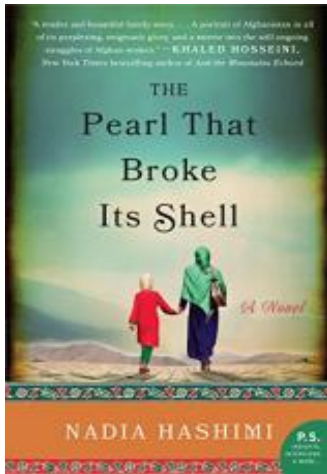


# The Pearl that Broke Its Shell

by Nadia Hashimi



## About the Book

Afghan-American Nadia Hashimi's literary debut novel is a searing tale of powerlessness, fate and the freedom to control one's own fate that combines the cultural flavor and emotional resonance of the works of Khaled Hosseini, Jhumpa Lahiri and Lisa See.

In Kabul, 2007, with a drug-addicted father and no brothers, Rahima and her sisters can only sporadically attend school, and can rarely leave the house. Their only hope lies in the ancient custom of *bacha posh*, which allows young Rahima to dress and be treated as a boy until she is of marriageable age. As a son, she can attend school, go to the market, and chaperone her older sisters.

But Rahima is not the first in her family to adopt this unusual custom. A century earlier, her great-great grandmother, Shekiba, left orphaned by an epidemic, saved herself and built a new life the same way.

Crisscrossing in time, THE PEARL THAT BROKE ITS SHELL interweaves the tales of these two women separated by a century who share similar destinies. But what will happen once Rahima is of marriageable age? Will Shekiba always live as a man? And if Rahima cannot adapt to life as a bride, how will she survive?

## Discussion Guide

1. Rahima says that Khala Shaima's story about Bibi Shekiba transformed her, and indeed, this is a novel about transformation. In what ways, besides dressing as males, do Rahima and Shekiba transform themselves?
2. When we first meet Khala Shaima, we see that men frequently mock or insult her because of her crooked spine, but her nieces and sister don't seem to pity her. Does Khala Shaima's disability work to her advantage?

3. Rahima loves being *bacha posh* for the freedoms it brings; being able to work in the market, play soccer and go to school. What are the disadvantages of her newfound freedoms and what are the consequences for Rahima and her family?

4. “It is up to you to find a way to make things easier for yourself,” Shekiba’s aunt tells her. How do the different women characters in this novel find ways to make things easier for themselves? What about Rahima’s mother? Bobo Shagul? Abdul Khaliq’s wives? The women of the king’s harem?

5. Rahima says of her sister Parwin: “In some ways, I think she was the bravest of all. She, my meek and timid sister, was the one who acted in the end. She was the one who showed those around her that she’d had enough of their abuse. As Khala Shaima said, everyone needed a way to escape.” Do you agree?

6. Shekiba envies the women of the harem: “At least they belonged to someone. At least they had someone to care for them, to look after them.” Do you think the King’s concubines live an enviable life? Are they better or worse off than women who live outside the palace walls?

7. The word *naseeb*, or destiny, comes up often in *THE PEARL THAT BROKE ITS SHELL*, as each woman is repeatedly told that she must accept her fate. When Rahima asks Khala Shaima “Wouldn’t people say that is blasphemous? To change the *naseeb* that Allah has for us?” her aunt responds “...you tell me which of those people who say such a thing have spoken with Allah to know what the true *naseeb* is.” When do Shekiba and Rahima accept their *naseeb* and when do they rebel against it? Do you believe in the concept of *naseeb* in your life?

8. What do you make of Shekiba and Rahima’s experiences with their husbands’ other wives? Are they helped or harmed by them? Could you adapt to that kind of married life?

9. When Bibi Gulalai opens up to Rahima about her own abusive mother-in-law, Rahima thinks “In other circumstances, I might have told Bibi Gulalai that I understood, that I could sympathize with her.” Does Bibi Gulalai’s revelation change the way you see her? What inspires or empowers the cruelty of older women like her and Shekiba’s grandmother, Bobo Shahgul?

10. How do Rahima’s years as a *bacha posh* ultimately help her escape her marriage to Abdul Khaliq?

11. Do you believe that Rahima and Shekiba’s stories end happily? What do you think became of them in the years after this book ends?

## Author Bio

Nadia Hashimi was born and raised in New York and New Jersey. Both her parents were born in Afghanistan and left in the early 1970s, before the Soviet invasion. Her mother, granddaughter of a notable Afghan poet, traveled to Europe to obtain a Master’s degree in civil engineering and her father came to the United States, where he worked hard to fulfill his American dream and build a new, brighter life for his immediate and extended family. Nadia was fortunate to be surrounded by a large family of aunts, uncles and cousins, keeping the Afghan culture an integral part of their daily lives.

Nadia attended Brandeis University where she obtained degrees in Middle Eastern Studies and Biology. In 2002, she made her first trip to Afghanistan with her parents who had not returned to their homeland since leaving in the 1970s. It was a bittersweet experience for everyone, finding relics of childhood homes and reuniting with loved ones.

Nadia enrolled in medical school in Brooklyn and became active with an Afghan-American community organization that promoted cultural events and awareness, especially in the dark days after 9/11. She graduated from medical school and went on to complete her pediatric training at NYU/Bellevue hospitals in New York City. On completing her training, Nadia moved to Maryland with her husband where she works as a pediatrician. She's also a part of the "Lady Docs," a group of local female physicians who exercise, eat and blog together.

With her rigorous medical training completed, Nadia turned to a passion that had gone unexplored. Her upbringing, experiences and love for reading came together in the form of stories based in the country of her parents and grandparents (some even make guest appearances in her tales!). Her debut novel, *THE PEARL THAT BROKE ITS SHELL*, was released in 2014. Her second novel, *WHEN THE MOON IS LOW*, followed in 2015 and chronicled the perilous journey of an Afghan family as they fled Taliban-controlled Kabul and fell into the dark world of Europe's undocumented.

She and her husband are the beaming parents of four curious, rock star children, two goldfish and a territorial African Grey parrot.

## Critical Praise

"Nadia Hashimi has written, first and foremost, a tender and beautiful family story. Her always engaging multigenerational tale is a portrait of Afghanistan in all of its perplexing, enigmatic glory, and a mirror into the still ongoing struggles of Afghan women."

---

### **The Pearl that Broke Its Shell**

by Nadia Hashimi

**Publication Date:** January 6, 2015

**Genres:** Fiction

**Paperback:** 480 pages

**Publisher:** William Morrow Paperbacks

**ISBN-10:** 0062244760

**ISBN-13:** 9780062244765