



Incarcerated and Silent: Exploring Female Prison Space in Nadia

Hashimi's *A House Without Windows*

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Abstract:

Afghan women have one of the lowest Gender Development Index indicators in the world. They are silenced, dominated and marginalised with little to no freedom or power. From being sexually marginalised to being politically silenced, the customary law is regressive beyond imagination. The present paper is a study of female carceral space and Afghan legal laws with special reference to Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows*. It subverts the idea of prison when it comes to women and explores prison space as therapeutic community, praxis of survival and a site of transformation. Moreover the paper analyses body as site of resistance and uses silence as a tool to protect one's own truth by controlling one's own narrative. By exploring the strategy of reticence, it delineates silence as passive resistance, a coping mechanism and a form of autonomy.

Keywords: autonomy, incarceration, patriarchy, prison, silence.

Introduction

Prison has always been studied and understood as a place of punishment, seclusion and loss of freedom. Prison space is a constant reminder of crime leading to social isolation and captivity. However, a world of repressive gender laws where women suffer confinement even outside the incarcerated space, it subverts the whole idea of prison. For women, bound by the relentless chain of patriarchy, the border between home and prison space gradually begins to blur, leading us to serious questions regarding the actual meaning of freedom. Living in a world that constantly mutes, questions, and judges them, deliberate silence emerges as a powerful tool of resistance, control and psychological self- preservation. Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows* is a powerful narrative of women inhabiting the prison space, promoting sisterhood and self- reliance thus challenging the conventional notions of imprisonment. The present research paper closely studies the novel through the lens of Foucault's theories of panopticon and surveillance, carceral feminism and spatial theory, thus exploring the transformation of prison space from punishment to collective empowerment.

Afghan Legal Context

Afghanistan's first human development report titled "Security with a Human Face" launched by UNDP in 2025, shows that Afghan women have one of the lowest Gender Development Index indicators in the world. Women are often viewed as property with little decision- making power. They are barred from education, public life and basic human rights. The legal system seems flawed, with customary law dominating in order to resolve cases or disputes. The decision makers often are a group of elders known as jirgas or shuras and consist exclusively of men, while women have neither any representation nor say in any legal matters. Women are forced to be dependent on men, and their movement outside without a male accompaniment

(mahram) is restricted, even considered unlawful. The situation inside home is no better with strict patriarchal standards imposed in the name of Sharia law. In this regard, Aslam comments, “Men use Islamism and its variants as means of self- actualization and directly in service of matters associated with personhood and, particularly honour.” (138)

Forced marriages are common to settle disputes and it is common for the women to be forced to marry their abductors and rapists. Girls are often married before the age of fifteen (often with no say in the decision) to settle debts by procuring bride price, while the instances of domestic violence dominate the scene with no major laws framed to punish the offenders. According to Pashtun tradition, “widows can only marry the brother or cousin of their dead husband. If no such person exists, the whole tribe shares the widow.” (qtd in “Afghanistan: Female Prisoners and their Social Reintegration” 17)

In the Pashto language, ‘zina’ refers to unlawful sexual intercourse or adultery and has serious legal consequences. Zina is seen as a heinous crime, and the punishment is severe and gendered. While men are flogged or jailed, women can be stoned to death for any sex outside marriage. “Statistics from Afghanistan’s Interior Ministry indicate that the number of women and girls imprisoned for “moral crimes” in Afghanistan had risen to about 600 in May 2013 from 400 in October 2011 – a 50 per cent increase in a year and a half. Since October 2011, there has been an almost 30 per cent increase overall in the number of women and girls imprisoned in Afghanistan’s prisons and juvenile detention facilities.” (Afghanistan: Surge in Women Jailed for Moral Crimes”) Women accused of attempted zina have to go through repeated virginity tests without consent.

Running away from home is viewed as a serious offence according to Afghan law and can easily land a woman into jail for up to fifteen years. This might result in honour killings as the

eloped woman is seen as bringing shame to the entire family. The killing in such cases often goes unpunished as it is seen as an attempt to keep up the family's honour. "Some women and girls who flee violence at home are able to access help – rather than being arrested – through shelters. The number of women's shelters in Afghanistan has increased from 14 in 2011 to 18 in 2013. However, the capacity of the shelters is far too limited for the number of women who require assistance, and fewer than half of the country's 34 provinces have even a single shelter." (Afghanistan: Surge in Women Jailed for Moral Crimes")

Concept of Prison: Subverting the Idea

Prison on the surface is a space of confinement, of punishment, of being away from family or loved ones. However what happens when the outside world is stifling, punishing and alienating? Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows* is a depiction of Afghan society that is highly patriarchal and regressive and explores prison as a space for transformation; a space that breathes life into the dead dreams of its women prisoners; a space that allows the establishment of an alternative community. Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish* talks about the social control that transgresses prison and is subtle, hard to be noticed. He writes, "... punishment like forced labour or even imprisonment – mere loss of liberty – has never functioned without a certain additional element of punishment that certainly concerns the body itself: rationing of food, sexual deprivation, corporal punishment, solitary confinement" (Foucault 15) Similarly Zeba's outside world is so suffocating that the prison fails to daunt her. She felt liberated, devoid of responsibilities and provided for. While the protagonist Zeba is accused of killing her husband, the other prisoners of Chil Mahtab are imprisoned on the 'charges of immorality' (Hashimi 45). Prison becomes a small world where the doors are unlocked, the inmates have access to a dilapidated beauty salon, and libraries, radio, newspapers, TV, a space where Zeba finds an outlet through her

poetry. It becomes a space of shared emotions and sisterhood. On contrary to being a space of confinement, it offers more freedom to the women prisoners than the outside world leaving the readers to major questions regarding prison and freedom, giving rise to what Jewkes in “On Carceral Space and Agency” calls ‘prison aesthetics’ (128). This prison of Chil Mehtab in the novel, in the words of Jewkes, is “not limited, classified or pigeonholed but... present internally diverse and fluid spaces” (Jewkes 128)

“Gaping drawers revealed round and flat hairbrushes, tins full of bobby pins, and tubes of lipstick. A can of hair spray sat atop the counter. One freshly coiffed prisoner sat in the chair, twisting her neck and torso to get a look at the back of her head. Two other women, with rust-coloured fingertips stained with henna, stood around her” (Hashimi 76)

Prison thus becomes a therapeutic community where the inmates not only survive but flourish and evolve as individuals. Wil Gesler busts the concept of only hospitals being therapeutic and suggests that the places that guarantee emotional adequacy and social relationships have an unmatched healing capacity. He claims, “Therapeutic landscapes are places where physical and built environments, social conditions and human perceptions combine to produce an atmosphere which is conducive to healing.” (Gesler 96) Chil Mahtab provides this environment with its emotional availability and social environment that heals its inmates and makes them stronger and hopeful. Sisterhood thus becomes a praxis of survival amidst layers of subordination. Zeba’s transformation from being a meek prisoner to a sorceress transforms the power dynamics within the prison. Prison becomes a space of hope, of solidarity and transformation.

Elizabeth Bernstein coined the term ‘carceral feminism’ in 2007 to criticize the relying on police or law affirming bodies to address gender-based violence. It brings into question whether these kinds of penalties actually contribute towards delivering justice or work against them, thus reinforcing the already existing gender inequality. Hashimi’s novel *A House without Windows* is full of instances of women who are not protected by law, but rather punished for acts of self-defense or even for daring to live or love. This makes us wonder about the gender-driven laws that fail to deliver justice, perpetrating more harm in the process as Carl Smart opines, “in accepting law’s term in order to challenge law, feminism always concedes too much.” (5) Thus, the legal system that is meant to provide justice criminalizes its victim in the current novel of study which hints at its failure to protect.

Spaces are highly gendered- home being inhabited by women, yet controlled by men; outside space inhabited by men, yet controlled by men. Amidst this, prison in this novel emerges as a space inhabited by women, lived by women, and shaped by women. Doreen Massey opines, “Space is always under construction” (9). In similar vein, prison space in the novel constantly challenges the patriarchal power by being a haven (unlike home), providing protection from abuse and subverting the myth of prison being a centre for surveillance. Hashimi is relentlessly bold in portraying home as more confining, violent, and constantly under surveillance by patriarchal authorities that bluff control in the name of care. Gulnaz creating a space for herself in the novel is seen as a threat, as unwomanly and a bad influence, with the idea of submissiveness (of women) so deeply ingrained that her own daughter fails to understand her or to stand up for herself. It is inside the prison space that Zeba gets time to ponder, reflect and understand how subtly the power regime works in the name of culture and law.

Facets of Prison: Prison in Their Own Bodies

“I was a prisoner inside my own body. I felt desperate, angry, stupid, confused, hopeless and absolutely alone... At times I felt suicidal.” (Sutton 12)

The subordination of women exists at various levels- the deadliest being the subordination of the body. Biology defines women as naturally inferior- man is the mind, woman the body; man is rational, woman is emotional; man is controlled, woman is unruly (hence the need to be controlled). Women have always felt trapped- by laws, patriarchal structures, and even in their own bodies. They have no autonomy over their own frame, which is constantly regulated and controlled by those in power. The control is so subtle, so conditioned that they internalise the shame associated with any kind of digression.

In Afghanistan, the subordination of women occurs in six patriarchal structures- paid work, domestic production, culture, sexuality, violence and the state. (Walby 12). According to research by Global Rights, 87% of Afghan women has experienced physical, sexual or psychological violence, and 62% have been subjected to various forms of violence (Jurencyk 19). The traditional legal system imposes restrictions on women in various forms whereas the judicial system offers little to no help. Bordo comments, “the human body is itself a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control.” (21) Zeba in the current novel of study is a victim of domestic violence, but she seems to find no help. She neither retaliates nor opposes- rather accepts her fate. Married at a very young age, she has no voice or say in any of the matters pertaining to her marriage. Her husband’s alcoholism, frequent outbursts, further marginalizes her and she seems to be a prisoner in her own body. The title of the novel aptly represents her predicament- house without windows symbolizing her emotions having

no outlet. Being the daughter of a sorceress, she has infinite capabilities which she refuses to acknowledge. The inferiority complex is so much ingrained in her that she sees Gulnaz as a threat to the peace of her house. Gulnaaz, her mother, is often termed as a sorceress, which is quite debatable. Having powers to control her life, or change the course of her life as she wants to, she is seen as a threat to the patriarchal structure. Instead of identifying her mother's individuality, Zeba is ashamed, which hints at how subtle the subordination is.

Hinting at Hashimi's quote "No criminal is worse than a woman who wants to live for herself" (56), the other female prisoners seem locked up in their own bodies, having little to no freedom of expression in the outside world. And when they choose to break free the metaphorical prison, the society punishes them by imprisoning them literally. To cite certain examples from the novel, Latifa, a 25-year-old woman, suffers at the hands for family and decides to flee to a world of freedom and possibilities. However, she is caught and imprisoned for crossing the line. Mezghan, another prisoner at Chil Mahtab, is imprisoned because she dares to refuse to marry her sister's brother-in-law and proclaims her love for Haroon. Nafisa is accused of zina because she was seen sharing lunch with the man she loved and was handed to the police by her mother, who feared she would be killed otherwise. Moreover, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Chil Mahtab is full of stories of women who dare to dream, who refuse to be a prisoner in their own bodies. Devoid of agency and autonomy, they are what Spivak calls as 'subaltern' (121). Sandra Lee Bartky observes, "A panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women." (72) This particularly resonates with what Hashimi has tried to portray in the novel. Chil Mahtab is just a physical prison; the bodies are the actual imprisonment women suffer from.

Body as a Site of Resistance: Silence as a Tool

“What good is a woman’s telling of the truth

When nothing she says will be taken as proof?” (Hashimi 123)

In a world that predominantly relies on dialogue, silence is often misinterpreted/ underestimated. However, silence is not a mere absence of words, rather a presence of power over oneself and others. It is an expression of control, of resilience, of agency. Dendrinis and Pedro opine, “Power is routinely exercised through speech”, but “Power...may also be exercised through silence” (Dendrinis and Pedro 219). Silence, therefore, is a means of self expression, a presence of intimacy necessary for transformation.

Practicing the ‘strategy of reticence’ (Stout 19), Zeba, in the novel of discussion, refuses any comment on her husband’s presumed murder at her hands. Sitting with blood stained hands near the dead body of her husband with a hatchet in his head, she is declared guilty without any doubt. Zeba remains silent, not by mere shock, but by her comprehension, and she thus controls her narrative. Her body becomes her site of resistance, and she allows nobody to enter her psyche. Elsa Ronningstam, a clinical psychologist, “emphasizes a transformative function of silence that has implications for both internal understandings of self and interpersonal relationships.” (Ronningstam 113) Zeba uses her time at Chil Mahtab trying to understand the power dynamics, reflecting on her life and relationship with her mother, analyzing her inmates and self introspecting on her current situation in life. Her carceral experience thus becomes a site of transformation, self- expression, and self- recognition.

Zeba is quiet “not because she lacks opinions or voices, but because she is resisting the societal expectation to speak or perform in a certain way.” (“Reading Silence: The Power of

Unspoken Words in Women's Stories") Her incarceration was not a question of truth. She had rather been pronounced guilty from the moment of murder, and the court proceeding was not a search for truth but an attempt to make her accept her crime. "You're supposed to help your client express remorse for what she's done...She's as guilty as she can be. We shouldn't be wasting our time with nonsense" (Hashimi 88), says the magistrate to Zeba's lawyer. Hence, Zeba knew it would be futile to plead not guilty. Her passive resistance is thus a form of autonomy, a coping mechanism, a shield, a "reclaiming of personal space in an environment that often tries to strip it away" ("Reading Silence: The Power of Unspoken Words in Women's Stories").

Zeba's presumed crime comes as a shock and makes us question when and how she transcended her passivity for something as gruesome as killing someone. Moreover, her silence creates an atmosphere of suspense which the author slowly unfolds. It is revealed towards the end of the story that Kamal, Zeba's husband, was actually killed by a young girl whom he tried to rape which flips the story in an instant. This also leaves the readers to ponder over the flaw in legal law regarding rape. The Penal Code of Afghanistan doesn't exclusively have law pertaining to rape and it is covered under zina. So, the one who is raped is tried on charges of zina till the crime of rape is proved. "Since the lines between rape and *zina* are unclear, and the proof of rape therefore extremely difficult, victims of rape may be penalized and imprisoned themselves for adultery, and, as a result, be shamed and stigmatized by their families and communities." ("Afghanistan: Female Prisoners and their Social Reintegration" 21) Understanding the direness of the situation, Zeba decides to protect the young girl's truth by not revealing the actual course of events with anyone.

Conclusion

Hashimi's *A House Without Windows* is a skillful narration of prison as not a space of confinement, but regeneration. It breaks the myth of domestic space being a haven and presents it as highly patriarchal, violent and oppressive while presenting Chil Mahtab as a symbol of strength and solidarity. Drawing upon the theories of Foucault and Bernstein, the novel redefines the concept of criminalisation and imprisonment. The paper aptly presents home as a gendered space with women having no authority or autonomy. Focusing on the idea of women being prisoners in their own bodies, the novel highlights the importance of autonomy and agency through the character of Gulnaz, who stands as a symbol of resilience. It aptly describes the body as a site of oppression and evidence of trauma by using Sandra Lee Bartky's theory of patriarchal discipline. Further, silence in the novel is not represented as a loss of words or weakness to protect one's integrity, rather a powerful tool of owning one's own story. The text transforms silence into strength and uses it as a tool for passive resistance.

Nadia Hashimi thus encapsulates the experiences of Afghan women amidst a stifling legal system and strict patriarchal standards. Her style is poetic, realistic and focuses on resilient women amidst tragic circumstances. Her narration is compelling and engaging, hauntingly bold, resonating with hope. Hashimi's words speak volumes and she never disappoints with her skillful narration and poignant description. Her novel is a powerful critique of patriarchal standards, legal inequalities and questions the idea of justice. By redefining prison as therapeutic and liberating, Hashimi has left the readers with the need for serious deliberation over the gendered laws that govern Afghan society.

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