

Ecological and Cultural outlook on Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* and *One Half from the East*

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Abstract:

Nadia Hashimi is a high-flying Afghan-American writer. She has authored about five novels. Though Hashimi is the citizen of America, she is very much concerned about her Afghan origin. Hashimi's works furnish magnitude to the tribulations of the Afghan society. Afghanistan is celebrated for its ecological wealth and affluent culture. The earlier green land of Afghanistan is turned into a parched land at present. Hashimi pinpoints the demolition of the profuse culture and the ecology due to the copious overseas incursion. Nadia Hashimi's novel *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* is a sequel to the novel *One Half from the East*. These novels glorify the cultural practices of

Afghanistan. Rahima, is the character which links both the novels through *Bacha Posh*, the dominant cultural practice of the Afghan society. But the inimitable Afghan culture is smashed by the chaos of the different rulers. All cultural activity interferes with the ecological balance of the environment.

Man is an important part of the ecosystem and is dependent on nature. But lamentably, the ecology of Afghanistan is also annihilated over the times along with culture. Because of the mishaps, the Afghans migrate to different countries and they live as refugees. Due to that, they lose their culture and their indigenous vegetation. Being refugees, the Afghans are unable to glorify their culture, as they struggle for their existence. They cannot concentrate on their agricultural practices and so their unique plants are astray. Both the environment and culture is highly destroyed by numerous invasions and technological inventions. This paper endeavours to expose the tormented lives in the novels and how they find solace in the nature.

Ecological and Cultural outlook on Nadia Hashimi's

The Pearl that Broke its Shell and One Half from the East

“But man is a part of nature,
and his war against nature is inevitably,
a war against himself.”

-Rachel Carson

Everyone knows the fact that man depends on nature entirely, right from the moment he has kept his foot on this planet. Nature is prominent for all his requirements

hence there is a deep connection between human and nature. Marc Bekoff, the professor emeritus of ecology quotes, “humans are a part of nature, not apart from nature”. No one would decline the actuality that human beings rely on nature throughout the history of his life on the Earth. Mythologies of different cultures are strictly in connection with nature. Most of gods and goddess are from nature. Even different religions are in close connection to nature. So man can assure that the beginning of the history of the relation of human and nature is utterly equivalent to the beginning of human’s history on the planet Earth . In “Culture and Materialism”, Raymond Williams puts it, “the idea of nature contains.... an extraordinary amount of human history” (67).

In a simple manner, culture is defined as the customs and social behaviour of particular people or a society. However, culture has a close correlation with ecology. Culture of a particular society can be modified either due to the environmental annihilation or through the profuse of the environment. The interrelatedness between culture and nature is a special focus of literary culture from its archaic beginnings in myth, ritual, and oral story-telling, in legends and fairy tales, in the genres of pastoral literature, nature poetry. Important texts in this tradition include the stories of mutual transformations between human and nonhuman life, which become a highly influential text throughout literary history and across different cultures. The mutual opening and symbolic reconnection of culture and nature, mind and body, human and nonhuman life in a holistic and yet radically pluralistic way seems to be one significant mode in which literature functions and in which literary knowledge is produced. From this perspective, literature can itself be described as the symbolic medium of a particularly powerful form of cultural ecology.

Cultural ecology is the study of how humans adapt to physical and social environments, in order to survive and prosper. Human adaptation refers to both biological and cultural processes that enable a population to survive and reproduce within a given or changing environment. However in modern days, when industry has spread its influence on human life mainly after industrial revolution, this connection gets weakened. Hence man is gradually alienated from nature. Human without nature can be devastated and ravaged. The people from countries with obliterated ecology are to be commiserated. Somalia, Albania, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon are some of the war-torn countries, where the ecology is also tattered.

“Afghanistan is a beautiful country endowed with nature’s gift of scenic beauty. The country has beautiful orchards of apples, grapes, and almonds. The quality of almonds, raisins and grapes is probably one of the best in the world” (23). Thus Major General Samay Ram elucidates the beauty of Afghanistan in his book, “The New Afghanistan, Pawn of America?” Agriculture has traditionally driven the Afghan economy, accounting for approximately fifty percent of Gross Domestic Product before the Soviet invasion in 1979. Before the invasion, only one fourth of the total arable land of fifteen million hectares was cultivated. At that time the main exports were sugarcane, sugar beets, fruit, nuts, vegetables, and wool. However, the continuing war has reduced production significantly. Soviet troops have planted land mines all over the country, rendering large areas of land useless and forcing large sections of the population to become refugees. This results in massive food shortages. Many writers such as Khaled Hosseini, Attiq Rahimi, Nadia Hashimi, etc., have pictured details about Afghan’s ecology and culture through their writings. Among them, Hashimi is the prolific novelist.

Nadia Hashimi is the most established Afghan-American fictionist in the recent times. She was born and raised in New York and New Jersey. Hashimi is providential to be encircled by a large family of aunts, uncles and cousins, keeping the Afghan culture an imperative part of their daily lives. Her upbringing, experiences and passions come together in the form of stories based in the country of her parents and grandparents. Hashimi likes to expose the reality of Afghanistan to the entire world. Her works explicit the unique culture of the country. Though she has not concentrated much about ecology in her fiction, her works secrete the ecological part. Auspiciously, all the titles of her fiction are associated with nature.

Based on the report by the National Foot prints Accounts Edition, 2016, Afghanistan is ranked one hundred and eighty-three among the one hundred and eighty eight countries. The Ecological Footprint is the area of land and water it takes for a human population to generate the renewable resources it consumes, and to absorb the corresponding waste it generates, using prevailing technology. In other words, it measures the quantity of nature that people use and compares it with how much nature on the whole in a particular place. The impoverishment of the land has lead to the deepening impoverishment of the Afghan people, with one quarter of the total population, many of them children, living on less than dollar a day.

The American response to this basic lack of ecological insight is a military one, an attempt to eradicate poverty and environmental degradation with a massive incursion of bullets and bombs. Because American war-making is so persistent and pervasive, and because every bomb that is dropped, whether it be on Afghanistan, or anywhere in the world, in the end falls on the earth and damages the life-enhancing capacity of the

biosphere. This unending aggression is actually a war against the earth itself. The United States has dropped thirty billion pounds of bombs on the planet's ecosystems in the last sixty years, along with ten lakh tons of napalm, and at least two crore gallons of defoliants sprayed on rainforests and crops with the intention of destroying them. The irony is that the physical earth and the life-sustaining qualities of the biosphere are the very foundation of human life.

The book, *An Introduction to Cultural Ecology* states, "The primary mechanism by which humans adapt to their environment is culture. Cultural responses include technology and organization, such as the structure of economic, political, and social systems" (97). Cultures interact with both the natural and cultural environment. A culture must first meet the biological needs of its members. Then the cultural needs of its members must be met, accomplished through religion, social regulation, and other mechanisms. As the environment changes, humans adapt both biologically and culturally. As all environments are dynamic, a culture must make constant adjustments just to maintain some sort of equilibrium, and there is a constant interplay between cultural practices and biological adaptations. For instance, people can be anatomically cold adapted but still wear coats. In Afghanistan, summer is very hot and winter is bitterly cold. But still, the womenfolk wear *burqa*, either hot or cold, represents their culture. A variety of cultural practices can mitigate the impact of ecological change and so level environmental differences.

Culture chooses from a variety of solutions to various problems, and as some solutions become unavailable, others present themselves. Afghanistan is known for its unique ethnicity. They give paramount importance to their culture. Afghans value their

ancestral practices and continue to observe them, no matter wherever they are. Among their cultural systems, the most fascinating one is, *Bacha Posh*. It is a gender-twisting custom, in which the families without sons would make a younger daughter dress and behave as a boy. By doing so, they believe that the family will get good luck and a son in the consequent pregnancy. In Hashimi's novels, she renders vibrant examples of *Bacha Posh*, through her characters, Rahima and Obayda.

As mentioned above, Hasimi's *One Half from the East* is a sequel to *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*. The character Rahima is the *Bacha Posh*, who plays the prominent part in both the novels. In *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*, Rahima along with her sisters are married off to a warlord's family to clear her father's debt. Thus the custom brings good luck to Rahima's father to marry off his three daughters at a stretch. In Obayda's family, the custom brings a son to her mother in the following pregnancy in *One Half from the East*. Hence, culture provides solution to the problems. The status of a girl as a boy ends, once she enters puberty. Afghans fix their culture along with nature. Hence the culture fluctuates with nature.

All cultures employ practices designed to exert at least some level of control over their resources and environment. Four fifths of the Afghan population live in rural areas, and most are farmers or farm labourers. Normally, Afghanistan grows about ninety five percent of its needs in wheat and rye, and meets its needs in rice, potatoes, pulses, nuts, and seeds. It depends on imports only for some wheat, sugar, and edible fats and oils. The variety of the country's crops corresponds to its topography. Earlier, in Afghanistan, people practice agriculture, and all of them own lands. They cultivate the vegetables for

their homes. They work together in the fields and harvest the yield. In the novel, *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*, Shekiba states, “There was much to be harvested.” (56)

Afghanistan’s agricultural industry has traditionally driven the country’s economy. But desperately, the land is difficult to cultivate due to land mines and persistent fighting. In some regions, agricultural production has ceased due to destruction caused by the war and the migration of Afghans out of those areas. According to recent estimates, Afghanistan currently has an export deficit, meaning more goods are brought in from abroad than are exported to neighbouring countries. The rotting economy forced farmers to grow the opium poppies as a cash crop. Afghan farmers are busy in their poppy fields as the annual opium harvest begins, underscoring the government’s failure to stamp out a crop that yields much of the world’s supply of heroin. Abdul Khaliq is the warlord in Hashimi’s *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*. When he wants to marry Rahima, he offers a land of opium as a bride price. Rahima’s father is very much fascinated by the bride price, as he is the lover of opium like the other men in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has a cultural system of getting bride price from the groom for giving their daughter’s hand in marriage. Rahima’s father is promised by the warlord Abdul Khaliq, “Of course, as family, we will share with you some of the products of the opium land to the north. Perhaps that would be of interest to you.” (133)

Afghanistan in 2000 was the world's largest producer of opium, used to produce the drug heroin. “We don’t get enough money if we grow wheat or other crops. The government has failed to provide alternate sources of income. We want the government to find us jobs and pave the ground for alternative farming. If there is a good alternative, there won’t be any need for cultivating poppy anymore”, laments Mohammad Nadir, a

farmer who worries about providing food for his five children from Kandahar, Afghanistan's second major center of cultivation of the opium poppy. The government should accomplish new schemes for farmers to promote agriculture and preserve nature.

Only when the last tree has died and
the last river been poisoned and
the last fish been caught
will we realize
we cannot eat money.

- Cree Indian proverb

As this proverb suggests, we the human should not wait till the last moment. We should plan accordingly, before it is too late. For the first time in Afghanistan's history an authority for environmental management is mandated. Seed improvement and development of agricultural cooperatives are also receiving attention at ministerial level. Nadia Hashimi suggests autonomy for Afghan women. She voices for the tormented Afghan female lives in the name of culture. She hopes a better tomorrow for Afghanistan. The growing political stability and continued international commitment for reconstruction are positive developments predicted for the future. Education for girls and women gets improving, and gender equality is being promoted. These endeavours can sow the seeds for a better future for Afghanistan.

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