



# PRISON: A SAFE HOUSE FOR AFGHANI WOMEN: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF NADIA HASHIMI'S 'A HOUSE WITHOUT WINDOWS'

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## Abstract

The title 'A House without Windows' is a visual metaphor for prison. Nadia Hashimi's novel decodes the various layers of captivity in which women are bound in Afghanistan. They suffer innumerable violent acts at the hands of the men in their families. Any attempt to mend the laws to benefit women is seen as losing control over them. The bias between men and women, in the eye of the law, is disturbingly evident. Under such situations, when a woman finally ends up in jail, even if the crime has been committed in self-defence, she is both restricted and rescued. Her body and mind become free from the constant agony of violence and molestation.

This paper is an attempt to study the psychological impact of prison on women in Hashimi's text. The research is an inquiry into the difference in the living conditions of women in their houses and their 'A House Without Windows'. Women in Hashimi's text also choose silence over justification as their words are futile in the eyes of law. It is interesting to analyze how Hashimi's characters use silence as a weapon. And finally, the current work is an introspection into Hashimi's style of writing. Hashimi's use of subjective narration for the representation of Afghan women is very different from western ideas and theories of feminism. It will be a sincere attempt of this study to deconstruct the stereotypical image of Middle Eastern women as weak and pathetic and represent their strengths as seen by writers like Hashimi.

**Keywords: Afghani Women, Prison, Symbolism, Subjective Narration, Feminist Writing**

## INTRODUCTION

'A House Without Windows', the third novel from Afghani-American writer Nadia Hashimi is basically an introspection into the life of Zeba, a loving and caring family woman, much loved by neighbours and friends. One unfortunate incident ripped her off her well-rooted family life and threw her into prison. Her lawyer Yusuf tries to understand why a woman who lived all her life by the laws of society suddenly decided to murder her husband. But 'A House without Windows' is not a murder mystery. It is rather a psychological analysis of gravely wronged Afghani women. Through Yusuf, Hashimi allows us to enter into the lives of women in Afghanistan and see for ourselves their daily toil and endless struggle in a society that is gravely biased toward them. Yusuf has returned to his homeland Afghanistan, as a lawyer and his first case is Zeba's. He tries very hard to seek justice for a helpless woman through a judicial system that has no place and authority for the voice of women. Through Zeba's journey, we also meet a spectrum of women going through the same strife. Hashimi wishes to break the ideology that women's lives are worthless if their names are tarnished in the eyes of society. The prisoners in Chil Mahtab are all forsaken by their families and society. They were once daughters, mothers, wives, and sisters. But in Chil Mahtab, they are all women. Life inside the prison is more comforting and compassionate to them. Zeba, though she misses her daughter, is seen reflecting upon the comfort of prison life where she is not expected to cook or take care of family. For the first time, she finds herself as a human whose needs are equally important as those of others (men and children).

The novel's indifference toward whether or not Zeba committed the crime shows that Hashimi does not want readers to be interested in finding the truth behind the murder. When the truth is revealed it doesn't come as a shock or surprise. It seems as if it has become evident for the reader to know the truth. Hashimi is more interested in protecting the pitiful condition of Afghan's socio-political scenario and the ever-so-bleak judicial system that tries but fails in making any improvement in the laws related to women. The women in Chil Mahtab are serving even for the crimes they did not commit or committed because it was the only way out.

Their words do not hold any importance in court. Because they are women, they are believed to have committed the crime. Consequently, women in Hashimi's text choose to be silent. In the words of the protagonist, Zeba, "What good is a woman's telling of the truth/ when nothing she says will be taken as proof?"

## Symbolic Relevance of 'Chil Mahtab'

The literal translation of 'Chil Mahtab' is 'forty moons'. 'Forty' in Afghani vernacular language suggests 'innumerable'. Hashimi cleverly chooses the name for the prison suggesting it to be the metaphorical epicenter of her novel. Tooba Rasheed in her latest research does a descriptive analysis of how the prison in Hashimi's novel acts as a wall of strength for its prisoners. Rasheed suggests that the women in 'Chil Mahtab' are not only safe from the physical violence they were subjected to, but they are also able to find their inner peace and solace, thus freeing them from their inner prison. The prisoners in 'Chil Mahtab' live in better and more humane conditions as compared to their own homes. The importance of the vernacular 'forty' is also very strikingly put in Hashimi's text. These women, who feel so weak and lonely all by themselves, find new strength in the union. They share the agony of their suffering in outer life with each other and find consoling and sympathetic arms of their cellmates to shed their tears on. Hashimi's subjective narrative gives space to the stories of many women in the cell. When we retrospect the endless pain they have borne, 'Chil Mahtab' seems to be a happy space for them. Tooba Rasheed mentions that 'A House Without Window' is a more comforting and respectful home when coming compared with the real home of Afghani women.

## Importance of Silence

Silence is used as a symbolic tool in Hashimi's work. The women in 'Chil Mahtab' choose to be silent when interrogated by officials. This silence can be deciphered in two ways. It can either be understood through Kristeva's concept of abjection where the horrific experience of their lives has shunned these women, or it can be seen as a mode of their resistance against the prejudiced social institution of Afghanistan. If we look at the former scenario, these women have suffered beyond imagination. Their stories bleed with cruelty and trauma. They were beaten, raped, and molested and some were even sold into prostitution. They are in a vicious circle where there is no respite. The judiciary that is supposed to do justice with them is broken and blinded in the hands of rampant and brutal patriarchy. Owing to this destitution and hopelessness, Hashimi's women are shunned. Consequently, they choose to be silent.

But, when we look at 'silence' as a mode of resistance by prisoners in Hashimi's novel, it opens up a whole new arena of discourse. These women willingly choose to be silent. They reject being heard by a judicial system that has turned a deaf ear to their sufferings.

Zeba in the novel says that it is a futile attempt, to tell the truth because nothing they say has any meaning in the eye of the law. The judiciary cannot possibly give justice to these women as it has been paralyzed by irrefutable phallogocentrism. A woman is considered an accused even if the crime has been committed by her in self-defense. A wrongly accused woman is also considered a criminal in the eye of the law. Her words in self-defense are unheard of simply because she is a woman. Thus, Hashimi's women feel that they are better off as silent spectators of their own fate.

Tooba Rasheed deconstructs this 'silence' of the prisoners of Chil Mahtab. She says that their stories and secrets are the core elements of their self. By choosing to be silent, they choose to control their story. Letting their agony known to the world makes them weak and helpless. But choosing to be quiet strengthens them. They feel they have control over their own life. Their silence could also be a projection of the title of the novel. Silence makes their minds windowless, from where nothing can go out.

Gayatri Spivak's concept of 'subaltern cannot speak' also finds relevance in the case of Afghani women. The women of Afghan choose to demonstrate silence in the form of an agitation against the global outcry that pretends to be their voice. The pitiful narration of their lives by writers and critics of the western world, somehow diminish the seriousness of their condition. It is only when the platform is even and the system unbiased can these women speak out. And, that would be their only true representation.

## Representation of Subjectivity in Hashimi's Writing

Rasheed mentions in her research that Hashimi employs her own version of ecriture feminine writing in 'A House Without Windows'. Naili and Anik, in their latest research, explore through a series of characters in the novel to look at how Hashimi's writing is more about the subjectivity of women's thoughts than the objectivity of actions. Incidents from the lives of characters like Zeba, Latifa, and Gulnaaz, have been taken for close consideration. Naili and Anik have proposed that women in Hashimi's text have given up freedom for self-consciousness. The reflection and retrospection upon the incidents of the past give meaning to the lives of these women. They become a stronger and better version of themselves by doing so. Hashimi, in the novel, says about Zeba that she is not the same resplendent woman physically but she has learned a new trajectory about love and relationship. Similarly, Latifa, a girl born into a poor family and unwanted by them, runs away to save her and her sister's lives. Gulnaaz, a mother, narrates to her daughter how she chose not to remarry (after her husband's death) and employed herself to feed her family. All these women and many more, come from different spectrums of life. But their strife as women is one. They all lack authority over their lives. A sense of slavery lingers over them. It is only the retrospection and re-telling of their miserable stories that give them a bit of respite from this slavery. It is for this reason that Hashimi has given these stories more importance and space than any consequential action, in her text.

Hashimi's writing is not a passive and narcissistic narration of the condition of women from a third-person perspective. Nor is it adrenaline-pumping objective-driven murder mystery storytelling where the focus is on the action. Rather, Hashimi chooses to be sublime and sensitive in her writing. Her presence and authority as a writer become obscure. Hashimi chooses to be silent to let the women in her story, be heard. The representation of the emotional turmoil of the women takes a grand space and actions become inconsequential. This subjectivity in narration makes 'A House Without Windows' a post-modern masterpiece.

## CONCLUSION

Women from third-world countries are often projected as submissive and helpless by writers and critics of the western world. Western ideas of feminism do not comply with women in eastern and Middle Eastern countries. This is one struggle of the writers and critics of Eastern and Middle Eastern countries. The other is to bring into the limelight the rampant hegemony of patriarchy prevalent in these countries. This blinded society denies any platform for discourse related to women's rights, much less for the voices against injustices done to them on daily basis.

Nadia Hashimi, a pediatrician, and writer relates to both of these conditions. Her writing reflects her sensitivity toward her roots. 'A House Without Windows' is not just a psychological narrative. It can be seen as a fictional memoir where Afghani women are given the platform to speak, reflect, and argue. The platform which is brutally denied to them in the current socio-political scenario of the country. The writer's abstinence from marking her presence in the text marks the presence of many thoughtful, proud women coming from different backgrounds in Afghani society. This paper has been a sincere effort to bring out a new feminist outlook from which we look at Hashimi's work. An outlook where we do not generate mercy and charity for these women. Rather, it should touch the cord of empathy in our consciousness. These women need to be seen and considered as strong and competent. They are radical and self-sufficient. When such people are wronged, we cannot let it go with just a hint of mercy. Things need to be thought about and done to change that. And that would be the true justice to Hashimi's effort in 'A House Without Windows'.

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