

Bacha Posh and its Impacts: A Study on the One Half from The East

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Bacha posh is a cultural practice that temporarily liberates Afghan women from the rules of restraint and servitude of patriarchy. On the contrary, it also entangles the gender identity of the individuals who are disguised as a bacha posh. This paper examines the identity crisis and its impacts encountered by the bacha posh during the crucial phase of their transition. It scrutinizes the suppositions that revolve around the notion of bacha posh. This article critiques that though the bacha posh as a cultural practice grants them pseudo- autonomy and mobility, it further complicates the gender identity of the individual.

Keywords: bacha posh, identity crisis, culture, transition, and patriarchy.

1. Introduction

Bacha posh is a cultural phenomenon of cross-dressing females in clothes traditionally designated for males is strategically utilized to blur the entrenched gender norms in Afghanistan. Jenny Nordberg, in *The Underground Girls of Kabul: The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys* asserts, “The colloquialism for the child who is not a son or a daughter is bacha posh” (67). This practice is prevalent in Afghanistan and select regions of Pakistan.

The Afghan government has refrained from commenting on the practice of bacha posh. As a matter of fact, the article in CNN, “They wanted a son so much they made their daughter live as a boy,” critiques the Afghan government as “CNN contacted the Afghan government for comment on its position on bacha posh but did not receive any reply. But the Afghanistan Women News Agency’s Ehrari said that the government has traditionally not spoken out against bacha posh, because it believed the practice comes from the Afghan culture and was a custom which couldn’t be changed”. It is imperative to comprehend that bacha posh is not rooted in religion but in culture. In a society where patrilineal and tribal lineage supersedes

any form of governance, a bacha posh aligns with the informal social structures of Afghan society. It refers to the collective knowledge system among Afghan women. The existence of a bacha posh is profoundly connected to the narratives of women in Afghanistan; those who are marginalized and acquiesced.

The pervasive deliberate cultural practice emanates, wherein young girls are consciously raised and inhabited in a way that is akin to males until puberty. The cultural practice is emanated as an endeavour to profess the set of prospects such as, education, elevated mobility, credentials to economic opportunities, and ingress into the public domain typically circumscribed by gender-based restrictions. Taking into account Afghanistan's patriarchal state of culture, Nadia Hashmi has delineated concerns and ambiguities that correspond to bacha posh in her novel *One Half from the East*.

Hashimi delineates the preponderant focus on the characters Obayda and Rahima both of them are the victims of bacha posh, wherein they undergo a provisional metamorphosis from girls to boys. The experiences of these female protagonists are characterized by profound adversity as they navigate the quandaries of adopting a male identity within a patriarchal society. Henceforth, they encounter the indispensable necessity to reverse their identity as a female after puberty which engenders a poignant and psychologically exhausting process. This ephemeral transformation instigates significant distress that results in an identity crisis.

During the course of preadolescence, Obayda falls victim to this cultural custom after her father suffers a permanent disability due to a bombing. The aforementioned circumstance has coerced the family to relocate from Kabul to an unnamed village. Obayda confronts a substantial gender identity crisis in acclimating to her new identity as a boy. The initial exposition of masculinity by Obayda is divulged when her mother, in an endeavour to disguise her female identity by shortening her hair. She unfeignedly appreciates the explicit components of her feminine identity. The idolization she has for her lengthy hair and the intimate moments of connection with her mother while she brushes and braids it ascertain a profound attachment to her feminine identity. These bodily metamorphoses are intricately correlated to an individual's sense of identity. This assertion is validated by Rosemary Ricciardelli in "Masculinity, Consumerism, and Appearance: A Look at Men's Hair" which asserts, "how one carries oneself, dresses, and looks one carries oneself, dresses, and looks has implications for identity because, in interacting with others, bodily presentation determines the self-constructed. Overall, bodily appearance and identity are highly intertwined" (183).

To contrive the masculine identity, Obayda is cross-dressed and made to wear shirts and pants. According to, Marjorie Garber in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* opines, cross-dressing concerning females is "not sexual but cultural desires" (45). In an alternative perspective, the incorporation of cross-dressing into Afghan society unintentionally alters the categorization from a marginalized and abnormal action to a potentially beneficial means of survival. The bacha posh custom exemplifies the agency of women within the confines of a singularly conservative culture like Afghanistan, where they confront significant limitations as women. The act of cross-dressing permits mobility, autonomy, and spatial freedom.

Obayda's name is changed to Obayd. The alteration of her name is an epochal element of her metamorphosis, symbolically camouflaging her former identity as Obayda. Obayda opines,

“There are big things for me to get used to. My name is the biggest” (29). Due to her transformation, she experiences a latent conflict as she contends with cultural norms and prospective alterations in her identity as a boy. Obayda “I watch the boys drift one way and the girls another. I am now in the weird place between both worlds” (43). Obayda's connotation of being caught between two realms highlights her incapacity to exhaustively integrate into either of the gender identities. Thereupon her transition, she is compelled to forfeit the dexterities and learnings acquired as a girl. She relatively adopts the mannerisms and behaviours of boys.

Obayda's transition is intensified by proscribing traditional household chores, diverting her towards activities such as visiting the market and participating in outdoor games with boys. The imposition of this new identity persuades feelings of profound insecurity and a persistent fear of exposure, as she grapples with the internal conflict that arises from the discordance between her biological identity and the physically imposed identity. Hashimi suggests that Obayda has a complicated psychological state that stems from her demand to dissimulate masculinity over her female body, which donates to her dubious identity as a bacha posh. Obayda exerts significant effort in performing the role of male identity, nevertheless, she has not yet entirely acclimated to it. Made Yaya Sawitri in “Cultural and International Dissonance on Girls Empowerment: The Case of Afghanistan's Female Son” asserts, “Her identity develops mere biological female to becoming a culturally defined boy through social interaction, within the family family and outside” (16). Meanwhile, Obayda's endeavour to accept the masculine identity becomes less convoluted when she encounters Rahima in her school.

Rahima a bacha posh like Obayda. She apprises Obayda that, to accomplish her obligation as a bacha posh, she should refrain from perceiving herself as a female dressed in male attire, rather she should determine and acknowledge herself as a male. Rahima deftly adopts masculine body language and fosters her identity as a boy. Accordingly, bacha posh grants the newfound freedom and mobility that, she had previously been restricted as a female. Rahima's bacha posh name is Rahim. Despite ‘Rahim’ being a socially assigned identity. Rahima has successfully assimilated her physical appearance to affiliate herself with the male identity and thus, succeeded in obtaining the social and cultural privileges of masculinity. In the process of levying a male identity, Rahima believes that the physical body must be aligned with the cognitive processes of the intellect.

By relinquishing their feminine identity, Rahima and Obayda accumulate the advantage of male privilege in patriarchal Afghanistan. However, they are comprehensively acquainted that their newfound liberation is eventually deceptive. Though bacha posh embrace masculine behaviours, they are not regarded as a man due to the societal perception of their masculine identity as inferior. Subordinated masculine identity cannot liberate, instead, it adds complexity to the identity of the bacha posh. Both Rahima and Obayda desire to annihilate their ambiguous identity since it hinders them from identifying as either of the genders. Nevertheless, this research article critiques that through the practice of bacha posh, the victims can never be emancipated from the subjugation, rather, it exacerbates their enslavement to the female psyche and distorts their sense of identity.

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