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Autonomy, Post-puberty *Bacha Posh* and Third World Feminism in Selected Afghan Fiction

By Asma¹

Abstract

This paper examines the fictional representation of the ways in which Afghan girls attain autonomy in their post-puberty stage through the tradition of *bacha posh*² despite the traditional constraints to switch back to their gender at birth. This analysis of *bacha posh* characters in Ukmına Manoori's³ *I Am a Bacha Posh* and Zarghuna Kargar's *Bakhtawara's Story* attempts to demonstrate how the *bacha posh* tradition develops the potential for transgression in Afghan girls, fostering a resistance to traditional gender roles. In doing so, this paper challenges and rebuts Western feminist views regarding Afghan women, who are stereotyped as incapable, voiceless, and oppressed entities. By drawing upon Andrea Veltman and Mark Piper's notion of "autonomy," Marina Oshana's concept of commitment to feminism and autonomy, as well as the three intersecting elements of Catriona Mackenzie's concept of relational autonomy, i.e. "self-determination," "self-governance," and "self-authorization" (Mackenzie 15), this paper explores the autonomous nature of the *bacha posh* particularly after puberty in the Afghan context. This study highlights how the *bacha posh* tradition has proved to be an asset for these otherwise suppressed women by equipping them with confidence, determination, and authority. In doing so, this paper also aims at rebutting the criticism on *bacha posh* which has focused predominantly on its negative implications. This discussion also concentrates on how these Afghan girls utilize the tradition of *bacha posh* to improve the conditions of women in Afghanistan. The present research attempts at providing an intervention within the discourses surrounding post-puberty *bacha posh* identity. It not only explores a rather sensitive and provocative topic but also induces a shift within the perceptions regarding the *bacha posh* tradition and its ramifications. In doing so, this research serves as a key entry point for readers and counters misperceptions regarding this globally misunderstood Afghan tradition.

Keywords: *Bacha posh*, Post-puberty *Bacha posh*, Autonomy, Self-determination, Self-authorization, Self-governance, Feminism, Afghanistan, Qualitative research design

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² *Bacha posh* refers to an Afghan tradition in which the girls are dressed in boy's clothes in the absence of a son. They perform their identities as a male child, a male name is assigned, and they are introduced to society and extended families as their sons. As a *bacha posh*, these girls earn livelihood, escort the female members of their families, and protect family members

³ Ukmına Manoori is Afghan and is a *Bacha Posh*. She fought to maintain this status, which allowed her to do extraordinary things for her country. She has been elected to the board of Khost province. She resides in Afghanistan.

Introduction

Set against the background of staunch Afghan culture, the current study explores the old yet bold tradition of *bacha posh* in Ukmīna Manoori's and Zarghuna Kargar's novels, in order to study how absolute autonomy is constructed and maintained at a post-puberty stage in the life of *bacha posh*. In doing so, this research aims at emphasizing the freedom, power, and agency acquired by Afghan girls as a result of the *bacha posh* experience. It also explores how the *bacha posh* tradition is a medium for Afghan girls to metamorphose their personalities into confident, autonomous, and self-sufficient women. Keeping in view the *bacha posh* experience as a whole, this discussion challenges the notion that the *bacha posh* tradition is a degenerative process, which is largely seen as hindering the growth of women in Afghanistan. In doing so, I argue that the tradition is not solely a patriarchal construct, but it is rather an intervention of families to deal with practical issues of everyday life. I am mainly interested in rebutting Western feminists and native critics, who contend that *bacha posh* is a patriarchal tool for silencing Afghan women.

Ignoring the history and conditions of women in Afghanistan prior to the Cold War era, the Western media has represented Afghanistan as an inferno for women as indicated by Sarah Garden in "Meet the Afghan Girls Who Dress Like Boys | Bacha Posh." Whilst talking about the *bacha posh* tradition, Garden writes, "The UN recently branded Afghanistan the worst place to be born a woman." This degenerative and regressive image of Afghan women has prompted human rights activists and feminists to embark on a journey for the salvation of women in Afghanistan. In her book *The Underground Girls of Kabul, In Search of Hidden Resistance in Afghanistan*, Swedish journalist Jenny Nordberg has also highlighted the oppression of women by example of the *bacha posh*, whereby families without a son dress their daughters in boys' clothing and announce them as their sons to the world. This type of cross-dressing entails "little girls sporting closely cropped hair, dressed in boys' clothing and carrying male names" (Arbabzadah 96), who are then introduced as boys to the outside world. Nordberg has talked about the life of different *bacha posh* living in a war-torn Afghan society. However, this research contends that Nordberg has failed to comprehend the efficiency and benefits of the *bacha posh* tradition for the Afghan girls, especially after puberty. Moreover, this paper asserts that not only are the Western critics skeptical of the tradition, but the native writers have also largely highlighted the negative image of the tradition rather than viewing it as a form of women's empowerment. Keeping in view the depiction of *bacha posh* in the selected fiction, this paper proposes that Afghan culture, family systems, social structuring, religion, honor, and the ongoing war should be taken into account before criticizing the *bacha posh* tradition.

I Am a Bacha Posh by Manoori is the story of Ukmīna, a post-puberty *bacha posh* living in war-ridden Afghan society. In line with the tradition, Ukmīna is declared a boy by her family at the time of her birth. In the role of *bacha posh*, the protagonist wears masculine clothes, cuts her hair short, and takes on a masculine label. This life of a *bacha posh* provides Ukmīna with all the necessities of life and freedom, which are otherwise denied to women in Afghanistan. As a *bacha posh*, the personality of Ukmīna develops as a determined, autonomous, and self-sufficient individual unlike the ordinary girls in the *Pushtoon* culture. However, with the onset of puberty, these liberties cease to exist for the *bacha posh* as the tradition demands that the girls resume their feminine identity. Ukmīna is supposed to follow the same prescribed path but she maintains her masculine identity, thus accentuating her autonomous nature.

Bakhtawara's Story by Kargar is more or less similar to Ukmīna's narrative. The story begins in Khost province of Afghanistan, with Bakhtawara introduced as a *bacha posh* walking

through the dusty road towards home. As the story proceeds, it is revealed that Bakhtawara like many other girls in Afghanistan is converted into *bacha posh* by her father at the time of her birth. By doing so, she is granted the freedom to direct her life activities like earning a livelihood, free locomotion, and education. In accordance with the *bacha posh* tradition, these individuals must yield to their natal gender, but Bakhtawara also maintains her masculine identity with the permission of her family.

The present research is particularly concerned with the ways in which the autonomy of the *bacha posh* protagonists in Manoori's and Kargar's novels are determined not only by the social structure and interactions but also by the individual's choices, decisions, and financial position. This study draws its inspiration from theories of relational autonomy which focus on the personal as well as social contexts that make an individual autonomous. As Afghanistan is a country primarily dependent on communal roles and social interactions, *bacha posh* autonomy can be better understood in terms of relational autonomy. Among the relational theorists, Mackenzie's theory of relational autonomy is useful to understand how *bacha posh* individuals choose to remain autonomous rather than merely being controlled by patriarchy. The three relational elements of autonomy are self-determination (having the freedom and opportunities to make and enact choices), self-governance (having the skills and capabilities to make choices and enact decisions), and self-authorization (regarding oneself as authorized to exercise practical control over one's life and to determine one's own values) (Mackenzie 17-18). These three elements serve as a foundation to an understanding of autonomy exerted by the Afghan women protagonists in the selected texts. This paper argues that autonomy gained through the *bacha posh* tradition enables the protagonists to retain their masculine identities. In doing so, they refuse to comply with the traditional gender norms of their society. Therefore, it is claimed that despite being a patriarchal innovation, the *bacha posh* tradition eventually leads to the empowerment of women in Afghanistan, thus enabling them to resist patriarchal structures.

Autonomy and Post-puberty *Bacha Posh*

To study the autonomous nature of post-puberty *bacha posh* protagonists in both fictional texts, it is important to understand the concept of autonomy and its manifestation in the Afghan context specifically. Autonomy is a complex and multifaceted concept. Generally speaking, it means being independent and possessing the power to make one's own decisions. Moreover, it also refers to a person's capability to act according to personal standards, principles, and willpower. In her article "Autonomy, Vulnerability, and Gender," Pamela Sue Anderson defines autonomy thus: "To be autonomous is to be capable of making decisions and acting on the basis of motives, values or reasons that are one's own" (17).

In the case of Ukmina, the very existence of being a post-puberty *bacha posh* in the Afghan culture is in itself an act of autonomy. While the *bacha posh* tradition is a convention that is largely approved by the society, post-puberty *bacha posh* status is not socially sanctioned and thus should call for the society's disapproval. It is obligatory for girls to resume their feminine identity, as per the traditional requirements, which Kamala explains to Ukmina in the novel, "When you are ten years old, we will go back to being real girls" (Manoori and Lebron 150). However, Ukmina declines to abandon her *bacha posh* status despite her father's insistence. Manoori's protagonist is firm, persistent, and determined. Even as a child she is represented as a person who achieves what she desires. This is evident from the incident where Ukmina's friends comment on her getting permission to go to school. She was able to convince her father despite his reluctance, "you really are the most stubborn person that I know,

Hukamkhan!” (Manoori and Lebron 18). With this personality trait in mind, this study contends that Ukmīna is capable of making decisions independently. Moreover, *bacha posh* protagonists also have the strength to persevere in their decisions. At her father’s insistence that she resume her feminine identity, Ukmīna refuses to comply with his orders and responds, “you choose to make me your son now it is my choice to stay this way” (Manoori and Lebron 37) which gestures towards the fact that she has “the ability to make decisions” (Anderson 17). In this manner, she justifies her decision of choosing *bacha posh* identity, hence emphasizing the freedom and power she has had over her decisions for years.

The characters in Manoori’s and Kargar’s novels possess the ability to “shape their own lives” (Veltman and Piper 1) by deciding to retain their *bacha posh* identity. Moreover, they live truly according to their personal notions of life instead of “being directed by external forces” (Veltman and Piper 1), as depicted through Kargar’s titular protagonist Bakhtawara. Kargar has represented her as the one who exerts control and authority: “She was in charge of her own life. There was no one to tell her what to do” (Kargar 240). Both the characters in the selected novels resist the enforcement of feminine identity that attempts to “manipulate and distort” (Veltman and Piper 1) their personalities by abruptly switching them back into a feminine persona after years of living as a boy. Forcing a *bacha posh* to resume feminine identity after puberty leads to serious psychological implications, which in most cases is gender dysphoria,⁴ an identity disorder. Gender dysphoria as a psychological outcome of the *bacha posh* tradition has also been discussed by J. Rajasree Menon who states that “through the cultural practice *bacha posh* system, Afghan girls feel gender dysphoria at the time of their puberty. They can’t adjust with their female gender” (1920). This disrupting effect of sudden reversal on post-puberty *bacha posh* is illustrated in the case of Kamala, a former *bacha posh* but now an ordinary married Afghan girl. Kamala suffers difficulty in resuming her feminine identity. Moreover, she feels as if she is pretending her identity as a woman which she confesses before Ukmīna, “my life would now be disguised and I would have to act, to pretend, pretend to be a woman” (Manoori and Lebron 77-78). As *bacha posh*, she was unaccustomed to the roles and upbringing of ordinary girls in Afghanistan who are supposed to do the household chores, be submissive, obedient, and voiceless. Kamala, as a *bacha posh*, was not trained according to the ideals of feminine gender as she states, “I have not been educated as a girl . . . I did not know how to cook, or prepare tea, or sew. I never imagined touching the body of a man” (Manoori and Lebron 77). Therefore, she was unable to fit in the role of a woman both physically and emotionally. As a result, Kamala is confused about her real identity as she reveals in her conversation with Ukmīna: “me, I do not know anymore who I am” (Manoori and Lebron 78). It is precisely this gender dysphoria which Ukmīna and Bakhtawara avoid by maintaining their *bacha posh* status after puberty.

The post-puberty *bacha posh* is not only “capable of making decisions” (Anderson 17) for themselves, but in fact they also have the capability of making decisions for others too. The protagonists in the selected fictions have earned the status of decision-makers for their people by becoming part of the power structure called *Jirga*.⁵ *Jirga* is the highest judiciary system of the *Pushtoon* society where all matters regarding the community or family are presented and resolved. In one of the episodes of Kargar’s novel, *Jirga* plays a crucial role in sorting out their

⁴ Gender dysphoria is a psychological trauma of a person who feels emotionally and psychologically to be a different gender than the one they were assigned at birth.

⁵ The *Jirga* is a council of the *Pustuns* at the village or regional level that has the authority to settle a dispute in a way acceptable to both parties. The *Jirga* council is a legislative authority in *Pushtunwali* that consists of the prominent members of the tribe who are well known for their authority and honor. The authority and honor of a member is determined by the extent to which he himself follows the rule of *Pushtunwali*.

problems as evident through the narrator's voice, "people solve their daily problems by calling a Jirgah . . . if a family has a money quarrel or a family argument over the land they won't go to the government but instead will summon the Jirgah" (Kargar 222). Keeping in view the nature and importance of the *Jirga* system, I argue that Bakhtawara was capable of making decisions for others as she was a prominent member of the *Jirga*. In her role as a *Jirga* member, Bakhtawara's decisions were valued. The *Jirga* was held to sort out the land dispute between two brothers who wanted an equal share of the land, although one brother had worked more over the land than the other. "Many of the men who were present in the *Jirga* agreed with Hajiani Bakhtawara's suggestion" (Kargar 233) of dividing the land and house equally among the two brothers and of making one brother pay money to the other for the work he had done in the house. Moreover, the conversation with her sister-in-law also indicates that she has been sorting out important matters at the *Jirga* as she responds, "Tomorrow, I have to get up early as the *Jirga* hasn't finished hearing the dispute between the two families" (Kargar 225) which is indicative of her decisive power, ability, and authority. In the context of being a *Jirga* member, this paper argues that Bakhtawara possessed what Mackenzie calls "personal liberties" which are "freedom of movement (if not international movement), freedom of sexual expression, and freedom from all forms of coercion, manipulation, exploitation, and violence, including sexual exploitation and assault" (Mackenzie 26). These personal liberties of self-determination that are necessary for the attainment of autonomy suggest that Bakhtawara is liberated from external manipulation and thus an autonomous entity.

Likewise, Ukmina in Manoori's *I Am a Bacha Posh* is also represented as the one who is elected as the member of the council of Khost province. This position and status give her the authorial power to make decisions for the well-being of her community. In her role as a member of the council and head of the women's affairs, she is responsible for resolving the problems of her people which she performs with honesty and confidence: "I listened for hours to stories and complaints of violent husbands, girls being forcibly married, evil mothers; widows came begging with their children saying they did not know what to do" (Manoori and Lebron 112). It is not only women's issues which Ukmina sorts out as a representative of the council. Men also approach her to discuss their problems as she says, "a man came to see us. He asked us for protection because of a dispute with one of his neighbors" (Manoori and Lebron 117). This *bacha posh* protagonist clearly possesses authority as people come to her from across the country and her decisions are accepted wholeheartedly.

Manoori's protagonist, a post-puberty *bacha posh*, is portrayed as an individual who has complete "control of her circumstances" (Veltman and Piper 1). The capability of exercising freedom is rooted in both Ukmina's and Bakhtawara's characters. These protagonists vividly display "self-determination" (Mackenzie 15) by retaining their *bacha posh* identity despite opposition from the society, which according to Mackenzie, is "having the freedom and opportunities to make and enact choices of practical identities" (Mackenzie 17). Ukmina, in sustaining her *bacha posh* identity, rejects her father's order in a steadfast tone, saying "I will not change (Manoori and Lebron 79) exemplifying that she possesses what Mackenzie calls "self-determination." In a similar manner, Ukmina also declines the prospects of marriage in a determined tone as she declares, "I prefer not to have a husband and choose my life" (Manoori and Lebron 37). This freedom of choice and decision-making by Ukmina is expressive of Mackenzie's "freedom conditions" which include "freedom of thought and expression and freedom of association" (Mackenzie 25). Likewise, Bakhtawara also possesses "freedom conditions" which is evident through her character representation as the one who "had gained a

kind of freedom no other Afghan women could ever hope to attain” (Kargar 224). These decisions and freedom of the protagonists further strengthens their personalities as autonomous individuals.

The availability and relevance of options in a specific culture determine the decision-making ability of an individual. In the case of post-puberty *bacha posh*, I argue that the options and choices are determined by the rigidity and extreme segregation of Afghan society. Afghanistan is predominantly a gender-segregated society with fixed gender roles, values, and norms assigned to each gender. Wimpelmann Toruun in *The Price of Protection: Gender, Violence and Power in Afghanistan*, while discussing the historical lineage of gender roles, highlights the importance and level of segregation in the *Pushtoon* culture as he states, “the ideal of gender roles and of keeping boundaries between the inside and the outside amount to a system of segregation along gender lines” (57). Owing to this segregation, Manoori’s and Kargar’s protagonists perform both gender roles so as to be accepted by society. This performance of both gender roles results in the availability of options of choosing any gendered identity in a particular situation, therefore making the “options realistic and unobstructed” (Oshana 90) for them. In the context of Manoori’s and Kargar’s fiction, I also assert that the performance of both gender roles results in the provision of an “adequate array of significant opportunities” (Mackenzie 27). This is manifested through the incident of voting whereby Ukmīna chooses to register herself as a man—“I went to the men’s side” (Manoori and Lebron 86)—although women had the right to register votes. Moreover, she let her photo be taken at the time of registration which is otherwise discouraged for women especially during the Taliban era. This availability and relevance of different opportunities in the case of *bacha posh* protagonists demonstrate their autonomy which equips them with reasoning ability to justify their post-puberty *bacha posh* state.

The protagonists in the selected fiction perform both masculine and feminine gender roles, hence exercising “self-authorization” defined as the ability “to determine one’s own reasons for action and to define one’s values and identity-shaping” (Veltman and Piper 18). Ukmīna reflects on her life, “I was a human being who would build her own destiny” (Manoori and Lebron 38). Moreover, Ukmīna’s reason to retain post-puberty *bacha posh* identity is to be free and independent as she expresses while arguing with the *Mullah*.⁶ She says, “I want to be free like men” (Manoori and Lebron 26), therefore exercising control and authority in her own domain. Ukmīna’s reasoning for retaining *bacha posh* identity is the outcome of self-authorization, which according to Mackenzie is “being prepared to provide reasons for our beliefs, values and being able to defend or revise them in the light of critical questioning” (Mackenzie 36). Furthermore, employing critical questioning, Ukmīna challenges her society by stating that it had no objection to the *bacha posh* tradition before puberty but suddenly everyone labels it wrong post-puberty. In one of the episodes, she even challenges the religious leaders, who consider dressing as a boy a sin. The religious leaders say, “it is a sin to remain dressed as you are. You must become a woman” (Manoori and Lebron 25), to which she argues: “throughout my childhood, I saw no wrong in wearing boy’s clothes, those that my parent gave me. And now in the eyes of my father, in the eyes of Allah, I was the incarnation of evil” (Manoori and Lebron 25). So, it is evident that the decisions of post-puberty *bacha posh* in this novel are driven by critical thinking and rationality.

In analyzing the importance of reasoning for autonomy in the cases of Ukmīna and Bakhtawara, this study utilizes Formosa Paul’s view that autonomy of will requires to “regulate yourself in accordance with reason” (194). This sense of regarding oneself as responsible for

⁶ *Mullah* is an educated Muslim trained in religious law and doctrine and usually holding an official post.

one's actions is elucidated in one of the episodes of Manoori's *I Am a Bacha Posh* when the religious leader at the *shura* (council) comments on Ukmīna's life. He explains to the members of the *shura* about the choices, reasons, and consequences of Ukmīna's decision of retaining *bacha posh* identity: "She chose to keep this appearance of a man . . . She is not married; she has paid the price and that is her choice" (Manoori and Lebron 111). As cited by Mackenzie, Westland views self-authorization as a "disposition to be answerable that we are prepared to take responsibility as agents for our beliefs, values, and commitments" (Mackenzie 36). This idea of answerability is manifested by Ukmīna numerous times. She does not blame anyone for her conditions and decisions, and neither does she regret her decisions. Moreover, Ukmīna's argument with the religious leader, who is trying to convince her to resume feminine identity, exemplifies the "accountability condition" which Mackenzie defines as "the kind of agent who can be held accountable and answerable to others for her reasons" (Mackenzie 35). This reasoning and accountability are also expressed in the incident where Ukmīna's brother is explaining to her that she should repent for her sin, the sin for dressing as a male before performing *Hajj* (pilgrimage). At this, Ukmīna reacts by arguing "Who said I live in sins? The mullahs? I do not listen to them. I will see him" (Manoori and Lebron 98). She is only willing to be accountable for her decisions to God only and nobody else. In doing so, she is prepared for any punishment God decides for her as she voices at the time of *Hajj*, where she is urging God to show some indication in her body that she is committing a sin: "I was quiet then. I concentrated. I was expectant" (Manoori 106). So, it is evident that Manoori's and Kargar's protagonists owned their decisions and the consequences of these decisions, which equips them with self-esteem.

In Manoori's *I Am a Bacha Posh*, Ukmīna's personality is governed by the idea of self-esteem and self-respect. Throughout the fiction, she repeatedly refers to her choice of retaining post-puberty *bacha posh* status as attributed to her self-respect. In the conversation with her childhood friend and a former *bacha posh*, Ukmīna explains that it was not easy for her to renounce her *bacha posh* status because it would be a kind "of shame" (Manoori and Lebron 72), a "self-evaluative attitude" which Mackenzie defines as standing "in certain self-effective relations to [one]self, in particular, relation of self-respect, self-trust, and self-esteem" (35). Ukmīna's comment, "I am at peace with myself" (Manoori and Lebron 79), is indicative of the fact that she resists anything that distorts her self-esteem. Through the novel, Ukmīna refers to herself as a confident, bold and determined individual because rebelling against society particular in the Afghan context is severely risky: "Because I am the bravest woman; the others would not do this – they do not have the courage. I have it for them" (130). Similarly, at another instance, she defends her choice of *bacha posh* in these words: "They all gave it up. Me, I have the courage not to do that" (Manoori and Lebron 92). Her words are in accordance with Trudy Govier's view of self-trust as a "necessary condition of autonomy" (99). Moreover, Ukmīna is also aware of her capabilities and strengths: "I knew that I had the determination of a man" (Manoori and Lebron 38). In order to be autonomous, people need to be aware of their capabilities because self-awareness leads to trust and respect for oneself as well as respect from others.

Keeping in view self-respect and social respect, this research emphasizes that Manoori's and Kargar's protagonists are respected in their society as "having social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others" (Mackenzie 34). Ukmīna is accepted by both genders in society, and she notes that nobody objects to her choice of post-puberty *bacha posh* identity: "Each one said I was one of

them” (Manoori and Lebron 109). This acceptance by society is what Mackenzie calls a “social recognition condition.” Comparably, Bakhtawara also has the social respect afforded to men, such as offering a seat to them, standing for them and serving them food, as evidenced when “Her sister in-law stood up and offered her seat to Bakhtawara as a mark of respect” (Kargar 224). Respect is not limited to the household only, since “The villagers stood up out of respect” (Kargar 241) thus making her an autonomous and respected individual in society.

Post-puberty *Bacha Posh* as Exponents of Women’s Rights

The discussion in this section is concerned with emphasizing the role of post-puberty *bacha posh* individuals in improving the condition of women in Afghanistan. Critics are of the view that the freedom and power brought about by the *bacha posh* tradition is short-term and limited. As Sawitri argues, “being Bacha Posh might be empowering, but it is temporary” (Sawitri 15). Moreover, it is believed that the tradition further strengthens the gender inequalities of patriarchy and reinforces the general notion that men are superior to women, by making these girls wear masculine clothes. However, the families and societies practicing the tradition regard it a step forward in enabling women to voice themselves and fight for their rights. The usefulness of *bacha posh* is expressed in the famous Afghan saying quoted by Sawitri in *Cultural and International Dissonance on Girls Empowerment: the case of Afghanistan’s Female Son*: “women are made for homes or graves; bacha posh has proven the opposite” (20). Furthermore, it helps in making the women break their silence and become independent, powerful, and dominating. As the protagonist of Manoori’s fiction states, “To fulfill my life, I needed to help women, make the invisible visible” (Manoori and Lebron 80). The *bacha posh* individual dedicates themselves to women’s rights and empowerment in Afghanistan which is only possible for them because they are *bacha posh* girls and not ordinary Afghan girls.

In a society engulfed with gender inequality, the *bacha posh* tradition is a unique way of challenging patriarchal structures. Families choose to make their girls *bacha posh* to provide basic rights to their daughters which are otherwise denied to girls in Afghanistan. As the Swedish writer Nordberg notes, “Their mother wants to instill some strength in the girls by raising them as boys at first” (Nordberg 133). To be a woman in Afghanistan means to be bound with numerous chains and restrictions. The women are kept subdued and oppressed, and they do not have any respect or value in the society. Therefore, the community has come up with its own unique solution to make women strong, and that is *bacha posh*. As expressed in Nordberg’s work by Azita the female parliamentarian and a former *bacha posh*, “being a bacha posh should not be seen as anything other than a useful and character strengthening education” (133). Taking into account this aspect of the tradition, Azita also converts her daughter to a *bacha posh*. The Afghan society and individuals do not consider it as something demeaning, but rather as a way of showing one’s determination, ability, and freedom, as Spoz points out: “It is only important to be ‘Bacha Posh’ in the head, to know you can do anything” (Nordberg 136). For them, there is no doubt that they are women, but to avoid the constraints, restrictions, and stigma associated with feminine gender roles, they prefer to be *bacha posh*, in order to be independent, self-sufficient entities. Individuals who are or were former *bacha posh* reject the delimiting regulations of Afghan society and have the strength to put forth their opinions. They are no longer the traditional girls which Afghan society wants them to be. This is evident in the case of Manoori’s protagonist who argues that “Girls who have grown up as boys cannot become women like the others, the invisible who keep silent” (Manoori and Lebron 78). Kargar’s *Bakhtawara’s Story* also highlights this aspect: “She has gained a kind of freedom no other Afghan women could

ever hope to attain” (Kargar 224). So, this freedom was only attainable because of the *bacha posh* tradition which is otherwise nonexistent for the women in Afghanistan. The Afghan patriarchy does not see the *bacha posh* tradition as a threat to their system of hierarchies. Because it is a tradition sanctioned by society, anything which is part of the culture is accepted with little opposition. For them, *bacha posh* simply means to survive in the society engulfed in never-ending war: “It serves as a portrayal of Afghan families who cleverly resist the rigid societal norms in the midst of constant wars and destruction” (Sawitri 20). It is a struggle not simply against patriarchy but also against the constant state of uncertainty and war in Afghanistan.

Arbabzadah, in his book *Afghan Rumour Bazaar: Secret Sub-cultures, Hidden Worlds and the Everyday Life of the Absurd*, calls the tradition a medium to adjust to the rigidity of Afghan society, “Bacha posh is one way of adapting to a rigid social environment” (97). It is by means of this tradition that the women show their agency, skills, and capabilities. With its assistance, women generate their role and agency in the society as evident in the fact that Azita Rafat is selected as a member of Parliament just because she was a former *bacha posh*. Similarly, in Manoori’s fiction, the narrator Ukmīna is chosen the representative of Khost province because she was a post-puberty *bacha posh* who was accepted and respected by both genders. She “was in charge of the women’s affairs” (Manoori and Lebron 112), dealing with their everyday problems like domestic violence and property rights in her role as a member of the *shura*. Ukmīna attempted to solve the problems of women of Afghanistan: “I would defend the interests of the lesser people, which is what we were” (Manoori and Lebron 96). Therefore, it is clearly evident from the selected works that the *bacha posh* tradition serves the empowerment of women.

By focusing on the empowering aspect of the *bacha posh* tradition, this study of Manoori’s and Kargar’s work has explored how the *bacha posh* tradition equips Afghan girls with autonomy, freedom, and agency. It has also indicated the ability, power, and creativity of the *bacha posh* individuals in dealing with conflicts both within and outside. Moreover, this article has also deconstructed the image of the *bacha posh* tradition as a degenerative process, which is seen as hindering the growth of women in Afghanistan. Situating *bacha posh* tradition in such a context has enabled me to challenge both foreign and local critiques of *bacha posh*. So, this paper contends that as *bacha posh*, these Afghan girls are promoting women’s rights, which they would have not achieved as ordinary girls. This is because girls in patriarchal societies like Afghanistan are conditioned to be submissive, passive, and shy, unlike *bacha posh* girls who are far more confident, strong, and vocal. Furthermore, this study highlights how *bacha posh* becomes an important component for Afghan women in eroding gender inequalities in Afghanistan specifically during war. It helps in strengthening women’s role in society even if it through disguise as men. This study reveals that even in societies so traditional and rigid there are mediums to bend the system for voicing oneself. I contend that these Afghan girls as *bacha posh* are more equipped to fight the oppressive system of a patriarchal culture.

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