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## The Conundrum of being a Bacha Posh: An Analysis of Nadia Hashimi's *One Half from the East* and *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell*\*

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### Abstract

*Afghanistan has witnessed decades of war, turmoil, invasions, and political upheavals. Umpteen years of violence and socio-political unrest have immensely contributed to the subjugation and oppression of Afghan women in the name of religion, war, and fundamentalism. The patriarchal society and its disregard for women's liberation and emancipation has adversely affected the position of women in the country. This paper attempts to discuss the existence and identity of a 'Bacha Posh', through a reading of Nadia Hashimi's fictional works *One Half from the East* and *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell*. Prevalent in many tribal societies of Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan, the custom of dressing a girl as a boy (Bacha Posh is a Dari word which literally means "dressed as a boy") is evidence of the androcentric mentality of privileging of boys over girls and the control exercised over women's bodies, both publicly and privately. The paper will analyse aspects of gender dysphoria, performativity, and the dynamic power structure as experienced by the "boy-girl" and will also study the developing disgust towards effeminacy, femininity and the transition from boyhood to womanhood of a bacha posh.*

**Keywords:** Bacha Posh, Performativity, Contested Identity, GID, Afghan women

### Introduction

Afghanistan has witnessed more invasions than any other country in the world. In the 19th century, the Russian and British empires eyed Afghanistan as a pivotal point for expanding their control and power, both strategically and economically. This led to the three Anglo-Afghan Wars during the 19th and 20th centuries, which drastically changed the face of this country. In the year 1996, after the collapse of the Afghan Government, the Taliban came into power and they retained till 2001. This regime strictly curtailed the role of women, restricting their mobility and disparaging their human rights. In a 2023 interview, Nadia Hashimi reflects on how, "Taliban aims to erase Afghan women from public life, limiting their role to childbearing, what is happening now is a painful picture for Afghan women..."

The rigid and highly androcentric structure of the Afghan families, under the rule of the Taliban, affected the practice of *Bacha Posh*, a Dari word which means "dressed as a boy". A well-known example is Bibi Hakima, a soldier, who was raised as a *Bacha Posh* and continued to be the same for all her life. Prevalent in many tribal societies of Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan, the custom of dressing a girl as a boy is usually practiced for some part of the girl's childhood, before she attains puberty though some girls, who can resist the conversion and choose to live as *Bacha Posh*, enjoy mobility and opportunities for their entire life. The *bacha posh* practice allows girls to enjoy some freedom and escape gender discrimination, at least for a while. However, this transition can also be understood as a double-edged sword because when a girl reaches puberty, her bodily changes become visible, revealing the biological gender, which can be life-threatening for her. As Hashimi explains in an interview (2014), "...people understand that it is a temporary

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phenomenon. In that temporary period, it might be treated as a third gender, but it's -- it's -- it is a guise, and the society only accepts it within those limits.”

Afghan families are expected to have a male progeny, so those who don't often choose to raise one of their daughters as a *Bacha Posh*. There are several reasons behind this decision. Some families do it to maintain their social status, as not having a son is seen as shameful in Afghan society. Others are driven by financial or practical needs, especially in situations where boys have more opportunities to work or move freely. In some cases, families believe that making a daughter a *Bacha Posh* will bring good luck and help them have a baby boy next time.

For many *Bacha Posh* girls, the idea of who they are becomes confusing, not just for others around them, but for themselves too. Their identities keep shifting as they move between different roles in society, making it hard to feel rooted in any one version of themselves. When a girl is turned into a *bacha posh*, she is expected to leave behind her identity as a girl and take on the role of a boy. Then, once she reaches puberty, she is told to go back to being a girl again. This delirium and confusion experienced by *bacha posh* girls is artistically portrayed in Nadia Hashimi's novels. Through the words of one of her protagonists, Obayda, she conveys, “Some boys like us don't know what to do when they're changed back. They get confused and act really weird” (Hashimi 2016, 45).

Hashimi is an internationally bestselling novelist, popular amongst young readers and adults. A paediatrician by profession, Hashimi found her passion in writing. She has an authenticity in her description of Afghanistan, which she attributed to her familial roots in the country. Hashimi's two novels, in Genette's (1984) view, are hypertextual. On the level of story, discourse, and the themes addressed by Hashimi, these two works establish various connecting aspects. These connective features between the hypertext (*One Half from the East*) and the hypotext (*The Pearl that Broke Its Shell*) not only enhance the understanding of the protagonists' lives but also make the narrative interestingly complex. Hypertextuality, thus, denotes the intentional and self-conscious establishment of a relationship between two texts. Based on Genette's definitions of hypertextuality, *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell* is a hypotext, and *One Half from the East* is the hypertext.

The two novels deeply delve into the pre, during, and post the experience of crossdressing, as lived by Obayda and Rahima. Born to an abusive and alcoholic father, with no son to shoulder the responsibility of the household, young Rahima is chosen to be a “made-up” son or a *Bacha Posh*. Her experiences as a *Bacha Posh* make her feel strong like a boy, and towards the end of the novel, she runs away from her husband's home to Kabul. She repeats the history, again dresses as a boy, cuts her hair short, and feels as powerful as she once felt as Rahim.

Throughout the novel, one can observe the crisscrossing stories of Rahima (or Rahim) and her great-great-grandmother Shekiba (or Shekib). It is interesting to note that though parallels run between the tales of these two women, while Rahima lived a part of her life as a *Bacha Posh*, Shekiba was never called a *Bacha Posh*. Shekiba was left orphaned at a young age when an epidemic took away her entire family. She started dressing in a sartorial manly fashion and passed as a man.

*One Half from the East* revolves around Obayda and her friend Rahima, both made to masquerade as *Bacha Posh*. Obayda's father lost his one leg in a bomb explosion in Kabul, which rendered him crippled and jobless. The adverse circumstances forced the entire family to migrate to a small village outside of Kabul. This family of three sisters, a crippled father, and a *Dokhtar Zai*, encountered a cultural shock, due to the polarity between tribal and modern values. Obayda's parents decide to “make Obayada into a boy” (Hashimi 2016, 15). After becoming Obayd, she runs errands, conquers the streets, attends a boys' school and there she meets Rahima. At this point, the two novels intersect. Later, Obayda and Rahima plan to go and catch the rainbow, convinced by the popular myth that crossing under the rainbow will change them into boys forever. However, as the novel unfolds, Rahima gets forcefully married to warlord and Obayda if left alone to live as a boy.

## Literature Review

The practice of *Bacha Posh* practice raises serious concerns as this phenomenon solely thrives on the doctrine that “repetition increases processing fluency”, which means that repetitions of a particular behaviour tend to become more truthful than novel information (Hassan & Barber, 38). In Newman’s terms, this occurs when familiarity surpasses rationality and leads to the “illusory truth effect”. (Newman et al., 52) Girls who have conditioned to behave like boys and are endowed with male privileges find it “extremely reluctant to identify as women later on in life” (Hassan & Barber, 37) and they become “extremely reluctant to give up such privileges” (Hassan & Barber, 38). This confusion is known as Gender Identity Disorder (GID), or Gender Dysphoria, a mental condition or phenomenon identified by clinically profound distress due to the incongruence between the assigned gender at birth and the experienced gender. Yarhouse (2015) explains,

“Gender Dysphoria refers to the experience of having a psychological and emotional identity as either male or female, and that your psychological and emotional identity does not correspond to your biological sex—this perceived incongruity can be the source of deep and ongoing discomfort. Specifically, Gender Dysphoria is on the one hand the experience of being born male (biological sex) but feeling a psychological and emotional identity as female. Similarly, Gender Dysphoria is the experience of being born female (biological sex) but feeling a psychological or emotional identity as male” (19).

Yarhouse's (2015) conceptualisation of Gender Dysphoria diverges significantly from the dysphoria experienced by individuals conforming to the *Bacha Posh* cultural practice. Yarhouse delves into the realm of Gender Dysphoria within the transgender context, whereas the dysphoria afflicting a *Bacha Posh* is not rooted in a genetic disorder but rather emerges from the imposition of a male identity upon a female individual, coercing her to assume a masculine role. His exploration of Gender Dysphoria centres on individuals who identify as transgender, involving a profound incongruity between their experienced gender and the one assigned to them at birth. On the other hand, the dysphoric experiences encountered by those adopting the *Bacha Posh* phenomenon differ qualitatively. The condition does not arise from an inherent genetic anomaly but rather from the forced adoption of a male persona by a girl, effectively subverting her authentic female identity and necessitating her performance of a masculine role in society.

Corboz, Gibbs, and Jewkes (2020) bring out the dilemma the *Bacha Posh* experience when they are reverted to womanhood,

“When girls raised as boys reach puberty, they are usually ‘converted’ back into girls. This often poses a dilemma for those girls who had more freedom and mobility during childhood, only to have this freedom restricted when being required to re-adopt a feminine identity and sometimes being prepared for marriage a short time after becoming a girl again. Conversion back to being a girl may be particularly difficult for those *Bacha Posh* who identify as male and want to continue living as a boy” (587).

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler writes, “if the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (136).

Butler’s *Performativity’s Social Magic* (1996) emphasises the practices prescribed by the culture that sustain belief in their own “obviousness” (114). Since “body is itself the site for ‘incorporated history’”, its defiance towards prescribed normative behaviour then meets negation and disregard at the hands of the socio-cultural institutions (119). Butlerian confluence of gender and performance blurs the boundaries between designated roles and renders them as normative. Butler distinguishes “between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity.”

## Methodology

This paper is a qualitative study of the two novels, using a textual analysis method. The study will employ the theoretical framework of gender and identity theories to understand Rahima, Shekiba, and Obayda’s identity delirium and gendered performance. This article also explores the

intersections of Gender Dysphoria, performativity, and shifting power dynamics through the lived experience of the “boy-girl”.

## Discussion

The various characters in these two novels experience Gender Dysphoria in varying degrees. *Bacha Posh*'s identity comes under scrutiny because of the sudden change in their gender performance and roles. Rahima shows a strong preference for the games and activities stereotypically associated with the male gender. As Rahima said, “I was a young man and it was in my nature to run through the streets” (Hashimi 2015, 48). Rahima, unlike her sisters, didn't have to be demure and proper; rather, she could roll in the dust while playing aggressive games with her friends, Abdullah and Ashraf. But as the day of her marriage approaches, Rahima's dreams of living as a “boy” forever comes crashing down. She is expected to carry herself like a girl and to cover her boyish hair with a *chador*. The unanticipated switching of gender roles leads Rahima into a downward spiral of perplexity and corporeal disorientation. In Rahima's own words, “All I wanted to do was to go back to school and back to my family, my friends. I felt clumsy in a skirt, my breasts pointy in the brassiere my mother had purchased” (Hashimi 2015, 175). Her resistance towards becoming a woman signifies her repugnancy towards her assigned gender. Shekiba (or Shekib) is the great-great-grandmother of the protagonist Rahima (or Rahim). Shekiba has had a life full of hardships as her entire family died of cholera, leaving her as a destitute woman in the countryside of Afghanistan. She ploughs the land, her father's land, constructs a house for herself, and ‘performs’ the masculine gender, better than a man. As Hashimi describes, “Shekiba's father took his daughter-son to the fields to help him manage their small plot of land. She hoed, she slaughtered, and she chopped as any strong-backed son would do for his father” (Hashimi 2015, 20). Later in the novel, her life takes a surprising turn, and various events lead her to the palace as a guard to the King's harem. Her character echoes the notion of gender being a performance, and her portrayal is a threat itself to staunch gender roles.

Obayda also experiences cognitive dissonance and is jolted by the unforeseen change in her identity. In Obayda's own words, “I am uncomfortable with my new life in pants...”. The polarity between the assigned gender roles and experienced gender roles leaves Obayda in a quandary. She finds herself disoriented when she hears Rahim's comment on the female gender,

“Girls are made of flower petals and paper bags. They eat berries and sip tea like something might jump out of the hot water and bite them.” I was torn- half of me angry at his depiction of girls and the other half of me proud not to be one for now” (Hashimi 2016, 73).

Aunt Aziza puts the idea forward of making Obayda a *Bacha Posh* in an unalarming and plain manner, but the complexity of this conversion is experienced by the young girls, whose consent doesn't even matter. Obayda is ten years old when she is turned into a boy. She is told that she's “raw clay” and her sisters, “pottery.” Hence, of all the girls in the house, she happens to be the most suitable for the purpose of all the girls in the house. Young Obayda, who loves “her dresses and her dancing” (Hashimi 2016, 14), is made to wear cargo pants, with her hair cut short. The physiological changes in the bodies of the young girls determine the extent of the reversal, but the psychological upheaval is not even a part of the narrative. In Aunt's words, “I've seen this work in the families around us. It's not magic-it's just how it is. And that's when Obayda can go back to being a girl. Everyone wins” (Hashimi 2016, 16). In a sharp contrast to her simple way of accepting the practice as normative, Obayda is really critical of it, as she explains her conundrum, “But I have been a girl my whole life. How can I forget everything?” (Hashimi 2016, 69). The incidents, as narrated in the novel, throw light on the psychological setbacks of this subversive tradition, Gender Dysphoria being one of many.

While life in this in-between is confusing for her, she meets another *Bacha Posh*, Rahim (or Rahima), in the all-boys school, with whom she champions untethered, in the strict patriarchal society. The playground of Obayda's school can be understood as a signifier of space and a fairground, where the male gender is performed. The bully boys call out Obayda for his timidity and knock him down in the traditional boys' game of *Ghursai*. The aggressive nature of the game

intimidates Obayd at first, but with Rahim's help, he pivots his might and main and comes back at them. As Rahima (or Rahim) tells Obayda (or Obayd), "Being a boy is not at all in your pants. It's in your head. It's in your shoulders" (Hashimi 2016, 71). Later in the novel, when Obayda is back to being a girl, she coaches the techniques of *Ghursai* to her classmates Rabia and Pari. The conversation between the innocent girls is interesting to note as it crystallises the Butlerian thought with much accuracy. As Obayda puts it, "There are more girls standing than fallen. They are moving in a direction and squaring off against each another. They are *Ghursai* players, ready for a match" (Hashimi 2016, 250). The use of the word "players" is a sign of defiance towards prescribed gender normative behaviour.

Renunciation of the feminine gender indeed bestows upon Rahima and Obayda the advantages inherent in male privilege. Nevertheless, these individuals possess a keen understanding that the perceived freedom accompanying such a transformation is a deceptive construct. While they may assume the trappings of masculinity, their true essence as men remains unattainable due to the socially perceived subordination of the *Bacha Posh*.

The highly androcentric structure of Afghan families is also of the same nature. The tokenisation and dehumanisation of women is one of the many subtle mechanisms of exercising and maintaining control. Among men, homosocial interaction is practised by imbibing the hegemonic masculinity norms. This stance is maintained by supporting and promoting signifiers associated with identities that fit hegemonic ideals. Lipman and Blumen (1976) define homosociality as nonsexual attractions held by men (or women) for members of their own sex. In Afghanistan, the practice of *Baad* can be read as a case of homosocial interaction amongst the men in power. This regressive practice is a transaction of young girls between the criminal's family and the victim's family. *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell* throws light on the exchange of women in marriage, solely based on the discretion and whim of the men in power. Rahima, Shahla, and Parwin were scorned by their grandmother for being *Dokhtar-ha-jawan* (young and unmarried women). They soon fall prey to their father's whim and greed, who gives them away in marriage to the men of an aristocratic family, signing the deal in exchange for an unlimited supply of opium and some ransom. The warlords these sisters are married to are twice their age and have many wives. As Hashimi articulates, "Men could do what they wanted with women" (Hashimi 2015, 125).

Hashimi's women characters brim with resilience and grit, and this could be seen in various episodes in the novels. As these young girls are treated as boys, they naturally gain the power and freedom of the boys. They venture to unknown lands, in search of a dreamy rainbow, they play aggressive games with other boys from school, and champion in all other skills predominantly designated as masculine. Reflecting on the same, Hashimi in an interview with Jacobs (2014) concludes:

"There is unmistakable resiliency to the human spirit, and Afghan women are no exception to that rule. Hope is intoxicating and irresistible. I think their drive comes from an instinct that they are worthy of more than society allots them. They believe in themselves and doubt the doubters."

## Conclusion

Hashmi's literary works delve into the intricate challenges encountered by the female form within the realm of *Bacha Posh*, a social practice that sheds light on the disarrayed state of society and manifests its inherent fragility. Both Obayda and Rahima yearn to shed the shackles of subordinated masculinity inherent in *Bacha Posh*, as it further complicates their position as individuals and gives rise to intricate gender dynamics. *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell* (2014) and *One Half from the East* (2016) present the readers with a worrisome and disturbing picture of life in Afghanistan. The novels refer to the Taliban's reign in the last decade of the twentieth century. But after the withdrawal of the U.S. Army from Afghanistan in August 2021, the situation for the Afghan natives has again become bleak and unpredictable. The horrific hues from the last Taliban regime paint a lethal picture of violated human rights. The entire world sits in a fearful anticipation, doubtful of the Taliban's promise to honour women's rights within the norms of Islamic law. Practices like *Bacha Posh*, *Jirga*, *Baad*, which became archaic with the advancement of education,

might get prevalent again. The hope for a fair and just treatment of women kindles in the prayers of the entire humanity.

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