

Behind the Veil: The Silenced Voices of Afghan Women in Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the thematic silencing of Afghan women in Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows*, examining how cultural, legal, and patriarchal forces contribute to their marginalization. Through the character of Zeba, a woman accused of murdering her husband, the novel portrays the devastating effects of a society that values honor over truth, obedience over autonomy, and silence over self-expression. The paper applies feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory to analyze the gendered mechanisms of control in the novel, such as forced marriage, honor-based violence, and the biased justice system. By examining both literal and metaphorical silence, the study reveals how Afghan women are often stripped of voice and agency, yet also shows how they resist and reclaim power through solidarity, storytelling, and resilience. Hashimi's narrative becomes not only a critique of oppression but a call to listen to those who have long been silenced behind the veil.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Silencing, Gender oppression, Subaltern voice, Gender and power

In societies governed by patriarchal norms and rigid interpretations of tradition, the voices of women are often muted, erased, or ignored. Nadia Hashimi's novel *A House Without Windows* offers a powerful exploration of this silencing, centering on the story of Zeba, an Afghan woman imprisoned for the alleged murder of her husband. Set against the backdrop of a deeply conservative Afghan society, the novel reveals how gender-based oppression operates not only in the private sphere of family and marriage but also within the public domains of law and religion.

Through Zeba's ordeal, Hashimi exposes the mechanisms by which women are denied autonomy, agency, and justice. These include societal expectations of female obedience, the weaponization of honor and shame, and the systemic failures of the legal system to protect or even hear women. Yet, even within the confines of a women's prison, paradoxically portrayed as more liberating than life outside, Zeba and her fellow inmates begin to reclaim their identities and form a quiet resistance through solidarity and shared narratives. This paper explores how *A House Without Windows* articulates the silenced voices of Afghan women and challenges readers to confront the intersecting forces of patriarchy, culture, and

injustice. Using a feminist and postcolonial lens, this study argues that while the novel reveals the devastating effects of enforced silence, it also celebrates the resilience and agency that emerge even within oppressive conditions.

In *A House Without Windows*, Nadia Hashimi illustrates how patriarchal structures systematically silence women, shaping their lives through fear, obedience, and repression. The novel is rooted in a social context where a woman's worth is tightly bound to her ability to uphold familial honor, often at the cost of her personal autonomy. As Zeba reflects, "In our culture, a woman's worth is measured not by what she says, but by what she keeps silent. To speak too loudly, to question too boldly, is to invite suspicion and punishment" (Hashimi 45). Her story embodies this reality: a wife and a mother whose silence becomes both her sentence and her shield.

Zeba's refusal to speak about her husband's death places her at the center of suspicion, not simply for the alleged crime, but for her nonconformity. In a society where women are expected to explain themselves, justify their actions, and display perpetual obedience, her silence is radical. She declares, "I will say nothing. Because sometimes saying nothing is the loudest cry a woman can make, louder than any words could be. In silence, I resist; in silence, I survive" (Hashimi 102). This strategic silence disturbs the assumptions of the men around her, especially the police and legal officials, who interpret her quietness not as strength or strategic restraint, but as guilt and defiance.

Moreover, this dynamic reflects Gayatri Spivak's concept that "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak, 1988, p. 280), emphasizing how marginalized women's voices are not just unheard but actively suppressed by the structures surrounding them. Zeba's silence is less an absence of voice than a manifestation of systemic erasure. Abdul Ali Wahab further explains that in Afghanistan, "patriarchal cultural norms systematically restrict women's legal rights and public speech, reinforcing their invisibility" (Wahab, 2019, p. 127). Zeba's silence is thus less an absence of voice than a manifestation of systemic erasure.

The cultural enforcement of silence is further reflected in the lives of the other women Zeba meets in Chil Mahtab, the women's prison. Many of these women are incarcerated not for what they've done, but for what society believes they should not have done: speaking out, seeking divorce, loving the wrong person, or defending themselves. Their stories reflect a common pattern, the silencing of women through physical, emotional, and legal means. Hashimi doesn't present these women as passive victims, but rather as individuals shaped by the constant pressure to conform to a male-dominated order.

Additionally, the language used in the novel underscores this silencing. Words like "honor," "modesty," and "shame" recur throughout the narrative, not as descriptors of morality, but as instruments of control. These concepts are upheld by both men and women, reflecting how deeply embedded patriarchal values are in Afghan society. Mothers, sisters, and neighbors become enforcers of silence, reinforcing Hashimi's message that the weight of patriarchy is communal, not individual. Through this depiction, Hashimi challenges readers to consider how silence can be coerced, internalized, and, paradoxically, weaponized. Zeba's refusal to speak is not simply an act of defiance, it is an indictment of a system that does not deserve her truth.

The legal framework portrayed in *A House Without Windows* mirrors the deep-rooted gender disparities of Afghan society. Through Zeba's arrest, interrogation, and trial, Nadia Hashimi exposes how the justice system not only fails women but actively contributes to their marginalization. In a world where truth is less important than maintaining social order and male dominance, the legal system becomes another tool of patriarchal oppression.

Zeba's experience begins with a presumption of guilt, not based on evidence, but on her gender and silence. The police quickly arrest her with minimal investigation, and the legal system makes little effort to uncover the truth behind her husband's death. She recounts, "They did not ask for my story. Their questions were not about justice but about control. They demanded explanations I could not give, assumed truths I had never spoken" (Hashimi 113). Her unwillingness to explain what happened is taken not as a right but as an offense, reinforcing the assumption that women must constantly justify themselves.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques how Western feminist discourse often “homogenizes ‘Third World women’ as a monolithic, powerless group” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 57). Hashimi’s narrative challenges this oversimplification by portraying Zeba and the other women as complex individuals employing various forms of resistance within oppressive systems.

Hashimi also uses the character of Yusuf, Zeba’s Afghan-born but Western-educated lawyer, to highlight the contrast between idealistic notions of justice and the grim realities on the ground. Yusuf’s frustrations with the slow, biased legal process reveal the limitations of even well-intentioned efforts within a corrupted system. His outsider status allows him to question the norms others take for granted, such as the automatic assumption that a woman accused of harming a man must be morally deficient or insane.

Perhaps the most damning element of the legal system in the novel is its use of honor as an informal but powerful form of law. In cases involving women, the legal proceedings are often secondary to community judgment. A woman’s guilt or innocence is less important than the shame her actions might bring to her family. Hashimi underscores this by showing how even women who are legally innocent remain imprisoned either literally or socially due to the enduring stigma attached to their cases. The prison, then, becomes a physical representation of a larger cultural prison in which women live.

Zeba’s trial is ultimately not a pursuit of truth but a negotiation between the expectations of the court and the demands of society. Her silence is interpreted not as a legal right, but as a refusal to conform. In this way, Hashimi illustrates how the justice system rather than serving as a neutral arbiter, reinforces the very power structures that suppress women’s voices.

Nadia Hashimi skilfully weaves rich symbolism throughout *A House Without Windows*, using imagery such as veils, walls, and windows to convey the themes of isolation, oppression, and resistance. These symbols are not only cultural and physical barriers but also psychological representations of the limitations imposed on Afghan women.

The veil in the novel serves as a complex symbol. On the surface, it represents modesty and protection, as traditionally intended in Afghan society. However, Hashimi also presents it as a tool of erasure, an external marker of a woman's enforced invisibility. Zeba contemplates, "The veil is not just fabric; it is a shield and a prison, both protecting and hiding what lies beneath. It conceals our faces but reveals our place in the world, a place where our presence must be muted, our voices stifled" (Hashimi 79). Veiled women are rendered faceless and voiceless, expected to move through society without drawing attention or asserting themselves. Afsaneh Najmabadi's scholarship contextualizes the veil's dual symbolism in Islamic societies, showing how it can serve simultaneously as "a marker of identity, piety, and resistance, but also a means of social control" (Najmabadi, 1998, p. 560). This paradox is reflected in Zeba's life and the experiences of the other women.

The prison, ironically, becomes the only place where women can express themselves freely. Chil Mahtab is filled with women who were silenced in their homes but find voice among one another. Zeba observes, "In this place, behind bars and locked doors, I have never felt more free" (Hashimi 145). Within the literal walls of the prison, new emotional and intellectual windows are opened. This paradox engages with Michel Foucault's concept that "the prison is an apparatus of power that disciplines bodies and controls populations" (Foucault, 1995/1975, p. 137). Hashimi's portrayal complicates this view by revealing how the prison space can also become a site of communal empowerment and narrative resistance, challenging the totalizing disciplinary power Foucauldian theory describes.

Yet, the veil is not depicted in entirely negative terms. In some moments, it offers Zeba and other women a sense of privacy, dignity, or even power. This duality challenges Western stereotypes that often frame the veil solely as a symbol of oppression. For Hashimi, the veil's meaning is shaped by who controls it. When worn by choice, it may empower; when imposed, it becomes a cage.

The house without windows, both the literal prison and Zeba's metaphorical home life, symbolizes a life without freedom, perspective, or escape. Homes in the novel, especially those belonging to traditional families, are portrayed not as sanctuaries, but as places of surveillance, confinement, and

emotional suppression. Zeba's family life, like that of many women in the novel, occurs within a domestic space tightly controlled by patriarchal expectations.

The prison, ironically, becomes the only place where women can express themselves freely. Chil Mahtab is filled with women who were silenced in their homes but find voice among one another. Within the literal walls of the prison, new emotional and intellectual windows are opened. They share stories, form bonds, and begin to articulate truths that were previously buried beneath shame or fear. This reversal, prison as sanctuary, challenges conventional ideas of space and liberty, emphasizing how freedom is not solely about physical movement, but about the ability to speak and be heard.

The absence of windows in Zeba's prison cell is a potent metaphor. Without windows, one cannot see out, and others cannot see in. This creates a double effect of isolation and invisibility. Symbolically, it represents the limited perspectives granted to women: they are expected to accept their roles without question, without access to broader views of the world or alternative futures. Hashimi's title, *A House Without Windows*, captures this claustrophobic reality.

However, even in the absence of literal windows, the women of the prison create metaphorical ones. Through stories, shared histories, and moments of reflection, they gain insight into themselves and one another. These narrative "windows" allow them to connect, to question, and ultimately, to imagine lives beyond confinement.

Despite the pervasive silencing and subjugation faced by the women in *A House Without Windows*, Nadia Hashimi's narrative is ultimately one of quiet but powerful resistance. The novel demonstrates that even in the most repressive environments, Afghan women find ways to reclaim their voices, forge solidarity, and assert agency in defiance of patriarchal control.

Within the prison walls of Chil Mahtab, Hashimi portrays an unexpected form of liberation: the solidarity that arises among women who share stories of betrayal, abuse, and survival. Zeba reflects, "We share our stories in whispers, in hopes that they will grow loud enough to break these walls. In the telling, we find strength; in the listening, we find ourselves" (Hashimi 161). Through empathy and storytelling,

they begin to heal not only themselves but each other. This act of storytelling resists the erasure Mohanty warns about, affirming that women's experiences in the Global South are diverse and marked by agency (Mohanty, 2003). Their shared narratives also provide an alternative power structure within the prison's disciplinary confines, resisting the Foucauldian mechanisms of control.

One of the most profound acts of resistance in the novel is Zeba's refusal to explain the events surrounding her husband's death. While her silence is misinterpreted by authorities as guilt or passivity, it is, in fact, a calculated act of self-preservation. Zeba understands that speaking the truth, especially in a system that does not value or believe women, could lead to greater shame for her children, further dishonor for her family, or even harsher punishment. By withholding her story, she retains power over it. Her silence becomes a form of protest, a way of controlling her narrative in a world that constantly seeks to rewrite it for her.

Within the prison walls of Chil Mahtab, Hashimi portrays an unexpected form of liberation: the solidarity that arises among women who share stories of betrayal, abuse, and survival. The relationships Zeba forms with her fellow inmates, women once labelled as criminals or sinners, are deeply humanizing. Through empathy and storytelling, they begin to heal not only themselves but each other. The prison, while physically restrictive, becomes a space of emotional and intellectual freedom. In many ways, it is the only place where women are permitted to speak without fear of reprisal.

This sisterhood is central to the novel's message of reclamation. When the women begin to understand their shared experiences, they build a collective resistance to the shame that has been imposed upon them. Instead of internalizing blame, they begin to critique the social and legal systems that failed them. Through this, Hashimi offers a vision of feminism rooted in community and mutual support.

Hashimi highlights storytelling as both a form of resistance and a path to healing. Zeba's mother, Gulnaz, a woman rumoured to be a sorceress, represents an alternative form of female power that exists outside of patriarchal structures. Through folk wisdom, ritual, and myth, Gulnaz passes on a legacy of

knowledge that defies male rationality and legal authority. Her role in Zeba's story is crucial: she ultimately reveals the truth about Zeba's past and enables her daughter's survival.

The novel suggests that reclaiming one's voice is not always about speaking loudly; sometimes, it is about choosing when and how to speak, or whom to trust with the truth. By the end of the story, Zeba's decision to finally reveal what happened to her husband is not a surrender to the system, but a defiant assertion of control. She chooses her moment, her audience, and her reasons, on her own terms.

Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows* offers a deeply moving and critical portrayal of the lives of Afghan women under the weight of cultural, legal, and patriarchal oppression. Through the character of Zeba and the many women she encounters in Chil Mahtab, the novel exposes the pervasive silencing that defines their existence, both literal and metaphorical. From family homes to prison cells, women are expected to conform, to obey, and most of all, to remain quiet.

Yet, amid the silence, Hashimi reveals voices that refuse to be extinguished. Whether through strategic resistance, solidarity among incarcerated women, or the subversive power of storytelling, *A House Without Windows* shows how Afghan women reclaim agency in environments designed to suppress them. Zeba's silence is not passivity, it is power. The prison is not only confinement, it is a place of awakening. And the veil, while often a symbol of erasure, becomes a complex marker of strength and survival.

By centering her narrative on the silenced and the marginalized, Hashimi challenges readers to listen more closely to the truths that are hidden behind veils, locked behind walls, or left unspoken in courtrooms. Her novel becomes not only a critique of patriarchal injustice but also a testament to the resilience of women whose voices, though suppressed, continue to rise.

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