

Representation of Afghan's Tradition and Culture in Nadia Hashimi's *When the Moon is Low*

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Abstract: This paper is an initiative to analyse tradition and culture entrenched in the lives of Afghan people. Tradition and Culture are intimately linked together. Tradition relates to a specific activity, event, or behaviour that has been repeated over and over again from generation to generation. On the other hand, Culture is the combination of a particular society portraying people's ideas, beliefs, cultural customs like arts and social behaviours. Tradition and culture based on their pattern of living show how they were forced to live in their own land. It also encompasses all the customs, beliefs and practices within the country. It scrutinizes to explain the ideologies and practices which explore their Afghan identity. This novel is a domestic fiction which revolves around Fereiba, a widow who is left with three children who jeopardise her life in migrating to other countries as a result of all the hardships faced under Taliban regime. This paper entitled Representation of Afghan's Tradition and Culture in Nadia Hashimi's *When the Moon is Low* attempts to examine Afghan cultural beliefs and customs via the perspective of Fereiba while also expressing Afghans' love for their home country and all it had to offer them before to the start of the conflict. The novel also enhances the Taliban regime and transnational migrations from a refugee's perspective. The paper also scrutinizes the ways in which the culture and tradition bothers the lifestyle of the people in Afghan nation.

Keywords: Afghans, Culture, Gender stereotype, Identity, Refugee, Tradition.

1. INTRODUCTION

Representation of Afghan's Tradition and Culture in Nadia Hashimi's *When the Moon is Low*

Afghanistan is basically a vast country and as a result it has a rich mix of ethnicities and tribes. Afghanistan has always prejudiced world cultures and heritage, more than their military or political mind set. A rich tradition in ancestry and pride in personal honour are features that offer a glimpse of the land and its people. Afghans are very proud of their land, religion and ancestry. Another trait that practically all Afghans have in common is their great loyalty to their clan, tribe, and courage. When it comes to family, it is the single most units in the Afghan culture. The people of Afghanistan are cordial and diligent. Their home serve as the heart of their lives and works.

The role of men and women are much more defined along with the traditional lines. Afghan tradition values son as a source of immense pride for their family. As a matter of fact, there are several practices held in Afghanistan once a child is born. Initially when it comes to naming a child, they whisper *azaan*, a call or a prayer in the ears of the newborn. "My grandfather whispered the *azaan*, or call to prayer, in Asad's newborn ear, baptizing him as a Muslim" (9). This is a ritual followed by almost all the people in the Muslim community.

A role of a mother is very special when it comes to any tradition or culture. Likewise in Afghan country, a mother is a supporting spirit in the development of a child from day one till it learns to live on its own. Mothers are more concerned about their new born especially after the first forty days of childbirth. They are more focused in protecting their child from the evil eyes surrounding them. "Fearful that the neighbours or family members would be jealous on the child and cast an evil eye on him, she sewed a small blue stone, an amulet, to the baby clothing her sister-in-law had given her to ward off the evil eye, or *nazar*" (9). Mothers are very keen in handling the babies till they successfully complete their first forty days without any difficulties. If someone compliments the baby, the mothers are so frightened that it would end up with something wrong happening to the baby. Mothers assume that, if someone compliments the infant, then something bad will happen to the child. "If Asad felt heavier in her hands, or if a visitor commented on his pink, fleshy cheeks, she would look to her nails. She punctuated their compliments with whispers of *nam-e-khoda*, praising God's name" (9). They do innumerable things in order to keep their babies endangered and vigorous. These parades the duties of mothers in Afghan customs.

Various other traditions like lining the child's eyes with kohl, and shaving their heads after forty days of birth were also practised in Afghan nation. "The babies' eyes were lined with kohl, sweets were purchased when they'd survived forty days, and their heads were shaved to give them full, thick locks" (16). Afghan people are mainly into superstitious beliefs and ideas that are passed from one generation to another.

Fereiba lost her mother in childbirth and grew up in the hands of her stepmother. She was ultimately blamed for the death of her own mother. She felt guilty and longed for mother's love. Initially, her stepmother was a bit considerate towards her needs. Later she wishes to bear a son as a pride to the family. But she fails to bear a male child though trying hard for four times in the hope of giving birth to a son. Instead, she has four daughters on the line. She strongly believes that it all happened due to the curse of Fereiba's mother who was earlier in her place, to be the real reason for her not bearing sons and bearing four daughters one after the other. "Mauriya's birth disappointed her and she believed that my mother's spirit had placed a powerful curse on her womb. When Mariam, my fourth sister was born, KokoGul was not in the least disappointed or surprised. Feeling thwarted by my dead mother, she bitterly resolved not to have any more children" (14). Blaming the first wife's dead spirit when a second wife couldn't bear a son is also one of the superstitions in Afghan culture.

There are also references to many other popular superstitions abound in Afghan culture. "We could not sleep with socks on, lest we go blind. If anyone dropped a piece of silverware, I was tasked with cleaning the house from top to bottom in anticipations of guests. If she coughed while eating or drinking, she cursed those who were undoubtedly speaking ill of her somewhere" (17). On the other hand, Fereiba's stepmother had superstitions on her own as well. "Two birds overhead meant she would get into an argument with a close friend. If her onions burned on the fire, someone was bad -mouthing her cooking, and if she sneezed more than twice, evil spirits were toying with her" (17).

Afghans are good at extending hospitality towards their guests. In Afghan tradition, serving sweets are considered as a symbol of positivity when it comes to marriage proposal. Sweets are only given as an acceptance of the suitor's family on their visit of marriage proposal. They never offer sweets to the suitor's family if they are uncertain about their choice of alliance. Fereiba's stepmother asks her to serve only tea and biscuits when Agha Firooz's wife and daughter came home for a marriage proposal for her son.

No sweets, mind you! I don't know exactly what this visit is about but we don't want to embarrass ourselves". Sweets were given to a suitors family as an affirmative signal, a nod of agreement to give the daughter's hand in marriage. It would be shamefully forward to serve candied almonds or chocolates to guests on their first visit (41).

Other traditions like preparing *shirnee* is also a custom practised among the suitor's families. *Shirnee*, is a tray served as a result of the families' acceptance of the marriage. "KokoGul was quietly gathering what she needed to make my *shirnee*, a symbolic tray of sweets to be presented to the suitor's family as formal acceptance of their proposal. A silver-plated serving serving tray, gold tulle, and a box from Kabul's confectionary store had been tucked into her dresser drawer" (52). Religion is a common strand that binds these Afghan people. Islam is the official religion of Afghanistan and the majority of them are Muslims. Their religious views dominate much of their personal, political, economic and legal lives. The people of Afghanistan are ardent followers of all the Islamic beliefs and firmly believe in an all-powerful God. Afghans are very strong in their religious faiths. They share their thoughts and inner feelings to God in the form of prayer. They have the habit of praying five times per day. "Five times a day, I had a chance to share my thoughts with God. I had a chance to ask for forgiveness and pray that Allah keep my mother and grandfather in His peaceful gardens" (59).

Quite a lot of things are also considered as a taboo in Afghan society. Mostly men and women never shake hands or make eye contact in Afghan society. Unrestricted interaction between men and women takes place only in families. Interaction with Men can be accepted as a societal norm only in a workplace setting. Other than that, talking to a man outside family is considered as a taboo in Afghan nation. "I spent all my time either in a classroom of girls or at home. The only boys of my age that I knew were my cousins. To have an interaction with a boy outside was taboo and I knew it" (40). Women in Afghanistan are expected to have a modest dressing covering their heads with burqa. Women wearing modern clothes symbolize their disrespect towards their culture.

Gender roles are highly patriarchal and rigidly defined in Afghan culture. Men are expected to earn well and are considered as a main source of income to their families. On the other hand, women are mostly asked to take responsibility of all the household chores. A common misconception in Afghan tradition is that women are not prioritised when it comes to getting an education or a job. Women are considered to be an authoritative figure only in domestic realm.

When the Taliban took control, they imposed severe restrictions on women. Education and other fundamental rights were denied to women. As a teacher, Fereiba feels distressed when Taliban enforce rules as women being restricted to teach at schools. THE NEW RISING REGIME, THE TALIBAN, INSISTED THAT WOMEN dress more modestly and men grow beards in accordance with Islamic tradition. Every day, they issued a new set of decrees and meted out swift punishment for those who disobeyed. As a woman, I wasn't allowed to teach. Girls were not permitted in school" (93). Being pregnant, Fereiba was not even permitted to go to the hospital with her own son when she was unable to bear her pain. No emotions or physical needs were taken into consideration by the Taliban. "Get back to your home. Go home with your boy and try to carry yourself as a respectful Muslim woman. You have no need for the hospital. Keep your woman troubles to yourself and spare your son the shame of being seen with you" (109). As a woman, stepping out of their home without their husband is considered as dishonourable in addition to the violation of rules imposed by the Taliban.

Ultimately Nadia Hashimi through her novel, *When the Moon is Low*, sceptically provides an in-depth knowledge to its readers about Afghans' customs and traditions in a nutshell. She highlights the unique cultural aspect of the Afghan society through ambiguous characters. Afghan society is kinship based and its traditional customs and practices vary from one region to another. The Afghans are generally non-interfering and hardworking people. Their simple way of living has influenced individuals both positively and negatively. Several times, their friendly nature has been misinterpreted for a compromising attitude and has led a great havoc in the current political conditions. The ongoing violence in Afghanistan has had a tremendous impact on the culture and way of life of the people. Besides Nadia have highlighted in the novel that Afghan people have come to value resilience as a crucial quality.

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