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"I Was Rahim": Postmemory, Gendered Hermaphroditism, and Embodied Precarity in Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*

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***Abstract*—This paper examines how ideas of vulnerability and post-traumatic memory are fixed within the everyday lives of Afghan women through Nadia Hashmi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014). Through the deeply entwined narratives of Shekiba and Rahima, who live parallel lives years apart, the study explores how gendered trauma is not only experienced but also transmitted across generations. Through an analysis of the Afghan custom of bacha posh, the paper suggests that the freedom associated with a male identity is often accompanied by uncertainty and conflict in constructing individual gender identity and selfhood. Rooted in vulnerability theory, gender performativity, and postmemory, the study introduces the concept of gendered hermaphroditism to describe this enforced oscillation between the two gender roles. The novel reveals inherited trauma as both a living condition and a site of narrative resistance.**

***Index Terms*—vulnerability, gender, memory, postmemory, trauma, gendered hermaphroditism**

I. Introduction

Afghanistan, situated as a landlocked nation in the heart of Asia, holds a significant place in world history and geopolitics. Marked by many years of prolonged conflict and complex cultural dynamics, the region reflects a complicated relationship through its tribal diversity, embedded historical trauma, and numerous geopolitical escalations. The land thus assumes a dynamic role in present-day international relations, making it pivotal for various political lineages. Its conservatism is often simplified in Western narratives, revealing a much more complex socio-political fabric. Ewans (2002) notes that nineteenth-century Afghanistan functioned as a "crucible of transformation" within its political imagination, while its modern history was shaped at the intersection of colonial borders and imperial interests (Rasanayagam, 2003). More than a peripheral space, Afghanistan emerges as a central site of geopolitical contestation. Afghan literature continues to bear the imprint of this history. Repeated invasions ranging from the early campaigns of Alexander the Great in 330 BC to the Persian invasions in the 18th century, to later devastations by the Mughals and the Taliban have left long-lasting marks on its cultural memory (Hiro, 1985; Simpson, 2012). Literary traditions in Pashto and Persian seek to capture this heritage through expressions of loss, resilience, resistance, and fragile identity formation. Contemporary Afghan writers have also developed new narrative forms through which they have explored questions of identity, vulnerability, and resistance while representing experiences of war, displacement, and gendered oppression (Crews, 2015; Abu-Lughod, 2013). As Afghan narratives entered global literary markets, they became entangled with other transnational discourses of representation, thereby creating new opportunities and constraints for articulating gendered experiences (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Bhabha, 1994). Contemporary studies on gender and power in Afghanistan suggest that practices such as bacha posh that became embedded in Afghan culture reveal the performative nature of gender roles by exposing how access to authority and recognition remain structured through patriarchal systems (Nordberg, 2014; Wimpelmann, 2017).

Themes of displacement, gendered oppression, and justice continue to shape the Afghan literary imagination, where writing functions as a form of witnessing (Ahmed, 1992; Butler, 1990). Memory, testimony, and cultural survival become important means through which these narratives reclaim agency in situations marked by prolonged violence and displacement, without reducing survival to a narrative of easy hope (Hirsch, 2008; Crownshaw et al., 2010). These narratives preserve diverse experiences of suffering, survival, and cultural endurance. Nadia Hashimi's fiction builds on this tradition while bringing particular attention to the gendered realities of Afghan women's lives. As an Afghan-American novelist, she constructs narratives that are both diasporic and deeply rooted in cultural memory. Her writing engages closely with questions of gender, identity, and survival, approaching Afghan womanhood not as an abstraction but as a lived experience. Across novels such as *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014), *When the Moon Is Low* (2015), and *A House Without Windows* (2016), Hashimi explores the effects of displacement, patriarchal control, and inherited trauma within Afghan women's lives (Hashimi, 2014; Abu-Lughod, 2013). Her fiction does not isolate personal experience from larger structures; instead, it reveals how individual lives are shaped by overlapping social and historical forces.

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell (2014) explores the tradition of *bacha posh*, in which a girl or a group of girls temporarily assumes masculine roles to navigate patriarchal restrictions (Hashimi, 2014). This practice operates not

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only as a cultural phenomenon but also as a socio-political metaphor, revealing how gender is shaped through social control. Set across rural villages in Afghanistan and in Kabul, the novel constructs a symbolic panorama of confinement and resistance, where the symbolic "pearl" evokes both fragility and endurance through which it is ultimately formed. Hashimi avoids portraying suffering as a noble or redemptive deed but links it to the social and political restrictions that govern women's lives. Her characters move through experiences of loss and negotiation, reframing Afghan womanhood not as passive victimhood but as a site of knowledge, resilience, and agency. Such experiences reflect vulnerability's dual character wherein it exposes the individuals to injury and dependency and can also become the centre for ethical responsiveness, relationality, and resistance (Gilson, 2014, pp. 1–8).

The current study argues that the narrative *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) portrays vulnerability and post-traumatic memory through gender hermaphroditism, where the practice of *bacha posh* produces a fractured self and a psychological impasse in the identity formation of the cross-dresser. The analysis adopts a qualitative literary approach foregrounded by gender performativity, trauma theory, and memory studies to analyse how identity, vulnerability, and resistance are shaped throughout the characters in the novel.

II. Literature Review

Modern Afghan feminist literature occupies a complex position within global literary discourse, engaging with themes of war, patriarchy, exile, and survival. These narratives do more than document violence; they preserve cultural memory while resisting erasure through storytelling. Within this body of work, the *bacha posh* tradition has emerged as a recurring motif, reflecting deeper anxieties about gender, identity, and social survival. The term, meaning "dressed as a boy," gained wider recognition through *The Underground Girls of Kabul* (2014), where the practice is situated within Afghanistan's gendered social structure. The narrative highlights the unequal value assigned to gender, showing how masculinity grants access to social freedom that gets frequently denied to women. *Bacha Posh* operates within the logic of a system that values male identity, allowing temporary access to mobility and recognition while leaving intact the underlying hierarchies in the society (Nordberg, 2014). Here, gender becomes less than a fixed identity and more of a role shaped by social necessity (Butler, 1990). Families use this practice to negotiate the limitations imposed on girls, relying on the social privileges attached to masculinity as a strategy for survival and participation in public life. Gender hierarchies in Afghan society are sustained through access to visible authority and subtle forms of regulation silently rooted within everyday life (Felitti et al., 1998). Social norms are fortified through routine practices, moral expectations, familial structures and ethical injustices that shape behaviour and limit sovereignty. These processes are often adopted not as a passive acceptance but as a form of adaptation within these constrained environments (Butler, 1990). The novel portrays a social order where masculinity is associated with honour, authority, and public recognition, whereas girls are subjected to expectations that limit their freedom and shape their life choices (Rashid, 2000; Abu-Lughod, 2013).

Research on trauma inflicted on an individual often expresses how certain conditions shape an individual's subjectivity over time. Experiences of denial, neglect, and isolation get rooted in the psychological and physiological responses, influencing identity formation and emotional regulation (Bremner, 2016; Evans & Kim, 2010). Thus, trauma is shaped by persistent social and interpersonal challenges, thereby influencing the character for a much longer period even after the whole events have culminated. Studies highlight how these experiences disrupt the usual stability and produce a lasting effect that extends beyond individual moments of violence (Felman & Laub, 1992; Rubin, 2002; van der Kolk & Fisler, 1995). Patriarchal trauma in Afghan society repeatedly intersects with class stratification, rural–urban divides, illiteracy, and geopolitical marginality, producing multiple forms of vulnerability which inhabit cultures shaped by silence and shame (Mahmood, 2005). Through her experiences, Hashimi demonstrates how economic, political, and spatial inequalities shape these gendered lives and reveal the interconnected nature of these forms of domination (Spivak, 1988). Vulnerability appears as an individual psychological state and as a structurally produced condition. Gilson (2014, pp. 12–18) argues that vulnerability should be understood as a relational condition produced through social, political, and embodied interactions. This perspective is useful for understanding the experiences of Afghan women in Hashimi's novel, where vulnerability gets imposed by patriarchal structures and gets negotiated through everyday acts of survival. The rise of the Taliban and the rising influence of conservative religious interpretations identified additional constraints on women's lives, with religion being used to justify and enforce existing gender norms (Mahmood, 2005; Enloe, 2000). Through their focus on women's lives, these Afghan feminist narratives question social and cultural structures that restrict female agency. They record experiences that are often absent from dominant historical accounts and highlight the role of postmemory in sustaining this identity and continuity. In preserving silenced experiences, they align with the witnessing of trauma that understands testimony as an ethical act capable of restoring subjectivity (Felman & Laub, 1992; van der Kolk & Fisler, 1995).

Trauma and vulnerability occur as the result of ongoing experiences whose impact builds gradually across different stages of life (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Recent scholarship has expanded postmemory studies beyond Holocaust contexts to encompass transnational, postcolonial, and conflict-based forms of memory transmission.

Researchers argue that inherited memory transmits through emotional and affective methods, inter-generational family narratives, and embodied practices, thereby shaping identity formation across generations living within the structures of violence and displacement (Reading, 2022; Bond et al., 2017; Craps, 2013). Such advances are useful for understanding how Shekiba's life is mediated through Rahima's experiences. Trauma deepens vulnerability, particularly

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in situations already shaped by marginalisation (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003; Brewin, 2007). Thus, vulnerability is both inherent to human experience and gets amplified through social and political conditions (Ahmed, 2004). Under militarised patriarchal circumstances like those in Afghanistan, femininity becomes associated with expendability, while male dominance is reinforced through cultural and ideological systems (Mahmood, 2005; Enloe, 2000). Afghan feminist literature responds to this ideology by reconstructing female subjectivity not as a passive victimhood but as a form of endurance and narrative control. Resistance in this literature often takes the form of memory, storytelling, and everyday acts of survival, through which women assert their presence and recover their histories that have been constantly overlooked or silenced (Herman, 1992; Hashimi, 2014). Modern vulnerability studies increasingly understand precarity as structurally produced through intersecting systems of gender, class, migration or displacement, and geopolitical instability. Vulnerability is thus shaped not only by personal circumstances but also by unequal social and political structures that determine access to protection and recognition. Studies on Afghanistan after the Taliban regime highlight how stories about Afghan women serve as archives of resistance by documenting their everyday forms of oppression by preserving memory amid political uncertainty and intensified gender restrictions (UN Women, 2024; Wimpelmann, 2017).

III. Analysis

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell (2014) offers a continuous exploration of Afghan womanhood through the frames of gender vulnerability that is lived, inherited, and negotiated throughout the novel (Hashimi, 2014). Rahima's experience as a *bacha posh* provides temporary access to her mobility, education, and social visibility, only to be withdrawn afterwards through her forced return to domestic confinement. This switch of gender from female to male and back to female reflects a system in which masculinity functions as a conditional privilege, accessible only within certain specific limits (Nordberg, 2014). Her cross-dressing transformation into the male Rahim earns her father's recognition, while her return to femininity results in the loss of his validation, marking a symbolic rupture in identity and social belonging. The narrative reveals that the independence gained through this swing is fragile and temporary, exposing the instability of the gender roles on which it depends. The novel therefore highlights how identity is influenced more by external expectations than by personal continuity (Butler, 1990).

From Arif and Abdul Khaliq to Abdul Sharif, the male figures in the novel function as personifications of a broader socio-cultural order in which violence is normalised, marital rape justified, and women are reduced to apparatuses of reproduction and social reputation (Mahmood, 2005; Enloe, 2000). Rahima's experience of physical abuse is not framed as an individual's cruelty but as a manifestation of the systemic patriarchal violence perpetuated across generations (Mahmood, 2005). Instead of presenting her as a passive victim, the narrative proposes how fear, shame, and silence together shape the everyday relationships and social behaviour across bodies and social spaces to sustain compliance. (Ahmed, 2004). Parwin's story introduces an additional layer of vulnerability shaped by intersecting forms of marginalisation recurring in her everyday life. Her disability, when combined with an abusive marriage, explains how gender, bodily difference, and social dependency deepen the precarity of her existence (Evans & Kim, 2010; Crenshaw, 1989). Her suicide underscores the limits of resilience within her historical setting. Alongside characters such as Shekiba, Khala Shaima, and Kamala, she reflects what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) describes as the condition of the subaltern, whose suffering remains structurally inaudible and unexpressed. These multiple experiences are not only suppressed but rendered ineffective outside the dominant outlines of recognition by the male-dominated society.

Hashimi reveals this patriarchal continuity by exposing how the institutional structures mould the women's bodies (Hashimi, 2014). Badriya's placement into a reserved parliamentary seat becomes a symbolic gesture of inclusion that conceals deeper exclusions, where visibility does not translate into voice but more into silence (Mahmood, 2005). The novel's movement between Shekiba's past and Rahima's present creates a layered temporal structure in which historical patterns continue to repeat within these lived experiences (Hirsch, 2008). This narrative strategy makes use of postmemory, which Hirsch (2008, pp. 106–111) defines as the relationship that successive generations establish with traumatic experiences transmitted to them through stories, images, and cultural memory (Hirsch, 2008; Felman & Laub, 1992). Rahima does not simply inherit Shekiba's experiences but reworks them to understand her own condition. (Hashimi, 2014). Through this to-and-fro interaction of past and present, it becomes more of a memory trail, with aporias getting filled through memories and experiences gained through generations. The novel exposes both the intimate violence of domestic spaces and the broader failures of patriarchal systems (Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2013), while opening fragile spaces for resistance through storytelling and remembrance. Within Afghan gender politics, practices such as *bacha posh* and *bacha bazi* reveal how gender roles get manipulated within patriarchal contexts (Nordberg, 2014; Mahmood, 2005). These practices do not disrupt the hierarchy but instead reinforce its dominance by regulating normal access to power and visibility. In the case of *bacha posh*, girls temporarily adopt masculine identities thrust upon them by society to gain mobility and recognition, yet this access remains conditional and reversible (Nordberg, 2014). The return to femininity forces Rahima back into systems of control, leaving her with a fractured sense of identity that cannot fully return to its former state. This negative transition often results in long-term psychological effects, where experiences of dislocation manifest themselves as lifelong trauma (Felman & Laub, 1992; Rubin, 2002; van der Kolk & Fisler, 1995). Both Rahima and Sheikiba feel distressed by the questioning of their gender and find it hard to be involved in this fragile gender switching of roles.

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The practice of *bacha bazi* exposes another dimension of gendered violence, where young boys get feminised and exploited within these same systems of power (Mahmood, 2005). Positioned within the intersecting hierarchies of age, class, and gender, they exist in conditions of extreme vulnerability where bodies become sites of consumption, and once they develop autonomy, they are discarded. Across both practices, gender is not an expression of identity but a mechanism of control. This imposed instability blurs the boundary between identity and performance, resulting in psychological fragmentation, dissociation, and enduring trauma (Ozer et al., 2003; van der Kolk & Fisler, 1995). Gender is shown not as an explicit personal identity but as a social arrangement that shapes access to authority, mobility, and recognition by reinforcing existing inequalities. The state, the family, and cultural traditions function together to maintain these practices as purely religious mandates and socio-economic systems of control (Mahmood, 2005; Masten, 2014). Conditions such as poverty, illiteracy, and the pursuit of social mobility therefore compel families to adopt these roles for their children as survival strategies in a society structured around the exploitation of women (Evans & Kim, 2010; Herman, 1992).

Rahima's narrative illustrates the difficult choices many families make within their restrictive social conditions. Her mother's decision is not rooted in ideology but in the desire to provide her child with greater freedom and recognition in a society that privileges sons over daughters (Felitti et al., 1998; Nordberg, 2014). The preference for male children thus reflects a broader socio-political logic, where a woman's worth is tied to her reproductive capacity alone (Mahmood, 2005). Shekiba's parallel story extends this outline, revealing how such conditions persist even across generations. While both women endure many forms of gendered constraint, their experiences open rooms for resistance, where the body becomes a site of memory, identity and reinterpretation (Hashimi, 2014; Hirsch, 2008). The forced oscillation between their masculine and feminine identity and roles produces a condition that may be understood as a socially imposed gender hermaphroditism. Here, the identity of the cross-dresser remains unstable, as individuals are required to move between gender and familial roles without fully belonging to either. Masculinity for them functions as a temporary social position that provides an outlet for their desire for independence when necessary but gets withdrawn once its purpose has been fulfilled.

IV. Discussion

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell (2014) weaves together the lives of Rahima and her great-great-grandmother, Shekiba, through a polyphonic narrative that connects their past and present. Across both these timelines, vulnerability is not depicted as an inherent trait but as a condition shaped by social circumstances. The *bacha posh* practice initially appears as a form of power cross-dressing, gradually reveals itself as a conditional arrangement that gets withdrawn once its purpose is fulfilled. Shekiba's reflection captures this tension: "It seemed like a hundred years ago that she'd walked about the palace grounds with cropped hair and men's slacks… only a daughter could know what it is to cross the line, to feel the freedom of living as the opposite sex" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 431). This moment does not signal liberation but highlights the temporary nature of such access. The experience becomes less a transformation than a rehearsal of freedom that cannot be sustained. The withdrawal from this role constitutes a central rupture in the narrative. Traumatic memory, as theorised in stress and coping frameworks, often resists linear narration and re-emerges through fragmented recollection (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Rahima's response to her forced return to femininity reflects this disruption: "I was no longer who I had been. The boy in me was fading, and I didn't know how to be the girl they wanted" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 339). This moment marks a dislocation of identity, in which the imposed transition creates a sense of estrangement from both past and present selves. According to Butler's (1990, pp. 179–190) theory of performativity, gender is not an inherent trait but results from repeated social actions that become naturalised through cultural repetition. The "boy" she refers to is no longer merely a social role but a psychologically meaningful aspect of selfhood. Hashimi therefore demonstrates that performative identities may become affectively internalised. The trauma experienced by Rahima arises not from performing masculinity but from being compelled to relinquish an identity that has become emotionally real. The novel thus extends Butler's theory by revealing the psychological consequences of enforced gender transitions.

From this standpoint, the characters' trauma is influenced by their social roles within Afghan society (Masten, 2014). Gilson (2014, pp. 55–61) which suggests that vulnerability is not merely a deficit to be overcome but a relational condition through which subjects encounter structures of dependence and power. Rahima and Shekiba's experiences illustrate this dynamic, revealing how vulnerability is produced through patriarchal institutions by generating forms of ethical awareness and resistance. Both Shekiba and Rahima attempt to narrate their experiences through storytelling as a way of negotiating fractured identities, aligning with the emphasis on recovery as a process for trauma linked to the restoration of voice and agency (Herman, 1992, p. 133). Trauma remains unresolved forever but also creates opportunities for resistance. This space of traumatic injury is not static but evolves through intergenerational acts of recollection and reinterpretation. Storytelling here emerges as a feminist practice of achieving independence and resistance over blind subjection. Through Shekiba's story, which gets passed down to Rahima, Hashimi constructs an intergenerational archive of resistance that is "so powerful, so monumental, as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch, 2008, p. 106). While Hirsch (2008) theorizes postmemory as the transmission of inherited trauma, Hashimi presents memory as an active process of reinterpretation. Rahima does not simply inherit Shekiba's experiences but reworks them to understand her own condition. The novel as a narrative transforms postmemory from a

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model of transmission into a form of feminist self-recognition. Rahima's awakening is shaped less by external intervention than by the revival of this inherited voice. Within this structure, *bacha posh* becomes more than cultural practice. Rather, it marks a condition of gendered liminality, where identity is repeatedly crossed and re-imposed, leaving lasting psychic effects. Hashimi reframes this wound as something to be resolved and reworked. Memory helps the characters to make sense of generational and gendered suffering and sustain a sense of self, enabling characters to reassemble fractured identities.

Afghan society, as represented in the novel, is equipped with rigid gender binaries that assign authority to men and obedience to women. These expectations are adopted early in a woman's life, shaping her inability to access power, mobility, and self-determination. Rahima's father, her absent brothers, and the family's fixation on producing a son collectively sustained this order by embedding patriarchy within everyday life. The narrative shows how social traditions make this gendered suffering appear normal and inevitable. Here, *bacha posh* as a tradition is repositioned as a metaphor for fractured girlhood and enforced conformity. Practices such as marital coercion, the liberty of male violence, and the public punishment of women reveal the depth of existing misogyny. At the same time, these conditions become moments of reflection and understanding, allowing the characters to recognise and question the forces that restrict them. Through shared memory and gradual acts of self-recognition, Rahima and Shekiba assert forms of presence within an arrangement that seeks to erase them. Through her portrayal of women's experiences, Hashimi invites readers to reflect on the social and historical forces that structure vulnerability, exclusion, and resistance. Vulnerability is shown as a lived reality shaped by unequal social relationships, where violence and exclusion become part of the ordinary frame of daily life. It becomes a condition shaped by both lived experience and imposed roles, particularly for girls like Rahima. Her father's lament- "If I had a son this would not be happening! Goddamn it! Why do we have a house full of girls! Not one, not two—but five of them!" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 5) reveals a world in which daughters are devalued while sons embody honour and continuity of lineage. This domestic sphere emerges as a space marked by unequal power relations, where family and care are frequently intertwined with surveillance, obligation, and control. The *bacha posh* practice reflects this contradiction. The novel simultaneously reveals the unequal distribution of gendered possibilities. Rahima gains mobility, education, and public visibility only when she is recognised as male after being a *bacha posh*. The narrative depicts that performativity does not occur within a neutral social field, but certain performances are rewarded while others are restricted. Hashimi consequently shifts the discussion in the narrative from gender construction to gender power, showing how patriarchal systems regulate identities and how they may be successfully performed. While the cultural tradition offers temporary access to mobility and recognition, this access remains conditional and is withdrawn when it no longer serves its purpose after the female puberty. Rahima's experience as a *bacha posh* expands her sense of possibility of freedom, but the expectation blanks out the moment she resumes a conventional female role, creating a profound disruption in her understanding of herself. Her declaration- "I was more than just a girl; I was a *bacha posh*!" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 151) captures the loss of a self that cannot be sustained forever. This imposed movement between identities produces lasting psychological effects. Rahima's mother, though caring, becomes complicit in this system, which Hashimi describes as a "co-conspirator" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 238), navigating survival through silence.

The novel brings about a parallel contradiction between domestic authority and state power, most importantly in restrictions on female education. Characters like Abdul Khaliq embody the form of a militarised masculinity where marriage becomes a transaction, and women are absorbed into systems of power as symbolic femme fatales. The psychological aftereffects of being a *bacha posh* extend beyond individual experience. Memory here functions as a site of cultural signature, where trauma is carried through mutually personal and collective histories. This enforced shift from masculinity to femininity drastically fractures the individual identity by producing forms of dislocation that affect both self-perception and social belonging. These incidents are connected to wider social conditions that shape and maintain unequal forms of power. The narrative also exposes how mainstream religious discourse gets manipulated to legitimise gender hierarchy. Resistance to power or hierarchy is vigorously met with punishment, hence revealing how authority is maintained through ideology and force. Under the conditions prevalent in Afghanistan, this religious authority becomes closely linked to the regulation of everyday life. The narrative gradually broadens its scope, connecting individual experiences of suffering to the larger patterns of societal inequality. It questions how control over women's bodies is ultimately institutionalised through emotional conditioning and physical coercion. Through its interwoven narratives presented in the novel, Hashimi creates a space where trauma, memory, and resistance coexist. The text leaves many conflicts unresolved and focuses on the continuing processes of witnessing, remembering, and reinterpreting experience. As both a narrative device and a cultural metaphor, the *bacha posh* practice here embodies these unresolved contradictions. While it appears to grant access to male privilege, it remains fragile and reversible on a greater scale. The temporary crossing of gender boundaries does not dismantle the hierarchy completely but reinforces its limits, turning moments of empowerment into a deeper experience of loss. In a way, the narrative shows that systems of power function not just by imposing restrictions but also by conditionally granting and withdrawing the power exertion in the society.

The study examines how vulnerability is structurally produced through the absence of institutional support, systemic misogyny, and the cultural valorisation of silence and endurance projected by women. Within this power frame, resistance does not appear as spectacle but as a persistence and quiet acts of remembering or reclaiming space. In

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Hashimi's novel, this resistance unwraps through intergenerational memory, introspection, and moments of limited power. Violence is not sensationalised, but it emerges through the loss of assertion of voice, enforced silence, and the denial of subjecthood. Everyday practices such as the imbibing of *bacha posh* identity into the fragment of society or the normalisation of child marriage demonstrate how trauma becomes embedded within the routine social practices, transforming exceptional violence into an ordinary feature of everyday life (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014). The dual-timeline structure in the novel reinforces this condition by revealing how gendered suffering persists across generations. The parallel narratives of Shekiba and Rahima do not simply repeat history but reinterpret it, positioning memory as both inheritance and critique. Intergenerational memory reinforces identity through the same silence across many decades. Rahima's understanding of herself develops through her engagement with Shekiba's story, which helps her recognise the connections between her own struggles and those experienced by earlier generations of women. The narrative portrays gender as something negotiated through everyday life by changing responses to social demands and personal circumstances (Butler, 1990). The enforced transitions between masculine and feminine roles produce instability, where the identity is continually reconfigured daily. Hashimi resists framing her characters as heroic figures, but her characters reveal their strength lies in a refusal to disappear within systems that seek to silence them. Trauma, thereby, is not presented as an individual wound but as a condition sustained by broader social and political conflicts. Vulnerability therefore functions here as a collective historical condition whose effects continue to be portrayed across generations.

The narrative of the novel brings forth this tautness through its portrayal of the many lives shaped by patriarchy, historical conflict, and psychological rupture. The knotted stories of Shekiba and Rahima accentuate the continuity of gendered violence across many generations, while also highlighting the continuation of resistance through memory. The memory that is mentioned here is the gendered memory of a fractured self, which is accentuated by the female hermaphrodite who is, in effect, a cross-dresser concerned with the after-effects of this cultural shock inflicted upon them. The *bacha posh* practice summarises this contradiction of gender-role disruption, and it appears to offer access to freedom which reinforces the very system that necessitates it. As Rahima reflects, "But they had raised me as a boy, only to cast me back into the world of girls. What kind of world expects a child to change her gender like changing clothes?" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 215). Living as both a girl and a boy allows Rahima to see how gender roles get created and maintained through everyday social expectations, a point that resonates with Butler's (1990, p. 191) understanding of gender as a socially constructed phenomenon. For Rahima, masculinity functions as a temporary role shaped by necessity, and its withdrawal produces a psychic rupture that destabilises her sense of self. Her forced marriage marks a further extension of this condition where she speaks: "Everything was decided for me; from the time I was to leave to whom I would belong. I was being handed over, like a parcel, like something bought and sold" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 237). Here, the body of the victim is reduced to an object within systems of exchange, reflecting broader structures of control.

In the novel, trauma extends beyond isolated incidents, shaping relationships, memories, and everyday life over time, but hinges on Rahima's recollection-"I tried to remember the days when I was still a boy, but they had become dreamlike, misty... I wasn't sure who I was anymore" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 281)- which captures this fragmentation. Memory does not fade but becomes unstable, reflecting a dissociation that complicates self-recognition (van der Kolk & Fisler, 1995). Shekiba's experience offers a parallel form of embodied trauma here. Her disfigurement marks her as socially abject, thereby stating: "They said I would curse the water I carried, that my face could spoil the milk... I became a creature of ill omen" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 96). Her body becomes a site onto which cultural anxieties are projected, reinforcing her exclusion. This same condition allows for an unintended rupture in normative gender expectations, positioning her outside conventional roles. Even within these restrictive circumstances, Rahima and Shekiba strive to retain a sense of resistance by telling their own stories. Storytelling becomes a way of reflecting on the past by giving meaning to difficult experiences without neatly resolving them. Hashimi's treatment of recovery is more ambivalent than Herman's (1992) therapeutic model might suggest. While storytelling allows women to articulate previously silenced experiences, the structural conditions that produce this trauma remain largely intact. The novel henceforth questions whether complete recovery from the trauma is possible within the ongoing systems of patriarchal domination. Narration of inflicted trauma becomes a pathway to closure rather than a strategy for survival. The transmission of Shekiba's story enables Rahima to situate her suffering within a larger history of inflicted trauma that has been going on for generations. She recollects: "The more I learned of Shekiba, the more I saw her in myself. Her strength, her fire, it was in me too. I was not alone" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 311). Through this process, the memory becomes a means of connecting individual experiences to a larger history of suffering and survival. Moments of gender inversion explicitly expose the instability of these structures. When Shekiba assumes the role of a guard, she experiences a temporary shift in power where she could exercise her inner masculinity. She is seen to justify this by saying: "For once, I was not the cursed girl. I was the guard, respected, watched. They feared me" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 177). This episode underlines how access to a dominant authority is shaped by social perceptions of gender, not by any inherent difference in physical ability.

Silence here operates as a central mechanism of control within the novel, where the voices of the women are constrained only through prohibition and systematic invalidation of their speech. When Rahima protests against her forced marriage, she is told, "You are a girl, and your fate is not in your hands. It never has been" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 249). Her voice is unacknowledged and rendered ineffective, illustrating how power structures determine the limits of

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expression. Similarly, Shekiba's attempts to speak are pathologised: "They looked at me like I was a rabid dog… Speaking up was a disease" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 203). Here, dissent is reframed as disorder, reinforcing compliance. The female body, throughout the narrative, remains a contested space—regulated, disciplined, and redefined. Shekiba's reflection — "My face, my ruined face, saved me from the fate of other girls" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 122) reveals how deviation from normative femininity can disrupt expectations, allowing for limited forms of autonomy. In this sense, the body becomes both a site of inscription and a point of resistance.

Biological hermaphroditism in this context refers to a physiological condition of gender liminality in which an individual possesses both male and female sexual characteristics. In Hashimi's narrative, this notion is reworked as a socially constructed condition more than a biological reality. It emerges from the cultural structures that determine gender roles in Afghan society, where masculinity is associated with mobility, authority, and legitimacy. The characters' experiences suggest that gender is defined more by innate qualities than by the social expectations attached to certain roles (Butler, 1990). The transformation of the adolescent girls into *bacha posh* reflects this dynamic process. It serves as a pragmatic response to patriarchal constraints, granting temporary access to education, mobility, and economic participation. This shift does not disrupt the existing hierarchies, but it reinforces the primacy of masculinity by demonstrating that authority remains tied to male identity. Masculinity can be assumed as revealing the asymmetry embedded in gender relations. Rahima's marriage to a warlord exposes the continuity of this system. Her experience of marital rape, reproductive control, and surveillance is not episodic or individual but sustained throughout many households. She reminisces: "He took what he wanted when he wanted it. I learned to leave my body behind during those times" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 273). The statement presents dissociation as a response to trauma, where the body is experienced less as a source of security than as a reminder of pain and vulnerability. As Judith Herman (1992) observes, such disembodiment often accompanies prolonged trauma upon the bearer.

The metaphor of the pearl maintained in the title condenses this condition. Formed through irritation and pressure, it signifies a resilience that got shaped by multiple elements of constraint. Its emergence in its true form requires a rupture from the pod in which it is held. Rahima's reflection on her emergence reflects this when she says: "I wasn't the girl they had raised… I was something else. Something they could not name" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 371)—signals a movement beyond fixed categories. Similarly, Shekiba's assertion, voiced many generations ago, where she tells: "I have lived both their lives and mine" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 389), suggests a refusal to remain confined within the prescribed identities. The narrative therefore resists the need for legibility within patriarchal structures, presenting subjectivity as an entity that exceeds binary classification. Hashimi situates these joined intergenerational experiences within a broader pattern of inherited trauma and gendered constraint. The interwoven narratives of Rahima and Shekiba reveal how violence persisted and still lingers across generations, shaping identity through repetition and adaptation. The *bacha posh* situation, instead of providing consistent empowerment, therefore creates a state of embodied discontinuity where individuals shift between roles without a continuous connection. Here, gender becomes a site of negotiation that is shaped more by necessity than choice (Butler, 1990). Rahima's engagement of her own experiences with Shekiba's story illustrates this transmission. Gender-role reversal offers a momentary excuse, where its withdrawal reinforces the instability of identity. As Shekiba recalls, "It seemed like a hundred years ago…" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 431), this memory is etched into the cultural schema, functioning not as nostalgia but as a recognition of loss. Rahima's own response to enforced femininity reflects a similar rupture, aligning with trauma theory's description of psychic withdrawal under sustained pressure (Herman, 1992, p. 52). Rahima's fragmented self-perception- "The boy in me was fading…" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 339)—captures this instability. Her experience reflects not a singular event but an ongoing negotiation between imposed roles and personal identity by a series of events. These episodes indicate that recognition and denial shape subjectivity, that validation offers dignity, and that erasure deepens dislocation.

The aftermath of this enforced gendered transition underscores the cost of conditional autonomy. Once returned to femininity, Shekiba experiences not only the loss of her role but also a deeper sense of incompleteness shaped by social expectations. Across the novel, women's bodies become sites where power gets inscribed through regulation, objectification, and public scrutiny. Physical appearance itself becomes a mechanism of control, reinforcing that hierarchies are tied to gender and respectability. Despite these constraints, moments of solidarity and recognition emerge through shared experience and narrative exchange where women create limited spaces of agency. These acts, though fragile experiences, enable a reworking of identity and memory. The *bacha posh* condition, while not directly analogous to exploitative practices such as *bacha bazi*, produces comparable psychological effects through the sudden withdrawal of male privilege. This enforced oscillation between the roles results in a drastic identity fragmentation and internalised shame. This condition does not dissolve the immediate hierarchy but exposes its underlying logic, where identity is shaped, regulated, and finally withdrawn according to patriarchal need.

Recent trauma and memory studies have increasingly emphasised that embodiment is a crucial site through which historical violence gets transmitted and negotiated across generations (Craps, 2013; Bond et al., 2017; Gilson, 2024). Hashimi's representation of *bacha posh* here aligns with these developments by demonstrating how gendered identities are embodied, performed, disrupted, resisted and remembered within structures of patriarchal control. The novel therefore contributes to emerging discussions concerning the relationship between vulnerability, embodiment, and intergenerational memory in contemporary war and conflict literature.

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V. Conclusion

Hashimi's work contributes to broader thoughts on gender justice, agency, and the enduring effects of cultural violence. The experiences of both Rahima and Shekiba, though marked by incompleteness, function as forms of narrative resistance through which they reclaim presence within histories that marginalise them. Through the voices that thrive despite the characters' psychic fracture, the novel presents trauma as a static memory with a lived experience held within the physical body. Instead of treating trauma as an individual event, the story circles around it as cumulative and ingrained in daily routines that get frequently normalised under the pretence of tradition. Here, vulnerability is depicted as a state influenced by marginalisation and a lack of structural safeguards. Hashimi's portrayal invites a feminist rethinking of trauma in a society where women are denied autonomy across economic, political, psychic and bodily domains. Through storytelling and memory, Hashimi creates characters who negotiate these constraints by transforming vulnerability into a space from which resistance and voice can emerge. The novel's engagement with socially imposed gender hermaphroditism further deepens this critique. This enforced switch between gender roles exposes the mechanisms through which patriarchy regulates the identity of a female. Such transitions produce individual instability, affecting belonging, self-perception, and continuity of a confident self. In this sense, the narrative shifts attention away from binary classifications of gender and toward the conditions that compel individuals to inhabit multiple roles without recognition. *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) moves beyond the usual individual stories to offer a collective account of endurance shaped by societal inequality. While the narrative does not resolve the tensions it presents, it tries hard to foreground visibility as a necessary step in confronting gendered injustice. Hashimi suggests that this kind of storytelling enables women to challenge silence and preserve experiences in the future that patriarchal systems attempt to erase. The study concludes that the gendered experiences in the novel cannot be contained within fixed categories of assertion. They reveal a condition of enforced instability where identity is forcefully fluctuated by the shifting roles imposed by accepted normative arrangements. This duality aligned here syncs with the idea of gender hermaphroditism that does not offer temporary liberation of gender roles but exposes how resistance can only play a key role in liberating these norms.

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