
**Unsettling Cultural and Gender Conventions in Nadia Hashimi's Novel
*A House without Windows.***

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Article Received: 29/02/2024

Article Accepted: 28/03/2024

Published Online: 31/03/2024

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.3.204

Abstract

Nadia Hashimi's novel *A House without Windows* explores Cultural standards and sex stereotypes while analyzing the lives of Afghan women. Through the engrossing portrayal of Afghan women's hardships and the exploration of cultural and gender customs, Hashimi sheds light on the struggles and injustices Afghan women face in a society that men control. The main character, Zeba, challenges gender preconceptions and the current quo in her compelling story. The novel's critical assessment and scholarly interpretation focus on the challenges experienced by Afghan women during times of crisis and conflict, prejudice, the issue of violence against women, and how they overcome these obstacles. This analysis closes a significant gap in the literature by shedding light on the resilience and ability of Afghan women to thrive on public platforms while adhering to social standards in the pursuit of a more just society.

Keywords: Nadia Hashimi, Cultural and Gender Customs, Afghan Society, Resilience.

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1. Introduction

Several authors have made a name for themselves in the current literary context by challenging the status quo and being outspoken advocates for marginalized communities (Imran & Ismail, 2022). Hashimi, in particular, has received recognition for her writings highlighting Afghan women's hardships and accomplishments. In *A House Without Windows*, Hashimi delves extensively into the lives of Afghan

women, examining gender norms and societal codes that restrict and enslave them (Nwoke & Cochrane, 2022). Her text, set against the backdrop of Afghanistan's sexist culture, presents a nuanced and multidimensional picture of Afghan women that goes beyond clichés and dispels common assumptions about their existence. She presents an engaging story that defies social norms and traditional ideas through the story of the superhero Zeba.

The central character, Zeba, is charged with killing her husband. The plot takes readers on a journey that clarifies the subtleties of sex roles in Afghan society in addition to exposing the truth about the murder. Prejudices based on race and geography significantly affect Afghanistan's judicial system, further marginalizing and oppressing women (Spencer et al., 2022). The novel sheds attention on the injustices faced by Afghan women and offers a forceful refutation of these stereotypes. Hashimi's work also emphasizes the resilience and fortitude of Afghan women, highlighting their capacity to overcome hardships and social pressures while redefining themselves. Her writing also pushes readers to reconsider ingrained sexual and social norms that limit women's freedom of choice (Ferreira et al., 2013). Through her vivid story and compelling characters, she challenges readers' perceptions and cultivates a greater understanding and empathy for the challenges that are faced by Afghan women (Naami, 2014). She also provides readers with a glimpse into Afghan women's everyday lives. The greater context of Afghanistan and its deeply embedded patriarchal culture must be considered when analyzing Hashimi's text, *A House without Windows*. The harsh reality faced by Afghan women, who commonly find themselves imprisoned in a society that maintains gender inequity and denies them access to essential opportunities and rights, is brought to light by her artwork (Dadras et al., 2022). In Afghan society, gendered codes of conduct significantly influence women's identities and perspectives. These traditions define the obligations and standards placed on women, limiting their freedom and making it challenging for them to fully express who they are in society (Shah et al., 2022). Zeba's experience navigating a patriarchal setting provides a microcosm for the more significant issues that Afghan women face. Hashimi illustrates how these customs fuel violence and injustice against women in Afghan culture by looking at the relationship between gender dynamics and cultural norms via Zeba's voyage. She also highlights the power disparities that typically occur in Afghan homes and communities, showing how these disparities support the culture of violence against women. Hashimi's work also shows how Afghan women resist these oppressive norms (Hamidi et al., 2021). Zeba is raised to respect the strict cultural norms of deference and humility. These expectations keep her within the parameters of her roles as a wife and mother, restricting her freedom and identity. She is an ordinary wife and mother dedicated to fulfilling these roles.

The analysis of Zeba's character lacks study in investigating the long-term effects of her actions and how they affect other women's lives. Despite the abundance of material examining the significance of Zeba's resistance and its immediate impact on the community, there is a lack of Research addressing how her activities affect women's agency and empowerment over the long term (Vásquez-Vera et al., 2022).

This study project aims to address this gap by investigating the long-term effects of Zeba's disobedience on other women in the community, both in terms of their personal development and group resistance against oppressive cultural and gender norms. Previous studies found that although Zeba's actions caused other women to reflect on their lives, they did not look at the long-term consequences or the proactive ways these women challenged patriarchal norms. In particular, the research article will focus on how Zeba's actions initiated long-lasting change and resistance against limiting cultural and gender norms and how her defiance changed community femininity's power and autonomy over time (Zembe et al., 2015). So little has been written on Afghan women's tenacity and defiance in the face of displacement and historical and normative gender violations. Through scrutinizing other women's activities in the public domain and their responses to Zeba's disobedience, this study uncovers how her actions have catalyzed sustained change and resistance against repressive institutional and sexual norms (Shah et al., 2022).

2. Historical Background of Afghan culture

Afghan culture's deep and diverse history has influenced the gender standards and social mores still in use. In Afghanistan, patriarchal traditions and gender inequality have a long history. Various historical events and influences have reinforced and upheld these cultural norms and behaviors (Mshweshwe, 2020). In particular, the tribal-based social structure in Afghanistan, which grants exclusively men's rights and unfettered access to public spaces, has contributed to the persistence of a deeply ingrained form of patriarchy. "Imagine a home led by three different patriarchs in one year, she thought. No, this kind of home could not survive, nor could a country" (Hashimi 27). One of the main reasons for the gender gap in Afghan society is the adoption of traditional gender roles and responsibilities. Because of these ingrained gender norms, men are expected to be the primary wage earners and women to care for the home.

Furthermore, Islam's influence on Afghan society has had a significant impact on the formation of gendered power dynamics and the reinforcement of cultural norms about men's and women's responsibilities (Dadras et al., 2022). Men are usually seen as the decision-makers and authoritative characters, while women are expected to be humble and obedient. Afghanistan's traditional civilization exacerbates gender inequality and restricts women's rights and freedoms. Growing knowledge and education have contributed to changes in Afghan women's circumstances, challenging long-standing norms and sparking a movement for gender equality (Kirkwood et al., 2021). However, advancing women's rights and achieving complete equality still requires overcoming deeply rooted cultural and gender conventions. Gender stereotypes are the most significant barrier facing Afghan women since, as a result of cultural expectations, they still face discrimination and have limited opportunities. Research indicates that traditional gender roles and patriarchal practices are deeply embedded in Afghan society, with men being supposed to earn.

In contrast, women are supposed to take charge of their households (Rasmussen et al., 2014). It is essential to remember that regional variations exist in

Afghanistan's gender norms and expectations. The dilemma of challenging and going against these cultural and gender conventions emerges to empower Afghan women and advance gender equality. This illustrates the significant influence that Afghan culture and gender norms have on Afghan women's opportunities and lives, limiting their autonomy and freedom of choice. In order to challenge these traditions and sexual conventions, break through gender stereotypes, and empower Afghan women, it is imperative to advocate for education and awareness campaigns that support gender equality. This could entail initiatives prioritizing enabling women and girls to attend education and encouraging gender-sensitive courses that debunk stereotypes. Furthermore, grassroots initiatives and community service can be critical in advancing gender equality and dismantling harmful cultural norms. It is also critical to work toward altering the legal frameworks that uphold gender inequality and limit women's rights (Sossou, 2011). By advocating for legislative and policy changes that promote gender parity and defend women's rights, Afghan women might gain the confidence to challenge and overturn these cultural and gender conventions.

Salman, Butt, and Mahmood are among the critics who have assessed *A House without Windows* from the perspective of violence against women in Afghan societies where men predominate. They analyze how violence against women is portrayed in the work using Sylvia Walby's theory of violence as a theoretical framework. They assert that Nadia Hashimi's text sheds light on the pervasive mistreatment Afghan women endure in a patriarchal setting and commend the author for bringing this critical issue to light (Salman et al., 2020). Afghan patriarchal customs and traditions have a significant impact on the legal system. It is predicated on the idea that women are inferior to males and must adhere to strict gender norms and expectations. These cultural traditions frequently restrict the rights and agency of women, especially regarding marriage, property ownership, and divorce.

"That is the frustration of trying to do something good here. Even when there is a real judicial process, the result can make you think we have gone back to Taliban times. There was a woman lashed in Ghor Province just this week for zina. Her case went through a real court, and in the end, an audience of men watched as they carried out one hundred strikes against her" (Hashimi 336).

Afghanistan's legal system for women is greatly influenced by Sharia law, which is interpreted and administered in a way that upholds male supremacy and restricts the rights of women. It is important to remember that not all Afghan women submit to the limitations and gender standards that the judicial system enforces. In advancing their rights and achieving more gender parity, many women have actively challenged and opposed these social conventions. Their communities now have linkages of trust and support due to their self-organization into groups and organizations (Nikhitha & Neermarga, 2022). These women have developed gender-specific survival strategies and boosted their voices on social media platforms. They have developed into social change agents who challenge established norms and push for a more equal and inclusive legal system.

4. The cultural implication of Zeba's character

"Have you lost your minds—all of you?" "The men looked at one another.

Fareed did not wait for an answer. In that second, he pounced on Zeba, and before anyone could stop him, his hands closed around her neck" (Hashimi 25).

When Zeba is suspected of killing her husband, her persona becomes the focal point for examining how gender and religious norms are restricting in Afghan society. Despite her innocence, she encounters bias and discrimination based only on her gender. Since she is presumed guilty in the lack of substantial evidence, she must negotiate the complexities of a patriarchal legal system that favors men. "Of course she did! There is a hatchet in the back of his neck! Do you think he killed himself?" (22) (Eaton et al., 2021). This is a prime example of how gender standards and cultural practices combine to restrict the autonomy and rights of women like Zeba. The belief that women are inferior to men and should submit to their authority is promoted by these cultural and sexual conventions. These constraints limit women's opportunities for professional and personal advancement and also expose them to numerous forms of violence and abuse (Kumari & Kiran, 2020). In light of Hashimi's portrayal of Zeba, readers can sympathize with her struggles and the injustices she faces. By shedding light on the cultural effects on Zeba's mentality, she draws attention to the need for reform and critiques traditional norms that marginalize and subordinate Afghan women.

"The day came when Zeba learned what kind of man he truly was. She found him attacking a young girl in their own home, defiling a school-age girl. That dear judge, is the heart of the matter. All that came after, including her enduring nineteen days of the shrine, was a woman trying to protect the honor of an innocent child" (Hashimi 326).

Through Zeba, Hashimi illustrates Afghan women's challenges and limitations due to society's culture and gender norms and their resilience and determination to challenge and subvert these damaging norms. She refuses to play the part of the submissive, passive lady; instead, she asserts her agency and strives for justice (Han et al., 2019). Even though Zeba was imprisoned for a crime she was not guilty of, her time in jail catalyzed her growth. She begins to question and challenge the cultural and gender standards that have shaped her life up to this point when she is incarcerated. Along with helping her fellow inmates discover their voices and advocate for their rights, she also offered support to those who shared her cell. Through her interactions with other female prisoners, Zeba learns she is not the only one impacted by gender and cultural standards (Saidi, 2021). She understands that these women's collective struggles and experiences result from larger societal systems of discrimination and exploitation, and she finds solace and courage in their testimonies (Wood, 1996).

5. From victim to victor: Zeba's journey of resistance and resilience

Zeba's character in *A House without Windows* evolves into a representation of rejection and resiliency due to her capacity to examine and confront the sexual orientation and social customs that have subjugated her. "I am more than fine, she told her daughters, and for the first time in a long time, she believed those small, precious words to be true" (Hashimi 342). Zeba's epiphany and moment of liberation are captured in this statement, where she sees the importance of standing up for her

identity and preferences rather than meeting social norms (Hutchinson-Colas et al., 2022).

Zeba's transformation throughout her incarceration represents her rejection to give in to the limitations imposed on her by sex, cultural, and societal norms. In prison, she begins to find her voice and create her agency. Unfair and harsh treatment inside the correctional system is what ignites dissent. She becomes a source of support and direction for the other imprisoned women, helping them navigate their obstacles and find their avenues of resistance. Her actions disprove the notion that women ought to feel meek and subservient, showcasing the power of resilience and persistence in resisting oppressive norms. Her incarceration periods also highlight the importance of cooperation and solidarity in the fight for justice (Gray & Schwan, 2022). The other women imprisoned in Zeba's story are more than just supporting figures; they stand in for the fortitude and defiance of a collective. Their joint efforts and experiences demonstrate that the detrimental effects of social and sex norms are part of a more extensive repressive system rather than isolated incidents. While some of them have experienced discrimination and exploitation, others have experienced physical and psychological assault. Zeba is aware of these injustices and understands that resistance must seek to destroy the social institutions that uphold oppression in addition to pursuing her liberation. To create a sense of community among the ladies, she urged them to share their stories and offer support to one another. "I am sure you all know the saying: Let justice find its rightful owner!" (Hashimi 331), demonstrating her dedication to group resistance and her conviction that they can forge a brighter prospect for themselves and others by uniting. She tries to create bonds and connections inside the prison that transcend racial and cultural divides to promote a sense of belonging. Zeba's actions show that people may challenge oppressive gender and cultural standards and stand up for what they believe in, even while accomplishing so in a correctional environment. Though many efforts have been made to lessen the suffering associated with incarceration and to give women some degree of choice and autonomy, the harsh conditions of the penal system are bound to limit the sense of authority and choice that inmates are capable of exercising (Shaw, 2002).

Other women in prison accompany Zeba. These women are Bibi Gul, who is vivacious and opinionated; Shabnam, who is well known for her storytelling skills; Mahnaz, who is reserved and attentive; and Naheed, an older woman who tutors the younger prisoners. Gul Minallah also encourages and befriends Zeba. These women stand by Zeba, offering her companionship, comfort, and bravery as they face their shared struggles (Imran & Ismail, 2022). These female figures' presence in the text highlights the solidarity and perseverance of Afghan women who are marginalized and imprisoned in a patriarchal society. Their interactions and relationships while incarcerated serve as a powerful illustration of the strength of female solidarity and the value of looking for companionship and support when up against injustice.

The figure Yusuf is crucial to Zeba's quest for liberation and to opposing the restrictive social conventions that go along with her incarceration. Yusuf fights for Zeba's rights and protects her despite the risks and social pressure to fit in. He assumes

the role of an advocate: "I do not want to save one life at a time, Yusuf declared. There are better ways" (Hashimi 16), speaking out against the atrocities she and the other prisoners endure. Studies on gender discrimination in Afghanistan's macho society have highlighted the importance of people like Yusuf, who actively work to abolish it. "Dignity is not in what work you do; it is in how you do that work" (13). These individuals push for gender equality and question the status quo. By protecting Zeba, Yusuf transforms into a symbol of resistance against the cultural norms that sustain injustice in Afghan society.

Zeba's mother and sorceress are crucial in defying expectations and standing by Zeba. "Gulnaz was a sorceress, a skillful teaser of fate just as her grandmother had been" (Hashimi 27). She is well-versed in traditional Afghan magic and has utilized it to subvert patriarchal norms that limit women's rights in Afghan society (Abadi et al., 2012). Gulnaz unravels the lies surrounding Zeba's case and exposes the hidden truth using her magical abilities. By applying her knowledge of ancient Afghan magic, she can enter a domain beyond the Western judicial system's jurisdiction, revealing its bias and flaws.

6. Gender-Neutral Restrooms

6.1 Promote women's education: By assuring that women and girls have top-notch education, we can challenge societal norms prioritizing home responsibilities above women's educational opportunities (Nguyen et al., 2020).

6.2 Promote equal employment and entrepreneurship possibilities for women: By advocating for these measures and demonstrating that they can also contribute to the economy and society as a whole, we can dispel the myth that women are only suited to caring for their homes (Pinkovetskaia et al., 2019).

6.3 Alter traditional gender roles: By promoting gender equality and educating individuals about it, we can encourage them to reconsider society's expectations of men and women (Sekulic et al., 2012).

6.4 Establish safe places and support networks for women: By creating secure areas where women can come together, share their stories, and support one another, we may strengthen women and offer them the opportunity to challenge gender and cultural conventions.

6.5 Advocate for gender-sensitive laws and policies: We can create a more inclusive society by working for legislative changes supporting women's rights and equal status (Dong et al., 2022).

7. Conclusion

The character Zeba, portrayed by Nadia Hashimi in *A House Without Windows*, is a powerful illustration of how to defy gender and cultural expectations in Afghan society. Zeba breaks the mold of the meek wife and becomes a force for social change in her community. Zeba's actions also draw attention to the restrictive nature of traditional gender conventions, as well as the challenges and conflicts that many women face in societies where patriarchal ideas are prevalent. These actions of resistance not only question the status quo but inspire other women to consider and face their circumstances (Dong et al., 2022). It is clear from analyzing Zeba's character and her defiance of gender and cultural standards that defying social

expectations is not an easy task. It requires a great deal of resilience, tenacity, and the support of a community willing to challenge deeply ingrained traditions and beliefs. In order to effect meaningful change, this study also highlights how important it is to understand the gender dynamics and cultural dynamics of societies like Afghanistan (Nygren et al., 2018). It also emphasizes how advanced gender equality in Muslim nations requires more intricate and situation-specific strategies. The study highlights how literature may provide a platform for marginalized perspectives and raise awareness of the oppressive nature of gender and cultural norms. The portrayal of Zeba's life serves as a potent reminder that those women's struggles against gender norms and social conventions are still very much alive and well (Ozgoren et al., 2018). The patriarchal norms that have long held them back continue to be a problem for them, and Hashimi's novel is one of the literary works that might draw attention to these problems and promote change. It also highlights the need for more complex and situation-specific methods to advance gender equality in Muslim countries. The research article underlines how literature may give voice to underrepresented viewpoints and shed awareness on how oppressive cultural and gender norms are. The depiction of Zeba's life is a potent reminder of those women's ongoing fights against social norms and gender roles (Ozgoren et al., 2018).

They still contend with patriarchal standards that have long held them back, and literary works like Hashimi's novel may highlight these conflicts and advocate for change.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge Prof. Surinder Paul, Dr. Mandvi Singh, and Pragya Gauttam from the Department of English and Modern European Languages at Banasthali Vidyapith for their encouragement and valuable critique while completing this paper.

Conflict of Interest

None

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