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Dr. Mercy George,
Asst. Professor,
Govt. V.Y.T. PG. Autonomous College,
Durg, C.G. 491001
India
amalbabu2710@gmail.com

Amal Babu,
Research Scholar,
Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University,
Raipur, C. G. 492010.
India

**The Underground Girls of Kabul: An Account on Disguised Faces and Unrecognized
Sufferings of Afghan Women**

Abstract

The nation has witnessed unremitting series of war and violence, external invasion, and political and religious traumas. All these factors became reasons behind a number of catastrophes in Afghanistan like high rates of mortality, lack of education, growth of terrorism, and poverty. Women and children are the major victims of all atrocities that occurred in Afghanistan. Lives of these marginalized groups during the period of war marked with intense sufferings. Writers who wrote about Afghanistan have always tried to spread light towards the torments and anguishes of these sidelined groups in Afghanistan. Jenny Nordberg, a Swedish journalist based in the United States of America was astonished to see the acute poverty and unimaginable sufferings of women and children in Afghanistan. Her famous nonfiction work *The Underground Girls of Kabul: The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys*, is about the practice of *Bacha posh*, a prevailing practice in Afghanistan. The work is a probe into the reasons, physical and psychological sufferings of females who act as men in their lives.

Key words: Afghanistan, *bacha posh*, Jenny Nordberg, sufferings and survival, war and violence.

Afghanistan is one of the war-affected countries that witnessed unremitting chain of internal mutinies, external invasion, radical terrorism, war, and violence. This has created mayhem in the lives of common Afghans, especially the marginalized groups. Emergence of Taliban and their rise to power during the final decades of twentieth century had a devastating effect on these groups. Taliban rule was characterized by strict observance of *Sharia* rules, war and violence, and curtailment of individual freedom. Hence, human life in Afghanistan became despondent and many Afghans started to migrate from their homeland. However, vast majorities of the population were unable to run away from their motherland and valiantly encountered this turmoil. The history of Afghanistan in the last decades of twentieth century and the early years of twenty first century portrays the heroic sufferings of Afghan society.

The post-Taliban Afghanistan witnessed tremendous changes in every spheres of life. The growth of literature, presence of international aid workers and foreign journalists brought radical changes on the existing social system in Afghanistan. They portrayed the sufferings and torments of common Afghan people during the Taliban regime. Many writers came up with Afghan themes and the world was astonished to see the pitiable state of Afghan populace during the years of war and violence. Jenny Nordberg, a Swedish journalist was astounded to see the gender segregation and suffering of female society in Afghanistan at every stage of their lives.

Her investigation about the inauspicious status of women in Afghanistan led her to find about the practice of *bacha posh*, which means ‘dressed up like a boy’ in Dari. She documented her exploration of this resistance practice in the form of a book, *The Underground Girls of Kabul: The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys* in 2014. This work is a deep study about the issues of gender discrimination in Afghanistan. It is a nonfiction document on the sufferings of various Afghan women who are forced to live as boys at different stages of their lives. The work demonstrates the lives of various characters like Azita, a female parliamentarian who was forced to turn her daughter into a boy; Zahra, a *bacha posh* and her struggles during puberty and her parents desperate attempts to bring her back to a girl; Nader and Shahed, who long to remain in male disguise as adults. Through the lives of these people, Jenny examines the circumstances that led to the emergence of *bacha posh* system, physical and psychological struggles, and its impacts on the society.

Bachaposh.com, founded by Jenny, defines the practice of *bacha posh* as follows:

In Afghanistan, “*bacha posh*” is the literal term for a girl who is dressed up, and disguised as, a boy. These children are part of a hidden practice in which parents disguise daughters as sons. Instead of wearing a headscarf, and a skirt or a dress, a little girl will get a short haircut and a pair of pants, and she’ll be sent off into the world as one of the boys. The *bacha posh* look like boys, they learn to behave like boys, and to those around them who don’t know, they are Afghan boys.

The patriarchal society of Afghanistan determines the honor of a family on the basis number of male progenies they have. In Afghanistan, a son is a matter of pride and glory, and a daughter is a symbol of shame and humiliation. As Jenny states, “a baby boy is triumph, success. A baby girl is humiliation, failure” (39). Because of this convention, birth of a boy is an event of celebration for the family whereas birth of a girl almost destroys the pride of the family, especially the wife’s. However, many rulers like Amanullah, Zahir shah, and many others aimed for the emancipation of women, the ethnic dominancy and their rules have a profound impact in the minds of Afghans. As Dr. Fareiba opens her mind to Jenny, “WE ARE THE Pashtun people. We need the son” (40). Subsequently, many Afghan wives who do not have a boy are compelled to turn one of her daughters to a boy until she ‘produces a boy’.

Afghanistan is one of the most dangerous nations for women to live on. Afghanistan has high rates of domestic violence, marital rapes, and poor living standards for women. The Taliban rules and male *shura* councils in villages often become fatal for women. Women confront intense agitations in marriage. They are considered as lesser creatures and are often treated as a machine to produce children. This low stature is further worsened if a woman is unable to give birth for a male heir. Women devoid of a son is considered as a symbol of shame and often cursed by family and society as well. Consequently, women who do not have a son are forced to ‘convert’ one of her daughters to a boy.

Extreme poverty and illiteracy also cause for the high rates of *bacha posh* in Afghanistan. Families devoid of male members often forced to adopt the practice *bacha posh* for survival. As a result, one of the daughters wears the masque of a boy and works for the family until she develops explicit features of a woman. When she becomes a mature woman, next kid acts as a boy and seeks daily bread for the family. As Jenny speaks about the reason behind the custom of cross-dressing in Afghanistan:

These women have met girls who live as boys because the family needed another income through a child who worked, because the road to school was

dangerous and a boy's disguise provided some safety, or because the family lacked sons and needed to present as a complete family to the village... A poor family may need a son for different reasons than a rich family, but no ethnic or geographical reasons set them apart. They are all Afghans, living in a society that demands sons at almost any cost. (70)

Bacha posh has tremendous physical and psychological impacts on the lives of girls who dressed like boys. The cross-dressed girls are expected to mingle with other boys in schools, leisure time, and workplace. Unlike the tasks that normal girls are expected to carry on for the family, they are forced to undertake laborious jobs. All these factors have a great impact on the psyche of these girls. They think, act, and live like men for a period of their lives and then return to the female world. Many of them face identity crisis during this make over and many find it impossible slip back to the life of a woman. Many mothers have given adequate consideration for this inevitable change and prepared their daughters to accept this shift both physically and mentally. On the other hand, some girls were unable to accept this change and decided to continue on the disguise of men.

The practice of *bacha posh* is not exclusively applicable to the Taliban regime and their rigid set of rules. Many afghan families have the tradition of women who dressed like men in order to elevate their family's pride, to uphold the glory of their land, and to fight against invaders. As one of the elderly members of a family tells to Jenny, "it is our tradition from a long time ago. Afghan girls dressed as boys when there were no weapons, only bows and arrows" (114).

Women and children were the most affected sections of the society during the time of war and violence. Many inhuman codes of conduct were implemented on them, which made their lives miserable in Afghanistan. Consequently, *bacha posh* has acquired a different status in Afghanistan; as a mean of resistance and freedom. During Taliban rule women were not allowed to appear in public places devoid of a male family member. This has tormented families where there was no male member. As a result, the *bacha posh* kid took the female members of the family to various public places and events. Likewise, girls who acted as boys were bestowed with a number of privileges that were denied to other girls. Since the society has seen them as boys, they were free to roam around the roads of Afghanistan, engage in physical exercises, participate in literary and artistic events, and most prominently, doors of education were open to them. However, all these positive elements were restricted to a minority of the society and for others; *bacha posh* was a practice of extreme physical and mental torment. Thus, *The Underground Girls of Kabul: The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls*

Disguised as Boys, can be seen as a unique literary document about the practice of *bacha posh* on the context of Afghanistan, and deplores its physical, psychological, marital, and professional impacts through the real life experience of various characters.

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