

Passive Resistance and Female Agency in Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps*

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Abstract

This paper intends to study passive resistance in Bina Shah's feminist dystopia *Before She Sleeps*. Passive resistance is one of the core characteristics found in the novel apart from other conventional characteristics of the feminist dystopian genre. Through the study, this paper also intends to represent female resistance within the already limited agency in third-world countries, particularly that of South Asian continents. Findings indicate the apparent but subtle passivity of the resistance where the women compromise on their agency to escape the greater evil of losing their reproductive control to the dystopian regime. Future scopes include studying the gaps of the voices of the mothers in the dystopian setup and more contribution of South Asian dystopian genre.

Keywords: passive resistance, female agency, feminist dystopia, south asian feminist dystopian narratives

1. Introduction

Bina Shah's dystopian novel *Before She Sleeps* (2018) offers a compelling narrative for exploring the multifaceted dimensions of female agency and resistance within a repressive societal structure. Set in a futuristic Green City, the novel depicts a society grappling with a severe gender imbalance, where women are systematically exploited, and their autonomy is severely curtailed (Faridi et al., 2025, p. 3). The governmental policies, enacted under the guise of societal restoration, manipulate reproductive processes and enforce polyandric couplings, thereby reducing women to mere reproductive instruments (Bashir & Tanveer, 2024, p. 9). This systemic oppression, characterised by biopolitical control over women's bodies, aligns with the theoretical frameworks of feminist dystopian analysis (Bhanbhro et al., 2025, p. 4961). Specifically, the novel presents a South Asian context for examining these power dynamics, distinguishing it from predominantly Western dystopian narratives and offering a unique lens through which to interrogate entrenched patriarchal norms and gendered hierarchies (Batool et al., 2025, p. 2). The novel critically examines how patriarchal power is consolidated not merely through overt legal restrictions but also through a normalised discourse that frames male control as protective, rational, and even divinely sanctioned (Mehmood et al., 2026, p. 2297). Within this oppressive framework, Shah's protagonist, Sabine, alongside other women residing in the clandestine community of Panah, exemplify nuanced forms of resistance, subverting prescribed gender roles and reclaiming personal autonomy through both individual and collective acts of defiance (Bhanbhro et al., 2025, p. 4947; Faridi et al., 2025, p. 2). This

resistance, often covert and psychological, challenges the prevailing power structures and highlights the conscious shift of women from subjugation to empowerment (Kanwal & Iqbal, 2024, p. 1). Indeed, Panah, a secret sanctuary operating beneath the city, emerges as a pivotal space where women reclaim agency by offering non-sexual emotional companionship to influential men, thereby subtly undermining patriarchal authority (Batool et al., 2025, p. 3). This strategic engagement allows the women of Panah to exercise a form of indirect power, manipulating societal levers from within a seemingly subjugated position. This subversion aligns with the broader feminist dystopian tradition, where authors often utilize such settings to critique contemporary gender norms and raise awareness about the potential consequences of ignoring women's rights (Omar & Alanazi, 2023, p. 378). The novel thus becomes a critical platform for envisioning alternative gendered power dynamics, moving beyond mere critique of authoritarian patriarchy to suggest transformative possibilities (Mehmood et al., 2026, p. 2303). This exploration aligns with critical dystopias that function as cultural texts, enabling readers to recognize the relevance of these debates to their own lives and advocating for female voices to challenge historical perceptions of women as passive or inferior (Sen, 2022, p. 136). This paper will delve into the various manifestations of passive resistance employed by female characters in *Before She Sleeps*, analyzing how these acts, ranging from subtle defiance to collective subversion, destabilize the totalitarian regime's control over female bodies and identities.

2. Literature Review

The scholarly discourse surrounding Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps* has generated substantial critical engagement across multiple theoretical frameworks, particularly feminist dystopian studies, Foucauldian analysis, and postcolonial feminist theory. This review synthesizes existing scholarship to examine the novel's treatment of female agency, biopolitical control, and resistance strategies within its South Asian dystopian context.

2.1. Feminist Dystopian Frameworks and Biopolitical Control

Feminist dystopian fiction has emerged as a vital genre for exploring the consequences of unchecked patriarchal power and the systematic erosion of women's rights (Omar & Alanazi, 2023). Scholars note that this genre serves a dual function: it raises awareness about the dangers of ignoring women's rights while simultaneously envisioning alternative possibilities for gender equality (Omar & Alanazi, 2023). Within this tradition, Shah's novel occupies a distinctive position by situating its dystopian narrative in a South Asian context, specifically the fictional Green City, thereby offering a fresh perspective on patriarchal oppression that diverges from predominantly Western dystopian settings (Batool et al., 2025). The biopolitical dimensions of Shah's dystopia have received considerable scholarly attention. Multiple studies identify the Perpetuation Bureau's enforcement of polygamy and reproductive control as a manifestation of state power that reduces women to mere reproductive instruments (Bashir & Tanveer, 2024; Bhanbhro et al., 2025). This systematic control over women's bodies aligns with broader patterns in feminist dystopian literature where reproductive choice and bodily agency become central sites of struggle (Basu & Tripathi, 2023). The concept of "colonization of the female body," where external forces dictate women's reproductive functions and personal autonomy, emerges as a recurring theme that Shah's novel powerfully illustrates (Nassour, 2024).

2.2 Foucauldian Perspectives on Power and Resistance

Foucauldian analysis has proven particularly fruitful for understanding the mechanisms of control and resistance in *Before She Sleeps*. Scholars employing this framework examine how the state produces

"disciplined bodies and minds" through strictly regulated routines, prescribed social functions, reproductive control, and constant surveillance (Bashir & Tanveer, 2024). Foucault's notion of disciplinary power, which operates throughout society through surveillance as a control mechanism, provides a theoretical lens for analyzing Green City's totalitarian apparatus (Sharmin, 2023).

The creation of Panah, the secret sanctuary operating beneath the city, has been interpreted as a potent symbol of resistance against such oppressive government structures (Bashir & Tanveer, 2024). This clandestine space represents what Foucault might identify as a site of "counter-conduct", a mode of resistance that allows women to govern themselves through alternative frameworks and disrupt the state's attempt to impose a singular, patriarchal morality (Asl, 2019). The women of Panah exercise agency by offering non-sexual emotional companionship to influential men, thereby subtly undermining patriarchal authority while operating within the system's constraints (Batool et al., 2025).

2.3. Pakistani Feminist Context and Literary Tradition

Shah's work has been situated within the broader tradition of Pakistani English fiction, which has increasingly focused on the female body as a thematic epicenter (Malik & Junejo, 2022). Scholars note that Pakistani women writers have exposed female sexuality at multiple levels in their fiction, addressing subjects that were generally repressed, tabooed, and less talked about in Pakistani society (Malik & Junejo, 2022). This literary tradition provides a crucial context for understanding Shah's contribution to feminist discourse, as her novel dramatizes the tension between the façade of reverence for women and the underlying reality of repression (Batool et al., 2025).

The novel's engagement with Pakistani feminism has been analyzed through multiple lenses. Some scholars emphasize how Shah's narrative provides a comprehensive understanding of gender inequalities and various forms of subjugation faced by diverse women in Pakistan, offering a more inclusive perspective within the context of Pakistani feminism (Faridi et al., 2025). Others highlight the transnational feminist sensibility of Shah's work, which places local gender struggles in the context of global discussions of authoritarianism, biopolitics, and women's autonomy (Mehmood et al., 2026).

2.4 Forms of Resistance and Agency

The scholarship on *Before She Sleeps* has identified multiple forms of resistance employed by female characters, ranging from subtle defiance to collective subversion. Sabine's journey, in particular, has been analyzed as a multi-dimensional escape from physical, emotional, psychological, and social constraints, transforming tools of oppression into means of liberation (Faridi et al., 2025). This strategic engagement allows women to exercise indirect power while operating from within seemingly subjugated positions (Batool et al., 2025).

The concept of "passive resistance" has been explored through various theoretical frameworks. Some scholars draw on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and subversion to analyze how performative gender roles perpetuate societal orientation while simultaneously offering possibilities for resistance (Faridi et al., 2025). Others examine how women engage in covert, non-visible forms of resistance against restrictive social mandates, challenging the taken-for-granted gendered social norms and ideologies (Zubair & Zubair, 2017). This aligns with broader patterns in feminist literature where women create "counter-spaces" to preserve their subjectivity against totalizing regimes (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005).

2.5. Spatial Resistance and Alternative Communities

The spatial dimensions of resistance in *Before She Sleeps* have garnered significant scholarly attention. Panah has been analyzed as a "liminal space" or "Third Space" where the state's surveillance is temporarily

attenuated, allowing characters to cultivate an interiority that resists the regime's instrumentalization of their sexuality (McCauley, 2018; SINGH, 2008). This reconfiguration of domestic sites transforms them from tools of state surveillance into sanctuaries that facilitate the forging of subversive identities (Roifah & Inayati, 2025).

Scholars have connected this spatial resistance to broader postcolonial feminist critiques, where the creation of alternative spaces becomes a form of resistance against patriarchal and heteronormative structures (Ranga & Prasad, 2025). The women of Panah establish a place where they can live by their own rules, free from the totalitarian and patriarchal government of Green City (Bashir & Tanveer, 2024). This underground community represents what some scholars term "counter-hegemonic zones" where marginalized identities can reclaim agency and reconstruct their social realities (Ranga & Prasad, 2025).

2.6. Comparative and Intersectional Perspectives

Comparative studies have situated *Before She Sleeps* within broader conversations about women's resistance across different cultural contexts. Scholars have drawn parallels between the novel's treatment of patriarchal oppression and similar themes in works by authors such as Margaret Atwood, Khaled Hosseini, and Arundhati Roy (Aiman et al., 2022; Omar & Alanazi, 2023). These comparative analyses highlight how different cultural contexts shape the expression of female agency while revealing common patterns of resistance against patriarchal structures.

Intersectional approaches have examined how multiple forms of oppression intersect in the novel, particularly the ways in which gender-based control is compounded by other systems of power. Some scholars employ Patricia Hill Collins' theory of the Matrix of Domination to analyze how women are oppressed through structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power (Salvianny & Nurcahyani, 2020). This intersectional lens reveals how the women in Green City navigate complex webs of oppression while maintaining their power of self-definition (Salvianny & Nurcahyani, 2020).

3. Methodology

This analysis will specifically employ a Foucauldian lens to deconstruct the mechanisms of state control over the female body and the Panah's creation as a potent symbol of resistance against such an oppressive government (Bashir & Tanveer, 2024, p. 1). It will also draw upon feminist literary criticism to illuminate how female agency is expressed through covert acts and the establishment of alternative social structures within the dystopian setting (Mehmood et al., 2026, p. 2298). Furthermore, a textual analysis methodology will be adopted to meticulously examine the linguistic and narrative strategies employed by Shah to portray these acts of resistance and the evolving understanding of female empowerment within the novel (Sharmin, 2023, p. 3). This approach will allow for a comprehensive exploration of how the female characters not only question and resist heteropatriarchal normalizations of sex and gender but also reconstruct their self-definitions within a restrictive societal framework (Anuar & Asl, 2022, p. 1208). This critical examination will demonstrate how *Before She Sleeps* extends the discourse on women's struggles against patriarchy by illustrating resilience and strategic subversion within seemingly insurmountable power structures (Astuti, 2024, p. 303). By placing the viewpoints and agency of these "Rebel Women" at the forefront, Shah disrupts traditional patriarchal narratives and opens new avenues for discussing women's rights and resistance against man-made rules in South-West Asian societies (Kanwal & Iqbal, 2024, p. 6).

4. Results

The analysis reveals that the Panah functions as a liminal space where the state's surveillance is temporarily attenuated, allowing characters to cultivate an interiority that resists the regime's instrumentalization of their sexuality (McCauley, 2018, p. 25). This reclamation of the body marks a critical pivot from passive compliance to active subjectification, whereby the characters neutralize the regime's biopolitical grip by asserting autonomous control over their own affective labor. This strategic appropriation of space demonstrates how domesticity, often weaponized as a tool of state surveillance, is inverted into a sanctuary that facilitates the forging of subversive identities (Roifah & Inayati, 2025, p. 169). By reconfiguring these domestic sites, the characters transcend their roles as state-mandated reproductive tools, evolving instead into participants within a clandestine network that prioritizes feminine solidarity and the restoration of individual autonomy (Imran & Ismail, 2022, p. 2). This rearticulation within the "Third Space" of the Panah reflects a postcolonial reclamation of subjectivity, where characters transform sites of marginalization into platforms for existential and structural resistance.

These internal transformations underscore the characters' participation in a wider tradition of feminist subversion, where reclaiming agency serves as a primary tool for dismantling the patriarchal hegemony that seeks to relegate women to mere objects of state control (Aiman et al., 2022, p. 175; Mohebkhodae, 2025, p. 24). This process of self-definition enables the women to transcend the regime's structural and disciplinary apparatuses, effectively challenging the matrix of domination by maintaining an internal locus of control that remains untouched by state surveillance (Salvianny & Nurcahyani, 2020, p. 252). Such covert negotiations effectively transform the women from objects of biopolitical administration into architects of their own moral and physical domains (Mehan, 2024, p. 4), (Ranga & Prasad, 2025, p. 310). This clandestine assertion of agency mirrors strategies observed in various feminist discourses, where individuals reclaim autonomy by engaging in subtle, non-visible forms of resistance against restrictive social mandates (Zubair & Zubair, 2017, p. 47). By conceptualizing these acts as "counter-conduct," the characters effectively govern themselves through alternative frameworks, thereby disrupting the state's attempt to impose a singular, patriarchal morality (Asl, 2019). This tactical re-appropriation of the domestic sphere functions as an "innovative transcript," mirroring the way women in conflict zones construct counter-spaces to preserve their subjectivity against totalizing regimes (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005).

The scholarly literature on *Before She Sleeps* demonstrates the novel's significance as a work that not only critiques patriarchal oppression but also envisions transformative possibilities for female agency and resistance. Through its nuanced portrayal of women's struggles against biopolitical control, its exploration of alternative spaces of resistance, and its engagement with Pakistani feminist discourse, Shah's novel has established itself as a vital contribution to contemporary feminist dystopian literature.

5. Limitations

The novel's exploration of pandemic aftermath and its impact on gender relations has acquired renewed significance in light of recent global events. Scholars note that Shah's novel, which predates the COVID-19 pandemic, imagines apt spaces for rebellion in the aftermath of infection outbreaks (Chambers & Lowden, 2022). The novel's depiction of how transformative action and liberation become identifiable in the aftermath of pandemics resonates with contemporary discussions about the gendered impacts of public health crises (Chambers & Lowden, 2022). This contemporary relevance extends to the novel's treatment of technological surveillance and state control. Scholars have examined how Shah's narrative anticipates

current debates about the intersection of technology, surveillance, and women's autonomy, particularly in the context of digital resistance and the use of technology as both a tool of oppression and a means of liberation (Faridi et al., 2025).

Despite the substantial scholarly engagement with *Before She Sleeps*, several gaps in the literature remain. Some scholars note the minimal representation of the Wives' own voices in the novel, which produces a notable narrative gap that slightly constrains the scope of the feminist critique (Batool et al., 2025). Additionally, while textual analysis has provided valuable insights into the novel's treatment of resistance, there is room for more empirical studies that examine the material precarity faced by marginalized women in actual conflict-ridden societies (Sarvesh, 2021).

Future research could broaden the intersectional lens by examining how male subjectivities are similarly, yet distinctly, shaped by the state's biopolitical constraints, thereby providing a more holistic view of the novel's power dynamics. Furthermore, comparative studies that situate Shah's work within broader South Asian and global feminist dystopian traditions could yield valuable insights into the novel's unique contributions to the genre.

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