

Subversion of Gender identity and Cultural conventions in *The Pearl that Broke Its shell*: A Study of ‘Bacha Posh’ and Judith Butler’s Performative Theory.

Suruchi Sharma¹, Dr. Mandvi Singh², Prof. Surinder Paul³ & Pragya Gauttam⁴

Department of English and Modern European Languages, Banasthali Vidyapith.

Research scholar¹, Associate Professor², Professor³, Research scholar⁴

Mandvisingh@banasthali.in

Abstract- This paper investigates how Nadia Hashimi challenges gender norms and societal expectations in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* by applying Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Rahima and Shekiba two main protagonists of the novel are compelled to adopt the “Bacha Posh” mantle to achieve freedom in a patriarchal society. Hashimi illustrates how gender may be played and disputed in many ways and how that influences Afghan women's lives. In conclusion, the study demonstrates how *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* critiques patriarchal structures that support rigid gender norms and underlines the importance of individual agency and resistance.

Keywords: Afghan women, Bacha posh, cultural norms, gender performativity, gender subversion.

Introduction

This paper analyses Nadia Hashimi's novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, which challenges societal norms and expectations regarding gender roles by utilizing a unique phenomenon called

“Bacha Posh” (Seswita 30-31). Up until they reach adolescence, girls who dress and behave like boys are referred to as "dressed as a boy" or "Bacha posh" in Dari. In Afghanistan, this practice has been used to challenge gender roles and facilitate the functioning of households without sons within patriarchal social frameworks (Corboz 586). The idea that gender is not an innate trait that defines one's behavior but rather something that can be played and subverted via deliberate effort is consistent with Butler's performative theory (Nayak & Kehily 460). Families who need a male heir or lost their male child and do not have one have used the Bacha posh practice, which entails disguising a young girl as a boy to permit her to move more freely and participate in activities traditionally reserved for boys (Borile 151). “I wasn’t the first Bacha posh. This is a common tradition for families in want of son” (Hashimi 36). Hashimi reminds us of the value of agency and self-determination in the face of societal expectations and constraints through the stories of Rahima and Shekiba. Both can challenge and modify society’s expectations and pave the path for greater gender equality and social justice by acting and subverting gender roles. Gender, according to Hashimi, is a societal idea that is not a biological presumption. By using Butler's theory of gender performativity, this paper shows how people can challenge and fight oppressive gender norms through their performances of gender (Abbady 243).

Hashimi presents two Afghan women Rahima and Shekiba who lived in different eras but experienced gender discrimination and encountered difficulties and limits in a patriarchal society that emphasizes male offspring over female children (Oumeddour Safa 7). “If I had a son this would not be happening! Goddamn it! Why do we have a house full of girls!” (Hashimi 5). The girls at the center of the story represent the fight for identification and self-expression in a world that is strongly gendered. Rahima and Shekiba are both restricted by the expectations placed on

them as women, but by adopting the persona of a boy (Bacha Posh), they can overcome these restrictions and achieve a sense of liberation and autonomy (Ekka 2). The practice of Bacha posh is perilous, though, and both women must navigate a complex web of connections and social expectations to keep their identities a secret.

Shekiba, Rahima's great-great-grandmother, was born in the early 20th century, and due to her family's poverty and the passing of her parents, she is forced to take on the role of a man to support her family. “She changed her approach as she realized she could take advantage of her “manhood”” (Hashimi 208). She decides to serve as a security in the ruler's harem by adopting a masculine identity (Kapoor & Mecsnober 2). Shekiba demonstrates the performative theory of Judith Butler, which contends that gender is something one does rather than something one is. Butler describes what is “produced through the stylization of the body . . . gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds” as “the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 179). Shekiba takes the masculine role and adopts male characteristics to navigate the patriarchal culture and gain agency and freedom. She does so by questioning social norms and conventional gender roles.

In the second story, an Afghani girl named Rahima disobeys gender norms by disguising herself as a boy to go to school and attain freedom. She continues to defy expectations by educating herself covertly and turning into a feminist activist. “I’m lucky I know how to read. It’s a candle in a dark room” (Hashimi 237). Rahima is later married off to a violent and cruel guy in the book, but she organizes her escape since she won't accept her predicament. She disguises herself as a man and travels across Afghanistan, resisting the patriarchal culture that wants to dominate her (Swain & Dwivedi 34). When a person is acting Bacha posh, they are actively assuming gender identification other than their assigned sex. By acting and dressing in a way that suggests

they have a male gender identity, individuals can take advantage of distinct social conventions and freedoms. Ultimately, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* is a powerful and emotional analysis of the desire for freedom and autonomy as well as the strategies that women might use to engage in subversion and resistance to assert their own identity and agency in the face of oppression. By presenting an ambiguous and complex depiction of how women may resist and disrupt traditional gender roles, Hashimi's work significantly contributes to the gender and identity discussion in Afghanistan (Das & Rai 3).

The cultural implication of gender-fluid tradition

Historically, men have held the bulk of positions of power and decision-making authority in Afghan culture, which has been predominantly patriarchal (Moghadam 20). They hold the opinion that "Girl, you know nothing of tradition" (Hashimi 123). Strict social and cultural norms have made it difficult for women and girls to participate in public life and have access to opportunities in education, employment, and other areas. According to historical chronicles and literary works, Bacha posh has been practiced in Afghanistan for millennia. In Afghanistan, Bacha posh has religious and cultural significance in addition to its historical roots. As a result, there are rigid social and cultural conventions governing the conduct and appearance of women, which might restrict their participation in public life (Asma 17). Families can obtain social standing, respect from their neighbours, access to employment possibilities, and other benefits by clothing their daughter as a guy (Sawitri 12). In Afghanistan and globally, the practice of Bacha posh has generated considerable discussion and controversy. Some see it as a way to empower girls and challenge gender stereotypes (Sumra & Taseer 162).

Culturally, Bacha posh is associated with Afghanistan's traditional gender roles that place great importance on male children and male privilege. It is important to note that Bacha posh is a custom that is not just practiced in Afghanistan and Pakistan but also in other societies. The fact that families believe they must use such methods to break down gender boundaries highlights how pervasive gender discrimination is in these countries (Hamidi, Vaughan, Bohren et al. 100064). Families may experience pressure to produce a male heir in specific circumstances, or they may experience discrimination and exclusion if they do not have boys. Throughout history, different cultures and circumstances have engaged in the practice of dressing in attire normally associated with the other sex. The practice of Bacha posh provides a deep and complicated viewpoint on gender roles and gender equality (Sindhu 17). It's crucial to keep in mind, though, because Bacha Posh does not inherently question the idea of gender as a binary. By implying that girls can only achieve success and prestige by adopting a male persona, it might encourage detrimental stereotypes and gender inequalities.

"Bacha Posh is not an expression of girls' rights or gender equality, but rather a temporary relief from the restrictions placed on them in patriarchal societies. It is a way for families to navigate around those restrictions and gain some of the advantages that come with having a son" (Nordberg 47). Moreover, the expectation that females return to living as girls after puberty implies that there are restrictions on what girls may do or how they can engage in society, which can be demoralizing or disempowering (Keerthana 5). Although it is just transitory and the girls are expected to return to their given gender roles at puberty or marriage, the practice is not truly gender liberating. There are times when Bacha posh is not a choice (Diksha 209). Girls may occasionally be coerced or forced into adopting a masculine persona. They might not be given

the same opportunities and resources as boys since they are thought to be a burden on their families. For girls Bacha posh can be a means of survival (Wingfield and Bucur 235).

The performative gender-disguising custom of Bacha posh

Butler contends that "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler 278). Concerning gender performativity, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." (Butler 45). In Bacha Posh, girls repeatedly dress and act like boys to give the impression that they are boys, adhering to the social and cultural norms of Afghan society. This demonstrates how gender is performative and not an inherent or stable trait but rather something that is built and enacted via repeated activities "Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" (273). To combat the practice of Bacha posh, feminist theory supports efforts by highlighting how gender is socially constructed, challenging cultural norms and expectations, promoting gender inclusivity and equality, elevating marginalized voices, and participating in feminist action. Hooks argues in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (1984) that gender is more than just a personal characteristic; it is also a set of socially accepted meanings and behaviors. It includes social, cultural, economic, and political facets of society and affects how people perceive and comprehend themselves in connection to others (33).

Rather than being innate or a stable element of one's gender identity, the body can be formed in a given situation to adhere to societal norms. "The body is not a thing, it is a situation" (Beauvoir 66). In the context of Bacha posh, a child's physique is changed through grooming, clothes, and socialization to correspond to cultural ideals of masculinity, their identities as men are strengthened by giving them names that seem authoritative "becomes the site of a certain crossing, a transfer of gender" (Butler 102) even if this may not be consistent with their internal gender identity. When the protagonist Rahima doesn't follow conventional gender roles and practices, wears more male apparel, and cuts her hair short. As she rejects following social conventions that restrict her autonomy and agency, Rahima's body takes on a rebellious and resisting role. It draws attention to how people perform their gender through their physical expressions and behaviors, challenging or meeting societal standards.

The "cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities" (Butler 137) like, "Sit up straight and watch your legs. Although you may not know it, you are a girl and you should sit like one." Bobo Shahgul snapped her stick against her grandmother's arm (Hashimi 42). The instruction to "sit like a girl" given by Bobo Shahgul suggests that there are particular postures that girls are required to adopt, which may differ from those of boys. It implies that certain gendered postures and behaviors are expected of people based on their gender, which can be viewed as a type of social conditioning. "We could change your clothes and we'll give you a new name. You'll be able to run to the store any time we need anything. You could go to school without worrying about the boys bothering you. You could play games. How does that sound?" (23). It is a reflection on the performative components of gender, such as clothes, identity, behavior, movement, and education decisions that gender identity has on these individuals. Sara Ahmed emphasizes that the body is not a static or

predefined thing but rather a dynamic and lived experience that is influenced by social, cultural, and political forces. The way the body moves displays it, and interacts with others actively contributes to the manufacture of meanings, which in turn actively contributes to the development of societal norms and expectations of gender, sexuality, and identity. "The body is not a neutral or passive entity on which cultural meanings are inscribed; rather, it is an active participant in the production of meanings" (Ahmed 43). The body actively changes and impacts the meanings that are associated with it through its embodiment, cultural context, identity, power dynamics, agency, and resistance, contradicting the notion of the body as a neutral or passive component in the process of meaning-making.

“Shekiba stared in wonder at the pants and could scarcely believe she should walk about in them. She slipped one leg in and then the other, fastening the buttons at the waist. She was given a corseted undergarment that pushed her modest bosom flat against her chest. She slipped her arms into the shirt and buttoned it closed” (Hashimi 155)

Shekiba’s body is not a passive or neutral object; rather, it actively contributes to the construction of meanings as she questions conventional gender norms and expectations. Shekiba actively engages in the formation and negotiation of her own gender identity as well as societal conventions by adopting a masculine identity and using her body as a tool of resistance, agency, and autonomy.

The biological traits that make someone male or female are influenced by social expectations and cultural connotations in addition to biological ones. "Sex is not simply a natural given, but a category that is always already infused with cultural meanings and social expectations" (sterling 5). It emphasizes the performative character of gender roles in this cultural setting and speaks to

the societal pressures and limits that may restrict people's agency and expression of their real gender identity. "She is now your brother, Rahim. You will forget about your sister Rahima and welcome your brother." (Hashimi 36). It demonstrates the pressure to live up to societal and familial standards of gender, the internal struggle between one's inner self and public personas, and the impact of cultural norms on how people feel about gender.

"One by one, he made me take off everything I'd been wearing. First the chador, then my socks, my pants, my dress. With every piece, I trembled more. When my pants came down, I began to cry, which didn't faze him in the least. I was humiliated. I stood before him, weak and vulnerable, my arms doing their best to cover as much as they could" (Hashimi 168).

In Afghan society, women's status and functions are determined by their capacity to fulfill traditional gender roles, such as bearing boys and being submissive wives. Women's behavior, speech, and expression are governed by gender roles and standards, which can reinforce this conditioning and encourage women to perform silence as a way of meeting these expectations (Rostami-Povey 295). It implies that social norms and expectations as well as biological variables play a role in determining femininity. Rahima's behavior suggests that gender is a performance or set of behaviors rather than an underlying trait. Rahima, who was made to act masculine as a Bacha posh, eventually acts femininely in a way that defies conventional gender roles and expectations, taking charge of her own life and opposing the patriarchal system that had subjugated her. "Yup, I go all around town and no one bothers me. I can do anything!" (Hashimi 74). The way that a person understands their own identity, including their gender identity, is greatly influenced by societal standards and cultural meanings.

Bacha posh as a form of resistance

Girls have been able to transcend the rigid gender stereotypes that society has imposed and experience a different kind of freedom because of the bacha posh practice of cross-dressing. In a culture where gender roles are rigidly established and patriarchal standards are strongly ingrained, Bacha Posh challenges these norms by enabling females to dress as men and assume masculine tasks and privileges (Lalthlamuanpuii 2). This behavior undermines the fixed gender duties and expectations that are imposed on people based on their sex and upsets the binary conception of gender as being exclusively male or female. "Dress has always served as an essential and often subtle signifier of power and its imbalances, of cultural and political difference and similarity" (Sedgwick 148). Dress, as a sort of outer appearance, conveys social and cultural implications that go beyond simple clothing, and it is frequently utilized as a subtly powerful signifier of many social and political forces. The dress can be a means of communication, an assertion of one's rights, or a challenge to established standards because it is a visible indicator of one's identity, social standing, and views. The traditional view of gender as set and rigid can be challenged by those who purposefully dress in apparel that is normally associated with a different gender. It may be a way to demonstrate gender fluidity or to refute the binary idea of gender as either male or female. "Cross-dressing is a way of subverting the conventional power relations that are embodied in gender identity" (Garber 3). This enables her to assume traditionally male roles and duties, such as working outside and making decisions for the family.

People who disguise themselves subvert social norms that try to define how they should display their gender based on the sex of their bodies. "Cross-dressing challenges dominant cultural beliefs about the naturalness of sex and gender, subverting the social codes that attempt to

prescribe gender-appropriate behaviour for individuals based on their sexed bodies" (Stryker 10). It has the power to challenge societal conventions that give some genders more privilege, power, or freedom than others. The pressures and expectations associated with gender roles in their society can also be regarded as being addressed by this culture, which helps families manage. "I felt a thrill as I chased after him. I liked being part of the team. I liked the dust kicking up under my feet. I liked being a boy." (Hashimi 52). Rahima, however, is discovering fulfilment and freedom in temporarily taking on a male gender role or partaking in activities that are normally reserved for the opposing gender. This emphasizes how unique and autonomous each person is in expressing their gender identity in its purest form. It is crucial to understand that Bacha posh girls' experiences are not all the same and can change depending on many variables, including their family's socioeconomic level, the culture in which they reside, and their unique personalities and life experiences. Additionally, clothing can give people a feeling of empowerment and liberation. Even if it might not be in line with cultural norms or the sex they were given at birth, transsexual people can construct a persona or outer appearance that reflects their true gender identity by utilizing clothing to conceal themselves (Stone 26). "You're a working boy! Now, that's news!" Khala Shaima clapped her hands together. "Yep, I go all around town, and no one bothers me. I can do anything!" (Hashimi 74). They can maintain their social standing by raising their daughter as a male and avoid the stigma associated with only having girls.

"And me. I was Madar-jan's helper. Her spunky, troublemaking Bacha posh. I know she wondered if she had made the right decision. If I were a little wiser, I would have told her it had been the best thing for me. I would have told her that I wished I could have stayed a Bacha posh forever." (Hashimi 147)

Afghanistan's conventional gender norms are frequently demanded of women, which may restrict their chances and freedoms (Abirafeh 3). Rahima was able to experience autonomy, freedom, and empowerment as a Bacha posh, something that was uncommon for girls and women in her society. Rahima now thinks that being a Bacha posh was the best decision she ever made. Even though being a Bacha posh was unusual or questioned by some, she loves the experience and sees it as a good component of her identity. It clarifies the complexity of gender and cultural norms and how people negotiate and contend with them in their quest for autonomy and self-expression.

The role of Bacha posh in Afghanistan's resistance to gender expectations

Agency and empowerment: In a patriarchal environment, Bacha Posh can be seen as a means for girls and their families to exercise agency and feel empowered. Girls might defy established gender stereotypes that limit their mobility, access to education, and involvement in public life by temporarily assuming a masculine gender identity. As a result, they may have access to chances for employment, education, and other endeavours that would not otherwise be open to girls.

Questioning the fixity of gender: By emphasizing the performative element of gender, Bacha Posh questions the idea that gender is permanent and unchangeable. It emphasizes how gender is not only established by biological sex but also produced and enacted through cultural practices. This calls into question the binary conception of gender and creates opportunities for gender roles and identities to be reimagined.

Resistance to oppression: Another way to look at Bacha Posh is as a kind of opposition to restrictive gender expectations and standards. It enables females to navigate and resist the

gendered limitations placed on them by society and to reject the notion that they must adopt the stereotypical roles and actions that are associated with femininity. Girls and their families can use this resistance to stand up for their autonomy and agency in the face of repressive gender stereotypes.

Limitations and ethical considerations: To properly analyse and discuss Bacha Posh, it is important to be aware of its ethical constraints and limitations. It's critical to tackle this subject sensitively and with respect for Afghan traditions and ideals as an outsider and as a country. Any analysis or interpretation of Bacha Posh must place a strong emphasis on the perspectives and experiences of Afghan people and groups while avoiding imposing preconceived ideas from the outside.

Implications and future directions: Talk about the implications of Bacha Posh as a form of resistance and how it might advance gender equality in Afghanistan. Discuss potential future routes for study, legislation, and interventions that could aid girls and their families in defying repressive gender stereotypes as you examine the difficulties and prospects for preserving and extending the practice of Bacha Posh.

Discussion

This paper focuses on how Nadia Hashimi challenges gender norms and societal expectations in *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell*. This study questions societal norms, expectations, and actions related to gender roles through the application of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. This looks at the way Hashimi shows how gender norms are warped and illustrates the various ways that gender can be controlled and questioned. In order to understand how Afghan women's lives are shaped, the study also examines the relationships between gender, socioeconomic class,

and ethnicity. This Intersectionality highlights the various forms of bias faced by women from minority communities, as well as how these problems contribute to their lack of agency. The text dispels myths and preconceptions regarding Afghan women's lives by giving a nuanced portrait of them (Flauri 35). The key question addressed was how themes and concepts of *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell* might be pertinent to more general discussions regarding gender and power dynamics in many global cultural contexts?

The study reveals how the concept of gender doubles as a performance that requires actors to conform to certain roles and expectations, often resulting in limited agency and freedom. By examining this context, the paper deepens our understanding of the complex factors that contribute to gender inequality in Afghanistan. Through the dual narrative of Rahima and Shekiba, Hashimi exposes the restricted nature of gender norms and demonstrates how they operate to maintain patriarchal dominance and control. Both protagonists must adopt the "Bacha Posh" behaviour, in which girls get dressed and raised as guys, to escape inequality, prejudice, and assault, although living centuries apart. Analyzing a literary work that presents a rich and nuanced portrayal of the realities of Afghan women in order to get a glimpse of their life. With this strategy, the value of various narrative voices is emphasized in furthering social justice objectives and fostering intercultural understanding (Siber 262).

These are the two key contributions that this article makes. First, the study analyses portrayal of sex roles and dynamics of power in relation to larger feminist and critical theoretical frameworks in *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell*. It next explores how this has consequences for cultural and political settings within Afghanistan as well as beyond. This viewpoint clarifies the value of different narrative perspectives in dispelling myths and highlighting the experiences of disadvantaged communities. Addressing the particular elements that lead to gender disparity in

that environment is essential for developing policies and practices that will improve the status of women in Afghanistan. The paper contributes to broader discussions about gender justice and equitable treatment by recognizing the multifaceted nature of sex roles and power dynamics in Afghanistan as well as the significance of varied viewpoints and voices in opposing these norms (Farhoumand 137). Second, the main characters' gender performances throughout the text show the ways in which gender is a created idea. Their performances highlight the ways that biological sex is used to assign gender roles rather than personal expression or desire (Shields 302). Through critical evaluation, *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell* offers a potent critique of patriarchal mechanisms that uphold inflexible gender standards and the expectations that society attached to them. More specifically, through the practice of Bacha Posh, which may be viewed as an act of performing in which gender is presumed for the reason of evading patriarchal limits, the novel emphasizes the significance of personal agency and resistance in opposing these norms.

Conclusion

Nadia Hashimi questions Afghani society's preconceptions about gender roles in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* through the extraordinary phenomena of Bacha Posh. The practice of Bacha posh in Afghanistan is a complicated and multidimensional phenomenon with important historical, religious, and cultural ramifications. By applying the gender performativity theory developed by Judith Butler, the novel highlights how "if the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style." (Butler 179). The experiences of Rahima and Shekiba serve as powerful examples of the value of agency and self-determination in the face of cultural expectations as well as how people can challenge

stereotypical gender roles to advance social justice and gender equality. The perspectives of feminist theorists like Butler, Hooks, Connell, and Simon de Beauvoir highlight how gender is performed and enacted through repetitive behaviours within societal norms and expectations. They highlight that gender is an evolving idea rather than fixed or natural, determined by many cultural, political, and socioeconomic variables. The body plays a vital role in the formation of gender meanings, altering and upending social norms and expectations rather than being a passive or neutral thing. The practice of "Bacha posh is a subversion of gender, a change in form that disrupts the established order. It is a resistance to the expected and a tool for achieving something else, something more" (Nordberg 7). It's critical to address Bacha Posh with complexity and empathy, taking into account the variety of viewpoints and experiences while advocating for gender equality and inclusivity. For this, a multifaceted strategy that takes into account concerns like women's and girls' legal safeguards, access to education, and economic possibilities is necessary, then only we can envision a society in which Bacha posh is no longer necessary and gender equality is the norm.

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