Reversible Personhood: Bacha Posh, Marital Renaming, and Women's Parliamentary Recognition[1]

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Abstract

This article develops the concept of reversible personhood to explain the fragility of women's political authority under quota regimes in patriarchal democracies. Drawing on Nadia Hashimi's literary representations of *bacha posh* in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and *One Half from the East*, alongside the practice of marital renaming in South Asia, the study argues that women's identities are frequently granted instrumentally and revoked upon deviation from normative expectations. Integrating Feminist Institutionalism with Recognition Theory, the paper demonstrates that quota-based inclusion often operates within pre-existing cultural grammars that render women's authority conditional rather than secure. Through comparative reference to Pakistan's parliamentary quota system and India's panchayat reforms, the analysis shows how descriptive representation can coexist with revocable legitimacy, informal veto practices, and patronage dependence. By operationalizing literature as Feminist Institutionalist empirics, the study identifies the pre-institutional recognition regimes that precede and shape parliamentary vulnerability. It concludes that durable substantive representation requires reforms that stabilize recognition—decoupling tenure from patronage, auditing informal institutional practices, protecting women's caucuses, and addressing identity substitution mechanisms such as marital renaming. The framework offers a scalable analytical lens for understanding quota fragility and advancing participatory parity beyond numerical inclusion.

Keywords: Reversible Personhood, Bacha Posh, Marital Renaming, Feminist Institutionalism, Recognition Theory, Gender Quotas, Parliamentary Representation, South Asia

1. Introduction

Across patriarchal societies, identity is not a stable ontological condition but a socially mediated status, granted and withdrawn through normative regulation. In South Asia, women's personhood is repeatedly reorganized at key biographical thresholds—childhood, puberty, marriage, and political entry—through mechanisms that reclassify their social standing in accordance with patriarchal need (Walby, 1990; Kandiyoti, 1988). Rather than constituting a continuous subject, the female self is frequently treated as administratively transferable: renamed, repositioned, and reauthorized under shifting guardianship structures. These transformations do not merely reflect cultural symbolism; they operate as regulatory technologies that determine who may appear in public, who may speak with authority, and under what conditions such authority may persist.

This paper introduces the concept of reversible personhood to describe this phenomenon. Reversible personhood refers to a socio-political condition in which recognition is granted instrumentally but remains revocable upon deviation from normative compliance. Authority, under this regime, is never intrinsic; it is contingent upon alignment with patriarchal expectations. When autonomy threatens hierarchy, recognition is withdrawn.

The Afghan practice of *bacha posh* offers a particularly illuminating case. Documented ethnographically by Nordberg (2014) and rendered narratively in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) and *One Half from the East* (2016), *bacha posh* involves families temporarily raising daughters as sons in contexts where male presence is socially or economically necessary. The transformation enables mobility, access to education, public speech, and physical autonomy otherwise denied to girls. Yet this masculinized identity is not recognized as self-determined. It is granted by family consensus and revoked at puberty, typically followed by reintegration into feminine seclusion, early marriage, or intensified domestic confinement (Nordberg, 2014; Das, 2021). Masculinity functions here not as liberation but as conditional authorization.

Parallel to this practice is the widespread phenomenon of marital renaming across South Asia, in which women's names, surnames, and often even first names are altered upon marriage to align with patrilineal lineage (Taylor, 1994; WE-FI, 2021; Zafar & Kalsoom, 2024). Renaming is frequently normalized as symbolic unity, yet it represents a profound institutionalization of identity substitution. The bride's pre-marital subjecthood is absorbed into her husband's genealogical framework, legally and socially overwriting prior affiliation. Unlike *bacha posh*, this renaming is not temporary. It is structurally permanent—yet equally conditional, in that status remains tied to marital continuity.

These domestic identity transformations reveal a broader recognition grammar: women's identities are administratively modifiable according to patriarchal requirement. This grammar does not disappear at the threshold of formal politics. Instead, it reappears in institutional form.

Pakistan's reserved seat system, introduced in its current configuration in 2002, guarantees approximately 17 percent representation for women in the National and Provincial Assemblies (PILDAT, 2004; IPU, 2024). Empirically, women legislators have contributed significantly to policy development in areas including anti-harassment legislation, child protection, and public health (FAFEN, 2023; Rafeeq, 2024). On the surface, quota reform appears to signal structural progress

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toward gender parity. Yet scholars consistently note that women entering through party lists remain dependent upon elite gatekeepers for re-nomination and committee placement (Childs & Kenny, 2014; Mackay et al., 2010). Their authority is often mediated through kinship lineage, party loyalty, or dynastic connection.

This paper argues that such institutional fragility cannot be understood solely through procedural design or party centralization. Instead, parliamentary vulnerability must be situated within a deeper, pre-institutional recognition regime that normalizes conditional identity. The same cultural logic that renders *bacha posh* masculinity revocable and marital renaming obligatory also shapes the interpretive field through which women legislators are evaluated. Inclusion may be granted; permanence is not guaranteed.

By integrating Feminist Institutionalism with Recognition Theory, this study contends that quotas address descriptive absence but leave intact the recognition structures that determine whose authority counts as legitimate. Women may enter parliament numerically, yet their political personhood remains susceptible to revocation when autonomy exceeds patriarchal tolerance. Thus, parliamentary inclusion often reproduces the logic of *bacha posh*: masculinity—or institutional authority—is temporarily conferred, strategically utilized, and structurally retractable.

The central claim advanced here is that reversible personhood functions as the cultural template through which quota fragility is produced. Without transformation of recognition regimes, numerical inclusion risks stabilizing symbolic presence while leaving substantive authority precarious.

2. Research Problem and Questions

Despite formal mechanisms of gender inclusion such as quotas, women's political authority frequently remains conditional, revocable, and mediated through patriarchal patronage structures. Feminist Institutionalism explains how informal rules constrain women after entry but under-theorizes how political subjectivity is stabilized prior to institutional participation. Recognition Theory emphasizes identity validation but does not sufficiently examine how institutions strategically govern recognition itself. Consequently, women admitted through quotas often experience authority as provisional—mirroring domestic patterns of conditional identity transformation such as *bacha posh* and marital renaming.

The study is guided by following research questions:

1. How do *bacha posh* transformations and marital renaming depict systems of conditional identity governance?
2. In what ways is gendered agency negotiated through strategic adaptation rather than overt resistance?
3. How do narrative ruptures in literary representations reveal the pre-institutional foundations of parliamentary recognition?

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This paper integrates Feminist Institutionalism (FI) and Recognition Theory to conceptualize conditional political authority. Feminist Institutionalism conceptualizes institutions as gendered systems in which formal equality mechanisms, including quotas, coexist with entrenched informal norms that structure access to power (Mackay et al., 2010; Waylen, 2012; Kenny, 2013). Parliaments operate as masculinized workplaces where veto points, committee assignments, and networking cultures reproduce dominance beneath formal reform.

Recognition Theory complements this structural focus by arguing that political agency depends upon normative intelligibility. Fraser (2000) conceptualizes participatory parity as dependent upon stable recognition; Honneth (1995) grounds agency in intersubjective esteem; Butler (2004) demonstrates that subjecthood itself is precarious, sustained only through compliance with dominant norms.

Building on this synthesis, the paper advances the concept of Conditional Identity Governance. Under this framework, legitimacy is treated as a loaned status. Inclusion is granted instrumentally—whether to satisfy quota requirements or to address household needs—but remains reversible when autonomy threatens patriarchal authority. This concept bridges FI's institutional focus with recognition theory's identity emphasis, identifying a pre-institutional grammar that renders authority structurally unstable.

4. Literature Review

Patriarchy has long been theorized not as a static relic but as a dynamic system capable of institutional adaptation (Walby, 1990). Rather than collapsing under modernization, patriarchal structures frequently reconfigure themselves through new mechanisms that preserve male dominance while incorporating reformist language. Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the "patriarchal bargain" illustrates how women navigate within these systems, negotiating constrained agency in exchange for security or incremental advantage. Crucially, such bargains do not dismantle hierarchy; they recalibrate it.

Contemporary feminist political economy extends this insight by demonstrating how neoliberal governance often integrates gender equality rhetorically while preserving structural inequalities (Fraser, 2013). Inclusion becomes a strategy of system stabilization rather than transformation. Roberts (2022) further notes that formal representation may enhance democratic legitimacy internationally without altering domestic power hierarchies. This adaptive quality is central to understanding quota politics. Gender quotas expand descriptive representation, yet patriarchal institutions frequently absorb these reforms without relinquishing decision-making dominance.

Feminist Institutionalism (FI) provides a powerful framework for examining how institutions reproduce gender hierarchy through informal norms. Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell (2010) argue that institutions are "gendered workplaces" structured

by historically masculinized expectations of authority. These norms operate beneath formal rules, shaping who speaks, who is heard, and whose expertise is recognized.

Waylen (2012) demonstrates that formal reforms often layer onto resistant informal cultures. Kenny (2013) introduces the concept of "nested newness," whereby new gender reforms are inserted into pre-existing institutional shells that constrain their transformative potential. Thus, quotas may alter numbers while leaving informal veto points intact.

Empirical scholarship supports this tension. Celis et al. (2014) and Palmieri (2018) show that women legislators are disproportionately allocated to less-sensitive committees and policy domains coded as "soft." Even in high-representation contexts, portfolio hierarchies persist (IPU, 2024). Descriptive gains therefore coexist with substantive constraint.

FI predominantly focuses on post-entry institutional behavior, it explains how informal norms shape women's experiences after they enter parliament. The manner how political subjectivity is pre-structured culturally before institutional participation begins, remains under-theorizes. This gap becomes particularly significant in contexts where kinship and lineage mediate candidate selection (Rafeeq, 2024).

Recognition Theory addresses this gap by foregrounding the ontological conditions under which subjects become politically intelligible. Fraser (2000) argues that participatory parity requires both redistribution and recognition; status subordination undermines democratic equality. Honneth (1995) conceptualizes recognition as intersubjective esteem necessary for self-realization. Butler (2004) extends this argument by demonstrating that subjecthood itself is precarious—sustained only through alignment with normative frameworks.

Under this lens, misrecognition is not merely disrespect but structural exclusion from intelligibility. Authority is contingent upon conformity to dominant norms. Applied to gender politics, recognition theory reveals that women's political agency depends not only on seat allocation but on whether they are recognized as legitimate political actors independent of male guardianship.

Scholarship on *bacha posh* highlights the fluid yet conditional nature of gender authorization. Nordberg's (2014) ethnographic work demonstrates that masculinization permits access to education and labor markets, yet this recognition is strictly temporary. Puberty triggers re-feminization, often accompanied by intensified restrictions. Masooda et al. (2021) further note the psychological and social consequences of abrupt identity withdrawal.

Importantly, *bacha posh* is not subversive in origin; it is instrumental. Families deploy gender transformation to navigate patriarchal constraints, not to challenge them. Masculinity is treated as a transferable asset rather than a self-determined identity. This impermanence mirrors institutional quota dynamics. Recognition is extended strategically and revoked when perceived autonomy threatens hierarchy.

Marital renaming, though less frequently theorized, represents another institutionalized form of identity substitution. Taylor (1994) links naming practices to moral frameworks of belonging. In South Asian contexts, surname change signifies transfer from natal to marital lineage (WE-FI, 2021). Zafar and Kalsoom (2024) note how bureaucratic documentation reinforces this absorption.

Renaming stabilizes patriarchy by embedding women's identities within patrilineal continuity. It is not episodic like *bacha posh*, but it similarly demonstrates that female identity is administratively modifiable.

While quota scholarship documents descriptive gains and FI explains institutional resistance, no existing framework systematically links domestic identity substitution practices to parliamentary recognition fragility. The literature treats *bacha posh*, marital renaming, and quota politics as discrete phenomena.

This paper bridges that divide by theorizing reversible personhood as the connective analytic category. It argues that domestic identity conditionality prefigures institutional recognition instability. Parliamentary inclusion operates within—not outside—the recognition grammar formed in the household.

5. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative interpretive design grounded in Feminist Institutionalism and Recognition Theory to examine how pre-institutional recognition regimes shape women's political legitimacy. It treats literary narrative as an analytical site for identifying informal norms that precede and structure formal political inclusion. Rather than using fiction illustratively, the study operationalizes it as conceptual evidence for institutional diagnostics.

The primary corpus consists of Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) and *One Half from the East* (2016), analyzed through close textual reading to trace patterns of gender transformation, revocation, and identity substitution. These narrative findings are placed in dialogue with theoretical frameworks on precarious subjecthood (Butler, 2004), participatory parity (Fraser, 2000), and gendered institutional rules (Mackay et al., 2010). Secondary sources—including parliamentary performance reports and comparative quota scholarship—are used to map conceptual parallels between literary reversible identity and quota-based political inclusion.

The analysis proceeds in three stages: (1) identifying structures of conditional recognition within the texts; (2) abstracting the concept of reversible personhood; and (3) mapping its institutional resonance in parliamentary contexts. The study is conceptual rather than causal; its aim is theoretical refinement and diagnostic clarity rather than empirical generalization.

6. Analysis
6.1 Conditional Recognition

In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, Rahima's transformation into "Rahim" is presented not as emancipation but as maternal authorization—a conditional allowance that permits mobility within social restrictions. As the novel makes explicit, "Men could do what they wanted with women" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 125), and it is only through masculine presentation that Rahima gains access to Kabul's marketplace and the protective oversight of her aunt. Yet this recognition is explicitly temporary. "It's time to undo Rahim… until you grow breasts" (p. 156) signals the predetermined endpoint of her masculine legitimacy. Puberty becomes the mechanism of revocation, returning her to purdah and reinstating gendered confinement.

Shekiba's parallel storyline reinforces this conditional structure. Her facial scars initially render her unmarriageable and therefore suitable for labor outside the domestic sphere, granting her limited mobility and economic participation. However, this provisional freedom collapses into an imposed marriage, illustrating again that mobility is tolerated only so long as it does not disrupt patriarchal continuity.

A comparable pattern unfolds in *One Half from the East*. Obayda's transformation into Obayd following her father's landmine injury is framed as "good fortune." As Hashimi (2016) observes, "Girls move around like ghosts—keeping our voices low, footsteps light, eyes to the ground." As Obayd, she gains entry into boys' school, access to better food rations, and the embodied confidence of wrestling and public movement—forms of citizenship otherwise inaccessible to girls. Yet the transience of this recognition is never in doubt. Rahim's warning—"until you grow breasts"—casts puberty as an inevitable threshold of reversion. Rahim's own narrative arc confirms this pattern: she is "withdrawn from school… forced to marry the warlord at thirteen… the price of being seen" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 134).

Rahima's trajectory intensifies this logic further. Her eventual bacha posh "undoing" culminates in marital renaming, where her identity is fully subsumed into patrilineal possession: "She became [husband's] wife, no longer Rahima" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 201). Personhood is not simply restricted—it is overwritten. The substitution mirrors the condition of certain women MNAs on reserved seats, whose quota-based entry remains publicly associated with dynastic lineage from bureaucratic/political families, where identity and authority function as statuses "on loan," sustained through patronage and subject to withdrawal (Rafeeq, 2024; Cheema et al., 2013)

Across both novels, masculinity is conferred instrumentally and revoked sans consent. This recurring structure exemplifies reversible personhood. Recognition is granted strategically rather than secured intrinsically. It resonates with Butler's (2004) formulation of precarious performativity, in which subjecthood persists only through compliance with dominant norms. It also aligns with Nordberg's (2014) ethnographic findings that puberty intensifies marginalization for Afghan girls by reimposing rigid gendered expectations. The *bacha posh* role does not stabilize agency; it dramatizes its fragility. Personhood remains contingent upon patriarchal convenience rather than self-determined continuity (Das, 2021).

A parallel structure is observable within Pakistan's 17 percent quota system in the National Assembly. Women enter parliament through party lists often intertwined with dynastic networks, yet their renomination can be jeopardized when they pursue independent legislative agendas (Rafeeq, 2024; FAFEN, 2023). Formal inclusion thus operates as conditional recognition. Legitimacy endures only so long as autonomy does not challenge party hierarchies. Feminist Institutionalism (Mackay et al., 2010) explains how parliamentary spaces operate as gendered workplaces structured by informal gatekeeping and committee marginalization. However, the *bacha posh* paradigm exposes something deeper: a pre-institutional grammar in which legitimacy itself is culturally constructed as revocable (Pitkin, 1967). Parliamentary fragility is therefore not merely procedural; it is ontological.

6.2 Strategic Agency

Hashimi's novels do not depict agency as overt rebellion but as calculated navigation within constraint. Rahima embodies Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the patriarchal bargain. She recognizes the risks of visibility—"She knew the price of being seen" (Hashimi, 2014, p. 201)—yet strategically re-inhabits masculine disguise when fleeing to Kabul. "I felt strong like a boy again" captures not a rejection of patriarchy but a tactical use of its gender codes to secure temporary autonomy. Her agency is iterative and adaptive. Rather than dismantling the system, she maneuvers within it to accumulate resilience and survival capital.

Obayda's narrative reflects a similar strategic consciousness. The childhood legend that "passing under a rainbow changes boys to girls and girls to boys" becomes a metaphor for her longing for permanence. Her "renewed excitement" upon meeting Rahim reflects the intoxicating empowerment of masculine embodiment. Yet she remains acutely aware of its impermanence: "If they took Rahim's boy, they'll take mine" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 134). When the rainbow quest fails—dismissed as "only a legend told to children"—Obayda does not succumb to despair. Instead, she recalibrates. "I'll wait, bide my time" (p. 267) signals reflective compliance that conceals long-term aspiration.

The affirmation exchanged between Rahim and Obayda—"I know you because I am you"—creates intersubjective recognition in Honneth's (1995) sense. Within constraint, mutual acknowledgment becomes a source of ethical selfhood. Mahmood's (2005) concept of norm-inhabiting agency clarifies this dynamic: transformation occurs not through transcendence of norms but through strategic inhabitation. Internal negotiation cultivates what Das (2021) and Azam (2024) describe as spiritual or psychological resilience against structural domination.

Comparable patterns emerge in India's 33 percent panchayat quota system. The phenomenon of "sarpanch pati," wherein husbands initially act as proxies for elected women, reflects institutionalized mediation. Yet empirical studies show that many women leaders gradually assert independent authority, advancing sanitation and education initiatives over time (PAISAL, 2022; Lalthlamuanpuii & Suchi, 2020). Strategic compliance becomes a pathway toward incremental autonomy. Obayda's

decision to "bide time" mirrors this progression. Likewise, women parliamentarians in Pakistan have leveraged caucus solidarity to influence approximately 35 percent of legislative initiatives despite structural marginalization (FAFEN, 2023). Agency, in these contexts, is neither absent nor revolutionary—it is cumulative.

6.3 Parliamentary Pre-figuration

The narrative ruptures in Hashimi's fiction prefigure the fragility of institutional authority. Rahima and Obayda's abrupt "undoing" parallels the precarious tenure of quota-based legislators whose positions depend upon party gatekeeping. Rahima's forced marriage after perceived behavioral "breach"—playing with older boys—echoes the informal sanctions faced by women parliamentarians who challenge party discipline through independent bills. Obayda's fear of losing "all opportunities as a boy" (Hashimi, 2016) captures the anxiety inherent in revocable access.

The emotional register of these reversions is particularly instructive. Obayda's confusion upon returning to girlhood and Rahima's memory of feeling "strong like a boy" in contrast to purdah's enforced invisibility mirror women MPs' experiences of committee sidelining and symbolic marginalization, even when measurable policy gains are achieved (FAFEN, 2023). The disjuncture between presence and power reflects Pitkin's (1967) distinction between descriptive and substantive representation and resonates with Celis et al.'s (2014) critique of symbolic inclusion.

Rwanda's 61 percent female parliamentary representation further illustrates this tension. Although legislators such as Consolée Uwimana contributed to inheritance reform, her expulsion following executive critique in 2021 underscores the conditional nature of authority even in numerically feminized legislatures (Berry, 2017; Itzkovitch-Malka et al., 2024). Presence does not automatically translate into secure autonomy.

The *bacha posh* figure therefore operates diagnostically. It exposes the cultural norms that render women's authority inherently revocable. Conditional recognition precedes institutional participation and shapes parliamentary vulnerability from the outset. Institutional reforms—such as consolidating women's caucuses and revising internal rules to limit informal veto power (Childs & Kenny, 2014; Childs, 2023)—are necessary not only to expand representation but to stabilize recognition itself. Without addressing the deeper grammar of reversible legitimacy, quotas risk reproducing symbolic inclusion while leaving substantive authority precarious.

7. Institutional and Parliamentary Implications

Moving beyond reversible personhood requires structural reforms that target the underlying recognition regimes shaping women's authority rather than merely expanding numerical inclusion. Parliamentary tenure must be decoupled from kinship patronage and party gatekeeping through stronger, more autonomous electoral mandates that reduce dependence on dynastic or leadership approval. Systematic audits of informal veto practices within committees, party hierarchies, and leadership structures are necessary to expose and dismantle the unwritten rules that marginalize women after entry. Women's caucuses should be institutionalized with formal procedural protections—such as guaranteed agenda-setting powers and cross-party safeguards—to stabilize collective authority against executive or party retaliation. Reforms must extend beyond parliament to the symbolic architecture of identity itself, including legal and administrative measures that stabilize women's names and personal status in official documentation, thereby challenging marital renaming practices that normalize identity substitution. In short, transformative reform must intervene in the cultural and institutional grammars that render women's legitimacy conditional, ensuring that recognition becomes durable rather than provisionally granted through seat allocation alone.

8. Conclusion

Reversible Personhood: Bacha Posh, Marital Renaming, and Women's Parliamentary Recognition argues that durable political authority cannot emerge solely from numerical quota provisions; it requires prior transformation of the pre-institutional recognition regimes that condition women's legitimacy. The study makes two primary theoretical contributions. First, it operationalizes literary narratives as empirically productive sites for Feminist Institutional analysis, demonstrating how fiction can illuminate the informal rules that structure political inclusion. Second, it develops the concept of reversible personhood—understood through the paired mechanisms of *bacha posh* masculinization and marital renaming—as a diagnostic framework for understanding quota fragility not only in South Asia but across comparable patriarchal democracies. The policy implications follow directly from this diagnosis and advance three interrelated interventions: (1) normative audits designed to sever parliamentary tenure from kinship-based patronage networks; (2) structured pre-entry legitimacy formation aimed at preventing the production of revocable proxy representatives; and (3) the institutionalization of veto-resistant women's caucuses capable of consolidating cross-party recognition and stabilizing collective authority. By confronting the cultural grammars that render women's authority symbolically conditional rather than substantively secure, these reforms seek to convert descriptive presence into transformative representation. In doing so, the framework addresses Feminist Institutionalism's pre-institutional blind spot while extending Fraser's (2000) conception of participatory parity within structurally patriarchal democracies. The integrated *bacha posh*–renaming model thus provides scholars and policymakers with a scalable analytical lens for challenging conditional governance well beyond the Pakistani case.

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