

**GIRLS ARE DE RIGUEUR TO BE BOYS: AN ANATOMY OF GENDER BENDING
CULTURAL PRACTICES IN JENNY NORDBERG'S *THE UNDERGROUND GIRLS OF
KABUL***

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Abstract

The world has produced many writers who skillfully use their written words in various techniques and styles to communicate their ideas. These writers have produced many literary and creative forms. Writers deal with different aspects of life, writing helps to inspire the public. Jenny Nordberg is unique in her writings; she is a Swedish journalist from New York who is most famous for her book *The Underground Girls of Kabul: The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys*. She has many credits in her account of being a writer and also a producer of documentary film, based on the topics 'nuclear proliferation in Pakistan, refugees in Iraq and about the Europe's financial crisis. *The Underground Girls of Kabul* is her non-fictional work about the cultural practice in Afghanistan called 'bacha posh'. This paper titled, "Girls are De Rigueur to be Boys: An Anatomy of Gender Bending Cultural Practices in Jenny Nordberg's *The Underground Girls of Kabul*" to find out whether this practice empowers or weakens women.

Keywords: Bacha Posh, Cultural Practice, Afghanistan, Marginalization

Bacha Posh is a Persian word which literally means "dressed up as a boy". It is a cultural practice mainly in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The family which does not have any son will choose the younger daughter to live and behave as a boy. Bacha Posh solves the problem and the social stigma of not having any male child. The term 'bacha posh' is translated from a local Dari language. In order to raise the social standing, the parent's convert their daughters into a bacha posh. Having a male child is a matter of pride and utmost importance in the society, this custom provides social relief. Bacha Posh is a social tradition, where the girls are raised as boys.

The details of the custom has been documented at least one century ago, it is a much older cultural practice, practiced still today. Women disguising as men, this practice may or may not have started in order to be protected or fight during war time. Jenny Nordberg says, "The way I have come to see it now is that bacha posh is a missing piece in the history of women. We have an idea of how patriarchy was formed. But back then, a resistance was also born. Bacha Posh is both historical and present-day rejection of patriarchy by those who refuse to accept the ruling order for themselves and their daughters."

The Underground Girls of Kabul is her non-fictional work about the cultural practice in Afghanistan called 'bacha posh'. It was published in 2014 and is an investigation and survey that uncovers the hidden secret notions in Afghanistan. The book is all about the stories of women who are or who have been bacha posh, the victims of cultural practices. It is also about the mothers whose insight wishes is to considering her new born daughters as bacha posh. Some families who have only a daughter or multiple daughters and not have a son, they will designate their children as sons. The communities in which they live are aware about this practice. Afghanistan offers the child freedom and autonomy to grow up as a boy instead of as a girl. Both history as well as present reflects in her work.

The two main characters of the story are Mehran and Zahra. Mehran's mother Azita buys her daughter boys clothes and made her a hair cut to fit her appearance as a six year old boy. Azita wants her daughter to enjoy all the freedom to play sports, open communication and activities. But at the same time another bacha posh Zahra is a teenager. She wishes to remain a boy and does not enjoy the treatment of Afghan women. Her parents try to attempt to transition her into womanhood but

she defies. Zahra wants to experience whole freedom as a boy and she wants to support her without a marriage or a family.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, there is a societal custom in families the need to have a son to carry the family name and inherit the father's property. In the absence of a son, the family picks a daughter who dresses as a male. It is believed that having a bacha posh in the family brings good fortune and that in a subsequent pregnancy the mother would give birth to a son. As a bacha posh, the girl dress as a boy, has her hair cut short and uses male name. Many people, such as teachers, family friends will be aware that the child is actually a girl but the purpose of the practice is not deception. She will occupy an intermediate status in which she is treated as neither a daughter or nor fully as a son in her family, but like other girls she will not need to cook or clean. As a bacha posh, a girl is freer to attend school, run errands, and move very freely in public, she can escort her sisters to places. When she enters puberty, the girl's status as a bacha posh experiences great difficulty during the transition because as a bacha posh, she had enjoyed the freedom of a boy and she is forced to switch back adapting to the traditional constraints placed on women in Afghan society. According to the author Jenny Nordberg, "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." (13)

In every era of history, women who took the role of men, being a woman became very difficult to sustain. Jenny Nordberg found out that between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries there were hundreds of women who lived as men. Many were discovered as women only after their bodies were carried off from the battle field. There are many reasons for women to take male identity. Some wanted to support their families and themselves and others needed to escape from the harsh traditional norms.

Esmaeel came to the family through divine intervention, she explains. When her sixth daughter was born, this desperate mother decided that the child should be presented to the world as a son...Her mother had been told by friends and neighbors that if she were to turn her girl into a boy, it would bring her good luck. Good luck, in this case, was a real son...Telling her story of giving birth to a son after dressing a daughter as a boy for two years, the mother looks immensely pleased. Her sixth daughter, who had been a bacha posh, died shortly after her third birthday, but she had fulfilled a greater purpose. (68-69)

Gender and freedom are closely linked in between and freedom is very important idea in Afghanistan. Gender becomes a concern only after the achievement of freedom and bacha posh is actually a struggle for freedom. The average life expectancy of a woman is forty four years. If a girl is born in Afghanistan condemned to a half-life. There is deep gender discrimination and gender division, to which bacha posh can be a short-term alternative. The parents are unaware of its future consequences as the girl suffers psychological trauma, identity crisis and more. There are no exact numbers of bacha posh in the country because of the "don't ask, don't tell" norm. Each and every Afghan family will keep the secret of bacha posh child in their family.

Afghan families have many reasons for to pretend their girls as boys. According to the New York Times, "these are poverty and need for the girls to work outside home, social pressure to have sons and, in some cases, superstition that doing so can actually lead to the birth of a real boy." To make a girl child a Bacha Posh, it is not difficult. Just dress her in typical Afghan men's clothing and cut short her hair. There are no religious or legal formalities against the bacha posh practice in Afghanistan. Sons are most valuable in Afghanistan and only the boy child is permitted to inherit the father's wealth and pass down the family name; the families without sons are the objects of pity.

Although most societies are not comfortable with the cross-dressing, it is one form of victimizing women in Afghanistan. Afghan women comments, "freedom has a very simple meaning and that is to avoid unwanted marriage and to be able to leave the house. The girl child being a bacha posh is price to pay for freedom, to study, to have a profession and to marry. However, the girl as a

bacha posh always has the fear that her true identity would be discovered. There are also permanent psychological scars while the bacha posh transition back to reality.” Therefore, in a highly patriarchal male-dominated society, bacha posh is a struggle for freedom.

Neuroscientists agree with Dr. Fareiba’s observation that puberty is “a dangerous time for the mind”- or rather, that puberty is when the human brain expands and takes a huge leap forward, fueled by hormones, which help grow a personality and form a gender identity.

As Zahra’s situation shows, the experience of bacha posh also begins to leave a more permanent mark when a girl goes through puberty as a boy. As I encounter more adult women who have grown up as bacha posh, I note that those who herald their boy years usually experienced them only as children. Any potential empowering effects of living on the other side seem to be preserved in an adult woman only if her time as a boy was brief, and ended before puberty. After that, just as in the case with Zahra, it quickly becomes far more complicated. (147)

The practice of bacha posh is growing in prevalence. It is a widely accepted system and is considered as a solution to not having boy child. The practice is common because of the poor government record-keeping and there are no records of the number of bacha posh. Most girls find it hard to socialize again with girls after having lived as bacha posh for sometime because they feel comfortable with socializing among boys. For example, a girl named Kamala has sisters and not any brother. She supported the home by serving tea in a shop. Everyone including her relatives, customers knew she was a girl. But the customers found no problem and took her for a boy because she served their favorite drink by wearing masculine clothing and her hair was hidden under a hat. The shop manager would not have hired her if Kamala had not made up herself this way. There is a public notion that girls did not work and they stayed in the house. Of course, everyone knew that Kamala was a girl but they accept her only in her disguised way.

For a bacha posh it is very hard to change back to being girls because at the time of developing their personalities, they are boys, so they show boyish personalities. Some bacha posh feel their lost childhood memories as girls but others feel that it was good as a bacha posh by enjoying all the freedoms that they would not get living as a normal girl in Afghanistan. When they are transitioned back into a women’s role all the rights and privileges of the “boys” are taken away and the change itself can also be very hard. Once they have experienced freedom as a boy, many women do not want to go back.

Bacha Posh are usually switched back to girls when they are of marriageable age, their parents choose somebody whom they are forced to marry. Bacha Posh believed that once married they will be repressed and even abused by their husbands and society, so they do not want to get married. Actually, the fear of repression is according to Afghan culture places men over women in their hierarchy. Another problem is that they grew up as boys did not need to learn the typical household chores. This makes married life miserable for bacha posh girls; they do not know even the essential things women need to know.

In Afghanistan, as a boy being born with power doesn’t necessarily spur innovation. When a woman is born from the moment itself they must learn to survive. There is no need of much well intentioned training of Afghan women for survival. The controversy over the practice of bacha posh culture is that, whether this practice empowers women or it psychologically damaging. Many women who have experience or have gone through this process say they feel empowering as well as smothering. Life as a woman in Afghanistan is one of the most challenging situation. Some families in Afghan gave permission to elementary education of girls. Other families believe that to educate a girl is an unnecessary.

Child marriages are prevalent in Afghanistan. Around fifty percent of Afghan girls are married at the age of twelve. Most of the teenage girls are marry a man, who is far older than them. Many families forced their younger daughter into marriage because of the lack of security, risk of kidnapping and rape. Many parents compel their daughters to marry at young age itself in order to

avoid the poverty and the cost of caring for them. The wealthy family come and will pay a larger amount to the girl's father as a bride price. Married girls can't continue their education,

they remain illiterate. They have babies at a young age itself. It will increase the girl health problems. Pregnancy under the age of fourteen is very risk; it may lead to the death of child and mother. Afghanistan has lots of widows; many men were killed due to the war conflict. Another reason is the older husbands. Thirty five is the average age of an Afghan widow.

In a male dominated society women still have to struggle against many handicaps and social evils. Many evils were still prevails in the modern society. One of the greatest sons of India, Swami Vivekananda quoted that, "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved, it is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing." The most important tool for women empowerment is education. It gives the women, the correct idea of their rights and responsibilities.

In Afghanistan, there are plentiful accounts of oppressed women. Afghan women have become the world's stereotypical victims of male domination, ignorance, starving widows, under-age girl forced to marriage, high maternal death rates, rape, murder, incest, abductions, wife beatings, self-immolation, deprivation of education, burning of girl's schools, restricted mobility, hidebound religious belief and the bacha posh system. Afghan women are the direct and victims of all fighting in the country. The ideologies of regime in power and the different phases of the conflict have contributed to the suffering of Afghan women.

In different ways the gender conflicts affects people. It can influence behavior, dress and self-image and also it can change the mannerism of a person who wants to express his/her gender. Some people may want to cross- dress or change the expression for social acceptance. Some people with gender dysphoria may openly want to be affirmed in their gender and they may allow themselves to express their true selves. They were adopting a new first name of their experienced gender and they use clothes and hairstyles of the opposite gender. At the same time children with gender dysphoria express their wish to be the opposite gender. They prefer or demand the name, clothing, hairstyles and the behavior of the opposite gender.

Gender Dysphoria is not like that of gender nonconformity. When the gender assigned at birth does not match the gender norms expected they behave like adults belonging to the assigned gender. Gender non conformity is actually not a mental disorder and gender dysphoria is not at the same as that of gay or lesbian.

Afghan girls were dressed as boys and it is a recipe for gender dysphoria. Afghanistan is different from other countries being a boy is very different from being a girl in Afghanistan. When this bacha posh girls learn to live by a new set of rules as they choose the male gender. The Afghan-Society and their traditional folk mind believe that the bacha posh, as a son brings honor to the family. He can do whatever he likes. He can look into the eye of a man while they speak and can sit cross-legged in a room with the men. Actually, bacha posh is biologically female but masquerade as boy for their freedom and for the reputation of the family.

When the bacha posh girl reaches adolescence or transformed into a young woman. She must have to learn about her real gender but she is not sure or she can't understand her real gender-defined identity. Her way of speaking, her walk, her looks, her mobility outside the home and also from her head to toe she is made to change into being a young woman. She is made to change into modest clothing and has to allow her hair to grow out. Afghan girls relish their time as boys before reaching puberty. This sudden transition can be emotionally traumatic as it leads to an identity crisis on a young psyche. Most of the girls refuse to transition back, they wish to stay as a boy and this adjustment period can be very difficult. Marginalization is a kind of cruelty among particular group or a group of people who are considered 'the other' in the society by not allowing them to present actively. The society gives them a secondary position or makes them feels that they are less important than those people who hold more power. "The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of female begins when the doctor says, 'it's a girl'".

As Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* talks about the process of “othering” by the colonizer, the created weakness of the bacha posh are exaggerated to make their other or opposite appear to have more strength which resulted in thorough exploitation. The collective unconsciousness of the bacha posh psyche which carried insult and inferiority. When the bacha posh find their own dignity and begin to protest.

As a bacha posh some girls feels that they missed their childhood as girls and at the same time some girls enjoyed the freedom by being a boy. The family of these bacha posh girls feels very happy and proud.

The article published in ‘The Hindu’ dated 24 April 2018 is the real life story of a girl named Sitara Wafadar; has a victim of bacha posh culture. Sitara likes to live like other girls but for more than a decade she disguised herself as a boy in accordance to her parents wish. She has five sisters and no brothers and being a boy she performed all duties in the patriarchal country. According to Sitara, she says, ‘I never think I am a girl. My father always says, ‘Sitara is like my eldest son’ sometimes... I attend funerals as his eldest son. While most bacha posh stop dressing as a boy after reaching puberty. I keep wearing male clothing to protect myself at the brick kiln. When I go to work, most people do not realize that I am a girl. If they realized that an eighteen year old girl was working morning to evening in a brick factory then I would encounter many problems. I am kidnapped. I don’t feel ashamed about what I am doing but people of my age tell me you have reached puberty and now you don’t have to work at a brick factory. But what should I do? I don’t have any other choice.”

Sitara’s father Noor always had a feeling that god did not give him a son and he is forced to make his daughter to dress as a boy in order to help the family. He also says, “If I had a son I would not have faced all these problems.” But in the case of Sitara’s mother Fatima, she always wishes her daughter could stay at home and live like other girls by wearing female clothes. But at the same time she is in a dilemma that, her bacha posh daughter is very helpful to the family. Fatima says, “she bring groceries, take me to the doctor and do other work because my husband is old.”

Sitara Wafadar works at a brick factory in Sultanpur village in Afghanistan’s eastern Nangarhar province. Her life becomes darker by the gender twisting custom of bacha posh. Sitara wants to live like a woman and she knows that the situation is unjust but she knows that if she resigned from this culture her younger sister who is only thirteen years old will face the same fate that Sitara is experiencing. So for that reason Sitara tries to cope with the situation.

In Afghanistan, there is a celebrity bacha posh named Bibi Hakmina. She is a politician and very proud that once she has spent her life as a man. Gender roles are very strict in Afghanistan, a women feels that she is coming from a different planet. If a girl is forced to be a bacha posh, everybody from her family, teachers, relatives, neighbors, schoolmates are a part of this deception game. Even after identifying the child’s real gender, they all pretend the girl as a boy as they think that this culture is part of their traditional custom.

After attaining puberty, the sudden change of boy’s to girl’s attire will lead to a psychological trauma for the girl because she enjoyed all the freedom as a boy and this sudden transformation created anger and disappointment at the realization that the freedom once enjoyed would never come back. One unique thing in this bacha posh culture is that the child can experience the world through both male and female eyes.

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