

Women's Identity and the Practice of Bacha Posh in Nadia

Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*

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Abstract

*Both at national and international levels, there has been several attempts by various scholars and writers to depict the difficulties and problems women encounter in Afghanistan, but the writers who have lived in the secure locations or in 'border zones' – like in Europe and U.S, have made plenty of efforts to present the plights and struggles in their works that these women have tackled throughout the history of this country. While adhering to the issue of women and their identity in Afghanistan, Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* has effectively presented and raised the issue of the Bacha Posh custom, a girl dressed as a boy for various reasons. But, it is the girl or a woman who faces problems based on her gender, not the boy or a man. This paper aims to problematize gender and identity issues related to Bacha posh girls and the Bacha Posh custom in Nadia's Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* where Hashimi as a female Afghan diaspora novelist have done a great deal to portray the problems most women have in their identities in their early age while encountering with this custom that girls are forced to wear like a boy and act like a boy.*

Keywords: Bacha Posh Custom, Identity, gender, women, Patriarchal society

Introduction

According to Nordberg, families in Afghanistan endeavor to make-believe their daughters can become sons for a while due to various reasons; some families may accept this 'crisscrossing' tradition for financial problems, but some others might be pressed socially for having girls. However, some will probably do it for the sake of a "superstition" that dressing up a girl like a boy "can lead to the birth of a boy." (para 5). In order to have access to getting education and

having freedom like boys, most girls in this society, from the past to the present time, have experienced the practice of 'Bacha posh', clothing like a boy to become an accepted member both for the male parent in the domestic life and in the society where 'patriarchy' and 'tradition' rules rather than the Holy religion of Islam that has permitted both men and women to gain knowledge disregarding gender discrimination or education based on gender. All men and women have been permitted to study. However, the society in which these two major women characters live is totally 'patriarchal' and is always following tradition that does not have any basis in Islam. Based on gender, Rahima, one of the major women characters in Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* living in the 21st century, is not the only girl who has to follow 'crisscrossing tradition' in order to get acceptance in education or get freedom like boys. In this novel Shekiba, a women belonging to Rahima's clan, the other women character, who has lived one century before Rahima, has undergone the practice of Bacha Posh after the death of her parents. In Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, the women who have been depicted to represent Afghan women are the two major women characters: Shekiba, Rahima's great-great grandmother, who has lived in the early 20th century, and Rahima, who lives in the 21st century. These two women represent Afghan women from two different centuries. To support, Khurshid believes that both Rahima and Shekiba despite of living in "two very different Afghanistan" are dealing with the same problems, rooted in or emanated from this society which is patriarchal (253). Nadia Hashimi has endeavored to characterize these representative women characters in order to project and raise the voices of those silenced women who have always attempted to fight against identity crisis and inequality based on gender throughout the history of this country.

Shekiba's quest for Identity

In the novel, Shekiba as a woman from the early 20th century, has lived a miserable life with plenty of struggles and difficulties, but Shekiba has become a role model for Rahima's struggles in order to achieve her freedom and identity as well as her fight against gender inequality. According to most gender theorists and sociologist, gender is a social construct. The gender roles given to both men and women have been assigned by the society and 'social groups'. However, the distribution of 'power' based on sex is political where men have a lot of access to power that they always marginalize women, control them and do not allow them to reach the means of

power. The same scenario occurs in Shekiba's life while living as a girl in her family. The only person who truly loves Shekiba is her mother, Shafiq, who considers Shekiba as a "gift" based on the meaning of her name. "Your name means 'gift', my daughter. You are a gift from Allah'" (Hashimi 13). In fact, Shekiba based on her gender really becomes a gift that is passed from one individual to the other, but her identity as a woman is always in crisis. In addition, the novelist has also compared analogically the situation of this country between two great powers and Shekiba's condition in this patriarchal society. "The borders between Afghanistan and India were drawn and redrawn ... People belonged to one country and then the other ... For great Britain and the Soviet Union, Afghanistan was the playing field for their 'great game', the power struggle to control Central Asia" (Hashimi 13). Shekiba like Afghanistan, her country is also passed from her family to Azizullah and Azizullah passes her to the king. In fact, Shekiba as a woman does not have any individuality and cannot possess or own herself. She has been entirely played by men both at home and in the society. Even some women like BoboShahgul, Shekiba's grandmother have been indirectly influenced by 'Patriarchal ideologies' that they favor boys than girls. BoboShahgul has always favored Shekiba's brothers, her grandsons than Shekiba and her sister as granddaughters. BoboShahgul as a woman must fight for the rights of women, however, she endeavors to ignore women's problems and starts to support men. Shekiba unconsciously realizes the fact that living as a girl in this 'patriarchal' society is extremely difficult, but a girl with disability will have the worst condition. Half of Shekiba's face works whether to laugh or cry; the rest of the face is numb and burnt. The society around Shekiba does not favor girls especially girls with disabilities. People around her would make fun of her and consider it as the punishment of Allah for the sin this family might have committed. Her mother, Shafiq would ask Shekiba to wear 'burqa' to save and protect her from the eyes of other people. Unlike Rahima, Shekiba has two brothers, Tariq and Munis, who would defend Shekiba's reputation and dignity when other people attempt to insult her. It would sometimes lead to Tariq's physical fight with other boys. Unlike Rahima's father, Shekiba's father, does not disapprove it. It means he rather loves and supports his daughter.

Shekiba is also like a gift for her father to help him in the housework and in the field rather than send her to school to get education and achieve her identity as a woman. After the death of

Shekiba's mother in the cholera, Ismail, her father pretends he has never married, but he has had one person as a child who is bothered by most in the neighborhood by having a burned face, but Ismail disregards her appearance. He only need her for work that Shekiba honestly does like a son, but Ismail does not care for Shekiba as his daughter and a woman who will need help. "And when he heard her shed tears, he shrugged her sniffles off as a touch of flu"(Hashimi 20). Ismail as a man has always exploited the physical power of Shekiba as a woman, but he has never struggled to understand Shekiba as a woman. Ismail is physically there at home, but he does not help Shekiba emotionally when she cries due to some reasons or loneliness.

To consider Shekiba like a gift, it is to question Shekiba's whole identity not only as a woman but also as an individual when men like her uncles and a woman like her grandmother save the life of Shekiba only for saving their own honor in the neighborhood, but not saving a woman or a person's 'individuality' or 'agency'. "Tell your wives to get her washed up ... We must deal with this creature if we are to save our good name within the village" (Hashimi 40). Shekiba has been depicted as a woman with no individuality, not only in her father's house, but also in her uncles' house where her grandmother, BoboShahgul rules. Shekiba has been doubly subordinated both by men and women in this family. Shekiba is relentlessly assaulted both physically and verbally by her aunts when she is not prepared to be showered and freshened up. Shekiba has been represented as a woman without having the right to claim for her father's property and ask for her fair treatment by the people in this family. "Her skin was raw and reddened from the brutal baths she had been given" (Hashimi 40). Her aunts are not the only guilty people for abusing Shekiba physically; even BoboShahgul does not treat Shekiba as her granddaughter. She punishes Shekiba with her walking stick for having a rude and impolite character like her mother, Shakiba. However, Shekiba has been portrayed as a woman with no power to stand against the harsh behavior and treatment by her uncles, aunts and grandmother. Shekiba has been depicted like an individual with no rights. In addition, she is a 'subaltern' character who cannot speak and the ones like her father's family and the society both are not willing to listen to and understand the 'discourse' Shekiba produces as a woman. They do not consider Shekiba as a person with individuality. Based on her grandmother's attribute for Shekiba, she is compared to a creature that can be any domestic or wild animal with no humanistic values.

Based on her gender, as a woman, Shekiba due to having a collective identity in this society, cannot have access to the ‘power structure’ to ask for her rights in her father’s land that the Holy religion of Islam has specified a woman’s rights both in her parents’ house and in her husband’s house; however, the men due to exploiting the ‘power relations’ in society have been portrayed powerful that they have marginalized women as powerless individuals. “Now there was no one in their way. They were taking her home ... part of her was still hoping to return to that home, to live their independently ... of course that would never happen” (Hashimi 56). Shekiba has been portrayed as an individual with no individuality both as a member of this family and as a favored member of the society as she has also been made fun of by the neighborhood for her burned face. Ismail, Shekiba’s father could help Shekiba in sending her to school by providing her ‘enabling conditions’, but he instead exploits Shekiba’s physical power for his advantage in cultivation of the land as well as in housework. As Ismail does not help Shekiba; her uncles and grandmother also sideline Shekiba from having access to having home and land in order to recharge her status financially. They rather forcefully take and occupy Shekiba’s house. And they have also been presented as the people who rob Shekiba’s identity based on her gender. For her aunts, uncles and BoboShahgul, Shekiba is like a liability rather than a person with agency. But, they only use her as a labor in return for the food and clothing she uses in this house. Shekiba has been kept like a slave rather than a woman with voice to gain her identity. Shekiba for being a woman does not have the right to touch an object of her own property. ““Hey Freidun! Look what she’s doing! Tell her not to touch the onions””(56). In this ‘patriarchal society’, Shekiba has been represented as a powerless and silenced woman that she is not permitted to touch her own property. Like onions, Shekiba has been presented, not as a woman with identity and power to have rights and agency, but as a commodity possessed by her male family members. Counting Shekiba as commodity is proved when her father’s family plan to sell her to Azizullah for the sum of cash they have to pay to Azizullah. Shekiba also depicts herself as the gift that her mother had described. “That is the problem with gifts, Madar-jan. They are always given away” (Hashimi 59). First, Shekiba was brought as a gift by her father’s family; now they would like to get rid of it. Shekiba has only been respected as a true gift for her mother that she could become her voice and represent her, but she is just an object for her father’s family. According to the gender

theorists, men have always used the opportunity to subordinate and marginalize women when it is the time to divide power based on gender.

As a woman, Shekibaa has been depicted as a ‘subaltern’ and also as an animal or an object. When Shekiba’s uncle sells Shekiba to Azizullah, they sell her as if she is an object or animal. She is made to wait for almost twenty minutes before she enters Azizullah’s living room. As a woman Shekiba because of her powerlessness ‘cannot speak’. Shekiba’s uncle represents Shekiba while selling her and Azizullah as the customer listens to Shekiba’s uncle describing Shekiba. In addition, Azizullah checks Shekiba’s countenance and face whether he checks an animal or an object before buying it. Shekiba as a person has no individuality. ““You will see that, as we told you, she is a very hard worker and is sure to prove useful in your home”” (Hashimi 63). Shekiba’s whole identity has been limited to being useful to men rather than having agency and the potential to raise her voice against the inequality based on gender. These two men, Shekiba’s uncle and Azizullah have marginalized Shekiba as a woman that she cannot speak for herself. Shekiba cannot represent herself; she should be represented. In fact, these men by disregarding the real rights of a woman entirely misrepresent Shekiba as a woman. After Shekiba work as a maid in Azizullah’s house, Shekiba attempts to build her status as an accepted member of society and as a Muslim woman, but these men around her disregards her attempt by using their physical power. Azizullah punishes Shekiba by hitting her badly when she attempts to claim for her father’s land by visiting the local religious scholar to show him the deed. Even Marjan, Azizullah’s wife has been influenced by these ‘patriarchal ideologies that she discourages Shekiba for claiming a portion of her father’s land.

Shekiba wearing as a man

Shekiba’s journey of identity transformation from a woman to a man starts when Azizullah sends Shekiba as a “gift” to the king’s palace. Such a change in the identity of Shekiba has never been based on her consent. However, she has been depicted as a woman who feels a little freedom in her new clothing shaking her past memories remembering her brothers playing in such clothes. Shekiba has never been the first woman to experience such a change in her identity by wearing men’s clothes and having names like them. Ghafoor, the leader of women’s group, is the Bacha-

posh whose real name is Guljaan. Patriarchy is involved in the subordination and marginalization of women in this society that women have to wear like men in order to be accepted as an individual to ask for their rights. In addition, the huge gap in 'social classes' and incomparable level of people's lives force the lowest to become the victim of 'high class'. Mostly, the victims are women who are not truly accepted not only as women, but also individuals both in their families and in their societies. Like Shekiba, Ghafoor or Guljan is sold by her parents like an object. Ghafoor like Shekiba has "been given to the palace in exchange for a cow" (Hashimi 157). The huge gap between the three classes in this society is to the extent that the king has luxurious life, having a lot of food and concubines to entertain himself, but fathers sell their daughters to earn for a living. Karima as Karim and Khatol as Qasim are the two sisters who are sold due to poverty. "Their mother cried violently as she told the girls they could not afford to feed all four ... their father had arranged for them to be taken to the king's palace" (Hashimi 159). The boys have never been the victim of such a disaster. When there is a problem, a woman must face it, not a man. Nadia Hashimi as an elite to represent the silenced women in this country by applying 'Orientalist views' has prioritized the discussion and description of life in king's harem and the opportunities it has provided for women. She has portrayed harem as a safe haven for women to entertain themselves rather than think about their true identity and true life where they should live like people with individuality to have control over their properties and personality. "The harem life was relatively simple ... They did not cook, nor did they carry buckets of water from a well" (159). Hashimi instead of encouraging women to help men in the housework rather convinced them to live a life of concubine without identity, owned by the king.

Shekiba's Identity as a married woman

Shekiba's marriage with Aasif or Agha Baraan has not been based on the presence of equal respect and individuality among these two couples. Shekiba has never had identity as a woman, be it in her family or her uncles' house or in Aasif's house. Her whole identity and happiness in the family is bound to delivering baby boys to Aasif as Gulnaz, Aasif's first wife has not succeeded. Shekiba does not possess personal identity; it is connected to Aasif and the babies she delivers. Shekiba's transformation of identity from a woman to a man and the presence of 'power' to control her and make her become a woman again, have put her in a critical situation.

Shekiba as a woman is not allowed to represent herself. Men around her have always portrayed her as a “gift”, commodity, or a machine to produce children. When Shekiba in her first attempt has not succeeded delivering a boy for Aasif, he becomes very aggressive. “What are you? You are not a man! You are not a woman! You are nothing!”(Hashimi 381). The roles given to Shekiba as woman have already been created by the society where the ‘social groups’ are mostly men. And, these men have always attempted to fail women. Shekiba has been portrayed as an individual who is stuck between the decision to be a man or a woman. As a man, Shekiba could not save the concubines. Moreover, she has failed her husband by not giving birth to a boy. Aasif as a man makes an effort to represent Shekiba that she ‘cannot speak’ and ‘cannot be heard’. In fact, Shekiba has been depicted weak enough to have agency and her own ‘discourse’ where she could represent herself without the intervention of men. She has undergone a lot of miseries as a woman in this society, but she prays for her female descendants to have enough land to pick up crops, enjoys the love of female parent, and the smile of baby. According to Shekiba’s prayers, she has lived in a society where having enough food to eat, having a child and enjoying the love of parents have been very difficult for a woman, but she does not want her grand female children like Rahima to encounter such a bitter destiny in their lives.

Rahimi’s Identity and Bacha-posh tradition

Rahima is not the only girl embracing the tradition of Bacha-posh to get access to education and free life like boys do. Centuries before, a woman from her clan, Shekiba, the great-grandmother of her Madar-jan after the death of her parents, survives by adopting the same ‘crisscrossing’ tradition that leads to bringing dramatic change in her life. In order to be an accepted individual in the society, Rahima, one of the main women characters in the story is encouraged by KhalaShaima, and her parents to experience transformation of identity in a temporary manner. By doing so, she will make her hair and should be dressed like boys. When Arif and Madar-jan argues whether to let Rahima become a ‘Bacha posh’ or not, Rahima is secretly listening to them, but she returns to Madar-jan after Arif leaves the house disguising that she knows nothing about it. When Rahima asks Madar-jan about the arguments, Madar-jan indirectly convinces Rahima to accept ‘Bacha posh’ – to become the son of the family which she could find useful as soon as she becomes one:

“You are worse than your father, sometimes. Yes, that one. I think it is time we change you something for you. I think it would be best if we let you be a son to your father.” “A son?” “It is simple and it’s done all the time, Rahima-jan. Just think how happy that would make him! And you could do so many things that your sisters wouldn’t be able to do.” She knew how to pique my interest. I cocked my head to the side and waited for her to go on. “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?” (Hashimi 23)

Rahima’s identity as a girl or as a woman has never been accepted both in the domestic sphere and in her society as well. Compared to boys, Rahima as a girl has never had freedom and has had little access to education. To elaborate, both at micro level, at home and in the neighborhood, and at ‘macro level’, in the whole society, Rahima as a girl has never had individuality and agency to produce ‘discourse’ in order to ask for her freedom as a woman and her right to study like other boys. In the ‘Patriarchal’ society where Rahima lives, women have been depicted as the people who must conform to the ‘gender norms’. Based on ‘gender norms’, boys and men have been portrayed as the winning sides in dealing with having access to the means of ‘power’ as well as having access to freedom and education. However, women have been sidelined, marginalized and silenced by the men. Rahima as a woman cannot have freedom and cannot go to school and cannot work, but the transformation in her identity can help her follow ‘gender norms’ in a temporary manner and in a way that could help her have the liberty to play with boys and go to school. There are two reasons why Rahima has been forced to become a son. First, Arif, Rahima’s father is the man who has been depicted as an oppressive father and a son loving person. He has always complained about having a lot of daughters. He has never valued them as human beings, and has never respected their identity as girls. So, Rahima’s ‘Bacha-posh’ condition is that Arif has to pretend Rahima, not as a daughter, but as a bread winner, a son. The second reason is the presence of problems for girls at ‘macro level’, in the society. This patriarchal society also forces Arif to abide by the ‘Patriarchal’ norms in the society. Rahima has to become a ‘Bacha-posh’ in order to be considered as an accepted individual in the society. She

will not only have the chance to play with boys and go shopping, but will also continue to go to school. However, her sisters, like Parwin and Shahla are forced to stay at home. They are just girls, and are depicted as people who do not have access to their rights as women.

Rahima's status as a daughter son or 'Bacha posh' has led to gender discrimination. Rahima does not only represent herself, but millions of Afghan girls who experience gender discrimination in this 'Patriarchal' society. When Rahima is transformed from a girl to a boy, her father's treatment of his daughters also changes. "bachem, ask your sister to bring me a cup of tea, And tell her to fix me something to eat too," ... "I was confused for a moment. Why hadn't he asked me to bring the tea and food?" (Hashimi 49). Rahima as a daughter son for her father has also been presented as an individual who is quite amazed by her father's act of discriminating her with her sisters. He does not bother Rahima for being a boy to do it. He rather wants Rahima's sisters to bring food and tea. Arif, Rahima's father favors Rahima than his other daughters is not based on her being a unique girl, but only for the current identity as a boy that she occupies in her girlhood. Rahima as a 'Bacha posh' has been portrayed as a girl who has gained the right to go to school at the cost of losing her real identity as a girl. She has been Rahima, but she is currently Rahim, having a boy's name that she has to remember and wear like a boy. In fact, Rahima has been depicted as a girl who has sacrificed her own female identity for the sake of gaining freedom and getting education like boys. But, Rahima's sisters like Shahla and Rohila are the girls or women who have been sidelined from the 'mainstream' of society. Like Rahim, they cannot go out or they are not allowed to go to school. All these girls do not have full access to the means of 'power' to generate discourse and represent themselves as individuals with individuality and agency to claim for their rights. They are just 'subaltern' characters who 'cannot speak', they have to be represented. So, a man like Arif, Rahim, Shahla and Rohila's father must represent their girls by applying his own 'Patriarchal' interests and desires by disregarding the interests and rights of these girls. Arif like the colonizer has sidelined and marginalized women as the other from the rights of studying. These women have been portrayed as the weak individuals whose only space for survival is staying home and performing the role of good women by doing the chores and get ready for marriage whenever there is a suitor in the house. If these girls raise their voices, their voices will be silenced. The only woman who helps

Rahima a great deal in reaching her goals is KhalaShaima. In fact, she is the person who encourages Rahima to become a woman who could generate or produce the potential to represent women in a better way. A man like Arif has never taken into account what women like Shahla or Parwin really want. Even, his relent and kindness towards Rahima will not be permanent. The sooner she becomes a young woman, the sooner she will be switched back to a girl. The only false identity – ‘Bacha posh’ that Rahima has accepted is because of moving towards having a life of having access to opportunities and freedom like other boys. Unlike boys, girls have always been kept away from the social activities. In other words, women based on the ‘gender mainstreaming’ are not allowed to be fully active in the jobs outside home. They have been made to stay home and do the housework, but men are not responsible for doing the housework. They have left all in door responsibilities to women by following traditional gender rules in this society.

A girl or a woman’s identity based on her gender in this society has never been equal to a man. women like Rahima, her sisters and her mother do not have the agency to decide about their destiny. Madar-jan as the mother of Rahima has been portrayed a weak man who is just in thoughts regarding the early marriage of her daughters, but is incapable of doing anything to forbid Arif from this marriage. Rahima’s mother has been represented as a woman who has been entirely influenced by the societal norms regarding marriage, women and their rights based on tradition. Young women must not be kept at home for a long time. She instead of defending Rahima’s rights to stop Arif from Rahima’s early marriage rather stands with his decisions. Men are the only decision makers in Rahima’s family. Padar-jangatherin his own brothers and parents to discuss daughters’ dowry and other related matters is the evidence that men have occupied the ‘centre’, but women like Madar-jan, Rahima and her sisters has been sent to the margins of ‘social mobility’. When Abdul Khaliq and his family show up in Padar-jan’s house, the people who should talk and discuss such matter are only men from both sides. Even, women are not given more chances to consult or raise their concern. Madar-jan as a woman and the mother of these three daughters possess the right to express her opinion, raises her concerns or even rejects this engagement and marriage, but her voice can be heard. In fact, her husband, Padar-jan is the first man who does not permit Madar-jan to participate in the decision-making gathering of men.

She is hopelessly waiting out of the room, just listening to what these men from both families do or can do about women.

A woman's identity as a married woman is to give birth to babies rather than having the same rights as her husband. Arif's mentioning the disability of Parwin as a concern is not without a response from Abdul Khaliq's father. "My second daughter – you probably do not know this, but she was born with a lame leg. She limps ...' 'No matter. She will not be a first wife anyway. I've seen lame-legged women bear children'" (Hashimi 132). As a man, Abdul Khaliq's father has portrayed Parwin as an individual with her ability in delivering children to her husband, but Parwin based on her real identity has been misrepresented. The whole personality of a woman like Parwin is limited to delivering children rather than respecting her as a human being. She is just considered as a machine for producing children. She does not possess any identity of her own. Her individuality is on sale between to families fueled by patriarchal structure in which a woman's job is to give birth to children no matter in what health condition a woman can be. Men like Abdul Khaliq and his family as well as Rahima's father, his brothers and parents do ignore the fate of these daughters. The whole discussion in this room is giving and taking rather than considering the proper rights and role of women before and after marriage. Rahima's male family members consider getting rid of young girls, but they have to earn a great deal in return. What will happen to these girls is not part of their concern.

Rahima's Quest for Identity after marriage

Rahima after her forced marriage with Abdul Khaliq, her identity as a woman has never gotten better. Rahima has the same low respect and rights as she has had in her parents' house. Rahima along with her sisters had lived under the ruling of the only one patriarch, her father. Similarly, Rahima as the wife of Abdul Khaliq encounters almost the same situation in Abdul Khaliq's family. As her father has never favored and liked girls in his family and has always tried to create extra oppressive boundaries for Rahima and her sisters, Abdul Khaliq as Rahima's husband also possesses the control of Rahima and his other wives. Rahima as an individual does not have agency or freedom to assert her individuality as a woman in her new family. Her freedom as a woman has already been designed by Abdul Khaliq. Rahima's freedom in this new

house becomes even more limited than she has had in her parents' house. "I will not tolerate insolence. Yesterday, I let you be. That was my gift to you, to show you I can be kind. Today, things are different. You are in your husband's home, my home. You will behave as a wife should"(161). To analyze and interpret, Abdul Khaliq has been depicted as the master and Rahima as a woman has been represented as a slave that she cannot claim for any shares in his master's house. "My home" by Abdul Khaliq is also a hint for Rahima that she also belongs to him that she could also be considered as a part of his house.

In this society, married women's identity has always been connected to delivering baby boys rather than baby girls. Rahima as a married woman is also part of this category. Before Rahima delivers her son, her grandmother, BibiGulalai does not treat her properly. Even, she is not allowed to visit her sister, Parwin in the neighborhood. Rahima is rather treated like a maid or a slave, but the rumor of her pregnancy dramatically changes the treatment of Rahima by BibiGulalai. "This will help you, you'll see. Your husband and mother-in-law will be pleased. Bearing children is a wife's duty ... One that Parwin had not fulfilled. Maybe that was why they had made her life miserable" (Hashimi 193). Subsequent to the release of the news of Rahima's pregnancy in the household, Rahima is represented as a woman who has just found identity and happiness in this house. Rahima is treated well. Even Rahima herself is also amazed by the dramatic revolution in the behavior of each and every individual while treating her. The identity of a married woman depends on giving birth to babies in the family. And it is also her job to bear children. Prior to her pregnancy, BibiGulalai, the minor character, who is Rahima's mother-in-law, does not treat Rahima well. She even forbids Rahima from visiting Parwin, who is living next door. As soon as the news of Rahima's pregnancy travels in the household, everyone starts to treat Rahima like a woman who has individuality and has the right to be treated well. Even Rahima herself is quite surprised by seeing KhalaShaima and her sister, Parwin, showing up in her house. Rahima is quite astonished about the dramatic change in the behavior of the women in this household.

Rahima has successfully performed her roles as a daughter and as a son, but her parents forces Rahima to marry Khaliq. In fact, Rahima, this major women character does have a marriage like some other women do. She is directly sold to Abdul Khaliq in exchange for a large sum of

money and opium that Abdul Khaliq will provide for Rahima's father and uncle. Rahima has been portrayed as a woman who cannot be compared to individual with rights, but like objects that can be easily sold and bought. Rahima as a woman does not have the identity and agency to defend herself before or after marriage. Before marriage, her father has always marginalized and oppressed her. At last, she is forced to marry Abdul Khaliq. After marriage, Abdul Khaliq after exploiting Rahima and her youth, would like to get rid of her by marrying another woman. In sum up, Rahima even after marriage cannot discover her real identity as a woman. Rahima as a 'subaltern' character has always endeavored to speak, but her discourse produced with such feeble agency cannot be properly heard by the men and the elites who would help her. When Rahima journeys with Badriya to Kabul as her assistant, Rahima's main goal is gain her real identity as a woman. However, there are four people who attempt to help. Ms. Franklin is in charge of the resource center, who acts as the European or Western woman to save Afghan women from the brutality and oppression of Afghan men. In addition to Ms. Franklin, there are Afghan elite women like Fakhria, the owner of the shelter for women and the two Afghan women MPs, Sufia and Hamida, who make an effort to help Rahima in gaining her identity by escaping from Abdul Khaliq and live in the women's shelter. In fact, they encourage Rahima to commit sin by breaking the traditional boundaries as well as disrespecting the position of women in Islam. These foreign and Afghan female elites by disregarding the culture and religion of this country prioritize their 'desire' rather than what Rahima really wants as a Muslim woman. They lead her to perversion rather than right path. They take Rahima from one prison, Abdul Khaliq's home to another prison, the women's shelter that is financially supported by the West. Rahima's wants as a woman are lost between the desires of Abdul Khaliq and these women elites.

Conclusion

Shekiba and Rahima as women of this country have lived in two different centuries, but their identities based on their gender have not changed a great deal. Both have faced various forms of marginalization and oppression by men in this society. Shekiba as a woman of the 20th century has not been accepted as an individual with human rights and agency to raise her voice against the inequality and violence she undergoes while living in the two families belonging to her father's family and Azizullah as well as her stay as a woman-man in the palace. Her uncles

exploit Shekiba's physical power in the field and at home in doing housework as well as her lowest status both in the family and in the society by selling her to Azizullah. Like her uncles, Azizullah treats Shekiba like a slave by checking her appearance and health before buying Shekiba. In addition, Azizullah beats Shekiba badly when she visits the local religious scholar to show her father's deed for the land in order to claim a share of her father's land from her uncles. Even, Azizullah's wife as woman does not support Shekiba in claiming for rights in her father's land. Like her uncles, Azizullah also sends Shekiba as a gift to the king that she must be taken to the king's palace where she gets a job as a 'woman-man' to safeguard the king's concubines. Finally, Shekiba becomes a woman again by marrying Agha Baraan or Asif. Like Shekiba, Rahima in the 21st century has never been accepted as a person with individuality and rights that the Holy religion of Islam has granted to women, but the 'patriarchal' ruling in the society does not allow women like Rahima to have access to their rights. Rahima along with her sisters has never been favored by Arif, their father. He has always counted Rahima and her sisters as liability and shame for the family. He would love to have sons rather than daughters. So, to pretend to have one, Rahima's parents persuade Rahima to become a 'Bacha posh' or wear like a boy in order to have freedom and have access to education. But, Rahima is changed to a girl when Abdul Khaliq would like to marry her.

Rahima as the Bacha-posh wishes she had the power and strength to do something. As a boy his mission is not only to protect himself but also the family members, but s/he cannot. He has been represented as the weak boy who has failed in his role in protecting himself and the family. Rahima during her married life until her pregnancy is treated badly as a woman. Her whole individuality and happiness is connected to giving birth to babies, especially boys that can make her husband and his family pleased. However, Rahima has been represented as a woman who is well treated after the release of her pregnancy news in family. The elites like Ms. Franklin, Fakhria, Sufia and Hamida, who endeavor to represent Rahima and try to save her from the oppression and marginalization by her husbands and parents, do not really listen to the real wants of Rahima. They fail to listen properly to the 'discourse' produced by Rahima, a Muslim woman, who lives in a traditional society. Breaking traditional boundaries and dishonoring families is a crime that Rahima commits by running away from Abdul Khaliq's home, but these

elites provided the opportunity for her. They make Rahima stay away from the ‘social mobility’ rather than providing ‘enabling conditions’ to join it. In the 20th century, Shekiba as a married woman of this society respects the traditional boundaries and the honor of her husband’s family by continuing to her submissive role as Asif’s wife, but Rahima as a married woman in the 21st century rather break the boundaries and ‘taboos’ in the society as a protest by running away from Abdul Khaliq’s home by living in the women’s shelter supported by the West. However, both Rahima and Shekiba as women despite of having lived in two different centuries have experienced similar oppressions and identity crisis in this society.

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