

**“Bacha Posh”: Gender Construct in Afghan Culture Examined through
the Lens of Children in Literature**

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Abstract

With the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and their return in 2021, Afghanistan has undergone drastic socio-political changes. In many families, children are introduced to the practice of “Bacha Posh” (dressing up like a boy), an Afghan cultural custom where girls are dressed up as boys until they are married off. Despite children being central to this practice, it has not been studied through their eyes. This article examines the custom of Bacha Posh through the children’s perspective and situates it within the current socio-political scenario of the country. A textual and cultural analysis of three literary works is carried out through a study of their child characters to examine how Afghan culture creates its own gender construct. Two are significant works of children’s literature that revolve around real-life stories of Bacha Posh – Nadia Hashimi’s *One Half from the East* (2016) and Deborah Ellis’ *The Breadwinner* (2000). The third work is *The Underground Girls of Kabul* (2014) by Jenny Nordberg, a seminal work in the study of Bacha Posh in which Nordberg focuses on the practice of Bacha Posh and presents the voice of children. This article then goes on to study the impact of the restrictive nature of the Taliban regime on girls and its influence on the cultural custom of Bacha Posh. It demonstrates how this practice creates an unstable gender construct among children, as evidenced by the gender dysphoria that some girls experience. It thus demonstrates the impact of culture on gender through filling in the gaps between culture, literature and politics.

Keywords: Bacha Posh, children, Afghanistan, Taliban, culture, gender

Owing to the rise and fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan has been experiencing a tumultuous social, political and economic environment. “It followed many forms of failed governance during the last century: absolute monarchy, communism, and an Islamic emirate under the Taliban or no government at all in times of civil war.” (Nordberg, 2014, p.17). This troubled state can be traced back to the monarchy of Abdur Rahman Khan during the late 19th century, where “...[in] a series of bloody wars, he created a highly centralised national state that did away with local autonomy” (Barfield, 2018, p.16). However, things deteriorated further when the Taliban seized Kabul in 1996 and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. In 2001, the Taliban government collapsed, and a new Afghan government was formed, led by Hamid Karzai. More recently, in 2021, the Taliban regained power, bringing back the totalitarian rule that violates many human rights (Maizland, 2023). Women, particularly, face major hardships under this oppressive regime that denies them basic rights, like the right to education. The dominant patriarchal rule, combined with the Taliban’s lopsided governance, leads to a strong preference for men in Afghanistan. In this context, this paper examines gender in Afghanistan through the practice of “Bacha Posh”.

Bacha Posh is a Dari language phrase that etymologically translates to “dressing up like a boy”. It refers to the Afghan practice in which girls are dressed up and raised as boys until they reach marriageable age. There are many superstitions attached to this practice, many of which are followed – for instance, that the practice of Bacha Posh will guarantee the birth of a son in the family. Arguably due to the fact that this practice is a cultural custom adhered to within the closed-off domain of the family, it so far has remained under-researched. “No statistics, however, exist regarding even an approximate number of Bacha Poshes in Afghanistan or in Pakistan, but this age-old phenomenon was widely publicised in 2014 by Jenny Nordberg, a New York-based Swedish journalist” (Bedi, 2021). In her book *The Underground Girls of Kabul: In Search of a Hidden Resistance in Afghanistan*, Jenny Nordberg brings this custom to the front. Through her study of Afghan women, she also arrives at the discussion this practice: “It is indeed appalling to discover that even though it is a system in Afghanistan, most people are reluctant to admit it or even talk about its existence. But Nordberg’s studies reveal that it is indeed very much part of the everyday reality in Afghanistan.” (Lalthlamuanpuui et al., 2020, p.1). Nordberg herself states: “The bacha posh tradition is not rooted in religion, but rather in the cultures of Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan. There are theories that it came from a need for boys or men to fight in times of war but evolved to fill a different “void”. It’s not happening in every household, but nearly every Afghan I’ve spoken to knew of a bacha posh in his or her neighbourhood” (Nordberg, 2014, p.15)

Children are central to the custom of Bacha Posh, as it is usually pre-pubescent girls who are made to practice it. If this practice is under-researched as a whole, it is especially so with regard to the children’s perspective. Jenny Nordberg’s *Underground Girls of Kabul: The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys*, Nadia Hashimi’s *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* and *One Half from the East*, Deborah Ellis’ *The Breadwinner* trilogy and Ukmuna Manoori’s *I Am a Bacha Posh: My Life as a Woman Living as a Man in Afghanistan* (2013) are perhaps the best-known works that are centred on Bacha Posh and offer us a literary glimpse of the phenomenon. Of these works, Hashimi’s *One Half from the East* and Deborah Ellis’ works are classified as

children's literature. These works are analysed in this paper to examine the perspective of children, along with the analysis of Nordberg's work on the subject used here as an ethnographic frame.

Methodology used in this paper consists of a textual and cultural analysis of the practice of Bacha Posh. These are carried out through the study of the four texts mentioned above. A close textual analysis of these texts is employed to reveal the deep structure of this practice.

The most striking fact about this practice is that there was no formal acknowledgement of its existence in Afghanistan and Pakistan in Western literature and academic studies until 2014. It was in this year that this practice was brought out by Jenny Nordberg as she describes her struggles while attempting to uncover the practice of Bacha Posh. She surveyed citizens, gender experts, health workers, and so forth, but to no avail. She says, "But my searches turned up nothing on any other girls who dressed as boys in Afghanistan" (Nordberg, 2014, p.24). Even the United Nations has not acknowledged the existence of this practice. "But senior officials at the United Nations and experts from both government and independent aid organizations delivered a unanimous dismissal when I approached them: Afghans did not dress daughters as sons to counter their segregated society. Why would they ever do that?" (Nordberg, 2014, p.25). This justifies the need for this study of a practice that is unacknowledged even today, the drastic impact of which is brought out through this analysis.

The generalised gender construct in Afghanistan affects both males and females through its oppressive gendered practices. "Bacha Bazi" is one such practice, which literally translates to "boy play". "Many Afghan boys (around eight years old) are the victims of cultural violence, as tradition establishes them as instruments and objects of pleasure" (Borile, 2019, p.498). This has been a longstanding practice in Afghanistan, where pre-pubescent boys are made to dance for large gatherings of men, particularly for men in the Afghan National Security Forces (Prey & Spears, 2021). These men are known to sexually abuse these boys, a practice established since the 18th century (Prey & Spears, 2021). Under the Taliban rule, this practice was put to an end as the Taliban were against homosexual relations. However, with the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Bacha Bazi came into practice all over again. It is hoped that with the re-emergence of the Taliban rule, Bacha Bazi will come to a permanent end. Practices like Bacha Bazi and Bacha Posh bring out the need to inspect the construct of gender in Afghanistan anew.

In their study of Bacha Posh, Lalthlamuanpuui and Suchi (2020) highlight the subversive nature of this practice: "A *bacha posh* moves beyond the grand totalizing narratives of gender binaries to create a space that is marked by fluidity and freedom" (p.1). However, they only looked at the literature on Bacha Posh meant for adults and the question of gender is therefore looked at through adults' appropriation of a practice that revolves around children. Similarly, a study by Corboz, Gibbs and Jewkes on the factors affecting Bacha Posh observes that aspects like poverty and individual gender attitudes play a role in the decision of families to practice Bacha Posh (Corboz et al., 2019). It provides quantitative evidence to understand the nuances of Bacha Posh, yet does not provide insights into the psyche of the children who undergo this practice.

In the following, this article addresses this gap through its focus on children's literature. Thus, looking at the cultural construction of gender, Padmi looks at "female masculinity" through a case study of Bacha Posh in Afghanistan and observes that gender identities are shaped through the lens of masculinity (2018, p.45). Talking about the gendered space in Afghanistan that is created by the practice of Bacha Posh, Sindhu J. (2018) states that, "While it may seem that the institution of *bacha posh* allows for a kind of free play of gender identity, it actually emerges as a reflection of the extreme rigidity of the heteronormative paradigm that constructs and preserves marriage and family in Afghan society" (p.20). The question of liberation or rigidity attached to this practice is often debated by writers in their works.

Ukmina Manoori's *I Am a Bacha Posh: My Life as a Woman Living as a Man in Afghanistan* (2013) is a memoir that presents itself as an example of this practice being perceived as liberating and is pertinent to the study of Bacha Posh. It narrates Manoori's journey of living her entire life as a Bacha Posh as at puberty, she refused to be turned back into a woman. "She lived through the war against the Soviets; she ran away into the mountains and helped the *Mujahideen*. She acquired the name Ukmina the Warrior and the eternal respect from the men of her village" (Manoori, 2013, p.10). This memoir presents the rare case of a woman who embraces the gendered practice of Bacha Posh and resists the conventional way of practising it. She finds the gender-fluid nature of this practice liberating in the restrictive patriarchal society of Afghanistan. She says:

I saw that the gap was widening between the two conditions: the independence and the autonomy that comes with the status of being a man and the confinement and alienation that signifies the life of a woman. In my childhood mind, I did not see anything wrong with envisioning another destiny other than the one I was given by chance at my birth.
(Manoori, 2013, p.22)

This question about the liberating/restricting nature of Bacha Posh has also been addressed through this analysis of the selected texts of children's literature.

"Bacha Posh" and its Impact on Children

Children's literature presents a seemingly simplistic version of reality since it is targeted at children. Allegedly written from the perspective of a child, it demonstrates how children look at the world and interpret situations. *One Half from the East* by Nadia Hashimi and *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis are children's literature which present Bacha Posh through the eyes of their children characters forced to practice it. Set during the Taliban regime, these novels, written in the 2000s, also highlight the condition of women under this oppressive regime.

Both novels have an absent father figure, which gives rise to the need for a daughter to practice Bacha Posh, to be able to go out and earn money for the family. Apart from the need to earn, *One Half from the East* also portrays the stereotypes attached to Bacha Posh in Afghanistan, thus contextualising the origins of this practice. In this novel, the aunt of Obayda (a preteen

girl who is made to practice Bacha Posh), Khala Aziza convinces Obayda's mother to convert her to Bacha Posh, "Then you plan for another baby in the family. Having a bacha posh at home brings boy energy into your household... It's not magic – it's just how it is" (Hashimi, 2016, p.18). Khala Aziza's words bring to the fore the belief in Afghanistan that if a family without a boy child has a Bacha Posh, a son will be born into the family. Thus, a cultural custom is justified through this practice centred around children. This is also thematised in Jenny Nordberg's interview of women who practised Bacha Posh in Afghanistan. She observes, "The health workers also each have at least one example of *magical* son making from their home provinces. They confirm that the prevailing reason to create a *bacha posh* might very well be to beget a real son." (Nordberg, 2014, p.79). In the *Breadwinner*, however, the decision to convert Parvana (the eleven-year-old protagonist) to a Bacha Posh is purely need-based. Her father being arrested by the Taliban leaves their household in dire need of money. Since women are not allowed to leave the house under the Taliban regime without male accompaniment, let alone work, the family decides to make Parvana a Bacha Posh so she can earn for the household.

These works demonstrate the initial state of confusion and resistance that the little girls display, on being told to practice Bacha Posh. Parvana, in *The Breadwinner*, shows a childlike concern for external factors like her hair. "It won't work," she said. "I won't look like a boy. I have long hair" ... "You're not cutting my hair!" Parvana's hands flew up to her head." (Ellis, 2011, p.37). Obayda, in *One Half from the East*, shows a similar childlike concern about letting go of the things that she associates with being a girl. "For ten years I've been a girl. That's a pretty long time. I like being a girl. I like doing girl things. My mother tells me that as a baby, I danced before I walked." (Hashimi, 2016, p.20). Factors like having long hair and dancing, are stereotypical qualities attributed to girls. The initial reactions of these little girls show how they have unwittingly internalised these gendered associations from the adults in their families. They are prevented from behaving naturally, and their actions are governed and manipulated by adults. Furthermore, as children, they are unable to predict the deeper implications of being asked to practice Bacha Posh. This is hinted at in *One Half from the East* when Obayda says, "I don't know how people will react to me. I'm not even sure how I'll react to me. "It won't be forever." Maybe that's where the problem is." (Hashimi, 2016, p.20). Obayda's reaction displays a latent identity crisis, as she is unsure of how she will react to her own self. In fact, she is unaware that she could be facing an identity crisis. The narrator's statement, "Maybe that's where the problem is" (Hashimi, 2016, p.20), shows a sense of foreboding. The fact that these children change back to perform girlhood later is known to create a sense of gender dysphoria, which refers to "psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one's sex assigned at birth and one's gender identity" (Turban, 2023), amongst these girls who are unable to cope with the constant changes in their gendered identities. This prediction, or anticipation, is beyond the purview of a child's mind.

A child's understanding of this life-changing practice is further portrayed through their frames of reference, which vary from that of adults. In *One Half from the East*, for instance, Obayda connects the practice of Bacha Posh to pretend play, a concept that is very popular amongst children (Hashimi, 2016):

I would take playful steps toward my sister, grabbing the end of her head scarf just as the actor did in the movie. Hand over hand, I'd pull her closer to me, in a tug-of-war that no woman ever won. I was the victor, the conqueror, the man. But that was pretend, and what my mother is talking about now is very different. She's talking about a real change, not something I'll stop doing at the end of a song.

(Hashimi, 2016, p.21)

During this pretend play, she pretends to be a man by displaying stereotypical male gender attributes like strength and power. This shows an acceptance of conventional gendered associations. Events like these form the foundation of a child's understanding of gender. Therefore, Obayda draws connections to realms that are familiar to her when an unfamiliar idea is introduced in her life.

In *The Breadwinner*, Parvana is seemingly given a choice, as Mrs Weera says to her (Ellis, 2011):

We can force you to cut off your hair, but you're still the one who has to go outside and act the part. We know this is a big thing we're asking, but I think you can do it. How about it?

(Ellis, 2011, p.37)

This appeals to her, as children tend to like a sense of agency where they feel they are not forced into making decisions. The feeling of being given the freedom to make this decision is the primary factor that leads to Parvana agreeing to Bacha Posh. "They could hold her down and cut off her hair, but for anything more, they needed her cooperation. In the end, it really was her decision. Somehow, knowing that made it easier to agree" (Ellis, 2011, p.38). However, this comes across as a tactic used by the adults, who had already made their decision. By presenting Parvana with the cognitive bias of the illusion of choice, they appeal to the child in her. Being a girl child during the Taliban regime strips them of any sense of agency. They are subject to patriarchy combined with the misogynist dictates of the rulers. Therefore, right from an early age, a sense of (stolen) agency becomes immensely valuable to girls in Afghanistan.

As Parvana and Obayda practise Bacha Posh, they are seen to grapple with its complicated nuances. Obayda says, "But then I realized I couldn't be a girl dressed in boy clothes. I had to be a boy wearing my clothes." (Hashimi, 2016, p.51). This shows the realisation that Bacha Posh has a deeper impact than merely external attire. Both these characters are seen to enjoy the sense of freedom that comes with being a boy. Parvana experiences this as she walks in a public space, "As she walked to the marketplace, her head felt light without the weight of her hair or chador. She could feel the sun on her face, and a light breeze floating down from the mountain made the air fresh and fine" (Ellis, 2011, p.43). Obayda, or Obayd, on being instructed by Rahim (another Bacha Posh) about how to behave like a boy, experiences this freedom. "He points at my feet, nudges my chin and my elbows. I listen to his words and feel

my body loosen. It's easier to breathe. Why is that?" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 52). The tactile imagery of flowing fresh air accentuates their feeling of freedom.

In both novels, the characters are seen to cherish this freedom that as girls they were otherwise deprived of. Antithetical to their first reaction, Obayd and Rahim, in *One Half from the East*, wish to remain boys forever. As children, they use their repertoire of knowledge to come up with a solution and turn to mythological stories that are read to or performed for children. One such story states that passing under a rainbow changes the gender of humans. Rahim and Obayd undertake this adventure and try to pass under a rainbow to change into boys permanently. This instance shows the innocence that makes them believe in these legends and do what is in their power to make their wish come true. In *The Breadwinner*, like Obayd, Parvana finds a friend in Shauzia, another Bacha Posh. Shauzia too does not wish to change back to a girl. She says, "I want to still be a boy then... If I turn back into a girl, I'll be stuck at home. I couldn't stand that." (Ellis, 2011, p.70). Her idea of a solution, though not mythical like Obayd and Rahim's, comes across as impractical and thus portrays her childlike attributes too. She wishes to escape to France, and her childlike innocence comes across as she excitedly explains her plan to Parvana (Ellis, 2011):

In every picture I've seen of France, the sun is shining, people are smiling, and flowers are blooming. In one picture I saw a whole field of purple flowers. That's where I want to go. I want to walk into that field and sit down in the middle of it, and not think about anything...I've got it all figured out. I'll tell a group of nomads that I'm an orphan, and I'll travel with them into Pakistan. My father told me they go back and forth with the seasons, looking for grass for their sheep. In Pakistan, I head down to the Arabian Sea, get on a boat, and go to France!

(Ellis, 2011, p.70)

She bases her entire plan on a picture she has seen and a story she has heard from her father. The narrator observes, "She spoke as if nothing could be more simple" (Ellis, 2011, p.70). This simplicity portrays a lack of experience and exposure to the world. In both novels, the confidence the children show in the plan they devise based on their limited knowledge shows how children are gullible and trusting, making them a blank canvas that adults write on.

It is this aspect of the nature of children that enables the perpetuation of the practice of Bacha Posh. Children are not provided with the agency to make decisions about their own gendered identity. This is brought out through Obayd's observation, "At the end of the day, we both know we're not in charge once we walk through our front doors and back into our homes. Everything changes then. We go from being kings of our own fates to children ruled by parents" (Hashimi, 2016, p.81). The narrative of parents having authority over their children's lives as they know better is exploited for the purpose of the practice of Bacha Posh. This is portrayed through Obayd's mother's words, who, consoling him about Rahim's forced marriage, says, "Obayd, let it be. You know perfectly well these are temporary arrangements. When the time is up, it's up. I explained that to you from the beginning. I'm sure they're doing what's best for her" (Hashimi, 2016, p.101). The reader, however, knows that forcefully marrying off a

thirteen-year-old girl to a reputed warlord is not in her best interest. Hashimi thus implicitly brings out the flaws of this practice, the biggest being that it does not take into consideration the voice of the children who practise it.

In her interview with Azita Jenny Nordberg (2014) comments on this power play between parents and children:

Azita and her husband approached their youngest daughter with a proposition: “Do you want to look like a boy and dress like a boy, and do more fun things like boys do, like bicycling, soccer, and cricket? And would you like to be like your father?” She absolutely did. It was a splendid offer.

(Nordberg, 2014, p.21)

This portrays how a major life event is trivialised by parents to appeal to children and make them subscribe to the system. In her interview with a doctor, Norberg reveals that,

Children’s rights are a concept unacknowledged in Afghanistan. If parents want a girl to look like a boy, then it is within the right of the parents to make that happen, Dr. Fareiba believes. This temporarily experimental condition will right itself later on. Children...take a predetermined path in life. For girls, that means marrying and having children of their own. For boys, it means supporting a family.

(Ellis, 2011, p.56)

The endings of Hashimi’s and Ellis’ novels in different ways interact with the impact Bacha Posh has on children. *The Breadwinner* ends on a note of uncertainty. Parvana is shown contemplating the uncertain future that lies ahead of her. “Twenty years from now, Parvana thought. What would happen in those twenty years? Would she still be in Afghanistan? Would Afghanistan finally have peace? Would she go back to school, have a job, be married? The future stretched unknown down the road in front of her.” (Ellis, 2011, p.91) This depicts the confusion that children who are forced to practise Bacha Posh. Amidst the chaotic confusion that characterises the political scenario of Afghanistan with the rise and fall and rise of the Taliban, children face uncertainty within themselves as their gendered identities are shaped by society rather than themselves. Parvana’s statement expresses this sentiment.

One Half from the East seemingly has a happy ending, as Obayda, despite being turned back into a girl against her wishes, comes to terms with it as her father re-enters their lives. A baby boy is born to the family, thus fulfilling the purpose of Obayda practising Bacha Posh. The birth of a boy brings the family together again, which makes Obayda happy. Obayda’s happiness again portrays her childish naivety, as she simply focuses on factors like her father being a part of the family again and the appreciation that she receives from her parents. She overlooks her desire to remain a boy:

I’m not the special child in the house anymore, but I’m okay with that. I like being one of the sisters, and I’m pretty sure my little brother is going to be in good hands with all

of us looking after him...And in this year I've realized that I have a thing too—I'm the girl that can do some really surprising stuff.

(Hashimi, 2016, p.168)

This exemplifies the gullible nature of children and how easily they can be convinced to carry out life-altering practices. She does not question her future or anticipate the impact this practice has had on her identity. Therefore, this “happy” ending, made possible only through the eyes of a child, makes a deeper comment on the nature of this practice and its lasting impact on children.

Gender Construction through “Bacha Posh”

The practice of Bacha Posh is born out of reactions to gender imbalances in a patriarchal society, and it further perpetuates this imbalance by creating rigidly gendered attributes. Nadia Hashimi (2016) says, “The longstanding bacha posh tradition of Afghanistan is a curiosity for many, but it is also a remarkable way to explore what it means to be a girl” (p.169). It makes concrete gendered stereotypes and thrives on the divide it creates. This practice, therefore, functions as a vicious cycle.

Bacha Posh also demonstrates Judith Butler's concept of “Gender Performativity”, in which she views gender as an unstable construct born out of constant performance (Butler, 2006). Butler says, “...gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time -an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler, 1988). Bacha Posh is thus an embodiment of Butler's perception and accusation of gender strictures, as they revolve around repetitive performances, thus revealing the unstable nature of gender as a singular and rigid construct. “A *bacha posh* is someone whose identity is chosen for her! She is a female ‘veiled’ in male clothing. She is sanctioned by society to ‘act repetitively’ like a boy. The simple act of ‘dressing up’ as a boy acquires a new political and sociological significance in the context of Afghanistan” (Lalthlamuanpuui et al., 2020, p.5). This practice exists through performativity and constructs notions of femininity and masculinity that are performed into being. Since the sustenance of the practice of Bacha Posh depends on children performing changing gender roles, it creates an unstable gender construct, to the detriment of its main protagonists.

Jenny Nordberg (2014) further comments on the origins of this practice. One of the women she interviews, Azita, talks about the importance of having a son:

Having at least one son is mandatory for good standing and reputation here. A family is not only incomplete without one; in a country lacking rule of law, it is also seen as weak and vulnerable. So it is incumbent upon every married woman to quickly bear a son—it is her absolute purpose in life, and if she does not fulfill it, there is clearly something wrong with her in the eyes of others. She could be dismissed as a *dokhtar zai*, or “she who only brings daughters”.

(Nordberg, p.21)

Nordberg (2014) observes that, “Azita says this as if it is a simple explanation” (p.21). Coming from a woman herself, this shows how deep such conditioning runs in society. There is a ubiquitous acceptance of the preference and privilege given to boys, which generates the need for a practice like Bacha Posh. Najia Nasim, the current Afghanistan country director for the U.S.-based community “Women for Afghan Women”, says, “When one gender is so important and the other is unwanted, there will always be those who try to pass over to the other side”. (Strochlic, 2021). This gives rise to the superstitious belief that the practice of Bacha Posh will lead to the birth of a boy in a family without sons, as explored in *One Half from the East*.

Girls in Afghanistan, especially during the Taliban regime, are doubly stripped of any agency as a result of their gender, as well as age. Rahim’s words in *One Half from the East* portray this double oppression that girls face, “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 a girl” (Hashimi, 2016, p.110). The practice of Bacha Posh relies on these individuals who are deprived of any agency by society. Norberg (2014) observes, “The ownership of an Afghan girl is literally passed on from one male—her father—to the one who becomes her husband. He will take over the ruling of her life, down to the smallest details if he is so inclined” (p.52). The decision to change back a Bacha Posh is also rooted in the deeply patriarchal nature of the society of Afghanistan. Nordberg (2014) notes, “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 a future marriage” (p.101). Therefore, the notion of marriage as the sole purpose of women and the importance given to their virginity to curtail female sexuality is the underlying aspect that drives this practice which only seemingly breaks out of gender restrictions. This portrays how the practice is deeply entrenched in the regressive socio-political gender system of Afghanistan.

The novels *One Half from the East* and *The Breadwinner* portray how a specific idea of gender is constructed in Afghanistan through Bacha Posh. In Hashimi’s novel, Rahim instructs Obayd,

“Stand tall. Stick your chin out like you’re daring me to hit it. Set your feet apart... Keep your palms open and let your arms swing while you walk. If you hear something behind you, turn around and look for it. When you run, slap your whole foot on the ground, not just your toes. Are you carrying eggs in your pockets?... Then don’t walk like you are. Run like you’re not afraid of cracking any shells!”

(Hashimi, 2016, p. 51)

This demonstrates how a certain body language is expected from each gender, an expectation that is unspoken but inculcated among children. Rahim is a child too, who has learnt of these nuances through observation, and is now passing on these learnings to Obayd. The freedom that comes along with being a boy is evident through the body language that Rahim proposes Obayda should display. Loosening of the body, and keeping the chin up, are signs of being confident in one’s skin. There is also a sense of pride attached to being a boy that is demonstrated through these bodily gestures. On the other hand, girls are expected to be stiff

and keep their chin down, and head bowed. This symbolises perpetual subservience. These gender roles are amplified in the Taliban regime, as depicted in *The Breadwinner*:

Parvana would slump down further on the blanket and try to make herself look smaller. She was afraid to look up at the soldiers. She had seen what they did, especially to women, the way they would whip and beat someone they thought should be punished. (Ellis, 2011, p.9)

The inhumane treatment of women by the Taliban is presented from a child's perspective who witnesses violence carried out against women. Parvana, thus, right from a very early age, learns to live in fear as a little girl and make herself look smaller.

In *One Half from the East*, one sees that to fuel gendered associations of masculinity and strength, Obayda's mother treats her differently once she becomes a boy, Obayd. She feeds him more food and gives him meat, unlike her daughters. "Obayd is a boy. He needs the meat if he's going to get stronger. I don't want to hear any more about it." (Hashimi, 2016, p.29). This shows how an idea of gender is constructed culturally, and these associations are perpetuated through this practice. Masculinity is equated with strength, as seen in the instance where Obayda, during pretend play, would be strong and hence act like a man. This gendered association is turned into reality by feeding sons better and more nutritious food, as portrayed in Hashimi's novel.

In the instance where Obayda engages in pretend play and pretends to be a man, the gendered associations are poignant. Pretend play symbolises the function of Gender Performativity, as children perform the gendered stereotypes that have been incorporated into their daily existence by society. Judith Butler's idea of gender coming into being through performance (2006) is demonstrated through this kind of pretend play. Here, children not only enact gender stereotypes, but bring a culture specific idea into being. Obayda's act of being "strong" and hence, pretending to be a man (Hashimi, 2016, p.21), concretises the stereotype of men being stronger than women.

In Nordberg's (2014) interview with Azita, where she convinces her daughter to practice Bacha Posh by saying, "Do you want to look like a boy and dress like a boy, and do more fun things like boys do, like bicycling, soccer, and cricket?" (p.21), one sees how certain activities are denoted with patriarchal cultural meanings. Simple activities like cycling, playing soccer and cricket, which should be common to all children, are seen as activities that are gender specific and exclusive to boys. These gender stereotypes are used to appeal to girls who are deprived of these pleasures, thus, not only manipulating the girl child into agreeing, but also deeply inculcating these stereotypes and perpetuating gendered associations in society. This is seen in *One Half from the East*, where Obayda's realisation that she can do "surprising stuff" is an outcome of patriarchy (Hashimi, 2016, p.168). Girls and women are made to believe in the "masculine" nature of certain activities, which thus comes as a surprise to children like Obayda when they see that they "can do" them. They remain oblivious to the fact that these are human activities that are not gender specific.

Girls who practise Bacha Posh are reported to experience gender dysphoria, which, according to the NHS:

... describes a sense of unease that a person may have because of a mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity. This sense of unease or dissatisfaction may be so intense it can lead to depression and anxiety and have a harmful impact on daily life.

(NHS, 2020)

A back-and-forth movement between genders and their socio-cultural expectations imposed on children causes lasting damage that a child may not realise immediately. Padmi (2018) observes that despite experiencing a sense of liberation while being a boy, “The Bacha Posh do not have the power to determine their gender preference and position in society” (p.57). Nordberg’s encounter with Azita, who herself was a Bacha Posh, evidences this sense of unease as Azita relates the time her mother asked her to change back into a woman to get married. “Azita rebelled as best she could. She screamed. She cried. She was silent and refused to eat for days. She existed in a delirium between sleep and the barest consciousness from lack of food and complete exhaustion. Some things she dreamed and some were real; she could not tell it apart.” (Nordberg, 2014, p.61). A study conducted by *The Wire* observes:

In many instances this transition was obviously hugely traumatic, to say the least, with many Bacha Poshes experiencing untold angst, disorientation and puzzlement; after a nearly decade-long hiatus they were now required to be shy, coy and to act in ways of which they had no notion.

(Bedi, 2021)

Commenting on the nature of gender dysphoria experienced by those who practice Bacha Posh, Mridula Kashyap says:

The gender dysphoria that a *bacha posh* suffers from is not a genetic disorder as *bacha posh* is an imposed identity upon the girl to perform the role of maleness... The *bacha posh* is reared in an altogether different cultural setting where rather than the fostering of feminine qualities such as compliance and submissiveness, excessively aggressive masculine attitudes are encouraged. The momentary liberty they experience as a result of the isolation from their birth gender creates gender identity conflict in them.

(Kashyap, 2022)

Gender dysphoria due to Bacha Posh, therefore, demonstrates the unstable nature of the gender construct, and leads to a disjuncture in the gendered identity of the individuals who practice Bacha Posh.

Conclusion

Through the cultural practice of Bacha Posh, many Afghans create their own specific gender construct which then becomes a strong reinforcement of patriarchal gendered stereotypes like women belonging to the domestic realm, incapable of carrying out any activities that demand any physical or, to an extent, mental strength. This gender construct is propagated by moulding children into embodiments of these fixed notions of masculinity and femininity created by Afghan society. An analysis of the selected texts demonstrated the nuances of the practice of Bacha Posh through a study of the children who undergo this transformation. The impact on children reveals the core of this cultural practice, which survives due to the vulnerability and receptiveness of children and their parents adhering to discriminatory social norms. This further enables the creation and perpetuation of the gender construct.

Due to the nature of Bacha Posh which allows for ambiguity and an overturning of gender binaries, some see this practice as subversive in nature: “A *bacha posh* challenges stereotypes that are associated with Afghan women by opening up new challenges and dialogues that were otherwise swept under the complicated knots of the intrinsically woven Afghan society” (Lalthlamuanpuui et al., 2020, p.6). However, this research showed that even though, on a surface level, this practice may seem like it challenges the gender binary, on a deeper level, it perpetuates patriarchy by creating and ensuring the continuity of the construct of gender through performance. Emily Schneider, in her study of Bacha Posh and Nordberg’s novel, mirrors this opinion as she says, “The “underground resistance” that Nordberg tries to uncover is neither underground nor an actual resistance. Instead, bacha posh is a way for families who have a girl but need a boy to work within the framework of Afghan society’s strict gender norms” (Schneider, 2014).

With the renewed prevalence of the Taliban, the future of this practice, and gender construction in general, remains in limbo. The gender construct that is born out of the cultural custom of Bacha Posh is increasing dysfunctional gender signalling, as portrayed through the experiences of gender dysphoria. The nuances inherent in Bacha Posh need to be scrutinised further in the future, as it is rooted in systemic gender inequality and the manipulation of children. Present practice would suggest that the construction of gender roles and stereotypes in Afghanistan needs to be deconstructed in order to allow for the reconstruction of the roots of dominant disproportionate and deeply patriarchal gender norms.

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