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Defying Boundaries: Breaking The Chains Of Oppression In Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows*

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Abstract: The article explores the themes of oppression, resilience, and human capacity for survival as depicted in Nadia Hashimi's novel *A House Without Windows*. The novel delves deeply into the life of the female protagonist Zeba, who is accused of murdering her husband. Through the portrayal of her life, Hashimi delves into the intricacies of the patriarchal and stereotypical Afghan society. The novel depicts how the female characters in the story are tortured under oppressive gender norms and how they struggle for justice within a corrupted and prejudiced legal system. Despite the societal boundaries imposed upon Zeba, she refuses to yield to desolation and despondency. She finds solace and strength in the ties she forms with her fellow inmates in the prison, who share their stories of misery, resilience, and hope. Through the depiction of the resilient female protagonist Zeba, Hashimi explores the strength and courage of Afghan women to challenge societal expectations. Her journey is a testament to the power of unity and the transformative power of collective struggle in the face of repression. The novel also sheds light on the problems of universal injustice and exploitation within Afghan society. It highlights the need for reform to address the actual causes of oppression and inequality. By challenging boundaries and flouting the shackles of oppression, Zeba's story serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring strength of the human spirit.

Keywords: oppression, resilience, inequality, empowerment, self-discovery.

A House Without Windows by Nadia Hashimi is a fascinating story of homicide, sisterhood, and a mother's affection for her children that irradiates the pathetic situation of a woman in a traditional Afghan culture. The novel rightly explores the themes of righteousness, tradition, and the status of women in Afghan society. The narrative follows the life of the female protagonist Zeba, who lived all her life as a loyal wife and an affectionate mother. As Hashimi points out, "She was a loving wife, a patient mother, and a peaceful villager. She did nothing to draw attention to herself" (3). But, one horrible day, everything changes, and her world is shattered when her husband is found brutally slain in the courtyard of their home. Drenched in his blood and impassive with shock, Zeba refuses to explain what had happened. When her children returned from school and witnessed the scene of the murder, she just shouted, "Go back into the house, my son...go back into the house...your sisters, your sisters...go back into the house..." (4). She was more concerned about the situation of her children rather than that of her murdered husband. The murder

creates suspense and the reason for the murder is revealed towards the end of the story. Zeba was eventually arrested and sent to Chil Mahtab, a women's prison in Kabul, where she awaits trial.

The novel employs several narrative techniques as it moves forward. This in turn makes the narrative more intricate and thrilling. Hashimi uses the flashback technique to reveal Zeba's upbringing in a conservative Afghan family. It traces her childhood experiences, her arranged marriage to Kamal, and the challenges she faced as a wife and mother in a conventional patriarchal society. The story also highlights her abusive married life and the power dynamics that pervade many Afghan households.

The insignificance of women's voices in traditional orthodox Afghan society is exemplified in several instances in the novel. Women are suppressed and silenced by the males who hold authority in their families and society. Having no role in making decisions regarding familial matters, they remain mere puppets in the hands of authoritative men. The marriage between Kamal and Zeba was arranged by their grandfathers, who were close friends. It is said that both Kamal's and Zeba's grandfathers "...sat together one day and, over a cup of tea, decided that Zeba and Kamal should be husband and wife. They tied themselves to each other through their grandchildren"(166). The opinion of Zeba or her mother was considered pointless. There was no point in arguing about a decision already taken by the dominant male folk. The insignificance of the opinions of women is expressed by Gulnaz during her conversation with the judge about the marriage between Kamal and Zeba. Gulnaz states, "A woman's account carried only half the weight of that of a man's. That was not her decision. It was how they'd always measured a woman's word" (174).

Inside the four walls of the prison, Zeba often reminisces about her forced marriage with Kamal. She had never seen Kamal before their engagement ceremony. At her grandfather's recommendation, her mother and brother married her off to Kamal at the age of seventeen. "She had no say in the arrangement- a decision made between her grandfather and Kamal's grandfather five years before the wedding date" (54). Though Zeba's mother objected to this alliance, her husband's family agreed long back and they were adamant to keep their promise.

Zeba led a reasonably happy life with Kamal for the first few years. She was well-treated by her in-laws. But things gradually changed as Kamal became the patriarch of the family soon after the death of his father and brother. "He was bitter toward the children...he would send Zeba tumbling to the floor with the back of his hand" (68). Sometimes he would leave home and return a few days later not bothering to share his whereabouts. He used to jab her both physically and verbally. Like all other typical Afghan women, Zeba learned to bite her tongue around him and quiet the children with a stern look.

Kamal began to humiliate and disgrace her in front of her family members as well as their neighbours too. Instead of taking care of his family, Kamal began to wander around in search of women. She could see how his eyes wandered through the market in search of women who had thrown aside their burqas. "She could see him tracing their silhouettes, undressing them with a greediness that made her face burn...He would travel to a nearby city sometimes, disappearing for a day-long with money that should have been spent on food for the family" (70). When Zeba begged him to consider their family and their reputation, he abused her physically and mentally.

Even though the marriage (in which the woman has no opinion or where she is not a part of decision-making), turns out to be unsuccessful, the woman is bound to bear the entire burden. When Zeba had an intuition regarding the impending danger, she dared to share her feelings with Kamal. But instead of offering consolation and considering the matter, Kamal dismissed her. He even scolded her and "...twisted her ear so hard that it swelled to a purple mass" (84). After this incident, she realised that Kamal was of no help and therefore decided that it was up to her to protect her family at any cost. At this point in life, Zeba thought about her mother who took up the burden of her family after her father left them without notice.

During Zeba's childhood, it was her mother Gulnaz who provided her with all the support and encouragement. Zeba was very close to her mother, "...as close as a flower to its stem" (24). Unlike other women in Afghan society, Gulnaz had complete control over her family and her emotions. She believed neither in a patriarchal home nor a patriarchal country. Her husband was content to let her exert her will. She is depicted as an exceptional character who questions the male domination in the country. This is evident in an instance where it is reported that Afghanistan changed presidents three times in one year. On hearing this, Gulnaz remarked, "Imagine a home led by three different patriarchs in one year...No, this kind

of home could not survive, nor could a country” (25). This very statement reveals her audacity in expressing her opinions.

The relationship between Zeba and her mother Gulnaz became problematic after her marriage to Kamal. Like Kamal and their neighbours, Zeba too believed her to be a trickster who deceives people using her supernatural powers. But when Zeba ends up in trouble due to Kamal’s change in his attitude towards her and their children, Zeba longs for the support of her mother. She believed that only Gulnaz had the power to help her. Her conviction in her mother is expressed in the statement, “Who better than Gulnaz to deal with something as intangible as this? Gulnaz approached darkness with her special kind of science”(83). At one point in the novel, Zeba even confesses to her mother and seeks forgiveness for disbelieving her. Zeba remarks, “Maybe things would have worked out differently then. I thought what you did, all those things you did for so many years, I thought it was so dark evil, but I know what evil is. Forgive me, Madar-jan” (137).

During the emotionally turbulent period in prison, Zeba sought the presence and support of her mother. She believed that only Gulnaz had the power to help her escape the grave and convulsive situation. Zeba’s belief in her mother’s power is revealed in an instance where she thinks, “She’d wanted her mother to come and save her, to bend the winds in her favour this one time. If she were to dare to have hope, this was the form her hope would take” (143).

As the narrative moves forward, it becomes evident how the support and care of female characters help Zeba survive the difficult times. In a patriarchal society, women are silenced beings. They survive only because of the support of other females who suffer similar fates. The portrayal of the female inmates in Chil Mahtab, the prison for females bears evidence of this. Zeba’s bonding with these women provides her immense strength. Though Zeba remains detached from them for the first few weeks in prison, she later becomes one with them. It is then she realised that Chil Mahtab was full of female criminals like petty thieves, drug smugglers, murderers, and women imprisoned for crimes of morality. Zeba further realised that the only way to battle the ennui of their lives in the prison was to sit in their rooms and share their stories. After listening to the stories of these women, she made up her mind to help at least a few of them using the tricks she learned from Gulnaz during her childhood.

The prison represents a microcosm of the Afghan society where women from diverse backgrounds are imprisoned. From the stories of these women, Zeba realises that these women are imprisoned for trivial reasons. Nafisa, the woman who shared her room with Zeba was a woman in her thirties. She was accused of having a relationship with a blacksmith. The thing that she had never married had not bothered her parents until this accusation. Her brothers were also angry with her for tarnishing their family’s reputation. It was her mother who reported her crime to the police as she knew that otherwise, her brothers would kill her. She had been sentenced to three years imprisonment for fornication, or sex outside marriage. Nafisa could never blame her mother as she knew that she would not have been alive, had it not been for her. She now lives in the hope that the blacksmith would ask for her in marriage and thus help her escape from her confinement.

The stories of women imprisoned in Chil Mahtab were almost similar. The accusations against them were insignificant. Zeba’s roommate, Latifa, was a woman around twenty-five years old. She had been beaten and cursed by her family members until she could bear no more. As she, along with her sister, tried to escape the bullying, she was arrested and taken to Chil Mahtab. She was accused of intending to prostitute her sister. She was charged with kidnapping and for running away from home. She later learned that her sister, whom she was trying to protect, was sent back to her home and was later married off to a distant relative. She was now serving a seven-year sentence for attempted prostitution and for running away from her home.

Mezghan, the third inmate was a nineteen-year-old woman who refused to marry her sister’s brother-in-law. She was arrested for having a relationship with a neighbourhood guy. Two weeks after the arrest, she was taken for a virginity test which proved her guilty. They arrested her partner Haroon, too for this illegal relationship. But he was soon released. Though Mezghan’s family pleaded with Haroon’s family to allow the two to marry, they turned down the proposal. Mezghan, being pregnant with Haroon’s child, now lives in the hope that he will come and rescue her and their child.

For all these women, Chil Mahtab becomes a place where they are treated better than how they were treated by their family members. Hashimi points out how Latifa thinks about this prison “Had she known what prison would be like...she might have marched herself past the barbed-wire fence long ago, turning herself in for some kind of impropriety” (45). This reveals the difficulty of women in living in a country where they are treated as inferior second-class citizens.

The conservative Afghan society treats women on a different pedestal. Their status is considered lower than that of men. Simon de Beauvoir’s statement, “women were neither theoretically nor concretely accepted as men’s equals” stands as evidence of this. There is an instance in the novel where Zeba is arrested and taken away by the police officers. On her way to the prison, she could hear her neighbours’ remark: “Zeba’s story is more intriguing than most. Typically, husbands killed wives, not the other way round” (59). She further heard a neighbour shouting at her, “You can’t kill your husband, even if he’s the horned devil himself” (59).

In traditional Afghan society, women are deprived of their rights but are reminded of their duties. Zeba appreciates the freedom within the confines of the prison even though she is worried about the fate of her children. She explains her life in prison: “If she did not want to rise with her cellmates, she could ignore their chatter, roll onto her side, and sleep through the morning. She had no responsibilities in the kitchen. Her meals came with impressive regularity”(67). Here she is free of the burden of family responsibilities.

As Zeba adapts to the intricacies of daily life within the confines of the prison, the narrative unfolds through the perspectives of diverse characters. An Afghan-born, American-raised lawyer named Yusuf takes on Zeba’s case. Despite the complexities of returning to a place that he barely knows, Yusuf decides to stay in Afghanistan to defend Zeba. In addition to that Zeba’s unfriendliness and detached attitude make it difficult for Yusuf to defend her. He contemplates, “I am defending a woman who doesn’t want to be defended. She thinks it’s better for her children if she doesn’t put up a fight. When she’s not screaming like a lunatic, she doesn’t talk. She’s given me nothing to go on. How am I supposed to make a case out of that” (147).

As Yusuf starts his investigation, he realises the hidden truths regarding the role of women in Afghan households and society. He faces resistance from both the legal system as well as Zeba’s own family. Their prime importance seems to be the upholding of their reputation and family values rather than protecting her. Even Zeba was unwilling to reveal the truth as she feared the corrupt legal system that might torture the real victim. From his investigation, Yusuf comes to know about Zeba’s abusive marriage and speculates that her husband’s death may have been the result of self-defense. He further realises that in a society where women have limited rights, proving her innocence has become a difficult task.

Zeba knew the prevailing situation of her country and believed that being young and inexperienced; a lawyer like Yusuf could not accomplish anything even though he had noble intentions. She believed, “Guns, money, power, pride-these were the currencies of this country” (127). She even reminds him of the difficulties of taking up the task of rescuing her in a country like Afghanistan: “If you are not from my village, you don’t know what fruits will grow in my soil” (89). She further adds, “...in my village, where I am from, forgiveness is not on the table” (90).

The legal system of Afghanistan too denied justice to the women citizens. Many of the prison inmates are arrested for allegations related to love, sex, and violence. After being arrested, Zeba had to wait for months to get a date for her trial. When Zeba shared her anxiety about this with her inmate Latifa, she remarked: “They like to keep people a good, long time before they even start the trial. Keep you in here so long that you and everyone you know start to believe you’re guilty of whatever’s written in your file” (77). Zeba’s fellow inmate Nafisa’s examination of her virginity exemplifies the brutal torture a woman should bear for having a relationship with a man she loves in conventional Afghan society. This is evident from Mezghan’s words as Latifa tries to explain the examination process as if it were a joke, “She’s going to be humiliated enough tomorrow as it is. You don’t have to make it worse” (79).

The injustice against women finds its clear evidence in the depiction of the prison housed with women accused of various offenses:

...many had been convicted of the broad crime of zina, sex outside of marriage. Some were convicted of attempted zina or imprisoned for assisting another woman to commit zina. An eighteen-year-old girl was arrested as she ran away from her elderly husband. A woman was arrested as she had left a husband after he sold their ten- and twelve-year-old daughters into marriage. Another had been arrested when a stranger reported seeing her leaving a man's private office...The prison was teeming with stories of sex, love, and violence (197).

For Zeba, "...the prison, with its beauty salon and televisions and crayon scribbled walls, was a dungeon. The injustice inside it leached all the energy from her body" (204).

Bell Hooks' statement regarding the victimization of women sheds light on the plight of women in a patriarchal society: "...women are most victimized by sexist oppression...women who are powerless to change their condition in life...They are a silent majority" (1). This is evident in the novel where even though the lawyer Yusuf tries to get evidence regarding the misconduct of Kamal, many of the villagers remain reluctant to speak about him. Walid, the raisin vendor, was the only man who came forward and said: "Kamal was not a right man. I knew that. Other people knew that. I'm sure his wife knew it too" (225). Though he spoke about the behavior of Kamal, he decided not to speak about the little girl he saw in Kamal's courtyard as he believed, "The best thing for that poor girl would be for no one to know what had happened, not even her parents" (224). He very well knew the plight of the young girl if he revealed the truth.

Even though Yusuf tried to get information about the presence of a girl in her courtyard on that particular day, Zeba was not ready to speak about the incident. She did not want Yusuf or Walid to render her sacrifice meaningless. She decides to accept her fate "...without visible question, without organized protect, without collective anger or rage" (Bell Hooks 1). When Yusuf pressed her to speak about the real incident and about the girl who entered their courtyard, Zeba reminisced, "All this because of a little girl who had been stupid enough to get within the reach of Kamal...The poor thing had been so frightened. Zeba could still see her eyes, wild and round with shame. She had looked so much like her own daughters" (232).

Zeba couldn't forget the girl's feverish face. Though Kamal wanted Zeba to be a woman who would look away forever, she was not ready to ignore the gruesome scene she had just tumbled upon. She never dared to explain it to her children. So she decided to sacrifice her life for the sake of that little girl "...who was too young to be so damaged" (233). She deliberately wanted to protect the girl by forgetting the horrible incident and pretending it had never happened.

Yusuf tried to convince her that a reasonable defense was not possible without sharing this information in court. But Zeba distrusted the legal system of the country. This is evident in her remark: "Anything I say will ruin her...I know what they might do to her if they find out...Every woman in Chil Mahtab knows. Every girl and woman in Afghanistan knows" (234).

In a male-dominated country like Afghanistan, the authorities make strict rules for women thereby giving a chance for the men to oppress them. "The women are deprived of their right to freedom of expression, association, and assembly, the right to work, the right to education, freedom of movement, and the right to health care" (Brown 15) It is based on this that Zeba remarks: "What good is a woman's telling of truth, when nothing she says will be taken as proof" (231). Even Yusuf had to admit this as he knew that "A woman's word held little value here. Women themselves seemed to hold little value here" (231).

Yusuf understood the situation and he recollects the events and stories he heard of the condition of the young girls and women of Afghanistan when he set his foot in Afghanistan. Yusuf reminisces: "Honour was a boulder that men placed on the shoulders of their daughters, their sisters, and their wives. The many stories in Chil Mahtab were evidence of this fact. This girl had lost her father's honor in Zeba's courtyard. If he knew that something had happened to her...she might not be forgiven, even though she was an innocent child" (234).

Whatsoever justification Yusuf placed before her to present the truth before the court in her defense, Zeba remained adamant in her decision to protect the honor of the girl. She said, "Do you think Kamal was the only person dead that day? He wasn't. I was dead the moment his blood spilled. The girl was dead the moment she was alone with him. There were three dead bodies in my home though only one had a decent burial and mourners to pray for his soul" (235). When Yusuf tried to convince her by citing one to two cases where justice is provided to victims, she further said, "You're talking to me about two cases in a land of millions. How can I burden that girl with such a risk" (235). This statement stands as evidence of the malicious and corrupt system that tries to protect the wrongdoer instead of the victim.

Both Zeba and Yusuf lost all hope of a fair trial as Zeba remained adamant in her decision. She was unwilling to sacrifice the life of a young girl for her safety for she believed that if she was released from jail after revealing the truth, every day of freedom would be torture. She was concerned about the girl's well-being. She knew that "Girls without honor were better off dead...If the girl's family was disgraced in town, they could seek retribution. Maybe they would demand Shabnam or Kareema be given to them as a wife or servant" (359).

Yusuf has profound respect for Zeba and considers her the bravest woman who is willing to submit herself to the mercy of the judge to save the life of a young helpless girl. Therefore, as the last ray of hope, he requested the mullah (Zeba's father) and Gulnaz to sway the judge towards mercy. Though the inmates of the prison were worried about the awaiting trial, Zeba made up her mind to accept her fate. She was only concerned about her children. She only wanted her children to speak her name without shame or resentment. The care and support of all the inmates of the prison moved her. For Zeba, Chil Mahtab became the only place where she found consolation. She remarks: "For a house with no windows, Chil Mahtab is not that bad. Sometimes I breathe easier here than I ever did at home" (398). This reveals her intimate bonding with the women who experience similar fates.

As demanded by Yusuf, Gulnaz visited the judge on the day before the sentence and narrated the incident that occurred on the day of Kamal's murder. She won by convincing the judge about the truth and Zeba's concern regarding the safety of the young girl and the protection of her honor. Gulnaz explained the incident: "She found him attacking a young girl in their own home, defiling a school-age girl...She's not breathed a word of it to you since her arrest because she fears for the safety of the girl" (392).

The Judge decided to rethink the matter after this meeting with Gulnaz. He understood the mental condition of Zeba on the day the incident occurred. He realised that Zeba had not intended to kill Kamal and that she only meant to defend herself and protect the frightened young schoolgirl who was suffering in the worst way imaginable. The court observed the behavior of Kamal as illegal and un-Islamic. The court finally decided that Zeba, having committed the murder, was supposed to bear an appropriate sentence for the crime, which is considered the time that she had already spent in Chil Mahtab. She is also asked to pay a fine of one thousand Afghanis, after which she is set free. For Yusuf, Gulnaz, and Zeba, this was a new jurisprudence incongruous with the traditions of Afghanistan. Though Zeba believed that "...True justice... is as rare as a seashell in this country"(176), she acquired justice through her willpower and support of her mother and other female inmates of the prison. It was these struggling women who empowered Zeba and reminded her of her power with their statement: "I've never met a woman as strong as you... There's something special about you. I knew that from the day they brought you into the cell. You've magic. You're powerful" (227). Through such a female bonding, Zeba defied the boundaries set upon her by the male-dominated Afghan society and challenged the shackles of oppression that confined her and many other women like her. She very well knew that her release and union with her children promises hope for many of the female inmates of the prison "who are arrested on trumped-up charges" (351-352). She made them realise that through self-awareness and determination, they can also get rid of male domination and proceed in their lives as well as in their society.

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