

Fractured Lives Under a Fading Moon: Personal and Social Plights Depicted in Nadia Hashimi's *When the Moon Is Low*

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Abstract

Nadia Hashimi, an Afghan-based writer, offers visceral view through her works into the political, social and psychological issues persisting in Afghanistan. The complexity of the issues faced by common people in Afghanistan is made relevant to the international readers who in turn come to understand, forming the bridge of relatability and empathy with the people designed and portrayed by the novelist. This paper takes into account the personal trauma of a woman facing different psychologically demoralising in Afghan and such depiction one is able to comprehend the social plights of the people in general. The family's plight under different circumstances is captured by the novelist, and this is taken into consideration for the study. Specific issues of the nation are linked to the universal problems by focusing on the lives of one particular family and its members.

Keywords:Plight, War and Conflict, Resilience, Sacrifice, Refugee, Nadia Hashimi.

Introduction

Nadia Hashimi, an Afghan-American writer and paediatrician, was formerly a political candidate. Her works focusing on Afghan people's lives and struggles have made her popular internationally. She was born in 1977 in Queens, New York. Her parents had migrated to the States before the Soviet invasion and her mother is one of the first graduates from Kabul University as a Civil Engineer. Hashimi graduated in Middle Eastern Studies and Biology and is practising as a paediatrician in Maryland. She is a member of the U.S Afghan Women's Council and she is actively vociferous of the Afghan women's basic rights and immigrant rights. Her major works from 2012 until 2014 includes *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, *When the Moon Is Low*, *A House Without Windows*, *One Half from the East* *The Sky at Our Feet* and *Sparks Like Stars*. Women have undergone a transition over a period: the state of moving from being total dependence to complete independence has not been chaotic. After having attained the position of empowerment, the struggle has not ceased. Life of

women in religiously dominated parts of the world like Pakistan or Afghanistan is difficult even in this century. Nadia Hashimi, whose family had migrated to the States, remained unaware of the plight of women and it was only after revisiting to her native land, she became acquainted with the reality. Her work *When the Moon Is Low* is one such significant work which captures the plight in its utmost realistic conditions, the novel shows how extremists are still dominant and try to keep the society under control. Hashimi provides a glimpse into extreme conditions and society and showing how the desire for freedom keeps people motivated. The journey of Fereiba and Saleem under unnaturally extreme conditions enlightens the readers with the truth of patriarchal dominance and extreme chauvinistic.

When the Moon Is Low is a novel which focusses on the life of one woman from her childhood unto widowhood and life thereafter in Afghanistan, which came under the rule and control of Taliban and extreme conditions and norms laid by them. Despite the best conditions and natural resources to survive, Fereiba is forced to leave the country as a refugee. Fereiba is an Afghan woman who has a difficult childhood after the death of her biological mother. She undergoes discriminative struggles at the hands of her stepmother. She grows up in Kabul, a place dominated by superstitious beliefs and practices and her stepmother does not allow her to go to school believing girls are not free to educate themselves. Only when she turns thirteen, she is allowed to go to school. Soon she enters into a marital life, beyond her imagination. She is married to an educated man, Mahmood a civil engineer who understands her, and provides enough freedom unlike her stepmother. She is permitted to attend college and dress according to her wishes, but Fereiba's happiness is short-lived. With the invasion of Soviet Union into Afghanistan in 1979 brought in many reforms which are against the existing norms, women are curbed of their basic rights and extremists, Taliban try to force extreme rules like women must wear chador and cannot have jobs. Fereiba and her husband decide to stay back when their relatives try to flee, believing peace shall surpass the violations soon. They have two children, Saleem and Samira and she is pregnant with the third child. Mahmood is murdered brutally because of his freethinking spirit. Fereiba is now forced to migrate to London to her sister's place traversing Europe. But her struggles are many, as Saleem who is now fifteen undergoes psychological trauma, and Samira after the brutal murder of her father becomes completely speechless, and Fereiba herself has given birth to the third child Aziz. Now she has to protect the child as it is malnourished and way back, they come across different sorts of problems. Saleem goes under the acquaintance of different people with different attitudes and beliefs. Fereiba works day and night to save for her travel to London, whereas Saleem under the influence of others gets into trouble and is also arrested, but somehow, he manages to escape to Italy. On the other hand, Fereiba goes to London. The novel ends with abrupt note, Saleem joins hardened criminals and could not continue with his mother to London. He is left in a position which could have lasting effects on his future. The novel ends with hopes of the family getting united but the same is not revealed as there are no concrete possibilities.

Review of Literature

Ahuja, Ishita, in *Crossing Continents: Navigating the Self and the Mother–Child Relationship in Nadia Hashimi’s When the Moon Is Low*, explores how crossing geographical borders also entails crossing the boundaries of the self. Throughout the journey, trauma is never experienced in isolation; instead, it is continuously shaped by the geopolitical structures that govern the characters’ movement. The transcontinental journey thus becomes more than a search for safety—it emerges as a relentless struggle to reconstruct identity amid profound loss of agency and pervasive disempowerment.” (5) The journey into different lands reflects the necessity of freedom both physical and mental. The struggles undergone teach every character innumerable lesson of life and autonomy, “Fereiba’s journey from Kabul to Iran, Turkey, and Greece is a quest for safety and autonomy, both physically and mentally. Each crossing represents a challenge to not only national boundaries but also to identity-defining borders set by Afghan patriarchal society.” (9) Subha Mol in her article “Religious Fundamentalism: A Backlash to Women in Nadia Hashimi’s Fiction *When the Moon Is Low*” opines that there are various factors that affect the growth of women and religious fundamentalism is one of the important factors. The character of Fereiba is an embodiment and an example of how women are able to break the stringent norms and come above the threshold and Nadia Hashimi has pictures portrayed the same in all its reality, “We can see Fereiba as a role model to other women for her resilience and perseverance and strength to survive in the war-torn country. Although, the situation may force her to take a decision to move her children from Afghanistan to a safer place, she has the courage to face all changes in her life. Fundamentalists may clip the wings of women; there are still some women who are trying to fight for their freedom.” (2445) Untying Refugee Actualities by Exposing the Imprints of Stranger King Theory in Nadia Hashimi’s *When the Moon is Low* (2015) Rajkumari Nivedha captures the struggle through her research, she opines, “The journey of Fereiba is the stranger king which offers her true solution to move away from her problematic region. Her journey is not easy. Even though the journey is not a permanent part of her life, she faces a lot of struggles which teach her unforgettable lessons. The stranger king which offers her a good solution also offers her poverty, anxiety, depression and isolation. But Fereiba does not care about the problems colonized in her mind because of the stranger king. Instead, she fights with them boldly to build a new dynamic life for her children.” (51)

Societal and Integral Struggles

Nadia Hashimi in the novel *When the Moon Is Low* has not only captured the struggles of a woman bound by the societal restrictions, but also how the life of a teenager could easily be diverted by the social and extremist issues. One hand there is the character of Fereiba, who undergoes innumerable struggles of being a girl child. A stringent society with fixed set of rules and regulations designed for women could only thwart the complete growth. She is not allowed to go to school by her stepmother. She is emotionally affected by the absence of her biological mother and father’s emotional absence marks the beginning of her emotional struggle, “Fereiba’s own history of abandonment and marginalisation—her mother’s death in childbirth, her father’s emotional absence, and her upbringing by a stepmother—contributes to the fear she brings into motherhood.” (8) Somehow after the age

of thirteen she goes to school and later marries a man named Mahmood who is already married and becomes a catalyst for her further growth, "she gets unconditional love with proper independence only from her husband after the marriage being Mahmood is a well-literate and cultured person. His character emphasises the importance of education. When a man gets educated, he learns how to lead a disciplined life." (50) A very short span of happiness is also ruined by the control of Taliban over Afghanistan. The fundamentalist group demands the people to follow the regime of the fundamentalism and target the forward-thinker "In the darkness, when you cannot see the ground under your feet and when your fingers touch nothing but night, you are not alone. I will stay with you as moonlight stays on water." (7) a promising husband, his empathising words offer her the courage even after he is killed. He is brutally murdered thereby shattering the smooth and happy middle-class life of Fereiba. She had been given chance for higher education and freedom of dress-code which were also curbed by the interference of Taliban. They not only ceased the working life of Fereiba but also the fundamental liberties of everybody in Kabul, "The new rising regime, the Taliban, insisted that women dress more modestly and men grew beards in accordance with Islamic tradition. Every day, they issued a new set of decrees and meted out swift punishments for those who disobeyed. As a woman, I wasn't allowed to teach. Girls were not permitted to attend school" (92-93). She was working as a school teacher which had to be stopped abruptly and that consequently affected the education and future of her children as well. The entire peaceful situation of the place is turned into warfare by the interference of Taliban, but they decide to resist and stay back until things settle, unlike others who had started to migrate, "We no longer saw Europe's frills. We could barely see beyond our own streets, so thick were the plumes of war. By the time my husband and I decided to flee our homeland, Europe's allure had been reduced to its singular, sexiest quality-peace." (7)

Fereiba's son Saleem on the other hand, is also the victim of the society like Afghan which could be anytime be brought under the control. Saleem who is merely fifteen loses his father, has a younger sister and a new born brother. He has to shoulder the responsibilities of a father after the death of his father, "Following the assassination of Saleem's father, Mahmood, the mother-son relationship undergoes a seismic shift. Saleem, still a boy, is thrust into the role of provider and protector. This premature transition exemplifies "parentification", a form of role reversal common in trauma-affected families, where children adopt adult responsibilities to fill emotional and practical voids (Hooper *et al.* 2011, 228). He has nowhere to go and no options left to opt from. The sudden loss of identity, as a resident of Afghanistan to becoming a refugee who is in utter need of migrating from continents to continents pressurizes him down. They have to cross borders to reach London to start the life afresh, but the journey is neither easy nor possible, they have to cross not only the borders of continents but the borders of unsafely to reach and start life afresh in the safe zones, "Refugees didn't just escape a place. They had to escape a thousand memories until they'd put enough time and distance between them and their misery to wake to a better day." (303)

Refugee crisis and Displacement

The dehumanizing conditions presented by Hashimi reflect the struggle of entire community of refugees. The broken dreams and broken families had to leave everything behind in search of life with minimal peace. The family of Fereiba had to depend to smugglers and underground agents to get forget papers and identities on their way. The lack of money and protection push them to take up work in hotels and menial jobs, which in turn help them save a little for the further travel ahead. Whereas Saleem is forced to abandon his adolescent period and take up responsibilities of protecting the family. Samira, his younger sister, suffers severe psychological trauma after witnessing her father's brutal murder. As a result, she becomes mute, while inadequate nutrition and harsh living conditions leave the newborn child, extremely weak. Saleem becomes resilient, as he has lost the beauty of childhood, the perils of adolescent as a fatherless in the society takes an upper hand over him. He has to take up menial jobs like working in the tomato farm to earn a little to provide for the family, he often tight lips from revealing the hardships he had to undergo in the society outside. Every experience makes him stronger and harder both physically and emotionally, he is shattered for a second time when he is separated from the family during a police raid in Greece, Athens. The struggles of a teenager are shown through the narrative of Saleem himself. His solitary struggles across Europe offer the glimpses of problems of refugees. The life of unattended teenagers as refugees under the dangerous conditions with improper support system and family's aid could be seen through the portrayal of Saleem's character. He is traumatized both mentally and physically. He is portrayed as a vulnerable teenager, suddenly exposed to an ambience he had been ignorant all those years. He had to make life-altering partnerships, decisions and take up responsibilities to merely survive in the foreign lands. Acquaintance with shadowy underground network puts him in danger as well. Hashimi does not end the journey of Saleem on a positive note, the readers are left with unambiguous conclusion, which only provides a little hope of him uniting with the family in London. There are no further developments in the plot and there are no hints of further union. He exemplifies the life of those teenagers who are left with no legal support and family's protection, and such younger people only become the victims of global displacement.

Motherhood and Sacrifice

Fereiba's journey is also filled with both emotional and physical impairments. The moment her husband is murdered, she is under the scrutiny of Taliban, who force her life into becoming a refugee. Her life as a school teacher ends, and the journey of a mother to protect the children begins, "I feared my son would be swallowed by the Taliban, and as a woman, there was little I could do to help us survive. [...]" "I have no choice but to get my children out of Kabul. Their stomachs are empty, their lips parched. There's nothing for us here" (115). She has to find a way to reach London fighting all odds. Her journey begins with forged papers and devoid of money. They have to travel on foot, crossing mountains and barges overnight to escape the punishments incurred by many who were caught by the Taliban in Kabul. Their life is always under peril, and the journey also demands high cost. They somehow cross Iran and enter Turkey and their struggles continue as well. They take up jobs of survival and save money for further journey too. After reaching Greece they are

filled with some hopes, as they feel they are closer to the safety in Europe. It is during a police raid, Saleem is separated from the family, and Fereiba is forced to decide whether to stay back and search for the lost son, or take the remaining children to Europe leaving behind Saleem. She further goes ahead into Italy, and then through France facing utter penury and perjury of life. Her sole goal is to reach safer abodes with the hopes of uniting with Saleem in future. She is finally able to reach the sister's place in London, securing her safety as a refugee. The resilience showcased by Fereiba and Saleem is incredible. A woman, as a mother could go to any extreme to protect her children. Despite losing everything she is not shattered completely, she gains the internal strength to protect and care for her children, "I will carry these children—my husband's children—as far as I can and pray that we will reach that place where, in the quiet of their slumber, I, too, will rest." (350) As a bold educated woman she had contributed empowerment to daughters in neighbourhood while in Kabul, but her dreams of empowering women in society remained short-lived, "I taught several of the neighbour's daughters in a makeshift classroom in our home. But when the Taliban executed three people in one week for running a secret school, even our neighbour's kept their daughters home. Our once bright and cheerful home felt stifling and dark." (94) Her education and forward thinking helped her in her journey towards newer abodes and a safer world. The dreams of being not born in a place like Kabul always remained in her, she wanted to live simple and normal liberated empowerments of a woman, which many in other countries celebrated but she had been destined to face the struggles, "If I were a European, I never would have left my home to come to Kabul. Not in those days. I would have stayed in Poland or England or Italy where there were no whistling rockets above, where meat and vegetables were abundant and women weren't afraid to step outside their homes. Why leave such a paradise to come to Kabul?" (94)

Conclusion

Nadia Hashimi through the portrayal of Fereiba and her children shows how life could be turned impossible under crucial circumstances, "Nadia Hashimi's *When the Moon Is Low* exemplifies the intertwined coexistence of individual suffering and global catastrophic events. The novel depicts the violence of displacement as Fereiba and her children attempt to untangle familial relationships, identity and mental health." (Ahuja, Ishita 9). Hashimi, in this work has captured the struggles and painful journeys of a mother and her children. The journey that began as a girl child in a land, which curbed the basic rights of girls remained painful throughout. Her transition from being a woman to becoming a refugee again shows that extreme conditions only worsen the life of people like Fereiba, the rays of hope are always feeble and short-lived, "Refugees didn't just escape a place. They had to escape a thousand memories until they'd put enough time and distance between them and their misery to wake to a better day." (95) As a girl she suffered under the conditions of her stepmother, and after growing up, as a married woman she had to face the norms and perils of the extremist. As a widow, her journey towards freedom was never easy or smooth. She could only stand firm to face the challenges to keep herself alive and her children protected. Saleem, on the other hand, remained a victim of the untoward conditions of the society. He

had never experienced such conditions until he reached fifteen, and the psychological transition from a teenage to manhood stage in the wink of an eye became traumatic to him. The life of these two characters reveals the life of refugees in general. The struggles they face and trauma they undergo are unfathomable. World has moved ahead, and women are no longer fighting for rights, but it could not be denied, the class struggle towards empowerment is still existing in many societies, despite the status of becoming a cliché, feminism and fight for fundamental rights are still important causes.

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