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FROM BIOLOGICAL ESSENTIALISM TO SITUATED KNOWLEDGE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR* AND SHAH'S *BEFORE SHE SLEEPS*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author discuss Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Shah's *Before She Sleeps* in the light of Haraway's *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*. This paper demonstrates how specific culture, knowledge, geography, and power dynamics shape gender identities and reinforce objective stereotypes. From a medical humanities perspective, it examines how medical and biological sciences have shaped women's experiences across various cultures. This study claims that the dimorphic concept of gender, which holds that men are essentially independent owing to their biological anatomy, is only one side of the coin. Donna Haraway's concept of Situated Knowledge challenges deterministic ideals of science and proposes a new science that includes and prefers women's lived experiences over their biology. In *The Bell Jar*, the protagonist, Esther Greenwood resists and questions the psychiatric institutions that label her nonconformity as mental illness. Dr. Gordon ignores her medical history and administers electric shock therapy, exacerbating her condition. Ultimately, with the arrival of a female psychiatrist Dr. Nolan, Esther begins to feel that her personal and lived experiences are acknowledged with empathy and respect. Similarly, in *Before She Sleeps*, some women create their own space, Panah, to resist the regime of the Green City. It manifest their struggle against the medical gaze, which reduces women to their reproductive capacities without considering them human. Medical authorities conducted experiments on women without taking into account their emotional, physical, social, and psychological well-being. This study acknowledges that women are influenced not just by biological traits but also by social structures, cultural norms, and values. It emphasizes their resistance to imposed biological roles using both mind and body, while also demonstrating that their responses differ among cultures and are not universally defined.

KEYWORDS Feminism, Medical Humanities, Situated Knowledge, and Biological Essentialism.

INTRODUCTION

Are the terms sex and gender refer to the same thing or are they distinct concepts? Sex and gender are related but distinct concepts. Sex refers to biological traits such as chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive anatomy, which are mainly determined by genetics and physiology. In contrast, gender refers to one's social, cultural, and personal identity. Sex alone does not define gender because intersex people have varying sex characteristics, and transgender people may be assigned a sex at birth that does not correspond to their gender identification. As a result, defining women only on the basis of biological sex undermines the complexities of gender identity and expression. Mishra (2018), in *Plato and Aristotle: A Comparative Study of Their Attitudes towards Women* asserts Plato argues that in an ideal state, women and men should have equal social roles, with the exception of physical strength. In contrast, Aristotle asserts the natural superiority of men and the inferiority of women, declaring males rulers and female's subjects. Centuries later, Clarke (1873), in *Sex and Education* expresses his concern for women's health and fertility. He also opposes women's enrollment to Harvard University because education impacts both their mental and physical health. To support his claim, he cites an example of certain girls graduating from universities but "with undeveloped ovaries" and when

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they married, they "were sterile" (p.39). These medical explanations have pathologized women's intellectual desires, confining them to domestic and reproductive roles, which also happens with Esther in *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Sabine in *Before She Sleeps* (2018).

Friedan (1963), in her famous work *The Feminine Mystique* describes the particular psychological challenges faced by women in the 1950s. According to Friedan, "Every suburban wife" experiences it alone because, over time, professionals have taught these women "how to catch a man," "how to breastfeed children," and, finally, that " real feminine women do not want careers" (pp.15-16). These perspectives are based on biological determinism, which is why they ignore women's mental health and limit them to a narrow biological deterministic roles. Women are more than their biological roles of producing and nurturing, and this study seeks to redefine women beyond biology while taking into account society, culture, geography, and power dynamics. In recent times, biological determinism persists in public discourses as well. According to BBC News (2019), during the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump, stated that Hillary Clinton lacks the physical look and stamina to be president. These sentiments reflected the enduring nature of misogyny that is rooted in essential views of women's bodies. According to a report by World Health Organization (2020), on *COVID-19 and Violence against Women*, one in three women worldwide has experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner. The situation worsens during emergencies such as pandemics, where existing inequalities become more pronounced. Women are isolated with abusers and burdened with additional care and responsibilities. Therefore, they are deprived of access to reproductive healthcare, psychosocial support, and legal aid. During the COVID-19 outbreak, reports from countries like China, the United Kingdom and the United States reveal a sharp rise in domestic violence cases. These realities reflect how structural and biological determinants of women's health are shaped by sociological dynamics.

Donna Haraway's *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1988), is used as theoretical framework to analyze Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018). Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas has been published after her death. The novel is semi-autobiographical and reflects Plath's own psychological turmoil and the pressures she faces as a young woman. This novel is written in the 1950s which is a time of societal conformity and gender roles that sees a surge in psychological issues among women including depression, anxiety, and the identity crisis. Women like Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), struggle to reconcile her individuality. The dominant discourse of biological determinism which reduces women's experiences to their biology further exacerbates those issues. Esther's depression isn't understood in light of her social and existential struggles, but rather treated through brutal medical interventions. Shah's dystopian novel *Before She Sleeps* (2018), is set in Green City, where a catastrophic pandemic and nuclear war have led to gender imbalance. In response, the authoritarian Perpetuate Bureau has implemented a reproductive regime. Through biometric surveillance, clinical experimentation, and forced fertility enhancement, women are compelled to produce children for multiple government assigned partners. The novel presents a compelling case against biological determinism pointing towards the ways in which societal constructs and power dynamics shape individual experiences. Through the novel's portrayal of the Panah's inhabitants, Shah challenges the notion that human behavior and traits are fixed by genetics and biology. As observed by Zia (2009), Pakistani writers are portraying "poor women as well as rich women..." (p. 96). Therefore, in the novel *Before She Sleeps* (2018), through the portrayal of characters that are shaped by diverse factors like family background, cultural heritage, traumatic experiences and societal pressures, Shah masterfully illustrates the multifaceted relationship between women from varied backgrounds which takes us beyond biological determinism.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Biological determinism is rooted in the fact that human identities, societal expectations, cultural norms, and psychological tendencies may be shaped by innate human traits that have evolved over a long process. Feminist theorists like Simon de Beauvoir (1949), in her work *The Second Sex* have challenged the idea that biology alone determines women's roles. To further study the connection of women with biological sciences, the medical humanities has emerged as a critical space. Scholars such as Susan Squier and Delese Wear have contributed to this interdisciplinary area, exploring how literature, medicine, and gender intersect to shape both medical practice and cultural narratives surrounding the female body. Historically, male authors have portrayed women as fragile. It was until Henrik Ibsen showed a lady like Hedda Gabler, who is outspoken, assertive, and has her own voice. However, female writers' contributions have substantially influenced women's representation. In English literature, pioneers such as Aphra Behn and Virginia Woolf paved the way for future women writers. Wollstonecraft (1792), wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in response to the works of authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argues in *Emile* (1762) that women's primary role is to serve and please men, and that their education should be limited to domestic chores. Wollstonecraft (1792), respond "I don't wish them to have power over men; but over themselves" (p.51). In the 19th century, Elizabeth Blackwell emerges as a prominent female doctor who has provided better care for women. Blackwell (1856), in her essay *An Appeal on behalf of the Medical Education of Women* states that male doctors cannot understand the problems of female patients, and even if they did, "he would be quite unable to supply them" (p.6). Her efforts have made it possible for women to earn professional degrees in medicine. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women across the globe have bagged and campaigned for the right to vote. Arab feminism has also been initiated to give Muslim women a voice. Egyptian writers, such as Nawal el-Saadawi, contribute to the realm of literature. Women's intellectual independence was stifled in the early twentieth century due to limited education, restricted employment and domestic constraints. Woolf (1929), in essay *A Room of One's Own*, emphasizes the urgent need for every woman to have a space for creativity. She claims that women in her period were unable to study or have access to the libraries of renowned universities. Their cognition and intelligence are diminished simply because of their sex, physical appearance and perceived fragile nature. They are often denied access to adequate nutrition and hygiene. According to Virginia Woolf, if a person is not well fed, regardless of gender, they can't "think well, love well, and sleep well" (p.12). This deprivation even extends to their basic human needs and that's why it is necessary to come together to have equal rights as men. In brief, the first wave of feminism primarily aims at to achieve legal, social, intellectual, and political equality with men, focusing on issues such as suffrage and property rights.

By expanding the ideals of first wave feminism, second-wave feminism emphasizes on not just equality but also on women's personal experiences and societal roles. Friedan's (1963), *The Feminine Mystique* becomes a foundational text of the second wave of feminism. In this book, Friedan exposes the dissatisfaction many housewives feel despite living in material comfort, calling it "the problem that has no name" (p.27). She argues that traditional domestic roles are suffocating women and limiting their potential. *The World's Women* (1970), a report from the United Nations also highlight the systemic barriers women face globally, including inequalities in education, healthcare, and employment. De Beauvoir (1949), in her groundbreaking work, *The Second Sex* argues that womanhood is not an innate identity but a cultural construct shaped by generations of patriarchal norms as one human being is not born a woman "but rather becomes a woman" (p.330). Greer (1970), in *The Female Eunuch* proposes the idea that women are socially, sexually, and culturally castrated. Women are encouraged to see themselves as passive and fragile from their childhood. During puberty, when a girl is unable to "manipulate her sexual situation," she tries to get that guidance that comes from outside, like her parents, siblings, and peers, who usually are unable to describe her (p.105). Citing violence and abuse

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against women as evidence of men's deep resentment, she depicts love is converted into hate. She encourages women to reject patriarchal structures such as marriage, challenge stereotypes, reclaim their sexuality, and seek liberation from misogynistic systems. Millett (1970), in *Sexual Politics* describes male-dominated institutions such as government, religion, industry, and academia dominate women. Millett associates sexuality with the politics, power, and authority that shape gender. The second wave of feminism expands beyond a legal and political focus, with the articulation of women's lived experiences at its core. This wave sees the establishment of awareness-raising organizations, which assist women in connecting their personal experiences to wider systems of political and social oppression. Moreover, Pakistani literature in English began to evolve before and after partition, with writers such as Bapsi Sidhwa portraying women in struggle. Saadat Hasan Manto is likely one of Pakistan's first female writers. During a tribute to Manto at Alhamra Hall, Kishwar Naheed says, if Manto were alive today, he would be writing about women who have been terrorized in the name of culture. It is true that Manto never portrayed women as defenseless victims; instead, he conveyed their resistance of the oppressive regime. During General Zia-ul-Haq's rule, these women finally established organizations that aggressively opposed anti-women laws.

At the end of the 1980s, some people began to argue that feminism is no longer needed. However, many feminists like Rebecca Walker, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards disagreed. They believed that women have made mass progress due to second-wave feminism, but true equality has not been achieved. Feminism needs to address new challenges such as the growing influence of neoliberalism. Butler (1990), in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* argues that gender is not something people are born with but something they perform through repeated actions and behaviors as "gender is always a doing" (p.33). In third wave of feminism, beauty myths have been put down, reproductive justice is achieved, disability feminism emerges and women face anti-feminist backlash. Despite these struggles, their battle to assert themselves in various fields continues and brought another wave of feminism called the fourth wave of feminism. By the early 2010s, fourth wave of feminism has begun to emerge, which led by millennials and Generation Z. Fourth wave of feminism involves hashtag activism with familiar phrases to boost digital campaigns such as *#Bring Back Our Girls* and *#MeToo movement*. These hashtags enable activists to interact with their audiences by providing real-time updates, sharing images, and spreading information. According to a United Nations Report (2024), almost 67 percent of women and girls face violence due to misinformation and defamation. Women in public roles or from marginalized backgrounds have been affected by technologically assisted violence against women and girls. The fourth wave of feminism still continues to advocate for women rights globally. Monosphere has exacerbated sexist stereotypes, with misogynist men facing little to no consequences for their words or statements. As a result, the current wave of feminist struggle meets challenges not just from patriarchal control over women's bodies, but also from the fields of technology and science.

Relying on the legacy of women's resistance in Western and South Asia, this study is comparative analysis of the works of two female writers. Both works are from different geographical, cultural, and societal backgrounds, and they focused on how female characters from various contexts respond to and resist the dominant power structures. Shae Kirkus et.al. (2022), examine *The Bell Jar*, using the Femininity as Disability framework that views femininity and disability as socially constructed identities. The authors argue that both are frequently portrayed as "abnormal" or undesirable, not because of any inherent flaws but due to the way society defines and enforces narrow standards of normality (p.18). This kind of approach often marginalizes women and people of disability considering them a taboo and humiliation for society. Just like women's sexuality, their mental struggles are considered insignificant as physical ones. In many cultures the discussions about mental traumas is a taboo. Bendris (2022), analyzes *The Bell Jar*, through a psychoanalytic lens and argues that "Esther's madness" is not a physical illness but rather a result of cultural influences (p.38). Imtiaz et al. (2019), uses *The Bell*

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Jar as a case study to examine how marriage has historically been used to exploit women (p.50). Throughout the novel, Esther's rejection of marriage is evident in her relationship with Buddy Willard who is a symbol of traditional masculine expectations. Writers argue that due to its exploitative nature, marriage in the novel symbolizes the systematic oppression of women. A review in *The Guardian* (2015), points out that the novel effectively portrays the "stigma" surrounding mental illness in the 1950s. During that time, many people did not understand mental health conditions and often believed that depression was a choice rather than a real illness. This lack of awareness is reflected in how some doctors and nurses treat Esther Greenwood, the novel's protagonist. Instead of offering genuine support, they often belittle her struggles making her feel even more isolated.

Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018), a gripping dystopian novel, examines these issues in a future where women are subjected to extreme control over their bodies and lives. The story reflects real world struggles drawing parallels with South Asian's history of political instability, military rule and using bodies of women for selfish gains. At its core, *Before She Sleeps* (2018), is a story about resistance and solidarity. Naseem et al. (2023) underscore the theme of "polyandry and pain in women" as central to their analysis of the novel (p.842). Polyandry, derived from the ancient Greek term meaning "many men" refers to a martial practice historically traced back to India (p.842). The article explores how this practice collides with the experience of women and sheds light on the emotional pain it often entails. In their discussion, the authors incorporate insights from scholars such as Tiwari, Goldstein, and Peter who argue that the setting of Green City simultaneously oppresses and prospers women. Through this approach, the study connects the cultural, historical and literary dimensions of polyandry and its implications in the lives of women in the narrative. Sahoo (2021), in her review on *Before She Sleeps*, uses the concepts of unity and collective strength as a central theme to challenge patriarchal systems. By focusing on solidarity and community. Shah emphasizes the importance of individuals coming together to resist or question the dominance of male-centered ideologies in society. Chambers and Freya Lowden (2022), in their analysis of the novel *Before She Sleeps*, argue that the book explores a dystopian world characterized by severe gender imbalance and the commodification of women's intimacy. They argue that the world of the novel is driven by misogyny and an obsessive focus on fertility that creates conditions where women develop a sense of "rebellion" against oppressive systems (p.1). The rebellion is not only physical but symbolic as these women reclaim their autonomy in a system that is designed to strip them of it. Shahzad (2023), explores *Before She Sleeps*, by analyzing the "monstrous culture of Green City" through the lens of monster theory (p. 467). The patriarchal structures in Green City act as invisible forces that control the lives of women. Green City is a metaphorical monster characterized by its oppressive environments. This monster prioritizes economy over individual freedom and women's wellbeing is sidelined for the development of the Green City. Furthermore, Shahzad draws attention to the harmful role of substance abuse particularly among women. This is a coping mechanism for them in the stifling environment. These drugs can temporarily help them to face the struggle but they erode their sense of self and individuality. Bashir & Tanveer (2024), analyze *Before She Sleeps*, through Michel Foucault's concept of discipline. By portraying the state's strategies of domination such as reproductive control and social surveillance, the narrative sheds light on how totalitarian regimes restrict women's autonomy.

Despite extensive research on *The Bell Jar* (1963) and *Before She Sleeps* (2018), the question of why women experience marginalization and oppression remains unexplored. This paper addresses this gap by examining how women in both novels interact with societal constraints, biological roles and spatial constraints. By taking western and non-western literature, this study challenges the dominant patriarchal narratives, and highlights how women challenge, resist and subvert the cultural, societal and patriarchal domains.

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Donna Haraway's in her essay *Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1988), analyzes key theoretical concepts such as the feminist epistemology, god trick, embodiment, disembodiment, politics of space, positioning, and apparatus of bodily production. These ideas are explored in relation to the selected novels with particular attention to how they challenge biological determinism and contribute to critical discourses within the medical humanities. Donna Haraway begins her essay *Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1988), by pointing out that feminist discourse has challenged the notion of objectivity for a long time because it has always referred to the exclusion of marginalized communities like women. In the essay, she points out that while feminist scholars often rely on objectivity to argue for justice such as in women's health care or exposing gender bias in medical research, they also recognize that traditional science has excluded or misrepresented women. Therefore she draws on social constructionist approaches to argue that science itself is shaped by cultural and political forces. In other words, science does not just discover facts, but it also reflects the assumptions and values of the society that produces it. For a long time, scientific objectivity has been a universally valid method for producing narratives and truth in society. However, feminist theorists have challenged this assumption. Feminist theorists reveal that truth is culturally and politically constructed. Science, as a form of power rhetoric, validates some voices while repressing others. As a result, the voices and lived experiences of women and other marginalized communities are often excluded from dominant scientific narratives. Similarly, biological determinism in medical humanities frequently ignores the lived and embodied experiences of women and other marginalized communities. Haraway criticizes a political and cultural system that values biological determinism, military technology, consumerism, and surface-level media engagement over real political action or embodied experience. She warns from falling into the trap of postmodern cynicism where truth becomes so fragmented that it seems meaningless. Likewise, she also warns against relativism which attempts to avoid the false objectivity, but it risks collapsing all perspectives into mere opinion and equally valid. This might seem liberating for marginalized voices, but it is impossible to evaluate oppressive beliefs because it treats all viewpoints as equally valid. Relativism states that there is no single, objective truth, but rather multiple culturally constructed perspectives.

Haraway, a material feminist, believes that materiality is important, but she refuses to reduce biology to destiny. Instead she asks questions: How are biological claims made? Who benefits from them? What power relations do they support? This allows for a feminist realism that takes bodies of women seriously without collapsing into determinism. She contends that biological determinism is another type of disembodiment, presenting itself as the ultimate form of concrete, objective knowledge that is grounded in data, genes, and hormones. The real lived experiences of patients, particularly those already excluded by biomedicine, such as women, are silenced by both biological determinism and abstract postmodernism. Haraway takes inspiration from Nancy Hartsock's concept of "abstract masculinity" (p.577). Therefore, a call for situated knowledge is not just a theoretical need but an ethical one that will produce an embodied and accountable discourse. Haraway uses the metaphor of "warp speed" which suggests that everything is in a constant flux which makes it hard to point out an ultimate truth (p.577). In her essay, Haraway urges readers to adopt radical social constructionism since biological discourses assert that women's brain structures make them less logical by nature, which results in social injustices disguised as objective science. Feminist scholars deployed a constructionist critique to show how truths are historically and socially constructed rather than facts of nature. However, this approach leads to "epistemological electric shock therapy" because in order to dismantle scientific discourses, feminists have resisted the possibility of any stable or actionable knowledge at all (p.578). Haraway does not completely ignore scientific knowledge but favor situated knowledge that is more contextual and complete. She proposes a "feminist objective"

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that is an accountable, situated knowledge based on positionality that acknowledges who is speaking, from where, and under what circumstances rather than the viewpoint from nowhere or anything leads to relativism. Haraway emphasizes on collective action, solidarity, political struggles and mutual understanding in order to produce knowledge because the world doesn't work on individual perception. She does not altogether reject science, but rather supports "successor science" a concept coined by Sandra Harding that aims to transform science by making it more ethical, more inclusive and more aware of the different positions and experiences people bring (p.579). Rather than one truth that erases all differences, Haraway proposes "earth wide connections," a web of partial, situated knowledge that can communicate across boundaries (p.580). Haraway argues Vision of god-trick is an illusion as it pretends to see nothing from nowhere while staying hidden and seeing everything. She argues that vision doesn't have to mean seeing everything from above like a detached, silent and all-knowing observer. Instead, it can be useful for moving beyond either/or thinking such as male versus female, nature versus culture and mind versus body. This is crucial when thinking about health, identity and the body where simple binaries fail to reflect the real experiences of people. She insists that all vision is embodied as it always comes from a specific person, in a particular place, with their own perspective and history. This directly challenges the deterministic idea of view from nowhere where knowledge is imagined as universal. Furthermore, she criticize idea of "neutral" gaze in science which claims to be objective and disinterested but actually comes from a specific position of power (p.581). This false neutrality is deeply rooted in militarized, racists and male dominated societies particularly in the United States and South Asia.

In the world of medical images, surveillance, and scientific visuals that claim to depict truth about bodies, feminists require situated knowledge in order to describe women's identities. Haraway advocates for "feminist objectivity," which simply means "situated knowledge" which is shaped by the subject's position in the world (p.581). Subject position plays a crucial role in creating situated knowledge. This position is constructed socially, culturally, historically indicating that knowledge is never free from power, politics, and ethics. She depicts feminist objectivity must involve "contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connection and hope for transformation" (p.585). She criticizes the dichotomy of science vs feminism because it gives preference to one group over the other. Alternatively, proposes that a map of "tensions and resonances" might foster global connections (p.588). Furthermore, even local and personal power is not distinct from global power. Haraway envisions a science with "politics of interpretation, translation, stuttering and the partly understood", and aims for multiple subjects with overlapping identities (p.589). What feminism resists is not science itself but the god-trick of rational knowledge. Accepting human agency, accountability and responsibility are the real characteristics of feminist epistemology. Feminism doesn't seek knowledge and experiences through phallogocentrism but embraces partial insights for the sake of global connections. She states that ecofeminists have been "insistent" in considering the world as an "active subject" (p.593). In a nutshell, using a feminist lens to examine Western philosophy, Haraway, addresses three important issues: how feminism critiques science, how gender is a situated difference shaped by social and historical contexts, and how women's embodied experiences matter for the production of knowledge.

ANALYSIS

From the clinical gaze of biomedical discourse to the patriarchal structures embedded in literary canons, female identity has often been reduced to a fixed, biologically determined essence. Therefore by bringing together Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018) through the theoretical framework of Haraway's situated knowledges. This study illustrates how women's experiences of the body, illness, reproduction, and health are shaped not just by biology but also by culture, society, and personal surroundings. The analysis is revolve around three central questions. To begin, how can socioeconomic, cultural,

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geographical, and power dynamics complicate biologically deterministic views of womanhood in both novels? Second, what types of resistance, persistence, and redefinition do the female characters in response to gendered expectations imposed on their bodies? Third, how do these responses vary across the distinct sociocultural settings of Plath's mid-twentieth-century America and Shah's dystopian South Asia?

Biological determinism serves as a powerful ideological force in both *The Bell Jar* (1963) and *Before She Sleeps* (2018). In *The Bell Jar* (1963), Plath resists the ideology of biological determinism by presenting female figures who are beyond the deterministic roles. Esther Greenwood, the protagonist is intellectually talented and has been chosen for a prestigious internship in New York City. Esther frequently feels constricted by the limited options available to women. Esther is torn between societal expectations and her own intellectual and creative goals. Jay Cee, her boss, and Buddy, her boyfriend, have both referred to her as neurotic. Despite what society thinks of her, instead of rejecting and reacting to their words, she accepts that she is "neurotic as hell" (p.84). Esther also reflects on the plots of many 1950s films where women in postwar America are portrayed as needing to conform to restrictive roles in order to be considered deserving of happiness. In this digital portrayal, films of that time period show that girls who are virgin will be rewarded with happiness in life and sexually open women will end up being miserable in life. This rule doesn't apply to men of the time. Men like Buddy need wives who are virgin and chaste when they aren't that chaste themselves. When Esther realizes that Buddy isn't that perfect as he shows himself to be, she distances herself from him. Similarly, she resists the Technicolor films of the era, where women's bright costumes and artificial cheer cater to a male-centered world. Moreover, Esther also questions the real meaning of marriage for women in the society. She remarks that women are "brainwashed" to become as "numb as a slave" in a totalitarian world (p.76). They are brainwashed into believing that their sole role is domesticity, reproduction, subordination, and motherhood. Mrs. Willard, a well-educated woman, has been assimilated into a lifestyle in which her worth is determined by how well she serves her husband and children. Thinking beyond biology does not mean denying the importance of motherhood, but rather putting childbearing and intellectual achievement side by side. When Esther is about to slit her wrists, she realizes that whatever she wants to kill is not in her skin but "somewhere else, deeper, more secret" (p.133). This recognition is an illustration of Haraway's concept of situated knowledge. Esther's pain is not physiological, but psychosocial, epistemological, and existential. Esther's psychiatric treatment under Dr. Gordon, including unexplained and unempathic electric shock therapy, intensifies rather than healed her trauma. This reflects that especially in the 1960s, traditional psychiatry treats women's distress as a biological defect to be fixed without considering the situated and lived experience of the patient. Dr. Gordon's cold, paternalistic authority which left Esther feeling silenced and violated. Haraway calls it a god-trick where a male dominant figure tries to define the identity of women from a controlled position while pretending to be hidden. When Esther is tired of Dr. Gordon and his mindless shock therapy, she tries to run away to Chicago. Ultimately she fails but her failure isn't a sign of madness or personal weakness; rather, it is a deeply situated moment to struggle. Her desire to escape, even if unfulfilled, is a sort of resistance to medicine, society, and power dynamics that attempt to limit her to her biological roles. Dr. Nolan immediately understands Esther, when Esther told her that she is afraid of electroconvulsive therapy because of Dr. Gordon. Dr. Nolan even explains that "some people even like" electroconvulsive therapy if it is performed rightly (p.172). Dr. Nolan response to Esther admitting that Dr. Gordon has failed to provide any assistant marks a crucial shift from the authoritarian detachment to a more feminist model of care. Geographically, even the urban setting of New York, which should provide emancipation and opportunity, becomes another site of alienation for Esther. Even the Amazon Hotel, which was designed specifically for women's comfort, becomes a suffocating site for Esther. For Esther, prison may appear more coherent than the chaotic freedom offered by a patriarchal society. The moment Esther feels her heartbeat and asserts "I am, I am, I am" is not

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a philosophical assertion, but rather a physiological insistence on existence (p.142). Psychologically, this moment displays Esther's embodied self-awareness. Her body, far from being passive or broken, acts as a subject who knows, suffers, and resists.

Esther's relationship with Buddy Willard, a medical student, demonstrates how masculine authority figures use science and medicine to promote gender stereotypes. He takes Esther to view the surgery of a woman named Mrs.Tomolillo who is giving birth and remarks that she should not see it because she will never "want to have a baby" and it would be the "end of the human race" (p.58). Buddy tells Esther about Mrs. Tomolillo, who is in labor and has been given a medicine to forget the pain of childbirth. This scene questions the medicalization of women's bodies, as well as how male-dominated medicine strives to control women's birth experiences. It wipes the memory of the painful process, and the woman will just go home and "start another baby" since the medicine causes her to "forget how bad the pain had been" (p.58). Furthermore, Esther realizes that the pain has not really disappeared; it has simply been repressed and hidden somewhere in women's mind and body. While the medications suppress the memory of pain, they also erase the real, embodied experience of motherhood. Esther reflects that perhaps it would be better not to give women any drug at all so they could at least remember the beauty of motherhood. This thought shows Esther's deeper concerns that women are being denied agency and full awareness in moments that are supposed to define them, like childbirth. By numbing pain, male-controlled medicine also numbs meaning. Moreover, when Esther heals from electric shock therapy and its violent use by Dr. Gordon, Esther's mother urges her to treat her breakdown “like a bad dream” (p.214). This suggestion of her mother also reflects how women suppress or erase painful and disruptive experiences to reintegrate into socially acceptable roles. However, Esther’s refusal to forget or minimize her experience marks a powerful act of resistance. She insists that her mental illness is not something to be erased but something that now forms part of her identity. When Esther later reflects on the treatment and feels “surprisingly at peace” (p.195), it signals that her recovery is not just medical but epistemological. The recognition is more affirmed in her interaction with Irwin. Unlike previous sexual or emotional encounters with men, Esther deliberately chooses lrwin, not as a surrender, but as an assertion of agency. It is a conscious act of reclaiming her body and final rejection of the objectifying medical gazes that once defined her.

Within the sociocultural and geographical landscape of the novel *Before She Sleeps* (2018), women's bodies are subjected to state control, stripped of individuality, and redefined as instruments of national survival. This regime enforces strict pronatalist policies that value women solely for their biological ability to give birth. Even Green City's official handbook for women reflects rigidly deterministic ideology, with each regulation systemically suffocating women’s agency and autonomy. The handbook states that “each individual girl” should act selflessly with sacrifice as “mothers of the new nation” (p.3). The very language naturalizes self-sacrifice and caregiving as essential female traits which conform to a gendered biological script. The women of Panah embody this resistance beyond the regime’s deterministic values, and they reclaim agency over their bodies and choices. When Sabine says that they have built a “community that existed… in our own heads”, she is reflecting that women are not passive victims; they are active knowers (p.22). Sabine mentions a woman named Nurya Saleem who have five husbands in the Green City. She may have the sixth one before the end of the month. The bureaucratic tone with which her life is handled mirrors the dehumanization inherent in the state's policies, which classify women as breeders rather than humans. Nurya's suicide is not considered a mental health problem, but rather a criminal conduct, and her family is simply "reassigned a wife" (p.11). She is a criminal in Green City, yet her suicide is a kind of resistance since she refuses to be reduced to her womb. Sabine claims she has neither “whispered prayers” nor cried for the deceased woman (p.11). Her reluctance is not a lack of emotion, but rather a feminist epistemology, since she understands that death is not isolated, and that weeping will not change the fate of all women in Green City. Actions will benefit them, but they must first

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become the object of the action. Ilona Serfati, Lin's aunt, is another character who opposes biological determinism. Ilona, as the driving force behind Panah's plays a critical role in shaping the resistance. She believes that if Lin grows up in Panah, she will avoid becoming a wife of multiple husbands. Serfati acknowledges the prospect of developing a new model of womanhood by ensuring Lin's upbringing outside of the deterministic regime. Later on, Lin, the most senior member of Panah, delivers one of the novel's most radical moments of resistance. While speaking with Reuben, who admires Green City's system of handling affairs, she adds, "You pump us full of hormones," but this is like "we are cows" who are only there to produce children (p.134). Lin argues state's reproductive policies are not only unjust, but also dehumanizing, violent, and industrial. She also criticizes how women's wombs are nationalized and used for economic gain. Lin's understanding of right and wrong does not come from state institutions; rather, it is situated knowledge based on lived experience, pain, and moral clarity. Apart from Sabine and Ilona, Chicken is a minor character yet symbolically powerful. She is young, afraid, and physically vulnerable, but her choice to act in the face of fear demonstrate embodied knowledge. When she says she would be "more scared" if she "didn't try" to leave the Green City, she becomes a microcosm of resistance (p.23). Growing up in a place like Green City and still deciding to leave is a sign of bravery.

In the Green City, it was a "capital crime to hit or abuse a woman"; instead, they must be protected at every costs (p.23). However, this protection is conditional on reproductive value. The true motive is revealed when the narrator observes that Green City's government has "doubled the family allowance" whenever a woman gives the state a baby (p.23). It means that women are economically incentivized and biologically assessed. According to Sabine, the Bureau rewards women's families for "raising a healthy girl" and these women go through several bodily checkups (p.27). These checks include regular uterine, fertility, breast and ovarian etc. Sabine notices that the white color for women in Green City is symbolized for purity that only exists on paper. In reality, the true color for women of Green City is red. Red signifies the realities of womanhood under coercion: menstruation as shame, childbirth as obligation, and blood as a marker of pain and sacrifice. In the Panah, women are not forced into state-sanctioned marriages or compelled to bear children as they are in Green City. However, they are still expected to perform a different form of gendered labor such as offering emotional comfort to men who are psychologically and emotionally exhausted by the pressures of the regime in the Green City. Sabine acknowledges this tension, and states she doesn't like to become a "sandpaper" to heal the "man's rough edges" but still it is bearable than becoming "an entire nation's incubator" (p.56). On the other hand, Rupa emerges as a resistance albeit in a different way. She said, "What if she wanted to be a wife?" but the rules of Panah have denied her this choice (p.50). Rupa does not like the patriarchal regime or the protective rebellion of the Panah. The state's reproductive policies subject women to medical surveillance, polygamous marriages, regulated pregnancies and reduces their bodies to tools for demographic preservation. Similarly, while resisting that system, the Panah imposes a denial of motherhood in the name of survival. Rupa rejects this binary and claims her freedom to seek motherhood on her own terms. Her resistance questions both forced reproduction and forced non-reproduction, demonstrating that autonomy is more about having the right to choose than about what one chooses.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the study examine how medical care and biological determinism alter women's identities, bodies, and acts of resistance in Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018). Women in these works have been exploited, resourced, and medicalized in order to please patriarchal society's medical gaze and god trick. Despite being victims of scientific discourses, these women challenge deterministic values. From Esther Greenwood to Sabine, each woman stands in solidarity with one another, which Haraway refers to as feminist objectivity that is accountable and contextualized. *The Bell Jar* (1963) and *Before She Sleeps* (2028)

expose societal, geographical, cultural, and power dynamics that work together to reinforce a biologically deterministic view of womanhood. In *The Bell Jar* (1963), doctors interpreted that Esther's struggles is a result of mental illness caused by chemical imbalances in her brain. Women are naturally weak, thus biology is to blame for their disease; but in reality, Esther's doctor, mother, and friends are reducing her to her biology. When Plath wrote this work, Plath's America did not value women and their intellect. Their major role is to marry, have children, and do chores while serving their husbands, which frustrates these women. As a result, women begin to raise their voices. Esther, a member of such society refuses to confirm to her biological role. Dr. Nolan, who works in medical care, does not reduce women to their sex; instead, she considers her patients' backgrounds before providing electric shock therapy. In *The Bell Jar* (1963), Esther's resistance is mainly psychological. She questions the expectations placed on her as a woman, withdraws from conventional roles, persists in her resistance, and redefines herself by constructing a new understanding of herself. Similarly, in *Before She Sleeps* (2018), the regime in Green City, South Asia, enforces biological determinism on a much larger scale. Women's reproductive abilities are treated as a national resource, and the state uses medical surveillance, hormonal injections, and forced polygamous marriages to control female bodies. Women living within the geographical boundaries of the Green City are denied the right to make their own decisions and are valued solely for their abilities to bear children in society. The institutional control is justified by a national fertility problem, but its true purpose is to maintain patriarchal order and biological determinism. However, the existence of Panah challenges biological determinism geographically, socially and institutionally. In *Before She Sleeps* (2018), women like Sabine, Lin, Rupa, and Ilona do not have the freedom to protest the regime openly, but they create alternative forms of life through emotional strength, physical refuge, and ethical decisions. As Haraway argues knowledge and agency arise from the body, memory, and local contexts. Panah's women create spaces of resistance based on care, trauma, and solidarity. All of them show that resistance can be emotional, relational, and situated.

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