

Yearning for Autonomy in a Gender Dysphoric Culture – An Analysis of Nadia Hashimi's One Half from the East

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Gender Dysphoria scientifically may relate to a condition in which individuals continually are under the stress of being irrelevant to the biological sex and the desirable sex, but the dysphoric thoughts always need not be scientifically oriented. It is sometimes limited with the thoughts of an individual, curbed under societal norms. The autonomy expected by a ten or thirteen-year-old girl is not about feminism or equality in the society, it is the mere desire to live the life itself. The denial of basic rights and curtailment leads to yearning; Obayda and Rahima are two different characters portrayed in the novel who are forced to behave in a particular way, antithetical to their biological gender. They are chained by the cultural opinions and search for an identification leads to the development of the story. This paper examines the yearnings depicted by the two main characters; the desire to live unapologetically, without any mask to cover their identity. The parallel portrayal of two different characters with similarities is to showcase parents play pivotal role in shaping the life of children and cultural norms are always flexible and fluid with possibilities of modification.

Keywords: Gender dysphoria, Autonomy, Freedom, Cultural inhibitions and Social stigma

Introduction of the Author

Nadia Hashimi is of Afghan origin, settled in New York. She was born in the year 1977, on December 12. Her parents immigrated to the United States and despite the intention to return to the native land, they did not due to the unsafe conditions in Afghanistan. She is a paediatrician by profession. She began her career at Children's

National Medical Center in Washington in the year 2008. She released her first novel in the year 2014 *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell*. This novel is one of her best international bestselling novels. Her second bestseller *When the Moon Is Low* was released in 2015. *A House Without Windows* the third novel came in the year 2016. She has also written children's books named *The Sky at Her Feet*

and *One Half from the East*. Her recent work in 2021 *Sparks Like Stars* is also well known like her other works. She has had a brief political stint too. She ran for the congress, if she had not been defeated by David Trone, she must have been the first Afghan-American woman democratic physician.

All her works draws the background from her rich Afghan culture. Her novels span generations and focusing on multiple themes like migration, forced migration, misogyny, gender issues, and poverty. She is a member of the board that aims to nurture most vulnerable children and also empowering the women of the future. She is married to a neuro surgeon and they have four children. She is very much an Afghan despite spending years in the U.S and continues stay rooted.

One Half from the East- in Brief

One Half from the East typically narrates the life of an Afghan family which undergoes into distraught conditions due to an explosion that results in the amputation of one leg of the father. The life of entire family the parents and their four girls is shattered. It does not amputate the normalcy but the psychological conditions derail too. Father loses the job, the steady income and they are unable to handle things at Kabul, forcibly they move to their paternal village. The explosion explodes the life of the father, who moves into conscious coma of not talking to the family members, merely remaining aloof, not bothering as on how the family with all the women are coping up or how the daughters are into their education; nothing is of any significance to the father. They are totally dependent on father's elderly brother's family, and the aunt takes an advantage of their disabilities. They stay in a small village house of the father, which is not in any way comfortable as their apartment back in Kabul. The life in the dry village has made their life dull as well.

The youngest girl Obayda, is the protagonist and the readers find the perspective of the ten-year-old girl throughout the story. She reflects the psyche of every family member. She hates the life

in the village, so does her mother. Father is again subservient to his physical deformed conditions. When things are real, hard the aunt Aziza comes up with an idea of turning the youngest girl into a bacha posh, an Afghan tradition of dressing up a girl child into a boy to bring better luck to the family. She forces the family to follow the tradition and Obayda, is transformed into a boy without considering her future psychological disturbances.

Obayda comes in contact with a similar bacha posh and their life takes a detour thereafter. The harsh reality of the biological sex and transformation for the sake of society juggle the psychological and physiological stabilities of the young girl. The gender dysphoric circumstances and the desire to come out of it forms the crux of the novel.

The desire to be the 'Self'

The struggle to be known by the individual identity begins when Obayda is suggested to become the bacha posh by the aunt Aziza. Delving deeper reveals the fact that the entire family lacks the sense of individuality. The father loses his freedom of being a man when his one leg is exploded. He is not able to face his daughters and his wife and that makes him a weakling. His world begins and ends inside a room,

He turned into a ghost. I don't mean that he died, but that he could be in a room and people hardly knew he was there. If he talked, it was in a light whisper. Most of the time he stayed in the bedroom he shared with my mother. When he got a little better, he would come out once every couple of days but avoided all conversation by saying his leg hurt. (Hashimi 4)

The mother is completely dependent on the father and her life is devastated as well. She is forced to move to the dry village, compelled to lead a life beyond her acceptance; in spite of missing her family she is helpless. She could not express her intentions or the desires, rather forcibly accepts the subalternity of her position in the society. She is unhappy, but accepts her fate, "My mother tries really hard...it's a lot

harder to make her laugh now, even when I'm being really funny". (8) Woman is always subdued in a country like Afghanistan, it is found the mother's character is submissive and also has to submit to the norms of the society. She is literally incapable, which is the reason for her sister-in-law to suggest to transform Obayda into a bacha posh. The inability to bear a male child is a taunt she has to bear with. She is chained by the customs of Afghan and she remains bound without attempting to break free. It is with the drastic step of Obayda, she decides to break the chains of her daughter and immediately transforms her into a girl ending the chapter of bacha posh. Though the decision initially was suggested by Aziza, the final decision was taken by the mother. She might be subservient with her life, but with her daughter's life she is decisive. She breaks the shackles to win her daughter the obligatory liberty.

Rahima, a bacha posh, who is thirteen is an example of a person with forward thinking. She is aware of the boundaries set for girls in the society, she conforms to the tradition and is obedient too, but the need to fly high freely is seen through her character throughout. As a bacha posh, she is brilliant, even the male children are in subordination to her. She is strong, bold, repulsive and enigmatic, but all these factors reflect from the transformed role she plays. As Rahim, Rahima is strong, which instigates in her the desire to remain bacha posh forever. She strengthens Obayda in the initial days of her transformation, she is reckless as a boy, she loves being a boy and does not like the transformation again, despite the fact, it is inevitable, she desires for such life.

A bacha posh is a Dari word which literally means "dressed as a boy". The term was first introduced in the book *The Underground Girls of Kabul. The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys* by Jenny Nordberg. (Pauline Lalthlamuanpuui1 and Suchi 1) Rahima is dressed as a boy, but clearly holds on to the truth that, a boy; a male child always has the freedom of being oneself in the society, but a girl is prone to

limitations. She somehow desires deep within to free herself of all the limitations,

I understand now why Rahim is digging up legends and looking for ways to save himself from being undone. My friend might talk rough but at the end of the day, we both know we're not in charge once we walk through our front doors and back into our homes. Everything changes them. We go from being kings of our own fates to children ruled by parents. (Hashimi 120)

Rahima's helplessness reflects when she is forced into a marriage with an elderly warlord Abdul Khaliq, "that's why I don't want to be a girl. That's why I would've done anything to make myself a boy forever." (Hashimi 166) The need to stay a bacha posh, believing in the myth to go under the rainbow to change the gender for ever is clear when she is found in the pathetic conditions by Obayda. The determination to escape the trap of marriage and live boundless is clear when she says, "I'm not going to stay here forever. I'll tell you something, Obayd. These people aren't very bright. I'll find a way to outsmart them, even it's not today." (Hashimi 168)

Obayda, is symbolic to women emancipation in this story. She is only ten, yet she is matured than any other character portrayed. Aunt's suggestion forces the family to follow the tradition of bacha posh. Obayda tries to agree without fussing over the discomforts new change could bring about. She is uncomfortable of her looks, her dress, every minute she is insecure of her demeanor. She is under constant pressure of getting exposed either before the teachers or the male students. Rahim's confrontation at the initial stage is gruesome experience to her, but on discovering the truth of Rahim, that he is also a bacha posh brings in him some respite.

Obayd constantly searches for an identity. She is displeased with the thoughts of playing a bacha posh, male dominated society teaches her to become a possible male. She is unaware of the truth of how a girl can never become a boy with merely changing the dress or by thinking of being a boy, the natural, biological phenomenon are

unknown to her. The fantasy of being a boy deepens in her the desire to remain a boy forever and Rahim's attitude as a bacha posh adds on to the inner craving.

She likes the freedom of being a boy. The limitless games, absolute freedom, attention, and jealousy of her sisters add to the desirability towards the need to be the opposite gender. She feels stronger day by day, and with Rahim she decides to become a boy forever, but the reality of being a real girl gradually takes a hold in her;

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. All I feel is sad that things are never going to be the way they were when it was me and Rahim. I reach behind my head and pull the Wizards cap on. I miss my best friend a lot tonight. (Hashimi 215)

The childishness reflects in Obayd and Rahim when they decide to find the waterfall and rainbow following the myth, or wearing the wizards cap to make themselves magical and strong; whereas the maturity reflects when they understand they are mere girls and the inner voice which constantly reminds them of the reality. Reality hits the girls hard, when they are helpless especially Rahima's condition of being married at the age of thirteen.

An Afghan Family with Forward Thoughts

The novelist introduces the family as an ensemble thought pertaining to the changes that were happening in the backward society. Obayda's character is pivotal in bringing the reality to the forefront. The elder sisters of Obayda find marriage of Rahima at thirteen ghastly. They know it for sure their parents will never let that ever happen to them. Despite the poor economical conditions, they are determined to give good upbringing to all four daughters. The father, who is diminished by the circumstances, finds the reason to live again with Obayda's efforts. The crutch she makes for him, and her journey into the world unknown in solitude

teaches him the lesson to be protective of the girls. He rises again to work and fend the family. The mother also reveals the truth, they were very happy when every girl was born in the family. It was after moving into the village we find the need for a boy was must, until then they did not pay heed to the societal demands of having a boy child. They expected the girls to be strong and Obayda's strength is an example to show how strong the girls were.

Obayda, also teaches other girls in her school to learn to be strong as boys. It is not something to do with the physiological attributes but the emotional and psychological. She teaches the girls to start with games played by boys and slowly that could make them stronger towards their approaches in life later. Like Obayda, who did everything alone, nobody taught her to do, it was the inner strength which she utilized to make herself stronger than she could ever desire.

Conclusion

Obayda's character makes everyone understand the fact that it is not the gender, but the personal opinion that shapes the life of an individual. One is born with certain attributes, the society; the inner and the outer shapes the future of an individual. Family plays a pivotal role in shaping the life of children. The novelist here has used the age-old tradition of bacha posh to make the present generation realize, freedom of an individual should not be curfewed. A girl child realizes her position in the society only when the men around her allows her to understand what she is, and women around her should teach her to live the life with utmost strength and dignity. Obayda's life sets an example to every girl child to seek the freedom that comes free to her, it is only the society and societal demands that turn the freedom into mere myths. Every character portrayed in the novel is in search of the freedom of one's own kind, and most of them are happy to enjoy the liberty eventually.

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