

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Gender is culture-based and varies from each different culture and time period. Beasley (2005) described gender as the social process of dividing up people and social activities following their sexual identities. Since childhood, human beings have been taught to act in a certain way according to their gender identity. Generally, gender is divided into feminine and masculine with those who were born as females were told to act in a feminine way whereas people who were born as male to act in a masculine way. These pre-existing ideas regarding the range of behaviors and attitudes that have to be in line with sex categories are referred to as ‘traditional gender roles’ (Tyson 2015, 85). However, the act of limitation of a person’s gender identity and expression as merely connected to their biological sex is heavily criticized by various gender studies theorists. Judith Butler as one of the prominent theorists proposed the idea that a person’s gender is neither fixed nor consistent with their sexual organ. Rather, it is formed through continuous repetition of a set of acts that are developed and naturalized over time (Butler 1999, 43). Therefore, the way gender is expressed by a person does not always correspond with their sexual orientation or biological sex organs that they were assigned at birth.

One of the forms of gender expression could be achieved by the act of cross-dressing, which could be defined as the act of wearing items of clothing or accessories that do not commonly associate with the wearer’s sex. The term was

first proposed by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1910 as *transvestism* (Latin for "cross-dressing"). Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough (1993) defined the term cross-dressing as "the ranges from simply wearing one or two items of clothing to a full-scale burlesque, from a comic impersonation to a serious attempt to pass as the opposite gender, from an occasional desire to experiment with gender identity to attempting to live most of one's life as a member of the opposite sex" (Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender, vii). The practice of cross-dressing can be viewed as the representation of freedom of gender expression by crossing gender boundaries that have been set by society.

Some cultures also have the practice of cross-dressing as part of their tradition and serve several purposes in the society, including *Lengger Lanang* in Indonesia, *Köçek* in Turkey, Native American's *Berdache*, and *Otokonoko* in Japan. Moreover, Afghanistan is also an example of a country that has cross-dressing traditions, namely *bacha bazi* (male-to-female dancer and/ or prostitute) and *bacha posh* (female to male cross-dresser). In the case of the novel *One half from the East*, the character is a female child in Afghanistan that is forced to perform as a boy in her daily life and become *bacha posh*. Hashimi (2015), the author of the novel, described *bacha posh* as the temporary third gender for girls who live as boys. The female children are dressed as boys and perform the male role in the family and society as opposed to the female role of their mother, sister, or other female relatives. This cultural practice occurs as the result of the patriarchal and male-centered culture of some parts of Afghanistan which values men as more valuable than women due to their contribution to their family.

The tradition of *bacha posh* also relates to the inequality of gender in post-conflict Afghanistan. As the girls who were raised to become their family's 'son' might be able to receive the privileges that only Afghan men could get, they depicted the difference of how the society treated men and women. The patriarchal society of Afghanistan allowed the *bacha posh* to receive more rights than the 'normal' girls due to their masculine appearance. When the United States launched the military act of Operation Enduring Freedom to Afghanistan in 2001, it promised to bring back the freedom and dignity for Afghan girls and women who were deeply oppressed under the Taliban regime. As a result, Afghanistan became a part of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2003 (UNAMA & OHCHR 2009, cited from Sawitri 2017). Although Afghan men and women are equal in terms of their legal rights, the decades-long conflict and the culture's deep-rooted link towards religion and hereditary customs has shaped the society to view women as second-class citizens that should be under the control and protection of men.

The acceptance of a female dressed as male in *bacha posh* tradition is due to the society's view of women as has to be protected and should not be seen in public to do men's work, therefore if women wanted to do the tasks that are considered as masculine, they have to be dressed and identified as a man (Ahmed 1992). Men are expected by the society to be able to build the household, earn money to support their family, and continue the family name, therewith preserving the legacy of their family. Sons are considered as valuable assets by their families because they are often tasked by their parents to perform the hard labor required to support the family. On the other hand, daughters are often tasked to help maintain the family's home alongside their mother until they reached marriage age and thus

send to live with their husband and in-laws. Despite the economic condition, the society in some parts of Afghanistan still frowns upon women and girls who joined in the commonly male-dominated work field to help support their family. The circumstances that enable women and girls from contributing to their family's financial problems lead the custom of raising young girls as boys still persistent in Afghanistan even though it contradicts Islamic values and the traditional patriarchal belief of the people in middle-east.

Interestingly, despite its initial aim as the tool of the patriarchal culture to limit women's position in society, the tradition of *bacha posh* could also be used as a way to resist the strict societal codes that dictate how women should and should not behave. This case is indicated in the book *The underground girls of Kabul: in search of a hidden resistance in Afghanistan*, where Nordberg (2014) argued that the girls and women who become *bacha posh* stated that their participation in the tradition enables them to resist against both the historical and present-day patriarchy norms set by their culture. Being a *bacha posh* could pave the way for them to access education and get a job where they would get paid equally as men. Moreover, despite Afghan society's awareness of the practice, an individual *bacha posh* are often isolated and left alone to ponder their notions of gender expression (Nordberg 2014).

This study focuses on how a young girl performs her opposed gender as shown by Obayda who turned into Obayd in the novel *One Half from the East*, a novel first published in 2016 by the Afghan-American author Nadia Hashimi. Hashimi has written many novel sets in Afghanistan that focused on gender related issues such as *One Half from the East*, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shells*, *When the*

Moon Is Low, and *A House without Windows*. The novel itself had been nominated in NCTE Charlotte Huck Award in 2017 and Rebecca Caudill Young Readers' Book Award in 2019.

One Half from the East explores the performance in the daily life of a girl who lived as a boy in the middle of the male-dominated culture of Afghanistan. After an incident that resulted in her father's disability, Obayda and her family had to move from their home in Kabul to her father's village. However, life in the rural area of Afghanistan still adheres to the traditional patriarchal beliefs, one of which is that each family must have a male heir or son and the family who are unable to conceive a son will be looked down on in the society. To help support their condition and regain her father's life spirit, Obayda's relatives decided to make her as *bacha posh* which is the tradition of turning young girls into boys. Although at first, she was reluctant to the idea of having to change her identity, soon Obayda who become Obayd enjoyed and became comfortable with the new male identity.

One study that explores the phenomenon of *bacha posh* is conducted by Menon et al entitled *Identity Crisis among Afghan Girls as a result of Bacha Posh Practice: A Cultural Study of Nadia Hashimi's Novels The Pearl That Broke Its Shell and One Half from the East* (2018). It applied a psychological approach to analyze the object that will be further analyzed in this study. The result of the study stated that the practice of forcing young girls to turn as boys could lead to a case of identity crisis and gender dysphoria in which they are unable to conform to their previous and current gender in the long run. Although the main characters of the novels found their freedom and showed their masculine side while performing as *bacha posh*, soon they have to once again re-adapt to their former feminine side

once they reached adulthood. Furthermore, Butler's theory of gender performativity has gained popularity in various fields, including literary criticism. Several studies have been conducted on the issue of gender performativity representation in literary works, including *Exploring Selfhood through Performance in The Danish Girl* (Dowerah and Nath 2018) and *The Presentation of Gender Performativity In Patrick, A Character In Neil Jordan's Breakfast On Pluto (2005) Film* (Wigati 2016). Both of the studies applied Butler's theory of gender performativity on films as the object of the study. The studies showed that gender is not merely related to a person's sex chromosome, rather it is a socially and culturally constructed form of self-expression. Furthermore, the studies also suggest that the characters performed a series of repetitions to transition from male-to-female.

Moreover, *One Half from the East* depicts how the expected gender roles from society can impact the lives of children and teenagers. The confusion that the main character had over the preferred gender identity that she had to face when initially transitioned from female to male is described in detail which slowly resulted in the acceptance of being a male. Thus, by conducting this study, the writer hoped to fulfill the research gap in the lack of studies conducted on *One Half from the East* using the gender studies approach. The analysis of the study will be focused on Obayda/ Obayd's gender performances through the repeated actions, gestures, and other behavior that the character performed throughout the novel.

1.2.Statement of the Problem

Based on the background of the study that has been stated above, the statement proposed in this study is as follow:

1. How is gender performativity represented in *One Half from the East* performed by Obayda/ Obayd as a *bacha posh*?

1.3.Objectives of the Study

Based on the statement of the problem that has been stated above, the objective of the study is as follow:

1. To reveal gender performativity shown by Obayda/ Obayd as a *bacha posh* in the novel *One Half from the East*.

1.4.Significance of the Study

In researching the novel *One Half from the East*, there are some significant points in this study that the writer wants to achieve. First, the writer wants to focus on the main character named Obayda/ Obayd to get more knowledge about the live condition of the girls and young women who were raised as female sons under the tradition of *bacha posh* in Afghanistan. Second, the writer also wants the readers to have insight into Afghanistan's culture and the tradition of *bacha posh* and develop an understanding of the impact of the tradition towards the people involved in it. Moreover, the study is also conducted to give contributions to other students of Universitas Airlangga, particularly those that are majoring in English literature and want to conduct a study on gender performativity.

1.5.Definition of Key Terms

Gender : Society's construction of being masculine and feminine (Butler 2004, 24)

Gender performativity: The act of repeating, citing, and imitating practice to become a particular gender. (Butler 1993, 2).

Bacha posh : An Afghan social tradition where girls are raised as boys; usually done by parents who have no son to raise the social status of the family (Sabet 2018).

Cross-dresser : Individuals who wear clothing and take on an appearance and behavior considered by a given culture to be appropriate for another gender but not one's own, have often been misunderstood and maligned, especially in societies with strict, dichotomous gender roles (Beemyn 2005).

Patriarchy : a form of social organization in which men are dominant and the central institutions of society are controlled by men and/or organized in their interest (Boyle 2005, 205).