Social Invisibility and Parliamentary Recognition: Gendered Agency and Institutional Voice[1]

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Abstract
This study examines conditional identity governance in parliamentary settings, where unwritten social norms mediate women's transition from invisibility to formal recognition, using Nadia Hashmi's (2015) *One Half from the East*—depicting Afghan/Pakistani bacha posh as provisional gender reclassification—as an empirical lens to bridge Feminist Institutionalism (FI), Recognition Theory, and agency debates. Despite Pakistan's 17% reserved seats yielding descriptive representation, substantive influence falters amid tribal/kinship vetoes, mirroring the novel's revocable "masculinity on loan" (Mackay et al., 2010; Rafeeq, 2024). Employing qualitative narrative analysis, it dissects textual moments of authorization, constraint, rupture, and strategic negotiation—interpreting Obayda/Rahim's arcs through Fraser's (2000) misrecognition, Kandiyoti's patriarchal bargain, and FI's gendered rules—to diagnose pre-institutional legitimacy gaps. Findings reveal reversible personhood as governance mechanism, negotiated agency within norms, and narrative pre-figuration of quota fragility, yielding a reform roadmap: norm-mapping, pre-entry training, caucuses, and cultural campaigns for uncond itional authority. By operationalizing literature as institutional diagnostic, this advances FI beyond quotas, urging normative transformation for parity (Fraser, 2000).
Keywords: conditional identity governance, bacha posh, feminist institutionalism, recognition theory, parliamentary quotas, reversible personhood, patriarchal bargain

1. Introduction

This research investigates the mechanisms through which unwritten social norms govern the transition from social invisibility to formal parliamentary recognition. By utilizing Nadia Hashmi's (2015) *One Half from the East* as a primary empirical lens, the study explores "conditional identity governance"; a process where political inclusion is predicated on adhering to specific, often gendered, social expectations. Hashmi's novel vividly illustrates this through the protagonist's bacha posh experience, where temporary gender reassignment grants provisional social mobility, only to be revoked upon puberty, mirroring the fragile legitimacy women navigate in political spheres.

The framework of Feminist Institutionalism (FI) posits that parliaments are not neutral arenas but function as deeply "gendered workplaces." In these spaces, informal rules and "gentlemen's agreements" frequently undermine women's substantive participation, even when formal legislative reforms are enacted (Mackay et al., 2010). Mackay et al. (2010) elaborate that these hidden norms—such as gendered committee assignments or exclusionary networking—persistently recreate male dominance, rendering structural changes superficial without addressing institutional gender biases.

While global gender quotas have successfully increased descriptive representation (the numerical presence of women), achieving substantive representation (the ability to influence policy) remains a persistent challenge (Krook, 2009). Krook (2009) demonstrates through cross-national analysis that quotas often lead to tokenism, where women's voices are marginalized unless backed by broader cultural shifts.

For instance, Scotland's move toward a parity parliament successfully nurtured influential feminist networks; however, these gains were often stymied by a deeply entrenched adversarial political culture that resisted systemic institutional change (Morrison, 2021). Similarly, in Argentina, quota reforms successfully boosted the number of women in office but inadvertently reinforced traditional stereotypes by confining female legislators to "gendered" policy domains, such as health and social welfare, while excluding them from finance or defense (Hinojosa & Franceschet, 2008). Hinojosa and Franceschet (2008) argue this channeling effect stems from informal veto points, where male gatekeepers enforce normative boundaries on women's roles. These cases demonstrate that numerical inclusion is a necessary but insufficient condition for genuine institutional transformation, highlighting the need to unpack pre-existing normative filters.

In Pakistan, the constitutional reservation of approximately 17 percent of parliamentary seats (60 out of 342 in the National Assembly) ensures a consistent female presence (PILDAT, 2004). However, this numerical threshold does not automatically translate into legislative authority. Power remains mediated by tribal patriarchies and complex kinship networks; extended family and clan systems that dictate social and political legitimacy; that determine a woman's eligibility before she even enters the assembly (Rafeeq, 2024).

To analyze this gap, the study integrates Recognition Theory, which argues that stable identity validation is a non-negotiable precondition for political authority (Fraser, 2000; Honneth, 1995). Nancy Fraser (2000) emphasizes status misrecognition as a barrier to parity of participation, while Axel Honneth (1995) traces authority to intersubjective esteem derived from social norms. Building on this, Judith Butler (2004) suggests that political "subjecthood" is contingent upon normative

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intelligibility—the requirement that an individual be "legible" or recognizable within established cultural frameworks. In Pakistan's hybrid democratic context, women's parliamentary entry thus demands alignment with patriarchal scripts, where deviation risks invisibility or expulsion.

This paper bridges the structural focus of FI with the identity-centric concerns of Recognition Theory by examining the Afghan and Pakistani practice of bacha posh (girls dressed and raised as boys). As ethnographic evidence shows, bacha posh represents a case of "provisional gender reclassification," where families leverage the practice for economic or social advantages, such as allowing the "boy" to work outside the home or uphold family honor (Nordberg, 2014). Jenny Nordberg (2014) documents its reversibility: upon menstruation, the girl reverts to her assigned gender, often with compounded marginalization, underscoring its conditional nature.

This dynamic prefigures parliamentary legitimacy in gendered institutions: not an inherent right, but a conditional grant based on the ability to navigate patriarchal norms. Just as bacha posh girls gain temporary visibility by performing masculinity, reserved female parliamentarians must embody "acceptable" femininity; familial loyalty, deference to male kin, or confinement to soft-issue portfolios; to secure recognition. This analogy reveals how pre-institutional norms govern identity allocation, offering a novel lens for FI to incorporate recognition struggles and advocate for transformative reforms beyond quotas.

2. Research Problem and Questions

Despite constitutional equality and gender quotas, women's parliamentary authority worldwide remained provisional because pre-institutional norms structured identity legitimacy before formal entry (Childs & Kenny, 2014). Feminist institutionalism documented post-entry constraints but under-explored cultural pre-structuring (Krook & Mackay, 2011). Recognition theory established identity validation's necessity for participation parity (Fraser, 2000), yet rarely operationalized literature as evidentiary data (Nussbaum, 1995). Hashmi's depiction of *bacha posh*; temporary masculinity granted strategically, revoked without consent; offered empirical insight into conditional recognition mirroring institutional fragility, particularly Pakistan's reserved seat dynamics where tribal norms override formal inclusion (Rafeeq, 2024).

This paper, therefore, addresses the following questions:
1. How does *One Half from the East* depict identity as conditional and reversible within a normative order structured by patriarchal expectations?
2. In what ways is gendered agency negotiated within informal systems of regulation, rather than erased by them?
3. What do these narrative dynamics reveal about the processes through which recognition becomes institutionalised within representative politics, particularly in parliamentary settings?

3. Key Concepts and Theoretical Framework

Reversible Personhood referred to identity statuses granted temporarily and revocable without notice or consent, rendering legitimacy contingent upon normative approval rather than inherent permanence (Butler, 2004). In Hashmi's narrative, Obayda's bacha posh masculinity exemplified this: social recognition as "boy" enabled privileges such as access to school and social mobility but remained "on loan" until puberty or family strategy shifted, mirroring institutional fragility where formal inclusion proves symbolically provisional (Pitkin, 1967).

Recognition constituted social validation prerequisite for political authority, encompassing visibility and acknowledgment as legitimate voice-bearer (Fraser, 2000; Honneth, 1995). Misrecognition manifested as unstable validation; provisional inclusion vulnerable to withdrawal; explaining parliamentary women's descriptive presence without substantive agenda influence (Childs & Kenny, 2014). This bridged recognition theory's identity focus with feminist institutionalism's (FI) structural analysis.

Agency was conceptualized as negotiated action within constraint, rejecting liberal autonomy models (Kandiyoti, 1988; Mahmood, 2005). Obayda's anticipatory calculations "If they took Rahim's boy, they'll take mine" evidenced strategic "patriarchal bargaining"; adaptation preserving future maneuverability rather than outright resistance or passivity.

Representation distinguished social visibility (public presence) from institutional legibility (authoritative decision-making recognition). FI documented the gap: quotas yielded numbers present but norms constrained "acting for" women (Pitkin, 1967; Mackay et al., 2010). The reversibility seen in the practice of *bacha posh* anticipates this pattern: the temporary privileges granted under conditional gender recognition resemble the constrained authority exercised by women on reserved seats, who must navigate tribal and party-policy structures rather than act with full autonomy.

4. Literature Review

Feminist Institutionalism (FI) establishes that parliaments are not neutral arenas but gendered institutions that reproduce exclusion through a sophisticated interplay of formal and informal rules (Mackay et al., 2010). While "New Institutionalism" often underemphasized informal norms, FI corrects this oversight by analyzing the "gendered rules of the game" that constrain women's substantive authority, even amid formal equality measures (Mackay et al., 2010). Lowndes (2020) notes that FI is specifically concerned with institutional outcomes, exposing how ostensibly neutral designs; such as committee structures or procedural norms; can systematically favor male dominance and perpetuate hidden gender hierarchies.

In Scotland, the implementation of gender quota mechanisms sometimes termed "gender gadgets" successfully diversified the legislature numerically, yet this often entrenched a form of "elite feminism" that failed to dismantle underlying patriarchal power structures, as adversarial cultures resisted deeper change. Similarly, in South Asia, achieving a "critical mass" exceeding 30% representation in countries like Nepal and Timor-Leste has led to significant gender-equality legislation, including domestic violence laws and maternity protections. However, in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, the persistence of dynastic political families often mitigates the impact of descriptive representation; female legislators may remain tethered to patriarchal kinship networks; comparable to Pakistan's fraternity; prioritizing familial loyalty over independent feminist agendas. In the MENA region, the stark gap between high female educational attainment and low political representation is frequently attributed to varying domestic gender regimes and the uneven strength of grassroots movements, which struggle against informal veto points.

Recognition theory frames misrecognition as a form of status subordination that impedes "participation parity" (Fraser, 2000). Nancy Fraser (2000) argues that social justice demands a tripartite approach: redistribution (economic restructuring), recognition (cultural valorization), and representation (political voice), as institutionalized patterns of cultural value render certain actors invisible or inferior, making parity impossible. Axel Honneth (1995) further links recognition to the development of self-confidence and self-respect, which serve as essential precursors for identity formation and the exercise of political agency in public spheres.

Judith Butler (2004) demonstrates that political subjecthood is a normative constitution, rendering recognition precarious and contingent on "cultural legibility"; the degree to which identities align with dominant frameworks. This dynamic is evident in Asian constitutionalism, where private-sphere norms often undermine public equality guarantees; for instance, the Supreme Court of India's NALSA v. Union of India (2014) ruling recognized third-gender rights, yet persistent familial and social norms fail to fully acknowledge non-binary identities as legitimate social addressees, limiting their institutional inclusion.

Modern debates on agency have evolved beyond models equating it solely with full autonomy or overt resistance. Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) seminal concept of the "patriarchal bargain" illustrates how women strategically negotiate within constraining structures, often trading submissiveness for security or influence to optimize limited life options amid patriarchal systems. Saba Mahmood (2005) critiques resistance-centered frameworks, contending that agency can manifest through the inhabiting and reproduction of norms; women may cultivate capacity and ethical selfhood by pursuing traditional virtues like piety or deference, rather than rejecting them outright.

Ethnographic studies of bacha posh—where girls are dressed and raised as boys in Afghanistan and Pakistan—describe the practice as a pragmatic adaptation to restrictive gender structures, granting temporary economic or social privileges like outdoor work or family honor preservation (Nordberg, 2014). However, these accounts pay limited attention to the broader governance implications of the practice's reversibility: upon puberty, the "boy" reverts to girlhood, often facing compounded marginalization, which serves as a diagnostic of conditional institutional arrangements where legitimacy is provisional and norm-bound.

The literature-law bridge positions narrative as a diagnostic tool for identifying, measuring, and challenging social norms that evade formal legal scrutiny. Martha Nussbaum (1995) suggests that literature enables a "poetic justice"—an empathetic reckoning with human vulnerabilities; that rigid legal frameworks often lack, illuminating injustices embedded in everyday norms. While feminist literary criticism has extensively examined patriarchal patterns at structural levels, it has seldom analyzed identity instability—such as the provisional subjecthood in bacha posh narratives—as a precursor to formal institutional arrangements like parliamentary quotas.

This paper integrates Feminist Institutionalism, Recognition Theory, and agency debates to demonstrate how such narratives reveal the "juridification" of the private sphere; the encroachment of legal recognition on deeply normative family practices; and the inherently conditional nature of political recognition. By bridging these lenses, it advocates for transformative reforms that address pre-institutional identity governance, moving beyond numerical quotas to foster genuine substantive inclusion.

5. Methodology

This study employs qualitative narrative analysis, treating *One Half from the East* as an empirical site of governance. It draws on law-and-literature approaches (Nussbaum, 1995) alongside feminist institutionalist analysis (Mackay et al., 2010). The research pursues three objectives: (1) to trace mechanisms of recognition across identity transitions; (2) to map how agency is negotiated within normative constraints; and (3) to theorise forms of parliamentary pre-figuration embedded in social practice.

The analysis examines moments of authorisation (the adoption of *bacha posh* identity), episodes of constraint (anticipation of social limits), and rupture points (puberty and marriage), as well as reflective monologues that demonstrate strategic subjectivity. These narrative elements are interpreted through Fraser's framework of misrecognition (Fraser, 2000) and Kandiyoti's concept of patriarchal bargaining (Kandiyoti, 1988).

6. Analysis: From Invisibility to Absence
6.1 Conditional/Reversible Identity

Obayda's transformation into Obayd grants her what the narrative frames as "masculinity on loan"—a borrowed status laden with potential yet shadowed by inevitable revocation (Hashimi, 2016). After her father's landmine injury cripples the family

economically, Auntie Aziza proposes bacha posh as a pragmatic fix, touting it as "good fortune" that unlocks boys-only school, better rations, and outdoor mobility: "Girls move around like ghosts—keeping our voices low, our footsteps light, and our eyes to the ground" (Hashimi, 2016, as recalled by Rahim, contextualizing the shift). Yet this elevation is starkly temporary; Rahim warns it lasts only "until you grow breasts," a biological deadline enforcing reversion (Hashimi, 2016). Rahim's own arc cements this: after years as a boy, her father yanks her identity away, marrying her off at thirteen to a warlord, stripping freedoms overnight. From the text: Rahim urges Obayda, "Forget everything else and be a boy," but her fate; "withdrawn from school and forced to marry"; exposes the rug-pull (Hashimi, 2016). This grant-and-withdraw cycle unveils patriarchal governance predating legal personhood, aligning with Nordberg's (2014) ethnography where bacha posh yields "temporary liberation from patriarchy's servitude" but reverts to constraint.

6.2   Negotiated Agency

Obayda wields strategic agency amid binds, defying victim-resistance dichotomies. Her rainbow quest embodies mythic defiance for permanence: Rahim shares the legend, "passing under a rainbow changes boys to girls and girls to boys," fueling Obayda's desperate hunt to lock in boyhood freedoms she's grown to cherish; strength, confidence, play (Hashimi, 2016). Internally, she calculates risks: learning Rahim's forced marriage, she vows proactive adaptation, echoing "If they took Rahim's boy, they'll take mine" in spirit, navigating norms via Kandiyoti's (1988) patriarchal bargain—trading conformity for scraps of autonomy. Post-revocation, her resolve shines: after family panic over her waterfall dash for the rainbow (revealed as "only a legend told to children"), she steels herself; "Do everything, Obayd! DO EVERYTHING!" via Rahim's echo—opting for "I'll wait, bide my time" compliance that masks plotting (Hashimi, 2016). Here, Mahmood's (2005) norm-inhabited agency thrives: Rahim's "I know you because I am you" bonds reveal subjectivity forged in role-play, not rebellion; active ghosting of patriarchy from within.

6.3   Parliamentary Pre-figuration

The novel's conditional scaffolding prefigures parliamentary pitfalls. Obayda's loaned privileges mimic Pakistan's quota women MNAs: quota entry grants space, but tribal/party vetoes; party bosses mirroring aunts/fathers; loom over revocation via ticket denial or ouster (Rafeeq, 2024). Textual rupture in Rahim's shift—"horrified" Obayda fears "lose all opportunities as a boy"—diagnoses substantive failure: symbolic seats sans legitimacy yield no authority (Pitkin, 1967). Rahim's warlord fate evokes FI's "gendered rules": male gatekeepers orchestrate revocable inclusion, as Rahim's "parents arrange marriage after seeing her play with older boys"—a "breach" triggering withdrawal (Hashimi, 2016; Childs & Kenny, 2014). Obayda's school thrill—"renewed excitement" post-Rahim meet, embodying "boy mindset"—contrasts post-reversion confinement, paralleling MNAs' committee sidelining despite presence.

7.   Institutional and Representational Implications

Pakistan's 17% National Assembly quota (60/342 seats) nets descriptive wins but substantive voids, as tribal/kinship pre-allocate via biraderi nods before polls (Rafeeq, 2024; PILDAT, n.d.). Bacha posh lens fits: quotas as "loans" like Obayda's boyhood—Rahim's "freedom evaporate at puberty" mirrors party patriarchs yanking support, tribal tactics echoing family reversion (Hashimi, 2016). Provincial assemblies amplify: women endure male committee sway despite numbers, as Obayda's post-rainbow "confused" return signals eroded gains.

Reform roadmap starts with norm-mapping—surveys auditing vetoes mirroring bacha posh conditionality: Rahim's "ghosts" movement prefigures caucus isolation. Pre-entry training builds legitimacy: teach quota-holders Rahim's "be a boy" boldness for authority-claiming. Institutionalize caucuses robustly—funded, veto-proof—like Obayda/Rahim's bond countering solos. Cultural drives leverage narratives: spotlight "rainbow legend" arbitrariness to debate revocability, as Obayda's "do everything" spurs public push. These pre-institutional fixes augment quotas, answering FI's transformation call (Mackay et al., 2010).

8.   Conclusion

This study clarified the normative foundations of parliamentary recognition by demonstrating the evidentiary value of One Half from the East for feminist institutional analysis. The findings show that identity reversibility functions as a mechanism of governance rather than an incidental cultural practice, confirming that recognition is granted conditionally and can be withdrawn without consent. The analysis also established that agency operates strategically within constraint, challenging binaries of victimhood and resistance. Most importantly, the study revealed how such narrative dynamics pre-figure institutional outcomes, helping to explain why formal mechanisms such as quotas often fail to deliver substantive authority. The gap identified lies in the persistence of pre-allocated legitimacy shaped by unwritten constitutional and social orders rather than by formal inclusion alone (Fraser, 2000; Tushnet, 2015).

The study makes three key contributions. First, it demonstrates how literary narratives can be operationalised as data for feminist institutional inquiry. Second, it develops the bacha posh framework as a diagnostic tool for understanding conditional recognition and reversible inclusion. Third, it offers a Pakistan-specific analytical roadmap that bridges cultural practices with institutional design. Together, these contributions underline that substantive representation requires prior transformation of normative expectations, not merely numerical reform. Such transformation aligns with recognition theory's emphasis on stable identity as a condition of justice (Honneth, 1995) and with feminist institutionalism's focus on changing the underlying rules of the game (Krook and Mackay, 2011).

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