

October 2022

Women in Afghanistan: The Ambivalence of the Prison in Nadia Hashimi's *A House without Windows*

Tooba Rasheed
Government Degree College, Ganderbal, Jammu and Kashmir

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rasheed, Tooba (2022) "Women in Afghanistan: The Ambivalence of the Prison in Nadia Hashimi's *A House without Windows*," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 24: Iss. 6, Article 17.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss6/17>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

Women in Afghanistan: The Ambivalence of the Prison in Nadia Hashimi's *A House without Windows*

By Tooba Rasheed¹

Abstract

“A house without windows” literally translates to a prison. Nadia Hashimi’s novel *A House without Windows* (2016) personifies Afghan women’s lives as prisoners in their own bodies while also dialogically situating their stories inside a prison—Chil Mahtab. This article focuses on the semiotic relationship between the spatial prison of Chil Mahtab and the temporal prison that women live in under the hegemony of men. The violated bodies of characters like “the little girl” carry the burden of patriarchal injustices in Afghanistan. And the horrifying stories of being rejected by male institutions, particularly the law, paint a picture of Afghan society and gender-based violence for the readers. This article studies the personified liberation of women in Chil Mahtab. When confined within an actual prison due to the hegemonic dictates of societal law, women, as victims of injustice, seek liberation within the prison alongside other women. The prison gains more significance in the text when it offers the space for women to create symbiotic bonds. The prisoners of Chil Mahtab feel belonging to a safe haven called home, repudiating their patriarchal house-of-a-man who owns them as a master. All these women, when sharing their tales, do not merely coexist but grow together. In this article, I argue that the prison is a vibrant space of both resistance and liberation at once. I also examine the silence maintained by Afghan women outside of the prison as a means of control over their voices. Silence thus becomes an active resistance rather than a passive resignation in the novel. In this article, I study the exigencies of a female writer fighting against patriarchal discourses and phallogocentricity through gynocriticism.

Keywords: Afghan fiction, Afghan women, Prison, Violence

Introduction

In her novel *A House without Windows* (2016), Nadia Hashimi weaves the stories of Afghan women, Afghan land, and Afghan prisoners into a narrative that voices female subjectivity in Afghanistan. The title of the novel can be read as a metaphoric eponym for Zeba, the protagonist of the novel, as well as for the land of Afghanistan. After the 9/11 twin-tower attack in the United States in 2001, Afghanistan has seen a vicious cycle of violence between the Taliban and the international coalition military serving in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and also between Russia and the United States of America (USA) on Afghan grounds (Bellal et al., 2011, p. 47). Afghanistan has become an open prison for its citizens since 2001, following the twin tower attacks in the United States. Gender-based violence in Afghanistan has especially been studied from varied perspectives in academia.

Huma Ahmed-Ghosh (2003), while studying the history of Afghan women, proposes a dialectical model of gender relations that chooses both secular and Islamic ideals for the development and modernization of Afghan women and their status. Brodsky et al (2011) study the resilience of the women’s activist group called Revolutionary Association of the Women

¹Tooba Rasheed is an Assistant Professor of English at Government Degree College, Ganderbal, Jammu and Kashmir. She has been teaching English Literature for the last four years. Her fields of research are Kashmir conflict, space narratives and memory studies. She has previously worked on child psychology in her fictional work, *Zerafa*. She can be reached at rasheed.tooba@gmail.com.

of Afghanistan (RAWA)² which advocates for peace and human rights. C.S. Reddy (2014) has worked on the perspectives of women in Afghanistan with regard to their health and education and their contribution towards a better economic future. Julie Billaud, in her work *Kabul Carnival* (2015), examines the role of women in state building, sovereignty, and democratization of Afghanistan. Ritu Mahendru (2020) has done a commendable study of Afghan women prisoners in her paper. She studies the gender-based violence of Afghan women who attempt to rebel against fundamentalism and extremism or try to escape forced marriages and virginity tests. Fiction writers can offer a model of the “fictional liberation” of victimized women who reject established masculine structures that are inherently misogynistic. By fictional liberation, I mean the freedom Nadia Hashimi succeeds in providing her female characters as a respite, one that others are unable to achieve on the ground in the real world. In *A House without Windows*, the character of the protagonist, Zeba, has been created as a personified prison—or a house with many secrets and stories but no windows to let them out. The prison of Chil Mahtab functions as an ambivalent space of suppression and discipline in the novel. The prison, ironically, provides a site for many smaller prisons of patriarchy—the prison of a woman’s body, unable to free herself of the burden of guilt. The prison allows victims of patriarchy a freer space for the exchange of stories, experiences, victimhood, desire, charges, and judgements in the novel. In its metaphoric significance, Chil Mahtab figures as a site of repression and resistance at once. As a repressive agent, it works as an embodiment of patriarchy that oppresses women by holding them captive. As a site of resistance, it offers a space where victims form a collective force with a common background of victimhood. The victims thus derive a sense of safety from it, thereby replacing the safe haven of the house with the safe haven of the house-without-windows.

The Prison of the Body

A prisoner in her own body, Zeba rejects her victimhood by exercising power over her body and choosing to be silent when the male inquirers demand that she speak. The subaltern figure of an Afghan woman succeeds in rejecting the suppression of patriarchal supremacy by choosing to be silent. The silence gains women the freer space of a political prison, thereby giving up their natural prison of the gendered body. While Zeba and other women make decisions that allow them to survive in the more liberated environment of the prison, Nadia Hashimi chooses fiction as a free space in which she can exercise her freedom through poetic license. She breathes into the body of her narrative with unusual poetic references and comparisons to reproduce her own *écriture féminine*³ that disregards the rules of order laid down by male writers, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article. In her novel, Hashimi tries to counter the societal idea that “girls without honour were better off dead” by reinstating their honour with their strong resistance (2016, p. 359).

All the female prisoners in the novel constitute a harmonious whole by establishing their own house without windows, where their co-existence helps them not just to survive but to grow. Hashimi locates the strength of each in their union. The congregation of female prisoners also appears to be a close representation of RAWA. They achieve liberation by refusing to be victimized by the men in their respective households and accepting the state’s punishment for a criminal. They choose a condition better than that of a victim of patriarchy and gender-based violence who finds no solace anywhere in Afghanistan. The only spaces left empty are the segregated spaces of discipline – the prisons. Residing inside this space of solidarity makes

² RAWA is the oldest political or social organization of Afghan women struggling for peace, freedom, and women’s rights in fundamentalism-blighted Afghanistan since 1977.

³ The term means “women’s writing,” a term coined by French feminist and literary theorist Hélène Cixous in her 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa.”

female prisoners wish to have found it much earlier, had they known this was an option for those who sought freedom (2016, p. 45). The significance of Chil Mahtab resonates in its name as well, which literally means Forty Moons (2016, p. 81) and metaphorically refers to the strength to be found in unity. In Middle Eastern tradition, “forty” represents a large proportion, whereas the moon has been used as a signifier for something that doesn’t own its light, or in this context, women who are powerless and build a powerful force when they come together in union.⁴

Women in Afghanistan suffer the subordination of their sex in the context of the family and society. The societal diktats, family responsibilities, and economic dependence result in an exponential increase in violence against women. These women live their lives in societal prisons that expect them to play their gendered roles, and any deviation leads to resentment within the family and punishment by the law. Similar cases have been studied by Ahmed-Ghosh (2014), and she remarks, “Any threat to polygamy, removal of bride price, raising of marriage age, or divorce laws was seen as loosening control over women who would then challenge men’s authority. Yet, this means that women’s dependence on men [...] ties them to the family [...]” (p. 10). Circumstances like these land women in a situation where they have to choose between a rock and a hard place. In Hashimi’s novel, Gulnaz jests and plays on the word “prison” by saying, “That is what marriage is, isn’t it?” (2016, p. 189). From an Afghan woman’s perspective, a marriage contract is no less than a punishment, or a prison where a woman plays her roles as per the dictates and expectations of a patriarchal setup. Such roles of subordination make her believe she has no autonomy and can never escape the authority of the men in her family.

Apart from the oppression due to the social system, the burden of female honour adds to the suppression of Afghan women. Nadia Hashimi’s female characters are positioned between a social player and a carnal object of desire. In both situations, a woman’s sense of subordination and inferiority is where Hashimi places the axis of her plot. She writes:

It was all about honour. Honour was a boulder that men placed on the shoulders of their daughters, their sisters, and their wives [...]. This girl had lost her father’s honour in Zeba’s courtyard. If he knew that something had happened to her – the details hardly mattered – she might not be forgiven, even though she was an innocent child. (Hashimi, 2016, p. 234)

This excerpt sums up the slow unfolding of the sequence of events. Here, Hashimi provides a brief of her plot and opposes the judgement of a male society where all the brunt is to be borne by a woman even if she is “an innocent child.” Zeba too knows what the future holds for the child who should have logically been excused from being judged based on her gender rather than just being seen as a victim of sexual violence. The writer underscores that in Afghan society, if a woman’s honour is lost, she is held responsible for whomever the perpetrator may be. This norm of absolving the criminal and holding the victim responsible is what reinforces a sense of inferiority and subordination in Afghan women.

Most of the women in *Chil Mahtab* were accused of moral crimes like sex outside of marriage, running away from home, falling in love and the like. Challenging the male authority in the family by any means is enough to land a female in prison. Inside the prison, the women have the liberty to do what they love doing to endorse their femininity, which was barred by the men in their families ordinarily. Latifa smokes, and Nafisa texts her beloved from her contraband mobile phone. Others have pictures of Bollywood actors and actresses pasted on the walls of their cells, apply make-up in the prison salon, and watch reality shows on TV. (2016, p. 156).

⁴ According to Wikipedia, in Middle Eastern traditions, the number forty is used to refer to a large number or “umpteen” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/40> (number)

Once the women arrive at Chil Mehtab due to one or the other allegation, they start sharing a life of ease with no fear of men. Zeba, too, finds her space of resistance inside the prison cell. In a hysterical manner, she cries out to the Director that “this is not a prison. Prison is out there [...] God as my witness, I am unshackled” (2016, p. 207). The sense of “unshackling” from patriarchal injustice is felt by all the female prisoners, even though the allegations and the judgements are far from just. While Zeba fought against patriarchy through her silence in the outside world (2016, p. 86), among the women of Chil Mahtab she feels free to speak, so much so that her expressions take the shape of poetry. The first words she pronounces in the prison are what she had learned when “women would get together in secret.” In these private female spaces, they would reject the body politic and move beyond the set limits to find “ways to empty a heavy chest” (2016, p. 48). The very first words she speaks to break off her silence in Chil Mehtab are a verse that ties all the stories of her cellmates into one thread. She remarks, “Men love for a moment because they are clever/ Women are fools because they love forever” (2016, p. 47).

Chil Mehtab is a liberating space for its prisoners, which the women realize only after ending up there. For instance, Latifa surmises that she would often “have marched herself past the barbed-wire fence long ago, turning herself in for some kind of impropriety” had she known what a prison meant for a woman (2016, p. 45). Behind the bars, the women find a secure, safe and peaceful environment, so safe that a mother prefers turning her daughter in to save her from the wrath of her brothers after losing her virginity. Nafisa’s mother considers Chil Mehtab as a refuge to save her daughter, “fearing her sons would see no way to restore their honour except by spilling Nafisa’s blood” (2016, p. 44). After sharing the last meal with her lover, Nafisa’s conversations and phone calls with him come to an end. But the prison offers her a safe haven to choose and act as per her desires: “Nafisa marveled without looking up from her contraband mobile phone. She had just texted a message to her beloved widower and was waiting for a response” (2016, p. 49). It is inside Chil Mahtab that Zeba practices black magic for the first time, adapting to the new space that she occupies on her own terms, where, like other women, she has no demands from men to satisfy. Zeba soon realizes the physical demands she has been meeting outside the prison. Her body had previously been used for catering to a family, and it is in this haven where she only deals with the demands of her own self:

She had no responsibilities in the kitchen. Her meals came with impressive regularity. Zeba bathed herself and no one else. She missed Rima’s soft cheek against her own, but there was also a delicious peace in walking without a baby on her hip, without the tiny fists pounding out the hot rhythm of a tantrum, without the mouth seeking her bosom with total disregard for Zeba’s needs. (2016, p. 67)

Silence and Secrecy

The silence in Nadia Hashimi’s *A House without Windows* is polyphonic as it does not portray the lack of agency of a woman but rather an exercise of choice. In psychology, silences are read as repression or denial and are a symptom of posttraumatic stress (Blaaw, 2002; Casas and Benuto, 2022). In power discourses, silence is studied as an operation of repressive powers. Yuko Otake (2019), in his study of the survivors of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, examines how “unspeakability” compounds and intensifies suffering. The use of silence as a tool of exercising power has been rigorously studied by postcolonial theorists. But David Armstrong (1987) applies this theoretical tool of analysis to his study of the dialogue between the dying patients and the medical attendant, which no longer represents the truth but instead the examination of the corpse (p. 651). From a feminist point of view, silencing has been seen as

a sign of the powerlessness of those on the margins, but it can also be used to control the story by not telling it.

In the novel, Zeba's silence helps her gain the space she desires, liberating herself from the shackles of patriarchy. Even after repeated attempts by the lawyer, the judge, and the constable to motivate her to speak, she agrees to Gayatri Spivak's claim that "the subaltern cannot speak." Her voicing of the truth would have delayed justice for the little girl who lost her honour in her courtyard. Silencing passes the lie into the misogynist world that she is the murderer of the rapist. The secret of her innocence remains within her; she preserves it through silence, and she exercises the agency of speech among those with whom she feels safe, denying the male inquirer a window into the house of her secrets. All such houses of secrets (women) come together under another house without windows – the Chil Mahtab – that provides a haven for the victims of oppression, misogyny, tyranny, and gender-based violence.

Yusuf, Zeba's lawyer, insists that she divulge the truth of how her husband was murdered, but Zeba purses her lips and says nothing (Hashimi, 2016, p. 90). On all occasions of formal visits made by him to his client, he fails to recover any information regarding the incident. Even to the police officers, "Zeba had refused to admit anything. She was too scared to say much and kept repeating the same few words. *I didn't kill him*" (2016, p. 93). Interestingly enough, the writer herself works through her narrative by the same method of secrecy and silence, and the reader, like Yusuf, is left with only hints that can be read through these silences about the murder. Zeba exercises the agency of speech in what Luce Irigaray proposes as a homosocial order, maintaining silence in a heterosexual patriarchal order and recognizing the worth of her testimony as no more than a "fraction of a man's" (2016, p. 230). Even when Gulnaz knows nothing about the actual sequence of events, she declares to Zeba, "[...] but you're my blood. Your soul talks to me even when your mouth doesn't." The gist of the event is revealed by Zeba to her mother first, someone whom she lost trust in soon after turning adolescent but whom she trusts once again when the masculine world was on the other side. A bit of the revelation from her side results in Gulnaz, her mother, revealing the childhood secret of Tamina, Zeba's sister-in-law, by telling that her brother "was a menace in her childhood" (p. 360). With this follows the writer's disclosure of the details of the rape: "[...] how many women kept secrets in the vault of their hearts. *Just a little girl and already so much to hide.*" (2016, p. 361) Thus, silence and secrecy for women become the means of sustenance in Afghanistan: "Shame, in its many shapes and colors, was what had broken Zeba, Gulnaz, and the girl Kamal had raped. It threatened to cast them out of their communities. It threatened the promise of a new day. It was an indelible stain on their spirits" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 357). The unlawful act perpetrated by a man upon a woman leaves the woman as the "Other" and the criminal in Afghanistan when the crime pertains to moral transgression. Angela King (2004), while arguing against Foucault's gender neutrality in his works about the subjection of women in discourses of power, says a woman "represents that which must be investigated and dissected until her secrets are relinquished" (p. 31). Hashimi creates a similar plot where a cursory look at the crime and the crime scene is not enough to verify the truth but requires Zeba (a woman) to open up and her secrets to be "investigated and dissected until... relinquished" (p. 31).

In the logocentric discourses of Afghanistan, rape has no specific signifier. Yusuf realizes this during the investigation of the case of Zeba. Commenting on the same, he says, "as if not naming the act would deny its existence," but the act does remain obscured when legal discourses work by means of similar elisions that make it invisible (Hashimi, 2016, p. 298). The crime gets silenced because of the illegality of sex in Afghanistan, and the use of *zina* (sex outside of marriage) as the only term the judicial system of Afghanistan recognizes. Thus the limitations of their terminology "equat[es] the crime [of rape] to a lusty and impatient couple having sex the day before their wedding" (2016, p. 298). The ethics and values of the patriarchal system do not allow a woman freedom either outside of marriage or within it.

Gulnaz desires to part ways with her husband and so does her husband. Living with this shame and harmed honour is not an easy task for an Afghan woman, so she chooses to be secretive about her husband's departure or builds a façade of him having joined militancy for the honour of the country in order to live a more honourable life as a woman whose husband dies for the nation.

The lack of justice extended to an Afghan woman can be seen in legal provisions which consider a woman's witness but half of a man's because two women make the equivalent of a male witness. Zeba's lawyer, Yusuf, after investigating the neighborhood of Zeba's house, meets the vendor, Walid, who testifies to Zeba's innocence. When Zeba is told about the "male" witness, she becomes skeptical, "on the brink of rage [...] that a man would step forward to further condemn her" and "render her sacrifice meaningless," which sums up the reason she prefers silence over an explanation (2016, p. 230). Even after knowing the male witness is in her favour of innocence, she makes "an effort to prevent any part of her body from revealing more," choosing to exercise her power over the knowledge of the incident with her secrecy and silence. For her part, she conceals what she wants to keep to herself for the safety of the young girl and her honour. She protects her truth because that is the only thing that she has the power to protect (2016, p. 230).

Male Voice and Male Gaze

In all patriarchal societies, discourse has been observed to be dominated by phallogocentricity, where logic and male dominance procure legitimacy. Susan James (2000) writes, "Feminist writers have directly addressed the opposition between body and mind, in an effort to reveal how the body is tacitly marginalized in philosophy and to find ways of reinstating it" (p. 30). So, in the novel, "the mind" marginalizes the harmed and the ravished body because an act of crime with regard to sexuality must punish the unmarried mother with her two illegitimate boys, even when a man had forced himself upon her and she was silent for fear of the knife. According to Catharine A. McKinnon (1982), "rape is a sex crime that is not a crime when it looks like sex. To seek to define rape as violent [...] often seems strategic" (p. 649). This mother of the two boys is the victim of rape that could not be seen as violent because of her submission for means of survival, and therefore she is not a victim in heterosexual discourse. To seek a definition of violence against a female in cases like these becomes what McKinnon calls "strategic." In *A House without Windows*, legal discourse emanates from the power of men over social, economic, and legal spheres. Zeba shows a distrust of the law since it abides by the dictates that disregard a woman and her rights. She remarks, "As long as men are the judges, nothing will change" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 327). The logocentricity leads to the rejection of the nomination of a female judge to serve on the Supreme Court on the grounds that she menstruates each month and can not touch the Quran for a week each month (p. 327). Therefore, the undaunted patriarchy rules the roost and all judgements are passed to victimize the victim more when it is a woman. King (2004) shares a similar view while discussing the opposition between the binaries of man and woman. She remarks, "Man may be able to transcend his biological materiality, but a woman is entrenched in her physicality," and thus, even when she rises to the stature of being nominated for the highest places of execution of justice, she bears the brunt of her gendered body (p. 31).

In Afghanistan and in the novel, there is no representation of women holding any office of authority. The Rule of Law is by men and for men, wherein they maintain their hegemony. In the power structure and legal discourses, a woman is a site where power is exercised. Even if the jurisprudence allows a woman rights based on religious laws, the execution depends on the whim of the guardians of the law. Yusuf satirically calls these books of law "a playbook" because in most parts of Afghanistan, "people didn't play by the rules. Even some of the higher courts judged without jurisprudence. [...] There was no true rule of law" (Hashimi, 2016, p.

146). For women, there was sentencing without a trial. Aneesa remarks that the justice system of Afghanistan is “as twisted as a mullah’s turban” (2016, p. 146) where a case like that of Zeba’s is an open and shut case and judgements were not even left for the judge to pass but pronounced by the streets (2016, p. 340) and the white beard (2016, p. 146). The plot narrates one such tale of agony where a woman is lynched by the mob for desecrating the Quran, and it later turns out that she was not the perpetrator of the crime, but she became the victim of an unverified rumour. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2007) report details the violence perpetrated against women in Afghanistan where most of the cases are handled by “customary laws” that affect women badly and further marginalize them because they have “no knowledge about their constitutional rights” (pp. 15-16). Due to the customary laws or whimsical judgements, Mezhgan, Nafisa, Latifa, and other women in the prison end up in Chil Mehtab.

In all social formations⁵ in Afghanistan, the superstructures are held by a man’s tight fist; courts are handled by men like Qazi Najeeb, and evidence for cases is collected by men like Hakimi in the novel. The police chief, Agha Hakimi, overlooks many nuances of Zeba’s case because each case for him is more of a means to recover his lost dignity among the villagers and less of an objective evaluation (Hashimi, 2016, p. 21). On finding the dead body of his cousin, Fareed expects the streets to pass judgement and, finding them silent, exclaims in exasperation, “Have you lost your mind – all of you?” and, getting no response, he “pounces” on Zeba (2016, p. 23). Instances of sudden bouts of anger exhibited by physically hitting women or abusing children from the fictional world of Nadia Hashimi are also to be found in the interviews (Brodsky et al., 2011, p. 231), fieldwork (Mahendru, 2020, p. 3), and reports (UNODC report, 2007, pp. 23-24) from Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, the lack of a strong legal system have caused violence against women to keep happening and to become the norm.

Along with the social and legal system, the disciplining voice of male authority also exerts its power over the female body through a male gaze. Sarah Gamble (2006), defining “gaze” in her edited work *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, quotes John Berger: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (p. 209). As an object of male desire, the character of Gulnaz is symbolic in this novel. She does not just acknowledge catching male attention but uses it to her own advantage. She is conscious of attracting the eye, sometimes manipulative of the same, and at times unscrupulous, as long as it re-affirms the power in her body to sway a man. In her desperation to save her daughter, she goes to Jawad to procure a *tawiz* (amulet) for her protection. On her return, walking down the hills, she feels his “eyes following her hips” but smiles to know she could charm a man with her beauty even at that age (Hashimi, 2016, p. 108). When under the scrutiny of the male gaze of the judge, Qazi Najeeb, Gulnaz does fear it. She is emboldened the next time she visits him in private, an attempt rare to find in Afghanistan. Gulnaz is an Afghan woman who is too brave to accept defeat in condescension; she looks for a man in marriage who will not “shout orders,” a choice few women have in her position or situation (2016, p. 124). After a long conversation with the *Qazi* in his private chamber, where he doesn’t ask her about their childhood meeting due to impropriety, she asks him instead. Gulnaz does not acknowledge the gaze to be a surveyor of herself, but her resilience is in finding alternatives.

Doors, Windows, and Walls

⁵ The French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, reiterates the importance of social formations in Marxist theory for the perpetual production of reproductive forces. A social formation, for him, is a complex of concrete economic, political, and ideological relations, bound together and given their particular character as capitalist, feudal, or whatever, by the fact that the economic relations are, in his words, “determinant in the last instance.”

The novel is loaded with metaphors of doors, windows, and walls that are built around the sign of the house-without-windows. Whereas sometimes Hashimi uses the denotative meaning of the title to refer to the gendered body of a female, she also connotes the secrecy associated with it. At yet another level, the significance of the title is with regard to a prison. The story revolves around two spaces mostly—one, Zeba's marital house, a prison for her in the heterosocial patriarchal world; and two, Chil Mahtab, a homosocial freer space, though literally a prison. The epilogue of the novel aesthetically plays on the same signification to arrive at the multi-pronged significance of it, and throughout the novel, many metaphors aim at the same. In all these terms, women figure as victims of violence and prisoners of their gender.

Hashimi quotes Rumi in her epilogue but makes it double-edged with a feminist play on the sign of windows and light. The play on the word "window" begins in the very first line where it is used as a means of light to pass and a house without windows is called a "hell." Hell, therefore, is a silent woman who lets no light (or knowledge) come out of her. Rumi refers to the creation of a window as "true religion," and Hashimi uses it to advocate for the empowerment of women in Islam. Rumi calls for raising the "ax [*sic*] to frame a window" and Hashimi energizes a feminist agenda in the Afghan context to frame it for the cause of the true religion, i.e., justice. The concluding couplet is invested with the profound philosophy that Hashimi uses to argue against the phallogocentric ideas of enlightenment ("sunlight") and the reason that it is but a shadow for women, similar to the appearance of the sunlight from behind the black veil of her garment. So, these lines are an indirect criticism of patriarchal justice, which is rarely fair to women.

The metaphor of the window is repeatedly used in the novel in association with light and enlightenment. When Zeba is taken to the shrine to get her insanity treated, she moves towards the window because the new space gives her hope to be free, and then, as the story unfolds, the same place gives her hope in the figure of her father. At his house, Yusuf has the habit of sitting on the edge of the window of his room to "spy into other windows" to learn more about the private lives of his neighbours, only to guard their secrets, a responsibility he carries at large as a lawyer for Zeba and others (Hashimi, 2016, p. 301). Zeba's mother, Gulnaz, as bold as she was, attempts to look at her would-be-husband through a window, an impropriety only a woman of her spirit could attempt. Here again, the window is used in terms of her gaining forbidden knowledge: "when he smiled, Gulnaz whirled away from the window and pressed her back to the wall of the house" (2016, p. 126). To maintain her dignity, she presses against the wall of the house. The walls are then associated with the family honour, and daughters are considered the honour of the house in a patriarchal system.

Private and public debates within feminism have been going on since the beginning (Jaggar, 1983; Benstock, 1988; Gilmore, 1994). The private space is seen as one associated with a woman of the house, the clean space that allows legal sex under a marriage contract with no violations. MacKinnon (1983) writes, "In feminist translation, the private sphere is the sphere of battery, marital rape and women's exploited labour," and Hashimi's story is an account of the same while focusing on one house to read through each (p. 657). She uses feminist metaphors to study the lives and exploitation of Afghan women. Her metaphors of doors, walls, and windows allow her to investigate a woman's implicit significance in her public and private life. For instance, the judge's room is "windowless" to show that there is no scope for light or justice to pass through it. In another instance, when Zeba and Gulnaz are discussing the affair and pregnancy of Mezhgan outside marriage, they laugh at ease in the open. They cross the line between the private and the public, discussing a private matter in the open space outside the jail that is neither patriarchal nor state prison. They impose themselves on this no man's land that stands apolitical: "There was no fence. There was no jail. There was only a mother and a daughter, gossiping [...]" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 190).

The metaphor of the door is used to refer to Hashimi's revelation of the secrets. Zeba desires her father to "walk through the door" not for the dependence she felt on him but to know the truth about the reason for his departure (2016, p. 131). Every time Gulnaz walks in through Zeba's door, she resists and closes it on her, believing her intrusion to bring in the dark secrets of the world of magic into her house (2016, p. 315). When Zeba returns to Chil Mahtab after her treatment at the shrine, she willingly allows her prison-mates to enter her cell and gain what little knowledge she had of magic to help them sort out their affairs (2016, p. 345).

Hashimi's metaphor of the wall demarcates the private and the public, and its concrete presence acts as a mark of dignity for the family it encloses. The novel begins with abstractions around the miserable day a little girl lost her honour in her backyard and how that changed the lives behind the walls of Zeba's life forever. Hashimi writes, "[...] had there been anyone around to see or stop her, perhaps the life that transpired in their humble courtyard and within the solitude of their *mud walls* would have continued for another year, another decade, or their entire lives" (2016, p. 5; emphasis added). The "mud walls" enclose a humble life Zeba shares with her husband that is secretive as well as silent about what transpires within it day in and day out. The walls, therefore, denote the enclosed private spaces of a family and their interactions and relations. But as soon as "the trail of footprints leaving their home" (2016, p. 61) is found by the people, the private becomes public and the "street spilled into their home" (2016, p. 222). The structuralist usage of doors, windows, and walls in the patriarchal order acquires a post-structuralist feminist semantics when used in the context of Chil Mahtab, a homosocial space for the women of Afghanistan in the novel. So when the narrator says, "she'd done nothing but contribute to the slow undoing of these walls," the undoing of the walls does not mean dishonour but a rehab for the suffering women of the heterosocial world, finding solace in one another's story in Chil Mahtab by bringing down the walls of their privacies and living their common suffering together. When in the courtroom in an anxious state, the narrator says, "the walls of the judge's office seemed to bend inward as if they were being pushed from the outside" (2016, p. 96). The bending of the walls then refers to the warped structure of law and the justice system that fails to protect the victimized and the oppressed.

Conclusion

Nadia Hashimi's novel *A House without Windows* is what Helen Cixous calls "écriture féminine" in the sense that she attempts to write to seek justice for women in Afghanistan whose experiences can't always be spoken in the given linguistic forms. Afghan women suffer violence and injustices of all sorts, and Hashimi attempts to rescue them by using a poetic language of metaphors that speaks of a feminine experience and debunks phallogocentricity. The ambivalence of the prison is observable in its spatial and temporal use in the text. The liberation of Afghan female prisoners is removed from its literality and instead, they are allowed a freer space of co-existence without men questioning their choices or holding them accountable inside the prison. In this haven, they repudiate the supposed havens that are held by the authority of men. This ambivalent space questions all logos and essence and the choices made, thus reinstating these women in spaces of honour and respect on their own terms by exercising more power over their bodies and their choices, whether sexual or otherwise. The author rejects logocentrism to talk about this homosocial order by infusing it with metaphors that depict ambivalence in the context of their usage. This creative exigence allows her to voice female subjectivity and reject established masculine structures. Hashimi seems to claim that the subaltern does not need to speak when silence is a choice.

References

- Afghanistan: Female Prisoners and their Social Reintegration. (2017, March). *A United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Report for Developing Post Release Opportunities for Women and Girl Prisoners*. New York.
- Ahmed-Ghosh, H. (2003). A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4(3), 1-14.
- Armstrong, D. (1987). Silence and truth in death and dying. *Social Science & Medicine*, 24(8), 651-657. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(87\)90308-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(87)90308-X)
- Bellal, A., Giacca, G., & Casey-Maslen, S. (2011). International law and armed non-state actors in Afghanistan. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93(881), 47-79. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383111000051>
- Benstock, S. (Ed.). (1988). *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. North Carolina: UNC Press Books.
- Billaud, J. (2015). *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Blaauw, M. (2002). 'Denial and Silence' or 'Acknowledgement and Disclosure'. in *International Review of the Red Cross*, 84(848), 767-784. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S156077550010416X>
- Brodsky, Anne E., Welsh, E., Carrillo, A., Talwar G., Scheibler, J., & Butler, T. (2011). Between Synergy and Conflict: Balancing the Processes of Organizational and Individual Resilience in an Afghan Women's Community. *American journal of community psychology*, 47(3), 217-235. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9399-5>
- Casas, J. B., & Benuto, L. T. (2022). Breaking the Silence: A Qualitative Analysis of Trauma Narratives Submitted Online by First Responders. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 14(2), 190–198. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001072>
- Gamble, S. (Ed.). (2004). *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. New York: Routledge.
- Gilmore, L. (1994). *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Hashimi, N. (2016). *A House without Windows*. New York: Harper Collins
- Irigaray, L. (1985). *This Sex Which is Not One*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Jaggar, A. (1983). *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. Washington DC: Rowman & Littlefield.
- James, S (2000). Feminism in Philosophy of Mind. In M Fricker & J Hornsby (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy*, (pp. 29-48). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- King, A (2004). The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5(2), 29-39.
- Mahendru R. (2021). Girls and women speak out from Afghan moral prisons: Tackling extremism and violence against women in a conflict environment. *Global public health*, 16(5), 729–745. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2020.1851384>
- MacKinnon, C. A. (1983). Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence. *Signs*, 8(4), 635–658. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494000>
- Otake, Yuko. (2019). Suffering of Silenced People in Northern Rwanda. *Social Science & Medicine*, 222, 171-179. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.01.005>
- Reddy, C. S. (2014). Women in Afghanistan: Their Role in the Political Future. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, 18(2), 124–143.