

BACHA POSH: PERPETUATION OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION IN NADIA HASHIMI'S THE PEARL THAT BROKE ITS SHELL

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Abstract

*The oppression of women in patriarchal societies often disguises itself as empowerment through cultural practices that appear to offer temporary freedom. One such practice is bacha posh, a tradition in Afghanistan where girls are allowed to adopt the identity of boys to access mobility, education, and social privileges. While often regarded as an act of cultural adaptation or empowerment, this tradition remains underexplored in terms of how it perpetuates gender-based oppression. This study analyzes how bacha posh is portrayed in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, revealing how the practice, though appearing liberating, ultimately sustains patriarchal control. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study applies Iris Marion Young's *Five Faces of Oppression* and Jacques Derrida's *Deconstruction* theory to examine how the characters in the novel experience exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. The findings show that the advantages girls receive while performing as boys are not rooted in equality but in submission to masculine norms. When they return to their female identities, these privileges are stripped away, exposing the illusion of empowerment. The study concludes that bacha posh, rather than resisting oppression towards women, perpetuates it by allowing only conditional access to power while keeping oppressive structures intact.*

Keywords: *Bacha Posh, Patriarchy, Women's Oppression, Deconstruction*

INTRODUCTION

The systemic oppression of women has been a persistent issue across large numbers of societies. It manifests in various mechanisms, including restricted access to education, early forced marriages, and the denial of autonomy over financial and reproductive decisions

(Amani et al., 2024). Within every patriarchal society, the hierarchical distribution of power ensures that men, compared to women, exert a dominant influence over ideology, resources, and positions of authority (Sohrab Hossen, 2020), which further limit women's autonomy and opportunities.

According to Afrin Rahman (2025), in a lot of Muslim countries, particularly in Afghanistan, in which historical tribal customs and religious interpretations coalesce into rigid gender norms, the role of women has frequently been depicted as subordinate. The sociocultural paradigms governing Afghan society dictate women's existential conditions, resulting in numerous constraints such as forced marriages, limited access to education, and strict mobility restrictions (Safaeimojarad, 2024). These deeply rooted cultural norms shape the experiences of Afghan women, often leaving them with few avenues for independence.

Regarding this circumstance, there is a practice that exists as both a coping mechanism and a reflection of gender-based oppression in Afghanistan, commonly known as *bacha posh*. Historically, this practice emerged in deeply patriarchal Afghan communities where the birth of a son has long been associated with family honor, economic security, and social status. In traditional Afghan society, sons are expected to inherit property, carry the family name, and provide financial support to their parents, while daughters are often viewed as temporary members who will marry into other households. Families without sons may face social stigma and economic vulnerability, which creates pressure to symbolically "fill" the role of a boy.

Abbady (2022) explained that this cultural phenomenon allows girls to temporarily assume the social identity of boys, granting them access to some privileges that are usually reserved solely for males, such as education, employment, and public mobility. In many cases, the decision to designate a daughter as a *bacha posh* also serves as a protective strategy: presenting as a boy allows her to move freely in public without harassment and to contribute economically to the family. For families in need of sons, this practice is rationalized as an economic and social necessity, wherein a girl is not only dressed as a boy but also socialized and is treated as one until she reaches puberty (Kabeer & Chaudhary, 2021), with the intention of providing her with better opportunities for the future (Seswita, 2022). These families perceive *bacha posh* as a means of survival that enables their daughters to contribute economically and socially in ways that they traditionally cannot.

On the other side, the writer assumes that this practice also concedes the perpetuation of gender-based oppression. *Bacha posh* offers a temporary solution but ultimately exposes the inescapability of patriarchal logic, reinforcing the idea that masculinity is the precondition for social participation, while femininity remains subordinate. When these girls are forced to transition back into womanhood, they often struggle with the loss of their freedom, revealing the illusion of empowerment within this tradition.

Nadia Hashimi's novel, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, explores the intricacy of *bacha posh* through the stories of Rahima and her ancestor, Shekiba, who both navigate the constraints of their gendered existence through *bacha posh* across different generations. While the novel acknowledges *bacha posh* as a means of survival, it simultaneously bolsters the contradictions within the system that oppresses women while granting them various privileges. To examine this, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction theory serves as a useful

framework. Deconstruction disputes binary oppositions such as man vs. woman, power vs. oppression, and freedom vs. constraint, acknowledging how these concepts are not as stable as they seem to be (Derrida, 2016). This article applies deconstruction to analyze how *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* both critiques and paradoxically perpetuates the oppression of women through the practice of *bacha posh*. Specifically, it aims to explore the forms of oppression that women experience in the novel while examining how *bacha posh* is depicted as a practice that perpetuates women's oppression.

While several contemporary works of Afghan women's fiction published in the same period explore women's struggle under patriarchy, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) stands out as one of the few novels that directly centers the cultural practice of *bacha posh* as a central narrative device. Other novels from the 2010s, such as Hashimi's *One Half from the East* (2016), mention *bacha posh* only briefly as a subplot, whereas *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* intertwines two generations of *bacha posh* experiences through its protagonists Rahima and Shekibaa. This dual narrative offers a rare, sustained exploration of how *bacha posh* functions not merely as a personal choice but as a structural mechanism shaped by patriarchy. For this reason, the novel provides a particularly rich site for examining the paradoxical nature of *bacha posh*, a practice that appears empowering on the surface yet reveals deep-rooted gender hierarchies upon closer analysis.

Many studies have examined *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* through various feminist perspectives, shedding light on the novel's depiction of *bacha posh* and its implications for women's lives. Bhardwaj & Gangwar (2024) examine how the novel portrays the intergenerational trauma, gender-based violence, and systemic marginalization faced by women in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Kumar (2022) analyzes how the patriarchal system restricts women's autonomy and subjects them to various forms of trauma, including forced marriage and social marginalization.

However, most of these studies have focused on the empowering aspects of *bacha posh* while overlooking its paradoxical role in sustaining the very patriarchal structures it appears to exist. By applying a deconstructive approach, this article moves beyond the dominant interpretation of *bacha posh* as a symbol of female empowerment to examine how the practice ultimately reinforces the very patriarchal logic that necessitates its existence. This perspective offers a novel contribution by exposing how *bacha posh* operates not as a form of existence, but as a survival mechanism that disguises, and thereby perpetuates, systemic gender oppression.

While previous studies by Seswita (2022) as well as Fatema Mubarak & Mahlaqa (2022) have discussed *bacha posh* as a form of resilience against patriarchy, the focus has largely been on its empowering aspects rather than its role in perpetuating systemic oppression of women. By combining Iris Marion Young's Five Faces of Oppression with Derrida's deconstruction theory, this article offers a unique interrogation of how temporary access to masculine privileges conceals the persistence of patriarchal power. This analysis reveals how the novel presents *bacha posh* as a practice that appears liberating yet ultimately upholds rigid gender hierarchies by allowing women to experience male privileges without ever truly challenging the structures that oppress them.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach using textual analysis as the primary method to examine gender oppression in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014). Since the study is literature-based, the data is drawn from narrative elements, particularly the experiences of Rahima and Shekiba, as literary representations of social realities.

The novel is analyzed thematically through selected excerpts that illustrate structural oppression towards women. Iris Marion Young's Five Faces of Oppression (1990) theory guides the identification of five categories of oppression—exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence—while Derrida's deconstruction supports the analysis of how the tradition *bacha posh*, while seemingly liberating, ultimately perpetuates women's oppression. The procedure involved four steps: exploration of the text through close reading; reduction by eliminating irrelevant content; abstraction to group excerpts into relevant categories; and synthesis through theoretical interpretation. This process helped uncover how *bacha posh* operates as a temporary survival mechanism that disguises, rather than dismantles, patriarchal power. By combining feminist and deconstructive perspectives, the study reveals that empowerment in the novel is conditional and rooted in systemic inequality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forms of Women's Oppression in "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell"

Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* presents a harrowing depiction of the systemic oppression of women in Afghan society. Following the lives of Rahima and Shekiba, the novel scrutinizes various mechanisms through which women are controlled, exploited, and subjugated.

Oppression, as defined by Young (1990), is not simply a singular act of discrimination nor violence but a structural and institutionalized system that limits the freedoms of certain groups. Additionally, Ahmadi (2021) describes oppression as a multifaceted phenomenon experienced by certain groups involving actions, attitudes, and structures that marginalize, disadvantage, or harm them. Drawing from both definitions, oppression can be understood as a systemic and institutionalized condition in which a dominant group exercises power over a marginalized group through various mechanisms, restricting the oppressed from claiming autonomy and accessing resources.

Young, through her Five Faces of Oppression theory (1990), categorizes oppression into five interrelated forms: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence; each of which manifests in the lives of the female characters in the *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*. These forms of oppression operate collectively to maintain patriarchal control, ensuring that women remain subordinated within family, marriage, and society at large.

Exploitation

Exploitation can be defined as the act of unfairly treating individuals to gain an advantage or benefit from their labor or circumstances (Ulya & Wedawati, 2020). In the novel, women's physical and emotional labor is continuously extracted for the benefit of men, whether through unpaid domestic work, arranged marriages, or forced servitude.

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell depicts how women are expected to perform relentless household labor without compensation and how their worth is reduced to their ability to serve. Reich-Stiebert et al. (2023) argue that women disproportionately take responsibility for unpaid domestic and childcare labor, which affects gender equality and corroborates systemic inequalities in employment and well-being. In patriarchal societies, women's labor is framed as "natural" or "a duty" rather than recognized as labor that sustains both individual households and broader economic structures. This perspective is evident in how Shekiba's physical labor is exploited without acknowledgement:

Quickly, most of the household work was turned over to Shekiba. Her uncles' wives found that, once she'd recovered, she was quite capable and could manage even the chores that required the combined strength of two women. (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 22)

Shekiba is seen as a resource to be exploited; her physical strength is valued only because it benefits others, which reinforces the gendered expectation that women's labor is not for their own well-being but for the household's convenience. Furthermore, the passage highlights how even other women within the household participate in the exploitation, normalizing unpaid labor and augmenting the expectation that a woman's duty is to serve.

van den Brink et al. (2020) argue that women are systematically excluded from financial independence through structural barriers that limit their access to wages, property, and decision-making power, which prevents full participation in society. Ultimately, women remain powerless over their own lives, strengthening the broader systemic oppression that keeps them in a cycle of servitude and dependency, illustrated in the established practice of forced and arranged marriages in the novel. This custom proves how women's bodies are commodified and used as bargaining tools in economic and social exchanges. Rahima's father, for instance, does not hesitate to trade his daughter for financial security:

"That should cover it," he said simply. "You'll have plenty there to cover the bride price of each of your three daughters. Of course, as family, we will share with you some of the products of the land to the north. Perhaps that would be of interest to you."

I knew my father's eyes were bulging at the promise of opium. (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 132)

This passage occurs when Rahima's father negotiates the marriage of his daughters, not for their well-being but to secure financial and material gain. The mention of "products of the land to the north"—which refers to opium farming—suggests that, here, women's marriage is being used as a means to secure not just a bride price, but also access to lucrative economic resources. Rahima's observation that her father's eyes "bulged at the promise of opium" underscores the notion that men's decision is commonly not driven by parental care or

assurance of their daughter's security, but by economic self-interest. It gives prominence to how marriage is treated as an economic and social transaction rather than a sacred union or personal choice, making secure the idea that wealth and power remain concentrated in male hands.

According to Shoib et al. (2022), Afghan women are often subjected to forced and early marriages due to economic hardship, as families resort to child marriage as a survival strategy for financial crisis. In this case, Rahima's worth is directly equated with material wealth, which reflects how fathers and husbands maintain economic control by exchanging women as "currency" in social and business transactions.

Another form of exploitation women faces in the novel is forced servitude and loss of autonomy, mirrored through the experience of Shekiba who is later given away to serve in a noble household, bolstering the pattern of women being exchanged as commodities:

"I would like to offer King Habibullah a gift of a servant."

"You mean Shekiba-e-shola?" (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 113)

At this point in the novel, Shekiba has already endured significant hardship—she has been orphaned, mistreated by her extended family, and forced into labor. Azizullah's words in the passage demonstrate that Shekiba is not seen as an individual but as a possession to be transferred, emphasizing how patriarchal structures dehumanize women by making them objects of exchange rather than agents of their own fate.

Marginalization

Marginalization refers to the exclusion of certain groups from economic, political, and social participation, diminishing their existence to dependency or invisibility. As Young (1990) stated, marginalized groups are systematically denied access to opportunities that would allow them to be self-sufficient, often leaving them reliant on those in power.

In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, women are consistently deprived of rights such as inheritance, education, and access to basic rights. Take Shekiba's attempt to claim her inheritance as an example:

"But what about me? Am I not rightfully an heir to the land? I am his child too!"

"You are his daughter. You are not his son. Yes, the law says that daughters may inherit a portion of what the son would inherit but the truth is that women do not claim land. Your uncles, your father's brothers, have no doubt taken the property." (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 81)

Shekiba is left orphaned after the death of her parents and siblings. As the only surviving child, she rightfully expects to inherit her father's land, which would allow her to sustain herself independently. However, she is immediately told that her gender disqualifies her from claiming ownership, despite the existence of laws that theoretically grant her the right to a portion of the property. The response, "Yes, the law says that daughters may inherit ... but the truth is that women do not claim land," reveals the stark contradiction between legal rights and social enforcement. Even if women are granted rights on paper, patriarchal traditions override legal systems in practice.

Shekiba's exclusion from land ownership prevents her from escaping oppression, as land ownership would have provided her with financial security and autonomy. This also aligns with

Bahrami-Rad's (2021) argument that women's inheritance rights rarely translate into financial independence, as property is strategically controlled by male relatives who keep wealth within the male lineage, pushing women's economic dependence even more.

Studies on gender and land rights by Agarwal (2010) show that when women own land, they gain not just financial security but also greater autonomy and decision-making power within their families and communities. By systematically denying women access to wealth and inheritance, patriarchal structures avert them from accumulating resources that could allow them to challenge male authority.

However, women's marginalization extends beyond economic exclusion—they are also barred from accessing basic rights such as education, mobility, and personal security. This is evident in how Rahima and other girls in the novel are denied the most fundamental freedoms:

"We could change your clothes and we'll give you a new name. You'll be able to run to the store any time we need anything. You could go to school without worrying about the boys bothering you. You could play games. How does that sound?" (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 22)

Rahima's parents acknowledge that, as girls, their daughters are restricted from participating in public life, including but not limited to running errands, playing outside, and attending school, all of which should be fundamental rights but are instead rebuffed to girls simply because of their gender. The need to explicitly "change her clothes and give her a new name" fortifies the institutionalized exclusion of women from public spaces. Rahima's family does not challenge the restrictions; instead, they accept that women must be hidden, controlled, and prevented from fully engaging in society. It exposes how marginalization functions as a systemic force that prevents women from becoming full participants in society.

Powerlessness

Powerlessness occurs when a group lacks autonomy and decision-making power, leaving them vulnerable to the control of others. This is evident in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, where both Shekiba and Rahima are consistently stripped of their ability to make choices and are expected to submit to male dominance:

"It's none of your business what I'm going to do! They're my daughters and I'll do what's right for them." (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 121)

The depiction of male dominance is shown by the power of Rahima's father in the quotation above. The phrase "It's none of your business" reveals how even a mother is excluded from decision-making, despite being equally responsible for raising the children. The assertion "I'll do what's right for them" reflects a paternalistic justification for controlling women, strengthening the belief that men know best and that women are incapable of making rational choices. Shortly after, Rahima internalizes this reality:

I realized what my mother knew as well. Men could do what they wanted with women. There would be no stopping what Padar had set in motion. (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 122)

Rahima and her sisters face the inescapable truth that their futures have already been decided by their father. His words, spoken with complete authority, dismiss any potential

objections from his wife or daughters, asserting the patriarchal norm that women have no control over their own lives.

In the passage, Rahima comes to a devastating realization: "Men could do what they wanted with women," which is not just about her immediate situation but about the systemic reality that governs all women's lives in her society.

Beyond external control, the oppression of women also works by internalizing powerlessness within the women themselves, incorporating the idea that resistance is futile. This reflects the argument of Tariq et al. (2021) that Afghan women have been systematically conditioned to accept their marginalization due to structural oppression, restrictive gender norms, and exclusion from political and social decision-making, which perpetuates a cycle of victimization that limits their ability to resist.

Girls, from a young age, are taught to prioritize obedience over independence, discouraging them from asserting themselves in adulthood (Connell, 2009). Mikołajczak et al. (2022) explained that women who defy patriarchal norms are more likely to encounter social backlash, which aligned with Ahmed's (2024) argument that women who challenge male authority are often punished; therefore, the cycle of submission is constantly reinforced, leading the victims of this systemic powerlessness to begin distinguishing their oppression as "natural" and accepting it rather than fighting against it (Bourdieu, 2001).

Cultural Imperialism

Young (1990) refers cultural imperialism to the imposition of dominant cultural norms on marginalized groups. It occurs when the dominant social group dictates the identity and behavior of marginalized groups, which further limits their ability to define themselves outside of these imposed norms.

In the novel, women are expected to conform to rigid gender roles that define their worth solely based on their adherence to patriarchal expectations. These beliefs create a system where deviation from traditional gender norms is met with social sanction. This is exemplified in Shekiba's story when she is deemed "well suited" for a role due to her masculine traits:

"Ah, what a brilliant solution! I am telling you, my brother, this girl is well suited for such a role. She walks and breathes like a man, my wife tells me." (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 114)

In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, Shekiba is repeatedly subjected to dehumanization as her identity is shaped entirely by the expectations and needs of others. At this point, women's worth is not intrinsic but contingent on how effectively they can be molded to serve societal interests. It reveals how cultural imperialism operates by dictating women's identities and erasing their autonomy.

Shekiba's experience is reflective of a larger pattern in which women are denied self-definition and forced into roles that benefit the dominant group. Cultural imperialism preserves the sentiment of gender norms being maintained through not only gender oppression but also the internalization of patriarchal values, which can be seen from the way Rahima's behavior is judged:

"Make sure she does a good job, Badriya. This girl has a lot to learn. She was a bacha posh, don't forget. Can you believe that? A bacha posh at this age! No wonder she has no clue how to carry herself as a woman. Look at the way she walks, her hair, her fingernails! Her mother should be ashamed of herself." (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 174)

Rahima, after being married off at a young age, is subjected to judgment by the women in her husband's household. She received a lot of criticism regarding her appearance and behavior that stems from her past as a bacha posh, a temporary male identity she assumed during her childhood. Now forced back into the expectations of femininity, Rahima is scolded for failing to properly embody womanhood according to societal norms. In this context, cultural imperialism forces women to comply with an externally defined identity. Across cultures, women face the necessity of fitting to a prescribed mold of femininity such as how they should dress, behave, or talk, whose nonconformity can lead to social ostracization, professional limitations, and even violence (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Violence

Young (1990) defines violence as the most explicit form of oppression, used to maintain control and enforce compliance. In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, Shekiba navigates a brutal reality in which physical violence is a threat used to coerce submission and maintain strict social hierarchies. Her internal thoughts reveal the calculated restraint she must exercise to avoid punishment:

She did not want to give them the satisfaction of exhausting her. Nor did she want to risk a beating for not being able to keep up with her work. In this home, there were many ready sticks to teach her that indolence would not be tolerated. (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 52)

The quotation reflects how women are trapped in a household where they are expected to perform grueling labor without complaint. They are never granted dignity or respect; instead, they exist under the constant threat of punishment. It highlights how beatings are not simply a reaction to laziness but a preemptive tool of control to keep women in a perpetual state of subordination.

Shekiba's experience in forced labor and the constant risk of beatings are predictable consequences of a society built on stringent gender hierarchies. In this society, physical punishment is a normalized form of control, particularly against women in lower social positions. Another slap form of physical violence is vividly depicted in the following quotation:

A slap thundered across my cheek. My knees buckled.

"No wife of mine looks at me in that way! How dare you?"

My eyes watered from the stinging blow. He was angry still. His fingers gripped my arm so tight I thought my bones might snap. (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 403)

This passage illustrates how men use violence as a mechanism to control women's subjectivities. Men's aggression is not merely an impulsive reaction, but rather an intentional act meant to assert dominance. The statement—"No wife of mine looks at me that way"—

suggests that men perceive any defiance, however subtle, as a direct challenge to their absolute control.

Furthermore, although not explicitly detailed in the passage, Rahima's forced compliance in her husband's sexual demands is a form of marital rape—a crime that, in many societies, is not legally recognized. In many parts of the world, marital rape is either not criminalized or is difficult to prosecute due to cultural beliefs that a wife's body belongs to her husband. Many women are conditioned to believe that their body is not their own; it is something to be used, punished, and controlled.

Bacha Posh: The Positioning of Women within Patriarchal Structures

Previously, various forms of oppression were outlined: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. These mechanisms of oppression serve as the foundation of patriarchal control, shaping the experiences of women in Afghan society. In Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, the tradition of bacha posh appears to grant young girls temporary liberation from the constraints of gender roles. However, when read through a deconstructive lens, it becomes evident that the tradition does not dismantle gender oppression, but maintains it in more complex and concealed ways.

Deconstruction, as a critical approach, focuses on unraveling internal contradictions within texts and dismantling the binary oppositions that uphold dominant ideologies. In the case of bacha posh, these contradictions expose how the practice, while seemingly empowering, ultimately sustains the patriarchal systems it attempts to escape, as elaborated in the following section.

Freedom vs. Constraint

The practice of bacha posh appears at first to empower women by granting them the freedoms associated with masculinity. Rahima's mother articulates this perceived liberation:

"... You'll be able to run to the store any time we need anything. You could go to school without worrying about the boys bothering you. You could play games..."
(*The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, p. 32)

This statement constructs a binary opposition: freedom (associated with boys) versus constraint (associated with girls). However, Derrida's concept of *différance* (1981) challenges the stability of such binaries. *Différance* suggests that meaning is not fixed but is constantly deferred and differentiated through language and context (Derrida & Bass, 1982).

Women's temporary freedom as a bacha posh is not an inherent liberation but a role contingent upon societal recognition of them as male. In below's passage below, Rahima's mother's apprehension about reverting her daughter's original gender role highlights the societal constraints awaiting her:

"... What Madar-jan was already dreading was the day they would have to change me back..." (*The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, p. 35)

This dread reflects that the freedoms women enjoy are not their own but borrowed from the male identity. The bacha posh practice, therefore, does not offer "genuine" empowerment. Instead, it perpetuates the exploitation of women's autonomy, as the privileges afforded by

bacha posh are dependent on their adherence to male-determined roles, emphasizing the ongoing cycle of women's oppression.

Power vs. Deviance

Rahima's role as a bacha posh introduces her to a sense of strength and participation previously inaccessible to her as a girl. She reflects:

I liked being part of the team. I liked the dust kicking up under my feet. I liked being a boy. (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 51)

The excitement signals more than physical freedom; it reflects a growing internalization of confidence rooted in how others treat women while they perform masculinity. Later, Rahima affirms:

I was a bacha posh! I had been practicing martial arts with my friends in the streets. I didn't have to crumple as my sisters had. (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 150)

However, this power is fragile. It is dismantled the moment women revert to their socially assigned gender role. Upon returning to life as girls, the confidence, independence, and assertiveness women had developed are no longer celebrated but condemned. This shift is reflected in below's dialogue:

"... This girl has a lot to learn... A bacha posh at this age! No wonder she has no clue how to carry herself as a woman. Look at the way she walks, her hair, her fingernails! Her mother should be ashamed of herself." (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 174)

This criticism arises after Rahima transitions back from being a bacha posh, revealing how society reasserts traditional gender expectations and punishes women who fail to conform. The traits that were once tolerated under the guise of masculinity are now used to shame her. This reflects the mechanism of cultural imperialism, as previously outlined, wherein patriarchal norms dictate strict definitions of acceptable femininity, and any deviation from those norms is marked as improper or disgraceful. Through this lens, Rahima's post-bacha posh experience illustrates how deeply entrenched gender roles are used to maintain control over women's identities and bodies.

This shift from acceptance to rejection reflects not a change in Rahima's behavior, but a change in how that behavior is interpreted. It exemplifies what Derrida calls dissemination (1981), where meanings scatter and shift based on context. What once symbolized autonomy and power is reinterpreted as deviance and disorder. Women's strength is not seen as empowerment when it no longer aligns with her gender performance. The behaviors that earned respect as a boy now invite criticism and rejection. Power, therefore, is shown not as a permanent state but as a performative condition regulated by patriarchal structures.

The shift in how women are perceived reveals that their power was never theirs to begin with. It was tolerated only when it conformed to a masculine-coded framework. Once that frame is withdrawn, so too is the perceived value of her strength.

Recognition vs. Devaluation

Derrida (1981b) in *Writing and Difference* explains that deconstruction exposes how binary oppositions, such as recognition and devaluation, are unstable. Women's ability to participate in public life as a bacha posh allows them to occupy spaces typically reserved for men, granting them visibility, recognition, and a sense of societal value. During her time as a bacha posh, Rahima reflects:

"...I went to school. I ran errands for my mother. I even worked and brought money home. I was learning how to fix electronics," (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 162)

In a male-coded role, women's actions are not only permitted but affirmed. Just like men's, women's contributions are acknowledged, their labor is seen as productive, and their presence in public space is normalized. Women gain access to responsibilities and opportunities typically withheld from girls, suggesting that it is not the capabilities of women that are lacking, but rather the value society places on them when expressed through a female identity. However, once a bacha posh is reclassified as a girl, her contribution becomes a source of discomfort as Rahima confesses:

And somehow it seemed I did everything wrong. I sat wrong, I cooked wrong, I cleaned wrong... I wanted to tie my chest down again. (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 171)

This quotation captures Rahima's internalization of shame as her identity is reabsorbed into rigid expectations of femininity. The autonomy and respect women once experienced are now replaced with judgment and limitation. The desire to "tie [her] chest down again," or to go back to being a bacha posh, symbolizes a longing not just for a physical disguise, but for the social freedom and validation that came with it.

What was once empowering now becomes burdensome. The body that moved freely in male-coded spaces is now disciplined under the expectations of femininity. This transition mirrors the form of marginalization discussed earlier, in which women are excluded from full participation in public and social life. In this context, being seen and valued is tied to masculinity, while femininity is linked to limitation, where women are expected to stay at home and are often ignored or dismissed by society. From Derrida's (1981b) perspective, the same behaviour that once earned recognition are reinterpreted as failures, revealing the instability of social meaning.

claim that binary opposites

Protection vs. Vulnerability

Derrida (2016) notes that oppositional terms such as protection and vulnerability always carry traces of each other. The tradition of bacha posh is often justified by its supposed function as a form of protection, offering girls a socially acceptable disguise to move freely and safely in public. The perception is echoed when Rahima confidently states:

"Yup, I go all around town and no one bothers me. I can do anything!" (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 73)

However, this assumption is swiftly invalidated. Rahima's perceived safety unravels when her roles as a bacha posh draws the interest of a powerful man who sees her as a potential bride:

Turning me into a boy hadn't protected me at all. In fact, it had put me right in front of this warlord who now demanded my hand in marriage. (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 132)

This contradiction undercuts the protective promise of bacha posh. While it appears to reduce vulnerability, it actually exposes girls to new dangers by placing them in male-dominated spaces where their biological identity remains unchanged. Protection is never complete; it carries the seed of vulnerability within. Although the practice of bacha posh is intended to shield girls from societal constraints, it paradoxically exposes them to new forms of risk, such as early marriage or coercion by powerful men.

This reflects the persistent operation of violence as a means of patriarchal control, in which both physical and structural threats are used to regulate women's bodies and choices. Bacha posh doesn't abolish vulnerability but merely redirects it. It displaces risk from one set of circumstances (being a girl in public) to another (being a girl disguised in male spaces). This paradox reflects Derrida's (2016) collapse into one another, as protection inevitably produces new forms of vulnerability.

Identity vs. Expectation

As Derrida & Bass (1982) argue in *Margins of Philosophy*, identity is never stable but is produced through shifting expectations and contexts. Rahima's retrospective reflections on her time as a bacha posh suggest a profound sense of reassurance in her:

I'd been so self-assured when I was a bacha posh. Walking around with the boys, I feared nothing. If they had dared me to wrestle a grown man to the ground, I would have done it. (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 317)

This quotation highlights more than temporary freedom; it reflects a moment where Rahima feels a sense of wholeness. As a bacha posh, women's behavior is affirmed and their confidence is valued. These experiences are not necessarily rooted in their personal traits alone, but in how those traits are socially received within the framework of masculinity. Women's self-assurance is a direct result of being allowed to participate in a gender role that is recognized as powerful and worthy by society.

However, this sense of authenticity collapses when women are forced to resume her female identity. The societal validation they previously enjoyed is withdrawn, and they are expected to adopt behaviors aligned with femininity—obedience, modesty, and silence. Rahima's emotional response to this forced return is one of the forms of alienation. She explains:

I had changed. I had lost my confidence. The dress I wore felt like a costume, something that disguised the confident, headstrong boy I was supposed to be. I felt ridiculous, like someone pretending to be something he was not. (The Pearl That Broke Its Shell, p. 317)

The metaphor of the dress as a "costume" is significant. It symbolizes the disconnect between women's internal selves and the external role they are now expected to perform.

While they once embodied a socially accepted version of confidence and agency, they are now compelled to suppress those traits in favor of a gender performance that feels foreign and inauthentic. Their loss of confidence is not due to a personal failure but is a response to societal rejection of her previously affirmed identity.

Here, Derrida's concept reveals that women's gender identity is never anchored; it shifts depending on what society expects and accepts. Neither the boyish persona they once embodied nor the womanhood they are now forced into feels 'complete' or 'real.' Both roles are exposed as socially constructed roles dictated by external expectations.

This sense of alienation speaks to the condition of exploitation, whereby even their identity becomes something women have to change just to survive. Rather than revealing a path toward an essential or true self, *bacha posh* exposes the social role of gender itself. In the end, the tradition of *bacha posh*—while appearing to offer freedom—ultimately reinforces the very patriarchal structures it seeks to evade. It reveals that any power, rights, or recognition granted to women remains conditional, fragile, and deeply rooted in gendered expectations.

The deconstructive lens of Derrida & Bass (1982) reveals that Rahima's sense of self is not anchored in an essential identity but in socially imposed expectations that continually shift.

CONCLUSION

The tradition of *bacha posh* in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* may appear, at first glance, to challenge the limits placed on Afghan women. However, a closer reading through a deconstructive lens reveals that it actually perpetuates women's oppressions. By allowing girls to access education, freedom, and mobility only when they present as boys, *bacha posh* upholds the idea that power and privilege belong to masculinity.

Through the lives of the female characters, the novel illustrates how women are systematically oppressed—exploited in their labor, denied access to rights and resources, silenced in decision-making, judged by narrow cultural norms, and controlled through violence. These experiences reflect Young's *Five Faces of Oppression* theory and show how deeply patriarchy shapes every aspect of their lives. Instead of granting lasting liberation, the practice *bacha posh* offers only a temporary escape that ends in the same cycle of oppression when the girls must return to traditional gender roles.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this research also offers practical benefits. By uncovering how *bacha posh* disguises systemic oppression under the illusion of empowerment, the study provides insights that can inform gender-related policy, education, and advocacy. Policymakers may use these findings to design interventions that reduce families' reliance on gender-disguising practices by expanding access to education and economic resources for girls. Community organizations and educators can draw on the novel's narrative as a tool for raising awareness about the psychosocial harms of *bacha posh* and for promoting more equitable gender norms. Mental-health practitioners may also apply these insights to develop reintegration and counselling programs for women who experience identity dislocation after transitioning out of *bacha posh*. Finally, the methodological combination of Young's (1990) *Five Faces of Oppression* and Derrida's deconstruction offers a

framework that other scholars can adapt when analyzing cultural practices that appear empowering yet ultimately reinforce patriarchal systems.

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