social, political and cultural structures contribute to female subalternity. They also point out the misinterpretation involved in the subordination of women in the name of Islam. Aspects of female subalternity evoked by the authors include, but are not limited to, violence against women, disenfranchisement and young girls' forced marriage. They analyze the factors behind the subjugation of Afghan women and its manifestations in Hashimi's novel. What needs to be addressed is the extent to which these factors also contribute to generating Afghan women's intersectional identities and their multiple subjugations. Further research on Hashimi and her work has refocused on female subordination and has dealt with socio-cultural items like the Afghan practice of *bacha posh* that consists of disguising girls as boys and allowing them to act accordingly because their families do not have boys. For example, Desi Saras Mahdyawati's undergraduate thesis, "Rahima's Struggle against Oppressions as Seen in *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* by Nadia Hashimi," emphasizes the oppression of Afghan women by analyzing the character of Rahima. "Identity Crisis among Afghan Girls as a result of Bacha Posh Practice: A Cultural Study of Nadia Hashimi's Novels *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and *One Half from the East*," by J. Rajasree Menon and P.P. Vijayalakshmi, deals with the identity crises that result from the practice of *bacha posh*. These two pieces of research have made significant contributions to scholarship; however, Hashimi's work also offers fertile ground for deploying the concept of intersectionality that has heretofore been overlooked by critics.

Therefore, one objective of my study is to examine how *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*, set in Afghanistan during the turn of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, gives voice to ordinarily voiceless Afghan women, some of whom are disabled, others from a poor background or both. Most female characters of the two stories that underlie the novel are alienated by patriarchy, classism and ableism. Intersectionality operates on two intertwining levels: the intersection of gender and class as shown in the alienation of women of a poor social background and the intersection of gender and disability related to the stigmatization of disabled women. The two levels are connected

by the alienation of poor disabled women. These intersectionalities demonstrate that society defines people, rather than their state of health, gender, or social background, and this is confirmed by the characters' distortions of their socially ascribed conditions.

Variations within these social definitions are revealed by what Patil terms "cross-border dynamics" (8), which happen when contact between cultures and societies occurs through colonialism, neocolonialism or globalization. Hashimi's novel is set in two periods known for foreign interference in Afghanistan. Using Patil's notion of "cross-border dynamics" and the existence of "various patriarchies" (863) related to the borders of the "global North" and the "global South," I will shed light on how Hashimi connects typically Afghan experiences of patriarchy to others that are Western, resulting from cross-border dynamics. Additionally, I will demonstrate how the indigenous experiences are transformed or shaped by transnational processes. The colonial, neocolonial and global dynamics that make contact possible between cultures accompany Western discourse that asserts the so-called inferiority of the Orient and Orientals. Hashimi is aware of the prevalence of race in Western assertions about the Orient and Oriental womanhood. Therefore, race becomes an intersectional category included in her debunking of Western/Orientalist stereotypes of Oriental women.

The Intersection of Gender, Disability and Class

In Hashimi's novel, the intersection of gender, disability and class is elaborated through three major characters: Shekiba, Rahima and Shaima. All are "multiply-disadvantaged" (Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing" 145). They are disadvantaged by the patriarchal rules of Afghan society, thus revealing patriarchy "as a term for naming gender inequality or gendered power relationships between women and men" (Patil 847). Their poverty contributes to their marginalization. In addition, Shekiba and Shaima are stigmatized because of their disabilities: Shekiba for her facial disfigurement and Shaima for her back and shoulder malformation. Hashimi does not limit herself to portraying gender, disability and class-related alienation; she shows how these women manage to "destigmatize" and demarginalize⁴ themselves. Shekiba and Rahima adopt the traditional *bacha posh*.⁵ Jenny Nordberg argues that several reasons make families choose one of

their girls to be “a made up son” (66). These include economic survival, safety, the obligation of male guardianship for women/girls in public places and to meet the expectations of Afghan “society that demands sons at almost any cost” (70). Along with being a cultural practice, the *bacha posh* constitutes a form of resistance to patriarchy. For Nordberg, “*Bacha posh* is both historical and present-day rejection of patriarchy by those who refuse to accept the ruling order for themselves and their daughters” (300). *Bacha posh* is a hidden form of resistance against the exclusion of women in the public space. Shaima, for her part, directly confronts discrimination and female subordination in the domestic space. She also instructs her sister to defend herself against her misogynistic husband and her nieces in order to fight any form of exclusion at school and in their own households after being married.

Before Shekiba assumes the mantle of *bacha posh*, she is subjected to constant social alienation. As a young girl, she does not hold a privileged position in her family where the “boys were well liked by their grandparents and valued as male heirs” (15). She is stripped of her fundamental rights to education and equality. After the death of all the members of her family, she has been refused her right to inherit her late father’s property.⁶ The author states that her uncles “wanted it all. Now there was no one in their way” (56). It is as if she were not present to claim her right to the land. Later, when she dares to claim it, she is punished because it “wasn’t her *naseeb* [meaning destiny or fate] to claim her father’s land” (141). In addition, she is subjected to the authority of her uncles and her grandmother. As soon as she is taken home, they assign her the toughest household chores. For them, her utility and role are limited to domestic tasks. Her submissiveness is at issue when her uncle decides to get rid of her. She has no say in the matter; she must only obey orders. On her way to the place where she is to be exchanged, she is forbidden to walk alongside her uncle, but rather behind him: “Shekiba stood just behind her uncle, feeling invisible... Nearly twenty minutes passed before she was summoned into the living room by her uncle” (62).⁷ She is used as a commodity by her uncles, for she is exchanged to settle a debt they owe to Azzizulla, a wealthy merchant “by village standards” (62). He, in turn, “gave [her] away to” King Habibullah (156) in order to enlarge his scope of influence. Shekiba finds herself repeatedly given away because she is

no longer wanted. Hashimi highlights the fact that her name “*means ‘gift’ [...] from Allah,*” but for others she is merely a “gift passed from one hand to another” (13). Due to her facial disfigurement, she is “gotten rid of [like] a monster” (61).

According to Garland-Thomson, any analysis of “gender intersectionality must take into consideration ... the ability/ disability system” (2). Abu-Habib argues that there is “inequality between the sexes” (12)⁸ within the same system described by Garland-Thomson. Such is the case with Shekiba. Due to her disability, she has to face another type of marginalization. She is seen as a “half-faced,” “horribly disfigured” (17), and “defective girl” (18). Shekiba only feels safe within her nuclear family, especially her father who sees her as a “daughter-son.” She works with him on the farm and proves “to be able-bodied, affirming her father’s confidence in her ability to manage the farm” (20). Shekiba’s condition begins to be a real problem after her family’s death. She must face her grandmother, her uncles and others who continue to throw at her displeasing “comments, ... jeers [and] stares” (17). Her cousins “came up with twisted names for her. ‘*Shola* face,’ as her skin resembled the lumpy soft rice. ‘*Babaloo,*’ or monster” (17).⁹ Because of her disability, she is nicknamed “*Shekiba-e-shola*” by her uncles and their families who “quickly embrace her nickname [because in] Afghanistan disabilities defined people” (55). They feel that they must get rid of her because they do not want to be associated with this “infamous monster” (63). This label draws attention to the fact that, as Garland-Thomson notes, “although the term has expanded to encompass all forms of social and corporeal aberration, monster originally described people with congenital impairments” (8).

Shekiba’s great-great-granddaughter Rahima is a young girl who suffers from gender inequality coupled with her parents’ poverty. As a girl, she does not receive the same education as boys. However, because her father has only girls and she is the youngest at the time, she has to assume the role of *bacha posh* or a “son to [her] father” just like Shekiba did a century earlier (23). Her parents decide that she will be named Rahim before puberty, so, unlike her older sisters, she advances in her education until puberty. Then, she faces the same fate as them, namely being married very young to relieve their family’s poverty. Therefore, she is transformed into a commodity exchanged

for the economic gains of her family.¹⁰ It is here that the intersection of class and gender becomes clear, as Rahima says:

Turning me into a boy didn't protect me at all. In fact, it had put me right in front of this warlord who now demanded my hand in marriage. Barely a teenager, I was to be wed to this gray-haired fighter with bags of money and armed men to do his bidding. (133)

Rahima's marriage with Abdul Khaliq, a wealthy and powerful warlord under whose orders her father fights, is motivated by the financial support he promises to her poor family.

In addition to child marriage as a fate reserved for young girls, some poor families dispose of their numerous daughters in exchange for money. Wealthy Afghan men purchase young girls for their "harem."¹¹ King Habibullah himself fills his harem with young girls whose families exchange them for money because they "can do without their girls [...and] need things" which they cannot afford without exchanging their girls for commodities (200). Shekiba is offered to the king, but not for the same reasons; due to her disfigured face, she can only be in his harem as one of its guardians. Rahima is married to a polygamous man whose wealth and influence transforms him into a violent husband. After her forced marriage, she must cope with the difficulties of being married and the "hardship life of childbearing" (Nordberg 71). Her poor background worsens her situation. Hashimi maintains that wives suffer more when their husbands are rich and powerful. Rahima recounts: "His power and influence in our area were growing, and with it, so was his aggression and domination at home. We four wives shared a fear of his ready fist" (192).

Rahima does not suffer from alienation caused by disability, but her aunt Shaima does. However, the author connects Rahima's alienation caused by gender and class to her aunt's stigmatization due to her disability through the latter's continuous advice. She always wants her niece to be strong and stand up for herself at school, when she acts like a boy, and then after her marriage. Shaima is always alienated because of physical disability, and she continues to stand up for herself in the face of adversity. She talks in a contemptuous manner to those who bully her because of her "hunched back and one raised shoulder"

(9). It is her manner of protecting herself against bullying:
if you didn't know that she had the best intentions at heart, you could be put off by the lack of pleasantries in her conversation, by her sharp criticisms or by the doubtful squint in her eyes while she listened to you talk. But if you knew how she'd been spoken to her whole life, by strangers and family, you wouldn't be surprised. (9)

Clearly, Shaima has always been verbally assaulted because of her disability, but this does not overwhelm her. Her resilience makes her assume a protective attitude toward her nieces, "She supervised everything" (9). When her nieces are withdrawn from school by their father, she stands up to him, telling him that if he holds on to this idea he is "no better than the Taliban who closed their schools" (11). But he does not listen to her because he considers that a "cripple" (11) is unable to have ideas. She retorts: "Well, this cripple has an idea that can solve your problem" (12). Clearly, Shaima is excluded from decision making concerning serious matters like withdrawing the girls from school. She is also repeatedly spoken to in an unpleasant manner. However, she continues to impose her point of view on people around her.

Additionally, she is forced to stay celibate because of her deformity. No one wants to marry her because she is seen as an unfit woman who does not conform to standards of feminine beauty or the reproductive role. Citing Fine and Ash (1988), Garland-Thomson writes:

the relative privileges of normative femininity are often denied to disabled women. Cultural stereotypes imagine disabled women as asexual, unfit to reproduce, overly dependent, unattractive – as generally removed from the sphere of true womanhood and feminine beauty. (17)

Shaima's family are witnesses to her exclusion from the ritual of bride choosing. People come to ask for her younger sisters, but never for her. Her grand-parents "had hoped to find a suitor before her shape became too obvious" (9). However, no one wants her "with her hunched back and one raised shoulder" (9).

Shaima has to remain single because of her disability, but her niece Parwin is married despite having a "lame" leg. Yet this marriage

is viewed as an act of compassion on the part of her husband who is “more than generous in agreeing [to give her] a chance to be wife of a respected man . . . And a disabled wife at that” (150). Shekiba, Parwin’s great-great-grandmother, is also excluded from marriage for a long time because of her disfigurement. People like the part of her face that is not deformed and refrain from looking at the other part. For people around Shekiba “The infamous monster was half-beautiful” (63). This liminal condition does not make her worthy of love or marriage. When Azizullah discusses with his brother Hafizullah the idea of gifting her to the king, he states: “No, she is not for marriage. She is abled-bodied and does the work of a man. Sometimes it escapes us that she is, in fact, a girl” (80).¹² According to people around her, she is physically capable but not beautiful enough to attract suitors.

The only chance Shekiba has to marry is due to another aspect of her femininity—her ability to reproduce and give birth to boys. Indeed, after having suffered a great deal of contempt toward her femininity, she is forcibly married to a member of the king’s court, no doubt because he sees her as the last hope for having boys. Aisif Baraan, a member of the royal court and Prince Amanullah’s friend, saves Shekiba from execution after she is blamed for a scandalous incident at the harem involving an adulterous affair of one of the king’s concubines. His motivation for saving her is the rumor that “women in [. . .her] family all bear sons” (344) and his desperate need for a son. Thus, he takes her as a wife. A few months after their marriage, she gives birth to a baby boy. With respect to intersectionality, it is important to note that having boys is not merely a matter of gender; it is also connected to social status. Nordberg asserts that “[h]aving at least one son is mandatory for good standing and reputation” in Afghanistan (13). Families blessed with boys are seen as wealthier and worthier of respect in society because when grown up the boys will uplift their families as male heirs. Therefore, Aisif Baraan desperately looks for a male heir, but he also wants to earn more respect in the community. Besides, Afghan society systematically blames women when they do not deliver boys, but the hidden truth is that husbands/fathers, like Aisif Baraan and Rahima’s father, inwardly experience it as a form of emasculation.

Hashimi also uses the birth of Shekiba’s son to debunk

the idea that women with disabilities should not get married and reproduce. Along with not choosing disabled women as wives because they supposedly conform less to standards of female beauty, men also refrain from choosing them, lest they give birth to disabled children. By delivering a healthy boy, Shekiba disproves these misconceptions about disability and reproduction. In “Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment—For Identity Politics in a New Register” (2013), Tobin Siebers distinguishes the “medical model” (290) of disability from the “social” one. The “medical model” involves disability as a health condition. From its perspective, Shekiba’s facial disfigurement does not constitute an impediment for reproduction. Neither does it justify her stigmatization.

However, because society functions through hierarchies related to class, gender, race, and others, people systematically stigmatize “disabled” people. Thus, Hashimi emphasizes the typical ways in which Afghan people stigmatize disabilities and people who have them. For example, they are seen both as manifestations of divine punishment and as the result of being cursed. When people speak of Shekiba’s disfigurement, they evoke “*God [who] only knows what they [her family] did to deserve that*” (16). For them, God has punished Shekiba. Her siblings are forced to learn to avoid the comments about their “cursed sister” (17). After her family’s death, people around her feel the same about her. These Afghan views of disability correspond to the “social model” (290) of disability evoked by Siebers. No medical or scientific argument explains the link between disability and ideas of cursing or divine punishment. What explains them is the pre-eminence of the “ideology of ability ... [which] is discriminatory and exclusionary” (Siebers 279). This social insight into disability is substantiated by its patriarchal use as yet another way to discriminate against Afghan women in favor of men. Two incidents involving Shekiba’s disfigurement imply that Afghan society prefers to have disabled girls/ women than boys/men. First, after being disfigured by accident, Shekiba’s family is thankful that “it hadn’t been one of the boys” (16). Second, when the boys die, her parents are pitied “not for the loss of their children, but for the disappointment that Allah could not have spared one of the sons instead of the defective girl” (18). These reactions reveal an intrinsic hierarchy characterizing disability and gender.

Disability and gender “are mutually constituted” (Patil 848) in the cases of Shekiba, Shaima and Parwin. In Afghanistan the two categories are seen through a similar lens. For example, Afghan society blames people with disabilities in the same way as women who give birth to girls¹³ or young girls accused of exposing themselves in public. Hashimi asserts that “[d]eformities were not easily forgiven” (26) in Afghanistan. This is why Shaima “steeled herself to resist the name-calling, the ridiculing, the gawking” (26), something Shekiba also does by “taking refuge under his shell” (133). Concerning gender, when Rahima’s sister reaches puberty and begins to be “the magnet for unwanted attention,” she is frightened “since people would have loved to assume that she’d sought out the attention” (2).

Similarly, Rahima’s father blames her mother for not giving him a son. For him, she is not a “better wife” (12), as if she is responsible for giving birth only to daughters. Rahima’s mother is a “*dokhtar zai*, or ‘she who only brings daughters’” (Nordberg 13), “with one daughter after another, Madar-*jan* [meaning ‘my dear mother’] did not become the wife Padar-*jan* [meaning ‘my dear father’] expected,” and is contrasted to her mother-in-law who has many boys; “even more sorely disappointed was my grandmother, who had respectably borne five sons and only one daughter” (25). Rahima’s mother loses the respect of her husband and mother-in-law. By contrast, the latter acquires a fairer position because she raises boys. Thus, a hierarchy intrinsic to femininity emerges. Giving birth to boys grants women power over those who are less fortunate. This corresponds to Patil’s discussion of “patriarchy’s unidimensional conceptualization of gender, its dichotomization of gendered individuals into women and men” and which has neglected “differences and power relations within each category” (850). The power relations inherent in the category of woman are illustrated by the power dynamics existing between Rahima’s mother and her grandmother; the latter acquires a right to speak on certain family issues because of her role as a bearer of sons, while Rahima’s mother is utterly silenced due to her unfortunate role as a bearer of daughters.

Intersectionality, Patriarchy and Cross-border Processes

The previous section demonstrated that intersectionality operates on three major levels: gender, disability and class. Because

the novel is set in two historical periods known for intermittent foreign interference in Afghanistan, these intersectional issues are subjected to transnational processes that create variations inherent to these issues as well as other forms of intersectionality. Afghan patriarchy is subjected to, and even transformed by, aspects of foreign patriarchy and colonial processes. The gap between the privileged few who hold power and wealth in Afghanistan and the poor majority of Afghans is also widened. Because colonialism is fundamentally racist, race interferes in the intersectional scheme. This manifests itself in prevalent Orientalist narratives about aspects of Afghan society, including the condition of women.

Patil argues that the cross-border processes of colonialism, neocolonialism and globalization generate multifaceted power relations between the “global North” (848) and the “global South” (851). Accordingly, she notes that “Examining the times and spaces of various patriarchies becomes especially important in the context of excavating the histories of transnational power relations” (854). The transborder process of colonialism deploys Western “patriarchal thought in constructing imperial and colonial hierarchies” (849). This sheds light on the “intersections of gender ... politics with transborder constructions of racial and cultural hierarchy” (849). For Patil, cross-border processes also shape traditional aspects of patriarchy. This results from the influence of Western patriarchal thought on indigenous gender relations. These are also affected by Western economic, political and cultural practices that transform indigenous practices, “I point to the way patriarchy ... is always already imbricated within multiple axes of power that are advanced by, complicit in, and often the vehicle for various border crossings ” (848).

Hashimi’s novel offers a congenial space for a broad analysis of transnational power relations and their effect on Afghan patriarchy. It deals with Afghanistan’s place in Britain’s and the Soviet Union’s “Great Game” (13) over the control of central Asia. Even if “the Afghan people ferociously resist ... outside control” (13), the country ends up controlled by both of them—each in its own way. To begin with, Amanullah, then prince, is preoccupied with continuous “unrest within our borders and unrest at the borders” provoked by Russians who know that “troubles at home make easy prey” (250). After succeeding

to his father, King Amanullah “had enough of British dominance [... so he] had embroiled the country in the third Anglo-Afghan war,” leading to “independence from England” (405). Decades later, the Russians re-invade the country, making it another front in the Cold War. Subsequently, the country finds itself controlled by the Taliban and their imported fundamentalist ideology. This leads to America’s military intervention and its two-decade presence in the country after the 9/11 attacks on New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Rahima’s cousin Siddiq states that “Amrika [meaning the United States of America...] came and they’re bombing the Taliban” (28). As a matter of fact, Afghanistan has “suffered enough in the hands of others in the last decades” (298). Under these circumstances, the condition of Afghan women is worsened.

Hashimi connects Afghan patriarchy to the colonial/neocolonial processes mentioned above by comparing Shekiba to Afghanistan. Her country’s “borders shrank ... Areas to the north like Samarkand and Bukhara had been lost to the Russian Empire. Chunks of the south were chipped away and the western front was pushed in over the years. In that way, Shekiba was Afghanistan” (13-14). After being disfigured, Shekiba becomes “a fragment of the person she should have been” (14). Like Afghanistan, she is dominated and “gifted from one stranger to another” (209). Every time this happens, her new owner is more powerful than the previous one, just as Afghanistan’s fate is determined by the power of the conqueror. Indeed, Shekiba becomes her uncles’ domestic servant, Azizullah’s property and the king’s harem guard. The part devoted to her ends with the reign of a “visionary monarch” (332), King Amanullah, for whom winning Afghan independence from England is meaningless without a gradual emancipation of women. Shekiba, too, ends up married to a moderate friend of the king. Rahima’s narrative shows that this era of emancipation does not last long because the country reverts to being prey to foreign powers during the Cold War. This prepares the ground for the Taliban and the replacement of traditional patriarchy by misogyny. Afghan women find themselves under the whims of fundamentalist ideology. The reign of the Taliban results in the US-led “war on terror,” sparking more debate about the condition of Afghan women.

Patil argues that transborder processes “contribute to the emergence of particular local dynamics” (863) that affect gender and patriarchy. Hashimi illustrates how such dynamics develop due to the different wars waged against and in Afghanistan by foreign powers. She blames the wars for the emergence of a “local” class of warlords—like Abdul Khaliq—and their powerful grip on the country: “Warlords were Afghanistan’s new aristocracy” (25). Rahima recounts how Shaima “would tell us about the war, how the warlords controlled everything, and conquered without mercy, even attacking women in the most shameful way of all” (26). They not only contribute to looting the resources of the country but also worsen the condition of women, for they “could do what they wanted with women” (128). Unlike warlords, veterans are in hopeless social situations due to post-traumatic stress disorder and/ or addiction to opium, as is the case of Rahima’s father whose family falls into a “desperate situation” (24). The author stresses that there “were casualties of the war inside” (24) his head, so he “clouds his mind with the opium that Abdul Khaliq kept around” (27). On the one hand, Abdul Khaliq’s power and wealth increase because of his business with foreigners. He is “already in good position with the contracts” he has secured (223) and spends “more and more time with foreigners” (221) in order to secure another contract involving a pipeline project which promises “a lot of money” (223). His military power is growing since “the Americans are going to be sending us some weapons or something” (71). On the other hand, Rahima’s father sinks deeper in his paralysis, so he turns to him for help. Abdul Khaliq tells him: “you came to me recently talking of your concerns. That you have young women at home and not enough money which to provide for them. I . . . am here to offer a solution” (120). Abdul Khaliq’s father continues: “you have a young woman whom my son would like to honor as his wife . . . as a result you would be better able to provide for your family” (121). Rahima’s parents are forced to accept the powerful warlord’s offer because of their desperate situation.

Due to Abdul Khaliq’s intimidating power, he is entitled to bypass traditional aspects of patriarchy in order to do or get what he wants. To begin with, in Afghanistan, the legal age for marriage is sixteen, but Abdul Khaliq circumvents tradition when he asks for Rahima, who is only thirteen at the time. Besides, she has two older

sisters, and tradition requires them to be married first (131). In order to take Rahima, he proposes the idea of marrying them to his cousins, although the three girls are too young for marriage. In an attempt to legitimize it, he uses an illegitimate *mullah* as a puppet so to perform the *nikkah*—the religious ceremony of marriage: “Hadji-sahib... had dubbed himself with the title after paying a visit to a shrine north of our town [instead of a real pilgrimage to Mecca]. But as a dear friend of Abdul Khaliq, no one contested his credentials” (146). Shaima is aware that the ceremony is a sham that transgresses tradition as the fake *mullah* “is reading the sura [chapter from the Quran] incorrectly” (147). Even if “all of this was wrong, a sin” (152), it is impossible to decline the warlord’s offer. Rahima’s mother is intimidated by him. She tells Shaima: “It’s not some peasant from the streets. It’s Abdul Khaliq Khan, the warlord. His bodyguards sat in our living room with their machine guns” (139), guns that have been supplied to them by foreigners.

Since Shaima is the girls’ “only advocate in the *nikkah*” (148), they are taken as young brides and suffer from the horrendous effects of their new life. Rahima recounts how her “inside hurt” (177) every night after she sleeps with Abdul Khaliq. She deplores her helpless situation each time he chastises her. She is also constantly worried about Parwin. Because she has a “limp” (151) and looks “half the size of her husband,” Rahima “shudder[s] to think how she would feel to be alone with him” (151). Parwin’s condition as a young bride is so unbearable that she puts an end to her life by immolation. Connecting Parwin’s suicide to connubial violence, Shaima states: “Sometimes women are pushed too far, kicked too hard, and there is no escape for them. Maybe she thought this was her only way. Oh, my poor niece” (215). This tragic incident motivates Shaima further in her vehement critique of Afghan society’s treatment of girls. She states: “Damn these people, taking such young girls” (196). She castigates child marriage in the same manner as she challenges the girls’ exclusion from education.

The education of Afghan girls is jeopardized further in times of war. Tradition already disadvantages them regarding education. Many families without boys choose to keep their girls away from school because they lack a male companion. Others limit their schooling to the period before puberty. The war makes the choice of keeping daughters

at home easy for parents. The “war on terror” incites Rahima’s father to withdraw her sisters from school. Her mother anxiously tries to justify this decision to Shaima: “I told you, once things have settled down, I’ll be able to send the girls back to school” (72). Schooling in war times is difficult anywhere, but for Shaima it is merely a pretext since there is not “a day when this country wasn’t at war” (72). Wars fought by foreigners in Afghanistan contribute to confining girls at home instead of sending them to school. This urges transnational feminists to extend their nonprofit work to the country and enables the opening of more schools for women and girls. In Kabul, Rahima is introduced to the women’s “training center under Ms. Franklin’s tutelage” (418). Ms. Franklin represents the class of Western female activists committed to a cross-border dynamic that promotes female education in some parts of Afghanistan. Rahima’s education proves to be vital to her:

It was only because I was literate that I was able to join Badriya in Kabul. It was only because I could hold a pen with purpose that I was able to be her assistant and feel comfortable joining Hamida and Sufia in the resource center. It was my few years of school that allowed me to read the beauty shop flyer in the store window, to locate the street where Ms. Franklin waited nervously to help me make my escape. (449-50)

The center can be seen as an outpost of the charitable organization Women for Afghan Women¹⁴ mentioned by Lila Abu-Lughod in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* The organization is dedicated to improving the condition of Afghan women. Rahima is surprised that the training center “is really just for women” (420), and she is informed that “international organizations send teachers and computers” (410). Abu-Lughod associates the inspiring work of transnational activists and feminists in Afghanistan with “integrity” because it is based on a principle of solidarity beyond borders (29).

At Ms. Franklin’s center, Rahima is also introduced to a refuge for “women who had run away from their husbands” (418). Sheltering these women can be considered as a serious offense to hardline indigenous patriarchal rules that permit domestic violence against women and “honor killings.”¹⁵ However, the shelter saves the lives of several of them. Their act of running away from seclusion and violence

could not have been dared before the establishment of such refuges. Shekiba cannot run away from her uncles or Azizullah. Despite being exploited, physically abused, and psychologically tortured, there are no refuges for women where she can shelter herself. There are also no precedents to this transgressive but lifesaving act from which to take inspiration. A century later, Rahima escapes from her abusive husband thanks to the center and the shelter. She explains her motivation: “I thought of the woman in the shelter. She’d disobeyed and her husband had sliced off her ear. I had no doubt Abdul Khaliq could be just as vicious” (422). The shelter can be seen as another branch of Women for Afghan Women. It is focused on providing protection for women and girls whose lives are threatened by domestic abusers. According to Nordberg, “[n]ine out of ten Afghan women will experience domestic abuse in some form” (71).

Another issue that arises at the intersection of “Western-style patriarchy[y]” (Patil 852) and indigenous patriarchal thought is the place of women in Afghan politics. Afghan women are traditionally barred from participating in politics. However, the issue has been included in the struggle for Afghan women’s emancipation in recent decades. At Shekiba’s time, women’s involvement in the political sphere is not acceptable. But at the time of Rahima, when Americans and other Westerners begin promoting democracy, the Afghan parliament passes bills that allow women into politics. However, opening up Afghan patriarchy to Western-style patriarchy does not necessarily lead to female empowerment. According to Patil, feminists who claim that patriarchy is indigenous and globalization processes lead to female empowerment are wrong because the reforms introduced become “less than empowering” to them (851). Hashimi corroborates this because she regards the reform as a mere smokescreen through which men perpetuate their hold on this sphere of influence. All men consider the reform stupid, but accept it because they know that elected women will bend according to their wishes. Shaima claims:

There’s a rule that a certain number of seats have to be filled by women. They made this rule part of the constitution because otherwise no one would give any woman the time of day. But he’ll put one of his wives in and tell her exactly what to say, how to vote, who to talk to. (240)

Clearly, women are politically disempowered because they do not use their own voice but rather are under the tutelage of their husbands. Arguably, even their admission to parliament is conditioned by their marital status as married, which would compel them to obey their husbands and only express their husbands' opinions. Hashimi maintains that an Afghan husband who lets his wife participate in politics wants the power through her, and "he would have his finger in a lot of different projects" (244).

The author connects women's powerless presence in the parliament to foreign interests in the country. She argues that men who allow their wives to be parliamentarians expect them to protect their lucrative business with foreigners. Abdul Khaliq sends Badriya, his first wife, accompanied by Rahima, his fourth wife, to Kabul to take his share in the oil business. Rahima recounts how Badriya only "apes" the votes of one of her husband's allies in parliament. She is surprised by the fact that her "husband's influence was this far-reaching, into the parliament building in Kabul" (306). Rahima explains Badriya's political lethargy by her husband's projects with foreigners: "You know these westerners he's always going out to meet. He wants them to pay him to provide security. But it's up for vote in the parliament whether or not that company should be allowed to build a pipe through our province" (345). Abdul Khaliq exercises political power through his wife and allies in parliament. Other warlords exercise it directly as they "make up at least a third of the parliament" (301).

Hashimi highlights what happens to a female politician who raises her voice against a parliament controlled by warlords and "outside forces" (306). She recounts how Zamarud Barakani "riled the entire parliament with her irreverent behavior" (315). She is shouted at, hated and threatened, but persists in expressing her point of view. Eventually, Barakani pays dearly for her right to her own voice, since she is assassinated because she constitutes a constant threat to Afghan male-dominated political order. Apart from her, no other woman in the parliament opposes the nominations being made, the projects being approved, or the policies being adopted. She risks her life by continuing to express her controversial opinions in order to inspire other women of her generation or of future generations to effect positive change through multiple female voices in parliament. What happens to

Zamarud is meant not only to silence her, but also to dissuade other women in parliament. Some of them even cease to attend the sessions. Rahima states: “The attack on Zamarud had frightened Badriya, as it had many other female parliamentarians ... two women had decided not to return” (352). Arguably, the inspiration for the character of Barakani is Malalai Joya. She is a strong parliamentarian who persists in expressing her point of view in the Afghan parliament and has survived four assassination attempts.¹⁶

Hashimi discusses how transborder processes modify traditional patriarchy and worsen the condition of Afghan women. She confirms Patil’s thought that a “simplistic focus on patriarchy as associated with indigenous religion or culture or tradition is insufficient, and in fact deeply problematic, and why patriarchy as explanation is really no explanation at all” (852). She uses traditional aspects of Afghan womanhood to criticize its representation in Western essentialist rhetoric—whether in colonialist narratives or Western feminist discourse.¹⁷ Such rhetoric “truncate[s]” the third world woman to being “sexually constrained ... ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized” (Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes” 65). Hashimi deconstructs this “truncated” image through the *bacha posh* and veiling.

Hashimi argues that *bacha posh* enlightens those who assume it about their rights and gives them confidence to raise their voices against male dominance. Shekiba has always been *bacha posh*, beginning with her role as her father’s “daughter-son” to ranking among King Habibullah’s harem guards. When her father dies, she buries him alone. Then she stays at her farm living self-sufficiently until her uncles take her in order to steal her land and to clear their family honor. For them, their honor is broken by Shekiba’s transgressive act of burying her father alone and living in solitude (39-40). Rahima, too, is her family’s useful *bacha posh*. The extra years of education she receives thanks to being *bacha posh* allow her to reach Kabul and to escape from her violent husband. Nordberg asserts that the *bacha posh* concerns “underground women slowly coming to disregard what they had been told about their weaker gender by learning to imitate and disguise themselves as the other” (301). It also affirms that Afghan women do not need Westerners to lecture them “about gender, freedom, human rights, and

how they might conjure up the confidence to speak for themselves” (Nordberg 301). In this respect, Shekiba knows that she has the right to inherit her father’s land. As a matter of fact, she secretly goes back to her home to document that the property is her father’s. She then smuggles herself to the local magistrate in Azizullah’s village in an attempt to plead her case. She tells him: “I have the deed to my father’s land and I am his only surviving child. I want to claim my father’s land. That land should belong to me and my uncles are taking it without right” (128). This firm statement by Shekiba to a man of power shows that her experience as *bacha posh* allows her to gain the confidence to speak for herself and to claim her right. It goes against the Orientalist representation of Oriental women as passive and silenced victims.

Additionally, Hashimi subverts the reductive meaning attributed to the veil or *burqa* in Western narratives. Most Western scholars associate the veil/*burqa* with male domination of women. Marnia Lazreg claims that the “veil has traditionally been discussed as the most tangible sign of women’s ‘oppression’” (1). In her book, she uncovers four major reasons of women’s donning the veil: in order to keep up with being modest, for being pious, as a means of protection against harassment, and as an expression of cultural identity. Lazreg does not evoke the fact that it also serves as a way of resistance against oppressive rules when it is lifted. It is precisely what Shekiba does when she decides to lift it in front of her uncles and grandmother. The author asserts: “Shekiba did something she never thought she would do. She lifted her *burqa* from her face and spat on her grandmother’s wrinkled feet” (60). Shekiba’s deliberate unveiling subverts “the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women’s unfreedom” (Abu-Lughod 40). When Lazreg speaks of the role of the veil in protecting against harassment, she means sexual harassment. However, Shekiba’s disfigurement makes her suffer from another form of harassment. Fortunately, she feels secure in it because it protects her against people’s contemptuous looks and comments about her disfigurement: “Shekiba was thankful for the ability to hide behind the blue cloak” (30). Similarly, when Shekiba’s mother is pregnant and her belly deformed, she covers herself from embarrassment when people are near her. It is stated that when “women headed in her direction she would hurry inside

and cover herself, embarrassed that her belly was swollen with child” (15). It follows that Hashimi sees the *burqa* both as a garment that protects against ableist attitudes and as a means of rebellion against patriarchy when it is withdrawn. This attitude to veiling shows that it is not synonymous with male control of Oriental woman’s body as promulgated in Orientalist narratives. The way Shekiba uses her veiling demonstrates that it is both protective and subversive.

Hashimi also dissociates veiling—with its varieties—from its misconception as a strict religious requirement to criticize the belief in “‘patriarchal religion’ as the a priori gendered oppression” (Patil 857) in Afghanistan. King Amanullah reportedly said “the *chador* [as a form of veiling] is not required in Islam” (434). Veiling is seen more as a form of costume that takes different shapes through time and space. Rahima notes that women “looked different now than they had a few years ago. Some wore long blue *burqas* and others wore long skirts and modest head scarves” (5). As a fashionable garment, it is subjected to foreign sartorial influence. The author evokes Western costume that occasionally finds its own place among Afghan women. For instance, Queen Soraya, King Amanullah’s “revolutionary” (428) wife, appears in public wearing a headscarf. Then, she takes it off in front of her approving husband, keeping her Euro-styled clothes, “a fitted jacket with a brooch that caught the sunlight, over a pencil skirt that ended midcalf” (433). The author evokes other European beauty practices that are imported to Afghanistan. In the harem, Shekiba learns about makeup introduced by a British woman who “had brought rouge and powder, showing the women how to lighten their complexion and bring an alluring tint of color to their cheeks” (266). She even wonders “if the powder could conceal her disfigurement” (266). Similarly, in Kabul, Rahima comes across beauty shops, and television stations project images of “female singers, female news reports. Even men advocating on behalf of women” (252). This image of progressive womanhood results from transborder processes which had started during Shekiba’s time, when a British female doctor has introduced beauty practices to King Habibullah’s harem, moving to Rahima’s time in Kabul, where Westerners introduced media practices that project images of a possible transformation of Afghan patriarchal society.

Conclusion

Hashimi criticizes the Afghan patriarchal society that normalizes the exclusion and marginalization of women. Their marginalization is worsened by poverty and/or disability. She notes that a century of social history has not brought fundamental changes to Afghan society's multi-layered discrimination against women. However, she is optimistic, given the rise of feminist awareness represented by Shaima. This awareness is partly the result of the education of women that has progressively been implemented in the country thanks to the efforts of Western non-profit organizations and their local facilitators. Nonetheless, now that the Taliban have retaken the country, these hopeful gains seem muted. After the US retreat from the country in August 2021, women have been put in a precarious position, and their condition reverts to 'state zero.' This question continues to preoccupy Afghan and international observers. Additionally, the critical move from a two-category intersectionality—e.g. gender and disability—to an extended one—including transborder processes—demonstrates that the stigma attributed to minorities are the result of a confluence of factors that are social, political, economic and transnational. These factors shape the way people are defined more than they are shaped by their state of health, gender, social background or national/racial origin.

Notes

¹ Garland-Thomson writes: “[t]he fundamental point I will make here is that integrating disability as a category of analysis and a system of representation deepens, expands and challenges feminist theory” (3).

² Patil distinguishes between “precontact indigenous patriarchies” (857) and “Western-style patriarchies” (852).

³ In “Transnational Feminist Crossings: On Neoliberalism and Radical Critique,” Chandra Talpade Mohanty uses the same notions of the “global South and North” (967). These constitute ideo-geographic entities referring to the South and the North associated with the so-called underdeveloped and developed worlds. In this particular context, this distinction includes the differences in the treatment of women in the two worlds.

⁴ According to Crenshaw, one of the goals of intersectionality is to bring marginalized social groups into inclusion: “[t]he goal of this activity should be to facilitate the inclusion of marginalized groups” (“Demarginalizing” 167). This must begin with treating minorities as equals.

⁵ Families without boys who “are blessings” (Hashimi 75) in Afghanistan can turn a daughter into a boy. However, as soon as the obvious signs of their femininity (such as grown chest, menstruation and voice) appear, they cease to assume this role. This is not entirely the case with Rahima, who continues to be *bacha posh* for a few more weeks: “Most children who were made *bacha posh* were changed back into girls when their monthly bleeding started but Madar-*jan* had let me go on [...because] I was too useful to her, to my sisters, to the whole family” (Hashimi 84).

⁶ It should be emphasized that the right to equality in property and inheritance has been a principle of struggle of feminists around the world throughout the history of the development of feminism. For example, Enlightenment feminist Mary Wollstonecraft includes it in her works *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). This type of right has also become a fundamental principle among contemporary feminists in the Arab-Muslim world. In this sense, recent feminist studies believe that Quranic law secures the right to inheritance for women, but lament the fact that patriarchy means that most of the time it is not exercised. As an example, Haifaa A. Jawad writes: “Theoretically speaking, then, the position of women as far as inheritance is concerned is secure and guaranteed by the Islamic Law. But in practice this is not the case” (68). This is what happens to Shekiba when her uncles decide to deprive her of this right.

⁷ In some cultures, a sign of the subjugation of women is walking behind men; in others, the sign is walking in front of them. The first involves the idea that men are the leaders; the second implies that women are overseen by men.

⁸ Abu-Habib questions the idea that “disabled men and women can possibly be said to be equal” and asserts the validity of “inequality between the sexes” (12).

⁹ In Afghan mythology, *Babaloo* is a nocturnal creature that scares children at night.

¹⁰ It should be noted in this regard that Shekiba is traded by her uncles to settle a debt they owe to a man of influence in their region. Shekiba and her great-great-granddaughters are similar in this sense; they are used for the financial interest of others.

¹¹ Reina Lewis claims that “the mystique of the forbidden harem stemmed from the vision of it as a segregated space, a polygamous realm, from which all men except the husband (generally conceptualized as the Sultan) and his eunuchs were barred” (Lewis 111). She adds: “The erotic charge of the harem has two trajectories: the fulfillment of seeing the forbidden faces and bodies of Muslim women; and the fantasy of one man’s sexual ownership of several women (112). To understand further the concept of the “harem”, one must read the works of Fatima Mernissi. The two most important texts are *The Harem Within: Tales of a Moroccan Girlhood* (1995) and *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1994).

¹² It should be noted that the type of handicap from which Shekiba suffers does not reduce her physical capacity but rather her attractiveness. This is why Azizullah refers to her as a physically strong person but incomplete due to her facial disfigurement.

¹³ The ableist attitude toward women with disabilities also applies to women who give birth only to girls. Indeed, in the Afghan mindset not giving birth to boys is seen as a sort of disease while those who give birth to boys are considered to be decent wives.

¹⁴ Women for Afghan Women is an organization established in 2001 that works to help Afghan women. Its website www.womenforafghanwomen.org states: “(WAW) is a grassroots civil society organization dedicated to protecting and promoting the rights of disenfranchised Afghan women and girls in Afghanistan and New York. In particular, WAW works to help Afghan women and girls exercise their rights to pursue their individual potential to self-determination, and to representation in all areas of life—political, social, cultural, and economic.”

¹⁵ Singh and Bhandari assume that “honor killings are perpetrated due to the (personal/social) belief that sexual misconduct of women, which brings shame and dishonor to the family, can only be restored by severely punishing or killing the woman and in some cases her paramour” (2). According to them, one objective of “honor killings” is “to serve as a warning against possible future transgressions and a mechanism to instill fear and maintain control over women and their sexuality” (2).

¹⁶ Malalai Joya is an Afghan parliamentarian who led a campaign against Afghanistan’s warlords from 2005 to 2007. She was frequently referred to as “the bravest woman in Afghanistan.” Her brave actions are embodied in her *A Woman among Warlords: The Extraordinary Story of an Afghan Who Dared to Raise Her Voice* (2009).

¹⁷ Mohanty argues that Western feminism constitutes a form of “discursive” colonization (“Under Western Eyes” 61) due to its “hierarchical terms” in relation to the Other (62).

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