

[TRANS] IDENTITY IN GENDER FALSIFICATION OF BACHA POSH IN *THE PEARL THAT BROKE ITS SHELL & ONE HALF FROM THE EAST*

H. Kabeer¹ and P. Chaudhary²

^{1,2}Manipal University Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

¹hasshahjahan@gmail.com, ²priyanka.chaudhary@jaipur.manipal.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper deciphers the custom of Bacha Posh and the way it affects the society primarily the preteen girls in the gender biased and ethnocentric third world nation, Afghanistan through the narrative of the Afghan American author, Nadia Hashmi. Hashimi's novels curvise the way how Afghanistan's male-controlled civilization, monetary enslavement proceeding men and societal humiliation and social pressure is responsible to carry out the families to adopt the custom of Bacha Posh. Adolescence, a developmental and identity formation stage, examines gender discrimination in Bacha Posh. The Pearl that Broke Its Shell (2014) and One Half from the East (2016) narrate how the preteen girl is taught to be modest and unexpectedly, she is ordered to be a faux boy. Once she reaches the age of adolescence, she is again forced to forget the ways of Bacha Posh for being a modest wife. This travesty, of puppetry life leaves her perplexed who she actually is. The essay investigates the identity crisis and gender biases through Bacha Posh custom on Afghan females through Feminist subaltern theories.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Bacha Posh, Gender Identity, Marginalization, Nadia Hashimi, Taliban

Introduction

It is indeed tough to be a woman in Afghanistan as they do not have any possibilities due to the control of their men on them. *Bacha Posh* basically is a social act, adopted by sonless families or a smaller number of sons in comparison to daughters in which the preteen girls are dressed up as boy till they reach the age of puberty and sometimes even after that. The girls, after this act, are promoted to behave more freely as they are now treated as boys. This assists herein performing all the duties that a male member of the house in conventional patriarchal society can perform. There are a lot of instances on the custom of bacha posh, depicted in works like *I am a Bacha Posh* (2014), *My Name is Parvana* (2012), *The Underground Girls of Kabul: In search of Hidden Resistance in Afghanistan* (2014) and *The Breadwinner* (2017) which is based on a novel of the same name by Deborah Ellis. Julianne Corboz et. al. (2020), in a qualitative research on 1463 Afghan women found obvious that bacha posh is owned by families with large number of daughters, with low number of sons, "that bacha posh is therefore a response to very contextual experiences of Afghan life – either to enable mobility or overcome the lack of a boy child in the household. Second, our data also support qualitative evidence that suggests that bacha posh in the family is linked to more equitable

gender norms. Third, the practice was associated in Kabul with greater engagement in work, and this may be because a bacha posh enables women's greater mobility."

Not only this, most surprisingly there is a misconception that if there is a *bacha posh* in the family, firstly, the next pregnancy will definitely bring a son to the family and secondly, good fortune will knock the door. One more constant reason was the civil war and the Taliban fundamentalist regime, where a family with no male member either will die out starving since it does not allow women to work in any condition and even to move outside without accompanied by a male relative. Since, after the Taliban came into power, this practice became necessary to adopt as now, they confined women rights.

Hashimi explores the tradition of *Bacha Posh* in *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* and *One Half From the East*. These preteen characters perform this particular custom on the request of their families or in the quest of a little freedom. Every Afghan knows about *bacha posh*. Hashimi paints the stories of two women - Rahima and Shekiba, even a generation apart narrative in the relation of grandmother-grandchild, who underwent an assortment of tragedies yet have a hope to live a dignified life. Shekiba's story is set in early 1900s where no Taliban and Mujahideen were in existence, still, her tragic narrative is more haunting than

any other. Nadia's character, Obayda, in the novel *One Half from the East*, is also a victim of *bacha posh* custom where aunt Aziza convinces her mother that the ten-year-old Obayda should be dressed up as a boy in order to help her father who lost his leg in a car bomb tragedy in the market.

"With her as a son, she will bring good luck to your home. You'll see your husband cheer up.... Having a *bacha posh* at home brings boy energy into your household. The next baby that comes will be a boy. And once you have a real son, what happens. Your husband will come back to life". (Hashimi 10)

This momentary reprieve and temporary appearance are accepted by the society in the lives of both the females. Rahima's transformation into Rahim was a sign of relief during the fall of hard times for the family. Rahim is now getting pampering and feeding the only chicken pieces while other sisters only have the gravy to eat. It is shown in this analysis how the performativity of *Bacha posh* forces Afghan women's marginal placement by performativity of diverse gender at such a young age where all the women Obayda, Rahima and Shekiba practiced living as males and enjoyed the freedom they always dreamt of but couldn't live longer with it. Identity conversion and ill-fated realities of various females in the world is one of the major traits that have added profundity to the narrative. The birth of the Mujahideen led to a sharp decline in women's conditions, though, the People Democratic Party tried to modernize women, the lengthy war that lasted for ten years worsened the condition of women in all aspects. *Bacha Posh* custom is not new to the distant past of Afghanistan since Shekiba's era also witnessed being living as a male guard where Shekiba as a guard realized the need of a home and a family.

For a young girl, living in Afghanistan, is a dream to play outside, and bringing vegetables from market and they get a special treatment at home over other girls. But sometimes this temporary life attains ineffaceable mark in young minds that they view their existence as an assuagement to their past grief and occupy utmost of their phase now in their fantasy land. It becomes very difficult for them to accept the reality and return back to their natural lives

again as girls, "some boys like us don't know what to do when they're changed back. They get confused and act really weird." (Hashimi 70). Woman, de Beauvoir states, start evaluating herself by the stereotyping and mystification of men—'Inferior', 'Other', the deviant—flawed version of males. A woman constructed as such by the sociocultural norms engraved in the patriarchs and they interpellated this hegemonic ideology in the Afghan women. Gender is a continuous performance which depends on time, location, age, and culture frameworks. These repetitiveness construct gender identity and societal discourse, body gestures, clothing, speech, mannerisms send a message to brain about the attributes of womanhood. These mannerisms are fixed in the mind as a kind of language and the body starts acting according to it.

"Some families think daughters are born to be wives and mothers and don't need to bother with books or writing...They can count only how many cups of rice to soak and can't tell the letter kof from the letter gof." (Hashimi 12)

Rahima, who after *Bacha Posh* becomes Rahim says:

"One little letter fell off the back end of my name and my world changed. It's the smallest little letter, barely even a sound. Rahim . . . Rahima. See? If you say it fast enough, you could miss it. Who ever thought such a tiny little letter could make such a big difference?" (Hashimi 10)

Forced transvestitism leads to a state of confusion. Gender, according to poststructuralists, is a text which needs context specific endless performance in order to recognition of gender. Gender, in *bacha posh*, shifting, provisioned and performed endlessly upon local citations of signs to get validation. Postmodern notions of gender believe in local meanings and demands repeated performances. The women's body is a site of control, discipline and gaze—her subjectivity, identity and gender are determined by social stereotypes. Being a *bacha Posh* is a short-term alternative. The fact is that the girls not only suffer emotional disturbance, but the question of individuality and identity also arises. Both Rahima and Shekeiba wish they could stay as a boy for longer and refuses to marry since it is

quite difficult for them to again start living within boundaries imposed by fundamentalists and phallogocentric society.

Diminishing Actual Identity

It is a state of ambivalence, where mimicry is performed once it associates with the occupied dominant culture. According to Lacan, "Mimicry is not at all a perception of establishing a harmonious background rather the effect of mimicry is blind, and it is not a question of coordinating with the upbringing, however in contradiction of a marked experience." Imposing imitation originates since the dominant group's longing on behalf of a rehabilitated, noticeable, further, equally a matter of alteration. Thus, what can be assumed is that mimicry is a twin expression, where one will imitate the habits and specifications but somewhere still; the originality will be overtaken with reality. The *bacha posh* starts behaving like boys not only with the physical advent but also in social comportment like playing outside, going to market, talking, walking and eating habits. Thus, they somehow start inheriting manly characteristics and dominating nature.

Rahima's mother tells Rahim "Listen, Rahim-Jan. You should be out with the boys, playing. That's what boy's do-do you understand what I am saying?" (Hashimi 68)

Obayda always loved dancing and wearing dresses that her sister expanded but now not due to false gendering performance. This ultimately makes every girl feel like they have always been at a disadvantageous position which lacks something. This thought strengthens its grip in Obayda's mind when she sees the way Rahima, the *bacha posh* who was always an inspiration to her, was forcefully married at an early age.

Afghan Female as 'Othering'

Hashimi's aggravation on how the conservative Afghan society is unable to imbibe the modernized changes with time. Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?", justified the confines of the subalterns. By 'subaltern' Spivak means the subjects "of inferior rank" like Afghan women. The subaltern as female is even more intensely in shadow. Spivak restates that the subaltern is not allowed to take part in

discourse, or they are unheard if they speak. The subservient women have no agency. Spivak surely not denies the societal agency existed of disempowered subaltern women. The subalterns were made to accept as true that they belonged to a lower race and so not suitable for creating any real influence on the civilization. Afghan women are the mute monuments either under patriarchy or under Taliban fundamentalists.

Afghan Women are being canned as the 'Other', 'Non-man' and with a lack. Women's rights in Afghanistan have been a subject of International concern since the 1990s. Over numerous transitory leadership—the mujahideen, Soviets, the Taliban, the US in the 1990s, women are marginalized. They are merely considered as shadows and string-puppets having no identity. Societal control through institutional ratification is seen when the females force the family girls to opt *Bacha Posh*. Another reason is Taliban's propagated power and misinterpretation of Sharia laws. They took over complete control and started subduing Afghan Women. They are under surveillance of Taliban and males. Power laid is coercive.

Nadia focuses on the way; society treats the families without sons. Rahima's mother suffers with the worst treatment from her husband for not giving birth to a son. The frustration of not having son leads Rahima's father towards opium. Somewhere, Nadia points out the enslavement going on constantly also on males besides how the communal disgrace initiatives people to admit the ritual of *Bacha Posh*. Both *bacha posh*—Obayda and Rahim want to forget everything about being a girl to enjoy the freedom provided to them. Rahim explains her that he had heard from her grandmother that passing under a rainbow turns boys into girls and girls into boys which they also tried at the stake of their lives on climbing a mountain. Somehow, Rahim and Obayda would never want to move back to the life of a girl. Here, the rainbow concept is a mark of delusion that Afghans accept as true so dreadfully. Obayda recalls Rahim's words saying:

Do everything Obayda! Do Everything. Meanwhile Obayda's mother tells her that Rainbow story is just a legend told to the kids.

Deserted Obayda shouts loud “Why would you want me to be a boy only for now? If being a boy is good, isn’t being a boy forever even better? (Hashimi 22)

As per an article in Asia Pacific (The New York Times) dated 20th September “There are no specifications on how many Afghans of several generations can frequently remember a *bacha posh* who was a friend, relative, neighbor or a co-worker. Further, throwing light on the same practice stretched back in centuries, where there were *bacha poshs* to safeguard the women of *Harem*.” The reason was that men cannot safeguard women over there. The worst part is the transformation back towards the girl again, where you should make every minute a counseling to your own heart that now you have to behave like a woman who does not have the right to speak. A mute woman with a heart and tongue but without a voice. The whole custom of *bacha posh* is trickery play, where everyone is deceiving each other by neglecting the truth. The society play-act, the girl to be a boy even after knowing the actual gender. The change in the behavior of the members of the family once the girl was a *bacha posh* was quite obvious.

In Afghanistan, a women’s condition is almost like a commodity by the society and even by the family members. Firstly, the girl is taught to be girl till teenage as Beauvoir says, ‘One is not born rather becomes a woman’ and when she learns all the modalities of a woman, she is ordered to be a *bacha posh*. Once she reaches the age of marriage, she is again forced to forget the ways of *bacha posh* and be dutiful wife. This is a travesty of her life leaving her in the state of mesh, who she actually is. Most of the Afghan women face somatic, sensual or psychosomatic forcefulness, or else stay forced into wedding to the men of triple of their age. In the name of sharia laws their complete command has been overtaken by the male members of the family. Many women still are in prisons for trying to elope from the brutal clutches of the Taliban. Once they are caught, it’s almost living dead. Many when learn the fact that escaping is impossible even tries to self-harm or slay themselves. Shekiba, the great grandmother of Rahima, who become an orphan at a very young age and destiny was so harsh on the half burnt girl that she, herself,

buries her dead father, mother and brothers. “As she passed by the tree where her family lay buried, Shekiba moaned and called out to them. She tried to lift her head to see the rounded mounds of earth. Madar, Padar, Tarik, Munis, Bulbul.” (Hashimi 39)

Shekiba finds out that she’ll be executed, and instead will receive hundred lashes. After her beating, she finds out that she has to be married. She learns that it is Agha Aasif who has requested her hand in marriage, and she figures out that it was he who had the affair with Benafsha, the concubine. She becomes his second wife, but only to have a male child. The only source of relief for the young bride Rahima was the visits of her aunt Khala Shaima whom she shared everything. Rahima’s soreness is noticeably audible in her statement when she cries: “I was a little girl and then I wasn’t, I was a *bacha posh* and then I wasn’t. I was a daughter and then I wasn’t. I was a mother and then I wasn’t.” (Hashimi 384)

As explained in one of the article Aljazeera on Jul 2015 titled “Afghanistan: No Country for Women “In war-torn Afghanistan it is not the Taliban that poses the greatest threat to women - it is their own families.” Its heart wrenching that in most of the cases, it’s the society and family who ill-treats women. It was Rahima’s father who arranges her marriage to the elderly warlord who just wants a different pleasure with the *bacha posh* of thirteen. The night when Rahima was called by her husband to the room, she sticks up stock-still in front of him “Take your chador off” he ordered. (Hashimi 167). Rahima hated the feeling of being with him, whenever she was called to the room she went, and he made her do what he wanted.

Ultimately, Nadia has painted woman power paradoxically, somewhere the custom *bacha posh* helps them to enhance their confidence due to which they come out as a liberated woman. In both the cases, they came up physically and mentally powerful in the role of *bacha posh* and a male Guard at King Ulla’s palace. Countless times, the term *naseeb* (destiny) rules the lives of young girls where they been convinced with the fact that it is all there in destiny and they are all helpless. Helpless *bacha posh*, Rahima becomes the wife of elderly warlord Abdul Khaliq who in

return giving a big amount of money to her father. She turns to her aunt Khala Shaima: "I looked at their faces. They were sad. "Why aren't you helping me?" I cried. Don't you see what's happening? Please, can't you do something? Madar-jan! Khala Shaima! Bibi-jan! I am sorry! Shahla, I'm sorry!" "Allah has chosen this as your naseeb," they each called out in turn. "This is your naseeb, Rahima." (Hashimi 134)

Hashimi is well portraying two centuries apart Afghan women who are connected by blood, custom and destiny. Shekiba and Rahima both figure out and create their own *naseeb* in a brutally male-controlled civilization. And both women discover momentary reprieve since they acquire Afghan tradition of *bacha posh*. Nadia brings out the character of Rahima powerfully resisting, especially at the time of her son Jahangir's death even after she is blamed by her husband Khaliq for not taking care of the infant. Collecting all the courage, she returns to the parliament to assist Badriya and with the help of two parliament members Sufia and Hamida, Rahima is finally successful in escaping from the hotel room. She pretends to fall ill so that she can put on Hashimi's cloths and move out to make a life for herself.

Somewhere Rahima was enjoying the liberty being a boy. She was even escaped of domestic work. When Rahima was escaping from the clutches of Abdul Khalq's boundaries, she realized how vulnerable and unrestricted she is. She was unstoppable walking through the roads of Wazir Khan where she found so many cars, a man yelling at him saying "he bacha! Watch where are you going" (Hashimi 444).

"What are we guarding?" Ghafoor laughed. "They have told you nothing? We are guards for King Habib Ulla's women". "His wives?" "Not exactly, His women. There are women he spends time with, women he takes when he is struck by the mood" Shekiba must have looked confused. "Men can take more than just their wives, dear girl; sometimes wives are not just enough." (Hashimi 136)

Hashimi focuses on the internal journey and struggle of her heroines, who are by all accounts left to fend for themselves. Despite going through insurmountable challenges, both women are determined to fight, not only against their oppressors, but most importantly

against the mental barrier of resigning themselves to their fate. Khala Shaima is opinionated, especially regarding what women should and shouldn't be allowed to do. Her speaking in proverbs may be a way for her to show that even though she is not valued or respected, she can contribute advisable points to a conversation and to any situation. Even till the day of marriage Rahima believed that Shaima will definitely do something to stop the unwilling marriage.

Conclusion

Hashimi's fictional world has picked up the fact exquisitely that how disrespectful it is not having a son in the family in the developing, and stereotypical more gender biased and ethnocentric Afghan society where women are triply marginalized in hands of ethnic disparity, phallogocentric norms, the Taliban regime and Postcoloniality. The community and family expectations are always high, since they have implicit that a son can contribute considerably. Hashimi's way of bringing up the unknown practice of *bacha posh* transmutes the interpretation for every reader that, exactly how challenging it is to grow up as a girl in Afghanistan. Nadia's effort to bring paradoxically female empowerment through the perplexing custom of *bacha posh* which might be an eye-bogger to the Western viewers. In a country like Afghanistan where the lives of women are confined by the society and Taliban, this exacting custom of gender twisting ritual is a reprieve for all the Afghan girls who once daydreamed to move unrestricted on the inherent streets. Knowing the fact that, at the time of puberty, they have to take back and are anticipated to be the old households.

Hashimi's efforts in bringing the social iniquities like *bacha posh* and child marriage are wrenching states for women's life. The biggest reason that *bacha posh* is done today is that people believe it will bring good luck to the family and that they will actually have a son. The *bacha posh* practice undoubtedly will vanish one day, once the women start taking various significant roles in the public and stand equally with men in all aspects. This blotting custom that lowers self-belief and self-worth, demand women resistance through which it can

be eradicated like the existentialist Simone de Beauvoir says that we have to speak for ourselves. The subjectivity is fragmented and lacks 'self'. The preteen girls who underwent this appalling practice feel powerless and

frustrated which reduced aspirations. The bacha posh act may cause Gender Dysphoria, opposite condition of euphoria which is anxiety and distress and body dysmorphia in the girls.

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