

The Unjust Twisting: Bacha Posh custom of the Invisible Girl Children in Afghanistan

from Nadia Hashimi's work

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Abstract:

This paper examines the factors associated with Children's Literature through the cultural phenomenon of bacha posh in Afghanistan (in which young girls are dressed and raised as boys) which occurs against a background of rigid gender norms and the patriarchal nature of Afghan families. Afghanistan is often regarded as one of the most unsafe countries for young girls in the world; this paper will focus on the concept of young children's sufferings and oppressions by the culture of bacha posh. It is a practice, in which some families without sons will pick a daughter to live and behave like a boy temporarily. This culture was practiced till today in Afghanistan. This culture also enables the child to behave more freely: attending school, escorting her sisters in public, and working. The cultural practice was originally non-publicized outside of the Middle East. However, as a result of media, a bacha posh and their role in society are slowly being revealed. Nadia Hashimi's 2016 children's novel *One Half from the East* is an emotional, beautiful, and riveting coming-of-age journey to modern-day Afghanistan that explores life as a bacha posh. The paper explores their isolation, experience of anxiety, depression, and mental trauma.

Keywords: Cultural studies; Gender discrimination; Child education; Quest for Identity and Marginalization.

Nadia Hashimi's *One Half from the East* will portray the narrative of two major girl children they are Obayda and Rahima who experienced oppression as a bacha posh. The focus will be on these two characters because Rahima and Obayda, both is victim of bacha posh practices as they change from girl to boy temporarily. These two female protagonists suffer a lot in order to adopt as a boy in the patriarchal society and later they must get back to their real identity as girls. This temporary transition is quite traumatic, and it leads to an

identity crisis on a young psyche. The bacha posh girls emotionally feel gender dysphoria, which will lead to a larger problem. These bacha posh girls are mentally and physically marginalized. Both girls in Nadia Hashimi's children's novel come under the situation of gender dysphoria, gender inequality, identity crisis, and marginalization. These two girls are like one half from the east and one half from the west from Obayda's mother stating that "You are the best of both worlds –one half from the east and one half from the west" (108). This statement also brings the description of the title *One Half from the East*.

Obayda is ten-year-old, and she is the youngest of four daughters named Neela, Meena, and Alia. Khala Aziza is her aunt who is not very close to her, but she is the one who gave the idea for the practice of bacha posh to Obayda's mother.

Life in the village becomes too difficult for Obayda and her family because of zero income. They not only undergo the economic change but also her family experience the oppressions in the patriarchal society from their childhood days. Obayda is not allowed to go to school freely like before in Kabul. There are a lot of restrictions for her to survive as a female child in the patriarchal society. Life in Kabul is much easier for all in Obayda's family.

Obayda is educated and she has a brave personality from her discussion with Rahima and also Rahima states, "I can't believe you kicked that snake off you. That was pretty brave, Obayd" (136). Obayda has been changed as bacha posh temporarily in order to bring good luck to her family. Obayda is apprehensive but her mother adopts this traditional underground practice. Though Obayda is not interested she wants to help her father. Obayda's mother transforms her into a boy by cutting her daughter's hair, dress her in pants and a shirt, and sends her to the new school dressed as a boy by changing her entire attire.

Obayda's mother converts Obayda into a young boy child Obayd by her Aunt Aziza's advice, "There are big things for me to get used to. My name is the biggest. (I'm Obayd

now –good-bye, Obayda.)” (29). When she is changed to a young boy, she faces a lot of difficulties and the first thing is to get used to her new name Obayd. She wants her other sisters to be made into bacha posh but her mother describes, “You’re only ten years old. They’re too old for this. A boy can’t have breasts” (22). Since her sisters are elder than her there is no choice of changing her sisters to bacha posh. Her first day at home as a boy is especially difficult for her since her sisters isn’t around. Because her sisters started going to school earlier, but her mother wants to give her a little more time to settle into her new identity. Obayda loves being a girl than being a boy.

In Kabul Obayda used to go to the market with her father. Now in a village when her mother insists Obayda, “Take this dough to the baker and come back with bread” (35). She feels oppressed to go out as a bacha posh in the markets for the first time. She walks slowly, watching the people around her to see if anyone notices that she is in pants for the first time ever. When she enters the baker’s shop the baker stares at her with one eye narrowed. She doesn’t know what to say, she somehow struggles to manage. She faces the situation with her arms thrust the tray in front of his face. She can’t face them and turning her back to them feels so much worse. She is oppressed by the situation because of her identity. In the young age parents use their children to balance their financial problem against the society in the name of bacha posh culture.

Obayda is uncomfortable with her new life as a boy in pants and at school, she joins the boy’s class. She is afraid that a boy at school is out to get her. She forces herself to concentrate in the class, but a teacher has her eye on Obayda. She faces difficulty in listening class to maintain herself to portray as a boy. She feels oppress to talk to other boys her age. She also feels nervous and lost her mind as being a bacha posh. Children in her age free to wear clothes according to their gender but for Obayda surviving in the society itself is a very big task without showing her to gender as a girl. At home, things have changed. Her parent’s

behaviour is very strange, and they have no idea that Obayda is a girl. The bacha posh thing has put a big wall between her and her sisters. She fears for being a bacha posh but also loves to continue her life as a boy because she is free to go out and play ghursai or soccer or catch along with other boys of her same age. Obayda is treated as a precious son like 'don't let her do anything that girls do'. This tradition also helps many young girl children to go out like boys without covering their face with clothes. She is specially served with chicken and vegetables whereas her sisters remind with the potatoes and onions for rice. She can be loud when she wants to be.

Obayda starts to experience oppression with her clothes on the first day at home as bacha posh because when Obayda is a girl she used to cover her body from head to toe but she is oppressed with the pants and shirt which feels naked for her. The dresses are off-limits, even her favourite ones. She is supposed to settle in her new identity. Everything seems to be new to her to take it into reality. Obayda is in the situation to learn everything to portray as a boy even the basic things like pee. Obayda is oppressed by sitting ideal inside the four walls in the village.

Afghan female children are known only to their close circles like families and relatives other than that they are supposed to do household chores whereas sons from their families can go anywhere and there are no restrictions for the male child. If there are no sons like Obayda's home, they will make the younger daughter into Bacha Posh. Likewise, Obayda has been a bacha posh for hardly six months in the novel meanwhile she faces a lot of oppression. To fulfil all her family needs as a boy, she must survive as bacha posh in this patriarchal society with less liberty which leads her lots of struggles.

Obayda feels weird when she changes to a boy. She feels oppressed by the patriarchal system because there in Kabul everyone calls her by her real name Obayda. But things in the village are vice versa she has to disguise herself as a boy with less liberty and privilege.

When her first-day school was in the village as bacha posh, she felt oppressed by watching the boys drift one way and the girls another. Obayd as bacha posh feels that she is now in the weird place between both worlds. She acts strangely, but she is not supposed to express her feelings as a girl even to her sisters that she is scared of a boy at school.

Obayda is being oppressed because of powerlessness when she plays the game Ghursai along with other boys. She feels powerless when compared to others to face this challenge as bacha posh. She faces a lot of struggles to portray as a boy among the real boys who play along with her in the field. Obayda struggles to manage but she fails in the game and got out, for Obayd everything seems strange and there is no choice of escape from it, and this is the first oppression that she faces as a bacha posh.

Things have changed in her home.

Obayda struggles between her identities because she is a girl dressed in boy clothes. Her body language must be completely bold but as a girl, she feels shy to act like one among them and is like learning a whole new language and she is struggling. As a daughter's son, Obayda suffers a lot from reality to fake and finally, she realizes that she couldn't be a girl dressed in boy clothes. She had to be a boy wearing her clothes. Obayda wants to portray her each action as a bacha posh. Each hurdle she passes by in her path as a boy is such a difficult task for her. The depiction of boys and girls to become a real boy Rahima trains her.

Obayda gets the opportunity to walk through the trees and she boldly climbs the tree to get a branch with a perfect y- shape so that it can be made into a crutch to get her father out of home and back to life. Though Obayd is a bacha posh she can't do everything she likes because "That's impossible. No one is going to let a teenage girl hang around with teenage boys." (115) and this kind of oppression are practiced regularly in her village.

Obayd sometimes misses her hair and also, she loves to wear her sisters' clothes once that it doesn't fit them but as a boy, she can't use those clothes. She is oppressed with being

half things. Obayda wishes not to be a half thing but things are not in her hand to change everything easily. Even in earlier days, girls like Rahima and Obayda are change to bacha posh and face oppression like how they face in the novel from Rahima's discussion, "Actually, my great-great-grandmother was like us too. She dressed as a man and worked as a guard for a king" (115). Afghan women face such problems a century before and still they practice the same to survive in the patriarchal society. "They say we're not supposed to stay like this forever. They say we're supposed to be girls again" (116). Evidently, Obayda is being oppressed because of the continued gender transformation from girl to boy and again a girl. Things become worse for her from time to time before they make up their life in one fixed gender. They undergo lots of struggles because of social and economic changes to lead a happy life but people from the patriarchal society pull them into such terrible practice of bacha posh in order to survive.

One day Obayda found a girl that she is incredibly happy with few drops of rain falls on her cheeks, her eyelids, her lips. As if a few silly drops of rain might be the very best thing that's ever happening to her. At this moment Obayda found how other girls are oppressed and not allowed to go outside to see even a sky. For those children, even the rainfall makes them very happy pricelessly.

Obayda has heard from her childhood onwards a myth that passing under a rainbow changes girl to boy. In this novel, Obayda and her father equally struggle to climb the mountain but the oppression in this patriarchal society is facing only by bacha posh girls even though they are treated as boys. When Obayda crosses her limits by going home the late-night she is oppressed by her mother with the statement, "My mother was so furious with me that she refused to unlock the gate and let me in..." (138). Obayda is oppressed because of her identity as bacha posh when there is no company for her to share things or to play with girls in her age like before in Kabul. She is oppressed when her best friend Rahima changes

back to the girl, who tells her about being basha posh is a good thing and even the greatest thing.

Obayda is oppressed by other women and girls in the village. Every time they remind her that there is no escape from society. One day she is oppressed by Rahima's sister Shahla because she states, "You better watch out for yourself. Boys like you and Rahima are not boys forever" (145-146). From what she can see, it's even worse that way. She can wear pants and act like she is going to knock this door down, but she is still a girl. She can't escape that. But she built confidence by herself as a boy and she didn't leave until she sees Rahima. She is in a state of oppression for not accepting the reality of being a girl when Shahla, Neela, and her mother talked perfectly about the temporary arrangements as a boy will not continue forever.

Obayda when she gives a second try to travel to the waterfall alone without Rahima she is oppressed because of the loneliness. This time she started early to get back home soon. Even-though she is in a state of oppression because of Rahima's condition. She taught to fulfil the myth that passing through the rainbow changing a girl into a boy so that at least Obayda can escape from being marginalized. So, she decided to cross all the hurdles with the hints which she learned from her father and to overcome all these oppressions. "I did it, Rahima. I climbed all the way up to the camel's head and hiked around his ear. No, I wasn't afraid. Not one bit" (193). Though she faces a lot of obstacles finally she reaches the destination successfully where no one imagines a girl trek to the mountain top.

After Obayda returns home late for the second time her mother decides to change her back to the girl. The belief of passing through the rainbow is shattering soon after when she came home. Her mother is too angry with her and she doesn't want any reason this time and she is strong in her decision. "Right now. As of this moment, Obayda. There will be no discussion about it. No questions. No complaints" (206). Obayda has marginalized again and

all her freedom to go out got restricted. Obayda's mother as a woman she is oppressed and feared of thinking her daughter's state when she didn't get back home. "I know you're mad, but I thought ... I thought you were dead. You don't know what you did to me" (208). As a woman, her mother is helpless to find Obayda when she hasn't got home earlier. She is extremely worried about her state though she is treated as bacha posh.

Obayda as a young girl she is stuck between the reality that she faces and is forced to change her identity from time to time. She is oppressed with her entire life in the patriarchal society with high limitations like expressing her girlish feels. Finally, one day she burst out with tears when no miracle happens to her. Obayda is oppressed by Meena's theory about the rainbow turning her back into a girl. Meena explained to her about the myth of passing rainbow, with the note, "Maybe it did work. You were Obayd when you went there. The legend says it changes boys to girls and girls to boys. So maybe it changed you from a boy to a girl" (213). Obayda when she woke up as a girl the next day, she is oppressed because of her identity which brings doubt in herself to be a boy or a girl. She is in a state of confusion about her identity because of her sudden gender transformation. Nothing magic happens to her though she crosses the rainbow nears the waterfall.

Obayda is a bacha posh for less than six months and it shows that she is not long enough to be as brave as Rahim. She feels different when her clothes changes to girl's clothes and she should use only skirts. Now she wishes to wear the boy's clothes, but nothing is in her hand to change. She feels completely strange when things become vice versa because of her boy hair and girl clothes. When Obayda used with pants and suddenly when everything changed, she feels uncomfortable with her girl dress. Even though she is not comfortable she uses to adjust because of the patriarchal society. "My legs, the legs that climbed up the tree to get the perfect branch for my father's walking stick, are those girl legs or boy's legs?" (235). She is stuck between her gender inequalities by the patriarchal system. She uses to be loud

but as a girl, she becomes silent when her freedom as a bacha posh has been stopped. She climbs trees, goes up to the mountains all by herself. She goes to the warlord's house and escapes by tricking the guards. She did lots of stuff that she can't even tell others about because it is so dangerous. She could do it because she is a boy.

Life as a girl made her move into one corner by hiding herself in the shadow by covering her face with her scarf. Obayda is happy when she used to be a bacha posh, so she wishes to stay as a boy forever and when things change, she feels great full for the opportunity that she experienced. "Being a bacha posh was the best thing that could've happened to me" (243). Obayda herself satisfies with the opportunity that she gets when she compares to other women those who still face oppression and not allows freely to go out in society. Even though Obayda is oppressed by her mother's decision she taught to accept the reality with her convincing note, "It is starting to sink in, though, that this girl-ness is for real. The tightness in my chest is gone. I don't feel weird anymore..." (215)

Rahima is one of the two main characters. She is thirteen years old young girl, and she is the third girl child among her four sisters. Shahla is the eldest sister among them, and she is the only one who is introduced in this novel by Nadia Hashimi. Her father is a former soldier and opium-addicted. Rahima has a brave personality. Rahima's personality as a courageous character is seen in her dialogue with other characters. Rahima tries to handle the tough situation by persuading her mother to get the solution while her siblings choose to stay quiet. Rahima is converted into a young boy Rahim by her mother. Once when she goes to school as a boy, she got two friends named Ashraf and Abdullah. In the entire novel, Rahima is portrayed as Rahim, and only in the last few chapters in the novel, her sister Shahla calls her Rahima. Rahima loves to continue her life as a boy and explore her entire life. "Never," my best friend says with so much fire that I get a little nervous for him. "I'll never be a girl

again.” (81) Rahima is very strong that she never wants to get back to girl. From the above statement she expresses her wish to not become a girl again.

Rahima is educated when compared to her other sisters because of the practice of bacha posh. Taliban's system makes limited access for the Afghan women. They cannot study at school or even go outside. Thus, Rahima and her sisters must cut off their education. However, Rahima has the opportunity to continue her study. Her experiences to be a bacha-posh allows her to go to school and she also has a lot of skills that boy can do as well. This opportunity gives Rahima a lot of benefits like gaining knowledge and skills like playing Ghursai equally like boys.

The presents of a son in the Afghan family are considered honourable since women do not have privilege like men. “Enough of this nonsense. This house has been out of control for too long. Now get out of here and don't come back” (147) this shows that, not only Rahima that marginalized but also her sisters and her mother faced oppression. Rahima experiences oppression of powerlessness by her identity as a girl. Her feeling of powerlessness also signifies her as a wife to Abdul Khaliq. “I can't,” she whispers and takes a deep breath. “I hate this, Obayd. I hate my dress. I hate where I sleep. I miss my sisters and my mother. I don't want to be here” (165). This shows how she is oppressed with her married life at her young age. Rahima has no one to save her from the oppression in her newly married life. Being a wife to Abdul Khaliq has no chance to refuse his commands. In the novel, the man has power over the family, Abdul Khaliq tells Rahima the rule of the house and there is no escape from him because there are guards and if she goes home, they will bring her right back. Even if she runs into the mountains, they will find her back to her husband. She does not have any chance to break this oppression as a young married girl. Society has made her feel powerless toward men.

Rahima is oppressed when she plays soccer along with other boys, she feels powerless when compared to other male children in her same age. Later when she has become smarter than boys and stronger than girls, Rahima starts to believe that practicing bacha posh is the most normal thing. When Rahima builds confidence and hope as a complete boy all of a sudden, she lost her power as a boy and changed back to a girl again. There is inequality in their patriarchal society which she faces in her daily life.

Most victims in the oppression of violence are girl children. Moreover, patriarchal society makes violence normal to punish women. In this novel, Rahima experienced this form of oppression by her father's decision to get married at her young age. As she receives multiple cases of abuse from her father she is oppressed and left with no power. In Rahima's family, all decisions are taken by her father and no one has the right to oppose him so Rahima feels weak and she expresses her emotion through her tears. This form of oppression is the most harmful to the victim since Rahima could die and society will never judge the man who does it.

Rahima is the only hope for their family to change her into bacha posh but when things become worse her father orders her to change back to a girl. Each girl child from the village faces oppression, even just a little attention from a strange can get a girl into the house so fast and her feet might get left outside. Rahima and other girls are trying to move around outside like ghosts with oppression. They have to keep their voices low, their footsteps light, and their eyes to the ground when they move in the public sectors. Such oppressions are strictly followed by Rahim and her sisters even other Afghan women in their village as they are under the control of males in their families. Though Rahima never wants to get back to the girl again she changes back from girl Rahima to Rahim and back to Rahima. So Rahima wants Obayd to make use of the bacha posh to fulfill all her desire as a boy before she loses it.

Rahima is stronger, taller, and sharper when she is Rahim. Her hair is shabby and uneven when she is a bacha posh. Rahim uses to wear a wizard's hat which feels like a shield for her to protect from the patriarchal society as a boy. The wizards' hat will help him to hide all her expressions like fear as a girl and she believes that the wizards' hat brings good luck for her in all her desires. But in the male dominative society, she feels oppressed, and her hair is the only thing about her that doesn't look like a girl.

In Rahima's life, one little letter fell off from the back of her name and changed her entire world upside down. She feels that tiny little letter had made such a big difference in her life when she is a boy. Rahima was a boy since she is nine years old and she is not that different from Obayda. Both of them had a similar problem and question that a single letter from their name changes their entire life into difficult. Even Obayda states, "‘Rahim... a.' It is a tiny sound at the end, but it makes a huge difference" (162). Both of them as a bacha posh, they experience such difference which made them ruin their entire life from their young age.

Rahima is physically strong as a bacha posh, but when she gets backs to a girl, she feels both physically and mentally very weak and there are no rights for her to decide her life partner on her own. Instead, she is oppressed and treated with inequality. There is nobody for Rahima when she changes to boy first. Rahima learned to manage everything by herself and she is completely oppressed by the practice of this patriarchal society at the end of the novel.

Rahima is late at night to home; she is oppressed and not allowed to school. No one is there to help her even her sisters and her mother is helpless in front of the male dominative society. Her life as a bacha posh is five huge, large years but everything should be stopped soon after her puberty and allows her to do what girls do. Even if they continue being a boy, they mostly seem to be untouchable. In the marginalized society, there is nothing to believe

in destiny to do with especially for girls like Obayda and Rahima. Finally, she remains silent, and men will be superior by leading her as a servant.

To conclude, the culture of bacha posh signifies the gender discrimination and injustice in the Afghan society. The gender transition from girl children to boy children and back is not only an emotional trial but also a physical challenge. The analysis of this novel aid in understanding the relationship between Afghan culture, socio-political conditions and female oppression. This research also widens cultural and gender study horizons.

In *One Half from the East*, Obayda and Rahima encounter lots of oppression during their journey as a bacha posh; this practice gives them more struggle and hardships though they like to be a bacha posh. They seem to accept the conventions of literary realism. As young children they face many difficulties because of the patriarchal society and their parent's financial issues. At the end of the novel as a girl child in Afghanistan, both Rahima and Obayda are oppressed as a bacha posh like *One half from the east* and *One half from the west*. This custom has to be raised for the upcoming young children to be free from this kind of oppression which is practiced till to date.

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