

## *Bacha Posh: The Invisible Girl*

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### **Abstract**

According to New York Times, *Bacha Posh* is a cultural practice in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, in which some of the families without the male child pick a daughter to live and behave as a boy. This masquerade is achieved through cross-dressing which leads to gender swapping of the pre-pubescent girls. These newly created boys can enjoy almost equal freedom like the boys in Afghanistan. It becomes really hard to imagine that there are girls who enjoy almost equal freedom as boys. However, this freedom comes at a great cost, as these girls have to eventually return to being normal girls once they hit puberty. They will have to marry, become mothers and follow all the set rules for women in Afghanistan.

The women folk in Afghanistan are one of the most vulnerable creatures. They cannot be on their own in the public domain or at least the Afghan society is of the given opinion. This is the reason why each and every woman in Afghanistan has to venture out of their houses with a male chaperon. Moreover, *Bacha Posh* can also be seen as an outcome of the belief, which states covertly that each and every family must have a son who can carry forward the name of the family and can inherit the property of the father. The girl child is not only unwelcome but also unwanted in the country, that their mere existence is erased. Whatever may be the reason of creating a *Bacha Posh*, it is fatal for the Afghan society as the tradition negates the existence of half of the society. This tradition is not only unjust but renders the girl child even more invisible. Hence it deep roots the all-ready prevalent patriarchy and misogyny in the country.

So, this paper would attempt to study and analyse the deplorable condition of Afghan girls in particular and woman through the lens of this practice called *Bacha Posh*. What identity crisis a girl who is raised as a boy faces, when she is asked to undo all that she has learnt so far. Moreover, how she is marginalized when she is pushed back to the domestic sphere after a breath of short-lived freedom.

**Keywords:** *Bacha Posh*, freedom, identity and identity disorder, cross-dressing, gender dysphoria.

### **Introduction**

Afghanistan as a nation has never been at peace and harmony. It is frequently marred by war, violence and insecurity: location of Afghanistan is such that many dynasties and countries were interested in the conquest of this Asian country. However, the citizens of Afghanistan are divided into multiple ethnic groups like Pashtuns, Hazaras, Uzbeks and Tajiks and these tribal men are so free spirited, fiercely independent and fighting men that they fail to get controlled by any other power. Hence, we can conclude that Afghanistan sways between western political ideology and internal religious groups. Western countries take the advantage of internal unrest and assert their control. Taliban was the outcome and the latest example of this chaos (1996-2001). So one can imagine the condition and position of both the gender in the given scenario. Men become hyper masculine and patriarchal while women are pushed to the domestic sphere with lost identity. The life of a woman becomes impossible as she is subjugated and segregated, and this is how a *bacha posh* is born.

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 19:9 September 2019  
Prof. Dr. S. Chelliah, Editor: Select Papers of the International Conference on *Paradigms of Marginality in Literature - Exploring the Nuances*

"For economic and social reasons, many Afghan parents want to have a son. This preference has led to some of them practicing the long-standing tradition of *Bacha Posh*-disguising girls as boys." (BBC. 1) It is essential to have a son in Afghanistan, those families who don't have an heir decide to raise one of their daughters as boy. This hidden societal practice of Afghanistan is called *Bacha posh*. The practice of cross-dressing has been followed across the ages for different reasons. Both Western and Eastern history is filled with the girls who have dressed up as boys. According to Sabet "Bacha Posh: An Afghan Social Tradition Where girls are raised as boys" "In almost every era of history, there have been women who took on the role of men when being a woman became impossible to sustain. Jenny Nordberg argues that there were hundreds of women who lived as men between the 16th and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries." (Sabet) So from her argument it is clearly visible that a number of girls have lived as boys.

"In the first century, Triaria of Rome joined her emperor husband in war, wearing men's armor. Zenobia was a third-century queen in Syria who grew up as a boy and went on to fight the Roman Empire on the horseback. Joan of arc was famously said to have seen as an archangel in 1424, causing her to adopt the look of a male soldier and help fight France's against England." (Nordberg 198)

These women have been documented in history for their extraordinary courage and valour. But why a girl living in modern-day Afghanistan should be disguised as a boy? The probable answer can be lack of freedom and breathing space. It comes as a shocking revelation to us, when we get to hear about these *bacha posh* girls who have the access to the similar freedom which the other gender enjoys. However, this speck of freedom these girls enjoy doesn't last for too long. They eventually have to go back to the sphere of domesticity because as per the norms of Afghan society, that's where girls belong. But the question, which becomes rather more significant at this juncture is, can 'freedom in disguise' can actually be called 'freedom' in the true sense of the term? One could further infer that freedom is granted to Afghan girls, but they must undo who they are to access freedom. Girls must erase their gender, they must behave like a boy, and they must conceal everything, which could make them appear feminine in the public dominion.

A woman disguising as a man to access freedom, is an explicit indication of societal, cultural and political breakdown and this practice must change to build an egalitarian social structure. In Afghanistan, the practice of *bacha posh* is an outcome of a social belief that each and every family must have a son. The rigid patriarchal setup in Afghan society welcomes and cherishes the male child. Moreover, in a country, which severely lacks rule of law, not having a son is seen as a sign of weakness. A male chaperon (husband, brother or son) should accompany a woman whenever she steps out of her house. Thus, a married woman must give birth to a son. One who is unable to produce heirs can be seen as "*Dokhtar Zai*" – one who only brings daughter. The woman who only begets a daughter is seen as lacking something. She is not considered a complete woman and essentially evil.

"When one gender is so important and other is unwanted, there will always be those who try to pass to the other side; says Najia Nasim, the Afghanistan country director for U.S based woman for Afghan woman."

“Why Afghanistan is still the worst place in the world to be a woman” (qtd.in.times.com). There are innumerable crimes against girls and women like forced marriage, child marriage, wife beatings, honour killing, rapes etc. ‘Bacha posh’ is the short-term remedy to attain freedom. But if we look closely it is actually a curse in the garb of a blessing. One can see how gender and freedom are closely linked to each other in Afghanistan. A small girl sometimes happily other times forcefully changes her clothes and becomes a boy. She gets to play football, go to school, roam around in the streets, and anything and everything under the sun, something she can’t even think of doing as a girl.

In addition to this, the economic dependency on man makes her a burden while a son is expected to have a job, earn money, and look after his parents in old age. To counter this, some re-assign their daughter’s gender at birth, or at the time of education. There’s even a rumor that a bacha posh daughter will lead to the birth of a son when the mother conceives again. So, this small experiment is done by the parents to bring some good luck for them in the next pregnancy. Freedom has a very simple meaning for the girls of this nation, in order to avoid unwanted marriage and to be able to leave the house they are ready to give up their identity. The girl child being a *bacha posh* is a price to pay for freedom, to study, to have a profession and to marry. However, the girl as a *bacha posh* fear that her true-identity would be revealed. There are also permanent psychological scars left after a bacha posh is transitioned to reality. The masquerade ends once the girl hits puberty and becomes of marriageable age. This is the time when real problem and confusion surfaces.

Often times a *bacha posh* faces gender identity crisis that sometimes leads to gender dysphoria, which an Afghan girl faces concerning the practice of bacha posh vis-a-vis the emotional and psychological trauma a *bacha posh* has to go through. American psychiatric association states that “gender dysphoria involves a marked difference between person’s physical or assigned gender and the gender with which he/she/they identify.” Afghan girls who are raised as a bacha posh feel gender dysphoria at the time of their puberty, they cannot adjust with their female gender; some girls struggle to find out what is happening to them. They come under a difficult situation in life, when the changes happening in the mind and the body are not in coherence with each other. They undergo through a state of mental trauma and confusion. These girls lie in the *trishanku* state forever, they are not able to place themselves in the larger society in general and woman in particular. The younger girls show the symptoms of irritation and anger, once the “privilege” is about to be snatched away from them and the others who are married are apprehensive of their role as a wife or a mother. So this statement by Hashimi is quite befitting here,

“In Afghanistan there are girls, there are boys, and there are the bacha posh, a temporary third gender for girls who live as boys” (Hashimi 2015).

“A baby girl is a sign of humiliation, a failure. He is a bacha, the word for child. A boy. She is the “other”: a *dokhtar*, a daughter”. So, if not a real son, let’s at least pretend to have a son. One doesn’t have to pay a price for changing the gender of the child. The skin-deep son is not only supposed to reinstate the family’s honour and pride but also serves as a good luck charm for the parents to conceive a male child in future. The transformation confers a very practical benefit as well, since a male or a bacha posh child can work outside the home, these girls contribute in the family income.

Parents never think, what will happen to the identity of the 'self' when a boy is switched back to being a girl. She must unlearn her gender defined identity, her speech, her walk, her mobility outside the home- as she slips back into her modest and ill-fitted clothing and lets her hair grow out. It is a practice that goes back generations though its origin is not easily traced nor is its prevalence known. Emotionally the transition can be quite dramatic as it is essentially imposing an identity crisis on a young psyche, the adjustment period can be difficult. An Afghan girl who is no longer a child but, on her way to becoming a woman should immediately be shielded and protected to ensure her virginity and reputation for future marriage. She should accept her fate and become a victim of male patriarchy and chauvinism. There are many girls like Zehra who is unable to fit in the company of woman, because they have lived like boys and they think they in the idiom of male.

“Standing on top of a table, she was an animal on display. There was cheering and loud laughter. Her body was frozen, and she could not move. When tears rolled down her cheeks, she did not lift her hands to wipe them off. That she cried engaged them even more. “Look, look “And she was looked at some more. Some clapped their hands with excitement. Finally, she buried her face in her hands, screaming, to block out the sound. (Nordberg 95) This episode of trauma occurred with Zehra in school. When she was discovered by her group of classmates that she is a girl. It might not be a physical form of violence, but psychological violence done by her peer group will remain with her in the future.

There are many women who say that the brief period of life as a *bacha posh* has strengthened them as a woman. After observing the outside male world and how it works, they have become prudent and practical human beings. It is important to note that even these women who believe in the optimistic side of discourse were confused at the time of transition though not unhappy. They act as agents of patriarchy and somehow believe that whatever the parents will do is best for them. So, these women lack a strain of freethinking and the psyche works according to the dominant belief system.

“Were you happy to become a woman?”

Sakina, now in her forties, ponders it for a moment. She was not unhappy. The right word might be confused. “I felt all right. It was my parent’s decision. I did not go outside anymore when I became a girl. That was a thing I was sad about. I stayed inside” (Nordberg 131). However, all the *bacha posh* in Afghanistan do not end up like Sakina. There are multiple cases of women who have been divorced or left like Shukria. There are many who choose to remain forever on the other side. The family threatens to leave them or marry them off which is an act of violation.

After reading a lot of memoirs, one comes across that there are many kinds and levels of so-called third gender of Afghanistan. There are those who are changed by their parents at the time of birth, many are changed during the time of education. Then there are ones who choose to become *bacha posh* to access more freedom. Many are forced to do so to earn a family for their living, they don’t want to become one. Some parents do this experimentation to get a male child; others do it to strengthen the girl child. Moreover, switching back happens at the time of puberty or at the time of marriage. Some transition happily while others choose to resist. So, the Afghan families are playing with the identity of these kids for their own distorted reasons. The heart of controversy over this practice is when the entire world is talking

of the women's rights and equality of men and woman. The practice of bacha posh is quite ambiguous. Is it the extension of patriarchy or subversion of patriarchy? Though the writer Jenny Nordberg in an interview to the Metrofocus takes a neutral stand on the subject saying that it is both. However, it seems more like a bane than a boon to these girls.

“It's a creative, some would say desperate, way to buck the system in a suppressive, and gender segregated society. In Afghanistan, men make most of the decisions and woman and girls hold very little value. From the moment she is born, an Afghan girl has very few rights and little control over her own life. She often cannot leave the house without an escort. She must guard her behavior and appear modest at all times.” (Nordberg 2014)

## Conclusion

Though the institution of bacha posh has an element of creativity and resistance. But what are these girls being transformed into – A boy. It furthers the invisibility of these girls; it seems that they do not exist at all. Even in the public spaces these girls venture as boys. So, this custom is simply strengthening the patriarchal set up because the presence of the opposite gender is not even known to the other side. So, what appears to be the fate of these girls in the long run? Can they really go back to being a girl again? The answers to these questions are not easy seeing the larger society of Afghanistan. The time as Bacha posh can be seen as a period of concession, but the practice itself is flawed. First of all, it is unnatural as Jenny Nordberg calls it ‘nature versus nurture’ experiment.

The primary purpose of this paper was to look into the complex arena of gender and its reception in Afghanistan. As stated earlier, the paper attempts to establish that being a bacha posh can be detrimental both from the perspectives of identity formation and psyche formulation of a young girl. It is time that Afghan society should seriously think of the long-term resolutions concerning the discourse of identity and gender instead of looking for a remedy, which doesn't last long.

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