The Paradox of Inclusion: Informal Norms and Gender Reform in Parliament[1]

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Abstract

While gender quotas have increased women's numerical presence in legislatures, substantive authority remains uneven and contingent upon cultural legitimacy. Feminist Institutionalism identifies how gendered rules structure power, and Recognition Theory posits that agency requires status validation; however, the link between institutional inclusion and identity formation remains under-theorized. This paper addresses that gap by conceptualizing political authority as conditioned by pre-institutional recognition regimes. Drawing on Pakistan's parliamentary context—where reserved seats provide representation without proportionate influence—the study argues that reform is constrained by "patriarchal grammars" rooted in kinship and patronage. Synthesizing subject formation with rule analysis, the paper advances the concept of conditional identity governance to explain how legitimacy is extended instrumentally yet remains revocable. This is developed through an interpretive analysis of bacha posh in contemporary fiction, treating provisional gender reclassification as a substitution mechanism for social recognition. By integrating these theories, the paper demonstrates that while quotas redistribute seats, recognition distributes legitimacy; thus, durable authority requires transforming both institutional design and the symbolic orders that render actors intelligible as authority-bearing subjects.

Keywords: feminist institutionalism, recognition theory, gender quotas, parliamentary legitimacy, conditional identity governance, normative intelligibility, bacha posh, Pakistan

1. Introduction

The institutionalization of gender quotas has been widely celebrated as one of the most significant democratic reforms of the past three decades. Across diverse political systems, quotas have increased women's descriptive/numerical representation in legislatures, often at unprecedented speed. Pakistan represents a prominent example of this transformation. Constitutional reforms institutionalized reserved seats for women, ensuring that approximately 17 percent of parliamentary positions are occupied by female legislators. These reforms are frequently cited as evidence of institutional progress toward gender inclusion.

Yet numerical inclusion has not uniformly translated into substantive authority. Studies of Pakistan's parliamentary development show that while women have secured presence, their influence often remains mediated by party hierarchies, elite patronage networks, and kinship-based political recruitment (PILDAT, 2004; Rafeeq, 2024). Women elected on reserved seats frequently depend upon party leadership for nomination and re-nomination, limiting their autonomy. Informal norms continue to shape committee assignments, leadership roles, and agenda-setting power. As a result, the formal architecture of inclusion coexists with persistent structural subordination.

This paradox—expansion of representation alongside constrained authority—raises questions that extend beyond institutional design. Why does formal inclusion not consolidate stable political legitimacy? Why does authority remain conditional even after legal reform? Existing institutional accounts explain persistence of informal gendered norms but often treat political actors as fully constituted subjects entering the institutional arena. They do not fully interrogate how political subjectivity itself is socially stabilized—or destabilized—prior to institutional participation.

At the same time, Recognition Theory provides a normative grammar for understanding the relationship between identity and agency. Fraser (2000) conceptualizes justice as participatory parity, requiring institutional arrangements that secure equal status recognition. Honneth (1995) situates recognition at the foundation of self-realization and moral agency. Butler (2004) further argues that subjecthood depends upon normative intelligibility—only those recognized within prevailing social frameworks can exercise viable agency. Yet recognition scholarship rarely addresses how institutional structures operationalize recognition conditionally, nor how governance mechanisms regulate legitimacy.

This paper bridges these theoretical traditions. It argues that in patriarchal democracies, political authority is governed through conditional recognition regimes. To illustrate this mechanism, the paper turns to literary narrative—not as metaphor but as analytic resource. Nadia Hashimi's portrayal of *bacha posh*—girls temporarily clothed as boys for familial necessity—provides a structured example of provisional legitimacy (Hashimi, 2014; Hashimi, 2016; Nordberg, 2014). The temporary conferral and withdrawal of recognition in this practice offers insight into how legitimacy operates in quota-based parliamentary systems.

The central claim is that women's legislative authority remains fragile not only because institutions are gendered, but because the recognition regimes underpinning authority remain conditional and reversible.

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2. Research Problem and Questions

The core problem addressed in this study is the persistence of conditional political authority despite formal mechanisms of gender inclusion: while Feminist Institutionalism demonstrates how informal norms and gendered rules constrain women's power within legislatures (Mackay et al., 2010; Waylen, 2012; Krook & Mackay, 2011), it insufficiently theorizes how political subjectivity is stabilized prior to institutional entry, and while Recognition Theory conceptualizes identity validation as foundational to agency (Fraser, 2000; Honneth, 1995), it remains under-attentive to how institutions strategically govern recognition itself; consequently, existing frameworks cannot fully explain why women admitted through quotas often experience authority as provisional, mediated, or revocable, particularly in contexts such as Pakistan where kinship structures and patronage networks mediate nomination processes (PILDAT, 2004; Rafeeq, 2024); this paper addresses that gap by theorizing conditional identity governance—a mechanism through which institutions extend legitimacy instrumentally yet retain the capacity to symbolically or materially withdraw it—arguing that without stabilized recognition regimes, institutional inclusion cannot produce durable parliamentary authority.

This paper addresses the following questions:

1) How did Hashmi's novels depict conditional identity recognition within patriarchal normative orders?
2) In what ways was gendered agency negotiated through strategic adaptation rather than resistance?
3) What narrative mechanisms revealed parliamentary recognition processes' pre-institutional foundations?

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Feminist Institutionalism conceptualizes institutions as gendered systems structured by formal and informal rules that reproduce power asymmetries (Mackay et al., 2010). Path dependency constrains reform, and new equality measures are often absorbed into masculinized institutional logics (Krook & Mackay, 2011). Waylen (2012) emphasizes the hidden life of institutions, where informal practices shape outcomes beyond formal design.

Recognition Theory complements this account. Fraser (2000) argues that justice requires participatory parity grounded in redistribution of economic resource and recognition. Honneth (1995) identifies recognition across affective, legal, and social spheres as foundational for agency. Butler (2004) demonstrates that subjecthood depends upon normative intelligibility. Political actors must be legible within prevailing gendered frameworks to exercise authority.

Agency within constraint is theorized through Kandiyoti's patriarchal bargain (1988) and Mahmood's analysis of norm-inhabited agency (2005). These perspectives inform the paper's core concept of reversible personhood, defined as provisional and revocable identity validation that conditions political legitimacy.

4. Literature Review

Patriarchy continues to operate as a durable system structured across multiple domains, including the household, culture, sexuality, violence, the state, and the economy (Walby, 1990). These interlocking structures reproduce male dominance not only through formal exclusion but also through everyday normative practices. Contemporary feminist scholarship has further demonstrated how neoliberal governance reforms, including gender quotas, may coexist with persistent hierarchies, creating symbolic inclusion without dismantling structural power (Fraser, 2013; Roberts, 2022). As a result, descriptive representation does not necessarily secure substantive authority.

Research on women's parliamentary representation shows that gendered marginalization persists despite numerical gains. Women parliamentarians frequently encounter heightened scrutiny, interruptions, limited speaking time, and exclusion from influential committees (Itzkovitch-Malka et al., 2024). Although global representation rose to approximately 27.6 percent following the 2023 electoral cycle (IPU, 2024), substantive representation often remains constrained by party discipline and elite gatekeeping (Celis et al., 2014; FAFEN, 2023). Women are frequently channeled into welfare or "soft" policy areas, reinforcing stereotypes and limiting influence over finance, security, or constitutional reform (Palmieri, 2018; IPU, 2023). Gender-based harassment and symbolic delegitimization further narrow political space.

Feminist Institutionalism critiques traditional institutional theories for neglecting the gendered dimensions of rules and norms. Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell (2010) argue that institutions are structured through formal and informal rules that are historically path dependent. Chappell and Waylen (2013) extend this analysis by highlighting how institutional change is often layered onto masculinized structures, producing what Kenny (2013) calls "nested newness," where feminist reforms operate within resistant institutional shells. More recent scholarship emphasizes "gendered parliamentarianism," identifying cross-party networks of women MPs who attempt to collectively counter exclusionary norms (Childs, 2023). However, much of FI scholarship focuses on post-entry institutional behavior rather than pre-institutional cultural conditioning.

Recognition theory deepens this analysis by examining how identity validation shapes political agency. Fraser (2000) conceptualizes misrecognition as status subordination that prevents participatory parity. Honneth (1995) situates recognition across spheres of love, rights, and social esteem, arguing that agency depends upon stable forms of social validation. Butler (2004) further demonstrates that subjecthood itself depends upon normative intelligibility. Individuals become politically legible only when they conform to socially recognizable frameworks. These insights suggest that political marginalization may originate prior to institutional entry, in cultural practices that condition who counts as a stable political subject.

Literature and law scholarship provides methodological tools for examining such norms. Nussbaum (1995) argues that narrative imagination fosters institutional understanding beyond positivist legal reasoning. Feminist literary criticism has long

examined how texts reproduce or contest patriarchal structures (Felski, 1989; Eagleton, 2002). Yet the use of literary narratives as empirical data for feminist institutional analysis remains underdeveloped. Existing studies of *bacha posh* primarily frame it as subversion or resilience but rarely theorize its governance implications (Nordberg, 2014; Das, 2021; Azam, 2024). This paper addresses that gap by operationalizing Hashimi's novels as empirical sites that illuminate how reversible identity functions as a mechanism of governance. In doing so, it integrates recognition theory's identity focus with FI's institutional analysis and responds to critiques that FI underplays cultural pre-structuring (Thomson, 2018).

5. Methodology

This study employs a Qualitative Interpretive Framework, utilizing Nadia Hashimi's novels (*The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and *One Half from the East*) as empirical governance sites. Following Nussbaum's (1995) "poetic justice" approach, literature is treated as a diagnostic tool for capturing "informal institutionalism"—the unwritten rules of social life that formal political science often misses.

The analysis followed a three-stage coding process:

a) Authorization Mapping: Identifying "entry points" where identity is strategically shifted to gain mobility (akin to quota entry).
b) Constraint Coding: Documenting "withdrawal ruptures" where legitimacy is revoked (e.g., puberty or marriage as a metaphor for term limits or party ousters).
c) Cross-Domain Synthesis: Mapping these literary findings onto documented parliamentary behaviors in Pakistan (drawing on PILDAT and FAFEN reports) to identify isomorphic patterns of conditional identity governance.

6. Analysis

6.1 Conditional Identity Recognition

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell and *One Half from the East* reveal a haunting social contract: women are granted freedom only if they pretend not to be women. In Hashimi's novels, the transformation into a *bacha posh* (a girl dressing as a boy) provides Rahima and Obayda with a temporary "maternal allowance" of education and mobility. However, this freedom is strictly provisional. As soon as biological markers of womanhood appear—"until you grow breasts"—this borrowed identity is "undone," and the characters are forced back into the isolation of purdah or coerced into predatory marriages. This cycle creates a state of reversible personhood, where a girl's rights are a loan that can be recalled at any moment to preserve patriarchal hierarchy.

This literary pattern serves as a powerful diagnostic for real-world politics. In Pakistan, the 17% parliamentary quota functions much like the bacha posh tradition: it allows women entry into "masculine" spaces of power, yet that power remains conditional. Much like Rahima's freedom was revoked when she became "visible" as a woman, female legislators often face ouster or symbolic "undoing" when they overstep the unspoken rules of their patronage—such as pushing for independent women's rights bills. Whether in fiction or the halls of parliament, the message remains the same: inclusion is a strategic tool of the state, but true legitimacy is still reserved for those who fit the traditional masculine order.

6.2 Strategic Agency Negotiation

In Hashimi's novels, agency is not a loud act of rebellion; it is a quiet, strategic negotiation. Rahima lives with the constant weight of "the price of being seen," choosing to inhabit her male identity as a protective armor to gain mobility. Similarly, Obayda is driven by the thrill of a "boy mindset," even chasing local legends of rainbows and waterfalls in a desperate hope to make her gender transition permanent. She understands that her time as a boy is an "excited" but fleeting reprieve, realizing that if the community "took Rahim's boy [identity], they'll take mine."

This desperate maneuvering illustrates what Deniz Kandiyoti (1998) calls the "patriarchal bargain." The characters aren't just victims; they are savvy actors who trade conformity for "scraps" of freedom, like education and rations. By "ghosting" the very system that oppresses them, they inhabit the norms of patriarchy to build their own internal resilience and subversive capital.

In the real world, this same bargain is mirrored in India's *panchayat* system, where the 33% gender quota often produces "sarpanch pati" dynamics—a "substitution mechanism" in which women like Sunita Devi (PAISAL, 2022) are elected as proxies for their husbands, yet they frequently leverage this temporary, instrumental recognition to eventually build substantive and independent political authority. Yet, even within this constrained role, these women find ways to negotiate. Much like Rahima and Obayda, they "bide their time," using their proxy status as a foot in the door to eventually push their own independent agendas. In both fiction and politics, these women prove that even when power is "borrowed," the agency they build while wearing it is very real.

6.3 Parliamentary Pre-figuration

The sudden "undoing" of Rahima and Obayda's freedom in the novels acts as a diagnostic tool for modern politics, revealing how institutions can grant and then abruptly revoke power. In Pakistan, the way family elders or aunts in the novels dictate when a girl must "return" to girlhood is mirrored in the biraderi (kinship) networks that deny party tickets to female MNAs who become too independent. This is a form of "institutional veto" where gatekeepers orchestrate inclusion only as long as it remains convenient.

Furthermore, the novels describe the "weight on the shoulders" and the feeling of being "ghosts," which captures the modern reality of committee marginalization. Even though women may set a large portion of the legislative agenda, they are often funneled into "soft" policy areas like social welfare, much like Obayda's education was cut short and replaced with domestic confinement. This ensures they have a presence in the building but lack legitimacy in high-stakes fields like finance or security. This fragility of power is not unique to South Asia; it is a global pattern. In Rwanda, despite women holding a world-leading 61% of parliamentary seats, the 2021 expulsion of an MP for criticizing the executive proves that even high numerical representation can be symbolic. Like the *bacha posh* characters, these women drive progress and gain "strength and confidence," only to face a sudden "undoing" when they challenge the core structures of the state.

7. Institutional and Parliamentary Implications

To move from descriptive presence to substantive authority, the findings suggest three systemic shifts:

Decoupling Tenure from Patronage: Currently, the "reserved seat" model functions as a form of institutional *bacha posh*—women are placed in positions by male-led parties to meet a quota, often as proxies. Substantive impact requires direct election mechanisms or internal party democracy mandates that grant women an independent mandate, making their political "personhood" legally stable rather than a gift from party elders.

Formalizing Informal Norms: The "informal vetoes" seen in narratives—where authority is revoked for "improper" behavior—must be countered by formalizing parliamentary procedures. This includes mandatory "gender-impact statements" for all legislation and transparent, merit-based criteria for committee chair appointments to prevent the "procedural ghosting" of female legislators.

Capacity Building as Recognition: Institutional legitimacy is reinforced when legislators are viewed as "subject-matter experts." Funding must be diverted toward independent legislative research bureaus for female caucuses. When a woman's authority is backed by technical expertise, it becomes harder for the "symbolic order" to dismiss her as a temporary placeholder.

8. Conclusion

Gender quotas effectively remodel the architecture of the house, but they remain powerless against the unwritten rules of the household. This study has demonstrated that in patriarchal democracies, political legitimacy is not a permanent acquisition but a state of conditional recognition. By using the *bacha posh* as a lens, we see that society employs a "substitution mechanism": it permits women to inhabit masculine roles of authority only as long as they serve a specific, instrumental purpose—be it familial survival in fiction or international democratic signaling in politics.

However, this inclusion is fundamentally reversible. The moment a woman attempts to move from a "proxy" to a self-constituting agent, the "normative intelligibility" that allowed her to function is withdrawn. She is "undone"—not by law, but by the symbolic orders of kinship, patronage, and elite gatekeeping that decide who counts as a stable, authority-bearing subject.

Ultimately, true empowerment demands more than the mere redistribution of seats; it requires a radical transformation of the cultural grammar of power. Until the political system recognizes women's authority as inherent and unconditional—rather than a temporary loan tethered to male-dominated networks—parliamentary inclusion will remain a fragile performance of progress. To move forward, institutions must not only change who sits at the table but must dismantle the recognition regimes that reserve the right to take that seat away.

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