

## **(Sub)Version of Power and Pakistani Women's Narratives: A Feminist Study of Shah's *Before She Sleeps***

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**Abstract:** This study explores well the conscious slide away of women from weak to powerful in the post-modern Pakistani fiction *Before She Sleeps* by Bina Shah. This research aims to explore the voice of the suppressed women and to highlight the efforts that have been made by them in getting liberation from the dystopian Green City that is a metaphor for all the unjust cities and states of the Southeast Asian region. This study highlights the ideas of Judith Butler about the subversion of identity and the dynamic nature of gender as she claims that gender is a historical situation rather than a natural act just like the unnatural atmosphere of the Green City. There is a spike in the feminist movements about the fluid nature of gender as women have started to work outside the four walls of their houses and tried new ways of terming patriarchy in all forms. This research also provides an apt reason for revolt against the havoc of a gender-obsessed world. It also brings into light the audacity of the peculiar and strong women who try to subvert their socially constructed gender roles by showing revolt and resilience against the fabricated defenses of men to control them. This research lays bare the marriage norms of the Green City to repopulate the city by declaring a gender emergency. An odd type of heterosexual matrix named polygamy is exposed by the researcher which has inflicted an emotional wreck upon the minds of the women who are unmoved by the heavy rewards of the system. The women are treated as cows or animals to turn the number of women to normal levels again as they were killed by a virus about thirty years ago. It mocks at a modern well-structured society where no woman can write a journal or diary to stop them from revolting against the values and to keep them away from the policymaking and political lobby. It also justifies that as everything in the novel is in flux and transition the gender roles for the majority of women are still static so they need a re-adjustment in a balanced way. It further shows that the power of men is just an illusion of the mind manipulated and subverted by a handful of strong-willed women. A tiny agency of women becomes a threat to the top officers of the Green City who consider themselves the best people over there as they have done incredible things for the uplift of the city. The women in this novel have an unusual courage that helps to defy the wrong regime altogether by taking strange measures that make them strong in the eyes of the feminist legacy.

**Keywords:** Gender, Performativity, Identity, Subversion, Revolt, Emancipation, Brave Women

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## **1. Introduction**

Feminism is a movement that demands equal rights and emancipation for women with the help of its new values without being dependent on men anymore. There are plenty of movements run by women to terminate the pressure of society and to subvert their roles as mere machines for producing children. In different waves of feminism, gender is always made and remade; out of human connections, out of social life, and from the surface and request of ethics and values. The concept of new women has emerged in the third wave of feminism as a radical change in all aspects of women's lives. Sarah Grand coined the term New Woman in an article in that refers to an independent woman who seeks revolt and a woman who is educated, liberal, and career-oriented in Europe. It includes not just a change of ideas but also concrete and physical changes like attire, hair, and other life activities that were not allowed before. The turn of each century brings with it new norms and values regarding all aspects of women in the whole world such as education and media to tell them about their equal rights. So, the role of a new woman in society has become important in the postmodern era in Pakistan and neighboring countries as well. In recent times, women often circumvent the pressure of society and become odd in the eyes of the world as they show a true spirit in getting liberation, earning money by themselves, showing extra resilience and non-obedience to social norms. In simple words, it states that the traditional women have been replaced by the new women of recent times. A scholar, Ahmed [1] also emphasizes the crucial role of literature in representing social changes in society. It is seen that the portrayal of women in Pakistani fiction has been sliding away gradually from the established traditions of women to new or odd ones. So being a female writer, Bina Shah also looks at the women of the South-West Asian context with different perspectives in her novel *Before She Sleeps* by putting into it the peculiar charm of women that the researcher has analyzed to achieve the objectives of the research.

The core aim of this study is to explore the nature of odd women in Pakistani Literature and a feminist analysis of Shah's *Before She Sleeps* as it deals with the new trends and habits of the emerging clan of women in recent times. In this research, Butler's theory of gender trouble has been used as an immaculate tool to find out the factors that are affecting women in South-Asian countries. It talks about the extent to which the women are becoming resilient to the dominance of patriarchy that prevails in Shah's *Before She Sleeps* which is set in the middle of the twenty-first century in near future. This study explores the representation of women in Shah's fiction: *Before She Sleeps* and analyzes the role and rebellious nature of the contemporary women of South-Asian

countries as well. For this, the present study is significant as it deals with the version(s) of power manifestation in South-Asian society and the subversion of power by the women of the region.

## 2. Background of the Study

Pakistani fiction in English has many orientations of female characters with various perspectives of feminism. An study talks about the women of Asia in a comprehensive manner conducted by Himani Sharma and Dr. Bhavya in [2]. They try to explore the sexual violence and social injustice in third-world women due to the regional tensions, particularly between Pakistan and Bangladesh in Tehmina Anam's *The Good Muslim*. The women of such regions are known as Global Sisters exploited by the men of other regions on such a mocked basis, which is rejected by feminism, and the rejection of this ethnic-racial identity that causes oppression in society. According to Abdul Ghafoor Awan and Haleema Rashid [3], the gender stereotypes in Pakistani novels are depicted lucidly. They point out and analyze the issue through a descriptive textual analysis of the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa and Qaisra Sheraz [4]. They explore gender stereotypes in the most famous novels such as *The Pakistani Bride* and *The Holy Women* and bring to light the cultural discrimination, and the role of culture as a constructor of gender and highlight the negative impact of the assigned responsibilities for women by society.

In the same way, Safdar and Ghani [5] highlight the dissatisfaction of modern Asian women with their traditional roles as depicted in *Hamid's Moth Smoke and How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* in a seminal work. This research, tells that Urban Pakistani women feel suffocated about their obligatory chores in society and try to get rid of them like all the well-educated women in the world. Usman and Salahuddin [6] also discuss the concept of feminine archetypes in the twenty-six fictional works by Pakistani women writers. These archetypes reflect their unique feminine energy that accounts for a difference in personality among women.

A researcher, Vithalrao in also explores the role of fiction in structuring the gender-based social and class order by discussing the works of Sidhwa. Being a Pakistani writer, Bapsi Sidhwa presents the condition of Pakistani women as a whole with the delineation of the female character of a girl in this literary work. Ahmed wrote a research paper in [1] and sheds light on the burning issue of women's empowerment in multiple feminist fictions in Pakistan. He talks about the empowerment of women in this selected fiction through postcolonial feminism, as Pakistan was once a British colony.

The extract of all the above studies focuses on different and versatile modes of feminism, such as religious feminism, ecofeminism, gender stereotypes, historical gender formation, women

empowerment, subversion of identity, and postcolonial feminism. However, this study is a unique addition to research in literature as it is based on the exploration of odd women who are not satisfied by their descriptive and pre-defined roles of being treated like machines for the production of children in South-Asian society. The concepts of subversion of identity and power structure are explored by the critics in some novels as they represent the women of South-Asian neighboring countries where they cross borders sometimes for the fulfillment of their wishes but often to get rid of the cruelties of men. Sometimes, they have been forced by men to cross the borders such as women trafficking in Asia are also evident in some fiction. As a result, it also sheds light on the developing perceptions about women that society has and the roles that they play in the selected novel.

### **3. Research Framework and Methodology**

The present research is a qualitative study with descriptive textual analysis of the novel *Before She Sleeps* by Bina Shah. The real benefit of qualitative research is the flexibility of research design and the opportunity to provide greater depth and detail in the findings of research. Moreover, qualitative research is a non-numerical, descriptive, and in-depth analysis of data. Descriptive research in coalition with qualitative analysis is very useful for obtaining and explaining information on a specific selected issue within the realm of literature. Textual Analysis is a mainstream form of qualitative research that gives a deep, well-informed, and conceptually organized analysis in the way needed for the study. In this context, the present study is a feminist study and the term feminism has spawned several criticisms from women all over the world who challenge the category of woman gender that has remained intact over the years.

#### ***3.1 Judith Butler's Feminist Version and the Subversion of Power***

There is a long list of feminists who want to do something unique to define their stance on the torture and stigmatization of women in society. Such as Simon de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Monique Wittig, Betty Friedan, Gytri Spivak [7] Mary Wollstonecraft [8], Merleau Ponty, Harriot Taylor, J.S Mill, Mary Ann Warren, Denise Riley [9], Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler [10] and many others. The third-wave feminists are extremely crazy and united on the notion of division between men and women based on 'gender' that needs to be reformed by social and political change. Being a third-wave feminist, Judith Butler focuses more on the fluid and dynamic nature of gender identity. In her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [11], Butler tries

to highlight the troubled definition of gender and challenges the forces of power to struggle for the rights of the marginalized identity of women by reflecting on the previous feminist theories.

In her article *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler offers a scathing critique of the conventional wisdom that views gender as a stable biological concept. She argues that gender is a social construct that is enacted by language, cultural practices, and societal expectations continuously. Following are the main postulates that have been extracted by the researcher from the theory of Feminism and the Subversion of Identity put forward by Butler:

1. Butler argues that certain gender behaviors of women are not natural rather they are imposed upon the women by normative codes and historical ideas that need to be subverted. Gender is not a fact rather it is a construction of society and culture and conceals the real genesis of women. So, Butler exposes the rift between the unreal and the real material of the gender.
2. Butler argues that gender is per formative and no stable identity is hidden behind the expression of gender. There exists no solid universal gender and the gender of men and women is always open for reinterpretation. She paves the way for new interpretations of the gender of both men and women on equal grounds.
3. Identity is not static because of its dynamic and fluid nature in association with gender and sex. They are changing day by day as the cultural norms are changing through globalization and the hybrid nature of different nations.
4. There is a need to re-establish a more just set of social and political relations by reshaping the social situation of women. The gendered body performs its role in a culturally restricted space by following the directives of the pre-existing script.
5. Gender must not be scripted on the body of a woman instead it should be put on by her through subversive performances of various kinds.
6. The design of gender needs to be reformulated with a new apparatus to conceal and stop the stigmatized production of female roles. Butler asserts the need for rethinking the gender hierarchy for a real emancipation of women.

This framework is quite adequate to unfold the gender troubles and subversive actions taken by the female characters in the selected novel from the beginning to the end of the story. It is also said that 'This theory has become central in feminist activism across the present world.' Breen and Bloomfield

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion

This research work is a significant feminist critique of gendered power dynamics offered through Shah's portrayal of female characters that break away from patriarchal and societal norms and claim their autonomy with the help of revolt in the end. Furthermore, the literature produced in the twenty-first century by women writers is loaded with subversive sort of actions that are visible in their story creation, art of characterization, context, and themes. This study seeks to evaluate the patriarchal rules and the subversion of power structures of South-West Asian states. Shah gives several historical references in this novel to show the slow collapse of power and the bloody unseating of the old monarchs, kings, and army dictators. It disrupts traditional patriarchal narratives, opens up new doors of debate and contemplation about women's rights, and advocates resistance to man-made rules in Asian regions and societies through an approach that places the viewpoints and agency of the 'Rebel Women' at the center of the story.

To continue a feminine legacy, Shah is one of the recent Pakistani writers who probe their female protagonists to become face to face with their social and moral circumstances so that they will be able to heal the wounds inflicted upon them by violent masculinity. Even though the women are fewer in number, the rebel women become a threat to the men as Bina Shah says in the novel; 'In a single morning, this woman had made him break away every rule in the book.' Shah [12], Bina Shah selects this very title *Before She Sleeps* meticulously as it creates a strong sense of connectivity to its underlying theme that revolves around the efforts done by the women of the novel to claim their rights vehemently before taking any pause in life.

##### *4.1 Noir Atmosphere of Green City for Women in Before She Sleeps*

The Green City stuffs the women in the novel with revolt to redress the system that is un-left after the waves of war because of its suffocated environment. Like all the war-stricken nations of the world, this is a waste and dead land where a great number of women have been engulfed by the virus. They expect women to repopulate the city to make an equal number of men and women in the future as women have died of a fatal plague by making a grand snare of 'Gender Emergency'. This is a turning point in the novel where a beautiful utopian state transforms into a dystopian land with cruel and unjust amendments.

Instead of being unmindful, a few of them go to Panah to disobey the artificial and fake system of polygamy presented by Shah in the novel is responsible for the subversion of power in the novel. Shah capitalizes the words 'Wife and Husband' intentionally to assert the equal roles of men and women side by side. In Asian countries, a single man can have more than one wife but the Green

City is showing something opposite by granting multiple husbands to a single woman. Some women do not want to be the subservient type of wives in this novel where to serve more than one husband alike. For these reasons, the women of Panah say; ‘Sometimes violence, lust or greed breaks through the artificial calm of the Green City.’ Shah [12].

There is a complete ban on the freedom of expression particularly for the female citizens of the Green City. It is stated in the Handbook for Female Citizens that, ‘No citizen is permitted to maintain or write a personal journal or diary.’ Shah [12]. The tough and bizarre circumstances mentioned above are always important for the women who shun a particular place like Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter A* by Hawthorne [13]. For a cause that helps them strangely build a new life. Sabine shows her resentment against the patriarchy in these words; ‘Man-made defenses against our lower selves prove too much to bear. We live in bizarre circumstances.’ Shah [12]. The mounting pressure on women is raising the spirits of the women of Panah for the subversion of power side by side who prepare themselves for a last and difficult ride on the path of emancipation. It shows the psychological and moral growth of women who look for the subversion of patriarchal powers and the fabricated identity in this process.

#### **4.2 The Rebel Women**

The gathering of a small number of women in Panah cannot be underestimated by the powerful men in the Green City in this novel. Though these women are less in number they are more than enough in vision and determination. According to them, the suffering of hiding in Panah is better than facing the cruelties of a new system as they chat and giggle freely underground. For instance, Faro thinks silently about Lin that, ‘an illegal is acting like a queen.’ Shah [12]. Lin Serfati, Sabine, Rupa, Diyah, Su-Yin, and Mariya are the women whose lives are at stake for a grand cause by saying ‘No’ to the system. This small clan of women beneath the ground is more powerful than a large number of forces and men of the Agency on the ground for having extraordinary traits of fighting. The character sketches of some of the most prominent rebel women in the novel are given below. The evolution of their characters is a great example in the eyes of feminism by subverting everything upside down from humble submission to refusal and revolt by keeping herself away from the unjust norms of society.

Lin Serfati is one of the strongest female characters among the six women in this novel as a leader of Panah because of her strong nature in her dealings. A hallmark of a strong character is that she does not crumble in the face of external pressure. She has never shown her internal conflicts to anyone else so that she may not be discovered freak by the other girls and the authorities. She says openly with an edge in her voice that, ‘Reluctance, Rebellion, and Revolt. I have committed all the

crimes.’ Shah [12]. She always follows her self-made judgments as she always uses short and cryptic messages whenever she connects with the outside world through deep web technology. She always mentions a girl by the name of 'Bird' to avoid arrest.

She makes Faro reckless by saying; ‘I refuse to be part of your system, arrest me for that if you have to.’ Shah. While negotiating with Reuben Faro, she talks about the importance of her world by assertively saying; ‘you have your world and I have mine.’Shah [12]. By the end, she talks to Faro with a strange surge of energy in these words; ‘The others can’t stay here any longer. The Panah is finished. You cannot put them back in the system. You have to help them leave Green City.’ Shah [12]. In the end, she takes the vial of sleep and pills near the fire instead of surrendering herself before men and says; ‘they would meet again once the fire had reduced her body into ashes and burned all the pain out of her bones.’ Shah [12]. She becomes immortal like all the patriotic leaders by melting her body in the arms of Panah which makes her the real rebel woman in the novel.

Sabine is another unconventional character in the novel as she chooses Panah as a sanctuary for herself willingly by writing a letter to it. For this reason; she loves and owns Panah from the core of her heart. She is the one who is the most worried and concerned about the poor condition of women who have been snubbed by the men in the name of gender emergency. She weeps a lot for hours when she sees the body of Nurya Salem in the pool of her blood on Info Bulletin at night. These lines reflect her concerns about the dangerous system of Green City. ‘I don't want to be married to anyone and I don't want to be a Wife of three, four, or five men. I am terrified.’ Shah [12].

She burns from the inside as she says; ‘Something in me told me to go deep in myself and to rescue myself.’ Shah [12]. She gets a sigh of relief after reaching a safe place where she finds a true refuge as she sits near the Charbagh and giggles with the other girls in the kitchen. She suffers from insomnia because of the heaviness of her mother’s death, a remnant of her pitiful past, her internal conflict, and the weight of sleepless nights with patience that makes her strong over time. She feels bewildered when she comes to know about the fact that Joseph has violated her body without her consent. At the time of fleeing from the Green City, she expresses her feelings by saying, ‘I have broken every rule and transgressed every limit that is set by the sanctuary. I should just die right here.’ Shah [12].

As the last rays of the sun linger on the sky in the desert and the night starts, her energy revives and she urges her not to give her life for this cruel city that has snatched everything from her. She awakens herself from the dream when she hears the soft voice of a female Semitian border guard, ‘Nobody is going to hurt you. You are safe now.’ Shah [12].She has been rescued like Zaitoon in

*Pakistani Bride* by Sidhwa by the security officers. Sabine becomes a symbol of hope for the rest of the women through her courageous actions to get her out of the bizarre circumstances and terminates all forms of violence against her vulnerable soul.

The third powerful woman in the novel is Rupa who exhibits a pure beauty, haughty and envious nature as compared to the other women in Panah. She is the only girl in Panah who wears a nose pin even though Lin does not like it, as it gives a cheap look like a prostitute. Panah forbids the women to make intimate connections with the clients as it only offers companionship services for them. Her nose-pin is a mark of identity and a sign of an outcast offspring before throwing her out of her house just to save her virginity from the men of the Green City. Her rebellious nature is evident in these words; ‘They are not my rules as I have never made them. I never agreed to them. I never got to say what I wanted.’ Shah [12]. She makes her stance clear by standing firmly with the rebel women in true letter and spirit who are going to subvert the laws of the patriarchal and dystopian Green City forever. Her audacity to be an independent woman becomes true in the end by obeying Lin Serfati, the leader of the Panah. Her character develops with the gradual increase in the story and she realizes her identity in the end after dealing with the powerful and haughty men of the society.

#### ***4.3 Subversion of Power by Reshaping their Identities***

The social shifting of realities in a woman’s life, in general, speaks volumes about the ways that are adopted by the women of Green City to subvert their previous identities. Sabine talks about the fake identities; ‘We did not call each other by our real names. Instead, we use nicknames like Rose, Jasmine, Honeysuckle, Ruby, Opal, Sparrow and Dove’. Shah [12]. Lin Serfati often assures herself by the secret vibes that Panah will not remain forever as dreamed by the founders when she says, ‘Panah could never be more than a resting place in their lives.’ Shah [12]. In this novel, all the main female characters lament their loss of identity and make unique efforts to search for a new identity and subvert the wrong and false powers as a whole by cutting ties with such a cruel system annoyingly. Through the course of the novel, research states that Green City is an illusionary, fake, artificial, dystopian, and unjust spasm of hope negated and subverted by a small clan of women. The brave women, under the nose of its perfect and strong Agency, dismantle this unjust system.

#### **5. Conclusion:**

The depiction of ‘Women’ in Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps* offers a feminist prism to examine and criticize gender norms, patriarchy, and female autonomy in Pakistani society. In this novel, a small clan of women challenges the conservative social norms and myths of gender behavior by

seeking to revolt against it finely. The dark and noir environment of this society conjures up a strange spirit of resilience and revolt among these women and this spirit leads them to their final emancipation. The whole research deals with the efforts done by women to break the snares of patriarchy peculiarly. The women here are said to be brave as they seek a furtive passage to liberty and autonomy by breaking up the snares of protective cages in which they have been kept by the patriarchy by throwing their offers of protection and wifehood back to their faces strongly. For instance, Lin rejects the proposal of marriage from Faro in a bold way as these women defy the constitution of marriage. The subversion of power becomes a final punch to the system of Green City. After thirty years of strange hide and seek, some of them flee from Green City while their leader Lin Serfati commits suicide to end her sufferings in this way. It shows that there is an absolute necessity for the world now if it wants to combat the subjugation of women, to encourage the pursuit of education as well as to raise knowledge about women's rights and gender equality to bring peace. The authorities need to dismantle the restrictive social norms and foster women's agency, as these goals need to be accomplished through the implementation of educational programs with a special emphasis on gender-sensitive content and encouraging critical thinking in society. The world cannot ignore the education of women in an era of globalization because keeping them behind on purpose may urge a desire for revolt in women just like the women of Green City. In the contemporary era of the twenty-first century, the works of women writers are trying to bring change in the social and psychological conditions of women. There are a range of Pakistani writers who also project the plight of suppressed women that is the result of gender prejudices and offer some pragmatic solutions to these issues. Bina Shah seems to make a humble effort in this tradition of showing a sneak peek into a cruel hub of men who want to control women according to their will. Her women know very well how to ask for their rights from the strong men who are responsible for the security of borders by heaping their secrets in bulk to use against them after thirty years. They executed their plan in a brilliant way that worked well for their safe departure from the noir premises of Green City. This research is a wonderful addition to the feminist legacy as it explores women in seeking revolt against the cynicism of men.

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