

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

**RESISTANCE AND AGENCY IN SHAH'S *BEFORE SHE SLEEPS*: A
DYSTOPIAN FEMINIST STUDY**



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Abstract

*This research is a dystopian feminist study of Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps*, which advocates female agency and personal autonomy in a dystopian society, critiquing pervasive technological surveillance. Grounded in Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and subversion, along with Donna Haraway's academic input on technology and surveillance, the research employs textual analysis as a method to study the problem. Shah's novel vividly depicts women's lives under a repressive regime ravaged by a gender-specific virus that has decimated the female population, centering on the protagonist Sabine. The analysis explores how performative gender roles perpetuate societal orientation and positioning, while interrogating technology's paradoxical dual role in both subjugating and liberating women. With a particular emphasis on the Pakistani context, this study advances a nuanced, inclusive Pakistani feminist framework through its examination of dystopian female agency and resistance. Ultimately, it concludes that, despite the deployment of culture, society, and technology to control women, female resistance persistently challenges restrictive norms to foster an egalitarian world grounded in equal gender rights.*

Keywords: *Dystopian feminism, Technological surveillance, Female agency, Gender performativity.*

Introduction

Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018) narrates a fictional story about a female protagonist named Sabine, who endures life in a repressive patriarchal society. Sabine's character embodies a unique identity, distinct from others, and reflects Butler's notion of "gender performativity" (1990, p. 183) as well as Haraway's concept of the "cybernetic organism" (1985, p. 65). Set in Southwest Asia, Shah introduces three key locations in her fictional world: Green City, Pannah, and Semitia. Green City is portrayed as an oppressive, authoritarian regime that exerts complete control over the bodies and autonomy of its citizens, particularly women. Pannah, in contrast, serves as a temporary sanctuary for women who resist, rebel, or revolt against Green City's oppressive norms and rules. Semitia represents a place of humanity, hope, and freedom, to which Sabine eventually escapes to free herself permanently from Green City's dehumanization. In this dystopian setting, war, disease, and a devastating virus have reduced the ratio of men to women in Green City to alarming levels. In response to this crisis, the city's authoritarian regime enforces a policy of assigning multiple husbands to women to ensure the nation's survival, growth, and progress. The "Perpetuation Bureau" (Shah, 2018, p. 11), a strict technological surveillance system, ensures compliance with these unjust rules, creating a terrifying and suffocating environment. This oppressive system forces women into subversive acts, with some choosing to escape and others resorting to suicide.

In Pannah, women are protected by powerful men from Green City who secretly offer them something that cannot be bought with money and is no longer available in Green City: 'intimacy'. In return, these identification and text-to-speech, text to tokenization, dictionary, thesaurus, word-to-vector analysis, feature extraction and analysis, and text recognition of words, classification, and more (Dootio, 2021). Men conceal the existence of Pannah's women, pretending that such rebellious women do not exist. In order to escape Green City's oppression, two friends, Ilona Serfati and Fairuza Dastani, create an underground refuge named

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

“Pannah” (Shah, 2018, p. 10). After Ilona’s time, her nephew Lin takes over leadership of Pannah, rescuing and sheltering women who resist Green City’s norms and rules. Sabine, with the help of Chicken, a girl from Green City, contacts Pannah and pleads with its leader for help: “My name is Sabine. I’m sixteen, almost seventeen. My mother killed herself when I was only twelve. She didn’t want to be married to anyone but my father. I don’t want to be married to anyone...I’m terrified” (Shah, 2018, p. 26). Lin, the leader of Pannah, rescues Sabine from the exploitative grasp of Green City. In Pannah, Sabine forms close bonds with her fellow residents, Diyah, Mariya, Suyin, and Aleyna. Together, they support and care for one another in all circumstances, fostering a sense of community and solidarity. Unlike Sabine, who consciously chose to come to Pannah, Rupa, her fellow in Pannah, was sent there forcibly by her mother. Rupa has two fathers, named N and Z. It is her young father, Z, who causes her both physical and emotional suffering. When Rupa confides in her mother about this abuse, her mother sends her to Pannah without her consent or desire. Despite her circumstances, Rupa longs to return to Green City and even considers subversive acts to achieve that goal. Everyone in Pannah is aware of her dream to become a Wife and mother in Green City: “I never got to say what I wanted” (p. 50). However, in the end, she escapes along with the rest of Pannah’s women. While serving in Pannah, Sabine was exploited by one of her clients, Joseph, who violated her unconscious body. As a result of his actions, Sabine suffered from an ectopic pregnancy and was taken to Shifana Hospital for treatment by Reuban Faro, a powerful member of Green City’s oppressive system. At Shifana Hospital (p. 95), Dr. Julien Asfour, a 26-year-old surgeon, operated on Sabine with the assistance of nurse Manalac and surgery assistants Ram and George. After the operation, Sabine met Julien, who informed her that she was five weeks pregnant. Realizing that she was no longer safe even in Pannah, Julien and Sabine decided to leave Green City. With the help of Rami Bouthain, a 68-year-old doctor at Shifana Hospital, Julien and Sabine began their journey toward the Semitia Borders to escape. When Sabine’s suffering comes to Lin’s attention, she realizes that women are not safe in Pannah either. Determined to end the cycle of pain, Lin decides to burn herself along with the place while ensuring the other girls are sent to safety by seeking Reuben Faro’s help: “She took out the vial of Sleep from her pocket...and swallowed...the fire had reduced her body to ash and burned all the pain out of her bones” (Shah, 2018, p. 218). Some women, like Rupa, accept the oppression of Green City as part of their lives and choose to live within it. Others, like Nurya Saleem, resist through acts of defiance such as suicide. Some rebels, such as Lin, Ilona Serfati, and Fairuza Dastani, create Pannah, and others, like Sabine, revolt by escaping toward Semitia.

Statement of the Problem

Shah’s *Before She Sleeps* (2018) problematizes the polemics of Pakistani feminism by demonstrating a dystopian societal setup in which the emotional and physical exploitation of women engenders a dynamic manifestation of agency and autonomy, serving as a counter-force to the imposed norms and pervasive technological surveillance instituted by a domineering regime.

Significance of the study

The research aims to examine the portrayal of female agency within a dystopian context, offering valuable insights into feminism and providing a nuanced understanding of gender issues, power structures, resistance, and women’s autonomy. While it does not aim to directly change societal unrest, it reveals a truth that demands acknowledgment. The research highlights the struggles faced by women and critiques the dominant societal ideologies, particularly within the context of Pakistan. Furthermore, the study’s findings have broader implications for contemporary discussions on gender roles, female agency, and empowerment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literary theory has many facets and is therefore not just the domain of Western scholarship. The primary

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

purpose of this literature review is to present an inclusive review of the current state of research regarding the worth of women in an authoritarian and repressive society. This review seeks to comprehend concepts such as exploitation of women, autonomy, agency, and multiplicity of gender, and the role of technological surveillance on identity of the subject by situating the study within the broader context of Pakistani dystopian feminism. The review, moreover, will examine the diverse theoretical perspectives on female agency and gender fluidity, including feminist dystopian theory.

Highlighting a significant gap, this research aims to address that despite extensive research on gender identity and autonomy, there is a lack of discursive study on the impact of the cultural construction of various identities of women, and this research also tracks the long-term effect of heterogeneous oppression experienced by women both materially and spiritually.

The earliest research, in this field, on the complexity of gender identity of women, conducted by Alvira (2021), focused primarily on the problem and effects of gender discrimination of main character of the novel, Sabine. Using the method of descriptive analysis and literature study techniques, this research highlights that a distant difference exists between the notions of gender and sex: "Gender is used to identify differences between men and women from a non-biological perspective. While sex to identify biological anatomical differences." (Alvira, 2021, p. 55). As gender is non-biological, this research claimed that politicized gender disparities and patriarchal social systems are the cause of gender discrimination.

With reference to the concepts of Lefebvre, Hicks and Foucault, Asif (2021) in his hetero-trophic study of Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018) analyzed cause and effects of spatial resistance, especially in postmodern urban space: "Spaces of inhabitants...serve as their lived experiences" (2021, p. 591). The privileged people in a constrictive regime can afford to live, like Reubon Faro, but females are restricted both in a space run by oppressive government in Green City and an underground regime called Pannah. The research concluded that class segregation, terror and technology are used as weapon against residents to create a postmodern urban dystopia.

Naseem (2023) in his research entitled "Female Self Objectification and Identity in Fiction 'Before She Sleeps' by Bina Shah" highlighted the issue of identity crises and self-objectification due to forced polyandry by exploring how the rights of women are removed from the depth in a regime dominated by patriarchy. He remarked: "Polyandry proves a mental disturbance in the life of women...It is crystal clear that a male-dominated society affects women a lot" (2023, p. 851). The research is deduced by claiming that a woman has no right to speak, even if she has a voice, and if she tries to speak, she has no right to hear, hence considered subaltern.

A research by Shahzad (2023) entitled "Navigating Monstrous Space in the Dystopian Novel Before She Sleeps" highlighted the benchmark motif of dystopian feminism by exploring how women are ostracized from their identity and forced to become reproductive machines. Shahzad (2023) argued that the every day spaces of females are subjugated to invisibility at the hands of patriarchy: "...Green city as a monstrous space...jeopardizing the female spaces and making them more claustrophobic" (Shahzad, 2023, pg. 16). Criticizing both the Green City and Pannah, Shahzad concluded that females always have a gruesome experience in a technological world as Shah's dystopia because their bodies absorb pain and their identities are ostracized from their selves.

In Kirkus Reviews (2018), it is argued that Shah's novel is not a feminist dystopia because women depend on men for decision-making, especially emotionally. Lin was dependent on Reuben Faro, Sabine on Dr Asfour, and Rupa on her client. Further, in this review, it is manifested that Shah's narrative is an explicit conversation with Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). The review deduces by claiming that Bina Shah mixes speculative fiction with soap opera and spy genre in her narrative *Before She Sleeps* (2018).

Hill (2019) in his review entitled *BEFORE SHE SLEEPS BY BINA SHAH* argued that Shah's narrative explores the subjugation manifested in contemporary Pakistan. He argued that contemporary feminist dystopia

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

has weaponized reproductive rights for its ideological concerns and exemplifies reproductive futurism in which the rights of living persons are snatched and restricted in the name of the rights of the unborn futuristic person, reflecting the contemporary scenario. Praising Shah's non-western-centric perspective, Hill deduces his review of *Before She Sleeps* (2018) by claiming that it is a feminist dystopian fiction.

Brown (2018) in his review entitled *What Is, What Could Be, What Should Be: Before She Sleeps* by Bina Shah advocates for and criticizes Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018). He advocates it on account of calling it a feminist dystopian science-fiction in which the female protagonist named Sabine struggles to subvert Green City's oppressive norms. On the other hand, he criticizes it because of cisnormativity and heteronormativity according to him founded in Shah's narrative. Brown called Sabine a cishet. He insisted that a non-cishet perspective is more reliable for analyzing the authoritative patriarchal role, especially in a dystopian setting.

Kramatschek (2019) in her review entitled *A bleak future scenario* argued that there is always a clash between feminism and the Muslim world because of religious obscurantism and patriarchal status quo. She stated that in such a catastrophic scenario not only women but also men too suffer. They have to share their wife with other four or five men. She deduces her review by claiming that women in Pakistan are participating in the economic and political sphere but are subjugated domestically.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FRAMEWORK

The feminist perspectives of Judith Butler and Donna Haraway have been utilized to demonstrate the impact of restrictive social norms and surveillance on people's emotions and lives. The interpretation is being done qualitatively. The data is collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include the text of the work and secondary sources include websites, articles, and textbooks.

Judith Butler- Gender Performativity

Judith Butler has made influential contributions to the fields of literary theory, queer theory, ethics, political philosophy, and third-wave feminism. She has challenged the conventional notion of gender and develop their theory of gender performativity. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler illustrates how identity, particularly in relation to the category of women, is constructed, stabilized, problematized, and becomes a central subject of feminism. Challenging the belief that gender and identity are innate or biologically determined, arguing instead that gender identity is performative—a societal construction that has evolved over time “The gendered body is performative... it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler, 1990, p. 185). The inconsistent and incoherent constitution of gender makes it inseparable from the political, cultural, racial, sexual, ethnic, and regional discursive intersections in which it is formed and defined. Butler asserts that women do not experience a common form of subjugation; therefore, the notion of their specificity should be analytically decontextualized in relation to intersections of class, race, culture, and region: “There is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term women denotes a common identity” (p. 4). She criticizes the idea that women share a universal, homogeneous identity, as it marginalizes their diverse experiences and perspectives. Just as universal patriarchy is problematic, Butler argues that feminist critics must also interrogate the presumed universality of women in representation. This fragmentation within feminism, Butler contends, may not only lead to contradictions in feminist aims but also serve to revitalize the movement. As a result, Butler calls for “a radical rethinking of the ontological construction of women's identity” (p. 7), contributing to discussions on post-feminism.

Unpacking the argument, Butler stated that agency and identity are dynamic and relational in their formation and deformation. Agency does not rely on a pre-discursive self; rather, it is an intrinsic capability that emerges through the discursive cultural construction of a subject's identity. Furthermore, they contended that the task of feminism should not be to create new, competing identities but rather to focus on these constructed

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

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identities and find subversive repetitions to challenge established norms and restricted agency, thereby creating more space for genuine agency and identity. Butler viewed agency as being rooted in and driven by cultural norms, social practices, discourse, and linguistic rules, all of which are structures of signification. Agency, they argued, varies and subverts these repetitive acts of signification.

Donna Haraway - Cyborg Theory

Donna Haraway has made influential contributions to the fields of feminism, technology, cybernetics, and science studies. She has played a significant role in the understanding of human-machine relations by clarifying the concept of the cyborg. In her seminal essay, *A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s* (1985), Haraway complicates the identity of the cyborg and presents it as a metaphorical figure that defies conventional dichotomies and limitations. Her theory offers a radical reinterpretation of subjectivity and agency in a techno-cultural world. Furthermore, she highlights the urgency of technologically mediated societies. She defines a cyborg as a being formed through the amalgamation of both organic and artificial elements.

Haraway asserts that technology plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of what we call reality and existence. Technological integration significantly contributes to the construction of subject identity. As technology becomes inseparable from ourselves and our perceptions, she describes humans as cyborgs, “a cybernetic incarnation” (Haraway, 1985, p. 67). According to her, the cyborg challenges traditional notions of fixed identity and transcends “biological determinist ideology” (p. 68), the idea that biology determines gender and identity. The cyborg, in Haraway’s view, becomes a symbol of liberation from the limitations of oppressive patriarchal control in a techno-cultural world. Thus, she challenges the humanist and traditional notion of an autonomous subject, arguing that the cyborg’s hybrid identity demonstrates that identities are constructed, mutable, inconsistent, fluctuating, and performative. Moreover, the post-gender cybernetic creature, the cyborg, according to Haraway, replicates rather than reproduces and exists “outside the salvation history” (p. 67).

Haraway’s cyborg theory is highly relevant for analyzing resistance and agency in dystopian contexts. The hybrid and interconnected nature of the cyborg provides a framework for understanding how individuals and communities negotiate and oppose oppressive institutions in technologically mediated societies. By using technology to communicate and evade control, the cyborg can successfully resist and overthrow the hierarchies of authority that uphold oppression. In dystopian settings, the powerful potential of cyborg identities is highlighted through this technological resistance. Moreover, in a technologically mediated society, oppositional cyborgs mobilize collective and networked agency rather than acting as isolated individuals. The cyborg’s ability to foster collective agency results in stronger resistance against oppressive dystopian regimes and their surveillance: “Networking is both a feminist practice and a multinational corporate strategy—weaving is for oppositional cyborgs” (Haraway, 1985, p. 90).

A Synergistic Approach

Combining Butler’s concept of gender performativity with Haraway’s cyborg theory offers a robust framework for analyzing resistance and agency in Shah’s *Before She Sleeps* (2018). This integrated approach enables an exploration of how women navigate their dystopian reality through performative subversion and technological interconnectedness. Green City’s regime and patriarchal control enforce strict gender roles to regulate women’s actions and identities, which aligns with Butler’s concept of gender as a socially constructed and regulated identity. On the other hand, the female characters’ use of technology as a means of subversion and resistance against Green City’s oppressive regime highlights Haraway’s concept of cyborg interconnectedness.

The identity, gender, actions, and agency of women in Shah’s dystopia are shaped and constructed through the integration of technological interconnectedness and gender performativity, positioning them as performative

cyborgs. Technology plays a crucial role in enhancing their resistance and agency against patriarchal oppression and authoritarian rule. They subvert traditional gender norms through technologized gender performative acts. Consequently, the women in Shah's narrative challenge normative gender identity and mobilize collective agency to resist the regime's control. They embody the essence of performative cyborgs, whose subversive acts are significantly influenced by technological interconnectedness.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Surveillance and Technology in Shah's Feminist Dystopia

In Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018), a post-apocalyptic world is depicted where women are systematically subjugated through surveillance and technology.

Technological Surveillance as Subjugating Female Autonomy

Shah's narrative opens by illustrating the subjugation of citizens, especially women, through surveillance: "*From the official Green City handbook for Female citizens: No citizen is permitted to write or maintain a personal journal or diary*" (Shah, 2018, p. 4). These opening lines indicate the oppressive regime's intent to dominate women's physical and personal space. Shah also reflects that the Green City authorities have officially institutionalized the subjugation of women through a handbook designed to enforce restrictive norms upon them.

Until the end of her dystopian narrative, Shah demonstrates that whether in Green City or Pannah—the underground refuge—women suffer everywhere. Through omnipresent surveillance and oppressive technology, Shah portrays the physical and emotional suffering of Sabine, the novel's protagonist, throughout her existence in both Green City and Pannah. Every aspect of her life—her autonomy and her individuality—is controlled by the leaders of these distinct locales. In Green City, Sabine remarks on the extent of surveillance and public scrutiny women face: "*Girls and women in Green City were required to have a public profile that men could peruse before applying for a Wife*" (Shah, 2018, p. 20). This quote illustrates that the Green City regime enforces conformity, compelling women to align with male preferences and societal expectations to maintain control over their freedom. Shah highlights that, due to technological surveillance, women's agency and individuality in Green City are reduced to mere commodities.

On Sabine's way back from visiting Joseph's apartment, one of Pannah's clients, Shah describes the pervasiveness of surveillance technology in every area of Green City. While attempting to return to Pannah, Sabine experiences a sudden, sharp abdominal pain that renders her unable to walk. As her perception dims, she becomes hyper-aware of the city's relentless surveillance: "*If the car idles more than a few minutes, the heat of the engine will register on the scanners; they'll send an Agency car to investigate*" (Shah, 2018, p. 87). This quote depicts a world where resistance is nearly impossible, as the regime's oppressive surveillance system swiftly detects and responds to any deviation from its norms. The political nature of such surveillance aligns with Haraway's notion that technology can serve both as a tool of subjugation and a potential means of liberation.

After suffering from severe abdominal pain, Sabine is admitted to Shifana Hospital, one of Green City's most significant medical institutions. Once she begins to recover, her desire to escape to Pannah intensifies, but the hospital's advanced surveillance system presents insurmountable obstacles. Julien, her doctor and love interest, warns her: "*But there are alarms everywhere. You won't even be able to see them*" (Shah, 2018, p. 153). This statement emphasizes how invisible technological surveillance restricts individuals, making it difficult to resist or challenge the oppressive regime. Furthermore, Julien states: "*Whatever I do on my device, they can see it... I could be tracked*" (Shah, 2018, p. 153). This quote highlights the extent to which surveillance invades not only public spaces but also the private lives of citizens. It also mirrors contemporary society's increasing dependence on technology, where personal spaces are constantly monitored and controlled.

Shifana Hospital stands out as the most significant example of technological surveillance in *Before She Sleeps* (2018). Shah presents it as a central location in the narrative, where advanced and pervasive surveillance

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

technologies—including hidden cameras, motion detectors, thermal scanners, and high-tech machinery—are in constant operation. Every action, movement, and medical procedure is meticulously recorded and monitored, as Julien explains: *"The use of all surgery rooms, drugs, and supplies was recorded, down to the smallest bandage. Putting the first cannula into her hand would set off a cascade of electronic tags that would lead right back to them"* (Shah, 2018, p. 98). Shah underscores the exhaustive nature of surveillance, which not only invades the autonomy of patients but also restricts medical staff. This constant monitoring fosters a sense of alienation, subjugating both the afflicted and those who care for them. The pervasive fear of surveillance discourages resistance and suppresses even the thought of escape, ensuring that every individual in Green City—especially women—remains trapped within the system.

Technological Surveillance as a Tool of Liberation

Although Shah's narrative shows the oppressive, exploitative, domineering, and authoritative nature of surveillance and technological power, she also highlights its liberating, empowering, constructive, and creative aspects. The women of Green City use the same technology that invades their autonomy and identity to protect them. The fear created in women's minds by technological surveillance is only dispelled through the very same technology. On her way to Pannah, the so-called hidden sanctuary, Sabine describes how women like her use technology for subversive acts against the authoritarian surveillance of the regime: *"I never have to worry about the Agency officers when I'm inside; they have their instructions never to stop a car with darkened windows or the special silver detailing on the back..."* (p. 10). Shah illustrates that by programming high-tech cars, women in Green City liberate themselves from the patriarchal and suppressive authorities.

Not only the cars, but also the place called Pannah, is protected by high-tech measures. The voice notes of Ilona Serfati, Lin's aunt and the creator of Pannah, reflect how Pannah was created and evolved into a secure haven through the use of advanced technology: *"Our refuge is made of reinforced concrete and radioactive-proof metals; it keeps us hidden from the men and their scanners above ground"* (Shah, 2018, p. 60). From this quote, Shah demonstrates a dystopian scenario where men and scanners—representing both men and technology—are the source of danger for women. To prevent detection, women use the same technology to subvert this unjust suppression. Furthermore, the need for such advanced protection underscores how fearful, dangerous, and unbearable the oppressive regime in Shah's narrative is.

During her escape from Green City towards the Semitia Border, Sabine's struggle to start her car illustrates how women in the oppressive regime of Green City use technology to break the agonizing shackles of control. She has never driven a car before, but the car's advanced technology communicates with her and shows her directions. As she claims: *"I've never driven a car before...the ambulance wakes up...it takes me only a few minutes to get used to driving the car..."* (Shah, 2018, p. 241). By taking control of the car, Sabine finally takes control of her life, gains independence from the oppressive regime, and embarks on a new, pure journey. Her ability to quickly learn and adjust to the car's technology symbolizes her capacity to grow and embrace change, even after enduring all the calamities she faces.

Agency and Resistance in Shah's Feminist Dystopia

Bina Shah's narrative *Before She Sleeps* (2018) presents a feminist dystopia in which women's agency and identity are tightly controlled by a repressive regime. Shah explores various strategies that women employ to reclaim their agency and confront the despotic authority.

Female Agency and Networked Identities

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Women are completely entrapped in Shah's suffocating totalitarian regime, but they are unwilling to accept their complete subjugation. Supporting each other and developing collective agency, they subvert and oppose all the restrictions and boundaries created around them, as evidenced in the voice notes of Ilona Serfati: "Just when it seemed that women had no choices left, Fairuza and I decided to speak with our feet and escape. But the borders were sealed and there was nowhere to go. Except down" (p. 35). When things seem out of control and anarchy dominates Green City, the only choice left for those women who want to live with their true inner selves and identities is to escape the strictly monitored gaze of the authoritarian regime.

Ilona Serfati and Fairuza are two major female characters with an extreme quest for autonomy who dare to oppose the oppressive norms of Green City and create their own home in a bunker they named Pannah. The phrase "except down" in the quote above signifies the sanctuary of Pannah, where they live the rest of their lives according to their will, desires, individuality, and dreams. The sealing of the borders further emphasizes the oppressive and powerful nature of the regime, indicating that citizens of Green City have no other option or choice left, except surrender. But under such strict surveillance, Shah demonstrates that women can still manage to emancipate with the help of technology. Furthermore, showing profound agency at the end of the narrative, Sabine, along with her beloved Julien, escapes the high-tech, narrow streets of Green City. After claiming her autonomy, she remarks: "I have broken every rule, transgressed every limit" (p. 244). The word "I" in this quote signifies Sabine's conscious decision to rebel against the oppressive regime of Green City. Although she had never driven a car before and was driving for the first time in her life, she forges her own path and drives herself by the end of the narrative. The role of technology here reflects Haraway's notion that by using technology in response to oppression, individuals can perform subversive acts and achieve liberation. It also embodies her belief that human beings and technology are inseparable and mutually dependent. Furthermore, this example of empowerment reflects Sabine's embrace of her true self. Her autonomy and individuality are preserved through the involvement of technology and the networked support of others.

Subversive Performances in Totalitarian Regime

The heart of Green City is completely devastated following the gender emergency. The patriarchal government decides to make women its soldiers to rehabilitate everything. Without asking for their consent, women are assigned the never-ending unpaid duty of reproducing as many babies as possible. This catastrophic scenario leads to subtle forms of resistance, as overt resistance is met with severe and unforgettable punishment. Therefore, the women begin performing subversive acts, such as communicating with each other non-verbally. Sabine, the central character of the novel, narrates how women engage in subversive acts within such a constrictive regime. She remarks: "We were really searching for each other. That spark of recognition as we stared into each other's eyes, that furtive smile, the twitch of fingers to wave hello or goodbye, would signal that girl as a friend—and an ally" (Shah, 2018, p. 21). In the Green City regime, women recognize each other not only because of shared experiences of suffering and exploitation but also for a deeper understanding and a way to escape. By performing small acts of subversion and resistance, they manifest their inner autonomy. These little gestures signify mutual understanding and subversive performances within the domineering regime. Hence, the above-mentioned quote from Shah's narrative reflects the clear and strong intentions of the women in the regime.

Lin, the leader of Pannah following her aunt Ilona Serfati, demonstrates acts of resistance and rebellion, openly asserting them in front of Reuben Faro, her beloved and an influential figure within the Green City government. She ironically asks Faro: "Don't you already know my crimes? Reluctance, rebellion, revolt. I've committed them all" (Shah, 2018, p. 133). Reluctance is a passive and subtle form of resistance; it serves as an early warning. Initially, the women of Green City show reluctance against the imposed norms. However, when their reluctance proves ineffective, they become rebellious and challenge the oppressive regime through both

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

subtle and overt means. They inspire each other to join, and their rebellion eventually leads to a full-scale revolt. Together, they challenge and attempt to overthrow the oppressive patriarchal system.

In the stifling environment of Green City, the greatest act of subversion and resistance is manifested by Sabine as she escapes toward Semitia, claiming: "I'm going to get us out of here" (p. 240). Sabine's escape is not merely physical but emotional, psychological, and social. Physically, she escapes the strict, oppressive environment of Green City, where every space, whether public or private, is monitored and controlled. Emotionally, she frees herself from the fear, distress, and anxiety imposed by societal expectations and the role of women. Psychologically, she represents a break from controlling ideologies and reclaims her agency. Socially, she challenges the status quo of the oppressive regime and subverts its authority. With the help of technology, she turns the tools of oppression into tools of liberation and resists the totalitarian regime.

Pakistani Feminism and Dystopia

Shah's dystopian narrative, *Before She Sleeps* (2018), 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.

Gender-based Control and Inequalities

Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018) manifests the essence, function, and nature of control and inequality throughout women's life journeys. Shah's narration of women's lives in the patriarchal, oppressive regime of Green City can be justified within the context of Pakistani feminism, given the conflicts and struggles women navigate in Pakistan.

In her significant work *Before She Sleeps* (2018), Shah highlights how women become endangered and are treated as an "endangered species" (Shah, 2018, p. 35) due to the pervasive control and perpetual inequality resulting from the upheaval of war, terror, and disease that descends upon Green City. To restore stability and sanity in the face of such disorder, chaos, and pandemic, women are forced to become warriors without their consent: "You will be its foot soldiers, working hard to fulfill your role as the mothers of the new nation" (Shah, 2018, p. 4). These lines from the official handbook of Green City justify the societal expectations imposed on women in a patriarchal, oppressive, dystopian regime, where their sole role is defined by their ability to reproduce and procreate to rapidly populate the regime. In the context of Pakistani feminism, the quote critiques the societal norms of reproductivity imposed on women in Pakistan, particularly in times of crisis or upheaval. Furthermore, it also reflects Butler's concept of 'gender performativity' (1990, p. 183), which suggests that social and cultural forces have a significant impact on shaping an individual's gender identity, particularly that of a woman.

Diverse Forms of Oppression and Agency

Individuals perceive oppression differently. During the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan, the rates of violence, subjugation, inequality, oppression, physical assault, psychological abuse, emotional separation, and marital rape against women increased rapidly. Likewise, in Shah's narrative, a "pandemic within the pandemic" (Khan, 2022, p. 25) collapses upon women. One pandemic is caused naturally and unintentionally, such as the virus, war, and disease, while the second pandemic that befalls women is the control and victimization of their reproductive rights, imposed by society to reconstruct and develop the nation.

The society in Shah's narrative thrusts all the weight and burden onto the fragile shoulders of women: "Only when each individual girl exchanges selfishness for selflessness, and sacrifices self-involvement for the care of others, can Green City achieve its destiny as a place of ingenuity, industry, and prosperity" (Shah, 2018, p. 4). Each girl, regardless of her race, ethnicity, class, or age, is forced to work for the patriarchal development of the

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

country. Women may be differentiated by society based on their color, race, class, and ethnicity, but they are all alike when it comes to subjugation and marginalization. In every nation, state, and country, men are considered more powerful and strong than women, yet the greatest duty—to repopulate and save nations, as exemplified in Shah's Green City—is subtly enforced upon women. Furthermore, there is no mention of men's role in rehabilitating Green City beyond exploiting it. They have destroyed both the environment and women's autonomy, yet the burden of rebuilding is placed solely on women. The irony here is that while men are responsible for the disease and destruction, they remain in control of restoring Green City.

Rupa, a significant character in Shah's novel, suffers from a different form of oppression than the women of Pannah. She wishes to live her life in Green City, but because of her father, Z, her mother is forced to send her to Pannah: "What if I had wanted to live on the outside, like a normal woman? What if I wanted to be a Wife, to bear a Husband a child? My choice was robbed from me" (Shah, 2018, p. 50). According to Rupa, the "normal" life of a woman is to get married, have a husband, and bear children, echoing Green City's patriarchal norms. She believes that this is the sole duty or purpose of a woman's life, a perception shaped by the biased education she received in Green City's patriarchal institutions. Similarly, in Pakistani society, women like Rupa exist—women who accept oppression as an intrinsic part of their identity and lives. From their patriarchally shaped perspectives, life outside this oppression appears abnormal. These women fail to recognize that within the institution of marriage, they are bound to men in every way—physically, spiritually, mentally, economically, socially, culturally, and verbally—rendering them co-dependent rather than independent.

CONCLUSION

Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018) is a fictive narrative that portrays a futuristic, post-religious, dystopian, authoritarian, "cyborg world" (Haraway, 1985, p. 72), in which individuals—particularly women—have their bodies, identities, and agency exploited under the guise of societal welfare, national interest, and public good. This research vividly demonstrates how Shah challenges traditional notions, binaries, expectations, constraints, and norms attached to women's identities and bodies, which create gender disparities in an oppressive, patriarchal regime.

The research raises questions about how women's agency, autonomy, and identity are constituted and shaped by societal power structures and how such oppressed women engage in subversive performances to challenge the totalitarian regime. It also examines the role of technology and surveillance in reinforcing societal norms to control women's bodies and autonomy. At the same time, it highlights how women utilize technology to resist and empower themselves against oppression. Furthermore, this study investigates how technologically mediated societies influence women's lives in patriarchal regimes like Pakistan. It aligns with Pakistani feminism in challenging the regime's unjust, patriarchal, biased, and political norms.

Shah's narrative envisions a post-gender world by demonstrating the empowerment of hybrid identities through ultra-modern technology. Filling a critical gap, this research illustrates that the subjugation, oppression, marginalization, exploitation, and reproductive disorders experienced by women—due to strict, covert, and overt surveillance and advanced technology in an authoritarian, dystopian regime—are not universal but rather multifaceted and sophisticated. Likewise, women's agency to resist and subvert domination varies in its forms. By creating networked identities, women demonstrate resistance and reclaim their agency and identity, using advanced technology as a tool of liberation against the authoritarian system.

Intertwining Butler's concept of gender and identity as performative and "performative subversions" (1990, p. 175) with Haraway's proposition of the "cybernetic organism" (1985, p. 65), this research extends the existing theoretical framework and introduces a novel perspective termed *performative cyborgs*—a hybrid identity formed through repeated actions, influenced by societal norms and technology, that challenges traditional notions of

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

stable, fixed identity and performs acts of subversion against the totalitarian regime. Through this novel theoretical framework, the research also provides new insights into contemporary Pakistani feminism.

It explores how women in a terrifying world of post-religious authoritarianism reclaim their agency by utilizing technology and becoming *performative cyborgs*. Not only does it pose critical questions, but it also provides answers to how, due to advancements in sophisticated technologies, individuals—particularly women—both suffer under and emancipate themselves from oppressive regimes.

Although this research provides crucial insights into the themes of female agency, autonomy, subjugation, control, and inequality within contemporary and futuristic societies, it also has certain limitations. Relying solely on a textual analysis of one literary work and selected significant themes, this research focuses specifically on women's suffering and their emancipation through technology in the dystopian world of *Before She Sleeps* (2018). Future research could expand by examining resistance and agency in other South Asian works using the concept of *performative cyborgs* and applying comparative studies.

Further studies could also explore other themes presented in Shah's narrative, such as hope and utopia, love and relationships, the impact of religion, sisterhood, men's roles in both oppression and support, class conflict, moral decay, fear and disease, and environmental degradation. These could be analyzed through emerging theoretical perspectives such as Posthumanism, Speculative Realism, Critical Race Technology Studies, Network Theory, Intersectionality, and Digital Humanities.

In conclusion, this research underscores the importance of acknowledging the unvoiced and often misrepresented subjugation of women in patriarchal, oppressive, high-tech regimes. It aims to highlight the ongoing reality that women have been, are, and will continue to be oppressed under patriarchal control and unjust systems—sometimes in the name of protection, honor, or biological inferiority, and at other times under the guise of national development, progress, and societal needs.

Furthermore, the research emphasizes gender-based disparities within the context of Pakistani feminism. In Pakistan, the lens of dystopian feminism has not been widely explored due to strict religious beliefs. However, with emerging global crises, advancements in technology, and evolving ideological perspectives, dystopian feminism is gaining increased attention in Pakistani literature and fiction.

It is crucial to recognize that Shah's portrayal of control over individuals' personal space—especially that of women—is a critical subject often ignored in contemporary society. This leads to unresolved psychological and intellectual issues. The prevalence of strict surveillance in today's world is eroding individuality and critical thinking, while the relentless dependence on technology is turning individuals into cybernetic organisms and shaping a technologically mediated society (Haraway, 1985, p. 71). Ultimately, this evolution is pushing the world toward becoming a *cyborgian* reality.

To achieve true emancipation, women must recognize the invisible political and power dynamics imposed by patriarchal structures. Institutions like Pannah in *Before She Sleeps* (2018) serve as only temporary escapes from an oppressive regime, as Shah illustrates. True freedom can only be attained when women realize their authentic selves and dismantle the invisible shackles of authoritarian control.

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Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

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