

## CHILD AS A HERO: A VALORIZATION OF HEROIC FRIENDSHIPS IN *THE BOY IN STIPPED PYJAMAS AND ONE HALF FROM THE EAST*

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### **Abstract:**

*Since time immemorial friendships were seen as nobler than any other sort of love. The great ancient philosopher and critic Aristotle, too, extolled the virtues of emotional connections that survives without any physical interactions and thus leading to ideal one that is, platonic friendship. The friendship can prevail between man and woman, man and man, woman and woman, boy and boy and between girls even. It is also marked by an intense bond and filled with deeply held feeling and sentimentality. It is suggestive of one's capacity to love and care. The prefix heroic is an adjective, adding more laurels of nobility and trust to the immortal friendship. In this backdrop, I have chosen two fictional texts-*The Boy in the Stripped Pyjamas* (2006) by John Boyne and *One Half From the East* (2016) by Nadia Hashimi.*

The fictional work entitled *The Boy in the Stripped Pyjamas* is set during the Nazi world and the horrible Holocaust and the novelist takes the opportunity to demonstrate the heroic friendship of two young boys of nine years old each, whose names are Bruno and Shmuel, the 'unheroic' heroes squatting amidst sadistic people and unaware of devastating politics of Aryan Superiority. Bruno a young German boy lives in Berlin during the Nazi regime arrives home from school one day to find his family's maid, Maria packing up his things. When he asks his mother what is going on, she explains that Bruno's father's job is the reason they are all leaving their home in Berlin; someone Bruno knows only as 'the Fury' has plans for his father's career. Bruno nodded and walked sadly musing:

The banister was the best thing about this house-that and the fact that Grandfather and grandmother lived so nearby-and when he thought about that it made him wonder whether they were coming to the new job too and he presumed that they were coming to the new job too and he presumed that they were because they could be hardly left behind. (10)

Thus when Bruno is forced to leave Berlin, one of the main complaints is that he also has to leave his three best friends. To make matter worse, when he first gets into their new house his eyes opened wide due to the shock because everything about it seemed to be the exact opposite of their old home and he couldn't believe that they were really going to live there. In contrast to his big and beautiful home in Berlin "the new house, however, stood all on its own in an empty, desolate place and there were no other houses anywhere to be seen, which meant there would be no other families around and no other boys to play with..." (12-13). When he closed his eyes, everything around him just felt empty and cold, as if he was in the loneliest place in the world. The middle of nowhere" (14). Above all, "there was something about the new house that made Bruno think that no one ever laughed there; that there was nothing to laugh at and nothing to be happy about." (14). Bruno could never understand that how this had all come about and how he was stuck here in this cold, nasty house... where no one looked as if they could ever be cheerful again... this isn't home and it never will be" (17). Soon Bruno finds through his bedroom window something that made him unsafe and cold. There are boys, men and elderly men living together on the opposite side of a fence that extends farther than they can see into the distance and notices that they are all wearing the same thing, 'a pair of grey stripped pajamas with a grey stripped cap on their heads' living after the fence with no grass, instead the ground was made of a sand like substance, and as far as Gretel, Bruno's elder sister, could make out there

was nothing but low huts and large square buildings dotted around and one or two smoke stacks in the distance. Both of them also notice a group of children huddled together and being shouted at by a group of soldiers. 'The more they were shouted at, the more they huddled together' (38). On asking his father about 'all those people' Bruno is told that 'they're not people at all'. For months now Bruno had been looking out of his bedroom window at the garden and the bench with the plaque on it, the tall fence and wooden poles and it had never occurred to him to wonder what it was all about. The innocent Bruno cannot help but muse, "What exactly was the difference? He wondered to himself. And who decided which people wore the striped pyjamas and which people wore the uniforms?" (103) Bruno has always been fond of exploration that was but banned at Out-With, nevertheless, one fine and final day he does away with all the bans and starts walking along the fence and after an hour when he thought that he had enough of exploration for one day, just at the moment a dot appeared:

...his feet were taking him, step by step, closer and closer to the dot in the distance, which in the meantime had become a speck, and then began to show every sign of turning into a blob. And shortly after that the blob became a figure. And then, as Bruno got even closer, he saw that the thing was neither a dot nor a speck nor a blob nor a figure, but a person. In fact it was a boy. (p. 108)

This is how the friendship between Bruno and Shmuel begins at the fence. Immediately they find things they have in common, and become friends almost instantly. Shmuel and Bruno are two little boys uncorrupted by the brutal realities of the world around them. In both fiction and real life nothing represents innocence like children; in fact, they are presumed to embody the notion of uncorrupted youth. Two boys, left untouched by the prejudices of adults, are prone to form friendships irrespective of differences in ethnicity. Bruno's father, however, is the commandant of the Concentration Camp in which Shmuel and his father is a prisoner—a prisoner based solely upon his religion. While Bruno regularly hears derogatory comments from Germans regarding Jews, he is unable to reconcile the negativity in those comments with the humanity he identifies in that other little boy on the other side of the barbed-wire fence. "Very strange, said Shmuel, because there may be dozens of Shmuels on this side of the fence but I don't think that I've ever met anyone with the same birthday as me before" (113). He looks very sad when he tells the whole story to Bruno about from their being plucked away from their native land to how they are forced to undergo the atrocities of this camp. Bruno innocently identifies himself with Shmuel as 'after all much the same thing had happened to him' and he proceeds to invite him to his house for dinner or also proposes to meet 'people of that side of the fence' without knowing the threats, without comprehending that the world could be so cruel. Also, for this friendship sake Bruno decides to keep the whole story to himself for the moment and not breathe a word about it. 'It would be his own secret. Well, his and Shmuel's!' (137) Then onwards both of them meet every day, Bruno walking all way and Shmuel sitting cross-legged on the ground waiting for him.

One day Bruno actually sees his friend in his home but not to be his playmate but as servant to polish glasses. Their happiness knew no bound but short lived as Lieutenant Kotler suspects their being familiar and that Shmuel was eating something from the fridge. At this point Bruno could not dare to accept his friendship with Shmuel and latter is severely punished:

Very slowly he turned his head back to look at Shmuel, who wasn't crying anymore, merely staring at the floor and looking as if he was trying to convince his soul not to live inside his tiny body any more, but to slip away and sail to the door and rise up into the sky, gliding through the clouds until it was very far away (178).

Bruno's heart is so regretful and for a week he goes to see him but in vain. He visited the place in the fence where they met, but Shmuel was never there. Bruno is so much ashamed as he had never imagined that he could behave so cruelly. He is convinced that what he had done was terrible that he would never be forgiven. But on the seventh day two friends are reunited as Shmuel was waiting for his friend Bruno as

usual. Bruno just is overwhelmed and confesses that he has been really ashamed of himself and then the two boys shake hands, 'lifting the fence up', 'the first time they had ever touched'.

By the time Bruno stops being bored and worried about his 'old friends and old home and old people' he knew in Berlin. He is almost glad in Outwith because the best thing was that he had a friend called Shmuel. He enjoys walking along the fence every afternoon and was pleased to see that his friend too seemed a lot happier. They even realize that 'this is the strangest friendship they ever had'.

Why? Asked Shmuel.

Because every other boy I've ever been friends with has been someone that I've been able to play with, and we never get to play together. All we get to do is sit here and talk (185).

The novel apart from being a historical piece does focus on the moves of two innocent boys and their heroic friendship and at the same time shuns the idea that the wars are heroic. It is important that it is Bruno's father, a powerful Nazi Commandant who directs Bruno's actions. The boys are thrust together by circumstances regardless of which side they are supposedly on. They share an unexplained bond, which starts with them sharing a birthday. Finally after a year of meeting and chatting Bruno is due to return to Berlin but this time he has different emotions for his native place. 'That had changed for him over time, mostly due to Shmuel, who had become more important to him than Karl or Daniel or Martin had ever been'. (192) On being asked by his father about the return to Berlin Bruno now finds that he has not been looking forward to this as much as he would have expected and he dreaded having to tell Shmuel the news.

At the end of the story, with his head shaven, Bruno can find very few differences between himself and his new best friend. Eventually Mother convinces Father to move the family to move the family back to Berlin. Bruno is saddened to leave Shmuel behind. But near the fence things were not 'as usual as Bruno does not find Shmuel for consecutive three days. On the third day when he appears he tells that his father is missing but innocently enough is unable to realize that his father is actually dead. Bruno tells Shmuel that he has to leave, and then they decide to have 'their final adventure' together. They decide that Shmuel would bring 'stripped pyjamas' the next day and then both would find Shmuel's Papa.

Both boys went home in high spirits that afternoon. Bruno imagined a great adventure ahead and finally an opportunity to see what was really on the other side of the fence before he went back to Berlin-not to mention getting in a little serious exploration as well- and Shmuel saw a chance to get someone to help him in the search for his papa. All in all, it seemed like a very sensible plan and a good way to say goodbye (206).

Two boys uncorrupted by the brutal realities of the world around them now stand face to face for the first time, 'unaccustomed to being on the other side of the fence.

Bruno had an urge to give Shmuel a hug just to let him know how much he liked him and how much he'd enjoyed talking to him over the last year.

Shmuel had an urge to give Bruno a hug too, just to thank him for all his many kindness, and his gifts of food, and the fact that he was going to help him find Papa (213).

The novel nears its end; the innocence is still there. Bruno cannot comprehend, even after all he has seen, that the world can be so cruel. He opened his eyes in wonder at the things he saw. In his imagination he had thought that all the huts were full of happy families. He had thought that all the boys and girls who lived there would be in different groups, playing tennis or football, skipping or drawing out squares for hopscotch on the ground. But to Bruno's amazement the reality was horrible and that people were just in groups, staring at the ground, terrible skinny and sad and with their heads shaven.

In fact everywhere he looked, all he could see was two different types of people: either happy, laughing, shouting soldiers in their uniforms or unhappy, crying people in their stripped pyjamas, most of whom seemed to be staring into space as if they were actually asleep (215).

After a while Bruno gets into hurry to return to his home, to his family but for the sake of his friend Shmuel he agrees to continue to search latter's papa, 'although he feels a lot less confidence now'. In the heartrending scene at the end, with Shmuel being corralled into the gas chamber along with the other prisoners Bruno never leaves his friend's hands:

Actually, he said, looking down at Shmuel, it doesn't matter whether I do or don't. They are not my best friends anymore anyway. He took hold of Shmuel's tiny hand in his and squeezed it tightly. You're my best friend, Shmuel, he said. My best friend for life (220).

The dark room goes very dark and somehow, despite the chaos that followed, Bruno finds that he is still holding his hands in his own and 'nothing in the world would persuade him to let it go'. All that these two boys could see is friendship and John Boyne's novel is the story of that heroic friendship.

The second novel in discussion *One Half From the East* (2016) by Nadia Hashimi is set in a small village in Afghanistan and is written about the unusual practice of *bacha posh*, dressing a young girl as a boy. It is a custom that is believed to bring the family good luck in Afghanistan in which families without a son will pick a daughter to dress and live as a boy because in such families there is lot of pressure in these societies for parents to have a son to carry on the father's name, inherit property, work and support the family. "A boy can work and earn money. A boy is good luck. A boy brings other boys into the family. Girls can't do any of these things" (16). Boys are allowed maximum freedom and opportunities than girls. But becoming a *bacha posh* gives a girl more space such as going to school and working. But when these *bacha posh* become young adults and are ready to marry, many return to living and dressing as a girl thus such a girl is encouraged to accept the notion of biological determinism, that is, women are childbearing sex and socially and culturally are conditioned to accept the traditional gender roles as normal. Human evolution provides bodily structures and biological potentialities that permit a range of possibilities rather than dictate a fixed type of gender differentiation. People contribute to their self-development and bring about social changes that determine and define the structure of gender responsibilities within the interrelated systems of influence. The narrator of the novel *One Half From the East*, the to be *bacha posh*, Obayda herself portrays the discrimination between sexes:

In the village there are two kinds of families. There are the ones that send their daughters to school and then there are the other ones who don't. Some families think that daughters are born to be wives and mothers and don't need to bother with books or writing. I feel bad for these girls because they don't get to do all the things schoolgirls do. They can count only how many cups of rice to soak and can't tell the letter *kof* from the letter *gof*. (22-23)

Obayda's family moved to rural village after a Kabul bomb blast takes her father's leg and the family's livelihood; in a bid to attract good fortune, relatives persuade her mother to transform Obayda, aged ten, youngest of four daughters, into a *bacha posh*, a boy. Obayda (Obayd) is aware of the forced inequality that exists in her society. In the school on the first day when Obayd is compelled to play *ghursai* and is knocked out easily, then she is too "frustrated to move", as why "my mother sent me out into this world like this."

It is easy to dance like a boy. Boys sway side to side and raise their arms like they're hosting a trophy. That's all they have to do. But everything else about being a boy is hard because it's so different from being a girl. Trying to act like a boy is like learning a whole new language, and I am really struggling to find the words. If I start to cry, there will be absolutely no hope for me. (50)

Obayda's apprehensive but wants to help her family as her father had got injured getting her medicine only. Transformed by the haircut, boy attire, and a new name-Obayd she joins the boys' school. Catapulted from youngest daughter to only son, she is served with meat while her sisters get sauce and vegetables. But as the fortune would have it, she meets Rahim (Rahima), another *bacha posh* who comes to her as a friend-rescuer, who actually 'knows her because I am you' and tells her to 'forget everything else and be a boy'. Rahim even is determined never to change back to a girl. "He... Should I call him he or she? He, I decide,



because that's what he wants to be" (67). The lives of two *bacha posh* change.

You are a boy, not a *bacha posh*, Obayd. If you get that, there is nothing else. You know your weaknesses now, don't you? Boys aren't supposed to have weaknesses. Boys are built of rock and metal. We eat meat and show our teeth.

And girls?

Girls are made of flower petals and paper bags. They eat berries and sip tea like something might jump out of the hot water and bite them (73).

Amidst these, social challenges and pretensions a heroic and memorable friendship springs forth between these two girls that results in the wish to be free, to wander and to have unsurpassable strength and confidence to acquire the freedom they so desperately want. Rahim assures Obayd that he would help him and will be like brothers as 'nobody helped me when I first changed' and he is quite happy to have Obayd. The two of them explore the village on their own, climbing trees, playing sports and more and make their days the best as boys. Both of them would never like to get back to the original identities and wish that they had certain magical powers as to let them remain boys forever. On one adventurous day they make a crutch for Obayd's father as to help him in walking, as Obayda's father has been into confinement for long due to loss of his leg. To make him feel that even Obayda, the daughter can be a son and can help her father to 'get up on his own'. Rahim and Obayd are on top of the world and can do 'much more' as one is 'one half from the east and one half from the west'.

While boys play in one courtyard and girls play in another, Rahim and I skip along the imaginary high wall that divides them, closer to the sky than anyone else. We are untouchables (117).

But their transformation would not last forever and the two friends never wanted to separate from each other-unless the two best friends can figure out a way to make it stick and make their new found freedom everlasting. Obayd discloses one myth to Rahim:

I remember my mother telling us about a legend once-about Rostam's bow. The legend says that passing under a rainbow changes boys to girls and girls to boys. Even if a pregnant woman passes under the rainbow, the baby in her belly changes.

I think we should do it, Rahim whispers.

You're serious?

I am. I want to go under the rainbow and be changed forever. I don't want *this* to be temporary. Do you? (118-119)

Rahim digs up the legend and looks for the way to save himself from being undone. He feels it now as his mother looks at him differently so he needs to act before she does. For the sake of friendship for each other both the girls transformed into boys by society decide to chase the rainbow. But as the misfortune would have it suddenly Rahim is missing and Obayd searches him and even reaches his home. He tells Rahim's elder sister:

I can't forget about him. He is my best friend.

That's the truth. He's the one who made everything okay. I would've been lost without him, fumbling through school confused about what I was supposed to do or be. Rahim showed me that being a *bacha posh* is a good thing, may be even the greatest thing that's ever happened to me (145).

Rahima is engaged to get married only at the age of thirteen. Obayd is extremely distressed as he thinks that had they passed under the rainbow this horrible odd would never have taken place. He decides to save his friend Rahim and himself. He bursts out when he risks his life and goes to see Rahima in her new home, actually the house of Abdul Khaliq, the warlord of the village, much older to Rahima.

Why did this happen?

Why? Because I'm a girl. Because people think they can do what they want to us. They think we should have no say in what happens to us. That's why I don't want to be girl. That's why I would've done anything to make myself a boy forever (167).

Obayd after that miserable meeting with Rahima decides to complete the undone adventure and reaches the place actually where he passes under the rainbow. 'In this secret, hidden place, something magical has happened'. Obayd later finds that mother is again on her family way and most exhilarating was that he sees his father standing and walking with the help of same crutch, which Rahim and he had made. '*Rahima, I wish you could see this*'. (p.250) Obayda's father is happy and proud of his all daughters, especially Obayda and tells her:

What do you think is a stranger sight to see—a girl with short hair or a ghost walking with a crutch? I promise, the only eyes that will be on you will be the ones wanting to see what magical child managed to drag a one-legged spirit out for a walk (223).

Hashimi's tale is a heartbreaking treatment of the impact of powerlessness as experienced by two girls who do not have freedom to control their own fate. This cultural practice of *bacha posh* allows these girls to ride bikes, climb trees make male friends and explore outdoors. She shares her experiences later with her schoolmates:

Pants are made for legs, and legs are freedom.

I climbed one of the tallest trees in the market. I even went up to the mountains—all by myself. You know there are lots of snakes and scorpions on the mountains, and I saw some. Even had a scorpion walk across my foot, but it was too scared to sting me. I did lots of stuff that I can't even tell anyone about anyone because it was so dangerous. I could do it all because I was a boy and because of Rahima (244).

Thus Obayda's friendship with Rahima rings of genuineness and validity. The reader who has no knowledge of Obayda's and Rahima's culture can understand how they find themselves in the circumstance and how they are able to resolve what they can and cannot, all the while holding on to their hope, optimism and spirit. Nevertheless, when a shocking circumstance results in the possible end of Rahima's period of *bacha posh*, she tells Obayda that their fates are not their own and that was why that she wanted to do anything to make herself a boy forever. It is noteworthy that both the girls wanted the same all children wish for: the opportunity to be free to learn, play and grow, to express themselves and to have a say in what happens to them.

Literature has shown us the ups and downs of friendship time and time again—and in most cases; those relationships have changed characters' lives. Both the novels *The Boy in Stripped Pyjamas* (2006) and *One Half From the East* (2016) are relevant to the title and theme of the paper due to the fact that 'nothing like *that (friendship)* could even happen again. Not in this day and age'. The dynamics and the similarities in friendship in each are considerable. Both the books feature friendship between two males, in the former example and two females, in the latter one, that knows no boundaries and has the power to overcome the oddities of societies.

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