



## Panoptic Control and the Female Body: An Analysis of Oppressive Structures in *Before She Sleeps* by Bina Shah

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### Abstract

*This paper explores Bina Shah's Before She Sleeps, a dystopian novel that critiques the commodification and subjugation of women within a patriarchal society. Through a feminist lens and Michel Foucault's theories of discipline and resistance, the study examines how the novel portrays women as reproductive tools subjected to constant surveillance and control. It investigates the characters' transition from reluctant compliance to defiant resistance. The research underscores how Shah critiques patriarchal structures while portraying female empowerment amidst societal oppression. By analysing themes of commodification, control, and resistance, this study positions Before She Sleeps as a powerful critique of gendered exploitation and a testament to resilience and agency in dystopian fiction.*

**Keywords:** *Feminist lens, discipline, resistance, commodification, dystopian fiction*

### Introduction

The society we live in is patriarchal, with patriotic roots and ideals that significantly discriminate against women. Women experience oppression, the denial of even basic rights, and the stigma of being commodities, others, subalterns, or just reproductive machines. *Before She Sleeps* rose to prominence in contemporary literature due to its unique investigation of women's commercialisation, an issue that is inextricably linked to feminist discourse. Set in the aftermath of natural disasters and nuclear turmoil, the novel unfurls against the backdrop of Green City, a unique dystopian enclave situated within the South Asian context. This geographical departure from the Western-centric dystopian narratives introduces a fresh perspective, rendering the work particularly noteworthy in the literary landscape.

The novel is set in a dystopian future in which a virus has caused a gender imbalance, resulting in extreme commodification and control over women. Women in Green City are coerced into polygamous marriages as "second wives" to maximise reproduction, reducing them to mere tools for communal survival. Women serve as both objects and reproductive machinery in this context. However, the author's purpose is to give these women the understanding they need to recognise injustice, realise the value of self-reliance, and fight for their independence, demonstrating the power of literature as a harbinger of social change.

This paper examines two interconnected themes in the novel: the commodification of women and their journey from reluctance to rebellion. The first theme is analysed through a feminist lens, focusing on how women's bodies and roles are commodified in Green City. The second theme employs Michel Foucault's theories of power, discipline, and resistance to explore how female characters transition from compliance to rebellion. By combining these approaches, this paper offers a comprehensive understanding of Shah's critique of patriarchal systems and her portrayal of female agency. While feminist theory highlights the dehumanizing effects of commodification, Foucauldian analysis reveals the mechanisms of control and resistance that shape the characters' lives. Together, these approaches provide a holistic understanding of *Before She Sleeps* as a work of dystopian fiction and feminist critique.

Existing scholarship on *Before She Sleeps* has primarily focused on its dystopian elements and feminist themes. Critics have noted the novel's exploration of gender inequality and its parallels to real-world patriarchal systems. For example, scholars have drawn connections between the novel's portrayal of women's commodification and historical practices such as forced marriages and

reproductive control. However, few studies have combined feminist theory with Foucauldian analysis to examine the interplay between commodification and resistance. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Butler's concept of gender performativity highlights how societal norms enforce gendered behaviours, reinforcing women's subjugation. These ideas are particularly relevant to *Before She Sleeps*, where women are commodified and controlled through rigid gender roles.

This paper builds on these theoretical foundations to offer a new perspective on Shah's novel. By combining feminist and Foucauldian approaches, it addresses gaps in the existing literature and provides a more comprehensive analysis of the novel's themes.

## Theoretical Framework

Control and resistance are themes in dystopian fiction that are similar to utopian visions of the future, but they vary in their emphasis on the repercussions of failure. The central topic of dystopia is the clash between an individual's wishes and identities and the state's collective goals, which prohibit or annihilate any individual expression. Using Michel Foucault's concept of 'discipline' from *Discipline and Punish* (1979), it examines how totalitarian regimes exert control over citizens' bodies. Foucault's idea of 'Panopticism' reveals how societies subjugate and monitor individuals through constant surveillance.

The novel portrays how mental and physical autonomy are eroded, leading to complete domination by the state. A key theme is the psychological manipulation of children, who are raised with state-approved values to become compliant and industrious citizens. Shah highlights the state's ideological subjugation and the suppression of personal choice through the assertion that individuals and their children are treated as state property. The statement, "None of them knows whose daughter she is and three fathers aren't much better than one..." (Shah, 2018, p. 21) portrays the idea that people and their children are treated as state property in a dystopian society is explored in the novel. The novel also underscores the state's use of technology for surveillance and propaganda. Shah writes: "The Agency has made sure to publicise all crimes well in the Flashes on the display...even through door-to-door visits" (Shah, 2018, p. 9). This illustrates how fear and manipulation are perpetuated in Green City through constant monitoring and information control.

Resistance threatens the state by empowering individuals to express themselves, reflect critically, and challenge authority. In Green City's dystopian regime, where individuality is stifled and citizens are constantly monitored, acts of defiance become crucial. One such act is the creation of "Panah," an underground refuge formed by women who escaped state oppression. The term "Panah" originates from Persian, meaning refuge, symbolizing resilience and defiance. The creation of the "Panah" is a pivotal act of defiance against the totalitarian and patriarchal regime of Green City. Women in Panah reject societal norms, embracing autonomy and solidarity. As Shah (2018) notes, "The Panah was the only life she'd ever lived" (p. 200). Free from patriarchal control, these women establish a space governed by their own values. Panah becomes a transformative site, enabling women to rediscover themselves and recognize the contradictions within Green City's regime, ultimately challenging its oppressive foundations.

Another theme that the novel tries to explore is the commodification of women, where in the novel, characters like Sabine and Lin navigate a post-apocalyptic society where women have been commodified due to a gender-based crisis. The comparison to gold emphasizes their perceived worth, further illustrating the theme of objectification and the association of women's value with their external appearance. This text explores the dynamics among women in a confined environment shaped by shared experiences of commodification and strict societal expectations. Sabine initially desires to protest this commodification but realizes she must quietly strategize for survival: "I was burning to tell my father I wouldn't be sold like a slave... Something in me told me to rescue myself if my father was not going to help me" (Shah, 2020, p. 37). Her plea to escape the oppressive system reveals her desperation: "I don't want to be Wife to three or four or five men. I'm terrified. I know you don't know me, but I'm begging you to help me" (Shah, 2020, pp. 38-39).

Shah highlights the desperation of a young woman who is seeking to escape the predetermined roles and fate assigned to her by society. The plea for help and the willingness to do whatever it takes to

escape underline the sense of commodification and lack of agency that women like Sabine face within their society. The excerpt reflects how they are willing to sacrifice their own wishes and follow a new path to avoid being reduced to mere commodities. The women of the Panah become a rare source of emotional fulfilment for men, demonstrating the ways in which women's bodies and emotions have been commodified and exploited in their society. Sabine, the protagonist gives vent to her feelings poignantly:

A few months after my eighteenth birthday, Lin said I was finally ready for an assignation. Over the last year, she'd schooled me in all the security protocols for arrivals and departures... we're the only ones who can give it to them because there are so few of us left: free women, unattached to anyone else, our loyalties belonging to no one but the Panah... We let them believe that possessing one woman, just for a short while, is still possible in Green City, even though that kind of life went extinct the moment the bombs went off in the Final War. (pp. 43-44) The Panah offers a rare refuge where women reclaim autonomy. As free women unattached to the state's rigid control, they offer emotional solace to men in a society devoid of genuine connections. The novel portrays women's struggles against commodification, highlighting their resistance and the emotional toll it takes. The mention of women being placed on a "pedestal" underscores their manipulation under the guise of protection. Even Sabine's mother resists by feigning infertility, but her defiance results in betrayal and apparent suicide, revealing the harsh consequences of opposing the regime (Shah, 2020, p. 156). This narrative emphasizes the dehumanization of women as reproductive tools while showcasing their resilience and desire for autonomy amidst oppressive societal norms.

## Conclusion

Although, the patriarchal, totalitarian regime continuously threatens women's freedom to express their sexual differences and define themselves as they see fit. These women assert their autonomy and self-determination by offering companionship without sexual involvement, challenging societal predefined expectations. This act represents a departure from the prevailing assumption that women's primary purpose is to bear and raise children. The women's choice to offer non-sexual companionship goes beyond the individual realm, symbolising a larger ideological struggle against patriarchal constructs. Their defiance, though risky, highlights the possibility of reclaiming autonomy in a repressive society. Through this lens, Shah's novel critiques the intersection of technology, gender, and power, offering a poignant commentary on the consequences of state-imposed control.

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