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REIMAGINING AFGHAN MOTHERHOOD: MATERNAL AGENCY AND REFUGEE SURVIVAL IN NADIA HASHIMI'S *WHEN THE MOON IS LOW*

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Abstract

This paper examines Nadia Hashimi's *When the Moon Is Low* as a literary representation of Afghan motherhood under patriarchy, Taliban rule, and forced migration. Focusing on Fereiba Waziri, the study argues that the novel reconfigures motherhood as a site of constrained but meaningful agency rather than passive suffering. Through close textual analysis and a feminist-postcolonial reading, the paper investigates how Fereiba's pursuit of education, her clandestine teaching, her role in protecting her children, and her morally complex decisions during migration challenge reductive images of Afghan and Muslim women as silent victims. The paper further contends that Hashimi represents motherhood as both an affective and political practice shaped by war, displacement, and gendered violence. By foregrounding maternal agency, the novel offers a nuanced critique of domestic patriarchy and transnational refugee precarity while highlighting the ethical burdens carried by women in conditions of structural vulnerability.

Keywords: Afghan women, Maternal agency, Migration, Motherhood, Patriarchy, Refugee displacement, War.

Nadia Hashimi's *When the Moon Is Low* is a refugee novel shaped by the overlapping crises of war, patriarchy, and transnational displacement. Set in Afghanistan under Taliban rule and carried forward through the uncertain passage across Iran, Turkey, Greece, and Europe, the novel traces the story of Fereiba Waziri, a woman whose life is remade by the violent collapse of domestic, social, and political stability. The narrative does not merely describe flight as a geographic movement from one country to another; it also records the emotional dislocation, moral burden, and gendered vulnerability that accompany forced migration. In this way, Hashimi situates refugee experience within the intimate life of a mother whose choices are never private, because each one is made under conditions of danger and responsibility. Fereiba is the novel's central figure because her life gathers together its major concerns: childhood deprivation, unequal domestic relations, delayed access to education, marriage, widowhood, motherhood, and exile. Her early life in a household structured by favouritism and emotional neglect introduces the reader to the gendered hierarchies that shape Afghan girlhood long before the Taliban's rise. When she later becomes a schoolteacher and a mother, these earlier experiences become central to

her identity, for they teach her that care and learning cannot be separated from social power. After Taliban rule intensifies the restrictions on women, Fereiba is forced to reimagine motherhood not as a stable domestic role but as a continuous struggle to preserve her children's lives, futures, and dignity.

The research problem addressed in this paper is how Afghan motherhood is represented in *When the Moon Is Low* under the combined pressures of patriarchy, Taliban rule, and forced displacement. The novel repeatedly exposes the limited agency available to Afghan women, but it does not reduce Fereiba to silence or helplessness. Instead, it presents her as a woman who makes morally serious decisions within a world that denies her full freedom. Her struggle for education, her work as a teacher, her secret instruction of her daughter, her protection of her children during wartime, and her painful decisions during migration all suggest that motherhood can become a practical and ethical form of resistance. This paper argues that Fereiba's motherhood should therefore be read not as passive suffering but as a constrained yet meaningful mode of agency. Methodologically, the paper uses close textual analysis and interprets the novel through feminist and postcolonial perspectives. This approach makes it possible to examine how Hashimi represents the intersections of gender, power, domestic oppression, refugee precarity, and maternal decision-making within one literary frame. By doing so, the paper aims to show that *When the Moon Is Low* is not only a novel about Afghan displacement but also a nuanced literary exploration of how maternal subjectivity is formed under conditions of political violence and social instability.

Fereiba's childhood in *When the Moon Is Low* is structured by a form of domestic patriarchy that is both intimate and deeply consequential, for the novel shows that gender inequality begins not in public institutions alone but within the family itself. After the death of her biological mother, Fereiba grows up under the care of KokoGul, whose treatment of her reveals how emotional neglect, favouritism, and household labour become mechanisms through which patriarchal values are reproduced in private life. KokoGul privileges her own children, especially her sons and daughters by birth, while Fereiba is left to perform unpaid work, accept reduced affection, and endure the sense of being an outsider in her own father's home. This unequal distribution of love and opportunity is significant because it marks Fereiba's childhood not simply as unhappy, but as formative: she learns early that girlhood in her world is associated with restriction, silence, and deferred possibility, whereas boyhood is linked with recognition, mobility, and future promise. "But being without a mother is like being stripped naked and thrown into the snow. My biggest fear, the dread that grows alongside my love for my children, is that I may leave them in the same way" (Hashimi 18).

The importance of this early exclusion lies in the way it shapes Fereiba's later understanding of motherhood. Because she has experienced what it means to be denied education and emotional belonging, she comes to see care not as automatic maternal instinct but as a conscious ethical responsibility. Her insistence on schooling, first as a girl and later as a mother, emerges directly from this childhood injury; education becomes for her not merely a personal ambition but a means of resistance against the conditions that made her feel socially surplus. In this sense, KokoGul's harshness paradoxically becomes one of the forces that forms Fereiba's maternal identity, since it teaches her what kind of mother she doesn't want to become. Rather than reproducing the same hierarchy of favouritism and neglect, she tries to build a mothering practice grounded in protection, encouragement, and the preservation of her children's futures.

Education in *When the Moon Is Low* functions not merely as a social privilege but as a crucial mode of self-formation through which Fereiba begins to imagine a life beyond the narrow definitions imposed upon her as a girl and later as a woman. Her desire to study is significant because it arises in direct opposition to the domestic enclosure that characterises her childhood, where she is kept at home to perform household labour while other children are sent to school. When she insists on attending school despite repeated resistance, the novel presents this desire not as personal ambition alone but as an act of intellectual and emotional self-assertion. Education gives Fereiba access to language, discipline, and possibility, allowing her to begin constructing an identity that is not wholly determined by the deprivation she experiences in her father's house. "I don't want to learn from a student. I want to learn from a teacher" (Hashimi 26).

This formative relationship with education becomes even more important when Fereiba becomes a teacher. Teaching allows her to transform learning into a public and socially meaningful practice, positioning her not simply as a recipient of knowledge but as a transmitter of it. In this sense, the classroom represents more than employment; it becomes a space in which Fereiba claims authority,

competence, and dignity in a society that consistently undervalues women's intellectual labour. Her profession also reveals an important continuity between her personal history and her adult identity. Because she herself had to fight for the right to study, she develops a deep commitment to protecting other children's access to education, especially her daughter's. Thus, education in the novel functions as both self-making and future-making: it enables Fereiba to redefine herself while also preparing her to resist the forms of gendered exclusion that threaten the next generation.

Taliban rule in *When the Moon Is Low* marks a decisive intensification of gender oppression, particularly through the prohibition of girls' education, which transforms learning from a public right into a forbidden act. The novel shows that this ban does not merely close schools; it attempts to regulate women's intellectual futures and confine them to passive domesticity. In that context, Fereiba's response is significant because she refuses to accept the erasure of education as inevitable. Her decision to teach in secrecy demonstrates that resistance under authoritarian rule often takes modest, hidden, and highly vulnerable forms rather than dramatic public protest. The secret classroom in the home becomes one of the novel's most important symbols, since it shows that domestic space can be transformed from a site of confinement into a space of defiance. Fereiba's act of teaching neighbour girls at home challenges the Taliban's attempt to control women through fear, and it also reclaims the ordinary interior of the house as a place where knowledge can survive.

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 (Hashimi 93).

The home, which patriarchal systems often define as a space of female restriction, is therefore reimagined as a fragile but meaningful centre of intellectual continuity. Even though the danger is severe, the mere existence of this hidden teaching reveals that resistance does not always depend on institutional power; it can also emerge through care, repetition, and the deliberate preservation of learning within the private sphere. This domestic resistance is especially important because it extends Fereiba's maternal role beyond biological protection into educational guardianship. By teaching children in secret, she acts not only as a mother to her own children but also as a custodian of the next generation's future. The novel suggests that maternal resistance is most visible in such moments, when the mother uses whatever limited space remains to safeguard dignity, literacy, and hope. Thus, the home in *When the Moon Is Low* is never merely a shelter; it becomes a contested political space in which oppression is reproduced, interrupted, and quietly resisted.

Motherhood in *When the Moon Is Low* becomes most visible as a form of crisis management after Mahmood's death, when Fereiba is forced to move from the relative stability of wifehood into the harsher role of sole decision-maker. The loss of her husband does not simply create emotional grief; it dismantles the small protective structure that had allowed her to imagine a future for her children, leaving her to confront war, poverty, and political persecution with no adult male buffer between her family and danger. In this state of emergency, her maternal identity is intensified rather than diminished, because every action she takes is measured against the immediate question of how to preserve Saleem, Samira, and the unborn child within conditions that offer almost no security. Her protectiveness toward Saleem and Samira is one of the clearest expressions of this crisis-driven motherhood. "We had no family to help us. I feared my son would be swallowed by the Taliban, and as a woman, there was little I could do to help us survive" (Hashimi 115). Fereiba repeatedly assesses what her children can safely endure, and her refusals are shaped less by authority than by a painful awareness of risk, especially once Kabul becomes a space of shelling, surveillance, and sudden death. When she denies Saleem permission to move through dangerous streets or delays decisions that might expose the family to further harm, the novel presents these acts as difficult maternal judgments rather than acts of repression. Her care is therefore practical and strategic: she does not merely love her children in an abstract sense, but actively calculates which dangers can be borne and which cannot, turning maternal concern into a disciplined ethics of survival.

Her refusal of dangerous movement also reveals how crisis narrows the meaning of choice while still demanding responsibility. Fereiba understands that leaving Kabul is hazardous, yet remaining is equally unbearable because the city has become a place where women are denied work, girls are denied education, and family life is continuously threatened by violence. This tension makes her decisions morally complex, since every option carries loss, and motherhood becomes the labour of choosing the

least destructive path rather than the safe one. Mahmood's death is the event that clarifies this burden, because it forces her to inhabit a maternal role that is no longer supported by shared authority and must instead sustain the family alone. In assuming that responsibility, Fereiba emerges as a figure whose motherhood is defined by endurance, judgment, and sacrifice, and whose decisions expose the devastating cost of raising children under war.

Fereiba's refugee journey in *When the Moon Is Low* is not presented as a linear passage from one place to another, but as a prolonged condition of uncertainty in which movement, delay, and survival are inseparable. Across borders, camps, and temporary shelters, the novel shows that maternal agency is exercised less through freedom than through the constant effort to reduce harm, preserve children's health, and keep the possibility of reunion alive. The border crossings themselves expose the fragility of refugee life and the unequal power relations that govern mobility. Each crossing requires Fereiba to negotiate smugglers, documents, officials, and the physical exhaustion of her children, so that movement becomes a test of judgment as much as endurance. Her decisions are not impulsive; they are shaped by the need to read danger, assess temporary safety, and choose the least damaging route forward. In this sense, the journey reveals a distinctly maternal form of agency, one that is compelled to act within systems that deny her full control. "In the darkness, when you cannot see the ground under your feet and when your fingers touch nothing but night, you are not alone. I will stay with you as moonlight stays on water" (Hashimi 120).

Work and illness further complicate this survival, because Fereiba must turn refugee precarity into a practical economy of care. She accepts poorly paid labour and depends on informal arrangements, not because these conditions are just, but because they offer the only means of feeding and sheltering her children while the family remains undocumented and vulnerable. At the same time, illness makes every decision heavier, since the needs of the sick and weakened children force her to delay movement, accept temporary refuge, or rethink routes that might otherwise seem necessary. The camps she passes through are equally unstable spaces: they provide temporary relief, but they also expose refugees to overcrowding, insecurity, and the slow violence of waiting. Smugglers embody the novel's harshest expression of transnational vulnerability, since Fereiba is repeatedly forced to trust men, whose assistance is tied to profit and risk. Yet the novel does not reduce her to helplessness in these encounters; instead, it shows that even under exploitation she continues to decide, evaluate, and endure. Her maternal agency is especially visible in her willingness to delay movement when delay protects the children, and to continue when continuation may be the only path toward a future. Hashimi thus frames refugee motherhood as an ethics of movement under constraint: a practice in which love is measured through calculation, patience, and the painful recognition that survival sometimes depends on postponement rather than arrival.

Fereiba's separation from Saleem is one of the novel's most ethically charged moments, because it forces motherhood to confront the brutal logic of refugee survival. Her decision to move on is painful not only because it risks family rupture, but because it requires her to choose between an immediate bond and the longer-term protection of the children still under her care. This is why the scene should not be read as abandonment. Fereiba does not leave Saleem out of indifference or emotional failure; she acts under conditions in which the refugee system itself fragments families, delays reunions, and makes certainty impossible. The loss is produced by the pressures of detention, undocumented mobility, and the unequal vulnerability of children within displacement, all of which narrow her choices until "choice" means selecting the least damaging option rather than a freely desired one. The novel therefore frames her act as constrained agency rather than moral desertion. Fereiba bears the burden of deciding that continuing without Saleem may preserve Samira and Aziz, even though that decision carries guilt, grief, and the haunting possibility of irreversible separation. In this sense, refugee systems do not simply interrupt family life; they actively reorganise it, forcing mothers into decisions that distribute loss unevenly across their children while making care itself a form of sacrifice.

Hashimi's novel ultimately challenges the stereotype of the passive Muslim woman by giving Fereiba a complex interior life in which grief, judgment, education, fear, and resolve coexist. Rather than depicting Afghan women as silent victims awaiting rescue, the novel presents motherhood as a form of political, moral, and emotional labour shaped by risk, memory, and constrained choice.

Maybe this is how it is meant to be. A wife without a husband. Children without a father. Perhaps incomplete is the very definition of a normal family. Where did my lofty expectations come from anyway? Afghanistan is a land of widows and widowers, orphans and the missing (Hashimi 221).

Fereiba's significance lies in the way her maternal practice exceeds private sentiment and becomes a mode of survival under patriarchy and displacement. She teaches, protects, delays, calculates, and sacrifices, and these acts show that Afghan motherhood is not simply nurturing in a domestic sense but also ethical labour carried out under conditions of violence and illegality. Her decisions are emotionally costly, but they also reveal a mother who thinks strategically about children's futures, which complicates any reductive reading of maternal passivity. This makes *When the Moon Is Low* especially valuable to refugee and feminist literary studies. In refugee studies, the novel insists that displacement is not only geographical but also administrative, familial, and psychological, because borders and asylum systems fragment kinship while forcing women to manage loss in real time. In feminist literary studies, it expands the category of agency by showing that resistance may appear as secrecy, delay, care, or painful compromise rather than public rebellion. The novel therefore contributes a distinctly Afghan and transnational perspective on motherhood as lived negotiation, enriching scholarship on gender, migration, and narrative subjectivity.

In conclusion, *When the Moon Is Low* presents Fereiba's story as a sustained argument that Afghan motherhood cannot be understood through the language of passivity alone. Her life shows that maternal agency exists, but it is repeatedly narrowed by patriarchy, Taliban violence, and the impersonal machinery of refugee displacement. Read as a whole, the novel demonstrates that Fereiba acts with purpose at every stage: she pursues education, protects her children, teaches in secret, flees danger, and makes agonising decisions under conditions that offer no fully safe options. These acts confirm that she is never merely acted upon, yet they also reveal that her power is incomplete because each choice is made inside structures that produce loss, separation, and fear. In this sense, the novel's central insight is that maternal agency is real, but it survives only as constrained agency, shaped by war and displacement rather than freed from them. The broader implication is that Hashimi redefines Afghan motherhood as a complex site of ethical struggle, emotional labour, and political resistance. Fereiba is neither a simple victim nor a fully liberated heroine; she is a refugee mother whose strength lies in negotiating impossible circumstances while trying to preserve her children's futures. By giving such depth to her experience, Hashimi also expands refugee and feminist literary studies, showing that Afghan women's narratives can illuminate not only suffering under oppression but also the intricate forms of care, judgment, and survival through which women remake the meaning of home, family, and agency.

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