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BREAKING PATRIARCHAL VOICES: STORYTELLING AS AN EMPOWERING FEMINIST TOOL IN AFGHAN NARRATIVES OF HASHIMI AND HOSSEINI

Abstract: *Storytelling is a foundational human practice that preserves collective memory, transmits cultural wisdom, and constitutes reality. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's reflections in "The Storyteller" in* Illuminations *(Benjamin 1968/2007), this article foregrounds the storyteller's role as a mediator or transmitter of experience, whose authority lies not in mere information but in the capacity to weave meaning into communal life. Complementing this, Jerome Bruner's "The Narrative Construction of Reality" (1991) situates narrative as essential to the cultural frameworks through which reality itself is apprehended, underscoring its epistemological force. From a feminist perspective, storytelling acquires heightened significance as a means of reclaiming silenced voices and resisting patriarchal erasure. Carol Galligan's* In a Different Voice *(1993) and bell hooks'* Talking Back *(1989/2015) reflect the urgency of narrative in foregrounding women's agency and authorship. This framework is applied to contemporary Afghan diasporic literature, where storytelling functions as survival and empowerment. Through Nadia Hashimi's* The Pearl that Broke its Shell (2014) *and Khaled Hosseini's* And the Mountains Echoed *(2013), the paper demonstrates how oral genealogies, epistolary forms, and fragmented communication converge to construct feminist counter-narratives against patriarchal structures. These texts situate Afghan women's experiences within broader historical, cultural, and transnational contexts, revealing storytelling as a critical site of resilience, resistance, and narrative justice.*

Keywords: Storytelling, narrative theory, feminist voice, patriarchal erasure, Afghan diasporic literature, counter-narratives, Nadia Hashimi, Khaled Hosseini, bell hooks.

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Introduction

Storytelling is a foundational human activity, deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of societies across time. Walter Benjamin (1968/2007), in his essay "The Storyteller," emphasises that "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (p.87). For Benjamin, storytelling is not simply entertainment but a means of preserving collective memory and transmitting cultural wisdom. Jerome Bruner (1991) extends this idea by noting that narrative not only represents but constitutes reality (p.5). Together, these perspectives highlight storytelling as both repository of cultural memory and a tool for making sense of the world.

From a feminist perspective, storytelling acquires an additional layer of importance. Carol Gilligan (1993), in *In a Different Voice*, appears to be interested "in releasing women's voices and making it possible to hear what women know" (p.x) simply because "And yet by restricting their voices, many women are wittingly or unwittingly perpetuating a male-voiced civilization and an order of living that is founded on disconnection from women" (p.xi). This underscores how narrative foregrounds marginalised voices and relational agency. Similarly, bell hooks (1989/2015), in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, insists on talking back and being heard; she posits, "To make yourself heard ... was to invite punishment." She adds, "To make my voice, I had to speak, to hear myself talk" (p.5). However, hooks, aware of the "endless" consequences of talking back, further resists to secure "the right to voice, to authorship, a privilege I would not be denied" (p.6). In this sense, storytelling consolidates feminist approaches by reclaiming silenced voices, challenging patriarchal erasure, and foregrounding agency.

Storytelling in contemporary Afghan diasporic literature often functions as both survival and subversion, a means of reclaiming silenced voices against patriarchal erasure. Oscillating between oral and written forms, these narratives embody a dynamic interplay of ancestral memory and textual inscription. Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* (2014) foregrounds oral genealogies and ancestral memory to construct a continuum of women's resilience and resistance across generations, while Khaled Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) deploys letters, postcards, interviews, and digital traces to extend his novel into an epistolary dimension that highlights dislocation, diaspora, resilience, and resistance among female characters against patriarchal schemes to silence them and to move them into oblivion. Taken together, these works demonstrate how fragmented

communication and intergenerational storytelling—moving fluidly between oral and written registers—converge as feminist counter-narratives, situating Afghan women's experiences within broader historical, cultural, and transnational contexts.

Hashimi's and Hosseini's novels both deploy storytelling as a feminist counter-narrative, though they do so through distinct strategies. In Hashimi's novel, the dual narrative structure intertwines Rahima's contemporary struggles with those of her ancestor Shekiba, creating a genealogical continuum of women's survival. This intergenerational storytelling functions as a reclamation of silenced voices, situating Afghan women's endurance within a broader historical and cultural memory. Proverbs, ancestral tales, and oral genealogies become the medium through which resistance is articulated, particularly in contexts where women's literacy and textual production are restricted. In Hosseini's novel, by contrast, women's resistance through storytelling takes the written form, as women's literacy and textual production are accessible in specific milieus. While not formally an epistolary novel, these fragments of communication foreground silenced voices and reclaim memory in ways that resist patriarchal erasure. Each act of writing becomes a gesture of survival and solidarity, situating women's experiences within broader diasporic, historical, and cultural contexts. Hosseini's fragmented type of storytelling emphasises dislocation, exile, and scattering voices across borders, highlighting how communication itself becomes a form of resistance against patriarchal structures that seek to silence women (Prathibha, 2020).

The contrast between the two texts lies in the narrative politics. Hosseini's fragments underscore diaspora and displacement, while Hashimi's oral genealogies emphasise continuity and rootedness within Afghan cultural memory. Hosseini juxtaposes feminist storytelling with patriarchal myth-making, particularly Saboor's tale of the div, which allegorises female dispossession through fate and allegory. Hashimi's approach to storytelling, however, consistently counters patriarchal traditions by reframing ancestral female stories as sources of agency and endurance, transforming suffering into a narrative of resilience rather than inevitability. Taken together, these novels demonstrate complementary strategies of feminist resistance. On the one hand, Hosseini's fragmented epistolary narrative highlights the survival of women's voices across borders. On the other hand, Hashimi's intergenerational storytelling insists on the continuity of female voices across time. Together, both approaches resist erasure, foreground memory, and reclaim narrative space for Afghan women, whether through diasporic fragments or ancestral inheritance.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach rooted in literary analysis and feminist theory, enriched by an interdisciplinary triangulation of philosophy, psychology, and cultural studies. Walter Benjamin's conception of the storyteller as a custodian of lived experience and cultural memory (Benjamin, 1968/2007) provides the philosophical axis, emphasising the storyteller role in transmitting meaning across generations. Jerome Bruner's constructivist view of narrative as constitutive of reality (Bruner, 1991) anchors the psychological axis, highlighting how stories shape cultural frameworks and human understanding. Feminist cultural studies from the third axis, drawing on Carol Gilligan's ethics of voice (Gilligan, 1993) and bell hooks' insistence on "talking back" as resistance (hooks, 1989/2015), which stresses narrative as a site of agency and reclamation against patriarchal erasure. By juxtaposing Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* (2014) and Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), the analysis demonstrates how oral genealogies, epistolary forms, and fragmented communication converge as feminist-counter narratives. This triangulating methodological design ensures that textual strategies are interpreted not in isolation but as part of a layered, intersectional framework that situates storytelling as survival, empowerment, and narrative justice.

Discussion

The Pearl that Broke its Shell

In Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl* (2014), storytelling functions as both surviving and resisting tool, embodied most powerfully in the figure of Khala Shaima. Shaima acts as a mediator between past and present, transmitting the struggles of Shekiba—Rahima's great-great-grandmother—as a living model of endurance and resistance. As Rahima recalls,

> 'That night Khala Shaima started a story of my great-great-grandmother Shekiba, a story that my sisters and I had never heard before. A story that transformed me.' (Hashimi, 2014:p.12)

This moment underscores how Shaima's narratives are not mere recollections of past events but transformative acts that enable Rahima to "remember-with" her aunt, situating her own suffering within a lineage of resilience. In Benjamin's terms, Shaima's act of narration embodies the storyteller's role in transmitting lived experience as cultural wisdom, where memory is preserved not as a static history but as a living,

transmissible force. At the same time, Shaima resists patriarchal oppression by insisting on telling and conveying stories that reflect women's agency, challenging the silencing structures around her. Bruner's narrative psychology further illuminates this moment: Shaima's story provides Rahima with a framework to interpret her own suffering, constructing meaning through narrative continuity and intergenerational continuities (Bruner, 1991). In a similar vein, feminist readings emphasise that Hashimi's novel foregrounds oral genealogies and ancestral memory as strategies of resistance, situating women's resilience within intergenerational continuities (Bushra, Imdad, & Malik, 2024). Shaima's dual role as mediator and resistor not only inspires Rahima but demonstrates how storytelling consolidates memory, empowers female subjectivity, and reclaims narrative space amid patriarchal erasure.

Moreover, storytelling, in *The Pearl* (2014), leaves discernible traces that extend beyond memory into symbolic acts of naming and inheritance. Khala Shaima's narration of Shekiba's life offers not only ancestral stories that can be remembered but embodied by posterity. As the novel recounts,

> 'SHEKIBA. Your name means 'gift,' my daughter. You are a gift from Allah. Who could have known that Shekiba would become the name she was given, a gift passed from one hand to another?' (Hashimi, 2014:p.13)

This passage illustrates how storytelling inscribes meaning into names, transforming Shekiba into a living metaphor for women's endurance and dispossession. Through Shaima's oral transmission, Shekiba's story becomes a recurrent trace that reappears in Rahima's consciousness throughout the novel, situating her struggles within a continuum of female resilience. Feminist scholars note that Hashimi's novel mobilises oral genealogies and ancestral memory as strategies of resistance, embedding women's voices into cross-generational narratives that defy patriarchal erasure (Siber, 2021:p.121). In this sense, storytelling in *The Pearl* is not a passive recollection of past events but an active inscription of cultural wisdom, where names, memories, and voices converge to construct counter-narratives of survival.

At the beginning of chapter 12, Rahima acknowledges her failure to fully learn from Bibi Shekiba's story, contrasting Shekiba's determination to build a life with her own sense of unravelling under patriarchal constraints. This admission is framed within Rahima's experience as a bacha posh, a practice that temporarily grants girls male privileges but ultimately reinforces gendered utility within the family. As she recalls:

> 'That night I thought of Bibi Shekiba. I liked to compare myself to her, to feel like I was as bold and strong and honorable as her, but in my most honest moments I knew I wasn't.' (Hashimi, 2014:p.89)

From a Benjaminian perspective, Rahima's reflection demonstrates not only how storytelling transmits lived experience as cultural wisdom, but also how its reception hinges on the listener's capacity to weave that wisdom into their own life (Benjamin, 1969/2007:p.87). In this respect, Shaima's narration of Shekiba's becomes a mirror through which Rahima inspects her own courage—a yardstick by which she measures her resistance. Bruner's narrative psychology further clarifies this dynamic: Rahima's comparison to Shekiba illustrates how narrative functions as a scaffold for identity construction, enabling her to situate her fragility within a continuum of resilience and meaning-making. Thus, Shaima's storytelling becomes a mirror through which Rahima inspects her own courage, inspiring her not only to resist but also forcing her into self-critical honesty.

From a different perspective, Hashimi's novel offers a nuanced response to Spivak's (1988) question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In fact, Spivak's interrogation of whether the subaltern can speak provides a critical lens for examining the dynamics of voice and silence in *The Pearl*. Both Rahima and Shekiba begin the novel as silenced figures, caught in what Spivak describes as "double colonization;"—oppressed simultaneously by gender hierarchies and sociopolitical structures (Spivak, 1988:pp.90-91). Their marginality is compounded by cultural practices such as bacha posh and patriarchal violence, which mute their agency and render them socially invisible. Yet, through Khala Shaima storytelling, their voices begin to surface in indirect but powerful ways. Storytelling becomes a counter-narrative that allow Rahima and Shekiba to "speak," not always through direct articulation but through remembered genealogies, embodied resistance, and actions that reclaim subjectivity. In this respect, the subaltern does not simply "speak" in a straightforward manner but communicates through fractured, mediated, and intergenerational forms of narrative. Moreover, Shaima's story functions as a feminist intervention, enabling Rahima to locate her own struggles within a lineage of resistance, thereby transforming silence into agency. The novel thus demonstrates that while the subaltern's voice is constrained, it can emerge through storytelling practices that collapse temporal distance and bring to the fore women's lived realities.

Rahima's observation that "It was time for us to be taken to our new homes, just like Bibi Shekiba" (Hashimi, 2014:p.135) crystallises the novel's insistence on the of patriarchal traditions across generations. Rahima and her sisters, described as "flower buds that had just started to open" (Hashimi, 2014:p.135), are commodified in much the same way as Shekiba had been decades ago; their future is determined by transactional arrangements between men. The ritual of "shirnee," prepared by Madar-jan with "a small bowl of sugar, wet with tears" (Hashimi,

2014:p.135), dramatizes the gendered politics of sacrifice, where maternal grief is silenced beneath ceremonial gestures of compliance.

Benjamin's reflection here is most expressive, as he contends that the storyteller draws upon lived or inherited experience and, in retelling, transforms it into the experience of the listener (1968/2007:p.87). Shaima's narration of Shekiba's fate thus becomes Rahima's interpretive lens, allowing her to recognise her own rebellious acts as a part of longer feminist pattern. Bruner, similarly, argues that narratives operate as versions of reality, accepted not because they can be empirically verified but because they satisfy narrative conventions and necessity (1991:pp.4–5). Rahima's comparison to Shekiba is therefore less about factual accuracy than about the narrative's capacity to provide meaning and coherence to her own situation.

This moment reflects how tradition functions not as a benign cultural inheritance but as a mechanism of control, binding women to roles of submission regardless of temporal distance. As Mohanty (2003) contends that women's oppression must be understood through the "politics of location" (p.106), where intersecting forces of class, culture, and gender reproduce marginalisation across time. In Hashimi's narrative, Khala Shaima's storytelling mediates between past and present; the echo of Shekiba's fate is reverberated through Rahima's own experience, thus transforming oral narrative into feminist lens that exposes the persistence of patriarchal structures as well as affirming the need for intergenerational solidarity.

On another occasion, Rahima's confession that she "prayed for her [Shaima's] health selfishly" (Hashimi, 2014:p.246) reflects the profound dependence she has on Khala Shaima, not only as her last remaining familial support but also as the wise bearer of ancestral memory. Shaima's laboured breathing and waning health somehow bears resemblance to the fragility of oral tradition itself: if Shaima were to die, Rahima would lose the mediatory voice that connects her to Bibi Shekiba's story, and by extension, to a lineage of resilience. At this point, Benjamin's reflections on storytelling clarify this dependence, as he argues that the storyteller transforms inherited or lived experience into the experience of the listener (1968/2007:p.87), Shaima's narration thus becomes indispensable for Rahima, who relies on the continuity of oral transmission to situate her own suffering within a broader genealogy of endurance. The selfishness of Rahima's prayer somehow becomes connotative; it reveals that her survival and sense of agency are contingent upon Shaima's ability to continue narrating. Moreover, Shaima's role as a storyteller is not ornamental but foundational; she sustains Rahima's hope by collapsing temporal distance and reminding her that her struggles are part of a larger circle of women's resistance.

From a feminist perspective, this moment highlights the precariousness of women's voices in patriarchal contexts. As bell hooks (1989) argues, storytelling and talking back are radical acts by which marginalised women reclaim agency and resist silencing (p.67). Shaima embodies this praxis since her moral narrative provides Rahima with a counter-discourse to the violence of Abdul Khaliq and the patriarchal structures that govern her life. Similarly, Mohanty's (2003) notion of politics of locations—which entails "the historical, geographical, cultural, psychic, and imaginative boundaries" (p.106) of a particular subject—illuminates how Shaima's story situates Rahima's oppression within a broader historical and cultural dimensions, allowing her to see her suffering not as insignificant and isolated but as a part of a collective struggle. Thus, Rahima's selfish prayer connotes more than personal attachment; it reveals the urgency of preserving Shaima's voice, for without it, the feminist counter-narrative that sustains Rahima's agency would collapse.

The magical power of Shaima's storytelling becomes evident in her inspirational dialogue with Rahima about naseeb or destiny. When Shaima suggests that Rahima might travel to Kabul, the city becomes more than a geographic location; it represents a symbolic site where ancestral memory and future possibility converge. Rahima has "only heard about it through the story of Bibi Shekiba" (Hashimi, 2014:p.247), and thus her imagination of Kabul is mediated through Shaima's narrative. Again, Benjamin's reflections on storytelling clarify this mediation: Shaima, the storyteller, transforms inherited experience into the listener's experience, Rahima; thus, Shekiba's experience in Kabul becomes Rahima's anticipated moment (1968/2007:p.87).

Furthermore, Shaima reframes destiny not as a fixed script but as something negotiable, teaching Rahima that fate may be altered through everyday acts of agency: "Maybe your naseeb is there but waiting for you to make it happen" (Hashimi, 2014:p.249). Kabul, as a shared space between Shekiba's story and Rahima's potential reality, becomes a feminist geography of possibility. Storytelling here functions as a magical act of conjuring; Shaima's voice animates Shekiba's experiences, making them available as a blueprint for Rahima's resistance, and enabling her to imagine changing her Naseeb rather than passively inheriting it.

Rahima's tentative suggestion to Badriya, "maybe I could help you in Kabul" (Hashimi, 2014:p.256), marks a crucial moment where Khala Shaima's storytelling begins to bear fruit. The idea of Kabul, which was first introduced through Shekiba's remembered life through Shaima's storytelling, how materialises as a concrete possibility in Rahima's imagination. Badriya's dismissive response—"You're young, just a girl! You know nothing about the jirga" (Hashimi, 2014:p.256)—reinforces

the entrenched patriarchal belief that political participation is beyond the reach of young women. Yet, Rahima's persistence reveals how Shaima's story has expanded her imagination, enabling her to envision herself in spaces traditionally denied to her.

Rahima's first arrival to Kabul is narrated through the lens of astonishment, but what makes this moment distinctive is how her perception is doubled; she sees the city with her own eyes and through the remembered impressions of Bibi Shekiba. "My mind jumped to Bibi Shekiba and her first impressions of the capital, as Khala Shaima told it" (Hashimi, 2014:p.270). This layering of her vision creates a palimpsest effect, where Rahima's experience in inscribed over Shekiba's, yet never erases it. The bustling streets, bakeries, and salons are not just new sights but echoes of a narrative she has already internalised. Moreover, when Rahima whispers "Bibi Shekiba..." (Hashimi, 2014:p.271), she acknowledges that her own destiny is entangled in ancestral memory. The Kabuli woman whose eyes meet hers through the tinted glass becomes a living counterpart to Shekiba's imagined gaze, collapsing the distance between past and present. This encounter dramatizes how storytelling prepares Rahima to read the city not only as geography but as a stage where women's lives are negotiated, concealed, and revealed.

Unlike earlier passages where Shaima's story functions as a survival tool, here it operates as a lens of recognition. Rahima realises that her own amazement is inseparable from Shekiba's unfinished narrative, and that her desire to know "what became of her almost as much as I wanted to know what would become of me" (Hashimi, 2014:p.271) is a feminist act of continuity. Kabul is not simply a place of wonder; it is a site where Rahima begins to imagine herself as a part of a lineage of women whose identities, though constrained, remain open to reinterpretation.

Towards the end of the novel, Khala Shaima explicitly frames storytelling as inheritance, urging Rahima to recognise herself as the living continuation of Bibi Shekiba's legacy. Her words, "You are her legacy, after all. Remember, your great-great-grandmother was Bibi Shekiba, guard to the king's harem" (Hashimi, 2014:p.419), transform oral narrative into a genealogical claim. Storytelling here is neither entertaining nor consolation but becomes a ritual of empowerment, binding Rahima's identity to ancestral resilience. Shaima insists that Shekiba is "not a fairy tale" (Hashimi, 2014:p.419) but a historical presence whose blood "courses through your veins and gives strength to your spirit" (Hashimi, 2014:p.419). Thus, this insistence demolishes the boundaries between past and present, rendering Shekiba's courage materially available to Rahima as embodied memory.

Eventually, Shaima's laboured breathing and heavy coughing remind Rahima that the storyteller's voice is finite, and that wisdom must be absorbed before silence

overtakes it. Shaima's plea, "It will give my heart peace if you can tell me that every story I've told...you've gotten some wisdom and some courage from it" (Hashimi 2014, p.419), positions narrative as a pedagogical tool, a means of ensuring that resistance survives beyond her own life. Moreover, by urging Rahima to "walk with your head high" and to remember she is "the descendant of a somebody, not a nobody" (Hashimi, 2014:p.419), Shaima reframes lineage as a source of feminist strength. Here, Shaima's narrative of Shekiba transmits courage into Rahima and generations to come.

Moreover, Rahima's account of parental betrayal, her sisters' fates, Shaima's failing health, and her own precarious marriage is not framed as isolated trauma but as a part of a broader feminist archive. By sharing her story with other women, Rahima ensures that her struggle and suffering come to the open and not suppressed, breaking the silence that patriarchal structures depend upon. This act exemplifies bell hooks' (1989) notion of talking back, where Rahima reclaims agency by articulating her subjectivity in dialogue with others, refusing to remain invisible. Rahima's statement, "the man-woman story had woven its way through my own" (p.439), cements Rahima's role as a successor in the storytelling lineage. Thus, it becomes apparent how Shekiba's life, transmitted through Shaima's voice, finds continuation in Rahima's profuse narration to Hamida and Sufia. This moment, from a feminist perspective, illustrates how storytelling functions as intergenerational resistance against patriarchal hierarchies; each woman's voice builds upon the last, ensuring that memory, courage, and critique are not lost but carried forward.

And the Mountains Echoed

In *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), Khaled Hosseini deploys letters, postcards, interviews, and even digital traces as narrative devices that extend the novel into an epistolary dimension. While the text is not formally an epistolary novel, these fragments of communication serve a feminist function by foregrounding silenced voices, reclaiming memory, and resisting patriarchal erasure. Each act of writing or storytelling becomes a gesture of survival and solidarity, situating women's experiences within broader historical and diasporic contexts. From a Benjaminian perspective, these epistolary fragments exemplify how experience is passed "from mouth to mouth" and transformed into collective memory, where the storyteller's traces cling to the narrative like handprints on clay (Benjamin, 1968/2007:pp.84,92). In this way Husseini's use of letters and testimonies preserves lived experiences as transmissible cultural wisdom, ensuring that women's voices are not lost but integrated

into the memory of the listener. Furthermore, Bruner's narrative theory further clarifies the function of these fragments. He argues that narratives are versions of reality whose authority rests on narrative necessity rather than empirical verification (1991:pp.4–5). The letters and interviews in Hosseini's novel do not need to be "true" in a factual sense; their necessity lies in how they construct meaning, enabling women's stories to accrue significance across generations and diasporic contexts. This accrual of narrative, as Bruner notes, eventually creates a cultural corpus—a tradition that shapes identity and resilience (1991:p.18).

In opposition to these feminist epistolary voices stands Saboor's self-invented tale of the div that demands a child from a particular family. This mythic narrative functions as a patriarchal justification for violence, displacing responsibility for Saboor's decision to sell Pari by attributing it to fate. His rationale is further vindicated and encapsulated in the proverb, "The finger cut, to save the hand" (Hosseini, 2013:p.48), which naturalises sacrifice as necessity and cloaks patriarchal authority in the language of inevitability. The div thus becomes a narrative device that masks economic desperation and legitimises female dispossession under the guise of cultural wisdom. Yet, this patriarchal myth is not Saboor's alone. Nabi—Pari's step uncle—too, is complicit in Pari's sale to the Wahdatis, motivated by his desire to offer Nila what no other man could—a child—given that her womb was surgically removed in India. Thereby, Nabi positions himself as a potential lover for her. His silence and complicity reveal how patriarchal bargains are sustained not only by fathers but also by men who pursue sexual gratification and personal gain at any cost.

Saboor's div tale in the novel operates as a patriarchal allegory that naturalises female dispossession and validates male suffering as heroic. Saboor invents this story for his children, embedding within it a moral about sacrifice and obedience. The harshness of Maidan Sabz—its desolate landscape, shallow river, and relentless labour—mirrors the bleakness of Saboor's own life in Shadbagh, where poverty compels him to give up his daughter. In this way, the div tale functions as a narrative rehearsal for patriarchal authority; it naturalises suffering and prepares children to accept loss as inevitable destiny. The poverty aspects of Maidan Sabz set the stage for the div's demand, naturalising the idea that hardship culminates in sacrifice and loss.

The moment when Baby Ayub is forced to choose which child to surrender to the div dramatizes the patriarchal logic of sacrifice. His anguished cry, his wife fainting, and the children's terror all reinforce the inevitability of loss, but the narrative frames this choice as a grim necessity: "The finger cut, to save the hand" (Hosseini, 2013:p.48). However, Saboor tells his story to Abdullah and Pari neither to entertain nor empower them but to prepare them for their own separation, em-

bedding obedience and resignation into myth. The mother's refusal to choose—"I cannot be the one to choose" (Hosseini, 2013:p.5)—indicates that her resistance is silenced, and the father assumes this burden, reinforcing male authority as the arbiter of fate.

Baba Ayub's grief over the loss of his favourite son Qais transforms into obsessive resolve. His forty-day mourning, followed by years of paralysis, culminates in a desperate journey to confront the div. The imagery of his trek—bare feet torn by jagged rocks, hawks pecking at his face, violent winds nearly sweeping him away—casts him as a tragic hero, embodying patriarchal ideals of endurance and masculine sacrifice. His suffering is monumentalised, but it is also solitary; he withdraws from his family, his community, consumed by guilt and the whispers of cowardice. At this level, the tale valorises male suffering while silencing female voices. Baba Ayub's wife, who refused earlier to choose from the sack of stones, is erased from this quest; her resistance is sidelined, while his endurance is mythologised. The villagers' whispers reinforce patriarchal expectations; a real father would have fought the div, even at the cost of his life (Hosseini, 2013:p.6). In this way, the oral tale functions as a disciplinary narrative, teaching children that sacrifice and obedience are inevitable, and that patriarchal heroism is the only path of redemption. Ironically, Saboor's seeing of Pari is not a part of the bargain that sells her.

The moment Baba Ayub confronts the div to retrieve his favourite Qais, the narrative shifts from mythic terror to moral allegory. The div reframes Ayub's unbearable loss as a "test of your love" (Hosseini, 2013:p.10), rewarding him with seeing his son alive and thriving. This transformation of trauma into moral validation exemplifies how patriarchal oral storytelling disciplines and preaches listeners—in this case, Abdullah and Pari—that suffering is not only inevitable but honourable, that obedience to authority proves courage. The div's words, "What you did, the burden you agreed to shoulder, took courage" (p.11), sanctify Ayub's sacrifice, turning grief into a lesson about patriarchal duty.

Saboor's penchant for inventing fables filled with jinns, fairies, demons, and divs reveals the dual function of his storytelling; it entertains his audience while simultaneously serving his own purposes. On the surface, his tales captivate village children, who listen in rapt silence, drawn into the imaginative worlds he conjures. Yet beneath this entertainment lies a strategic use of narrative as a tool of influence. By embedding moral lessons and allegories within his stories, Saboor shapes the perceptions of his listeners, preparing them to accept hardship and sacrifice as natural parts of life. His expressed desire to write down these stories one day (Hosseini, 2013:p.57) underscores his awareness of their power, not merely as oral

amusement but as enduring texts that could preserve and legitimise his worldview. In this way, Saboor's storytelling is never neutral; it is both a source of delight and a subtle mechanism of control, reinforcing patriarchal values under the guise of fables.

Nabi's first description of Nila's poetry is a striking moment, for he depicts it as a radical means of expression that both defies Afghan literary traditions and asserts a feminist voice. Nabi's astonishment—his "ears burning red" (Hosseini, 2013:p.98) as he listens—reflects how disruptive Nila's poems are in a cultural context where poetry is revered but typically bound by classical forms and themes. Afghan poetry, as Nabi notes, is traditionally associated with canonical figures like Hafez, Khayyam, Saadi, or Rumi, whose verses often elevate spiritual longing, nature, or mystical love. Nila's work, however, breaks with this lineage; she writes about physical intimacy, desire, and pleasure—subjects rarely voiced by women in Afghan society. Read through a Benjaminian lens, her storytelling—poetry—transforms her lived experience into the experience of the listener, unsettling conventional wisdom and leaving traces that demand reinterpretation (Benjamin, 1968/2007:p.87). Applied here, Bruner's narrative theory further clarifies this disruption; Nila's poems construct a version of reality whose authority rests not on empirical evidence but on narrative necessity, challenging cultural conventions by insisting that female desire and subjectivity belong within the Afghan literary imagination (Bruner, 1991:pp.4–5). Her storytelling through poetry thus becomes a feminist intervention, reclaiming language to articulate female sexuality and subjectivity in a space historically dominated by male voices.

At this point of the novel, this part complicates this feminist assertion by showing how Nila's art intersects with personal pain. Her choice to read a poem about a grieving couple mourning the loss of their infant resonates with Nabi's own family tragedy, and he experiences it as betrayal—his sister's suffering transformed into aesthetic entertainment for guests. Benjamin's considerations on storytelling help illuminate this tension; he posits that the storyteller reshapes lived or inherited experience into something that becomes the listener's own (1968/2007:p.87). Nila's act of transforming grief into art demonstrates both the power and the risk of this transmission, as the story accrues meaning for an audience but simultaneously unsettles those whose memory are implicated. At this level, this tension brings to the fore the double-edged nature of feminist storytelling. While Nila's poetry challenges patriarchal forced silence and asserts female agency, it also risks appropriating private grief for public performance. In this way, Hosseini dramatizes the power and peril of feminist storytelling. Nila's voice is disruptive, liberating, and transgressive, but it also unsettles those around her, exposing how women's

self-expression can destabilise communal expectations of silence, modesty, and reverence for suffering.

Nabi's role in persuading Saboor to sell Pari to Nila reveals the complexity of his part in this patriarchal bargain. While he frames his proposal as born of "goodwill and honest intentions" (Hosseini, 2013:p.100), the story makes that his motives are not purely altruistic. Nabi's complicity lies in the fact that rationalises an act of female dispossession—separating Pari from her family—by cloaking it in the language of necessity and long-term benefit. Yet beneath this veneer of honour, he admits that it is also for self-serving desires; that is his longing to secure a unique place in Nila's life and to give her something no other man could. This confession exposes how his actions are driven as much by personal infatuation and the hope of intimacy as by concern for Nila's sterility or Pari's future. In effect, Nabi's complicity underscores how patriarchal bargains, often masqueraded as benevolence, conceal male desire and ambition. His role in Pari's sale is therefore not simply that of a mediator but of an active participant whose motives blur the line between duty and self-interest, reinforcing the novel's critique of how storytelling and rationalisation can mask female exploitation.

Roshi's published at the end of Hosseini's novel represents the transformation of fragmented testimony into narrative agency. Earlier, her voice was mediated through Amra's transcription and Idris' evasive replies and promises, but the act of publishing allows Roshi to reclaim authorship and permanence. Seen through Benjaminian lens, this shift demonstrates how storytelling converts lived experience into the experience of the listener, embedding traces of the storyteller into the narrative itself (Benjamin, 1968/2007:p.87). Roshi's text, unlike Idris' broken promises endures as cultural memory, ensuring that her story of suffering and survival is not lost but transmitted as part of a collective record. Moreover, in Bruner's terms, Roshi's published account does not need to be judged by factual accuracy alone; its necessity lies in how it constructs meaning, transforming her fragmented testimony into a coherent version of reality that asserts her agency. In this sense, Idris' narrative of care—promises and emails—collapses as illusion, while Roshi's text asserts accrues as a durable narrative that shapes cultural memory and feminist solidarity.

From a feminist perspective, Roshi's dedication:

> 'To the two angels in my life: my mother Amra, and my Kaka Timur. You are my saviors. I owe you everything,' (Hosseini, 2013:p.171)

is crucial. It explicitly excludes Idris, affirming that real solidarity came from Amra's relentless advocacy and Timur's decisive action. Amra's role is essential; she fights bureaucracy and medical neglect, embodying feminist resistance and maternal

determination. Her solidarity with Roshi exemplifies what feminist scholars as resistant maternal agency, where care becomes political action against patriarchal erasure. Along with Idris, Roshi's uncle and his pretentious care for her proved elusive, revealing how patriarchal promises fail to accrue meaning in Roshi's story.

Nila Wahdati's interview in *Parallaxe* (Winter of 1974) is emblematic of her revolutionary stance against patriarchy, both in her poetry and in her life choices. Born to an Afghan Pashtun father and a French mother, Nila embodies a hybrid identity that allows her to challenge Afghan patriarchal traditions from within while also drawing on Western feminist discourses. Her mother's decision to leave Afghanistan for France already signals a refusal of patriarchal confinement, and Nila continues this trajectory by using poetry and public interviews to articulate female desire, autonomy, and critique of patriarchal structures.

Storytelling here becomes her weapon of resistance. Unlike Saboor's oral div tale, which naturalises female dispossession and silences women, Nila's poetry and interviews foreground female subjectivity and sexuality. Her frankness in discussing love, intimacy, and pleasure destabilises Afghan literary traditions that valorise mystical longing and male-centred narratives. By speaking openly in a French literary magazine, she not only crosses cultural boundaries but also asserts that Afghan women's voices belong to global feminist discourse. This act of self-representation is revolutionary, as she refuses to be confined to silence or modesty. Instead, she claims space in both Afghan and French literary communities; her words resist erasure and insist on recognition.

The second part of Nila's interview in *Parallaxe* (Hosseini, 2013:pp.179–183) reveals her radical feminist stance, articulated through both her personal narrative and her reflections on Afghan history. Situating herself as half-French half-Afghan, Nila distances herself from her "troublesome half" (p.180), underscoring her disillusionment with Afghanistan's patriarchal structures. Her invocation of King Amanullah and Queen Soraya indicates that she admires their reformist vision—discouraging the veil; abolishing polygamy, child marriage, and bride price—while mandating education for women. However, she also recognises the fragility of such reforms in the face of entrenched religious and tribal patriarchy. By describing Amanullah as both "visionary" and "fool," she highlights the precariousness of feminist progress in societies resistant to change.

From a storytelling perspective, Nila uses the interview as a platform to narrate Afghan history through a feminist lens. Her vivid metaphors, such as "a tsunami of bearded rebellion" (Hosseini, 2013:p.182), transform political upheaval into a cautionary tale about the suppression of women's rights. Read through Benjamin's

conception on storytelling, this act of narration embodies how lived experience is reshaped into collective memory, leaving traces that demand reinterpretations across generations (Benjamin, 1968/2007:p.87). In Bruner's lens, Nila's interviews construct a version of reality based on narrative necessity and not necessarily on factual evidence, thus, reframing Afghan history around women's struggles for autonomy (1991:pp.4–5). Her decision to leave Afghanistan in 1955, she explains, was motivated by the desire to protect her daughter from becoming one of those "diligent, sad women" (Hosseini, 2013:p.182) condemned to lifelong servitude and silence. Moreover, Nila critiques not only Afghan patriarchy but also Western romanticisation of Afghan women's suffering, exposing how their endurance is admired from afar, but rarely alleviated (p.182).

From a feminist perspective, Nila's interview exemplifies resistance through voice and self-representation. Many feminist scholars have dealt with this particular point. For instance, hooks (1989) posits, "to speak is to resist, to make oneself heard, to disrupt silence and domination" (p. 6). Similarly, Yumnam and Laishram (2025) argue that feminist narration reclaims silenced voices from male-centric histories, while Shamsieva et al. (2025) stress that gender analysis reshapes how history is produced and remembered. Together the perspectives validate the revolutionary power of Nila's narration as a feminist act of historical and narrational reclamation.

The section of Nila's interview on pages 193 to 197, deepens the understanding of her feminist rebellion by situating it against the backdrop of her father's aristocratic Pashtun authority and her own maternal role with Pari. The juxtaposition of the photograph of young Pari in Normandy with the black-and-white image of Nila's father in Kabul reflects the generational and cultural shifts that define Nila's life. Pari, absorbed in mathematics at the Sorbonne, represents a new form of rebellion–quiet, intellectual, and detached from Afghanistan—while Nila herself embodies a more flamboyant resistance through art, lovers, and public voice. Her remark that "whether I approve or not is irrelevant. This is France, Monsieur Boustouler, not Afghanistan" (p.195) draws attention to her rejection of patriarchal parental control, situating her maternal role within a feminist framework of freedom and autonomy.

However, despite the fact that Nila lived with striking autonomy—rebelling against patriarchal norms by leaving behind her ill husband, pursuing lovers, drinking and smoking, and artistic freedom—her life ended in suicide as the culmination of profound contradictions. Her rebellion against Afghan patriarchy, her unstable extramarital relationships, her jealousy of Pari, her failed business ventures in Paris, her repeated visits to hospital emergency rooms, and her inability to reconcile freedom with fulfilment all contributed to the conditions that led to her untimely

death. Thus, Nila's tragic end dramatizes the fragility of feminist rebellion when lived in isolation, while her poetry and interviews would perpetuate her role as a storyteller and remain as her enduring legacy of resistance.

Results

Both Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* and Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed* reveal storytelling as a feminist force that transforms lives and preserves legacies. In Hashimi's novel, the intergenerational narrative of Shekiba—mediated through Shaima's oral retelling—becomes a decisive catalyst for Rahima's rebellion. Overburdened with suffocating patriarchal constraints and faced with imminent death, Rahima draws strength from Shekiba's story of survival, reimagining her own destiny and carving out a new life. Storytelling, here, is not a passive recounting of events but an active blueprint, transmitting resilience and resistance across generations. In Hosseini's work, storytelling, though fragmented in forms, sustains feminist legacies. Roshi's published book—supported by Amra's solidarity—transforms trauma into testimony; Nila's poetry and interviews, though fractured by instability, leave behind a provocative feminist blueprint; and Nabi's letters, though patriarchal in logic, preserve the memory of Pari and highlight the ethical responsibility of men to witness and honour women's lives. Despite few shortcomings, these storytellers endure and persist. Roshi's testimony circulates, Nila's voice persists in print, and Nabi's letters embody a rare male voice of empathy and accountability. Together, Hashimi and Hosseini demonstrate that storytelling is one of the most enduring feminist tools, capable of inspiring rebellion, preserving memory, and unsettling patriarchal silences across generations.

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DEKONSTRUISANJE PATRIJARHALNIH GLASOVA: PRIPOVIJEDANJE KAO OSNAŽUJUĆI FEMINISTIČKI ALAT U AFGANSKIM NARATIVIMA HAŠIMI I HOSEINIJA

Rezime

Pripovijedanje je temeljna ljudska praksa koja čuva kolektivno pamćenje, prenosi kulturnu mudrost i oblikuje stvarnost. Oslanjajući se na razmišljanja Voltera Bendžamina iz eseja „Pripovjedač" u djelu *Iluminacije* (Benjamin 1968/2007), ovaj rad ističe ulogu pripovjedača kao posrednika ili prenositelja iskustva, čiji autoritet ne počiva na pukoj informaciji, već na sposobnosti da utka značenje u zajednički život. U prilog tome, Jerome Bruner u tekstu „Narativna konstrukcija stvarnosti" (1991) smješta narativ u središte kulturnih okvira kroz koje se stvarnost uopšte spoznaje, naglašavajući njegovu epistemološku snagu. Iz feminističke perspektive pripovijedanje dobija dodatni značaj kao sredstvo ponovnog prisvajanja utišanih glasova i otpora patrijarhalnom isključivanju. Carol Giligan u djelu *In a Different Voice* (1993) i Bel Huks u *Talking Back* (1989/2015) ukazuju

na hitnost narativa u isticanju ženske agentnosti i autorstva. Ovaj teorijski okvir primjenjuje se na savremenu avganistansku dijasporsku književnost, gdje pripovijedanje funkcioniše kao sredstvo preživljavanja i osnaživanja. Putem romana Nadije Hašimi *Biser koji je slomio školjku* (2014) i Haleda Hoseinija *A planine odjeknuše* (2013) rad pokazuje kako se usmene genealogije, epistolarne forme i fragmentirana komunikacija ukrštaju u izgradnji feminističkih kontranarativa nasuprot patrijarhalnim strukturama. Ovi tekstovi smještaju iskustva avganistanskih žena u šire istorijske, kulturne i transnacionalne kontekste, otkrivajući pripovijedanje kao ključno mjesto otpornosti, otpora i narativne pravde.

▸ ***Ključne riječi***: pripovijedanje, teorija narativa, feministički glas, patrijarhalno brisanje, avganistanska dijasporska književnost, kontranarativi, Nadija Hašimi, Haled Hoseini, bel huks.