

GENDER INSTABILITY AND SUBVERSION OF SOCIO-CULTURAL POWER STRUCTURES IN NADIA HASHIMI'S *THE PEARL THAT BROKE ITS SHELL*

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Abstract

This study applies Butler's theory of gender performativity in The Pearl That Broke Its Shell by Nadia Hashimi. Butler claims that gender is not something biological rather a performance individuals do through repeated actions and behaviors. These actions are shaped by socio-cultural norms, societal expectations, and language. By applying Butler's theory, this study examines how characters in this novel question the traditional view of gender identity through their actions, behaviors, and daily activities. Characters like Shekiba and Rahima struggle against the patriarchal domination in Afghanistan, mainly through a shift in their gender roles. Rahima takes on masculine roles through a cultural practice of bacha posh. She gains access to educations, public places, markets and even earns for her family despite being a girl. Similarly, Shekiba adopts male duties and responsibilities after the death of her family members. Later in her life, she is even forced to work as a palace guard. This study uses a qualitative method of textual analysis focusing on characters' actions, behaviors and gender roles.

Keywords: gender performativity, the pearl that broke Its Shell, gender identity, gender fluidity, socio cultural norms.

Introduction

The distinction between gender and sex is relatively recent. Before 1960s, the word "gender" was generally used in grammar. In 1972, John Money suggested that sex should be used for biological categories (male/female), whereas gender should refer to the behavioral differences. After that, feminist scholars began to separate biological differences from the social and cultural meanings related to them (Udry, 1994). Butler defines performativity as any act that produces an effect. According to her the subject does not exist before the action; it is rather the action which creates the subject itself, as she states "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1990, p. 33).

Building on Butler's claim, Elena Loizidou observes gender identity as a process rather than an essence that exists before its subject. According to her though one's sex may be imposed at birth, but gender is something that comes into being through an ongoing process of performances, shaped by social and cultural expectations. The way people behave, dress, speak, move, and interact with one another reflects this ongoing process of gender construction. By repeatedly doing these acts, they conform to socially accepted roles of masculinity or femininity. Butler notices that gender acts and gender identity are inseparable; because of this reason, gender must not be considered as

a fixed identity (Loizidou, 2007). In this way, Loizidou extends Butler's theory of performativity into everyday activities. The novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014), by Nadia Hashimi, provides different characters to explore this theoretical framework. This novel set in Afghanistan in 2007, its story revolves around two main female characters, Rahima and her great-great-grandmother Shekiba, both of them seem to struggle against the restrictions of Afghan patriarchal society. The main character Rahima, challenges the traditional gender norms through adopting the cultural practice of bacha posh, where a girl temporarily takes on the role of a boy to gain the opportunities and freedoms often related with male identity. Similarly, the character of Shekiba, confronts the challenges of societal gender expectations and struggles to break free from these limitations. She resists societal expectations and tries to live a life beyond the restrictions imposed on a girl. Through these characters, this novel offers complex portrayals of gender identity, which reveal the tension between individual self-expressions and social norms.

Traditionally, gender has been considered as a binary and biological attribute, that is stable and innate. However, this novel challenges this traditional perspective by showing characters whose gender identities are constructed, fluid, and constantly changeable. This questions the idea of gender as biological and unchangeable. It is in this context that Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity becomes relevant. Butler claims that gender is not something one is but something one does, which consists of a series of repeated acts and performances shaped by societal expectations and norms. She states, "The action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" (Butler, 1990, p. 178). In this novel the character of Rahima and Shekiba's shift into male roles show this concept, as their gender identity shift according to societal needs. when societal circumstances force it. By dressing in boy's clothing and cutting her hair, and changing her name into Rahim, Rahima starts performing the role of a boy. This shows that gender is enacted rather than naturally fixed.

Therefore, Butler's theory helps to explore the constructed nature of gender identities within *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*. Rahima's shift from a girl into a boy and again to her previous identity reveals that gender identity is a social construction, unstable, and dependent on circumstances rather than innate. This novel, when analyzed through a framework of Butler's theory, critiques the dominant ideologies of a patriarchal society and shows possibilities for transformation and resistance. This study therefore adopts Butler's concept of gender identity as a framework to analyze how the characters of this novel challenge the fixed ideas of gender identity and depict women's struggles against strict social codes.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, analysis approach, applying Judith Butler's idea of performativity as a lens. According to Cresswell (2014), qualitative research method is carried out to investigate and understand the meaning of groups and individuals as part of human social life. It collects and analysis descriptive data in the form of story and words, to describe events or phenomena associated to human behavior. In this study, descriptive methods are used to analyze narratives in depth. It focuses on the thematic analysis and examines the struggles of the characters with their gender identity. This thematic analysis focuses on the careful examination of the selected text with special focus on actions, behavior and dialogues of characters related to gender issues and subversion of traditional norms.

Theoretical Framework: Gender Performativity

According to Judith Butler, gender identity being a man or a woman is not an innate fact, rather something that is shaped through actions that are influenced by social and cultural powers. She argues that gender is not something that comes into being by inner essence or from a fixed truth, nor it is biological fact, it is the repeated gendered acts that shape and produce the very concept of one's gender. Whereas without these acts gender does not exist at all (Butler, 1990). She is with opinion that subject of gender is the effect of those performative acts, it comes into being only through one's repeated actions that align with social and cultural norms. Butler believes that gender is "assigned" to people through family, social systems, daily actions, media and cultural norms. These systems and forces transfer gender roles from generation to generation, which individuals then perform as socially accepted behaviors. For Butler, gender is observable in the ways one uses his/her body such as in movements, gestures, behaviors and clothing. Over time, these everyday actions create an impression that gender is natural and stable part of one's body. Yet, she emphasizes that gender is more like a performance, such as a character performs on stage. Gender identity is shaped by the way people use and present their bodies. They present it through their daily actions, movements and gestures. These behaviors and actions seem to be natural and fixed (Butler, 1988).

An important part of Butler's claim is that gendered acts are repeated and with the passage of time they seem to be natural and stable, but actually they are not. According to her gender must not be considered a fixed and stable thing that people naturally have, rather it is something that is created through repeated acts and behaviors (Butler, 1990). Therefore, a young woman may show femininity through traits such as soft speech, passivity, feminine clothing and a focus to bodily appearance, on the other hand a young man may express masculinity through masculine clothing's, assertive traits, short hair, and actions often associated with physical strength. Butler believes that such identities are not rooted in one's biology but rather expressed through socially accepted performances.

Gill Jagger (2008) further explains this view that gender is a process of doing gendered acts repeatedly. According to him individual's gender identity emerges from the acts he or she does, which are the results of heterosexuality. He further believes that the division in gender identity is not rooted in one's physical body but are shaped by systems of discourse, power and knowledge. Butler thus links gender performativity to the wider forces, showing that what seems to be stable gender is actually maintained through systems of compulsory heterosexuality.

Butler in her theory also discusses about gender parody and subversion, where gender performances exaggerate or make fun of conventional gender roles and challenge the societal norms. For example, drag kings and queens often perform gender in exaggerated ways, showing that what we consider about masculine or feminine is not natural or essential but a performance that can be acted. This parody doesn't just show gender to be imitative but also shows that gender is a performance "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself as well as its contingency" (Butler, 1990, p. 175).

Desabrina (2023) applies Butler's theory on Adam Silvera's novel *They Both Die at the End*, showing that gender identities emerge from environmental influences rather than being natural or fixed. The novel shows that gender identities of characters are not purely their choice, but get influenced through their appearances, sexual relationships and social context in which they are living. Where the character of Rufus is portrayed with more feminine appearance, while Mateo looks more masculine, however their identities are labeled and shaped by their surrounding and

circumstances. Their conversations further reveal the performativity of gender identity, as both characters slowly acknowledge their attraction to each other. Finally, their relationship and physical closeness show how their desire is also performed and expressed through repeated acts. Thus Desabrina concludes that gender in this novel is not biological or predetermined but produced through actions, social circumstances and relationships.

In a similarly way, Sadjadi and Hojabri (2019) apply Butler's theory on Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. Through the analysis of different characters, they explore the nature of gender as fluid and shaped by social powers rather than a fixed and biological truth. They try to explain that gender identity is shaped through repetitive actions that are carried out in order to fulfil societal expectations. The novel shows this clearly through character's performative acts such as Orlando's inner sense does not change after his shifting from male to female, but she has to do certain social roles to be accepted as a woman. Sasha, on the other hand through her behaviors refuses to conform to the traditional image of feminine, while Harry disguises as a woman in order to win the attention of his beloved. These examples prove Butler's arguments regarding gender something non biological which is produced and reproduced through social roles.

Building upon these viewpoints, Arshad and Siddiqui's (2024) study of *Middlesex* also demonstrates characters' gender identity to be fluid and unstable. Where the character of Calliope's transformation into Cal shows Judith Butler's idea of unstable gender. In this novel gender identity is shaped through repeated acts such as character's clothing, walking style, and other physical actions. The character of Cal consciously adopts masculine traits, such as going to a barbershop, getting short hair and changing his walking manner, to reconstruct his identity. These regular acts reveal how gender is produced by one's repeated actions and cultural norms. Arshad and Siddiqui also note that Eugenides in his novel challenges the rigid binaries by showing Cal's struggle with societal perceptions and embracing intersex identity. Ultimately, the novel presents gender as changeable, that is shaped by one's actions and social expectations.

Analysis and Discussion

Sumra and Taseer (2018) are with opinion that *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* is a feminist work that often deals with women's issues in a patriarchal society, depicting female characters as subaltern. The novel shows women struggle for their self-freedom and attempt to liberate themselves from the shackles of patriarchy. It also depicts female characters as active members of society who are aware of their subordination and try to break these shells. They further describe that the novel's title reflects its central theme, as Rahima adopts masculine gender in order to live freely in a culture where men hold the power and women are deprived of their rights. The story revolves around two women, Rahima and her great-great-grandmother Shekiba; they live a century apart but face the same struggles of violence, oppression and subjugation. This view is supported by Suraya's (2018) research which shows that most of the female characters in this novel experience subordination from society. Parwin, Shahla and Rahima were forced to be married out of their choices, and on the other hand Shekiba was deprived from her father's property because she was a daughter. Therefore, Rahima and Shekiba had to adopt bacha posh role to become boys in order to be accepted by society. Similarly, the study written by Anisa, et al. (2019) showed the female characters to be subjugated because of their gender. The character of Shekiba and Rahima, who as Afghan women, did not have rights and freedom of choice until they were married without their consultation. Therefore, the findings of these studies reveal that women's lack of agency is because of gender based oppression.

Judith Butler argues that gender identity is like performative act, in other words the subject of gender does not exist prior to the acts that constitute it. Instead, identity is constructed through repeated acts, gestures, behaviors, and expectations enforced by society. In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, the lives of Rahima and Shekiba clearly highlight this idea. Their stories show that gender is not defined by biological sex but by daily roles and performances that are assigned by society and culture. The novel exemplify Butler's theory, showing how gender shifts with recognition, circumstance, and survival. Shekiba's story highlights how societal pressures force her adopting masculine roles. After being burned in an accident when she was two years old, she grows up with scars which become the reason for her isolation from her community. This disfigurement, along with her family's loss, cause her to perform tasks that are usually assigned to boys and men. From a young age, her behaviors reflect the labor she carries out, even when she is not conscious of it. For example, her grandmother scolds her: "Sit up straight and watch your legs. Although you may not know it, you are a girl and you should sit like one" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 23). This scene proves Butler's view that those who fail to align with gender norms are often punished. Through her body language and posture, which are shaped through her repeated hard labor, Shekiba unconsciously performs masculinity. Her father further strengthens this transformation when he takes her to the fields where "She hoed, she slaughtered and she chopped as any strong-backed son would do for his father" (p. 24). Shekiba because of her repeatedly performing masculine roles is treated as a son, this highlights how her gender identity is perceived through her daily acts rather than biology. Her story also shows that repeated acts gradually shape identity. Shekiba's involvement in farm works changes not only her social role but also her physical appearance "Years passed. Shekiba's features grew coarser; her palms and soles were thick and callused" (p. 24). This passage reveals how repeated masculine tasks alter her both externally and internally, supporting Butler's claim that gender is constituted through repetition. Later, when she becomes a palace guard, a role reserved for men, she again adapts to societal demands. "She became what her family needed. She became what the king needed" (p. 16). Therefore, her survival depends on these shifts, reinforcing that gender identity is constructed in relation to necessity and context.

A similar transformation is seen in Rahima's story. When Rahima becomes a bacha posh, she does not simply change her clothing, but also starts performing tasks that are usually associated with boys. These tasks give her more freedom and respect in that society. As Rahima says "Sure, I went to school. I ran errands for my mother. I even worked and brought money home. I was learning how to fix electronics" (p. 151). These lines show that Rahima's daily life and activities began to align with what the Afghan society usually expects from their boys. Therefore, running errands freely, earning money, going to school without fear, and learning how to repair electronics are all actions traditionally fixed with boys and men. It was not Rahima's physical body that made her a boy in her surrounding, but her daily tasks and actions. With the change in her gender roles her parents and society's expectation also seem to change. she is even relieved of her duties within the household "Ever since I'd been converted into a bacha posh, I'd been relieved of all cooking duties as well" (p. 156). Rahima was no longer expected to do domestic tasks like cooking, washing and serving. Once the society accepted her as a boy her duties changed within the house and outside. Those duties and actions that were previously expected from her as a girl were no longer required from her, showing that how a society judges gender identity of people by the role they play in society. Her experiences reveal that gender identity is tied to her actions and the roles assigned to her rather than her body. Rahima's character clearly shows Butler's claim that gender is constructed through repeated performances.

However, the cultural practice of *bacha posh* itself shows the fluid and social constructed nature of gender. As Rahima observes “I wasn’t the first bacha posh. This was a common tradition for families in want of a son” (p. 39). Those families who do not have sons temporarily transform one of their daughters into a boy to fulfill social needs. According to Sawitri (2017), bacha posh children often gain freedoms and opportunities that are unavailable to normal girls. They may join school, play sports, run errands, and even visit public places. This well-known practice shows that gender identity is not fixed but can be reassigned to meet social expectations and needs. Rahima’s story highlights how society actively shapes gender by assigning performances that align with its expectations.

The character of Rahima performs different gender roles depending on societal expectations and personal needs. Her story supports the concept that gender identity is shaped with the help of one’s actions and social pressures rather one’s biology. Rahima’s change into Rahim proves to be a strong example of how repeated performances can reshape the gender identity of a person. When Rahima was dressed as a boy to be more useful to her family, she starts taking part in masculine activities. Her masculine side even becomes more clear when she and her friends talk about martial arts, which is another activity often associated with boys. She says, “We were fans of martial arts. We’d seen some magazines with fighters in different poses, their feet higher than their heads, their arms fired forward. We wanted to be like them and flipped through the pages copying their stances” (p. 82). Rahima does not only like male behaviors, she also actively imitates those. By trying to learn those strong and difficult stances of martial arts, she shapes her physic more masculine. These repeated and difficult physical exercises make her body appearance boyish and behaviors seem more real to her new gender identity.

Butler also emphasizes the role of language in shaping gender identity. According to her language shapes reality and imposes conventions. Language can be one of the tools for creating socially accepted traits, hence making them look “real” (Butler, 1990, p. 146). Rahima’s gender shift is not simply about changing her clothes and cutting hair. A very important point of her transformation is her new and masculine name that her family refers her. Her transformation becomes official when her mother says “Bachem, from now on we’re going to call you Rahim instead of Rahima” (Hashimi, 2014, p. 38). Renaming functions as a powerful act that consolidates gender roles. The above passage is an important moment it shows that along with physical appearance language also plays a significant role in gender formation. Until she was referred by her girl’s name Rahima, her surrounding expected her to live a life according to the social roles for girls such as being weak, modest, quiet and having limited freedom to go in public areas. However, when she was assigned a boy’s name Rahim, her parents gave her the freedom to live a life as a boy. Therefore, this change in name is not only change in letters but it is a complete shift in one’s freedoms, actions and behaviors. The roles and responsibilities related to her new name are made clear when her mother instructs her “Listen, Rahim-Jan. You should be out with the boys, playing. That’s what boys do?” (p. 66). This passage shows that after Rahima is renamed to Rahim, the society immediately expects her to behave according to her new gender, her mother encourages her to go outside and play with boys. As previously playing with boys was banned for her as a girl. This act of changing name brought new responsibilities and freedoms for her. She now must do tasks that are related to masculinity. Until she was referred Rahima, she was expected to be quiet, modest, and limited to domestic works. But now as Rahim, she gains more public freedom and is encouraged to adopt boyhood behaviors. This supports Butler’s argument that “language shapes

reality” (Butler, 1990, p. 146) where words and names do not merely describe identity but also create it.

The character of Shakebia too undergoes a linguistic transformation when her name is changed in palace “And now you are one of us. Welcome, Shekiba. But here you will be Shekib, understand?” (Hashimi, 2014, p. 145). The change in her name from Shekiba to Shekib is not only a change of letters but also a whole shift in her gender identity. This change authorizes her new male role, which allows her to participate in tasks that were previously restricted to her as a girl. According to Oumeddour (2022), when Shekiba’s name was changed to Shekib, people expected her to act according to the new male identity that her name carries. This new name allows her to take on the roles, behaviors, and freedoms that are usually associated to men. In this way, she lived a life of a man than a woman.

Conclusion

The character of Shekiba and Rahima in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* are strong examples of Butler’s concept that gender is not something fixed or natural tied to one’s biology, but rather a performance shaped by repeated behaviors, actions, and language. These characters show that gender identity is shaped through everyday expectations and roles imposed by society, and that it also can change depending on recognition, context, and survival. Their stories highlight how socio-cultural powers limit the definition of a boy and a girl, and how those definitions are subverted when individuals perform roles that society relates with another gender. Through the character of Shekiba, Hashimi portrays how individuals perform their gender through daily roles that do not necessarily match their biological sex. Her family’s loss and disfigurement lead her to do tasks that are usually reserved for men, and her repeated tasks gradually shape her gender identity. Through working on the farms, chopping, slaughtering, and later becoming a palace guard, Shekiba seems to be recognized and treated as a male. Her story supports Butler’s argument that gender is constructed through repeated acts, and also shows that individuals who fail to align with social expectations face rejection and punishment. Her transformation is not the result of her personal choice but out of survival and necessity in a society that over the time expect different roles from different genders. Similarly, Rahima’s transformation into a bacha posh demonstrates the unstable and socially constructed nature of gender. When she becomes Rahim a boy, her responsibilities, social roles, freedoms and opportunities change with her new identity. She then gains access to school, market and public places not because of her body, but because of the actions and roles she performs as a boy. Her story illustrates how society judges’ individual’s gender identity through their roles rather than biology, and how language, particularly naming, strengthens gender shifts. The act of changing her name from Rahima to Rahim reinforce her new gender role and changes the expectations and the ways her family and society treat her. The tradition of bacha posh itself proves the idea that gender can be reassigned to fulfill societal needs, showing its fluid and constructed nature. Therefore, the stories of Rahima and Shekiba in *The Pearl That Broke its Shell* support Butler’s broader claim that gender is shaped through repeated performances and maintained through social and cultural expectations, power structures and language. Hashimi through these character challenges the idea of gender as innate or fixed and portrays that it is dependent on necessity, survival, cultural context, and recognition.

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