

Gender Intervention Through Toxic Masculinity in Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*

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ABSTRACT

This article is about the idea of gender intervention through toxic masculinity reflected in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* based on the theory of toxic masculinity by Terry A. Kupers. Beginning from a position that sees masculinity as a socially constructed idea in a patriarchal culture, this article works through the concept that hegemonic masculinity under patriarchy can turn toxic. There is a connection between toxic masculinity and hegemonic masculinity because toxic masculinity deviates from hegemonic masculinity aspects that are destructive. Many toxic masculinity traits can be found in society. This research uses a descriptive qualitative research design since this study will be limited to explain on two traits that are found in the novel. The most prominent traits that can be found in the novel are the subordination of women and violence. The idea of subordination of women can harm women because it puts them in an inferior position. This idea is also harmful to men as well when they could not meet society's expectation of being "real" men. Toxic masculinity also has the belief that to prove their manhood, men have to be able to act violently. From that idea, some characters in the novel perform violence because they want to fit society's expectation of being a "real" man. This study concludes that the hegemony of masculinity under a patriarchal society can result in a bad situation where men are viewed as superior and women as inferior. It can push the idea of toxic masculinity, which is harmful to both men and women. It is because men's superior position in this situation can be destructive and harmful for both men and women.

Keywords: gender intervention, subordination of women, toxic masculinity, violence

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the phrase "toxic masculinity" has drawn criticism. It is researched in the field of men's studies under the tent of "Critical Studies on Men" (CSM), where the significance of power dynamics is acknowledged. The concept of hegemony and its key applications in current theories on males are of primary relevance. These applications, similar to hegemonic masculinity in the understanding of masculinities, are qualifiedly criticized (Hearn, 2004: 50). There has been much confusion in defining the term "toxic masculinity". Therefore, it will be easier to define the phrase itself first. The field of gender studies defines the term masculinity as "the set of social practices and cultural representations associated with being a man" (Zimmerman in Nurhadi, 2018; Pilcher & Whelchan in Brooks, 2019). There is no pre-social category for masculinity. Male biology does not determine masculinity; instead, it is continuously referenced (sometimes metaphorically and implicitly) about male bodies. As a result, one can talk of manly women and feminine men, as well as gender ambiguities and paradoxes (Connell in Horlacher, 2015: 40). Masculinity, in its wide definition, can be defined as a set of behaviours and practices that have traditionally been associated with manhood in a culture. Society dictates what is expected from men so that those who do not conform

to the ideal types of manhood are usually condemned. As Zimmerman (In Nurhadi, 2018) said that gender can't be performed but fundamentally produce and act continuously. In other words, men are expected to act a certain way and embody those cultural norms. The modifier "toxic" is used to highlight the fact that these kinds of behaviours carry with them some potentially serious and even deadly consequences.

Kupers (2005: 714) describes the term toxic masculinity as the set of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the subordination of women, homophobia, and violence. Toxic masculinity, then, is a term that is used to refer to a subset of those behaviours which are harmful or destructive. This kind of phenomenon is most likely to happen in a society that adopts a patriarchal system. Related to patriarchy, Singh (2021: 138) defines a social structure known as patriarchy as characterized by the dominance of male members of the clan or family and the subordinate status of female members. The term "patriarchy" refers to any social and political structures that reproduce and enforce male domination over women. Men defend their dominance by focusing on the actual and perceived biological disparities between the two recognized sexes and asserting that women are biologically inferior.

Beginning from a position that sees masculinity as a socially constructed idea in a patriarchal culture, this article works through the concept that hegemonic masculinity under patriarchy can turn toxic. Since the early 1980s, gender studies have employed the idea of hegemonic masculinity to describe men's dominance over women. It has been used to explain men's health behaviours and the use of violence by emphasizing the legitimating power of consent rather than fundamental physical or political strength to ensure compliance (Jewkes et al, 2015: 112). There is a connection between toxic masculinity and hegemonic masculinity because toxic masculinity deviates from hegemonic masculinity aspects that are destructive. Many toxic masculinity traits can be found in society. For example, when men cannot meet society's expectation of being "real" men in a patriarchal society. Toxic masculinity also has the belief that to prove their manhood, men have to be able to act violently.

The notion of toxic masculinity is often portrayed in literary works, one of which is the novel entitled *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* by the Afghani-American author Nadia Hashimi. It is a story about a young girl named Rahima who is growing up in modern-day Afghanistan. It is also a story about her great-great-grandmother named Shekiba who lives decades earlier. Both of them are dressed for a time as boys and live their lives as boys as they endure the struggle of being a woman in Afghanistan, a place where the opportunities and rights of men and women are dramatically different. Rahima and Shekiba are transformed into what Afghani society calls "bacha posh", a tradition that allows them to enjoy the privilege of being a boy in Afghanistan. In this study, the writer is interested in the notion of toxic masculinity in the novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* by Nadia Hashimi. The reason why the writer decided to choose this novel is that the writer has not found a previous study on the notion of toxic masculinity in the novel. Yet, the notion of toxic masculinity is portrayed in the novel itself. The writer will focus on the traits of toxic masculinity that are depicted in the novel.

2. METHOD

This study aims to describe the toxic masculinity depicted in *The Pearl That Broke its Shell* by Nadia Hashimi. This study was conducted because societal expectations of men to follow conventional masculine roles result in the promotion of toxic masculinity and its harmful effects. This study is designed in a qualitative way. According to Airasian, et all (2007:7), qualitative research is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest. The result of the analyzing process is also

presented in the form of words, clauses, and sentences instead of numerical data. In this study, the writer focuses on the written data in the form of language from the novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* written by Nadia Hashimi that are related to the kinds of toxic masculinity traits in a society that adopts patriarchal systems. In this study, an extrinsic approach is used to examine topics such as patriarchal society, masculinity, and gender intervention that are not directly related to the literary work. The extrinsic approach, according to Wellek and Warren (1977: 139), is focused on topics outside of the literary work, such as feminism, religion, culture, psychology, and so forth. By analyzing the novel, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, this article explores the description of toxic masculinity found in traditional ideas of masculinity rooted in female subordination and violence.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

There are some traditional masculinity traits that are considered destructive to society as a whole, hence, it is called toxic masculinity. There are many toxic masculinity traits that can be found in society. However, the writer limits two traits that are found in the novel. The most prominent traits that can be found in the novel are the subordination of women and violence. The followings are the analysis of subordination of women and violence.

3.1 Subordination of Women in the Novel

One of the main traits of toxic masculinity is the notion of woman's subordination. The subordination of women is rooted in the men's idea of viewing women as inferior to men. The patriarchal system, which refers to the concept of male domination, has placed women in an inferior position. Connell (2005) states that women's subordination by male dominance is one of the hegemonic masculinities that is entrusted by society. Society believes that boys and girls are not necessarily equal. Son preference in society emerges due to the belief that sons are considered to be blessings and pride of the parents while girls are more likely to be a burden to the family. In the novel, son preference over a daughter is clearly seen several times. One of which is portrayed in the quotation below.

"If I had a son this would not happening! Goddamn it! Why do we have a house full of girls! Not one, not two—but five of them!" he would yell. Madar-*jan* would busy herself with housework, feeling the weight of disappointment on her shoulders. (Hashimi, 2014: 5)

The quotation above happens when Rahima's father is so angry owing to the fact that he does not have a son in his family. For Rahima's father, it is hard to find a more shameful thing than having only daughters and no son in a traditional patriarchal society like Afghanistan. Rahima's father considers that it is a shame to have no son in his family. It is a tradition in Afghanistan that a man's honor, dignity, and the name have been carried by a son. For a family in a patriarchal society, having a son is preferable to a daughter because they can carry the family's name. In other words, a son brings honor to his father by virtue of his very existence. Whereas on the other hand, a daughter is placed at constant risk of dishonoring her father. This kind of toxic belief is perpetuated in a patriarchal society like Afghanistan.

Patriarchal society believes in education given to boys and will bring positive impacts to their life prospects, such as in future jobs. As women are being subordinated, they have no freedom to live their lives as they want them to be. In a patriarchal society, women are not given the same opportunities for making choices such as in marriage. Women are forced to marry out of their choice. Many women have to suffer from forced marriage because they are considered burdens in their families due to their gender. Women are seen as dependent on men; therefore, marriage is seen as the best solution for a woman because a man can support her life. When a woman comes to her husband's house as a wife after marriage, her husband thinks that she is in a subordinate position and

he is more powerful than her. Another factor that perpetuates the practice of forced marriage is poverty. Poverty is one of the causes of early and forced marriage in a society where women are considered subordinate to men. In the novel, Rahima's family is described in a bad economic condition. Arranging early and forced marriage for daughters is a gateway for parents to reduce the financial burden. Another reason for forced marriage practice is because it is considered shameful to keep young girls unmarried in a patriarchal society. It can be seen in the quotation below that Rahima's father worries about what society thinks of him keeping unmarried daughters in his home.

"She said she was taking care of all of us. She said it was a house full of *dokhtar-ha-jawan* and it wasn't easy. All of a sudden, he got quiet. Then he started pacing the floor, saying his house was full of young women and that it wasn't right."

"What's not right?" "Don't you know what people say? They say it's not right to keep a *dokhtar-ha-jawan* in your home." (Hashimi, 2014: 105)

In many cases, women have no right to choose their husbands. Rather, the male members of their families impose decisions on them while men can choose their partners freely. Rahima's marriage is one of the examples of many Afghan women in the novel who are set in a forceful marriage with an unwanted suitor. In the novel, Rahima is forced by her father to marry a man who demands a marriage. This practice shows that as the superior in his family, Rahima's father uses his power in order to control and oppress her daughter. In fact, even Rahima's mother could not do anything to prevent the forced marriage of her daughters from happening but her efforts came to no avail. Rahima's father determines her to get married at a young age. Her father is consistent with his choice and ignores his wife's opinion. He has the authority to decide everything in his daughters' life. A wife is excluded from decision-making positions in the family. For Rahima's father, everything about his daughter's life is his business. He does not need to ask everyone, including his wife.

In the novel, Rahima is married at thirteen years old to Abdul Khaliq who is nearly as old as her father. Abdul Khaliq is a warlord, who has a large network of power and drug business. Rahima's father considers him a powerful man who can change their family's lot as Rahima's family is described in a bad economic condition in the novel. Rahima's father agrees to marry his daughter to Abdul Khaliq at a huge bridal price. Rahima is forced to marry him and she knows that she could not do anything to prevent the marriage from happening as she thinks that, "Men could do what they wanted with women. There would be no stopping what Padar had set in motion" (Hashimi, 2014: 123). The arrangement is shocking and frustrating since marriage has never crossed Rahima's mind before. She refuses it but Rahima's refusal cannot cancel the marriage arrangement because she has no power to face her father's intention.

The idea of subordination of women can be so toxic because it actually affects not only women but men as well because a family tends to put burdens on men's shoulders. Society prefers baby boys over baby girls because boys are considered leaders in the future, so their needs should be prioritized and fulfilled. As a consequence, boys are encouraged to study a lot of things, meanwhile, girls are only permitted to know and do house cleaning. Normally, parents think that boys will have a brighter future compared to girls. The family's full support to boys will encourage them for having a good living. In other words, parents think that men can provide good lives for their families. From that idea, parents put burdens on men's shoulders. The society in which the novel takes place allows boys to get better facilities and more privileges compared to girls. It influences parents to prioritize their sons' education. Boys should perform many things in his life until they grow up. It can be seen in the quotation below.

"I've got a lot more sense than you, *engineer-sahib*." A low blow. Padar-*jan* had wanted to major in engineering when he finished high school but his mark didn't make the cut. Instead, he took some general classes for one semester and then dropped out to start working. He had a shop now

where he fixed old electronics, and though he was pretty good at what he did, he was still bitter about not making it as an engineer, a highly regarded title for Afghans. (Hashimi, 2014:11)

Rahima's father feels ashamed of himself because he could not meet the standard of being the real man in the society in which the novel takes place. He lives in a society where failure to ascribe to and adequately perform within the bounds of masculinity means one has failed to live up to one's potential. Men who do not fit within the ideal definition of what is considered "manly" are ostracized and considered not "real" men. Boys and men are given access to the outside world so they may acquire skills, knowledge, and more opportunities. The families would provide financial backup for them to get an education and provide anything for their sons. The effect of this idea can be so harmful to men when they could not meet society's expectation of being "real" men.

3.2 Violence in the Novel

Toxic masculinity has the belief that in order to prove their manhood, men have to be able to perform violence. As a result, men who live in a culture of violence are demanded to perform that they have the capability to become violent (Nillson&Lundgren, 2020). There are several reasons why men enact violence but one of the most common is to prove their manhood. They do not want to be perceived as weak or soft by society so they choose to be aggressive and violent. In the novel, that pattern of behavior is what Rahima's father continually repeats. It can be seen in the quotation below.

All we managed to do was embarrass my father. My mother sobbed, her hands in powerless fists. Khala Shaima shook her head and shouted that this, all of this, was wrong, a sin. She didn't stop until my father slapped her across the face. She reeled backward. Our guests looked on, feeling it was well deserved. My father had redeemed himself in their eyes. (Hashimi, 2014: 152)

That quotation clearly shows that Rahima's father acts violently toward Khala Shaima in order to restore his manhood in the face of his guests. The quotation happens when Khala Shaima strongly refused her nieces' forced marriages in front of the guests. Rahima's father felt humiliated by Khala Shaima's action so he hit Khala Shaima in front of his guests to redeem his honor as a man. This belief has caused destructive effects for men because as they don't want to be seen as weak or soft, they are forced to be violent by patriarchal masculinity. This form of belief has caused destructive effects for both men and society. Men are forced to resort to violence, if they do not want to be seen as weak. He did it so that Abdul Khaliq's family can realize that if he can conform to the traditional masculine traits which are considered toxic.

Being masculine implies being violent because to be a "real" man, one needs to exhibit his power. As a result, men who live in culture of violence are demanded to perform that they have the capability to become violent. This display of toxic masculinity is encouraging the culture of violence by making it acceptable and trivializing and normalizing violence. When Abdul Khaliq managed himself to defend his homeland against Taliban, he is appraised and recognized as the real men by the society. This acknowledgement from the society will boast his pride and the craving for more recognition makes him to act more violent.

For Rahima, being forced to get married in such an early age marriage becomes the beginning of her long severe life with a very domestically violent husband. In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, many female characters experience physical violence. They do not resist because women have accepted it as part of their identity. Accepting the physical abuse is considered as part of marital life. Women do not resist because deep inside their mind, being passive, dependent, and dutiful is a form of respect to their husbands. Physical violence is a type of violence involving direct and intended physical contact to cause feelings of intimidation, injury or other physical suffering or damage to the body. Physical violence includes slaps, kicks, and other actions that may cause physical harm (Annisa in Istikomah, 2015: 57). In the novel, Rahima often experiences physical violence conducted by her husband, Abdul

Khaliq. One of many physical attacks Abdul Khaliq does to Rahima is when she is considered disrespectful by Abdul Khaliq when she is turning her head away from him. Below is the quotation which shows that Abdul Khaliq viciously violates Rahima.

“I never saw where it came from. Maybe under his pillow. Or maybe in his jacket pocket. In a flash, Abdul Khaliq grabbed my hair and pulled my head off the ground. My head slipped forward. He snatched again and jerked my head up. My scalp screamed. When I saw locks of hair on the floor around me, I realized what he was doing. I tried to pull away, begged him to stop, but he was barely there. He was trying to take me apart, to disassemble the pieces that were hardly holding together as it was. More hair on the ground. I tried to crawl away but his grip was tight. I shrieked as I felt my scalp lift off my skull.

“Please,” I begged. “Please stop! You don’t know!” He had taken a knife to my hair, a blade I’d seen him tuck into his waistband before he and his guards went off for his meetings. The blade was dull and he had to chop at my hair again and again, holding it taut by the ends.” (Hashimi, 2014: 408-409)

Rahima suffers from terrible physical injuries on her body. Abdul Khaliq’s cruelty is described clearly in the quotation above that the beating happens viciously. Wife battering is quite common in the society in a society which adopts patriarchal system. The quotation below shows how horrible it is living in the society in which all men have the power and authorities to conduct violence against women when they do even the slightest mistakes.

Psychological violence is more insidious because women are affected in their dignity. It includes menacing, threatening, isolating from friends and family and any action that results in psychological distress (Annisa in Istikomah, 2015: 56).

The quotation below is an example of psychological violence that is experienced by Rahima.

“During the day I watched the compound’s walls, hoping for a glimpse of my sister. I prayed Parwin would hobble into our courtyard unannounced and surprise me with a visit, drawing a smile. I couldn’t bear to think of what her days were like. I hoped she didn’t have to do all the things I had to do. Parwin’s leg moved slowly, clumsily. People didn’t like that. If the people around here were anything like the people around me, she was sure to be punished. I’d been smacked around more than once for a job not done well enough.” (Hashimi, 2014: 178)

The quotation shows that one form of psychological violence experienced by Rahima is isolation from her husband's family which makes it very difficult for her to meet her sister named Parwin. Parwin is married to Abdul Khaliq’s cousin named Abdul Haidar. It is very difficult for Rahima to see Parwin even though the distance between them is only separated by a wall. A form of psychological violence experienced by Rahima is isolation from meeting her family.

Another form of psychological violence that is experienced by Rahima is surveillance done by Abdul Khaliq. “It angered me to realize how tight our leash was, even in this far away from Abdul Khaliq. I felt like I was being buried in a hole, deeper and deeper every day until I could hardly see daylight” (Hashimi, 2014: 352). It shows that Abdul Khaliq is constantly doing extreme surveillance on his wife. Even though psychological violence is insidious, it has great negative effects on the victims’ lives. Another form of psychological violence that is portrayed quite often in the novel is verbal aggression. For instance, Abdul Khaliq often insults, mocks, and threatens Rahima and his other wives. The quotation below describes that it is not easy for Rahima to bear Abdul Khaliq’s scorn, ridicule, insults, and his way of treating her. “Hard to believe you could be even worse as a mother than you are as a wife! My son deserved better! He would be alive if he’d had a mother better than you!” (Hashimi, 2014: 408). His verbal aggression is a form of psychological violence that results in constant humiliation for Rahima.

Another form of violence experienced by some of the female characters in the novel is sexual violence. Sexual violence includes all actions performed by resorting to force without the consent of the person such as rape, sexual harassment, marital rape and incest (Annisa in Istikomah, 2015: 53). Rahima experiences marital rape or a rape of a wife by her husband. Abdul Khaliq, Rahima's husband, always forces his sexual desire on his wives. He forces them to serve him even whenever he wants to be served. It can be seen in the quotation below.

He turned my face toward him. He was so close I could see the lines on his face. I could make out each hair of his eyebrow. I tried to keep my eyes lowered.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" I nodded. My mind flashed back to his bodyguards and their guns. I was terrified.

"Good. Now, do as I say and take off your chador." He could have done it. I thought about it later and realized he could have done all the things he made me do, but that wouldn't have served his purpose. One by one, he made me take off everything I'd been wearing. First the chador, then my socks, my pants, my dress. With every piece, I trembled more. When my pants came down, I began to cry, which didn't faze him in the least. I was humiliated. I stood before him, weak and vulnerable, my arms doing their best to cover as much as they could. He nodded in approval; his lips wet with excitement. (Hashimi, 2014: 168)

For Rahima, sexual intercourse with her husband is sickening since Abdul Khaliq never asks Rahima for her consent before, they have sex. It can be told that their sexual intercourse is a marital rape that sickens, tires, and disgusts Rahima. Since Rahima is forced to serve Abdul Khaliq sexual desire without her consent, their sexual intercourse is a marital rape that is hidden and justified in marital bound. Another example of how disgusted Rahima feels whenever they have sexual intercourse is shown in the quotation below.

I hated to feel his breath on my face. I sometimes tried to pull away, to squirm from him like the fighters in the magazines. But the more I struggled, the more forceful he became. And worse than that was the smirk on his face. As if he enjoyed when I put up a fight. I shouldn't have been surprised. He was a man of war, after all. Each time, I felt dirty and weak. I hated that I was powerless under him. I was supposed to be this man's wife and that changed everything. I wasn't supposed to fight back. And the look on his face told me that fighting back would only make matters worse.

"So many nights I lay curled on my side, crying quietly and waiting for morning to come so the man snoring beside me would stretch his arms and leave". (Hashimi, 2014: 174). From that quotation, it can be seen that Abdul Khaliq always forces himself upon her so that sexual intercourse is merely a duty done of necessity for Rahima. Rahima cannot do anything because she thinks that resisting what Abdul Khaliq wants means she will suffer more because her husband can be so violent to her. All she can do is just letting him do whatever he wants to do. Rahima does not resist because she does not want her husband to divorce her. When a woman is divorced by her husband, it seems like she will have no place to return because her family will consider her odious.

4. CONCLUSION

Toxic masculinity is developed from hegemonic masculinity aspects that are considered destructive. Toxic masculinity deciphers the traditional masculine traits that are constructed by the patriarchy that can have damaging consequences for individuals and the society at large. The writer found that the toxic masculinity traits are identified in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*. There are two toxic masculine traits depicted in the novel such as subordination of women and violence. Subordination of women is shown repeatedly in the novel by male characters and society in which the story of the novel takes place. In the novel, the writer shows that the idea of subordination of women can be so harmful to not only women but also men. As women are being

subordinated, they have no freedom to live their lives as they want it to be. On the other hand, the idea of subordination of woman can be so toxic to men as well because society tends to put burdens on men's shoulders to fit what the society expects from them.

Toxic masculinity has the belief that in order to prove their manhood, men have to be able to perform violence. As a result, men who live in culture of violence are demanded to perform that they have the capability to become violent. There are several reasons why men enact violence but one of the most common is to prove their manhood. They do not want to be perceived weak or soft by other men so they choose to be aggressive and violent. In the novel, the constant need to prove their masculinity is what causes men to act violently.

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