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Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Cultural Agency in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and *A House Without Windows*

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***Abstract*—Afghanistan's geographical location and chaotic history, marked by external and internal conflicts, have had an indelible impact on the personal as well as socio-cultural aspects of Afghan lives. Afghan literature in English offers global readers an insight into the cultural and historical factors that shape the country. Afghan writers incorporate various indigenous elements into their literary works, reflecting the country's multiethnic tribal composition. The concept of indigeneity is often associated with colonial histories. However, this study attempts to redefine it within the tribal and cultural structures of Afghanistan. The research situates Afghan literature in English within the discourse of indigenous studies to explore how Nadia Hashimi's novels *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) and *A House Without Windows* (2016) preserve and disseminate indigenous knowledge systems of Afghanistan to global readers. Applying Stuart Hall's cultural representation theory, the research studies how meanings are produced, contested, and preserved in the novels. The close reading and qualitative analysis of the texts reveal indigenous oral traditions of Afghanistan, such as storytelling, proverbs, poetry, magic, traditional healing methods, and cultural practices like *bacha posh*, becoming dynamic forces that shape the characters' agency. This study moves beyond the oppression-focused victimization narratives that dominate existing scholarship to reveal how literary texts produce and disseminate Afghan cultural identity by integrating indigenous elements.**

***Index Terms*—indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, cultural representation, Nadia Hashimi**

I. Introduction

The geographical location of Afghanistan, particularly with the Khyber Pass as the major trade route between Central Asia and South Asia, has placed the country in the path of harm and destruction. This history of invasion and war has affected the demography of the country and has diversified the population.

Today, though its ethnic groups can be categorized as tribal or nontribal, Afghanistan remains a predominantly tribal country. Tribes, such as the Pashtuns, are connected by a "unilineal descent," while the Uzbeks, Turkmen, Hazaras, Kirghiz, and Aimaqs are structured around a clan-based system. On the other hand, nontribal groups like the Tajiks identify themselves through geographical residence rather than genealogy (Barfield, 2010). As a result, Afghanistan is divided by religion, ideology, gender, language, parochialism, and class (Pourzand, 1999), and various tribes have left the country divided territorially, politically, and culturally; indeed, tribal animosity is cited as one of the primary reasons for the lack of unity on various matters (Khan, 2021; Chang et al., 2022).

As a result, in the context of Afghanistan, the term "indigenous" must be understood differently than it is in other areas of the world. First, however, to situate Afghanistan within the research framework of indigenous studies, it is essential to define "indigenous people." According to Friedman (2008), "indigenous refers to the enclaves of minorities who pre-date the formation of the nation-state (in general), associated with previous life forms and economies in a situation where the national population makes no claims to indigeneity" (p. 32). Many indigenous groups of Asia describe themselves "as prior inhabitants vis-à-vis later arrivals" (Barns et al., 1995; as cited in Kapoor & Shizha, 2010, p. 3). Chilisa (2012) further conceives indigeneity as a cultural group's unique way of perception of reality, knowledge, and value systems. In the postcolonial scenario, indigenous "internationalizes" the experiences of colonized people and is seen as a function of the state of which it is a part (Smith, 2012; Minde, 2008; Chilisa, 2012). Using these perspectives, this paper attempts to explore the indigenous elements embedded in Nadia Hashimi's novels *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) and *A House Without Windows* (2016).

After the 9/11 attacks in America, global attention went to Afghanistan, and Afghan writers who write in English presented the complexities of Afghanistan's culture and identity to a worldwide audience (Gopal, 2023, p. 195). Their works embody the social, historical, cultural, economic, and religious aspects of Afghanistan. These authors now bear

the responsibility of sharing not only the rich indigenous oral traditions of Afghanistan but also the historical and cultural experiences of Afghans, as the country's unstable political conditions have caused displacement and repatriation, endangering the future of oral traditions (Kreyenbroek & Marzolph, 2010, p. 310). The indigenous spirit aligns with the romantic principle of *volksgeist*, or "the spirit of the people." Rooted in the culture and tradition of the land and created by the common people, the indigenous elements shed light on the shared cultural heritage and collective identity. Folk literature and elements of indigenousness embedded in it are a result of the "creative act of an anonymous collective," which ensures cultural continuity (Kreyenbroek & Marzolph, 2010, p. xxxvi). Indigenous knowledge enhances cultural, educational, and traditional values and establishes a connection to the social norms and values (Rehman et al., 2021). Barfield (2010) points out that Afghanistan's "intrinsic Islamic identity is … fused with a strong cultural identity" (p. 41). Religion becomes embedded within the cultural consciousness of the nation and intersects with indigenous knowledge systems, an intersection encapsulated in Nadia Hashimi's novels.

Nadia Hashimi is an Afghan American writer whose works draw on the rich oral traditions and cultural practices of Afghanistan. This study identifies and analyzes the indigenous elements embedded in Hashimi's novels *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) and *A House Without Windows* (2016) to understand how the indigenous knowledge systems promote cultural agency. *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) chronicles the tale of Rahima and her great-great-grandmother, Bibi Shekiba, who, though distanced by time, are connected by their experiences in the highly patriarchal society of Afghanistan. *A House Without Windows* (2016) tells the story of Zeba, who is imprisoned for the murder of her husband. Hashimi contributes significantly to the dissemination and preservation of Afghanistan's indigenous oral traditions and knowledge systems. This paper examines how the author incorporates indigenous oral traditions of Afghanistan, like storytelling, proverbs, poetry, and the use of magic, along with cultural practices like *bacha posh* and traditional healing methods, into the narratives.

II. Literature Review

Existing literature on Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) and *A House Without Windows* (2016) focuses predominantly on gender inequality, subalternity, identity crisis, systemic oppression, and the cultural and psychological implications of the cultural practice of *bacha posh*. This review synthesizes major themes explored by scholars to identify the gap in existing scholarship.

Applying Spivak's subaltern theory, Sumra and Taseer (2018) explore gender subalternity, resistance, and the intersection of religious and patriarchal ideologies on the identity of women. Similarly, Kumar (2022) investigates the oppressive power of patriarchy and the characters' struggle to create an identity within restrictive social frameworks. Monish and Kannadhasan (2021) advance this analysis by conceptualizing patriarchy as a political framework that limits the freedom of women. Darkhasha (2023) and Ekka (2022) analyze the predicament of Afghan women as victims of marginalization and "internalized sexism" in a patriarchal society.

Using critical discourse analysis, Imran et al. (2024) and Imran et al. (2023) identify linguistic structures as tools that sustain patriarchy and suppress female agency within the context of Afghanistan. Hegemonic masculinity in patriarchal society manifests in the subordination of women and acts of violence that reinforce destructive gender hierarchies (Rahayu et al., 2022).

The sociocultural landscape of Afghanistan, as represented in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014), has been studied extensively, focusing on systemic oppression and gender inequalities. Ekka (2023) dissects the socio-cultural practices of Afghanistan that promote gender inequalities and the subordination of women and analyzes their impact on psychosocial development. Adding to this, Kabeer (2022) investigates the impact of socioethnic issues of Afghanistan, the Taliban regime, and the civil wars on women and marginalized sections of the population. Singh (2021) advances this deliberation by reviewing how characters grapple with identity crises in the chaotic sociopolitical scenarios found in the works of Khaled Hosseini and Nadia Hashimi. The study explores the trauma, struggle, and resilience of characters amid violence, oppression, and marginalization.

The cultural practice of *bacha posh*, where girls are dressed as boys, has also been a focal point in research on Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014). Vincily (2018) investigates the representation of women in Afghan culture and highlights the practice of *bacha posh* as an offshoot of deeply ingrained gender inequality in Afghan society. *Bacha posh* is identified both as a survival mechanism and a form of resistance against patriarchy (Abbady, 2022; Seswita, 2022). Menon (2018), highlighting gender dysphoria, identity crisis, and marginalization, examines the emotional and psychological impact of the practice of *bacha posh* on girls. Kabeer (2022) further investigates the socioethnic issues of Afghanistan and highlights how the tradition of *bacha posh* affects the autonomy of women in identity formation and hinders psychological development.

Recent studies on *A House Without Windows* (2016) document the systematic subjugation of Afghan women through forced marriages, physical violence, economic control, emotional manipulation, and social isolation (Naflath, 2025; Tahir & Imtiaz, 2024; Sudarwati et al., 2025). Putratama and Chusna (2022) and Rasheed (2022) identify prison as an ambivalent space where Afghan women experience freedom, resistance, and sisterhood, thereby redefining freedom as autonomy in actions and speeches.

Existing studies in Hashimi's novels predominantly employ postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks to focus on patriarchal structures and systemic oppression, victimization, and resistance. As a result, limited attention is

given to indigenous cultural practices beyond *bacha posh* that constitute Afghan cultural identity. Furthermore, the application of Stuart Hall's cultural representation theory in the context of Afghan literature remains unexplored. This study addresses these gaps by examining indigenous oral traditions such as storytelling, proverbs, poetry, the use of magic, and traditional healing methods to understand how they promote cultural agency and function as instruments of resistance and identity formation. Using the framework of Stuart Hall's cultural representation theory, the study aims to move beyond the oppression-focused analysis to understand how Nadia Hashimi's novels produce and disseminate Afghan cultural identity.

III. Theoretical Framework

This study uses Stuart Hall's cultural representation theory to analyze the construction and portrayal of indigenous elements in Hashimi's novels selected for study. Employing this framework helps to understand the textual representation of cultural practices and traditions.

Representation of culture through language is central to the "production and circulation" of meaning (Hall, 1997, p. 1). Culture is both a system of shared meanings and a distinctive way of life (Hall, 1997; Sewell, 1999; Anderson-Levitt, 2012). Hall (1997) conceptualizes culture as a process of producing and negotiating meanings through language, representation, and discourse. As a result, meaning is formed that influences identity, governs social interactions, and links to power structures. Culture—contradictory, loosely integrated, contested, and permeable—operates as a "dialectic of system and practice" and shapes power relations through struggles and resistance (Sewell, 1999, pp. 52-54). Anderson (2020) views culture as an "assembled effect" continually shaped by external factors, "mediated experience" experienced through rituals, memory, and emotions, and "forms-of-life" merging nature, spirituality, and community. Expanding on this idea of culture as dynamic and constructed, Hall examines the construction of cultural meanings through representation. In his discussion on Foucault, Hall reiterates that representation operates within relations of power and knowledge. He situates cultural meaning within "a historical, practical, and worldly context" shaped by language as well as institutional power (Hall, 1997, p. 33). Emphasizing that knowledge is never neutral, Foucault asserts, "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge" (as cited in Hall, 1997, p. 27).

Thus, the representation of cultural realities participates in discourse about what is accepted as truth within a society. Examining indigenous elements like oral narratives, local practices, traditions, and belief systems in Afghan novels helps construct an alternative representation of Afghan identity. These counter-discourses go beyond Western colonial discourses and reclaim the Afghan cultural legacy. Indigenous elements embedded in literary texts are a way of preserving, transforming, and asserting indigenous identity through creative expressions. This dynamic expression of cultural practices resists cultural erasure and challenges dominant worldviews by becoming instruments of cultural survival, resistance, and identity formation (Ballantyne et al., 2020). By incorporating indigenous elements, Hashimi challenges the hegemonic discourses and shapes Afghan cultural identity against Western frameworks.

IV. Discussions

A. Storytelling

Storytelling occupies a central role within indigenous epistemology and pedagogy (Chan, 2021; Iseke, 2013). *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) uses indigenous storytelling as a pedagogical tool to impart life lessons, as a medium to share history, as knowledge, and as a source of spiritual strength (Iseke, 2013, p. 560). Chan (2021) identifies storytelling as an integral factor that facilitates regaining "a sense of belonging and identity, connection to the land, and a sustained process for healing" (p. 171). As a cultural act, storytelling establishes a connection to the geographical space, culture, and community and constructs a collective identity. Beyond its cultural function, storytelling becomes a political act as it offers the marginalized a "process of reclaiming the story, to own the story, rather than be defined or storied by others" (Chan, 2021, p. 172). This aspect is particularly significant in the context of Afghanistan, where women exist in the peripheries of society and thought.

Constantly changing political conditions and the history of war and conflict victimize and threaten the safety of women in multiple ways. In fact, the narrative of liberation of Afghan women was the central justification behind the United States' War on Terror in Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Women, though invisible in public discourses, play a critical role in shaping the political and cultural landscape of Afghanistan. They contribute significantly to preserving and transmitting the value system in indigenous communities (Aziz et al., 2021, p. 204) using folklore, anecdotes, proverbs, and songs as mediums of transmission of knowledge. As such, storytelling, embedded in the indigenous ethos, becomes a tool for women in the novel to overpower the hegemonic forces that undermine their existence. In Hall's terms, storytelling serves as a representational site where Afghan womanhood is discursively constructed thereby repositioning women as cultural transmitters and active producers of knowledge within a field that has silenced them historically (Hall, 1990, p. 226).

In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014), Khala Shaima, the protagonist Rahima's aunt, molds her nieces through stories about Bibi Shekiba, Rahima's great-great-grandmother. The stories become guiding lessons for the younger generation. Hashimi develops the stories of Shekiba and Rahima analogously through alternating chapters. Bibi

Shekiba's life will not strike others as an exemplary one. However, by telling the story of Shekiba to her nieces, Khala Shaima elevates her into a legendary figure. Storytelling, in this context, establishes a connection with the past, present, and future. This intergenerational connection disrupts the linear, crisis focused narratives of the West and positions Afghan identity as historically grounded and self-sustaining. Stories are integral in indigenous literature, as they offer "both a narrative of history and an attitude about history" (Smith, 2012, p. 19). Shekiba's history and experiences empower the children and show them how to face adversities. The story of Shekiba becomes a powerful medium that transforms the life of Rahima. Rahima learns from the past of Shekiba, gaining wisdom that transcends the limits of time and space and becoming an agent of change. "Her story is your story… I suppose we all carry the story of our ancestors in us" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 140). She finds the courage to break away from her abusive marriage and take control of her own life. The connection with the past enables the individual to learn from history, forge an identity, and develop resilience. According to Hall (1990, p. 226), identity is not an essence but a positioning; Rahima's transformation demonstrates how representational practices connect subjects to collective histories.

Storytelling in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) can be located within the Islamic practice of *halaqah* (study circle). Halaqah, a traditional Islamic pedagogy, is identified as an indigenous knowledge transmission method that is effectively used in Islamic societies (Ahmed, 2014). A part of the oral tradition, this practice plays a significant role in the transformation of personalities and individual and community empowerment (Ahmed, 2014). In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014), the informal storytelling sessions between Khala Shaima and Rahima embody the transformative pedagogical principles of this indigenous practice. Rahima gains wisdom, strength, and resilience through stories and not through formal education. Moreover, her storytelling retains cultural practices and strengthens both individual and collective identities (Chan, 2021, p. 176). Rahima's escape from the unjust and oppressive marriage can be seen as concurrent with the transformative influence of *halaqah*. The informal *halaqah*-like storytelling becomes counter discursive creating alternate meanings of womanhood that challenge the patriarchal authority. Behind closed doors, Khala Shaima becomes a mentor for Rahima through her stories, enabling her to create an intellectual space to recuperate from her traumas and guiding her towards personal development and liberation. Thus, the novel 're-signifies' indigenous epistemology as an authoritative site of agency and resistance.

B. Proverbs

Another indigenous element found in the close reading of the text is the abundance of proverbs in the narrative, especially in the conversations between characters. Proverbs (*matulana* in Pashto and *zarbul masalha* in Dari) play a very significant role in Afghan indigenous cultures, as they reveal philosophies of life rooted in Afghan culture. Mieder (2008) defines proverbs as "concise traditional statements of apparent truths with currency among the folk… (they) contain wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and are handed down from generation to generation" (p. 11). Furthermore, norms, values, and truths are preserved in proverbs (Sierakowska-Dyndo, 2013, p. xvi), which are derived from the experiences of older generations and handed down through situational usage to younger generations. Kreyenbroek and Marzolph (2010) identify proverbs, along with folk stories, riddles, epics, and romances, as "valuable repositories of social-historical, psychological, and ethnological insights on Afghan popular ideas and values, generally those supporting mutual responsibility and social solidarity" (p. 309). From the perspective of Hall, proverbs function as representational codes through which cultural meanings are circulated within a society (Hall, 1997, p. 25).

The proverbs in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) serve two functions: they address the collective well-being by offering guidance for the individual or community and embody collective wisdom gained through shared experiences that transcend individual wisdom. The novel does not merely reproduce proverbs, but places them within the narrative that rearticulates their meanings. Frequent use of proverbs by Khala Shaima reiterates their significance in the indigenous culture of Afghanistan. Some of the proverbs that appear in the novel are analyzed here to understand how they impart wisdom and values.

Khala Shaima reveals a pragmatic message about avoiding interference in other people's affairs to prevent misunderstandings and confrontation with the proverb "Don't stop a donkey that's not yours" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 10). The proverb reinforces the significance of personal boundaries and social harmony. Shekiba supports Raisa's decision to transform Rahima into Rahim, a *bacha posh*. When Raisa fears that her in-laws will not appreciate the decision of changing Rahima into a boy, Shekiba remarks, "The person who doesn't appreciate the apple doesn't appreciate the orchard" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 46). The proverb criticizes people who fail to see the value of little things and suggests that such people will never learn to appreciate greater things either. It is also a commentary on the patriarchal nature of Afghan society that neglects and devalues women. The proverb stresses that people's disapproval marks their own limitation rather than the woman's worth and thus underscores the themes of self-worth and resilience.

Proverbs can also be used to confront hard truths. Rahima's father is addicted to opium without any regard for his family. When Raisa defends his actions because he was her husband and husbands should not be contradicted, Shaima tries to tell her to open her eyes to reality and pushes her to make the right choices: "Sit with us and you'll be one of us. Sit with a pot and you'll be black" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 73). The proverb metaphorically emphasizes the influence of external factors on an individual's decisions. It teaches that even when it is difficult to make the right choices, it is the choices that define a person. Later, when Raisa expresses her helplessness and worries over her daughters' marriage arrangements, Khala Shaima responds with the proverb, "Every man is king of his own beard" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 139).

The proverb in its conventional sense emphasizes personal autonomy. However, Shaima uses the same to critique the attitude of the patriarchal society where men exercise absolute power over family affairs with no regard to the feelings of others. The proverb "In an ant colony, dew is a flood" shows how something insignificant becomes overwhelming in certain situations (Hashimi, 2014, p. 238). This also serves as a critique of the structures existing in society, where minor injustices can have devastating consequences. Thus, proverbs serve to reinforce moral values and offer strategies of survival in a patriarchal and hierarchical society, thereby becoming tools of empowerment and resistance. By foregrounding the role of proverbs as a site of social critique, Hashimi reclaims Afghan orature as a dynamic tool for cultural resilience.

C. Poetry

Poetry, like proverbs, has a significant place in Afghanistan's indigenous culture. Folk songs, often composed by illiterate poets, reveal the "feelings and recorded the true life of a nation" (Sierakowska-Dyndo, 2013, p. xvii). *Landays* and *chaharbeiti* are traditional forms of poems that are recited by both men and women. Furthermore, *landay*, also called *mesri* and *tapi*, is preferred by Afghan women to express their passions, thoughts, feelings, and hopes. These are short two-line poems in Pashto with nine syllables in the first line and thirteen in the second line, having a therapeutic impact on human emotions (Daud, 2017, pp. 16-17). *Chaharbeiti*, a four-line poem sung by both men and women, is a regional folk form with its roots in Sufism and the Persian language (Doubleday, 2011, p. 4). Both forms become significant mediums for "female artistic and emotional expression," as they predominantly deal with themes of love, separation, longing, and dispossession (Doubleday, 2011, p. 5). These indigenous forms function as signifying practices and representational cultural sites where women claim agency by transforming personal experience into collective meaning.

A House Without Windows (2016) adapts the indigenous tradition of using poetry to give voice to incarcerated women, thereby transforming personal suffering into collective testimony. The prison, in the novel, is a representational space where marginalized subjects reclaim discursive agency by redefining themselves. The novel contains many couplets composed in English that, though structurally different from *landay*, retain the thematic and functional dimensions of Afghan poetic traditions. This adaptation shows a manner in which indigenous cultural practices can be preserved and transmitted across linguistic boundaries, making them accessible to a global audience. Women in the novel use poetry as a means of self-expression, expressing dissent against cultural practices and articulating common truths about war, bloodshed, grief, and chaos that define Afghan society (Griswold, 2013, p. 195). The poems, though stemming from personal experiences, are subversive and rebellious. As Abu-Lughod (1986) observes, such poetry is "not individual, spontaneous, idiosyncratic, or unofficial but public, conventional, and formulaic—a highly developed art" (p. 251). As a result, poetry has become a symbol of freedom for women. The patriarchal society devalues women, pushes them into the peripheries of the society, and leaves them yearning for love and recognition: "My full height, my beloved husband never did see/Because the fool dared turn his back on me" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 2). These verses capture the tragedy in the lives of Afghan women: invisibility. They also reveal how the willful blindness of men renders them foolish despite their assumed authority. Through poetic articulation, the novel destabilizes the structures that normalize female erasure. Poetry enables marginalized women to gain representational power by transforming silence into speech and invisibility into discursive presence.

Zeba, imprisoned in Chil Mahtab for murdering her husband, uses poetry for self-discovery and self-expression. Her verses mark her transformation from a silenced wife to a symbol of resilience:

> Alone and free of angst and sorrow
> I've bled enough for today and tomorrow
> Now it is time for my bud to bloom
> I'm a sparrow in love with solitude
> All my secrets contained within me
> I sing aloud—I'm alone finally. (Hashimi, 2016, p. 53)

Her couplets become therapeutic, calming her, distilling her fury and despondency into the shortest of verses: "Medicine is what this man calls his liquor/ Strange is the remedy that only makes him sicker" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 71).

Poetry is also used as a tool to critique patriarchal oppression. Latifa, having to prove her purity through a humiliating medical examination, reflects on the injustice: "Innocence is a word that can only be spoken/If your womanly veil has yet to be broken" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 98). Women in Chil Mahtab are punished for committing honor crimes, yet Latifa exposes the hypocrisy of Afghan society's honor ideology: "If a man's honor is the highest prize/Why then stash it between a woman's thighs?" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 80). This verse, using a rhetorical question, dismantles the honor ideology that forces women to shoulder the burden of the honor of men.

Other verses capture the gendered nature of justice. "Men love for a moment because they are clever/Women are fools because they love forever" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 47). "What good is a woman's telling of truth/When nothing she says will be taken as proof?" critiques the credibility gap between the testimony of a man and a woman (Hashimi, 2016, p. 231). However, for a man, his manhood itself becomes a testament: "Men treasure their manhood as God's greatest gift/Because without it, justice is brutal and swift" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 198).

The women who protest through these verses find solace in their sisterhood, as their poetry reveals the collective experiences of Afghan women. Poems establish a community among prisoners, reassuring them that they are not alone

in suffering. Poetry gives voice to the silenced women, transforming it into a tool for survival, and individual verses become a chorus of resistance and transformation. Hashimi thus uses the traditional forms of poetry as a vehicle for feminist critique, re-signifying indigenous poetry as a site of epistemic authority and repositioning Afghan women within global discourse.

D. Shamanic Healing and Spiritual Traditions

The novels of Hashimi integrate indigenous belief in magic and shamanic healing into the narrative. Despite Islamic hegemony, shamanism was prevalent in Afghanistan and Central Asia, and some shamanic practices still survive today, having seeped into the fabric of indigenous culture and finding expression within the mystical Sufi traditions (Sidky, 1990, p. 285).

Zarcone (2013) establishes an association between Sufism and the pre-Islamic practices. Sufis, the propagators of Islam in Central Asia, were orthodox and heterodox at the same time. Sufism's flexibility allowed it to integrate pre-Islamic healing and spiritual practices into itself. Ziarat worship in Afghanistan is cited as a prominent influence of pre-Islamic spiritual practice. Ziarat, the grave of an ascetic, was believed to possess supernatural powers. The keepers of these shrines, who act as diviners, are reminiscent of the shamans of the past (Sidky, 1990, p. 288). Even though these men operate under various Muslim titles, their engagement with the spirits and use of "ecstatic techniques" make them distinct from the conservative religious practitioners (Sidky, 1990, p. 290). Hashimi documents these traditional, cultural, and indigenous practices and uses them to explore questions of faith, justice, and female agency. These spiritual practices operate as cultural signifying systems that shape how suffering and agency are understood and experienced. In *A House Without Windows* (2016), Safathullah, Zeba's grandfather, is a *murshid*, a central figure in Sufi spiritual guidance, believed to possess a connection to the Almighty and the ability to intercede on behalf of others. *Ziarat* worship is also highlighted in the narrative. At the *ziarat*, the spiritual guide is believed to be "a purveyor of the secrets and tricks people used when their faith became sullied with desperation" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 143). The use of the word "tricks" suggests that the traditional healing practice functions as a psychological refuge for people.

The role of religion in enhancing the healing process is essential to understanding indigenous healing practices in the context of Afghanistan. In Islam, a combined reliance on the divine, spiritual, psychological, social, and ecological factors is crucial to healing and health (Rahman, 2015, p. 120). Faith healings in Islam cleanse the body and soul, strengthen trust in God, and promote virtuous deeds to tackle evil forces (Qamar, 2013, p. 50). Visits to shrines and ritual healings are sacred activities performed by many Afghans. These ritual healings through religious practices at shrines offer a holistic therapy encompassing the mind, body, and spirit (Charan et al., 2020). Hashimi explores the coercive potential of these traditional practices through Zeba's treatment at the shrine, where she is sentenced to forty days by the Quazi for killing her husband. The shrine is a small single-story clay and mud building built on the tomb of Hazrat Rahman, run by Mullah Habibullah. It is believed to be much more powerful than any medication if one has faith; Zeba spends forty days experiencing the healing power of the ziarat. Institutional judgement and spiritual knowledge intersect in the shrine exposing the tension between formal authority and indigenous belief systems.

Like *ziarat* worship, magic, and other such practices occupied a significant place in early Islam as they integrated pre-Islamic practices. Prayers "were supplemented by an array of symbols whose function was to strengthen supplications. Many of these symbols were inherited from earlier cultures, and their origins and significance have become obscure with the passage of time" (Savage-Smith, 2021, p. xxiii). In *Magic and Divination in Early Islam*, Savage-Smith (2021) identifies talismans, amulets, magic squares, magic, sortilege, letter-number interpretation, and astrology as just a few of the practices that have their roots in indigenous cultures. When faith fails to satisfy people, they turn to amulets and talismans, which are not advocated by the Quran. This shows how meaning is negotiated within religious discourse, revealing the fluid boundaries between orthodox Islamic beliefs and Afghan indigenous practices. When Zeba loses everything, her *taweez* (talisman) gives her hope and acts as psychological sustenance. People came to the *ziarat* for a talisman and "the deliberately placed letters, the undecipherable method by which Jawed filled the tiny squares with a verse, a symbol, or a set of numbers. There was method to his magic" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 108).

Beyond talismans, the Afghan belief systems include other supernatural elements. The characters' belief in *djinns* and the "evil eye" reflects another pre-Islamic practice (Sidky, 1990). Black djinns are evil and malevolent, whereas the white djinns are good and benevolent (Dupree, 1997, p. 106). Hashimi uses these beliefs in *A House Without Windows* (2016) to explore the psychological state of her characters. Zeba experienced the presence of a dark power while she was married to Kamal. The dark presence she felt, ignited by her belief in djinns, represents her abusive marriage. The traditional belief systems serve a psychological function by helping to understand suffering. Zeba considers nightmares as omens and feelings as divinations. These practices allow the characters to decipher the chaos unfolding in their lives.

Another indigenous notion that has caused worry in Islam is the "evil eye," for which there are several teachings on the evil eye and ways to avoid it. The evil eye is the fear of envy and jealousy in the gaze of the beholder, transmitted by "look, touch, or verbal expression of envy or excessive praise" (Abu-Rabia, 2005, p. 243). In Islam, traditional healers employ various methods to offer protection against the evil eye and djinns.

An amulet or talisman (*taweez*) is used in traditional healings while seeking protection against the evil eye. *Taweez* are prayers written on paper and worn on the neck or around the arm of the one who seeks protection. Some Muslim scholars disagree with this practice, calling it traditional and un-Islamic, as it was not practiced by Prophet Muhammad

(SAW) (Qamar, 2013, p. 48). Moreover, it is a common belief that the evil eye could threaten the well-being of anyone, especially a child. The belief in the evil eye appears in both the novels of this study. In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014), Shekiba uses *espand* (wild rue) to ward off the evil eye. In *A House Without Windows* (2016), Gulnaz pierces her son's earlobes after an aunt commented on his height. She leaves one lock of his hair uncut until he turns fourteen to protect him from *nazar*. These actions manifest the indigenous practices of Afghanistan.

A House Without Windows (2016) highlights traditional healing practices known as "*tawakkul*" that are grounded in nature and faith. Hashimi portrays women as inheritors or practitioners of shamanic knowledge, thereby giving them agency and a transformative power. Gulnaz, Zeba's mother, is an authoritative figure in the patriarchal society, which is an unusual depiction of a woman. Her use of holy water, amulets, and natural remedies is influenced by indigenous healing practices. Gulnaz is considered a "sorceress, a teaser of fate" with mastery over the usage of herbs and other medicines, just like her grandmother (Hashimi, 2016, p. 25). "When the children burned hot with fever, she dripped holy water into their mouths and placed amulets beneath their pillows" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 25). This points to an integration of Islamic faith with the traditional healing practices of Afghanistan. When Rafi writhed in pain because of a boil, Gulnaz applied a poultice made from a freshly killed frog to draw out the infection. Her treatment demonstrates how indigenous healing practices are combined with religious beliefs. This knowledge is passed on to Gulnaz by her grandmother and is inherited by Zeba. "These were gifts of knowledge, and ignoring them constituted a sin" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 128). Under patriarchal oppression, where human rights and justice are denied, resorting to the traditional, unorthodox practice of magic repositions women as agents within cultural discourse. When Zeba uses her indigenous magic to help other women in prison, she facilitates resilience and empowerment. The black magic Zeba learned from her mother helps her save Mezghan from the dishonor of giving birth to a bastard child. Hashimi highlights these indigenous healing practices and magic as integral parts of Afghan identity. These practices are meaningful for the practitioners, offering them solace and becoming useful for other women navigating oppressive systems. Women use these practices to control their circumstances and resist the limitations imposed by oppressive social structures, thereby exercising cultural agency.

E. Cultural Practices Rooted in Indigenous Culture

Hashimi incorporates indigenous cultural practices like *bacha posh*, the practice of turning a girl into a boy until she attains puberty, into the narratives to demonstrate how these customs shape, restrict, and, at times, empower women in patriarchal Afghan society. *Bacha posh* can be traced back to pre-Islamic Afghanistan (Padmi, 2018, p. 54). However, no data points to the clear origin of the tradition. It is a "cultural practice driven by a patriarchal setting" (Corboz et al., 2019, p. 587) and reflects the deeply gendered aspect of the conservative patriarchal society of Afghanistan and certain parts of Pakistan. *Bacha posh* has been prevalent in Afghanistan for centuries, and it is said that King Habibullah made his youngest daughter a *bacha posh* to guard his harem (Sawitri, 2017, p. 14). Among families without a son, the practice of *bacha posh* serves both as a means of protection and a fragile form of empowerment. It operates within the "informal structures or micronarratives" of Afghan society and is identified as a part of the knowledge system shared by Afghan women (Lalthlamuanpuii & Suchi, 2020, p. 2). The practice, often criticized as dehumanizing girls, is both subversive and pragmatic. Even for the shortest period of time, the girl can enjoy the freedom that boys enjoy. Puberty and changing the *bacha posh* back into a girl is traumatizing, but in a society where women have neither rights nor freedom, the practice can be seen as a means of sustenance. Within the narrative, bacha posh becomes a representational lens through which gender is revealed not as a fixed essence but as a socially constructed position (Hall, 1990, p. 226).

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell (2014) talks about an indigenous myth in Afghanistan about walking under the rainbow to change girls into boys and boys into girls: "We drank in spirits and played in fields/Enamored of/Indigoes, saffron, and teals/There was fog in the space/Between them and I/…And the mist opens its arms, colors reclaimed" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 37).

The imagery of "fog" that existed between "them" and "I" highlights the gender disparity prevalent in Afghan society. The excitement, joy, and privilege that accompany gender change are transient, as signified by "colors reclaimed." In the novel, Rahima becomes Rahim to help the family navigate through the difficulty of not having sons, giving Rahima limited access to mobility, education, and visibility. The temporary transformation shows how social privilege is attached to representational positioning rather than biology alone (Hall, 1990, p. 226). Shekiba also embraces the life of a *bacha posh* as the guard of the king's harem. Moreover, the practice of *bacha posh* gives Rahima and Shekiba the freedom to experience certain privileges that are denied to women in the name of "honor".

Notions of *naseeb* (fate) and honor, like many other factors, are embedded in the cultural fabric of Afghanistan. *Pashtunwali*, the honor code, is the traditional rules and laws deeply rooted in the values of the Pashtun tribe that preserve the tribal nature of the community. It does not "exist in the form of commands, prohibitions, or recommendations, but (as) the categories of moral obligation" (Sierakowska-Dyndo, 2013, p. 7). Furthermore, Pashtunwali, rooted in the principles of freedom, equality, honor, dignity, generosity, hospitality, and competition, has been part of the oral tradition passed down from one generation to another.

As Barfield (2010) observes, Islamic faith has been fused into the cultural fabric of the country, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish indigenous cultural aspects from the religious aspects. One such aspect of faith that is constantly evoked by Afghan women is *naseeb*, or "destiny or fate." When things go beyond the control of human hands, they entrust the future to *naseeb*, the destiny God had in store for them. *Naseeb* can also be seen as a religious

way of keeping women submissive. When the men of the family arrange the marriages of Rahima and her sisters, they accept it as their *naseeb*. "Allah has chosen your *naseeb*… this is our *naseeb*" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 134). Women accept their life as "whatever in your *naseeb* will happen" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 137). Shaima believes that "*naseeb* is what people blame for everything they can't fix" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 139). Rahima, imbibing lessons from the life of Shekiba, wants to be the master of her *naseeb*, asserting that it is molded by one's choices. It neither comes from God nor from others surrounding you. Hashimi reclaims the cultural practice of *bacha posh* as a site of empowerment rather than subjugation. The character's faith in altering their *naseeb* and embracing *bacha posh* enables them to redefine their identity. Rahima's mastery over her *naseeb* and embrace of bacha posh repositions Afghan womanhood from fatalism to cultural agency.

V. Conclusion

Afghanistan, being a predominantly tribal nation, has preserved the rich indigenous knowledge that continues to shape Afghan identity in its literature. Native Afghan writers as well as expatriate Afghan writers incorporate these indigenous elements into their texts, opening a window into the cultural fabric of the country. The analysis of Nadia Hashimi's novels reveals how intricately the indigenous elements of magic and shamanic healing practices are integrated into the narratives along with oral traditions of storytelling, proverbs, and the use of poetry and songs. Storytelling creates intergenerational continuity by positioning women as producers of cultural knowledge, while proverbs, as repositories of collective wisdom, both reinforce and contest patriarchal norms. When poetry transforms personal suffering into an expression of resistance, spiritual practices and belief in magic reveal alternative epistemic systems that offer psychological empowerment. Hashimi's novels integrate, preserve, and disseminate indigenous oral traditions and knowledge systems of Afghanistan. A thorough analysis of the novels helps in understanding the intersection of Islamic practices with indigenous practices. The characters demonstrate cultural agency by transforming their lives using cultural practices to negotiate power and resist oppression. Agency is shaped by and shapes culture and is crucial for social transformation. The indigenous elements establish the cultural authenticity of the texts while offering women an alternate mode of resistance. Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation reveals these indigenous elements as signifying practices producing meaning, identity, and agency. Literature, thus, becomes a medium to preserve the indigenous knowledge as Afghanistan navigates through political instability. *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) and *A House Without Windows* (2016) demonstrate how the indigenous and oral knowledge systems become tools in the hands of Afghan women to preserve cultural identity as well as to empower themselves in the face of systemic constraints. The study is limited to two novels of Nadia Hashimi and does not encompass the full diversity of Afghanistan's multilingual literary traditions. Future research could focus on indigenous elements in Pashto and Dari literature or compare the works of Afghan writers to examine the role of indigenous knowledge systems in the formation of Afghan identity.

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