

Politics of Concealing and Unveiling: Cross-dressing in Launda Nach and Bacha Bazi

DIKSHA

Abstract. Cross-dressing in the context of men and women prevails in the society through ages. It can be seen as old as clothing itself. Now and again humans have twisted the dress code to rework the gender boundaries and human identity. The traditional dressing ordained by the society can be stifling. However, breaking free from the code can make people feel liberated. Cross-dressing has served as a major trope in the arena of drama, theatre and literature. It provides a gap where sensibility of gender beyond the anatomy can come to fore. The concept of female impersonation is not new to the culture of South Asia. Launda Nach and Bacha Bazi are two such traditions which have more in common than one can fathom. Launda Nach is performed in India while Bacha Bazi is performed in various parts of Afghanistan. These traditions involve boy play, where men masqueraded as women perform to titillate men. The blending of gender markers on such nights definitely undermines the stability of gender binary. The seemingly heteronormative sexuality of a patriarchal society borders on the flimsy line of queer. Khaled Hosseini is one of the few novelists who focus on the theme of Bacha Bazi in their work. He has documented about the evil practice in his novel *The Kite Runner*. The plot of the novel is anchored firmly to the issue. The protagonist Amir presently living in America must return to his war-torn country to rescue his little nephew Sohrab from being a 'Bacha Bazi' sex slave.

Keywords : Cross-dressing; impersonation; Launda Nach; Bacha Bazi; gender; queer; sexuality; kothi.

When we think of Afghanistan, the image that pops up in our brain is of a spectacle marred by war, violence, ethnic conflicts and foreign invasion. A similar image conjures up when we think about Bihar, one of the states in India. Not exactly like Afghanistan but Bihar has its fair share of depravity when it comes to caste conflict, class issues, ethnic conflicts, location of women in the societal strata and last but not the least dearth of development and resources. If a state is repeatedly crushed down to its debris, then what remains of it? Maybe a large group of ghosts that haunts the consciousness of its people. The road to survival becomes the ultimate hope. This paper would be a comparative analysis of the foresaid traditions. It would also take a deeper look at gender identity of the performers. How cross-dressing can be seen as an act of politics in the heteronormative society :

Naach is a popular musical theatre performance from Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. It is similar to various folk theatres of India like Nautanki, Naacha, Swaang, Jaatra and Tamasha. Similar to

these, Naach also represents womanhood through the technique of female impersonation by the male artists who are called laundas. (Dost, 106)

To understand the culture of any society it is imperative to have a solid understanding of its folk theatre. Launda Nach is known for its earthiness and timelessness. It also brings in the dimensions of caste and migration along with gender. The tradition also displays the social realities of Bhojpuri society. Folk traditions display the local culture and bring in the hues of social life, folk language, problems, conflicts and emotions of everyday life. The launda performers are given full freedom to express themselves with minimal use of theatrical devices. Their troop is often accompanied with bandmaster who are known as bajawalas :

'Launda' literally means a young male adolescent. However, in everyday life it is considered a derogatory term, suggesting a man who is effeminate, vulgar, immature and from an inferior class or caste. (106)

The name 'Launda' is given by the Indian bourgeoisie community to these dancers. The politics behind the catcalling is to segregate the masculine men from the distorted abnormal boys. So the mechanism of toxic masculinity and feudal mindset is at work here.

According to Humanrights.brightblue.org.uk, Bacha Bazi, or 'boy play', is a custom that is practised in parts of Afghanistan. It involves boys as young as nine called 'bacha bareesh' being forced to dress as women and to dance seductively for an audience of older men. These young boys are typically owned by wealthy patrons who are the major landlords and warlords, and are regularly the victims of sexual assault and abuse :

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975.
(Hosseini, 1)

The very first line sets the mood of the entire novel. The story begins in the past tense and protagonist is reminiscing about his childhood days. It is suggestive of the horror he has witnessed on that particular day and the horrors he is going to witness in the future. The precise year of 1975 is indicative of the brief period of peace just before the soviet invasion and a prolonged civil war as a result of which Amir will be forced to migrate to America and also the time period in which Amir's story will revolve around. The protagonist is confessing about his failure to rescue his childhood friend and playmate Hassan. He was violated and raped for his friend Amir but he couldn't protect him. Amir's failure will lead to his transformation and atonement :

Never mind any of those things because history isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara. I was Sunni and he was Shia, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing. (9)

Afghanistan is divided into various ethnic groups. Pashtuns are the major landowning community along with the Uzbeks and Tajiks. Hazaras are the ethnic groups who have been persecuted in Afghanistan for ages. These young boys are mostly from poor families and belong to exploited communities like Hazaras, who are in minority. In the novel also Hazaras are referred to as 'flat nosed' and 'load carrying donkeys'. Since the Hazaras come from Asia originally, they experience bouts of racism in the country. The protagonist Amir, even as a child is aware of the distance between him and Hassan. They cannot be equals. This is the reason why Assef, the son of a warlord, raped Hassan. Hassan was a mere Hazara :

His head was shaved, his eyes darkened with mascara, and his cheeks glowed with an unnatural red. When he stopped in the middle of the room, the bells strapped around his anklets stopped jingling. (279)

Amir returns to Afghanistan to rescue his little nephew after his father's death by Taliban soldiers. This is how he found him. He was a sex slave to powerful warlord. The tradition of gender swapping contains an even darker reality for boys. The boys perform on overtly sexual themes. These poor boys are often bought or kidnapped, forced into pseudo-sexual bondage. They are cross-dressed and rich men take pleasure by looking at them and harassing them. There is often this belief in Afghanistan that women are for procreation but boys or a 'bacha' is for pleasure. These boys are kept by powerful and respected Afghan men, many of whom fought the decade long war against the Soviet Union :

Sohrab danced in a circle, eyes closed, danced until the music stopped. The bells jingled one final time when he stamped his foot with the song's last note. "Bia bia my boy", the Talib said, calling Sohrab to him. Sohrab went to him head down. Stood between his thighs. The Talib wrapped his arms around the boy. "How talented he is. nay, my Hazara boy!" he said (280)

Both these practices are age-old folk traditions and seem quite normal to the local people. At present they are degraded and have taken the form of male prostitution. They are mutually connected by the act of cross-dressing and female impersonation. The following traditions are integral to raise the entertainment factor for the people. They usually perform at weddings and family functions. Women are not allowed in these male parties.

According to the Sharia law, a woman cannot be alone and independent in Afghanistan. She is not allowed in outer spaces without a male chaperon. She has to be accompanied by her husband, her son or her brother. Since women cannot be on their own, they are strictly prohibited to follow any other pursuits let alone dancing. The beardless boys take their place instead. The concepts of shame and carrying the family honour are associated only with the women. So Afghan males are free from any kind of conundrum. However, when we see the other side of this twisted practice the plot becomes rather confusing. When we sketch a portrait of an Afghan man, he stands out with a hyper-masculine and a warrior image. He is fiercely independent and defends the honour and pride of his country. How can a religious Afghan man indulge in acts of homosexuality? Moreover, homosexuality is strictly banned in Islam. So how come once sanctioned 'hegemonic masculinity' is now lost into perversity? Afghan history seems to be laced with the traces of non- heteronormativity and aberration, here and there.

However, it also seems that men are not to be blamed alone. Toxic masculinity and patriarchy works in the strangest of ways possible. It spreads its tangles and gets hold of the psyche of its people. Stanikzai in his article, "Redefining Masculinity in Afghanistan" says :

Decades of lost educational opportunities widespread destruction and disintegration of communities, families and pervasive unemployment combined with insecurity and ongoing violence have placed a tremendous burden on youth population, particularly young men who are often forced to assume the role of bread winner at a very young age. (Stanikzai, 2018)

Gender is undeniably salient force present in the society. Gender roles dictate how people are expected to behave in a gender bound scenario. The dictums are taught to us at a very young age and it is a slow and continuous process. The gender roles change according to the culture and they are self- perpetuating. As Judith Butler mentions about the performative nature of gender and how it constructs itself through repeated behaviour and act. Therefore, sex, gender and sexuality are closely related. They might seem constant and incredibly joined. However, the three are negotiable, constantly changing and not the same. Cross-dressing can be seen as a mode to resist the established sexual and gender norms. It can be situated within the fluidity of gender spectrum rather than fixed gender binary. When we look closely within these performances, speck of identity can be visible.

It is true that most of the boys are pushed into it. However, the effeminate or sissy boys who cannot express themselves freely in the microcosm of family choose to remain in the profession. The boy who himself was a bacha once wants to possess a string of his own dancers. Hence victim transforms into a victimizer as said by Katherine Hansen :

For both men and women, performances of feminine identity opened up an arena in which gender norms can be articulated and debated. In consequence, theatrical cross dressing in this period went beyond the reification of existing gender boundaries, or the transgression of those boundaries for the purpose of generating laughter. This was a two-fold process that had far reaching implication.

(Hansen, 128)

It is rather astonishing to note that these boys have access to the public space. Ironically, the sanction is limited, patriarchy continuously checks their presence and visibility in the outer spaces. There is still some reservation regarding men cross-dressers in the society while women cross dress are freely accepted in the society. One might assume that the reason for this dichotomy is patriarchy itself. Women can simply adorn the dresses of men because it gives them power and mobility. It gives them the newfound freedom to conquer the world. However, men in women clothing are pathetic. They almost degrade and become mere shadows. Men like that can only gain visibility for select purposes like entertainment, disguise and sexuality. Hence, trans dressing can act itself as a trope; tropes that further perpetuate patriarchy and gender discrimination. It is an act of politics, the politics of concealing and unveiling.

The gender identity and identity of self is closely related. A Launda dancer identifies with the identity of soul trapped in a body. The body is of a male and the soul inside is feminine. It is important to clarify that a Launda is quite different from Hijras. In the words of Ramesh Venkatesan ('Rose') :

There is a marked difference between a transgender and a transvestite. The latter is a pervert who gets a sexual kick by dressing up like a member of opposite sex, whereas a transgender changes his or sex out of love. (Chanda, 2007)

From the above statement it is quite explicit that Launda dancers rarely go for a sex change operation. They embrace the familial set up. Some of them marry and even have kids. The restrictions posed by the family prevent the dancers to cross dress. So why to cross dress then? "The desire to become a women is always a desire to dress like women and look beautiful. The only way a kothi body can be publicly accepted is in a disguised and ritualized form". (Kumar, 201) The identity of these performers is not simple and straight in line. It is confusing and difficult to comprehend. One cannot blindly apply the gender and queer concepts from west as it once again poses the risk of over simplification. The theory tends to compartmentalize these cultural categories. In the process the cultural and local essence is lost and the individuals blend into global categories of gay, lesbian and bisexual etc. :

Questions of identity are complicated to begin with and become even more complicated when one has to relate dissonant sexual and gendered identities with the specificities of national identities.

(Dasgupta, 443)

The paper is an attempt to trace the resemblance between Bacha Bazi and Launda Nach in respect of the act of cross dressing and female impersonation. The place and history of origin might be different but the nuances of gender and identity is similar. Both of them are struggling to make sense of their identities.

Diksha

Research Scholar
Department of English
Central University of South Bihar, Gaya.

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