

Bacha Posh: A Cultural Practice in Afghanistan as Seen in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*: Resilience against Patriarchy

Seswita

{seswita.sasingunand@gmail.com}

Universitas Andalas, Padang, Indonesia

Abstract. Bacha Posh is a cultural phenomenon where a young girl is dressed and raised as a boy until she reaches a marriageable age or puberty by a family with no sons for the sake of a better future. This term considers being one of the cultural practices in Afghanistan, which is famously known as a Patriarchal country. *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* is written by Nadia Hashimi and presents two female characters that follow this tradition to survive and get a proper life in the family. This research depicts how the practice of Bacha Posh is claimed to save a daughter in a family from the perspective of Patriarchy and its impact on the psychological side. The article then presents a brief overview of Patriarchy's restraint in Afghanistan, which later evoked this practice (Bacha Posh) to be well-known in society. This article focuses more on gender and identity, which relate to the psychological issue within the main female characters. The psychology of gender and women has been investigated in many specific areas. In this case, it will discuss how the phenomena of Bacha Posh affected the psychology of the female characters represented by the two female characters, Rahima and Syeqiba. This phenomenon happens in Afghanistan in which girls are dressed and raised as boys to get a better life. This research concludes that Bacha Posh in this novel gives better opportunities for the female characters' lives socially and psychologically by leading them into modern and intelligent women in their era. By following this cultural tradition, Rahima can pursue her dreams to be a politician. She managed to be chosen as a member of parliament due to her experience at school during childhood. This article also depicts the ideology behind the Bacha Posh by showing its positive impact, which gives the girls the opportunity to support the family income by having a job, having a long-term chance at school, and pursuing their dreams for a better life.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Bacha Posh, cultural phenomena, feminist-psychology, gender, Patriarchy

1 Introduction

Afghanistan is one of the countries where women are struggling against Patriarchy. It may be the only country in the world in which over the last century, kings and Politicians have been made and unperformed by struggles referring to women's status. Lately, the situation of women under Taliban rule has been the main point. The role of women rose to symbolize the Western

military powers; a justification of war in the name of freedom of women. Although the situation of Afghan women may alter according to different ethnic groups and social-practical contexts, it is similar in essential aspects.

The extended family, lineage, or sub-lineage (Chaum) give an important role in the traditional Afghan social order based on kinship relations. The patrilineal own circle of relatives is thus, to a big extent, the point of interest and the primary framework of private and social identification to its members [1]. Women's steadiness, particularly in rural settings, is often highly strained due to the concerns about policing women's sexuality and maintaining the family's honor, leading to purdah or the 'protection' and control of women through seclusion and veiling[2]. It is in the Mujahideen regime (1992–1996) and Taliban regime (1996–2001) where women's mobility became strictly controlled, mainly under the recent era, with the Taliban authorities introducing and evoking an extensive adjustment that it is prohibit for women to leave the house without a mahram (male relative)[3].

Based on the situation, many families worried about their daughters, and Bacha Posh has been a good solution. The Bacha Posh will be girls again, usually in the age of 10 or 11, a phase where they have reached puberty. Nashimi (2014:2) states that Afghanistan is a patriarchal society where men control significant institutions. Since 2001, many efforts have been accomplished to uplift women and improvements detected; thus, the main principal of discrimination against women have now no longer been uprooted[4].

Furthermore, Povey (2004:6) invigorates that patriarchal belief and designs stay extraordinarily sturdy in Afghanistan. Afghan women confront and cope against various types of power (masculinity, traditions, religion, age, national and international). It determines that the women in Afghanistan are afflicted by the social rule that were created by the men in the patriarchal society. The men have their strength to manipulate over the women. Sultana (2010: 3) states, the patriarchal hierarchy is defined by strength, control, hierarchy, and attitudes in which men dictate, harass, and utilize women. Hence, Patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices wherein men dominate, oppress and exploit women

On the other hand, Bacha Posh is a cultural phenomenon in Afghanistan that started in ancient times and is still adopted up to the present. It is literally a term translated from the local Dari language, "a girl dressed like a boy." Not only just dressed as a boy, but the girl is also raised as a boy until she reaches a marriageable age or puberty by a family with no sons for the sake of a better future. Parents who only have daughters prefer to adapt this practice by converting one into a Bacha Posh to rise their social status and provide social relief. A daughter's birth in a family is considered a piece of bad luck, especially if the family has no sons. This situation leads the parent to follow the cultural practice, Bacha Posh, to save the family's dignity. It is claimed to keep the girls from acquiring education and supporting the family through employment and income generation.

According to Nordberg, there are various reasons why a few families raise girls as boys in Afghanistan. The main point is to break out the social stigma a family may practice from having no boys and the tension given on families to bear at least one boy: Nordberg (2014, 24) states, "Having a girl's son was way better than none". Many families treat and change daughters as sons as it is believed to bring good luck for the future births of a son[5]. The alteration of changing a girl may be complicated for the Bacha posh's perpetrator as she wants to keep being a boy. This conversion often creates further problem for the girls who had extra capability and flexibility in the phase of childhood, best to have this freedom limited whilst required to re-undertake a female identification and constantly being organized for marriage a brief time after turning into a girl again[6].

Nadia Hashimi is an American-Afghan-born writer who attracts on her Afghan culture to craft internationally bestselling books for adults and younger readers. Her novels cover generations and continents, taking on themes like forced migration, conflict, poverty, misogyny, colonialism, and addiction. She was born and raised in New York and New Jersey. Her parents left Afghanistan in the beginning of 1970s, before the Soviet aggression. Her mother, the granddaughter of a famous Afghan poet, flown to Europe to obtain a Master's degree in civil engineering. At the same time, her father arrived and lived in the United States and worked hard to achieve his American dream and build a new, better life for his immediate and extended family. Nadia was lucky enough to be enclosed with her extended while keeping the Afghan culture an integral part of their daily lives.

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell is one of her novels reflecting the burden of living in a patriarchal society. The novel depicted women of two generations who struggle for their lives in a patriarchal society. Both characters experience complex lives under Patriarchy; however, they strive to change their fate and gain their freedom. This novel talks about two women in different times who survive in the oppression of Patriarchy when the Taliban rules Kabul. Shekiba, a woman who lives in the early nineteenth century, was left orphaned by epidemic cholera.

She saved herself and built a new life from the deprivation of living in a rural village to the luxury of a king's palace in the bustling metropolis of Kabul. While in the early twentieth century, Rahima, with her sisters, lived with a drug-addicted father with no brothers can hardly leave the house or go to school. Their only hope is only in the ancient Afghan practice, which is Bacha posh, which permits young Rahima to dress and treat as a son until she reaches marriageable age. As a boy, she has the previously unimaginable freedom, which is the freedom that transforms her forever[7].

Based on the explanation above, this article identifies the phenomena of Bacha Posh in the novel and analyzes its impact through the perspective of feminist psychology. Rahima is the female character turning into a Bacha Posh until she reaches the age of thirteen, which is considered too late and becomes a big sin for the family. In contrast, Shekiba became a bacha posh to camouflage and covered up her deformed face for the sake of saving her life. Hence, this article discusses Rahima's process as a bacha posh.

2 Methodology

The present study is intended to explore Bacha Posh as a cultural phenomenon in Afghanistan, as seen in Nadia Hashimi's novel, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*. The analysis of the novel is conducted based on the following statements:

- a. The issue of Bacha Posh and Patriarchy in the novel
- b. Bacha Posh as resilience against Patriarchy

The issue of Bacha posh and Patriarchy in the novel is discussed by presenting how the family in the novel adapted the value of Patriarchy and performed the cultural practice of Bacha posh. As in the next step, the article mainly discusses how the Bacha posh becomes a resilient tool against the Patriarchy. The research is adopting qualitative research using Extrinsic approach (Gay et al.,2000) by applying the close reading method suggested by Jacobus (2001). The study defines the outcome of Bacha Posh seen in the novel as resilience against Patriarchy based on Millet (1970) and guided by the feminist psychology viewed by Marecek (2017).

Kate Millet is one of the American feminists who argue that Patriarchy deals with politics and its issue. Millet (1970: 52) depicts the term politic as the power-structured affair by which another controls one group of persons. In terms of women's struggle in a patriarchal society, Millet states that women should be aware of their situation both in society and at home, form their self-consciousness as women, demand equality with men, and obtain autonomy. Resistance is the only solution to gain equality, dignity, and rights (such as the right to education, freedom to birth control, right to divorce, and participation in decision-making)[8].

Millet also announces her view of 'patriarchy,' which she sees as pervasive and expect 'a systematic analysis – as a political system.' Patriarchy demeans the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male. This power is strained directly, or indirectly, in civil and domestic life to constrain women[9].

When it comes to feminist psychology, the essential yet fundamental thing to discuss is that it is a branch of psychology concerned with gender, sex categories, and sexualities. It includes academic researchers and practitioners (i.e., psychotherapists and counselors). A commitment to social justice often fuels feminist scholarship. Feminist psychologists have confronted cultural beliefs about innate female nature and unfair stereotypes about various groups of women. It has enlightened the lives of women and girls across the social cycle. Feminists have also considered the part that gender plays in distributing power in a population. In clinical psychology, feminists have asserted the connection between psychological suffering and social context, with some focusing on experiences of sexual abuse and intimate violence[10].

This article explores both Patriarchy and the term bacha posh in Afghanistan through historical data from some trusted sources. This Bacha posh claims to be a solution for the Patriarchal system that considers victimizing the female characters in the story.

3 Result and Discussion

The article's discussion is divided into two points: First, the issue of Bacha Posh and Patriarchy in the novel and second, Bacha Posh as resilience against Patriarchy. The analysis is as follows:

3.1 The issue of Bacha Posh and Patriarchy in the novel

As mentioned before, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* depicted Bacha Posh through the image of one of the main female characters, Rahima. Rahima is a bright girl who lives with her parents and her four sisters. Her father allows the girls to go to school, but he worried about their safety every time they returned home since many boys in their neighbourhood always chase and disturb the girls.

This situation happens when Afghanistan is under the regime of the Taliban. Taliban's system limits the access for women. They are unallowed to study at school and asked to remain at home. Hence, Rahima and her sisters have to give up on their education. The main reason they stop going to school is that the boys disturb them, as the quotation show below:

“He wanted us to go to school but struggle to make that happen safely. How would it look for his daughters to be chased by local boys for all to see? Awful. "If I had a son, this would not be happening! Goddamn it! Why do we have a house full of girls! Not one, not two –but five of them!" he would yell. Madar-jan would busy herself with housework, feeling the weight of disappointment on her shoulders (Hashimi, 2014:5).

The quotation above shows Rahima's father's anger at his wife and blames her for not being able to bear a son for him. In Afghanistan's patriarchal society, economic dependency on men and social stigma put parents in difficulty. Daughters are often considered a burden, while a son will earn money, carry on the family legacy and stay home to care for their aging parents[11].

Patriarchy has become the main reason for this Bacha Posh's and preserves in Afghanistan, and Hashimi, as an author, brings out this issue to her story. Patriarchal culture makes violence a standard action to punish women. It can be seen through the female characters in the story, especially the character of Madar-jan, who is constantly abused by her husband, padar-jan. As the leading figure in the house, Rahima's father has the strength to control the family using offenses.

Rahima witnesses his acts toward her mother. As a powerless woman, she cannot do anything to prevent his action. Even Rahima's mother told her that men are powerful, "Men are unpredictable creatures," she said, her voice tired and defeated, "God knows what he'll do" (Hashimi, 2014:107). Rahima was trained to be devoted and loyal to men, especially her father. The patriarchal value is clearly seen throughout the story as it reflects the society in Kabul during that time.

The decision to have Rahima as Bacha posh comes from Khala Shaima, Rahima's unmarried aunt who has a physical disability. She is an intelligent and critical woman who loves her sister and nieces, constantly visits their house, and asks for their news and health. Fully aware of her physical deficiency, Shaima chooses not to put hope in getting married and taking care of her parents and nieces instead. She likes to tell a story about her great grandmother, Shekiba, to Rahima and her sisters. Shaima is also the one who advises Rahima to keep going to school and learn as many things as she can because she sees hope in her favorite niece.

The quotation below can support the analysis:

"The girls need a brother."

"That's what you've come here to tell me! That we need a son? Don't you think I know that? If your sister were a better wife, then maybe I would have one!"

That night Khala Shaima started a story of my great-great-grandmother Shekiba, which my sisters and I had never heard before. A story that transformed me. (Hashimi,2014:12)

The quotation above shows it was Shaima's idea to change one of the girls in the family to be a Bacha posh. The first line of the quotation emphasizes that one of the girls needs to be "changed" into a boy so that the family may still have pride and the girls can get back to school as they have a "brother" to take care of them.

In Afghanistan, as well as in many other Islamic countries, women are generally assumed to be assisted by a mahram when they are in public. In a situation wherein there are few boys in the household and/or the male head of household must be in charge to escort more than one wife, this may limit women's opportunity to move and expand. It is conceivable that raising a girl as a boy may enhance further mahrams to escort women blatantly, notably if women have less sons convenient to help this task[12].

One of the main reasons Rahima's mother insists her husband accept her sister's idea is to provide their daughters with a good chance of getting an education at school; the Bacha posh can walk the sisters to school and help her run errands to the store. At first, padar-jan did not agree with the idea, but mother-jan manages to convince him and let her "change" Rahima into Rahim, as can be seen in the quotations below:

"We could change your clothes, and we'll give you a new name. You'll be able to run into the store any time we need something. You could play games. How does that sound?" (Hashimi,2014:23)

"Yes, she is now your brother, Rahim. You will forget about your sister Rahima and welcome your brother. Can you do that, girls? You must speak only of your brother, Rahim, and never mention that you have another sister". (Hashimi,2014:36)

The quotations are dialogue from madar-jan to Rahima and her other sisters when she finishes changing the look of Rahima or Rahim. She asked all the family members to "forget' Rahima and change it to Rahim instead.

According to a trusted source, it is mentioned that obtaining education is becoming the best solution to rescue women from male domination. Only 40% of Afghan girls drop in elementary school, and only one in 20 girls catch school beyond the sixth grade. Some of Afghan families will only allow their daughters to attend all-girls schools near home which is rare. Other families believe girls do not have to be well educated[13]. Patriarchy has been firmly rooted in Afghanistan from ancient times until nowadays. Through her novel, Hashimi tries to deliver her idea, voice, and reactions to the uprooted system in her mainland country, Afghanistan. The image of madar-jan and all the female characters in the story are described as victims of Patriarchy.

3.2 Bacha Posh as resilience against Patriarchy

In the perspective of feminist psychology, the term resilience is substantially tangible since the definition of resilience is an action of adapting nicely in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or compelling sources of forces — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences. The capability of an individual to heal from the difficult phase of their life and be able to go back to everyday life can also be said as resilient [14].

According to everydayhealth.com, resilience gives people the emotional strength to cope with trauma, adversity, and hardship. Resilient people utilize their resources, strengths, and skills to overcome challenges and work through setbacks. Hashimi, in her novel, narrates that Bacha Posh can be a solution to resist and survive the Patriarchy in society. Becoming a bacha posh made Rahima or Rahim's life full of energy, enthusiasm, and passion. She loves being a bacha posh as she gets a lot of opportunities to be outside and do everything she has been dreaming of before.

Many sources discuss the effect of Bacha Posh negatively by describing the girl's choice to stay as a boy although she has reached puberty or marriageable age. While in his story, Hashimi delivers the practice positively as it enhances Rahima's ability to survive in her miserable marriage life. This article discusses further how Bacha Posh becomes resilient against Patriarchy through the image of Rahima divided into her life as a Bacha posh and after Bacha posh.

3.3 Rahim's life as a Bacha posh

Rahim has been a Bacha posh for three years, which consider longer than the other Bacha posh has ever been. The age of thirteen has been viewed over puberty age, as the common Bacha posh usually changes back to her girl's life at ten or eleven. Rahim enjoys her life as a boy, as can be seen in the quotations below:

My first errand as a boy was an exciting one. I was to go to the market for oil and flour. Madar-jan nervously handed me a few bills and watched me walk down the street (Hashimi, 2014:42). I felt a thrill as I chased after him. I liked being part of the team. I liked the dust kicking up under my feet. I liked being a boy. (Hashimi,2014: 52).

"You're a working boy! Now, that's news!" Khala Shaima clapped her hands together. "Yep, I go all around town, and no one bothers me. I can do anything!" (Hashimi, 2014:74).

The quotations show Rahim's excitement as a boy. She is fully aware of her sister's jealousy as their father is treated her like a real boy. Rahim gets her freedom and lives her dream life as a boy. She even manages to gain money by working in the nearest local shop and helping to earn an income for the family. In an article, Ganesh (2013) states that Bacha posh may be able to finance the family through business and earnings generation in the terms of high standards of poverty and restricted chances in economy for women[15]. The statement is reflected in the story when Rahim gets a job and earns money for the family with her part-time job during her Bacha posh life.

The moment Rahima reaches puberty and has her first period is supposed to be when she stops being Bacha posh and changes again to be a girl, yet her mother still enjoys Rahim as her boy, and so is Rahim. She wishes to continue her life as a boy due to her freedom as a bacha posh. It can be seen in the quotation:

I wonder how long I would have gone on as a boy had Madar-jan not seen us on the day. Most children made Bacha posh were changed back into girls when their monthly bleeding started, but Madar-jan had let me go on, bleeding but looking like a boy. My grandmother warned her it was wrong. She couldn't bear to give up having someone who could do for her what my father couldn't. and I was happy to continue playing soccer with the boys. (Hashimi, 2014: 84).

The bad temperament of Father-jan is still not changing even though Rahim has been a son for him. Rahim and her other sisters still witness how their father beats Mother-jan, finally normalizing the situation. Rahim is becoming Rahima again by the age of thirteen.

3.4 Rahima's life after Bacha Posh

In her thirteen, Rahim changes again into Rahima undeniably. Her grandmother has the power to advise Padar-jan to stop the changes, and Mother -jan fully realized that it has to be stopped years before by the time Rahim gets her monthly bleeding. A piece of striking news comes up after Rahima's life returns to normal again when a famous and wealthy man called Abdul Khalid comes to their house to propose Rahima to be his fourth wife. Rahima and her older sisters are proposed by Abdul Khalid's cousins to be the third wife. Padar--jan accepts the proposal and marries his three teenage daughters to three men with a very big age difference. The life of Rahima after Bacha Posh has changed upside-down; it is her life as a wife for Abdul Khaliq. Madar-jan begs her husband not to let their daughters marry in their teenage life, but her husband barely hears her.

In the perspective of feminist psychology, Stephanie Shield, in her latest book, *Speaking from the Heart* (2002), analyzed how gender stereotypes create an ambiguity in our interpretations of feelings (e.g., through construing men as each angrier and much less emotional than women). She offers evidence taken from distinct historical eras and exclusive social contexts in phrases of various norms approximately emotional responses. She manages to sum up that our emotions which are particularly gendered and that those beliefs are consequential. Shields concludes that "Judgments about the presence and meaning of emotion in oneself and others are not made casually or lightly. Who gets called 'emotional' depends on who is naming, who is named, and the circumstances in which emotion occurs? The relationship between gender and emotion is not just a subject of academic inquiry, but one that profoundly affects every aspect of lives in ways that we often do not even suspect" [16].

After becoming a wife, Rahima cannot resist being submissive to her husband and her mother-in-law, and her other three wives of her husband. Her act of resilience toward her life after the Bacha Posh. While Father-jan receives a lot of money from his son-in-law after the

marriage of his three daughters, Mother-jan consumes a lot of medicines as her resilience. She becomes a drug addict just like father-jan did.

I was Madar-jan's helper. Her spunky, troublemaking Bacha posh. I know she wondered if she had made the right decision. If I were a little wiser, I would have told her it had been the best thing for me. I would have told her that I wished I could have stayed a bacha posh forever (Hashimi, 2014: 147).

The quotation shows that Rahima felt grateful for her mother's decision to make her a bacha posh, proving how she could survive her complicated life after the marriage. Being a bacha posh has changed Rahima's life. She becomes a tough, brave, and intelligent woman in her life as a wife, which finally leads her to be chosen a member of Parliament in Kabul, leave her husband, and pursue her happiness.

4 Conclusion

To sum up, this research suggests that the Bacha posh has been a way out and become a resilience to resist the value of Patriarchy. By becoming Bacha posh, Rahima struggles to pursue her dreams. Getting their rights is the evidence of the fact that inequality and lack of opportunity for women still exist in Afghanistan. By the full power of men in a patriarchal society, they are given a leading position in enforcing the norms they desire. However, Rahima has the essential capability to stop her suffering. She is brave enough to defeat her weaknesses as a woman. Some of the female characters in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* who are submissive and recklessly struggle and resist the Patriarchy from the figure of father and husband, can be seen in the characters of Madar-jan, Shahla, and Parwin. On the other hand, this novel also presents some female characters who are submissive yet intelligent and brave, and they are Rahima, Shekiba, and Khala Shaima. Rahima's life as a bacha posh helps her shape her personality into a better person who is willing to struggle to pursue her dreams and happiness.

References

- [1] Boesen, I. W. 2004. From Subjects to Citizens: Local Participation in the National Solidarity Programme. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1047812/1329_1213783041_id-32941.pdf [Google Scholar]
- [2] Brown, A. Widney., Bokhari, Farhat., and Boroumand Roya. 2001. Afghanistan Humanity Denied: Systematic Violence of Women's Rights in Afghanistan. *Journal of Human Rights Watch*. Vol.13, No. 5, pp 1-26. <http://www.hrw.org>. Retrieved on July 5, 2019
- [3] Corbos, Juliene, et al. 2019. Bacha Posh in Afghanistan: factors associated with raising a girl as a boy. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2019.1616113>. [Google Scholar]
- [4] Gosh, Ahmed H. 2003. "A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 4 (3):1-14. [Google Scholar]
- [5] Hashimi, Nadia. 2014. *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*. HarperCollins Publishers, New York.
- [6] Ganesh, L. 2013. *Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan, 2003-2012: Information Mapping and Situation Analysis*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. <https://areu.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Synthesis-Paper-copy.pdf> [Google Scholar]
- [7] Marecek, Jeanne. 2017. *Feminist Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118430873.est0124>
- [8] Millet, Kate. 1970. *Sexual Politics*. St. Albans: Granada Publishing. 1970. <https://archive.org>.
- [9] Retrieved on December 21, 2018.
- [10] Nasimi, Sabhan. *The Devastating Truth of Women's Rights in Afghanistan*.

- [15] <https://www.opendemocracy.net>. 2014. Retrieved on December 18, 2018.
- [16] Nordberg, Jenny. 2014. *The Underground Girls of Kabul*. London: Virago. [Google Scholar]
- [17] Selden, Raman and Widdowson, Richard. 1993 *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*; Third Edition
- [18] Stewart, Abigail and Dottolo, Andrea L 2006. *Feminist Psychology*. An article in *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society* . December 2006.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279403900_Feminist_Psychology
- [20] Strohlic, Bynina. *Inside the Lives of Girls Dressed as Boys in Afghanistan*. An article in *National Geographic* published March 2, 2018
- [21] Wald, JayePh.D, et all. 2006. *Literature Review of Concepts; Psychological resiliency*. Toronto: Defence R&D, 2006 *Developing Resilience*. Mind tools content team.
- [22] <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/resilience.htm>
- [23] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/resilience>