



# An Exploration Of Prison Ideas In Nadia Hashimi's A House Without Windows

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**Citation:** Senthil Mithra J, (2024) An Exploration Of Prison Ideas In Nadia Hashimi's A House Without Windows, *Educational Administration: Theory And Practice*, 30(1), 894-899

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.5760

## ARTICLE INFO

Received: 08-05- 2023

Accepted: 15-05- 2023

## ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the ideas of prison in Nadia Hashimi's *A House without Windows*. Her works offer readers a window into everyday life in Afghanistan through her interesting women characters and age-appropriate conversations about gender expectations and roles in different countries. Her novels span generations and continents. The famous works of Hashimi are *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014), *When the Moon is Low* (2015), *A House Without Windows* (2016), *One Half from the East* (2016), *Sparks Like Stars* (2017), *The Sky at our feet* (2018). This study focuses on only the work *A House without Windows*. The author exhibits the ideas of prison through the protagonist, Zeba. The days behind the bars of a dark prison and the view of a small window bring light and air inside the prison are symbolic premonitions of her hopeful future. "Prison" is ironic in *A House without Windows*, it represents Kabul's women's prison, Chil Mahtab which acts as an extended home and even more than home, peaceful heaven for Zeba, a mother of four who finds her free space in prison and gives up her guilty life for killing her husband, finds her new friendship, self-awakening, self-recovery, finding family and identity. Thus the novel is no wonder the bestseller that showcases the family, suffering, guilt, resistance, silence, and self-discovery of Afghan Womanhood. The methodology of the study adopts the theory of panopticon proposed by Michel Foucault to illustrate the ideas of prison in Hashimi's work. The results of the study are compared and discussed with other studies concerning prison ideas. Finally, the findings of the study explore that prison ideas exist in the work.

**Keywords:** Prison, woman, suffering, punishment, loneliness

## Introduction

Literature is a way and art of expressing emotions, values, and concerns, exposing social realities and language that changes the society and self. According to Stauffer, literature is a "catalyst, guide, or mirror of social change". The success of the writer is not in the result, but his writing to persuade its spectators, over a common understanding of some issues and this initial acknowledgment brings forth change in the society or individual. Prison literature is a popular literary genre characterized by literature that is written while the author is confined in a location such as a prison, jail, or house arrest. The writing can be about prison, informed by it, or simply coincidentally written while in prison (Shane, 2018). Some of the fascinating works of prison literature are Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* written in 524 AD, Marco Polo's *The Travels of Marco Polo*, which is an account of his travels to China, that was told to his prison inmate in Genoa, Dante Alighieri wrote his *Divine Comedy* while he was in exile, Martin Luther translated the New Testament from Greek to German while hiding from the pope. And John Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress* while he was in jail in 1678. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote the letters that were later published as *Glimpses of World History* whilst being in prison between 1930 and 1933. Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* written in 1994, briefs about his 28 years in prison, after which he was released in 1990. *The House of the Dead* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky is an autobiographical novel published in 1862 that describes the "life of Russian prisoners in a Siberian prison camp. The author of *Crime & Punishment*, a psychological novel written to reflect his political involvement in the liberal movement.

All literature written behind prison walls delivers an upsetting interpretation of physical and mental suffering laterally paving the way with optimistic perceptions of human courage, resilience, and a stubborn will to be free. Prison Literature and their characters' most uttered soulful saying is "You can only imprison a man's body, not his mind". Prison experience varies from person to person (Alberahim, 2023). Everyone's situation, the prison ambiance, and the inmates define their after-prison life. Nadia Hashimi's character's cognitive mindset towards their problem, crafting solutions rather than looking into it as a havoc or a condition, to handle the situation carefully and walking hopeful to find identity through resilience and embracing freedom. Being an Afghan American writer known for her powerful best-seller novels, probes into the themes of identity, family, and Afghan culture. Her novels with emotionally vibrant words capture the complexity of Afghan society. The inevitable characteristic of this prison literature is about finding liberty, unrestricted choice, individual responsibility, bereavement, existential fear, harassment, and alienation.

The effect of colonial domination on Afghan society after the Soviet Invasion in the year 1979. The writer captures the fundamentalist notions that are linked to Islam, rather than colonial power and its influence on the identity formation of the colonial subject. Under twenty years of war, women in Afghanistan suffer from oppressive situations and rules resulting in inequality and injustice. Afghanistan women face difficulties at all levels - patriarchal society, misogyny, forced migration, conflict, prohibition, poverty, guilt, addiction, and political and cultural oppression due to colonialism. Nadia Hashimi's work offers readers a window into everyday life in Afghanistan through her interesting women characters and age-appropriate conversations about gender expectations and roles in different countries. Her novels span generations and continents. Drawing on her Afghan ancestry, Hashimi paints an arresting picture of what it is like to be an undocumented immigrant fleeing Taliban-controlled Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion. Focusing on the experiences of one family rather than a faceless multitude, Hashimi forces the reader to confront the hardships and traumas suffered by anyone suddenly ripped from a middle-class lifestyle and forced into a meager, hunted, and unstable existence. Nadia Hashimi aspires to set right the twisted lifestyle of the family.

Nadia shines a light on the history and culture of the native Afghans, and she contradicts the current Modern Afghan people, through her stories - *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014), *When the Moon is Low* (2015), *A House Without Windows* (2016), *One Half from the East* (2016), *Sparks Like Stars* (2017), *The Sky at our feet* (2018) beautifully crafted; sometimes shattering, more hopeful learned despair and moving. Women like Zeba, Rahima, Fereba, Obayda, and Sitara Zamani, in the story are sensible and serve a crucial structural purpose. All the stories are knit with a common thread of power, love, and hope.

In *A House Without Windows*, the first two are set in Afghanistan, from which her parents immigrated in the early 1970s. It is the story of a devoted wife, Zeba, who discovers her husband, Kamal, brutally murdered with a hatchet to the head in the courtyard of their home. When she is found next to him, covered in blood, her neighbors and even her children believe she killed him, although no one knows why. Hashimi depicts the scene in such a way that it is unclear whether Zeba stumbled upon Kamal or murdered him in an impaired state. She is arrested and taken to Kabul's women's prison, ChilMahtab. Here she awaits trial, sharing a cell with three other prisoners, all of whom have been charged with violations of Afghanistan's traditional patriarchal culture. Hashimi portrays how Afghan women are jailbirds in their own lives because of the authority that men hold over them. The novel elaborates on how patriarchy takes over as the power edifice and women are sequestered from this system, how patriarchy becomes a burden and limitation to them while the male bodies keep replacing themselves as the controller of women (Hashimi, 2016).

Prison narrative is one of the tools implemented by Nadia Hashimi, the author of the novel *A House Without Windows*. The trait of the Prison Narrative in this novel is intertwined with the threads of tales of torture, trauma, and experienced atrocities narrated by the victims who share their testimonies in prison which are synonymous to one another and are captured behind bars for the same cause. This penetrating study rests on a literary critical perspective that draws upon many and varied disciplines to uncover the interplay between self-narration, imprisonment, and the bigger question of human rights abuses.

### Literature Review

The study of Eamonn Carrabine (2010) deals with stories of prison and punishment told in literary and visual arts. The author mentions Fielding's works and he explored prison and irony in *Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great* (1743). In this fiction, the thief-taker becomes synonymous with Walpole's leadership of parliament. The author, Carrabine states that many writers were imprisoned for political, religious, or other ideological reasons. He elucidates prison writing in three different ways. Firstly, some intellectuals were imprisoned including Socrates; Bunyan, and Gramsci. Secondly, writers speak from within a prison culture. Their messages have more often than not disappeared. Thirdly, the beginning of history includes the parts of the 'Old Testament' stories of songs and stories of the American and Caribbean slaves. In addition, most of the prison writings are based on the above types.

The study by Kate Owens-Murphy (2023) states prison politics in the US especially the contradiction between the benefits of literacy and punitive prison politics. The author mentions the writings of Malcolm and Etheridge Knight. Their writings deal with the difficulties of negotiating the institutional rules and personal and political rewards of learning to read and write behind bars, particularly black people. In 2011, the author began teaching literature at prisons and jails as a classroom aid. So, he abbreviates the libraries in prison. Kate mentioned the

works of Knight's *Letter to Dudley Randall* (1970), *Poems from Prison* (1968), and Malcolm's *Message to the Gross Roots* (1965).

The study of Jason Haslam (2005) mentions a fugitive slave who escaped from North Carolina and abbreviates the writing style based on the slave narrative struggle in the gothic genre. The author utilized the book *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. In this book, Hannah Crafts is a slave. She and her mistress were put into prison. So, the writer has explored the behavior and the ambiance of the prison and its prisoners. The author elucidates the relationship between the prison and slavery as institutions. Moreover, the writer has mentioned, "the prison becomes a palace, an ideal domicile, and representative of the nation". This is the main idea to explore regarding prison. Many writers and readers criticize this quote.

The study of Jan Alber (2008) describes the representation of prisons and their inmates in Charles Dickens novels: *Little Dorrit* (1998), *David Copperfield* (1981), and *Oliver Twist* (1966) through the film 'The Shawshank Redemption'. Both of them criticize prisons and their innocent and unlikeable prisoners especially the treatment received by the prisoners. The author mentions the narrative style of prison that may generate cultural understandings of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of prison as a form of punishment. In this study, the author utilized Foucault's behavior theory to illustrate the behavior of prisoners in prison.

The study of Ahsan Haq Magray and Aneesa Farooq (2020) mentions prison literature especially emerging genres of world literature and explains the experience of imprisoning writers and their writing style. Many writers were imprisoned and they were in solitary confinement, denied reading and writing materials. This focuses on many of the world's classical texts produced in prisons, jails, or house arrest. The authors have given details about Ahmed Fouad Negm. He was a famous Egyptian poet who was imprisoned for eighteen years. He has written "The Poetry of Ahmed Fouad Negm" which talks about prison in the 1960s. Negm was imprisoned for his political views under the rule of Presidents. The famous poetry collection is "Images from the Life and Prison (1962). In this study, the authors have utilized Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977).

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1988) is an American author who wrote this cognitive to symbolically spread his strong opinions into the minds of readers directly in his historical fiction, *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance*. This story takes place in Puritan Boston in Massachusetts about a young woman Hester Prynne, who begets an illegitimate baby and is made to stand on the scaffold, as an act of public humiliation and to wear a scarlet letter "A" for the rest of her life, and imprisoned as a punishment for not revealing its father's name. When Hester was in the prison cell, she was questioned by the minister of the church and by her husband to revenge on the child's father but she never divulged that information till her death. In the last chapter, the lover Dimmesdale addresses himself upon the scaffold, confesses his sin, and dies in Hester's arms. Hester also dies and gets a tombstone near the lover. This story explores themes of legalism, sin, and guilt. She has employed symbolic words like -roses, a prison door, sunshine, and the forest to portray deeper, more profound thoughts. The 'prison door' is described as 'old, and rusted', 'yet strong and sturdy', 'heavily timbered with oak', and 'studded with iron spikes' hammering the severity of the Puritanical law, people's incapability to break, no toleration of irregularity and its powerful clutch on society.

The book *Women, Incarcerated: Narratives from India* edited by Mahuya Bandyopadhyay and Rimple Mehta (2022) delves into the study of the prison experiences of Indian women, and the State act as extensions of the family and the prison community women seen as deviants. It captures all features everyday life of imprisoned Indian women; this book narrates the experiences of exclusion, marginalization, and violence in the lives of women prisoners. The book also highlights their discussions with and resistance to punitive power. It also addresses gender inequality in that 97 % of prisons are designed for male prisoners and only 13 out of 37 states and union territories have female prisons. That is different from other prison narratives.

The study of Jelodar. E.S. et al. (2014) focus on educating prisoners of tradition. Media can have an enlightening role in promoting gender equality by presenting women leaders who could be paragons for ordinary women. By analyzing the plight of Afghan women with a couple of YouTube documentaries on women's imprisonment, we argue that 12 years after the US-led intervention, women are still suffering from traditional and tribal laws, male domination, and gender inequality. This paper seeks to demonstrate that untraditional education is a "sine qua non" for the women of Afghanistan to overcome the negative aspects of tradition and tribal laws and women activists cannot have much to say as they are usually attacked by the conservative and traditional leaders. They face prison if they break the taboo. What men and women of Afghanistan need is untraditional education. People of Afghanistan have to be taught the value of humans and the equality of men and women. Afghanistan cannot get rid of its negative tribal and traditional customs unless its men become a part of the solution and they should allow women to become agents of change. For example, "Prisoners of Tradition: Women in Afghanistan" (2012) is one of these YouTube documentaries produced by Ariane Wu, Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR). The documentary begins with a portrayal of different women in prison. The majority of these women are jailed for what Afghan courts deem as "moral crimes" such as refusing arranged marriages, marrying without their father's consent, and running away from home.

The above studies represent the idea of prison, and various authors in different works conduct these studies. Therefore, the present study will bridge the gap between the works of literature. Thus, the present study attempts to dig out the prison idea in Hashimi's text.

## Methodology

Michel Foucault is a noteworthy French philosopher, writer, political activist, and literary critic. His theories address the relationships between power and knowledge. They are portrayed through social control institutions. He made many contributions to different concepts such as communication studies, anthropology, sociology, psychology, criminology, cultural studies, literary theory, feminism, and critical theory. He has written many works: *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *The Order of Things* (1966), and *Discipline and Punish* (1975). In this work, he deals with the analysis of the social and theoretical mechanisms that occurred in Western penal systems. Foucault argues that prison did not become the principal form of punishment. Firstly, he mentions, "... punishment like forced labor or even imprisonment – mere loss of liberty – has never functioned without a certain additional element of punishment that certainly concerns the body itself: rationing of food, sexual deprivation, corporal punishment, solitary confinement" (Foucault, 1977, p.15). Likewise, Nadia Hashimi is a well-known writer in English. She is known for the book *A House Without Windows* (2016). In this book, she has expressed, "Home had not been a refuge. Home had been, for as long as Basir could remember, a broken place – broken dishes, broken ribs, broken spirits" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 4).

Secondly, Foucault abbreviates, "The prison, that darkest region in the apparatus of justice, is the place where the power to punish, which no longer dares to manifest itself openly, silently organizes a field of objectivity in which punishment will be able to function openly as treatment and the sentence be inscribed among the discourses of knowledge. Understandably, justice should have adopted so easily a prison that was not the offspring of its thoughts. Justice certainly owed the prison this recognition" (Foucault, 1977, p. 256). Likewise, Hashimi states, "There were moments when Zebra felt light and liberated. She missed her children dearly, but it was hard not to appreciate the freedom she had. If she did not want to rise with her cellmates, she could ignore their chatter, roll into her side, and sleep through the morning. She had no responsibilities in the kitchen. Her meals came with impressive regularity" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 67).

Thirdly, Foucault describes the victims' condition as "Humanity rises against the frightful thought that it is not a punishment to deprive a citizen of his most precious possession, to plunge him ignominiously into the den of crime, to snatch him from everything dear to him, to bring him perhaps to ruin and to deprive not only him but his unfortunate family of all means of subsistence" (Foucault, 1977, p. 120). Hashimi in *A House Without Windows* writes about her woman protagonist Zeba's life lost and ruined by Kamal's alcohol addiction. She mentions "With each time Kamal was spotted drunk in town, he further condemned Zeba to a life of ignominy. She begged him to consider their family, their reputation" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 71).

Fourthly, Foucault examines the family members as their friends and their lives. He elucidates, "It was then remembered that the families of some of the former comrades of the convict lived at Ivry" (Foucault, 1977, p. 257). Likewise, Hashimi throws light on the family of the cellmates through the stories shared "Listening to their conversations, she learned the spectrum of criminals housed in ChilMahtab: pretty thieves, drug smugglers, and murderers. Zeba's cellmates, however, were some of the many women imprisoned for crimes of morality\_\_ falling in love or running away from home" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 48).

Fifthly, Foucault states, "Thus, the classroom would form a single great table, with many different entries, under the scrupulously 'classificatory' eye of the master: 'In every class there will be places assigned for all the pupils of all the lessons, so that all those attending the same lesson will always occupy the same place'" (Foucault, 1977, p. 147). Similarly, the ambiance of the prison has explored in Hashimi's text. She eulogizes, "the cells were unlocked for the most part, and women walked through the hallways, gathering in open rooms or the yard. There was a dark kitchen full of pots deep enough to hold a watermelon, a classroom that consisted of a blackboard and silvers of chalk, and a playroom for the many children who lived in the prison with their mothers. The classroom was a shared space, used sometimes for the women and other times for the children" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 49).

Both Foucault and Hashimi talk about the convict's solitude phase in prison, "Solitude and self-examination are not enough; nor are purely religious exhortations. Work on the prisoner's soul must be carried out as often as possible" (Foucault, 1977, p. 125).

*Now it is time for my bud to bloom*

*I'm a sparrow in love with solitude*

*All my secrets contained within me*

*I sing aloud\_\_ I'm alone, finally*

(Hashimi, 2016, p. 53).

Foucault mentions punishment and affirms, "The punitive practice of the nineteenth century was to strive to put as much distance as possible between the 'serene' search for truth and the violence that cannot be entirely effaced from punishment" (Foucault, 1977, p. 56). Hashimi vividly captures the internal change in Zeba that the good prison days bestowed on her that is not by punishment but the counseling and conversation with her cellmates. "By morning, Zeba would be a bit more Zeba-- relying on no one to fix the small messes an average day brought. It was one of life's many tragedies that Kamal wasn't around to see it." (Hashimi, 2016, p. 74).

The above explanations reveal that the text of Nadia Hashimi gives substantiation to the theory of the panopticon. These incidents are linked with Foucault's panopticon theory. Finally, the author's exploration of prison ideas in the text of Hashimi is highly visible.



## Discussion

The prison narrative as implemented by Nadia Hashimi in *The House Without Windows*, is intertwined with the threads of tales of torture, trauma, and experienced atrocities narrated by the victims who share their testimonies in prison that are similar to one another, arrested behind bars for the same cause. This penetrating study rests on a literary critical perspective that draws upon varied disciplines to expose the interplay flanked by self-narration, confinement, and the higher question of human rights abuses. There are a few studies regarding prison concepts in literature. Those studies are compared and illustrated with Hashimi's select text in terms of prison ideas.

The study of Daniel Mears (2012) implicates the changes in social order in prisons and for the individuals in prison, their families, and the communities to which they return. In this study, the author included prison order theory to illustrate prison rules. This theory deals with prison cultures, communities, and gender differences in prison. The author mentions that prison experiences and prisoner views affect inmate behavior and prison order. Moreover, this study focuses on inmate adjustment and victimization, visitation, gangs, programming, inmate perceptions, spatial and temporal variation in rehabilitative efforts prison engagement, and more. Likewise, Hashimi has explored the prison concept in her work *A House without Windows*.

The study of Leland Monk (1994) abbreviates the idea of prison in Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818). He mentions the prison as 'Tolbooth Prison' and includes architectural construction in the opening conceits in his novel. John Bender argues the concept of imagining the penitentiary in Scott's novel. He says that it is eighteenth-century novelistic ideas of realism that are explored in Scott's novel. Moreover, it informed emerging ideas and the physical design of the modern penitentiary. Likewise, Hashimi has explored the prison concept in her work *A House without Windows*.

Rene Denfeld (2014) is a famous writer in English. She is known for the book *The Enchanted* (2014). This novel focuses on the psychological aspect and it is a debut novel. The entire scene of the novel is located in a prison in America. The unnamed narrator narrates the whole story. The unnamed narrator finds darkness and loneliness in prison. The writer has explored the architectural construction of the old prison. The culture of prison corruption is the main concept at the end of the climax. Likewise, Hashimi has explored the prison concept in her work *A House without Windows*.

Nathaniel Hawthorne is known for the fiction, *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance*, (1988) describes the severity of Puritanical Laws by employing symbolic words to portray deeper, more profound thoughts. 'Prison door' is described as 'old, and rusted', 'yet strong and sturdy', 'heavily timbered with oak', and 'studded with iron spikes' readers can feel the incapability to break, intolerance of irregularity and clutching on society it is powerful. As we readers explore Zeba's life, we come to know about the women's prison in Afghanistan, Chilmuhtabwe find Yusuf. Hashimi reveals key pieces of information along the way and explores an unfamiliar prison culture through sensitive narratives, plots, backdrops, and characters. Women are supposed to be under the Taliban's horrifying rule outside, 'the prison in Afghanistan is both a 'haven' and not a house -of -a -man that he owns as a master. Moreover, she addresses the 'female prison guard' as 'a fairy godmother' who treats the incarcerated women decently. Removed from the harsh and unforgiving outside Afghanistan, Afghan prison is 'a safe home', a small world' and the cellmates form an indelible 'sisterhood' 'supportive comrades' or 'jailbirds'. 'The prison', 'the walls', and 'the window' represent the mysterious corners of Zeba's life, the guilt trap, and the liberating female space free from male voice and gaze but the house is without windows in this story means that light and air cannot pass through metaphorically figurative language are employed almost with similarity in prison narratives.

According to the survey reported in, Disturbing health crisis among women in Afghan prisons, UN report Nov 22, 2023 issue, Girls and women in the war-torn country have faced many challenges in Afghan prisons regarding issues of physical and mental health, struggling with drug addiction, broken families, and uncared children since Taliban turned to power. There is no access to education, employment, and public spaces. In *A House Without Windows*, the prison is a 'closed world' where she sees a 'window' in this novel where seemingly ordinary housewives take their time to think discuss, and support each other to bring order into their lives breathing harmony into the family. Especially shy mothers like Zebra without the prison experience, like a window light peeping into a house, it is an eye-opening moment she lives for herself streamlines her thoughts, and modifies her life with four children. The women can liberate themselves from being a 'victim of injustice'. The symbolic bonds share created in prison become very significant as 'they do not coexist but grow together'. Thus window symbolizes 'hope' It is a historical fiction, that focuses on the sufferings of Afghan women and their budding hope through new friendships in the prison. Thus, prison is not the same for everyone.

Jelodar E.S. et al. (2014) by analyzing the plight of modern Afghan Women through the modern lens of Media, and a couple of YouTube documentaries on women's imprisonment, we are aware that 12 years after the US-led women suffer and are victimized in prison. They become prisoners for breaking the taboos. "Prisoners of Tradition: Women in Afghanistan" (2012) is one of these YouTube documentaries produced by Ariane Wu, Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR). The documentary begins with a portrays of different women in prison. The majority of these women are jailed for what Afghan courts deem as "moral crimes" such as refusing arranged marriages, marrying without their father's consent, and running away from home. In *A House Without Windows* (2014) through the prison days, Nadia Hashimi sheds light on the Afghan woman characters – Zeba, Nafisa, Latifa, and Mezghan who are imprisoned and suffer the guilt of injustice. Latifa is a brazen

twenty-five-year-old woman who is imprisoned for kidnapping her fifteen-year-old sister for protection. Nafisa is a woman in her mid-thirties who is imprisoned to protect her from an honor killing in retaliation for having an improper relationship with a widower, Mezghan, a nineteen-year-old unmarried woman who is pregnant, charged with a love crime, and Zeba middle-aged mother of four children accused and victimized for killing her lovable husband.

### Conclusion

The present study analyzes the prison ideas in Hashimi's *A House without Windows*. Finally, the prison ideas are rendered in the select novel of Nadia Hashimi through her writings. The present study recommends for auxiliary studies that future research can be accomplished in the areas of the exasperating life of Zebra, psychological barriers, a quest for identity, alienation, migration, cultural disparity, love, the role of friendship, and so on.

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