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Afghanistan’s “Bacha Posh”: Gender-Crossing in Nadia Hashimi’s The Pearl That Broke Its Shell

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“Being a boy is not all in your pants. It’s in your head. It’s in your shoulders.
(Hashimi, One Half from the East)

Introduction

This article explores the tradition of Bacha Posh\(^1\) in Afghan culture as depicted in Afghan-American writer Nadia Hashimi’s debut novel The Pearl That Broke Its Shell (2014). In this highly acclaimed novel, Hashimi shows how Afghan girls are obliged to cross-dress and live dual lives as boys for several years to lay claim for their rights to education and freedom of movement. Unlike the “transvestites”\(^2\) in Western culture whose cross-dressing is read mostly as a marker of transsexual and/or gay identity, the bacha posh in Afghanistan is recognized and practiced by society as a long-established cultural tradition. For a girl to go to school and move freely, or for a mother to compensate for her failure in providing a son to help support the family, Afghan girls use clothing to temporarily resist the restrictions imposed on them because of their gender. Drawing on and departing from the complex interplay between cross-dressing, transgender identity, and Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, this article argues that Afghan culture, though deeply misogynistic, destigmatizes the act of cross-dressing by coding the bacha posh tradition, not as a transgression of gender norms but as a legitimate cultural practice. By institutionalizing cross-dressing, Afghan culture changes, though in all probability unintentionally, the categorization of cross-dressing from a stigmatizing deviant act to an effective survival strategy.

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell has two alternating parallel narratives, both of which start in a small Afghan village and end in Kabul. Two women, Rahima and Shekiba, separated in time by nearly a century, recur to the

\(^1\)According to Hashimi, the bacha posh tradition is still practiced in Afghanistan, but no official record shows how much it is prevalent. On the origins of that tradition Hashimi explains that “[t]here are theories that [the bacha posh] came from a need for boys or men to fight in times of war but evolved to fill a different void” (Hashimi, “Q&A with Hashimi”).

\(^2\)The term “transvestism” was coined in 1910 by German physician and sexologist Hirschfeld. However, for the purpose of this article, I opt to use the more general, less sexually laden term of cross-dressing, since transvestism is taken predominantly as a symptom of sexual deviation.

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The cultural implications of cross-dressing

Clothing in any cultural context signifies multiple factors: gender, religion, or social class. As such, clothing “allows us to play – temporarily or permanently – with identity and self-image” (Suthrell 81), yet “boundaries highlighted by gender specific dress are seldom crossed lightly or without intention” (Suthrell 5). In the context of transgender studies, Harry Benjamin argues that cross-dressing is interpreted as a “conspicuous symptom” of “a disturbance of behavior and emotion” (45). From a religious viewpoint, Western societies as far back as the sixteenth century regarded “[s]ex differences as ‘natural,’ God-ordained. Transgressing natural distinctions meant transgressing social and moral ones” (Herrmann 296–97). Even though cross-dressing was already a popular theatrical practice in Europe at the time, it “led to unnatural behavior, particularly behavior that was sexually ‘unnatural’” (Herrmann 297), implying the possibilities of same-gender infatuation. Cross-dressing has been considered a violation in both Western and Eastern cultures because of its association with forms of sexual tradition of *bacha posh* to empower themselves against the restrictive gender norms in their society. This chronological gap between the two narratives highlights the stagnant, misogynistic nature of Afghanistan; regardless of time, women still experience oppressive cultural norms. The story of Shekiba takes place at the turn of the twentieth century and narrates the cruel life that a young girl leads because of her deformed face. When she is only two years old a pot of hot oil drops on Shekiba and burns the entire left side of her beautiful face. As such, Shekiba becomes unsuitable for marriage and is eventually given away as a gift to King Habibullah to work as a “woman-man” guard in the king’s harem because “he doesn’t trust men to watch over his women and he has collected a group of women who are kept as men” (Hashimi 114).

The second story is about nine-year-old Rahima who lives as a boy for almost four years and then, after the downfall of the Taliban, is married off by her addicted father to a much older warlord. After surviving years of severe beatings, Rahima escapes and seeks refuge in a shelter in Kabul. The “desire ‘to persist in [their] own being’” (Lloyd 100) compels Shekiba and Rahima to reverse their gender at various points in their lives by cross-dressing and living as men. Even though their primary motive is to resist the oppressive gender norms in Afghan culture, this defiant act of gender-crossing becomes possible only “because a certain historical convergence of norms at the site of … embodied personhood opens up possibilities for action” (Butler, “Performativity” xi). In other words, Shekiba and Rahima manage to persist through recourse to the *bacha posh* tradition only because it is arranged and approved by Afghan culture, not because Shekiba and Rahima possess inherent powers.
deviation. As far as Muslim cultures are concerned, cross-dressing is strictly forbidden since it is interpreted as an attempt to alter the creation of God; a desire for impersonating the gender that God has not intended for a certain person. This is clearly emphasized in the Qur’an\(^3\) and along the same line stands a reliable hadith that forbids women to cross-dress as men and men as women: “Allah’s Messenger (PBUH) cursed those men who are in the similitude (assume the manners) of women and those women who are in the similitude (assume the manners) of men” (Sahih al-Bukhari 102).\(^4\) But since Muslims basically believe that “actions are (judged) by motives” (The Forty hadith of Imam Annawawi 1),\(^5\) the unorthodox act of gender-crossing might be seen from a different perspective.

Charlotte Suthrell convincingly argues that the motives and perceptions for cross-dressing across gender lines vary considerably according to a “variety of contexts, both historically and geographically” (2). Generally speaking, according to Aristotle, “the human norm in terms of bodily organization [is] based on a male model,” so a male-to-female gender-crossover would be seen as “an anomaly” (Braidotti 63). By claiming the “unprivileged” gender identity, a male-to-female crosser would be stigmatized for adopting “abnormal” traits and their motive would be seen as predominantly sexual. For seeking unconventional sexual excitement, male-to-female crossers may not be tolerated either by society or by religion,\(^6\) whereas female-to-male cross-dressers are often perceived as having “not sexual but cultural desires” (Garber 45, emphasis original). Taking into consideration the restrictions imposed on women in an extremely conservative culture such as Afghanistan, the bacha posh tradition expresses a woman’s “wish for spatial freedom, voicing not her sexual, but her social discontent with the restricting role imposed by female garments” (Heilmann 91). In such a culture, a young woman is sometimes obliged to cross-dress as a man to be able to continue her education, or to support herself and her family without having to go through the usual harassment a woman might face. For having such legitimate and clear motives, female-to-male gender reversal would be tolerated by both religion and society.

**The bacha posh as gender reversal**

Sabrina Petra Ramet defines gender reversal as “any change, whether ‘total’ or partial, in social behavior, work, clothing, mannerisms, speech, self-designation, or ideology, which brings a person closer to the other ...”

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\(^3\)Attempting to alter the creation of God is altogether forbidden; in the following verse Satan swears to seduce human beings to disobey Allah: “I will order them to change the nature created by Allah” (Translation of the Meanings of The Noble Quran in the English Language 4.119).

\(^4\)For a thorough explanation of Ahadith as an essential component of Islamic divine discourse see Asma Barlas, Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’a’n, pp. 32–49.

\(^5\)This hadith is the first of The Forty hadith of Imam Annawawi. See: https://sunnah.com/nawawi40:1.

\(^6\)In Unzipping Gender, Charlotte Suthrell spotlights a peculiar yet perplexing tradition of cross-dressing in India, i.e., the hijras, in which men dress as women and grow their hair, while at the same time shave and act like men.
gender” (2). In the case of the *bacha posh*, Afghan girls are allowed to reverse their gender for some time in their life, if needed, through fixing clothing and comportment. Judging from the perception of maleness as the norm, a female-to-male cross-dresser affiliates herself with the “desirable” gender, hence managing to obtain “the social and mental privileges of masculinity” (Heilmann 91). Certainly, cross-dressing across gender lines raises the question of categorization; what is the *bacha posh* in terms of gender identity? In *The Transgender Studies Reader* Stephen Whittle explains that “‘trans’ as a stand-alone term did not come into formal usage until it was coined by a parliamentary discussion group in London in 1998, with the deliberate intention of being as inclusive as possible when negotiating equality legislation” (xi). Whittle further explains that a “trans” identity now encompasses a variety of experiences; the queer, transgender, transsexual, and even the occasional cross-dresser (xi) which is the focus of this article. Taking into account the inner transformation that ensues from dressing and living like a boy for several years, the *bacha posh* tradition reverses a girl’s identity and could be thus categorized as a “trans” identity, albeit a transitional one. What makes it a valid “trans” identity is the fact that a *bacha posh* consistently acts as a boy even around family members; he/she is even given a male name to go with all the freedoms and privileges of a young man.

In traditional rural societies, having several sons is a major source of pride for both the mother and the father. Yet, the responsibility of providing male offspring to carry on the family’s name and “to supplement the family’s income in an agricultural or cash economy” (Emadi 47) is laid on women alone. When Rahima’s grandmother learns of her being transformed into *bacha posh*, she “hated that anyone in her family was forced to resort to the *bacha posh* tradition” (Hashimi 45). Although this tradition is valid and practiced by many families, people seem to view it as a marker of their failure to provide “real” male offspring. Additionally, since a *bacha posh* would not in fact carry the family’s name given that she is, biologically speaking, not a boy, some people may view it as a mere illusion. But being in bad want of a son tempts Rahima’s parents to seek solace in this new, yet fake, son.

Judith Butler explains that, for female gender-crossers, “the changeability itself, the dream of a metamorphosis … signifies a certain freedom (Bodies That Matter 125). Rahima’s mother takes advantage of this innate dream of freedom and convinces Rahima to become a *bacha posh* to “go to school without worrying about the boys bothering you. You could play games” (Hashimi 23). But the transformation of Rahima into a *bacha posh* is not merely about cross-dressing and looking like a boy; it is a thorough performance of the male-gender experience including aspects of name, “gesture, posture, movement, and general bodily comportment” (Bartky 134). Indeed, Rahima’s mother does her best to ensure her daughter’s transformation is
authentic: “she is now your brother, Rahim. You will forget about your sister Rahima and welcome your brother .... It’s very important that you speak only of your brother, Rahim, and never mention that you have another sister” (Hashimi 36, emphasis added).

On the other hand, Shekiba’s transformation proves to be easier and more authentic than Rahima’s. Burdened with what Frances Macgregor describes as the “most devastating of social handicaps” (qtd. in Garland-Thomson 105), Shekiba’s deformity accelerates her gender-crossing for she already lacks an essential marker of femininity, i.e., beauty. In her “intentional quest for civil inattention” (Garland-Thomson 42), Shekiba “worked beside [her father] day and night. The more she did, the easier it was for him to forget that she was a girl. He began to think of her as a son” (Hashimi 20). In such case, passing as a man relieves Shekiba from the social pressure put on girls who reach the proper age of marriage, which eventually qualifies her to work as a woman-man guard in the king’s harem. Shekiba’s “ineliminable condition of vulnerability” (Watkins 192) due to her “illegible face” (Garland-Thomson 105) and unusual manly strength leads to her being ultimately rejected by the entire society.

According to Leila Ahmed, the harem is this “inviolable” space where women are allowed to “share living time and living space, exchange experience and information, and critically analyze ... the world of men” (528–29)7 without fear of punishment. To the contrary of Shekiba’s expectations, she finds comfort in the palace where she is “surrounded by women pretending to be men” (Hashimi 155). Within the walls of the harem Shekiba’s “woman-man” identity is normalized as she is surrounded by women who have also been rejected and given away by their families because “lots of families: can do without their girls. Lots of families need things” (200) (Hashimi 155). It is this sense of shared sisterhood that unites not only the woman-man guards of the harem but the king’s ladies as well. Unlike Rahima whose bacha posh identity starts with fixing her appearance and then readjusting her movement and behavior, Shekiba’s gender-crossing actually precedes her act of cross-dressing since it is achieved naturally through her looks and comportment, even while she still wears female garments. Shekiba’s cross-dressing as a man in the palace finalizes her rather official, hence legitimate gender-crossing:

Shekiba stared in wonder at the pants and could scarcely believe she should walk about in them .... She was given a corseted undergarment that pushed her modest bosom flat against her chest .... Her legs felt loose and she blushed when she looked down and saw the crotch of her pants .... And yet there was something liberating about her new clothes .... here you will be Shekib, understand? (155, emphasis added)

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7The discussion of the harem in relation to the lesbian theme is beyond the scope of this article. See Leila Ahmed’s “Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem.”
In this seemingly first encounter with the image of her body, Shekiba surprisingly shows pure feminine reaction while she blushes over the possibility of exposing what she has been trained to hide under the *burqa*. Despite her ostensibly masculine identity, then, Shekiba possesses a feminine psyche. Yet her persistent struggle for recognition distorts her perception of her own gender: “I have always been my father’s daughter-son. My father hardly knew I was a girl . . . . I am not to be considered for a wife, so . . . . What of me is a girl?” (83, emphasis original). Obviously, not conforming to “external body norms of beauty . . . stimulate[s] feelings of inadequacy” (Shusterman 44). Besides her lack of self-acceptance, society does not recognize Shekiba as a woman since she does not “[comply] with certain norms that govern recognition” (Butler, *Performativity* iv). But even though “non-compliance calls into question the viability of one’s life, the ontological conditions of one’s persistence” (iv), Shekiba’s noncompliance opens up new possibilities that are made available by the same culture that denies her recognition under different circumstances. While she is an outcast according to the standards of her village, in the palace she has a function and a value.

Since “the terms by which persistence – or survival – is made possible are social terms, that is, norms that are the contingent effects of specific power relations” (Lloyd 99), Shekiba has to commit to a specific gender identity inside the palace to be identified as a subject. She is not allowed to perform her female identity while inside the palace because being a man is the only qualification based on which she is granted a place in the palace. This explains why even though the king recruits “women who are [already] kept as men,” these women still undergo a thorough defeminizing process; it is to guarantee their loyalty to their job as guards and not to indulge themselves in the luxuries afforded to his ladies. As expected, Shekiba manages to adapt to the male gender identity quite easily; she even “no longer missed being able to pull her head scarf over her cheek. She found it liberating to walk about, her hands in her pockets and the sun on her face” (Hashimi 225).

American political theorist and feminist Iris Young argues that women are surrounded by an imaginary space that constrains their movement beyond the limits of that space (143). Through this virtual space, which is evidently a product of the social restrictions imposed on women, a woman’s body is confined. To accentuate the importance of that confining space, a woman’s freedom of movement is always associated with “looseness . . . in her morals” (Bartky 134). Although Rahima is only nine when she becomes *bacha posh*, she is quite aware of the existence of such restricting power surrounding her body. Hashimi’s detailed description of Rahima’s first “errand as a boy” is indeed significant as it shows the well-founded fears of transgressing gender boundaries even for a child:
Madar-jan nervously handed me a few bills and watched me walk down the street . . . .

“Agha-sahib, how much for a kilo of flour?” I asked, remembering to keep my shoulders straight. I couldn’t quite bring myself to look the man in the eye so I kept shifting my gaze to the tin cans he had stocked on the shelf behind him. (46)

As Ann Heilmann asserts, clothing, “not the body, ... inscribed gender and assigned social power to the wearer” (83). This explains how, after being identified as a “little boy” by the shop keeper, Rahima starts to argue confidently with him about the high price he is charging for flour: “I’m no fool, agha-sahib,” I said, and forced myself to look him in the eye, as a boy should” (Hashmi 47). Yet, despite Rahima’s audacity, the bewilderment in her sense of identity is explicit and is mirrored in her “vacillation between masculine and feminine” (Herrmann 295) while seeking acceptance from the scrutinizing male gaze.

Prominent feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky differentiates between “loose” and “nice” girls in the way they look at men and the way they respond to the male gaze. Because the male gaze is “[l]aden with sexual desire, predation, voyeurism, intimidation, and entitlement” (Garland-Thomson 41), a modest woman is trained to “avert [her] eyes or cast them downward,” while the “loose” woman ... looks at whatever and whomever she pleases (Bartky 135). When Rahima first approaches the shop keeper she does not dare to “look the man in the eye,” not only because she is worried the man may recognize she is a girl, but also because she is trained to avoid the male gaze or else be shamed. Later when her gender identity starts to take shape, Rahima decides to look the man in the eye “as a boy should.” Rahima’s gender reversal makes her realize the privileges of being a man and she immediately takes up the power of the male gaze and uses it “as a form of domination” (Garland-Thomson 42) over the shop keeper. When Rahima, with the help of her vested new power as a boy, manages to get the flour at a reasonable price, she reacts in a manner that further confirms her gender-crossing:

My walk turned to a jog as I realized I didn’t have to be demure and proper. I tested an old man walking by. I looked directly at him, meeting his squinted eyes and seeing that he didn’t react to my forwardness. Thrilled, I started to run faster . . . . My legs felt liberated as I ran through the streets without my knees slapping against my skirt and without worrying about chastising eyes. I was a young man and it was in my nature to run through the streets. (Hashimi 48)

The confinement of women in garments designed specifically to restrict their movement and maintain their chastity is not peculiar to Muslim cultures. In England in the seventeenth century, a campaign was sponsored by King James I against the “insolence” of women who cross-dressed as men. The king’s proponents, all men needless to say, agreed that “for women to wear
elements of masculine dress was wrong” (Stoyle 9). Simply put, then, men who are free to move when and wherever they wish are assigned garments that suit their way of life, while women who “generally are not as open with their bodies as men in their gait and stride” (Young 142) are assigned clothes that would regulate their movement. Nevertheless, Iris Young emphasizes that even though women now wear pants, they “still tend to sit with their legs relatively close together and their arms across their bodies” (142). This illustrates that female cross-dressing as an empowering strategy manifests only when gender-crossing ensues, which “[demonstrates] the essential performativity of gender” (Heilmann 83). In the above-mentioned episode, Rahima is slowly absorbing the privileges of her new gender identity, and while her freedom of movement might be simply attributed to the fact that she is now wearing pants, her sense of liberation seems to be a product of a new mind-set afforded to her by her newly acquired male identity. While Rahima forces herself to readjust her physical performance so that it suits her new identity, Shekiba’s early and much longer transformation significantly alters the way she moves.

According to Young’s theorizing of feminine body comportment, movement, and space (139), Shekiba in her capacity as a daughter-son is able to “make full use of the body’s spatial and lateral potentialities” (142), which assists and affirms her gender-crossing. Passing as a boy from a very young age allows Shekiba’s body to naturally correspond with her male gender identity. The unusual strength that Shekiba exhibits confirms Young’s conclusion that what truly undermines women’s strength compared to men’s is “the way each sex uses the body in approaching tasks,” not the lack of “brute muscular strength” (Young 142, emphasis original). More importantly, it seems that women “do not wish to appear too strong” (144) because in that case their feminine identity would be subverted, a problem that Shekiba would not worry much about in the presence of a disfigured face and “arms and shoulders [that are] knotted with muscle” (Hashimi 20).

As Sandra Bartky convincingly argues, “[t]o have a body felt to be ‘feminine’ – a body socially constructed through the appropriate practices – is in most cases crucial to a woman’s sense of herself as female” (145). Shekiba’s tangible rejection of her female identity might thus be attributed to her sense of ineliminable ugliness, hence, undesirability. The elimination of her femininity forces Shekiba to seek solace in the male gender where a man’s value is determined by his strength not the beauty of his face. Shekiba’s gender crisis starts when her father dies, and her grandmother and uncles try to tame “the beast”: “Sit up straight and watch your legs. Although you may not know it, you are a girl and you should sit like one” (Hashimi 42). Their attempt to “undo” Shekiba’s male gender by fixing the way she sits, moves, or even breathes signals their own intimidation by her manifest masculine identity; to
be able to subordinate Shekiba, she has to become a woman, or at least to perform like one.

**The bacha posh and the feminine psyche**

In his influential study *The Transvestites* (1910), pioneer German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld stresses that even if “women feel like men when dressed in men’s clothing, they still remain aware that in reality it is not so. To be sure, some do imagine – and if so, then the wish is the originator of the thought” (33). Thus, as Butler explains, what is “produced through the stylization of the body … gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds” is “the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (*Gender Trouble* 179). This is particularly true in the case of the *bacha posh* since it is merely a transitional reversal of gender; it hardly ever entails any change in the feminine psyche as proven in the cases of both Rahima and Shekiba. Despite Rahima’s authentic transformation into a *bacha posh*, and Shekiba’s genuine masculine demeanor, their gender identity keeps vacillating between male and female, which highlights the impossibility of achieving harmony between the psyche and the body even when consistently dressing and acting as men. In her interactions with her “real” male friends, Rahima’s female psyche restrains her movement and leaves her confused as to how to properly behave around boys:

Listen, Rahim-jan. You should be out with the boys, playing. That’s what boys do . . .

Yes, Madar-jan, but sometimes I just don’t want to. They . . . push each other a lot.

Then push back.

I was surprised by her advice . . . Here sat my mother telling me the exact opposite of what she’d always said. (*Hashimi* 68)

In the process of perfecting her transformation by spending more time around boys, Rahima comes face to face with her natural desires as a female adolescent. Even in her seemingly masculine fascination with martial arts, her feminine psyche is entirely dissociated from her supposedly male body which, it seems, engages in playful fights with the boys for its own reasons:

Sometimes I came away with bruises . . . But it was worth it . . . for that moment when, inevitably, Abdullah would have me cornered, or would twist my arm behind me and I could feel his breath on my neck. Somewhere inside I tingled to be that close to him . . . I felt dangerous and alive. (*Hashimi* 85)

Seeing “her daughter pinned under a boy in the middle of the street” (86, emphasis added) infuriates Rahima’s mother for she finally realizes the limits
and limitations of cross-dressing in enforcing an actual reversal of gender. When “it’s time to undo Rahim” (123), Rahima’s mother, disappointed and helpless, drastically changes her earlier instructions for her *bacha posh*: “‘You are Rahima. You are a girl and you need to remember to carry yourself like one. Watch how you walk and how you sit. Don’t look people, men, in the eye and keep your voice low’” (138). To comply to the rules of the *bacha posh* tradition, Rahima’s female identity has to be reassumed; first by adding the letter dropped at her transformation and then by readjusting her behavior.

Shekiba’s lack of desirability makes it easier for her to fully embrace the male identity and “give up being a woman” (157). However, living in the *harem*, even cross-dressed as a man, educates Shekiba into the world of “real” women and reminds her of her own female identity. After all, as she learns, “the key to a satisfied man” is bearing him sons (226). Determined to make a life for herself, Shekiba starts telling everyone “that women in her family rarely bore anything but boys” (Hashimi 265). Even though Shekiba’s cross-dressing does not have a “profoundly masculinizing effect on her psyche” (Heilmann 90), it does alienate her when she gets married and her husband becomes mad at her failure in conforming to the role of a wife: “You liked being a man so much that now you refuse to be a woman! What are you? You are not a man! You are not a woman! You are nothing!” (Hashimi 381). Unlike Rahima, in the psyche of Shekiba there is present a masculine admixture (Hirschfeld 34), which explains her “failure as a woman [while finding] comfort … in her existence as a man” (Garber 189). This explains her sadness when she realizes that she “could no longer float between genders like a kite carried by the wind” (Hashimi 393). When society finally recognizes her as a woman and allows her to play the traditional gender role of a wife and a mother, Shekiba is finally able to reassume her real gender identity.

**Conclusion**

In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, Hashimi is occupied with the plight of Afghan women throughout the ages as her novel shows no tangible differences in the status of women there. Even under the rule of King Amanullah, when Shekiba’s story is set, attempts to modernize Afghanistan and free women failed (Barfield 169). The authentication of gender reversal in the form of the *bacha posh* changes the deviant act of cross-dressing into a survival strategy that enables unprivileged women to persist. The analysis in the article highlights the significance of appearance, comportment, and even names as markers of identity. In both Rahima’s and Shekiba’s transformation, their male identities are given an authoritative feel by providing them with a male name which “becomes the site of a certain crossing, a transfer of gender” (Butler, *Bodies* 102). As the stories of Rahima and
Shekiba show, the identity of the *bacha posh*, even though transitional, is empowering to oppressed women. It enables Rahima to go to school and later to escape the brutal beatings of her husband, and it enables Shekiba to avoid the humiliating gazes of people. Nevertheless, the vacillation between male and female identities that alienates Rahima and Shekiba confirms that cross-dressing is indeed an illusion, an intermediary or transitional identity that provides comfort or material success only temporarily.

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