

*Culture: An outlet to conquer hardships of women in Nadia Hashimi's The Pearl that Broke its Shell*  
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## **Culture: An Outlet to Conquer Hardships of Women in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke its Shell***

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**Abstract**

*American literature was encompassing the understanding of the society. America was under British Colonies, in early histories. Literary traditions of America began as linked to the broader tradition of English Literature. The writers found their unique style in their writing after a long struggle of imitating forms, styles and structures of European countries. The rise of science and Industry brought the changes in the ways of thinking and feelings of people's lives. The writers started including their cultural issues and political issues of the society and they found the changes in the tradition and culture. The value of literature is determined by its quality and not by its quantity; the writers began to think about the great changes and brought legendary changes in literature of America, which found a new place for American Literature among the world Literatures.*

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## **Introduction**

American literature was encompassing the understanding of the society. America was under British Colonies, in early histories. Literary traditions of America began as linked to the broader tradition of English Literature. The writers found their unique style in their writing after a long struggle of imitating forms, styles and structures of European countries. The rise of science and Industry brought the changes in the ways of thinking and feelings of people's lives. The writers started including their cultural issues and political issues of the society and they found the changes in the tradition and culture. The value of literature is determined by its quality and not by its quantity; the writers began to think about the great changes and brought legendary changes in literature of America, which found a new place for American Literature among the world Literatures. The entire world Literatures portrays its culture and traditions relates to the struggles they face in their society. Likewise, the modern Literatures also portray the inconvenient struggles in the culture. The common American Literature themes are the American dream, loss of innocence, coming of Age, relationship with nature, relationship with Society, relationship with science, alienation and desolation, survival of the fittest, disillusionment, rebellion and protest. Nadia Hashimi, being an Afghan – American writer adapted to the societal conventions of America, her writings brings the cultures that she has adopted. The famous writer of twenty first century, she writes in historical fiction and brings reality in Literature. She brings the family bondage, cultural conventions, women suffering and gender identity in her writings. All her works bring a certain optimistic perspective in the society. She tried to bring solutions through her writings, which attract the readers to find some relaxing phase among all the other writers. The contemporary writers of Nadia Hashimi, are Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, Harold Bloom, Philip Roth, John Updike, Harper Lee, Octavia E. Butler have created a new module for the American Literature. Likewise, Khaled Hosseini, Zalmay Khalilzad and Wazmah Osman bring historical realism, true picture of political situation and complex relationships in the society. Nadia Hashimi's other works are *The Pearl That Broke its Shell* (2014), *When the Moon is Low* (2015) and *A House Without Windows* (2016). *The Pearl That Broke its Shell* is her Debut novel. Through her writings, she conveys the cultures of Afghan people and their restrictions for the gender discriminations. Afghan people are Muslims predominantly. Afghan and Afghan-American women are strong, resourceful and valuable members of their families. Although the father plays the dominant role in the community and extended family, the mother's role should not be overlooked. In Afghanistan, a society in which women's lives were so constricted under the Taliban that they couldn't even walk unescorted down the street, some young girls enjoyed unprecedented freedom by posing as boys. In some

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families, there were without sons would pick a daughter to live and behave as a boy. This enables the child to behave more freely, like, attending school, escorting her sisters in public and in working. The tradition of bacha posh, the term for posing as boys which is used in the novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, that exists till the day. The girls wear male clothes, adopt boys' names, roughhouse with boys and enjoy privileges accorded to boys. They do this at the command of their families and with the unstated authority of the entire community, until they reach puberty. After then they were expected to change back their role of bacha posh. This tradition exists till the present era. The author has taken this as her medium to state the restrictions and the sufferings of the Afghan women especially. Gender-bending, cross-dressing tradition is the heart of *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, the debut novel by Nadia Hashimi. "Mobility-wise, a young boy has different access to the world than a young girl has. He can work outside the home." The novel *The Pearl that Broke its shell* having two stories weaves together, of an intergenerational story of two Afghan women whose lives are different separated by 100 years but connected. The novel set on Kabul in 2007. The two female protagonists are, Shekiba and Rahima. One plot set in the early 20th century, which tells the story of Shekiba, who becomes a pariah after suffering a disfiguring accident as a young girl. Shekiba toils as a servant until she is presented to the king, who uses women dressed as men to guard his harem. The second story takes place in 2007, when the Taliban no longer were in power but still exerted enormous influence over the lives of women. It follows Shekiba's great-great-granddaughter, Rahima, who becomes a bacha posh. So she can barter at market, attend school and perform other activities that keep her nearly all-female family afloat. But Rahima's days of freedom are numbered when the brutal warlord who runs the village takes a shine to the 13-year-old protagonist. Rahima, a teenage girl, lives in twenty-first-century Afghanistan. In the wake of Taliban rule, Afghanistan's government is divided and the culture is fractured. The plot moves back and forth between the two characters, chronicling their lives and the obstacles they face under oppressive patriarchal regimes. Rahima lives in a small village with her parents, her older sisters Shahla and Parwin. The family runs by her drug-addicted father, Arif, with no brothers. Her aunt, Khala Shaima, visits often, helps take care of the family, and tells the girls stories about their great-great-grandmother Shekiba. Rahima finds hope in the ancient custom of Bacha posh, which allows her to dress and be treated as a boy until she reaches the age of marriage. This cultural convenience opens the world to her, as she can protect her older sisters. She soon learns that she was not the first woman in her family to embrace this custom, and she goes on a journey of discovery about her family's history and the story of her great-great-grandmother Shekiba. Rahima dresses as a boy, attend school, and run

errands for the family. Rahima loves to wear pants and interact with boys of her age, although she feels uncomfortable when approached by older men, including warlord Abdul Khaliq, who has his eye on her. She chooses to stay a Bacha posh longer than expected, which angers her father. After she gets into an argument with her mother, her father decides to marry Rahima off to Abdul Khaliq, as well as to marry her older sisters Parwin and Shahla off to Khaliq's cousins. The women of the family are devastated when he arranges the triple wedding. As the wedding day approaches, Khala Shaima tells the girls about their great-great-grandmother Shekiba. She was scarred by hot oil when she was only two, leading her to be rejected by those outside her family. She lost her family to cholera and her father to a broken heart soon after, and she continued to tend the family land. The hard labor gave her a mannish appearance, and she was kept on as a servant when her extended family took over the land. Rahima is Abdul Khaliq's fourth and youngest wife; he favors Rahima, but the other wives hate her. To avoid beatings from him and his ruthless mother, Rahima obeys his every demand. Shekiba finds herself in the custody of Azizullah and his wife Madar -Jan, who work her hard and try to keep her from reclaiming her rightful land. They give her to the king, where she'll serve as a Bacha posh guard for his harem. She befriends the lead guard, Ghafoor. She finds that when she becomes a guard, she feels freer than she ever has in her life. Like Rahima, she loves the freedom of pants. Rahima meets her housemates and realizes the forces that has brought into the family. Everyone in the family behaves indifferently. Rahima tries to adopt all the problems and workloads given to her by her new family. Rahima finds a friend in Jameela, the second wife who becomes her ally. Rahima soon has a son, who she names Jahangir. As the author states, "When things are rough, people look for an escape. A way out. Sometimes it's hard to find the right way." (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell) Rahima also wants to escape from the hardships that she faces through her family. Since the people in the family are rough in their nature in behaving with Rahima, she wants to quit the family. She was there only for her son Jahangir. Whereas, in Shekiba's story, her sufferings she turned it only to work hard. Shekiba fits into palace life, ignoring rude treatment from the women of the harem. She proves herself useful, having the strength of a man. She sees a man sneaking in and out of the harem quarters but is unable to catch him. Khala Shaima suggests to Rahima that she go with Badriya to Kabul to attend parliament sessions to further her education. As Badriya can't read, she allows Rahima to join with her. Jameela looks after Jahangir and Rahima enjoys her time in Kabul. She attends a resource center established for women of the parliament so that they can improve their skills. Rahima's aunt continues to share stories about Shekiba. Shekiba sees the king's son, Amanullah, around the palace and comes up with a plan to marry him. She tells him

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that she comes from a line of women who bear mostly sons. Amanullah is always accompanied by his friend and advisor Agha Aasif Baraan. However, her plan is ruined when Fatima, one of the women of the harem, falls ill. They move her into another room and find that another woman of the harem, Benafsha, is having an affair. Ghafoor, when called before the king for allowing this to happen, blames everything on Shekiba. She, along with Benafsha, is sentenced to death by stoning. During one of Rahima's visits to Kabul, Jahangir dies from an illness. Although Abdul Khaliq's mother is to blame for not treating him properly, Rahima is blamed, and her husband brutally beats her. She no longer sees a purpose in her life with him. After mourning her son, Rahima returns to Kabul with Badriya and shares her story with Sufia and Hamida, two parliamentarians she befriended. They introduce her to Ms. Franklin, the teacher at the resource center. While imprisoned, Shekiba asks Benafsha why she had an affair but doesn't get a real answer. Shekiba finds out that she'll be spared execution and will instead receive 100 lashes. After her beating, she finds out that Agha Aasif Baraan has requested her hand in marriage, and she figures out that it was he who had the affair with Benafsha. He wanted to spare Shekiba from a fate that he caused. Shekiba becomes his second wife, and he hopes she'll bear him a son, which she does. His wife, Gulnaz, is aloof toward her, but Shekiba is otherwise treated well. She is glad she took the risks she did to find her relatively happy ending. On a visit to Kabul, Rahima feigns illness. She then puts on clothing she took from Hashmat, escapes the guard outside her room, and avoids detection by once again dressing as a boy. Taking a bus out of town, she meets Ms. Franklin at a cafe, where the teacher sends her to a woman's shelter far away from Abdul Khaliq. Rahima writes a letter to Khala Shaima, who is old and sick now, and tells her she's escaped and will be free now. Rahima signs the letter with her new name, Bibi Shekiba. All the two protagonists decided their life to begin their new decision in their life. Though there is a different ending to the two protagonists, Rahima's great-great-grandmother's life ends with a satisfactory unity with her family, Rahima finds her self with over throwing her family. Rahima, an educated girl with the modern perspectives, she also had family and a son but after her son's death she finds everything desolate, because she was not interested in marriage life or in family life. Her modern perspectives learned through her education, and the Bacha posh role in the society made her to think about the freedom and the unwanted problems and struggles that was created by the family of her husband. She was used to practice like a man, and she behaved like a man. This created an enthusiasm to her to be free from all the restrictions created by their Muslim community. In Muslim customs the women should dress with a restriction, which is to wear hijab whenever they go out. But she was used to practice with pant and trousers to make her appear as a man.

She was practiced to it. She wanted to come out from the family and the bondage. As Hashimi states, “The human spirit, you know what they say about the human spirit? Is it harder than a rock and more delicate than a flower petal.” (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell). Every woman has to be treated equally with soft hand, which was not there in the point of Rahima, where she feels indifferent to exit the family. Unlike Shekiba, Rahima is different in deciding her future. Shekiba is an uneducated woman whereas, Rahima is an educated woman. She learnt the family bondages to treat a woman with freedom. But in their custom, they do treat the woman with importance, but for the household works. So she set out from her family bondage from the restricted life. Here Nadia Hashimi wants to convey that, a modern woman can decide their own life with their freedom. She portrays the modern women will be bold and clear in their thoughts to decide their future. As Hashimi’s words stated, “But her personality made her glow. People looked at her and couldn’t help but smile.” (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell) her behavior like man, Bacha posh, made her to behave with this personality to overthrow all her bondages and the family where she lived from the beginning. Above all, Rahima thinks herself as a free bird, because she has been practiced with freedom given by their family, which she needs again. She found a chance to fly like a bird, apart from all the sufferings, and she flown. “But times change. Everything changes. Birds fly away, one by one.” (The Pearl That Broke its Shell) In conclusion, when there is a culture there will be some restrictions for the welfare of the society. Likewise, there is also some conveniences for the escape from the problems especially a woman has to face. The writer, Nadia Hashimi, analyses her own culture and the struggles of their community especially for woman, with a optimistic note and has given a solution to the problems found among the protagonists. She gives the solution for the modern woman that, no woman is tending to suffer from the family bondages and from the tortures given by the male community. There are some intelligible solutions for woman to stride over the struggles of the society as well as the family. All that a woman needed in the society is just the boldness to overcome the problems and think about the future with optimistic perspective without deviating from their own culture and it is a woman’s skill to rethink about the culture which has shown the right path for the welfare of the people. Culture always guides people and helps them to conquer their hardships in people’s lives. References: 1. Nadia Hashimi, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* 2014; William Morrow 2014. 2. *An anthology of Contemporary Afghan American Literature*: Zohra Saed, SharMuradi: Books. 3. [www.washingtonindependentreviewofbooks.com](http://www.washingtonindependentreviewofbooks.com) 4. [www.everyculture.com](http://www.everyculture.com) 5. [www.supersummary.com/the-pearl-that-broke-its-shell/summary](http://www.supersummary.com/the-pearl-that-broke-its-shell/summary), jan22,2020