

## REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN BINA SHAH'S *BEFORE SHE SLEEPS*; A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS

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### Abstract:

*This research paper examines Bina Shah's dystopian book, "Before She Sleeps," using the theoretical frameworks offered by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. The study investigates the representation of women within the novel's oppressive sociopolitical landscape, drawing on Spivak's critique of imperialism as elucidated in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (1985) and Mohanty's exploration of feminist scholarship and colonial discourses in "Under Western Eyes" (1984). The analysis explores at how patriarchal norms intersect with larger systems of power, such as imperialism and capitalism, to shape women's experiences in "Before She Sleeps." The current study examines the agency and resistance of women in the story using Spivak's paradigm, focusing on their techniques for negotiating repressive regimes. The study also uses Mohanty's observations to attack Western-centric notions of feminism and emphasizes the significance of including non-Western voices in feminist discourse. This study using a postcolonial feminist lens provides a nuanced explanation of how "Before She Sleeps" challenges dominant narratives and amplifies the voices of marginalized women. And it concludes that Before She Sleeps (2018) demonstrates that the situation of women has remained unchanged even after decolonization. They are treated similarly to how they were handled during the colonial period.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Postcolonial, Female agency, Decolonization, Bina Shah, Before She Sleeps

### Introduction

Colonialism refers to the “settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands, often by force” (Boehmer, 2005, p. 1). It is also associated with imperialism. In this regard, Judd (1996) states that “[n]o one can doubt that the desire for profitable trade, plunder and enrichment was the primary force that led to the establishment of the imperial structure” (p. 3).

However, Post colonialism, on the hand, questions and subverts the perspectives of colonialism especially about the third world countries. The colonial discourses mainly impose their values and perspectives on the natives of colonized nations. This way postcolonial theory is the reaction of that imposed values of colonial discourse. According to Ashcroft et al (2006) ‘‘Post-colonial’ as we define it does not mean ‘post-independence’, or ‘after colonialism’, for this would be to falsely ascribe an end to the colonial process. Post-colonialism, rather, begins from the very first moment of colonial contact. It is the discourse of oppositionality which colonialism brings into being. In this sense, post-colonial writing has a very long history.’’ This way postcolonial criticism examines the literature, culture, and other modes of discourse in the countries that were once colonized by the colonial powers.

The postcolonial feminist criticism is inspired from the postcolonial theorists. It has objective to represent the experience and suffering of women especially of the third world countries. It is a modern approach that deals with the state of women in third world or the decolonized states. It represents the non-western women specifically in their social, political and economic context. Further, this criticism mainly studies the effect of colonialism on the life of women and believes that women are oppressed on the one hand by patriarchy and on the other hand by the after-effects of colonial systems. This way it can be said that it is the extension of postcolonial theories to the matters of gender. Furthermore, postcolonial feminist criticism analyses how women are represented in the postcolonial literature and at the same time it questions the assumptions that are reflected about women in literature.

This criticism was born in response to the colonialism, and Eurocentric and American centric feminism in which the feministic values of these countries were imposed over the other nations. Furthermore, this criticism does not believe in the idea of universal oppression. It claims the face of ‘equality’ is different in different regions and cultures, for example a US middle class woman and an Arab cannot be judged in the similar stable terms. According to Kamran (2017) ‘‘If Euro-American feminist movements focus on the gender pay gap, unpaid domestic labor, or the dehumanizing aspects of pornography, these forms of oppressions and subsequent resistance is not necessarily useful for women outside of Euro-America.’’ This way the postcolonial feminism goes quite away from the European context and establishes its own theoretical perspective to represent the women of decolonized and third world countries. In this context Navarro (2013) suggests that ‘‘Women around the world have very different histories with respect to their postcolonial inheritance, involving such experiences as imperial conquest, slavery, enforced migration, and even genocide.’’ However, the western feminism is mainly associated with the political liberation movements therefore it ignores the plight of the women of third world countries.

Moreover, postcolonial feminist criticism believes that the oppression of women does not end with the removal of colonial powers; it assumes that this oppression continues even after the decolonization in the form of patriarchy that is quite analogous to colonialism. This way, this

criticism highlights the ways through which women continue to be oppressed and have a marginalized status in the society.

The major contribution of postcolonial criticism is the theoretical questioning of the feminist theories in advanced countries. This criticism argues that the label ‘women’ is insufficient to differentiate between certain groups based on gender. It stresses over the idea that the individual experiences and struggle of women are not universal, and each group in relation to their geographical and cultural location have their own experience of being women, which may not be the similar to the one experienced by the European women. In this regard Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism* (1985) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1984) are rather very important. Spivak (1985) states that “the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism” (p. 243). In the similar way Mohanty (1984) argues that “production of the image of the “third world woman” as always and everywhere oppressed is what sustains the illusion of “first world” women’s autonomy: the assumption that they are “secular, liberated, and have control over their own lives” (p. 353).

In the similar way Judith Butler states that the “the very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms” (Butler, 1990, p. 1). These writers and many other found many theoretical issues with the word “feminism” and thought that it cannot be assumed in the some fixed, stable away. Furthermore, Mohanty (1984) in her essay uses the word “western feminism” which means “substitutions, which imply first, that all feminism is Western feminism; second, that all feminist scholarship is Western feminist scholarship; and third, that all Western feminist scholarship is the same” (Chambers and Watkins, 2012).

Bina Shah is the Pakistani writer, columnist and novelist and short story writer. She has written five novels and one volume of short stories. Her novel *Before She Sleeps* was published in 2018. This novel is a feminist dystopia which depicts a futuristic society in eastern region of the world where women face so much oppression and repression.

## Literature Review

A literature review does more than just present relevant evidence on a specific topic (Khokhar et al., 2018; Maitlo et al., 2022; Soomro et al., 2023). It also explores ideas from past research that connect to your current work, and explains how these earlier studies fit into the bigger picture of existing knowledge (Kalhor et al., 2023; Maitlo et al., 2024; Khokhar et al., 2024). There are various studies available over the application of Postcolonial feminist criticism over the literary texts. The researchers have studied the literary texts in order to determine the representation of third world women. In this regard Zidan (2013) examined postcolonial feminist perspectives in Margret Atwood’s fiction. The researchers made her observations that the characters of Atwood suffer colonial, patriarchal cultural as well as geographical colonization. This sort of treatment creates feeling of displacement and disconnectedness related to their own life. The researchers

further examined that two types of colonization of women can be found in Atwood's fiction. The first is physical colonization and second is psychological colonization. In this way, on the one hand their body is colonized and on the other hand their thinking is also restricted by the social norms. Further this victimization is conducted through language, culture and historical discourse as well.

Zidan (2013) concluded that one the one hand has both man and women are victims of the social systems of the modern world. On the other hand, in case of women, they are not only repressed by men but also by "by underdevelopment, racial segregation, imperialism and by women themselves as well" (p. 25). Furthermore, women cannot think of living without men. Moreover, Atwood in her fiction seems to be implying that adoption is rather very important in life, therefore women have to change their behavior in order to adopt in the new system of life. Further, her fiction also suggests that religion is also used as a tool to not only repress but also humiliate women. The researcher also examined in this analysis that "Atwood's novels denote pessimism and continuous loss" (p. 25). However, at the same time it was also observed in the fiction of Atwood that women use language and other various methods to resist all these forms of repressions.

Bonet (n.d) studied aspects of Postcolonial Feminism and Hybridity in Lani Wendt Young's *Afakasi Woman*. *Afakasi woman* is was a collection of short stories written by Lani Wendt Young. The researcher states the in comparison to the state of white women, the women of the colonial and the decolonized nation have been doubly colonized. On the one hand they are colonized by the colonizers that make repressive policies and also oppressive social norms. On the other hand, these women are also colonized by their own native men. This is the reason, according to the researcher the third world postcolonial feminist writers have made their own theoretical voice in order to represent the third world women.

The study further observed that Lani Wendt Young "hybridized her text by intentionally mixing Samoan expressions" (p. 17). In these stories the researcher found many instances where the Samoan words and expressions were used along with English. The same time Bonet (n.d) further observed that "Besides hybridizing some of her work by combining Samoan and English, Young also makes use of 'grammatically incorrect' English in the story called "I'm here to Pray" (p. 14). This way the writer has created a multiplicity of Englishes that is hybridity which researcher believes is an important part of postcolonial literature.

## Research Questions

1. How women are represented in *Before She Sleeps*?
2. What forms of repression of women are depicted in the novel?
3. Is there any difference in the colonial and postcolonial forms of repressions?

## Research Methodology

This research study involves the qualitative method that according to Flick (2009) is a suitable method to analyze the texts. In this regard Gay (2009) suggests that “qualitative research data is collected on many variables in a natural setting and in this study ideas and things are studied in their natural being and existence.” There are various that are used in qualitative research. However, this research study involves interpretative method that is termed as hermeneutics by Silverman (2005). At the same time Barryman (2004) also recommends this method specifically when the objective is find new meanings in the text.

## Theoretical framework

For this research study the theories of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak given in *Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism* (1985) Chandra Talpade Mohanty *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1984) have been used. The theorists state that the women of third world cannot be judge on the western feminist patterns because the experience of third world women is different from first world women. This way, the representation of women in *Before She Sleeps* in a postcolonial world will be analyzed. In this regard all the forms of repression that are typical in third world countries will be determined. Further, it will be determined whether there is any difference colonial and postcolonial forms of repression and whether there has been any change in the life of women in third world countries after decolonization.

## Analysis and Interpretation

The country that this novel mentions is an imaginary country with the name Green City. However, this name is more analogous to Pakistan. Therefore, this imaginary state may be taken as Pakistan, but at the same time it may be noticed that this imaginary Pakistan may be different from the real Pakistan. This novel presets the picture of women as how they are treated in Green City, specifically those women that live in Panah. This state is rather very repressive and it is evident that there is no difference between the colonial state and a decolonized state. The state that has been represented in the novel is as repressive as the colonial state used to be. Furthermore, this novel implies that the condition of women does not change whether it is colonized state or the decolonized state. The system of patriarchy is similar in both conditions and represses women in all segment of the society.

*“No citizen is permitted to write or maintain a personal diary”*

This rule applies to all citizens, but for Green City's girls and women, understanding is even more important than compliance. We must focus completely on the task of survival, which means we must focus on the present and the future." (Shah, 2018)

In this example it can be observed that the society this novel depicts is holistically repressive for both man and women. When there is matter of recording one's experiences no matter whether it is men or women, none is allowed to maintain a diary. However, when it comes to colonization or repressions women seem to be more vulnerable. They can't do more than that that they have to survive and for their survival women need to be more abiding.

The colonization of women on the one hand is seen at social level. There are multiple restrictions and at the same time there is also so much surveillance over the women, especially those are involved in prostitution. There are multiple repressive agents for women. The one among them are the Agency Officers. They act as colonizers or repressive agents and keep a constant vigilance over the women and sex workers. In order to escape their surveillance, they have to select a time when they are not available around the sensitive buildings or in streets.

*"I make it a rule to always leave the Client's house in the darkest part of the morning, the half hour before dawn, when the night is its thickest and the Agency officers are at their slowest."*  
(Shah, 2018)

This passage shows that the repression of women in the postcolonial society starts from the social norms and the administrative policies. The administration of the country is itself a tool of repression and follows the colonial policies. It can be noticed their policies are in one-way shadow of the colonial policies and there seems no difference between the two.

Another form of colonization is the rules that have been set by the administration. These rules are written as well as unwritten. However, in either case they have to follow these rules. Any deviance from these rules will cause women insufferable punishment.

*"I grimace, my back to him. "I am sorry, Joseph. The rules are the rules. I have to be out of there before dawn."* (Shah, 2018)

In reference to the implementation of these rules, the role of Agency Men is like that of colonizers. They are always vigilant over these women and if they find any act of transgression, they not only disgrace them, but also publicize their crimes that their actions become even more disgraceful.

*"You know why," I say, momentarily nonplussed. We all know what's at stake if we're caught: the Agency has made sure to publicize all crimes well in the Flashes on the display, the Bulletins,*

*even though door-to-door visits, something almost unheard of in this time where almost everything is done remotely and anonymously.” (Shah, 2018)*

Another tool of colonization is to keep the women in ignorance and don't let them have access to knowledge. In this system of colonization, the novel presents a system that disallows any form of knowledge for women subjects. It is deliberate and well-thought of system to keep the women subjects in ignorance so that they may not question the established rule or the norms that keep them colonized and that given man a privilege and feeling of being a patriarchal as well as a colonizer.

*“It's too dangerous for me to know who you are. Or for me to stay any longer than necessary. Now would you please let me get dressed?” (Shah, 2018)*

The above passage from the novel shows that knowledge of any sort is dangerous for women. It might lead them to disastrous results and might cause them a huge disgraceful downfall under the social norms.

There is not only psychological colonization but at the same time there is also physical colonization of the women in the similar patriarchal sense. This novel refers to the ideas the bodies of the women in the strict physical sense don't belong to them. In fact, it seems they are the unwritten and undeclared properties of men. In this decolonized society of Green Land women are not only physically punished but killed even on petty issues. In this regard this novel is full of news and the events where women are brutally killed even on the small meaningless issues.

*“I want only to see darkness, but instead, my mind conjures up the image that Rupa, Lin, and I saw on this morning's info bulletin: a dead woman, lying on the floor of a nondescript house somewhere in Green City, her body picked out from the shadows by a ray of bright, unforgiving sunshine.” (Shah, 2018)*

This example is one in many that refers to the physical colonization of the women's bodies and shows that the master of their bodies are men and it is in their authority to treat their bodies as they choose to.

In this novel the role of man is of a colonizer who controls and masters the physical as well as the psychological life of a woman. In this novel a woman has more than one husbands, and all those husbands act as colonizing agents that control their life.

*“It is reported today, I repeat, today that a Wife has committed suicide in her home in Qanna neighborhood. She was found by her third Husband, who reported the event to the Agency. The*

*Agency immediately sealed off the area, but our sources tell us that the Wife committed suicide in a most criminal manner.” (Shah, 2018)*

The above passage shows that the women on the one hand are the properties of their husbands that may be more than one. This shows that there are many controlling hands that master the lives of women. These controlling hands are so much torturing in the physical and psychological sense that sometimes women cannot bear them and end their life. This way the most challenging thing for women is to survive in the face of physical as well as psychological tortures.

Furthermore, the life of woman is not in her hands. This is under the control of her husbands that decide her destiny.

*“Nurya Salem had five Husbands and was due to be married again to a sixth at the end of the month. It is suspected that she was opposed to the marriage, although this cannot be confirmed. Her children, five girls and two boys, have not been told about her actions. They will be taken to a care facility, informed of their mother’s death and treated for trauma before being returned to the house where the Wife lived with her Husbands. This particular family will be reassigned a Wife by the end of the month, along with compensation for the tragedy endured by them, by order of the Perpetuation Bureau.” (Shah, 2018)*

The above passage shows the domestic life of women who have too many controlling hands. Although she had five husbands, she was forced to go for one more that she was opposing and for which it seems she was killed.

In the social life of Green Land, the women are treated like any other inanimate property. They are treated like things and no more.

*“We do not consent to their conspiracy, first to decimate us, then to distribute those of us who remain among themselves as if we were cattle, or food.” (Shah, 2018)*

This example shows that women are treated like cattle or like food that is only used when there is need of it; like food is only needed when one is hungry. In the similar way women are needed when their need is felt, and when there is no need of women they are treated like trash and dumped away.

Moreover, this society where these women live has created huge wall around their sense of freedom. There is no safe place for them. Even a small act of freedom is considered an act of transgression and any act of transgression, however small it may be, there is strict punishment.

*“Then again, women like me are never meant to feel safe. We steal our freedom when and where we can. And I, the provider of peaceful sleep to these men who pay for something they can never*



*own, am destined to spend yet another sleepless night in my bed at the Panah. I never sleep; I keep vigil over my Clients, the men, while they dream.” (Shah, 2018)*

In this context, the above passage shows that on the one hand women have no freedom to choose their life, and, on the other hand, they exist only to serve men. They have not their own specific purpose in life; except that they are for the service of men. This way, this novel points to the idea that in the existential sense women have no separate meaning their life; whatever menacing they have it comes from man and it ends with man.

For example, the women in Panah are used to satisfy the sexual needs of men. They have to entrain men the whole night which means that they have to awake the whole night even when men are asleep they have to keep their eyes open because anytime man can reawaken and need to be entertained. This way, women suffer from the condition of insomnia; that is lack of sleep.

*“I am Morpheus; Insomnia is my ever-faithful lover. Maybe we’re crazy, or we’re criminals, like wretched Nurya Salem. But we know exactly what we are doing, and at what cost to ourselves.” (Shah, 2018)*

This passage shows that for women each action has some cost that they have to pay themselves.

The Green Land presents a society where rules already exist before any woman is born. These rule that may also be the norms already expect women to behave and to act in certain ways. They also put barrier into their thinking.

*“We’re told what to do, how to behave, even what to think, from the day we’re born. I’m not yet used to thinking for myself. The rules of the Panah provide a halfway house between the strictures of Green City and the complete freedom that exists in places I can’t even imagine.” (Shah, 2018)*

The women of Panah cannot think for themselves or with full freedom. There is no chance of complete mental freedom for these women and they can’t even imagine if there can be complete freedom. To them, the notion of complete freedom is non-existent and the freedom they have is the normal way of freedom; and nothing exists beyond.

Furthermore, the social norms that exist in Green Land require women to be absolutely loyal to their husbands; and deviation from this loyalty will be unacceptable.

*“Such things count for nothing in Green City; the only loyalty a woman’s supposed to have is to her Husbands. The only reason we’re allowed to grieve her death is because it’s the loss of another precious woman from this corrupt society. The ones who die should consider themselves lucky to be done with it for good.” (Shah, 2018).*

The above passage shows that the state of women is so much bad that even death is seen of a lucky act and something that does good to women and frees them from the repressive society.

## Findings and Conclusion

### Findings

Like the study of Zidan (2013) two types of colonization have been observed in *Before She Sleeps*. The first is physical colonization that is in its strict sense the spatial colonization as well, where the movement of women is restricted to certain specified area. Whereas the other colonization is psychological colonization where their thinking is repressed and they cannot think beyond. Further is psychology is colonized by the colonial and patriarchal system. Furthermore, like Bonet (n.d) suggests, there is double colonization of women in *Before She Sleeps*. On the one hand they are colonized by the system, language, authorities and social norms. On the other hand, there is also domestic colonization at the hand of husbands that may be termed as domestic colonizers. There is little difference between husband and the colonizers. It seems that at the domestic level husbands follow the colonial policies and apply them in their homes.

In the external or social colonization, the administration also acts as the colonizing agent. In this sense the Agency Men are the conspicuous colonizers and act as the patriarchal heads. In each act women have to keep these figures into their mind because all the time they are vigilant over them and record their movements and actions. Second, the administration uses the system of rules that may also be unwritten rules in the form of norms that women have to follow. These rules also add to the system of women colonization and these rules are ever prevalent, even in the absence of those who ensure their implementation. In the presence of these ever prevalent rules, women have to be careful, if they are violating these rules. This way they themselves keep check on their own activities in context of these rules. They themselves become the colonizer of their own activities and don't allow their own self to transgress the rule and norms.

In this regard another tool is ignorance that administration or society wants to keep them in. Any system that allows knowledge is resisted so that the women subject may live in utter ignorance and abide by the laws of repression without questioning them.

Apart from the physical colonization there is physical colonization as well in the sense that the bodies of women don't belong to them but to their colonizing master. It is in the hands of those masters that they can treat their bodies as they choose to. Then can even kill them on some petty issues. In this system of women colonization, the husband(s) act as the symbolic colonizers that control the bodies as well the mind of women. These two sides are under the authority of men and any transgression of this authority will be tantamount to act of transgression and will be liable for punishment.

## Conclusion

This research study comes to the conclusion that *Before She Sleeps* (2018) suggests that the state of women has not changed even after the decolonization. They are treated in the similar way as they were treated in the colonial period. Although, in the political sense them been decolonization but this removal of foreign colonizers is not much to effect to the life of women because although the colonizers are not present in the literal sense but their system of colonization still continues to exist and is as effective as it was in the colonial period. Further, the system of patriarchy as it was repressive in the colonial period is as repressive in the post-colonial period as well. The man is the same man as he was in the colonial period. In the similar way the system that repressed women in the colonial period in the domestic as well as in the social life continues to exist in the similar from and continues to repress women. Therefore, the system of decolonization did not bring any change in the life and status of women.

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