

# The Peter Pan Principle: Survival and Sustainance through Stories in Nadia Hashmi's *A House Without Windows*

Sapphire Mahmood Ahmed & K. Rizwana Sultana

## Abstract

Humans move between stories throughout their lives and almost always refuse to come out of this *Neverland*, a feature which Jonathan Gotschall calls Peter Pan Principle (306). When Zeba is found beside her husband's corpse in Nadia Hashmi's *A House Without Windows* (2016), it marks the beginning of the mystery of murder. While her neighbourhood believe a story of her guilt, Zeba has a story of resistance to the patriarchal society around her. This paper looks at the two different aspects of stories, one urging a deeper interrogation of how traditions and power structures converge to perpetuate injustice and the other that becomes the means of survival. With the ideas put forward by Gotschall, Barthes, Foucault, Gilbert, Braidotti and a few others, it explores how stories are either readily available or constructed for resistance. Emphasizing the human need to cling onto the Peter Pan Principle, this paper concludes that stories have agency upon human actions and thoughts, and humans can have agency upon stories. Sometimes this is necessary for justice and survival.

**Keywords:** Feminism; Gender roles; Ideal-Deviant Binary; Peter Pan principle; Survival.

Stories are essential to every human being. It is omnipresent, irrespective of whether we are awake or asleep. In other words, for human beings, who are constantly in search of meaning in their lives, stories are the means through which meanings are either deciphered or produced. Jonathan Gotschall, in *The Storytelling Animal* (2012), captures this very storytelling nature of humans and explore why they are so addicted to stories. Gotschall observes that humans are not only capable of producing their own stories but also sometimes impose their version of the story into the

reality (172). They are used to prune, shape or distort the reality. Evidently, humans find pleasure in stories. This is what Gotschall calls the Peter Pan Principle. "Humans are the species that won't grow up. We may leave our nurseries behind, but not Neverland" (306). This also points to another feature of story, that they have the ability to influence our thoughts and actions and shape our perceptions. Keith Oatley argues that reading fiction is similar to "simulation" that can modify our emotions and social perceptions by allowing us to experience empathy and understand complex social situations (17). The stories we engage with affect how we see the world and, by extension, how we interact with others. Stories are indeed powerful medium to shape human psychology and society.

*A House Without Windows* (2016) by Nadia Hashmi tells the poignant story of Zeba, a woman in Afghanistan accused of murdering her husband, Kamal. As she is imprisoned, Zeba becomes a symbol of resilience in the harsh societal systems, where women face severe injustices. Her lawyer, Yusuf, an Afghan American, determined to fight for her freedom, must navigate a complex legal system and cultural biases to uncover the truth. The novel explores themes of family, justice, and female empowerment, illustrating the often-overlooked lives of Afghan women and their struggles within a restrictive society.

Hashmi portrays the precariousness of living as a woman in a typical Afghan village, where women are defined based on their rigid gender roles as a wife, daughter and mother; and the honour of the family and the society in general is linked to female virtue. Violence against women has been legitimised by the patriarchal culture and this has made women the most vulnerable in the Afghan village. Zeba, the protagonist, is accused and convicted to Chil Mahtab, a women's prison, when she is found beside the corpse of her husband in her courtyard (6). The neighbours immediately come to the conclusion that Zeba is indeed the murderer. Zeba's arrest and transfer to jail sets motion the propagation of various stories, raising questions on her character, her loyalty as a wife and even the character of her murdered husband, Kamal. Once within the prison, Zeba, who remains adamantly silent, intrigues her cell mates, who are curious to know her version of the story. However, Zeba refuses to answer any of their questions. This only drives their imagination into inventing wild stories.

Based on the research in neurosciences, Jonathan Gotschall explains that humans have the tendency to extract stories from the information they receive and "if there is no story there- we are only too happy to invent one" (176).

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A web of whispers laced through the prison, and with every voice, the account of what Zeba has done changed, sometimes merely by degrees, but sometimes by great leaps.

*You know she killed her lover – so that her husband wouldn't. Can you imagine that kind of passion? ...*

*I heard she cut off his head and ran through the village with it" (54).*

When Zeba refuses to give her version to the mystery of Kamal's murder, the women of the prison start making their own stories using their wild imaginations. They cannot stop themselves from this. As Gotschall says, this is "automatic and insuppressible" (51). People cannot stop themselves from weaving stories from the limited information they receive. For the women of Chil Mahtab, who either willingly or are forcefully put into prison, such stories are their only way out of the lethargy, boredom and misery of prison life. "There was only one good way to battle the annui of their days. The women sat in their rooms and shared stories, dazzling cellmates with their tales, even as they accused one another of pilfering hair oil or laundry detergent" (49).

Stories are like social glue that connects people together. They are women who have lost almost everything in their lives. The social and cultural circumstances add to the process of disempowering the women and thereby exclude them from the society. It is only their stories of commonly shared misery and oppression that hold them together and gives them the strength to move forward in their lives. The act of sharing stories is a communal experience for the women and helps them in breaking the ceaseless cycle of oppression that they suffer. Referring to the mechanism of the mirror neurons in the human brain, Gotschall quotes Marco Iacoboni to explain how stories enable one to develop empathy with other people around them "because we literally experience the same feelings ourselves" (111).

Within Chil Mahtab, stories play a great role in the day-to-day lives of the women. They are in search of stories; they share their own stories and even act upon the stories they hear. "The human mind was shaped for story, so that it could be shaped by story" (Gotschall 103). Stories can act upon humans, and it can be acted upon by humans. In other words, each have agency over the other. Humans are wired for story. With each wild story, the inmates' perception of Zeba also changes. Roland Barthes, in *Image, Music, Text* (1988), argues that stories are not just fixed narratives

but open structures that people interpret, adapt and make their own (114). Hashmi's depiction of Chil Mahtab's women exemplifies how stories offer both agency and a means of survival, providing a platform for self-expression and resilience.

This paper builds on the premise that stories in *A House Without Windows* are not merely forms of entertainment but essential tools for empowerment. By examining how these women use stories to navigate personal and communal challenges, the paper reveals storytelling as a lifeline that sustains their sense of self. Based on the ideas put forward by Jonathan Gotschall, the kind of stories that we see in *A House Without Windows* can be classified as ready-made stories and constructed stories. In case of ready-made stories, the humans are acted upon by these stories. The influence of such stories upon the actions and thoughts of humans are worth looking at. In the case of constructed stories, the agency lies with the humans. They create and even manipulate certain stories so that they can control the situation.

### **The Ready-Made Stories**

Gotschall explains that stories have a pervasive influence on our lives. They contribute to the shaping of a culture and developing certain beliefs among people. "Research shows that story is constantly nibbling and kneading us, shaping our minds without our knowledge or consent. The more deeply we are cast under story's spell, the more potent its influence" (245-246). Ready-made stories, in a broad way, can be described as those kinds of stories that are easily accessible to anyone within a society. They are the stories for which people do not go deep in search of. These stories are capable of shaping their perspectives, opinions and politics. To be more specific, these stories originate from societal norms, traditions or shared cultural myths. They can shape a society's perceptions of morality, ideas of honours and justice within that community. This intersects with Roland Barthes concept of myths as cultural narratives that shape collective meaning (*Mythologies* 65). Gotschall emphasizes the evolutionary and psychological importance of stories in structuring reality, while Barthes sees myths as socially constructed systems that naturalize cultural values and ideologies. Together, their ideas reveal the dual role of stories in fostering connection and perpetuating societal norms.

The various incidents in Hashmi's novel show that such ready-made stories are capable of acting upon the people in the society and push them into dangerous actions. When Zeba is found beside her husband's body,

her hands covered in blood and shaking from head to toes, it leaves her children in a complete state of shock. However, the neighbourhood that immediately floods into her courtyard is quick to jump into conclusions regarding the murder:

“But why isn’t she talking? What happened here, Khanum? Did you kill your husband?”

“Ofcourse she did! There’s a hatchet in the back of his neck! Do you think he killed himself?” (19).

Within a few minutes, there is an agitated mob in Zeba’s courtyard demanding to know what happened to Kamal. However, out of respect for Agha Rafiqi, the eldest person present there, they decide to let her spend the night with her children. The Afghan village, portrayed in the novel, has no means for any scientific or forensic investigations. Hence, unfortunately, the judgements of any crime are mostly based on the emotions of the people involved. The sudden bursting of Fareed, Kamal’s cousin, into the crime scene affirms this fact. As soon as he sees the dead body of his brother, he jumps at Zeba’s throat trying to strangle her to death (23). Inspector Hakimi is now forced to arrest her so that he can save her from being murdered at the hands of the mob.

The ready-made story of honour and shame, almost always associated with the female genders, frequently dictates the actions of characters, leading to life-altering or even life-threatening outcomes. The neighbourhood’s reaction to the crime scene and Zeba are deeply rooted in the community’s in-built narrative about the role and virtue of women, which serves to control and punish behaviour. The neighbourhood’s immediate judgement of the crime and Fareed’s attempt to strangle Zeba are all motivated by the story that they all have in their mind in advance. Women are easily and immediately blamed for the disintegration of a family, any kind of moral rectitude or social ills. The conclusions the neighbours draw from the crime scene are inevitably against Zeba. Never does it cross their mind that the murder might be committed by a third person and Zeba can possibly be a witness. There is not even the question of carrying out a scientific investigation before concluding who the culprit is. Rather than viewing the situation objectively, emotions here take a major role. The society’s prejudice against the woman is evident here. In a society, where honour is linked to the woman, the pressure upon women to restrict themselves within the prescribed gender roles is high. A failure in this regard can be dangerous, which we saw in Fareed’s attempt to strangle Zeba. Fareed’s aggression, a presumption of guilt without investigation, is not a rational

one but a performance of a deeply ingrained story, where honour and morality are policed through violent control of women.

Nafisa, a cell mate of Zeba, again, is a victim of the ready-made stories that are spun around her. "While Nafisa swore it had been nothing more than a quick bite with a platonic friend, few believed her story. That she'd been an obedient and loving daughter and sister all her life did not change a thing" (44). Her family chooses to stick on to the anti-woman, ready-made story rather than listen to or believe what she has to say in the matter. Nafisa's mother, fearing the danger of this story, deliberately hands over her daughter to the police so that she is saved from the heinous act of honour killing. As in the case of Zeba, Nafisa is also jailed to be saved from furious revenge. The ready-made stories are capable of the murder of the woman involved in the situation; no matter she is guilty, or innocent of the crime accused. As in the case of Fareed, honour killing, an act of aggression, again, reflects the internalization of such power structures, where individuals enforce societal norms on behalf of a larger system.

Both Zeba and Nafisa's experiences reflects upon Roland Barthes' concept of myth in *Mythologies* (1957), in which he argues that such narratives are constructed as natural and unquestionable thus embedding themselves in the fabric of social behaviour (65). Nafisa's mother knew that she alone could not fight off the power of these stories. Hence, she chose prison for the safety of her daughter. Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), explores how societal discourses create systems of power that discipline individuals, often compelling them to conform to predefined roles at great personal cost. Disciplinary power operates subtly through systems of norms and expectations (182).

Zeba and Nafisa are victims of these ready-made, anti-woman stories. In all these cases, the woman becomes the criminal. It is her honour that comes under the radar. The stories act as the panopticon, to use Foucault's term, through which the characters can be observed at any time, enforcing the possibility of self-regulation (201). Over time, individuals internalise these norms and conform to roles prescribed by society, often at the expense of their freedom. At the same time, the men in question do not need to face the wrath of the society or the law. Kamal, despite being a known alcoholic and wife-beater, is not questioned by the family or neighbourhood. Nafisa's platonic lover is not jailed, unlike Nafisa. For Zeba and Nafisa, the anti-woman ready-made stories cause them to be thrown into jail, against their will. However, regardless of jail being their chosen path or not, it is obvious from their situations that the world outside the prison

would not leave them alive or let them live honourably. The society does not give second chances to women who have digressed from the morally right path that is dictated by the ready-made stories which the society blindly believes in. Steeped in bias, neither the police nor the general society is neutral seeker of truth. They are engaged in enforcing a system that prioritizes the honour and superiority of men.

The police interrogation and the judge's initial response to Zeba's case are enlightening on how the ready-made stories can influence one's thoughts. From the moment Zeba is found beside the dead body of her husband, it is determined that she is indeed the murderer. All that was left for the police to do is bring out a confession from her:

*You killed him. Just tell us why.*

*You're not going to get away with this. It'll be easier on you if you tell the truth.*

*Your own husband. Your only hope for mercy is if you cooperate (93).*

The judge says in the very first hearing, "she's guilty as guilty can be. We shouldn't be wasting our time with nonsense" (92). Zeba finds herself subject to the judgements of legal system and cultural framework that views her not as an individual but as a role- wife, mother or criminal. The police's interrogation of Zeba is deeply rooted in the cultural narratives that transform socially constructed ideas into seemingly natural truths. These ready-made stories may be equated to such myths, to use Barthes' term, to uphold male dominance, framing the man as the rightful authority and the woman as the inherently subordinate one.

Yusuf, Zeba's lawyer, has a tough time before the judge, trying to convince the latter to nullify the police record of Zeba's confession to the murder. Zeba, however, is not surprised. Besides being terrified of the proceedings in the police station and the court, she does not hope much for herself. She is very well aware how things work in her country and is almost sure that there would not be a verdict that would be in her favour. The woman is always on the wrong side of law. The ready-made stories in her society are dumped upon the woman. In this intense patriarchal anti-woman society, truth and investigation evidence do not matter. Zeba is aware that she will not be able to navigate past these ready-made stories imposed upon her and be free from jail or the impending death sentence.

The ever-present gaze of societal expectations forces women like Zeba to internalize their prescribed roles, which are often defined by subservience,

chastity and loyalty. This internalisation limits their ability to act freely or even think of alternative possibilities. Her silence to Yusuf's questions is indicative of her awareness of the hopeless situation. "She would scream her story for all to hear if she thought anything good would come of it" (99). The potential of such ready-made stories is evident in the police interrogation scene as well the *qazi's* (the judge) response to her in the initial hearing.

Once a woman is sentenced to prison, she is deprived of all her rights and dignity. She is excluded from the society and denied access to a free world. The inmates of Chil Mahtab are the expelled people, who are accused of crimes that they have or have not committed. Their fate is always dictated by men. As Sandra Gilbert observes in "Literary Paternity" (1979), traditionally and culturally, superiority and authority has been accorded to the males (14). Whether they choose to go to prison or they are pushed into prisons, it becomes clear that the women within Chil Mahtab are the victims of the "prison of the male texts" (12). They are confined to the role of either the ideal woman or the deviant woman. Anything in between these binary opposites is neither acceptable nor convenient to the male society and such women deserve to be excluded from their society. In this patriarchal society, it is the men who decide the fate of women. Women are made to be dependent on the men, be it the father, brother or husband, for all their needs. Hence, the lives of women are planned according to the needs and comfort of the men.

The ready-made stories here are capable of influencing the thoughts and actions of the characters (Barthes 114). Both the Qazi and the police act as institutional agents of this surveillance upon women. They embody the internalized gaze of patriarchy that bound a woman by her roles (Foucault 182). Such is the agency that the ready-made stories have upon the characters in the novel. Despite the agency, however, they are only capable of placing women within the limitations of certain binary opposites. Either the woman has to be the ideal one or she has to be the deviant one. The murder scene marks Zeba's digression from her role as the perfect wife, perfect mother and peaceful villager. When Nafisa is caught with a man in a public space, she is immediately rejected from the role of the perfect maiden and is now the bad woman who must be killed in the name of honour. Within the narrative of the ready-made stories that their society so religiously follows, the women do not have a gray position.

In short, the society that is portrayed in *A House Without Windows* places the man at the central or pivotal position. Drawing from Barthes and Fou-

cault, we may say that there are collisions of cultural narratives and power dynamics that uphold patriarchal control. Every decision or judgement made is designed such that it is favourable for the man, and the woman in question is relegated to a more inferior position that is worth discarding. The ready-made stories feed to the anthropocentric attitudes and thereby strongly roots the male-dominant, anti-woman patriarchal culture. In order to attain an identity that is neither the ideal nor the deviant, the women must construct their own version of stories that are not dependent and digresses from the ready-made stories.

### **The Constructed Stories**

Hashmi's novel can be easily read as a protest against the intense patriarchal system in Afghan society that adamantly privileges the man in a higher hierarchical position. When the inmates of Chil Mahtab narrate each of their stories, it pushes one to re-think on the worthiness of the man who has been historically placed in such a high position through such ready-made stories. Once within the prison walls, the man is decentred. Hashmi's novel gives us an insight into the impermanence of the male-agency. Within the prison, the male agency is shifted to the periphery and the novel experiments with a new mode of agency, when women take the central position. Chil Mahtab becomes the space to deconstruct the traditionally accorded pivotal position of the man in the society. Rather than the male being the pivotal point, as was in her life till then, Zeba's silence draws attention towards her. The mystery of Kamal's murder revolves around her and this baffles the neighbours, the lawyers involved and even the cell inmates of Chil Mahtab. When Zeba refuses to answer any questions from her cell mates or her lawyer, it places her out of the binary of ideal-deviant woman. They are curious to know her story but simply cannot place her into either of the two categories. Zeba's initial silence is capable of shaking this boundary set by binary opposites and manifests the gray area in between. Her silence is also capable of invalidating the ready-made stories. By resisting the urge to explain or justify herself, Zeba reclaims agency over her story and invalidates the oppressive narrative framework that seeks to define her in the binary opposites.

Adrienne Rich, in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (2012), defines re-vision as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18). For Rich, re-vision involves challenging and rewriting inherited narratives that have historically marginalised or misrepresented women. Zeba's silence is an act of re-vision. By refusing to contribute to the ready-made

stories that categorise women as either the ideal or the deviant, she resists the traditional narrative framework imposed by the society. Her silence forces those around her- her cellmates, lawyer and society at large- to confront the inadequacy of their binary classifications. This act destabilises the patriarchal myth of womanhood and compels re-evaluation of societal norms. In refusing to answer, she attempts not to rewrite her story within the confines of the existing binary but instead rejects the binary altogether. This refusal exemplifies the process of re-vision, where the goal is not to be shaped by patriarchal expectations but to dismantle them entirely.

Interestingly, every woman who plans to walk out of the prison is very well aware that they may not be able to enjoy the autonomy within the prison once they are outside it. Going back to the patriarchal society outside would mean they can no longer be in the central position as was within Chil Mahtab. Hence, they resort to other methods so that they can have a stable support and existence in the outside world. Once the women ceased to pivot their world around the men in their lives, they found ways to navigate through the social inequalities and violence in different ways. One such way was black magic.

The practicing of black magic associates one with the demons and evils. It is usually an act that is performed with the intention to cause some damage or harm to an enemy. For the Afghan society, which has an Islamic background, black magic is seen as a sin and can be a cause for being the social outcaste. There is also the fact that black magic gives the practitioner an agency over other people as well as their possessions. Despite its status as demonic, it is obvious from Hashmi's novel that this art is part of the culture represented here.

"When she overheard a neighbour's wife speaking ill of her family, Gulnaz sprinkled a line of dried, crushed pepper at their gate. When the neighbour's cow was found lifeless the next morning, Zeba felt protected and safe" (129). Zeba's mother's black magic implies at the desperate need to concoct a story from unrelated things. As Gotschall explains, the storytelling mind tends to weave unrelated things together to make a story from them.

Of course, we recognize consciously that these [unrelated] sentences could serve as building blocks for an infinite number of narratives. But studies show that if you give people random, unpatterned information, they have a very limited ability *not* to weave it into a story. (176)

People tend to connect unrelated things and develop their own stories as an explanation to the things that is happening around or to them. Such stories that are newly developed may tend to be based on the ready-made stories that they already have in their minds. When people encounter ambiguous, unexplained events, they draw upon existing social norms, cultural narratives and personal biases to form explanations. These act as templates, which are deeply embedded with societal power dynamics. Gulnaz, who practices black magic, is feared by both men and women around her, due to her dominance over others at a psychological level.

As daughter of the powerful *murshid*, people had always treated her with cautious respect. And when they caught a glimpse of her green eyes, she could see them hesitate to take their next breath, as if she might have cursed the very air around them. (115)

Women tend to blame anything that went wrong in their lives upon Gulnaz as she is the known evil woman in the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, Zeba is also looked upon with doubtful eyes since she is Gulnaz's daughter. However, unlike Zeba, Gulnaz is a woman who enjoys and takes advantage of the negative publicity that she receives due to her use of black magic. It helps her to gain autonomy over the society that continuously tries to oppress women. For Gulnaz, black magic is a way to create an alternative life experience.

In "The Master's Tools" (1981), Audre Lorde famously asserts that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (99). This applies to *A House Without Windows* as well. The ready-made stories cannot be used to liberate women. They must be deconstructed and replaced with narratives born out of women's lived realities and resistance. New systems of thought and action must be created that do not replicate the structures of the oppressor.

Zeba, when she was determined to live as a good wife, rejected Gulnaz and her black magic, prohibiting her mother from entering her home. "*I am nothing like my mother, she would tell her adolescent self*" (131). But, after her imprisonment in Chil Mahtab, Zeba is no longer expected to be the good wife or good mother. She immediately reconnects with her mother (135). She eventually resorts to black magic, with the intention of helping her fellow cell inmates. Through the practice of black magic, Zeba and the inmates of Chil Mahtab are attempting the production of an alternative lived experience. They construct a reality that is based on the stories that they wish to have in their lives. They find means to evolve out of the

male-dominated oppressed lives they have been living. As Rosi Braidotti argues in *Posthuman Feminism* (2022), this evolving cannot occur in isolation. It needs alliances and connections to thrive (237).

Mezhgan, unlike her cell mates, finds a way to twist her fate by seeking help from Zeba. She is jailed when found pregnant before marriage. Although her lover has not yet asked her hand in marriage, she deeply trusts him and blames his family for things not happening according to her dreams. In other words, Mezhgan is the kind of girl who does not accept the reality and does not even consider the possibility of something going wrong in her dream-world. She refuses to come out of her *Never Land*, a realm of imagination where her own imagined story has shaped her perception of reality (Gotschall 306). However, she would later require Zeba's black magic tricks to twist her fate and make the reality conform to her dream-story. In line with Lorde's idea of rejecting the master's tool, Mezhgan refuses to wait for the invitation of her lover to marriage (which may never come) and instead takes things into her own hands, seeking the help of Zeba's black magic. Once Zeba's tricks work, we see Mezhgan is immediately married to her lover. Once she leaves the jail as a married woman to her own *Neverland*, we do not see her returning. With the aid of black magic as her new tools to dismantle the narrative of such ready-made stories, Mezhgan has "re-visioned" her story of *Neverland*.

Mezhgan's travel to the *Neverland* also foreshadows the end of the novel. Zeba's magic tricks hands over the pen of fate to the women's hands, undermining the power and agency of the masculine in deciding the fate of women here. Like Mezhgan, they now prefer to write their own stories as they wish it to be. Hence, once Zeba return to the prison, she is hailed as *Malika* (the Queen) and her cell is flooded with the women seeking her magic tricks (335). Within *Chil Mahtab*, women teach each other to empower themselves. Although surprised by the new position that she is given within the prison, Zeba, like Gulnaz, is enjoying it.

"You've done something," she declared.

Zeba hid a sheepish smile. Gulnaz's intuition was confirmed.

"What did you do?" she pressed.

Zeba shook her head. There was an undeniable twinkle in her eye.

... "I told her about the string and the chicken feathers."

"You did?"

"I did."

Gulnaz looked puzzled.

“Where did you learn that from?”

“From you, of course. You made me pluck the chicken feathers myself when we did it for Nooria-jan.” (189).

Chil Mahtab and black magic gives her an opportunity to exclude herself from the impositions of the gender roles upon her by the patriarchal society and to possess power and agency for the first time in her life. Through her initial silence and her black magic, she reclaims her autonomy and creates a new space for agency.

The women’s dependence on stories, black magic and the belief in their *Neverland* are a way of surviving in a world that is determined to subdue them. They find solace in that which is constructed and manipulated rather than the reality of the world outside of Chil Mahtab. Stories aid them in either accepting the reality or to have their way through this harsh reality. “To survive, they had to adapt. They could adapt themselves or they could adapt the space they occupied, Zeba realized” (156). When Mezghan seeks Zeba’s help, she has chosen her own version of a story for her reality. “You unlocked my *naseeb*”, she says to Zeba (158). She decides to bend the ways so that she does not need to leave her *Neverland*. The women of Chil Mahtab are more open to the gray area between the binary than the men in the novel. Once out of the pressure of being the good, ideal woman, the women learn to sympathize with each other.

The walls of the prison enable them to move away from the intellectual histories which privilege the mind and rationality of man. Such binary thinking gives man agency over other beings, and other human and non-human bodies are without agency over their lives. Once away from the world of the male-dominated patriarchal society, these women find a pathway to access certain privileges and entitlements. As Braidotti rightly points out in *Posthuman Feminism* (2022), it is through forming alliances and collaborations that one becomes capable of reflecting on contemporary injustices and will be able to bring in some transformations. This helps in recognising the interdependence with not only other humans, but with other species. This helps us to understand that alternative experiences can be formed by involving the entire system that we live in (237).

Hashmi’s novel gives us the idea that the solution to the problems that the women find themselves in is to manipulate their reality by constructing stories. As in the case of Mezghan, other cell inmates also seek the magic tricks of *Malika* Zeba, believing that this would be the solution to their

problems (345-348). To Zeba's astonishment, her *taweez* and other tricks work for the women. "I've never seen anything like this. I've never seen so many women getting a break. Malika Zeba is a miracle maker", observes a cell inmate (348). They develop a strong sense of community, despite the myriad differences between them. While constructing their own stories through magic tricks and re-writing their own fates, these women have also underlined their own individuality and preserved their authenticity.

The constructed stories are not the same for everyone. Zeba's solutions are customised, in other words. The women of Chil Mahtab were in the predicament together. Yet, they are "not one and the same", to use Braidotti's words ("Posthuman Knowledge", 00:54:40-00:55:20). The construction of stories and thereby the construction of an alternative reality in this novel has incorporated the complexity of the situation and has brought in an all-encompassing collaborative solution, as Braidotti hopes for.

While the use of black magic aids to the construction of an alternative, more preferable reality for the women in Chil Mahtab, Zeba, through her silence, has also created an alternative reality. Laylee's story was never revealed before the public. Zeba was the sole witness to the crime committed by Kamal, who was murdered with the hatchet by Laylee. Other people who later sensed the truth chose to remain quiet, knowing the society's habit of haunting the victim instead of bringing the culprit before the law. Yusuf, Qazi Najeeb and Walid, the dry fruits vendor, who eventually discovered the truth collaborated with Zeba. Each of them, without openly acknowledging it, knew the power the ready-made stories have over their society. The final scene on the river side seals the unwritten, unuttered secret bond that Zeba and Laylee have. Laylee, who was still recovering from the wounds inflicted upon her by Kamal, did meet Zeba's eyes. Yet, other than a blink and smile, they do not communicate anything else with each other:

Zeba lifted a hand and pressed it to her chest. Her eyes could have followed the girl forever, until she became nothing more than a purple dot against the sparse trees, but Zeba closed her eyes, burning the image of that timid smile into her memory (411).

Zeba chose to remain silent. She chose to keep Laylee out of the tyranny. She chose to protect the unknown young girl from the wrath of the society. She took upon herself the suffering of going to prison and the torture of being separated from her own children. It was better that the society never know the truth. Only that would guarantee Laylee an almost nor-

mal life, protected by her loving parents. Zeba's silence and her choice to suffer let the cruel society to swim in their own world of stories and seal the Peter Pan Principle. It allowed Laylee to escape from constrains of the reality, the constant panopticon surveillance she would otherwise have been subjected to and from the oppressive power perpetuated by the ready-made myths. Zeba acts as an active agent that subverted the structures that work to oppress victims like her.

Zeba, through her silent resistance, created a story for the society so that Laylee is well protected. For a society which depended, with intense emotions, on certain ready-made stories, Zeba constructed a story to dwell upon. She created a *Neverland*, not for her but for the society around her to dwell upon. It was a fantasy world, created with the aid of the ready-made stories that the society has already dumped upon women like her.

Implying that Kamal's murder is justified due to other crimes that he had committed, the Qazi's verdict also made sure that Laylee's truth was protected (399-402). He does not rule out Zeba as the murderer so that Laylee's name does not come out but frees her from prison quoting that she had gone through enough punishment. The verdict, in other words, contributed to the conserving of the story that Zeba had started building. Qazi Najeeb, Yusuf and Walid, without ever speaking openly about it or with each other, collaborated so that this *Neverland* offered by Zeba to the intense anti-woman patriarchal society is never disillusioned. Like Mezghan who travelled away to her own *Neverland*, Zeba's story let the society to continue to believe in its lies and be in its own *Neverland*. The adoption of the Peter Pan Principle was a necessary way for survival and sustenance of a dignified life for a young girl. It empowered the characters to imagine lives beyond constrains, fostering hope and resilience.

### **The Triumph of Story over Truth**

Hashmi's novel opens up a dialogue on the survival and sustainability of all human beings, not just one particular category of human beings. The novel shows how everything in this world is interconnected, be it human or non-human, be it living or non-living. Zeba's story manifests the values one must put forward to survive in a world where everyone is not equal and same but different in perspectives; and yet, are together in its predicaments. As Braidotti says, "human" has never been a universal or neutral term. The term has always been a pathway to privilege man over all other beings. It is a discriminatory term, according to Braidotti (2013), that is meant to create inequalities not only between humans and other liv-

ing beings but also between different categories of humans ("What is the Human", 00:03:48-00:05:10; "Posthuman Knowledge", 00:07:48-00:08:21.). The other beings "are not even considered fully human" ("The Posthuman" 1). The stories of Mezghan and Nafisa testify to this. Mezghan and other cell mates' dependence on Zeba's black magic to twist their fate according to their wishes also is an extended act of rejection of the traditional man. Zeba's silence is also a rejection of the superiority of the man who has taken all the major decisions of her life.

It is interesting to note that Zeba's adamant silence and determined calmness over her murder accusations and the practicing of black magic not only removes the male from the pivotal position, it also removes all humans from that privileged position. Human does not have the sole agency over the happenings in this world. Sometimes, the agency to exercise power is transferred to other living beings or even non-living beings, as seen in the influence of black magic in the novel. The chicken, the blood, the thread, the *taweez* and other things that are used in Gulnaz and Zeba's black magic attain an agency over the fate of the humans in the novel. As Mezghan observes, if it is to be successful, black magic must be done in the correct proportion and with extreme care (158). Here, the agency is taken away from humans and passed over to other things. As Jane Bennett would agree in *Vibrant Matter* (2010), the exclusive agency is not endowed upon humans. Humans are interconnected and interdependent with the non-humans (18).

Rosi Braidotti, in *Posthuman Feminism* (2022), observes that for the people who have not been considered socially and politically fully human, it would be difficult to develop a positive relation with the society around them. They would have an ambivalent relationship (238). This explains Mezghan's choice to choose the crooked path to be part of that society. The women resort to black magic to twist their fate in their favour. At times, like Mezghan, they refuse to come out of their dream-world. As for Zeba who is conscious of the intense anti-woman bias of her society, she lets people be in their own *Neverland* so that a young, innocent girl is saved from the wrath of that society. Zeba does not hope to rectify her society but fights its bias in her own way through her silence and allowing the construction of stories around her regarding her guilt. She does not build a positive relation with her society yet manages to carve her own space there. Both the ready-made stories and the constructed stories have profound impact upon the characters in *A House Without Windows*. Gotschall's emphasis on the emotional and psychological impact of stories complements Barthes' view of myths as cultural tools and Foucault's

ideas on panopticon. Stories do not only reflect existing power structures but actively mould perceptions and beliefs, embedding ideologies into the society.

Mezhgan's travel to her *Neverland* and Zeba's silent construction of a story of her guilt contributes to the development of the Peter Pan Principle in the novel. This is their way of continuing to exist in this world. They have created a story of their own around them and continue to live in the protection provided by that story. Once out of the prison, the women are living in a world that is different from the one that they had lived in their pre-prison life. It is a world where they either have the autonomy or knows the means to attain the autonomy. In other words, they have redefined the world in their favour. These are women who have a unique vantage point to look out at the world they prefer to live and have redefined their own existence through their own means. This is attained through the women's efforts. They find ways to not only survive but also to sustain in this intense anti-woman patriarchal world. Drawing from Barthes, Gilbert, Foucault and Gotschall, we may conclude that resistance emerge when the ready-made stories are deconstructed, alternative narratives are authored, the mechanics of power are exposed, and the influence of stories is redirected to empower the oppressed voices. The newly constructed stories disrupt the ready-made stories, challenge the power structures and reshape their values. The adoption of the Peter Pan Principle in *A House Without Windows* point at the fact that, while stories reinforce dominant ideologies, they also hold the potential to offer a path toward equity and liberation.

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