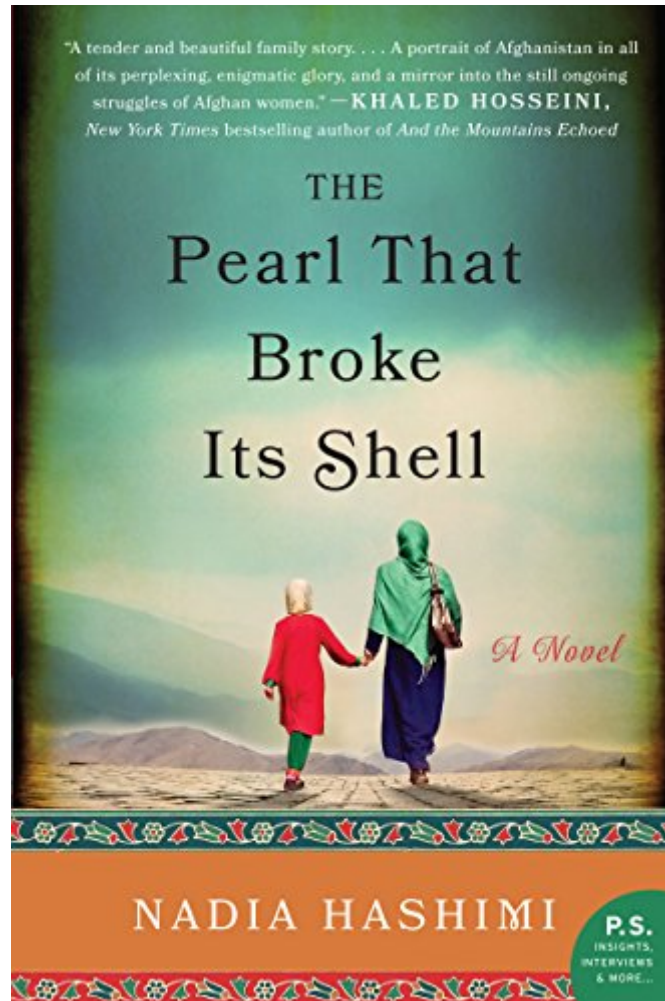


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# The Pearl That Broke Its Shell: A Novel



## Synopsis

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 the 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?

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

There are few words that would do this story justice, deeply personal accounts told in an

all-encompassing way, giving a flavor for the women of Afghanistan that will open new doors for readers of all ages and stages of life. The prose is lovely and lyrical, the main storyteller is Rahima, the youngest of three sisters that were sold into marriage by their father when Rahima was just thirteen. Descriptive and emotive details give readers the insight into all of the confusion, fear, resentment and even obeisance to traditions that are centuries, if not millennia old. Rahima was the "son" of the family, the bacha posh, given freedoms that other women do not have, yet never allowing her to rise above her actual position and restrictions as a woman. With current and remembered events, a recurring thread from an unmarried aunt who tells the tale of their great-great grandmother a guard to the King's harem, and plenty of beauty centered on the vista, the arts and poetry of the country, we see Rahima grow and expand her internal life and determination to be more than just the low bar set for the women of her country. What remain constant and indefatigable are the women: every woman who is struggling to survive and adapt to a country where wars, power struggles, political upheaval and religious fanatics are part of the daily landscape, and bound to change repeatedly and without warning. This was an emotionally raucous ride, filled with highs and lows, fear and utter breath-holding as events are laid out to feed a reader's visual and emotional reactions in a way that is fulfilling and visceral, not overwhelming. In fact, the style and voice seem to encourage a sense of hope, tied to the hopes and dreams for different held by Rahima, and the pages almost turn themselves.

MY REVIEW: HarperCollins Publishers | April 10, 2014 | Trade Paperback | ISBN:

978-0-06-233851-8 Debut Afghan-American author Nadia Hashimi's *THE PEARL THAT BROKE ITS SHELL*, the entwined stories of two Afghan women separated by a century who find freedom in the tradition of bacha posh, which allows girls to dress and live as boys until they are of marriageable age. "I think it is time we change something for you. I think it would be best if we let you be a son to your father." Kabul, 2009: Growing up in a family with five daughters and no sons, Rahima and her sisters can only sporadically attend school, and then, as they grow older, can rarely leave the house. Their mother struggles to support the family as their father becomes increasingly addicted to drugs. But one day their aunt, Khala Shaima, makes a suggestion: as a bacha posh, Rahima can become a son—dressing as a boy, with a boy's name, tread as a boy—until she is of marriageable age. She will be able to attend school and go to the marketplace. It's an old custom, but one that most of society turns a blind eye to when girls are young. And then Khala Shaima begins to tell a story that transforms Rahima's life: the story of her great-great-grandmother, Shekiba. Kabul, 1909: Shekiba, the daughter of a rural farming family, is disfigured in an accident as a child. When her

parents and siblings die in a cholera epidemic, she has no one left to support her and is treated as little better than a slave in a relative's home until she is able to escape her life of drudgery by dressing as a man.

In this extraordinary novel, we are transported to Afghanistan through the lives of two women unfold, one born of current days, the other at the turn of the 20th century, bound together by blood and hope. From a family of five daughters in rural Afghanistan, Rahima, at nine, is allowed to take on the guise of a bacha posh, a girl dressed as a boy, able to attend school and go out in public. Shamed by his inability to produce sons, Rahima's father tolerates this situation, frequently absent fighting the Taliban with his warlord, Abdul Khaliq, growing increasingly more addicted to his medicine, opium. A few years later, in a rage, Rahima and her two eldest sisters are offered in marriage to Abdul Khaliq and his two cousins, Rahima to wed the warlord. Throughout their troubled childhoods, with an addicted father and a fearful mother, the girls find solace through the stories of their great-great-grandmother, Shekiba, as related by their maternal aunt, Khala Shaima. Never married because of the deformity of her bent spine, Khala Shaima relates the courageous actions of Shekiba, born at the turn of the 20th century in a rural village, working the family farm with her father. When her family is decimated by a cholera epidemic, Shekiba helps her father until his death, later forced to join the extended family compound, her sheltered life at an end. The unfortunate Shekiba, half of whose face is disfigured by a burn in childhood, is exposed to the jeers of her relatives, little more than a beast of burden, bitterly recalling her mother's words: "Your name means gift, my daughter. You are a gift from Allah." She also understands that gifts are given away as easily as they are accepted, a reality both for Shekiba and Rahima years later, each the pawn of family and society.

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