
Gender Fluidity and Social Survival in Afghanistan: A Study of Hidden Lives, Hidden Identities in Jenny Nordberg's *The Underground Girls of Kabul*

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Abstract

Afghanistan has endured a relentless series of wars, external invasions, and political and religious turmoil. These factors have led to numerous crises, including high mortality rates, lack of education, the rise of terrorism, and widespread poverty. Women and children have borne the brunt of these hardships. Among the deeply ingrained practices in the country is bacha posh, where a family with no sons may choose to raise a daughter as a boy. The girl is given the rights and freedoms typically reserved for boys, but once she reaches puberty, she is expected to revert to her female identity and is often married off. In Afghan society, girls are generally unwanted, and a woman's worth is tied to her ability to bear sons. If she cannot, she is often seen as cursed.

METHODOLOGY: Qualitative research seeks to collect and analyses non-numeric data to understand an individual's social reality, including their attitudes, beliefs, and motivations. Information for the literature review is sourced from various materials, including educational websites, peer-reviewed journals, and online resources.

FINDINGS AND RESULT: This paper explores the bacha posh practice and examines the psychological impact on girls who are forced to transition back to their female identity. It also highlights how some women view bacha posh as a means of resistance, as depicted by investigative journalist Jenny Nordberg in her book *The Underground Girls of Kabul*, which follows real-life women challenging rigid cultural norms in search of self-meaning.

KEY WORDS: Bacha posh, gendered violence, Afghan women, patriarchy, trauma.

1. BACHA POSH PHENOMENON

Female masculinity emerges as a challenge to gender dichotomy and the statement of gender as cultural dynamic that can be taken on and off (Nguyen, 2008)

The term bacha posh, derived from the local Dari language, translates to "a girl dressed as a boy." In this tradition, children don't just dress like boys; they are publicly presented as such. This practice has been common in Afghanistan and Pakistan but remained largely hidden from the outside world due to the complexities of gender politics. Despite its secrecy, many families are aware that others in their community engage in the practice. It is not legally recognized in Afghanistan, which means the official count of bacha posh children is likely inaccurate.

Being a bacha posh fetches a girl many advantages. She can freely move out of the house, do some chores and earn income, go to school, play with kids, all the things that a girl can ever dream of. She can escort her mother and siblings in the absence of her father, a privilege that she can never fulfil if she were a girl. Hence many girls consider it a better option knowing that this is short lived and that they eventually will have to marry and

serve men. Being one can be thought of as empowering for many women and many treasure the life experiences too. The process of turning back to her real self is a struggle for most of the women which in turn affects their married life to a great extent. They are not used to the femininity and charm and the submissiveness that an Afghan woman should possess. No one, not even her mother seems to care about the mental trauma that she has to undergo once she is reverted back to her real self, and even if someone does, there is absolutely nothing that they can do to change the plight of the girl.

2. BOOK SELECTED FOR STUDY

The book that has been selected for this paper is Jenny Nordberg's *The Underground Girls of Kabul: The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys*

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

- To examine the impact of the restrictive nature of the Taliban regime on girls and its influence on the cultural custom of Bacha Posh.
- To investigate the practice creates an unstable gender construct among children, as evidenced by the gender dysphoria that some girls experience.
- To delve into *The Underground Girls of Kabul* examining Afghan history and the parallels to subversive actions of people who live under oppression everywhere.

4. METHODOLOGY

The researcher selected the "Exploratory Design" to investigate the issue at hand. As noted in the previous chapter, mythology has been studied for over a thousand years. This research specifically seeks to address the question of "how," meaning how mythology remains relevant despite its evolving forms. Qualitative research aims to understand a phenomenon, situation, or event by examining it in its entirety. *The Underground Girls of Kabul: The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys* is an in-depth exploration of gender discrimination in Afghanistan. This nonfiction work highlights the hardships faced by Afghan women who are compelled to live as boys at different stages of their lives. It features stories like that of Azita, a female parliamentarian who was forced to turn her fourth daughter into a boy; Zahra, a bacha posh struggling with puberty as her parents try to return her to girlhood; and Nader and Shahed, who wish to continue living as men into adulthood.

5. JENNY NORDBERG

After the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan experienced significant changes across all aspects of life. The rise of literature, along with the presence of international aid workers and foreign journalists, brought profound shifts to the country's social structure. They exposed the hardships and suffering endured by ordinary Afghans during the Taliban's rule. Numerous writers focused on Afghan themes, revealing to the world the dire conditions of the people amid years of war and violence. Swedish journalist Jenny Nordberg was particularly struck by the gender segregation and the hardships faced by Afghan women at every stage of life. Her investigation into the grim situation of women in Afghanistan uncovered the practice of bacha posh, meaning "dressed up like a boy" in Dari. She documented this form of resistance in her 2014 book, *The Underground Girls of Kabul: The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys*.

6. CROSSING GENDER BOUNDARIES

The country Afghanistan has always been marred by war and violence and this, in a way has reflected upon the lives of the people, especially the women folk. All these accounts for a patriarchal setup in which women are degraded to a domestic sphere where she is made to survive till the end serving men, deprived of her own identity. When one gender is so unwanted, so despised, and so suppressed in a place where daughters are expressly unwanted, perhaps both the body and the mind of a growing human can be expected to revolt against becoming a woman. And thus, perhaps, alter for good (Nordberg, 2014, p.178)

It becomes highly impossible for women to move on in a society where she is segregated and bacha posh came into existence as a result of this. The social and the economic conditions prevalent, favours a male child

and this has led to the Afghan society practicing this old tradition of bacha posh even now. For an Afghan girl, the segregation starts when she is born. Sons are regarded as the ones who contribute to the family's income and they are expected to take care of their parents as well during their old age. But this is not so with the case of a daughter. As far as the family is concerned, a daughter fetches them bride price when she is married off, leaves her house forever and rarely visits too unless her husband allows her to. In a society where the laws are made by men, it is obvious that it favours them. Inheritance and household assets in Afghanistan are passed only through male lineage because her presence in her birth family is considered temporary(Sato,2007) And many instances of women who have cross dressed when it has become impossible for them to survive have been found in the Eastern as well as the Western history. A woman who fails to bear boys are branded as Dokhtar Zai and is viewed as someone who failed to impart a meaning to her very existence; a threat to her society.

The freedom that she used to enjoy over the years is no more. We can never try to make ourselves into complete men, or complete women. But we try the best we can to be good humans before God (Nordberg, 207)

The discipline and control of women's body are central in the patriarchal establishment. Any woman who tends to violate the societal norms and move out alone or who is bold is thought of as a whore, as someone who invites disgrace to her whole family. The male member, especially the father is to be blamed if the girl tries to break away from these societal clutches. The people around brand the male as a begherat, which translates as a coward who failed to protect his women. Honour killings are too common in Afghanistan, this can be thought of as the primary reason. Women's position within marriage are under the husband's patrilineal system of family in which Afghan women carry the responsibility to produce sons, maintain the family's honour, and later they gain some authority as mother-in-law(Riphenburg,2003)

7. DISGUISED DAUGHTERS

Nordberg presents the real life experiences of women like Zahra who refuses to revert and lead a normal life. She might have not been able to get over with her body transformation and her socially constructed gender. Bodily changes, such as menstruation, the growth of genitalia and underarm hair, breast development, and development of broader hips might increase awareness of one's own birth sex. At the same time , increased cognitive skills enable reflection of own self-identity and representation based on the information and the consideration of her surroundings(Cote,2009) Zahra lives with the idea that it is far better to live like this than marrying , as her social status being higher than that of a normal woman if she remains the same. The idea that she would go on to repeat the life of her mother, with a husband and a long line of children, seems absurd and horrifying to her (Nordberg, 106).

Nordberg brings forth the notion that such women tend to have gender dysphoria. Likewise, life has not been that easy for Shukria who reverted and got married. She was able to go to school because of her being a bacha posh and it was that what fetched her steady income, using which she supported her husband and kids. But she could never get out from her past, the days that she had freedom. She even accuses of her being a bacha posh as the prime reason for her husband leaving her . Her circumstances prompted her to become one and now she takes utmost care that her daughter be raised as a traditional girl as switching won't be a good option for her.

Shukria's husband had left her, and it was time to accept it. And it struck her for the first time then: She had not only failed as a wife. She had failed at being a woman (Nordberg, 257).

Afghan law does not grant divorce to a woman that easily .As far as many women are concerned it was easy for them to end their life rather than opt for a divorce as the husband becomes the sole custodian of their kids and she will be looked down as a fallen woman. So despite the domestic violence and other atrocities women tend to stick on to their marriage as they couldn't imagine being separated from their kids. The life of Azita being a typical example. She had to hold on no matter what for the sake of her kids. Being a bacha posh for a long time and one who earns a high status in the society, Azita, the politician recalls her experiences on a positive note too. Being one gave her an opportunity to interact with people, and that was how she gained self confidence and resilience which paved way for her successful political career. According to Werner and Smith (1982) girls who are able to combine feminine traits (including nurturance, emotional sensitivity and social perceptiveness) and masculine characteristics (such as activeness and independence) are at an advantage compared to the 'traditional' girls who possess only feminine qualities. Being a bacha posh empowers a girl to face the challenges of her life

as she tends to be more flexible.

Nordberg through her *The Underground Girls of Kabul* has tried to incorporate the living experiences of many women who lived as bacha posh for years and that of many who are resilient to covert back. This cultural practice is not even familiar to many people outside the South-Asian countries. A better understanding is needed to raise voice against this pernicious practice. In this post modern era, it is hard to digest that practices like this still exists and it is hard to accept that woman is denied even her fundamental rights because she was born one. The resistance made by the bacha posh women is evident in the narrative. Many women who were bacha posh turned out to be better wives and mothers who could stand on their own without depending on their husbands and who gained the right to dream of a better future for their daughters, just because of the insight that they gained from being one. Hope one day they can bring about a change in this patriarchal set up. In a country like Afghanistan where little is cared about the rights of children and their welfare, there is nothing much left for women to do other than to accept everything and blame their fate. And cultural practices like bacha posh come in handy as it can be thought of as is the only ray of hope for a girl to experience all those things that she is denied.

8. GENDER AND POLITICS IN AFGHAN SOCIETY

Violence against women has always been an issue that requires worldwide attention and it is not something concerning Afghanistan alone. Women in the western societies too have witnessed different forms of bacha posh. All these women united for the same cause: freedom. Over the years, women have been successful in fighting for her rights as well as gaining equal status in the society as that of men. And it is high time that the Afghan patriarchal society realises that they ought to make a permanent solution for the betterment of women and children rather than going after cultural practices which are short lived, and which in a way makes no sense. Hope one day

A woman will not need to be disguised as a man to go outside, to climb a tree, or to make money. She will not need to make an effort to resemble a man, or to think like one. Instead, she can speak a language that men will want to understand. She will be free to wear a suit or a skirt or something entirely differentAnd maybe someday, her identity will not be confined to how she relates to a brother, a son, or a father. Instead, she will be recognised as an individual, whose life holds value only in itself (Nordberg, 306)

9. CONCLUSION

The real issue is not the bacha posh practice itself, but rather the broader concern of women's rights. As Nordberg highlights, Afghanistan recognizes three genders: male, bacha posh (a third gender), and female, with social preference given in that order. Males enjoy the highest status, bacha posh holds an intermediate position, and females are ranked the lowest. Afghanistan has one of the highest rates of domestic abuse against women. A report by Global Rights: Partners for Justice revealed that 87.2% of women had experienced at least one form of physical, sexual, or psychological violence or forced marriage, and 62.0% faced multiple forms of abuse (Nordberg 322). These troubling statistics show the urgent need for equal opportunities and the end of violence against women.

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