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A Post-apocalyptic Study of Gendered Space in Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps*

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Original Article

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Abstract

Women's historical struggle against gender-based discrimination and subjugation has been marked by their resilience and determination to get freedom from oppressive norms. This study delimits Bina Shah's Before She Sleeps to examine the issue of gender discrimination. This novel portrays how government-imposed regulations subject women to unjust treatment, force them into polygamous marriages, and compel them to bear numerous children. Employing qualitative research methods, this study analyzes various components of the selected novel, including characters, settings, power dynamics of discourses, and contextualization of gender discrimination in a patriarchal system. Through a combination of descriptive analysis techniques and an extensive review of relevant literature, this research uncovers the multifaceted struggles for gender equality and women's empowerment, and hence, contributes to politically influenced gender disparities.

1. Introduction

Gender, a complex social construct extending beyond biological distinctions, plays a pivotal role in shaping our societal structures and systems. This very construct, while encompassing both men and women, becomes a harbinger of injustice and discrimination. These manifestations of gender-based discrimination range from the physical and psychological to the sexual, involving harm, coercion, threats, and the deprivation of essential liberties. It is this underlying theme of gender inequality that forms the core of this study's investigation. This study delves into the intricate web of gender disparities within a meticulously designed society and explores the resilience and resistance in postapocalyptic literature. Bina Shah's novel, *Before She Sleeps* (2018), sets the stage in a dystopian realm known as Green City, a nation grappling with the stark consequences of a gender-skewed virus. This virus disproportionately affects women, leading to imbalances that necessitate a drastic government response. To address the crisis, the government imposes polyandrous marriages on women, mandating them to bear as many offspring as possible. The protagonist, Sabine, emerges as a symbol of defiance, challenging these oppressive norms by concealing her identity and pursuing freedom from the repressive forces that seek to control her.

2. Literature Review

Postmodern fiction in the late 20th century is intricately tied to the complex tapestry of history, notably, to the turbulent aftermath of the Second World War. In *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War* (2011), Daniel Grausam says, that postmodern literature emerges as a nuanced response to the defining events of the modern era. These nuances include the looming specter of the Cold War, which proliferated the nuclear arsenals, and the cataclysmic potential of their use. Grausam () posits that postmodern fiction provides a distinctive lens through which authors of the postwar period navigate a world and society irrevocably shaped by the horrors of global conflict. They serve as a means for them to engage in contemplation and critique, navigating the tumultuous waters of an uncertain future born from the specter of nuclear warfare. This concept harmonizes with Linda Hutcheon's notion of "historiographic metafiction," emphasizing that postmodern narratives actively participate in the exploration and portrayal of contemporary history, especially concerning historical time and the ever-elusive concept of futurity.

Grausam's examination also adopts a historical perspective, positioning postmodern fiction as a response to the profound shifts in perceptions of space, time, and futurity ushered in by the Cold War. This perspective aligns with Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction, even though it appears to diverge from Fredric Jameson's viewpoint that postmodern narratives remain disinterested in history or, at best, reduce it to depoliticized pastiche or nostalgic reverie. Both Jameson and Hutcheon, despite their differences, converge in acknowledging the intricate relationship postmodern fiction shares with history and its manifold representations. This insight casts postmodernism in a significant role, particularly within the post-apocalyptic genre, which mirrors the outlook of both Hutcheon and Jameson concerning postmodernism and its interplay with history.

In this genre, postmodernism serves as a dynamic force, offering nuanced ways of reflecting the profound impact of the Cold War on society's perception of space, time, and futurity. Grausam's historical analysis reinforces the position of post-war postmodern fiction as an answer to the altered understanding of these critical elements, brought about by the nuclear age and the omnipresent fear of total nuclear warfare during the Cold War. His perspective aligns with Hutcheon's portrayal of postmodern fiction as historiographic metafiction, distinct from Jameson's view of postmodern narratives as disinterested in history.

Grausam argues the pervasive theme of the unknowable future and the profound dread cast by the looming threat of instantaneous annihilation during the Cold War. This ominous backdrop underscores the intricate relationship postmodern fiction shares with the concept of reference, echoing the profound connection between this literary form and the uncertain horizon brought about by the looming specter of nuclear warfare. In his exploration, Grausam delves into the dichotomy between realist and postmodern fiction, a topic that has ignited fervent debates within literary circles. The contrast is stark, with some regarding postmodernism as a potent and resourceful narrative mode and others branding it as hopelessly self-indulgent. In contrast, realist fiction is often seen as a conduit for exploring possibilities or even as evidence of creative inadequacy. In response to this duality, Grausam contends that postmodern fiction does not evade these questions; instead, it offers a distinctive pathway to engage with and decipher the multifaceted tapestry of recent history.

3. Research Methodology

To establish a coherent research methodology, this study begins with a theoretical foundation, delving into Henri Lefebvre's seminal work *The Production of Space* (1991). Lefebvre's exploration of spatial concepts is essential to understanding the multifaceted nature of both physical and social spaces, forming the bedrock of this research. Lefebvre's distinction between physical and social space is a fundamental concept underpinning this study. Physical space, viewed as a divine

creation, encompasses practical and sensory activities, as well as our perceptions of the natural world (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 27). In contrast, social space transcends the constraints of physicality; it is a dynamic entity that accommodates new actions and the presence of others. Social space, as described by Lefebvre, remains indeterminate, shaped by various social forces, evolving over time, and adapting to changing environments and circumstances. It also plays a crucial role in governing social roles related to production and reproduction.

Lefebvre's spatial triad, consisting of spatial practice, the representation of space, and spaces of representation, provides a conceptual framework for this research. This triad explores the multifaceted nature of space across three distinct dimensions: physical, mental, and social. Space, in this context, emerges as a product of interactive gestures and moments resulting from the coexistence and amalgamation of diverse elements. The first facet, spatial practice, relates to the tangible, physical dimension of space, encompassing everyday activities and sensory experiences associated with it. It represents the embodiment of space in practical terms and is closely intertwined with nature (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 27). The second facet, conceived space, delves into the mental and symbolic realm. It originates from mental images, maps, drawings, and designs. Conceived space is "imbued with ideology and information" and relies on signs and codes for organization and formation (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 41). It serves as a bridge between the physical and symbolic dimensions, significantly influencing our perception and comprehension of space. The final facet, perceived space, explores how individuals perceive space. It encompasses the spatial arrangements and locations characterizing various social formations. Perceived space is a dynamic interplay between mental representations of space and the practical aspects of daily life. City authorities, planners, and individuals collectively contribute to this aspect of space, converting abstract mental conceptions into lived experiences (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33).

Shah's work also converges on Michel Foucault's (1967) concept of heterotopia, offering a profound insight into the dynamics of postmodern spatial resistance under non-hegemonic conditions. Heterotopia, as hypothesized by Foucault, embodies the characteristics of spaces that challenge dominant norms and offer an alternative vision. Through the acts of spatial resistance portrayed in the narrative, this study delves into the subversive potential of spatial dynamics.

4. Text Analysis

The story unfolds in Green City, a nation characterized by a dichotomy of stringent rules and rapid progress. In Green City, stark social disparities cast a long shadow, creating a substantial gap between the privileged and the underprivileged (Shah, 2018). The impoverished are compelled to toil harder than their affluent counterparts to attain leadership positions. It is here, under the umbrella of Michel Foucault's concept of power, that the government extends its influence into virtually every facet of community life: this includes the regulation of marriage and sexual affairs, making the far-reaching impact of power evident, as it permeates every nook and cranny of Green City's society (Shah, 2018).

This state of affairs extends to the realm of gender-based violence, encompassing physical, mental, and sexual harm, coercion, and the deprivation of liberty, as per Kalibonso's (2006) definition. Discrimination is not only a direct affront but also permeates through various media channels. The establishment of television stations dedicated to instructing women in the art of homemaking underscores the persistent gender discrimination. Even after completing their secondary education, women are mandated to undertake household-related classes, while their male counterparts are exempt, being prepared for influential roles. This narrative underscores the limited choices and opportunities available to women, emphasizing the entrenched reality of their daily struggles. "Gender Emergency" becomes the embodiment of the gender imbalance caused by a virus that disproportionately affects women. As Shah (2018) argues: "Obedience becomes a Green City hallmark by the time the Gender Emergency had come about" (p.13). Faced with a dwindling female population, the government imposes regulations that significantly burden women,

positioning them as victims of dire circumstances. Women who enter polyandrous unions are subjected to an unending cycle of pregnancies, exemplifying how gender disparity is the driving force behind gender discrimination.

Under the oppressive weight of these pressures, the central character embarks on a quest for asylum in Panah, a women's shelter that boldly defies the Bureau's regulations, particularly those adjacent to marriage (Shah, 2018). This sanctuary remains elusive to the prying eyes of the Bureau, serving as a silent witness to women's resolute defiance against the system and their unyielding assertion of their right to self-determination. Within the confines of Panah, its residents employ illicit trade to secure essential provisions, leading to a life of constrained conditions as a form of resistance. The protagonist takes a bold stand against the state's structure by making her escape and supporting herself by accompanying educated men of influence during their sleep, all the while ensuring she remains undetected (Shah, 2018). This narrative underscores the profound significance of power in knowledge and unveils the intricate interplay between the two elements.

The adverse impact of the system is not limited to women alone. Men, too, suffer as they yearn for the undivided affection of a single partner. This desire drives some men to challenge the system, prompting them to cast aside their roles in law enforcement to become protectors and rebels. The women of Panah go about their tasks without forging emotional or sexual attachments, as their collective aim is to evade the shackles of a system that seeks to pigeonhole them into roles of childbearing and servitude to multiple husbands. The characters' harrowing experience of gender discrimination is inexorably linked to the gender gap that plagues the nation. This chasm serves as the wellspring from which their mistreatment within the government-crafted system, which mercilessly strips her of her fundamental rights and robs her of the agency to choose her own destiny, flows (Shah, 2018).

The selected text weaves a tapestry of political undertones, laying bare the patriarchal edifice erected to stimulate population growth. The deeply entrenched patriarchy remains the chief architect of gender discrimination, wielding its influence to stifle the rightful aspirations and ambitions of women. In her unwavering quest for emancipation, the protagonist of the novel mounts her resistance by breaking free from the shackles of the oppressive system (Shah, 2018). This act underscores that the dismantling of such deeply ingrained structures cannot be achieved through mere acts of defiance. The omnipotent figures of authority, ensconced in their positions, are all too ready to quash those who dare challenge the established order. Recognizing this harsh reality, the protagonist opts for a different path. Instead of confrontation she eludes the watchful gaze of the powerful and vanishes into the shadows as if they were mere ghosts of her past (Shah, 2018). This strategy underscores the palpable urgency of her struggle for autonomy and the lengths she is willing to traverse to attain it. This unyielding gender-based discrimination lies in the tenacious patriarchal ideology that renders the women's rights movement toothless and falsely purports that it is the women alone who can rectify the problems that afflict Green City.

Henri Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad encapsulates the intricate interrelationships between physical, mental, and social spaces. It offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing spatial concepts within various contexts of the delimitation of *Before She Sleeps* (2018). These theoretical foundations examine and interpret specific cases and scenarios, unveiling the interaction between different spatial dimensions. This textual analysis of *Before She Sleeps* (2018), with a central focus on the leitmotif of spatial resistance, immerses readers in a postmodern urban dystopia where the manipulation of space by authoritarian forces reigns supreme. To understand this exploration of space as an arena for resistance, Shah initiates her analysis by venturing into the realm of spatial production. The blatant manipulation of urban spaces, orchestrated by the authoritative regime to facilitate the dictatorial objectives helps understand the multifaceted role of space in shaping social

dynamics. These spaces serve as instruments for the execution of totalitarian strategies, reflecting the power dynamics that define this dystopian world.

This study delves into the oppressive urban landscapes governed by the ruling powers. Through the portrayal of a South Asian city in her narrative, Shah encapsulates the essence of these power dynamics. The modern and aesthetic Southwest Asian city stands in stark contrast to the dystopian undercurrents that define the social space. The emergence of a dystopia characterized by class segregation, the imposition of draconian laws, and the utilization of terror and technology underscores the disorder and injustice that pervade the post-pandemic society, emphasizing the juxtaposition of the privileged elites of Green City with the oppressed victims of the prevailing unjust system. In this oppressive regime, the protagonist, Sabine, emerges as a symbol of defiance and resilience. Overcoming childhood trauma and an unwavering determination to defy societal norms, she embarks on a courageous journey to escape Green City (Shah, 2018). She aims to rebuild her life in the company of like-minded women who share her aspirations for freedom and autonomy. Sabine's tumultuous journey navigates the labyrinth of gender-based discrimination, illuminating the multifaceted forms within the post-pandemic society (Shah, 2018). Sabine's experiences serve as a poignant illustration of the challenges she and countless others face. Deprived of education and confined to the role of a dutiful housewife, obligated to manage a cluster of husbands and bear as many children as possible, Sabine is entrapped by a system designed to perpetuate her oppression. Her resistance and escape from these circumstances drive her to explore the intricate dynamics of gender injustice within a constructed world. The characters in Shah's work – Julien, Sabine, Lin, and Bouthain – emerge as agents of change, defying the prevailing order and nurturing dreams of constructing a society founded on principles of freedom, peace, and love. This space of resistance serves as a beacon of hope, challenging the established norms and presenting an alternative path to societal emancipation. *Before She Sleeps* (2018) places the character Sabine at the center of a profound conflict. Physiologically, Sabine is described as a woman with dark hair and smooth skin, yet her depiction goes beyond the physical. Sociologically, she belongs to an affluent family, a fact evident through her father's unwavering efforts to secure her future (Shah, 2018).

4.1 Postmodern Urban Dystopia

Jeffery L. Hicks' characterization of the Lefebvrian spatial triad as an urban dystopia provides a compelling framework for understanding the complex world of *Before She Sleeps*. Concerning Bina Shah's novel, this study portrays a strict categorization, fragmentation, and manipulation of urban space. Hicks (2014) posits that literature after the early twentieth century began to reject the utopian ideals that once prevailed and instead turned its focus toward exploring the "darker underside" of postmodern urban spaces (p. 2). This narrative shift aligns with the genre of urban dystopia, which critiques the domination and ownership of urban space while delving into social, cultural, and political issues with the intent of catalyzing positive change (Hicks, 2014). Classism, inequality, and prejudice ferment a bubbling cauldron of aggression, rebellion, and resistance. The dystopian lens, as Hicks suggests, seeks to expose the multifaceted problems besetting nations and diverse groups in the hope of instigating transformation (Hicks, 2014).

Before She Sleeps is narrated by Ilona Serfati, and the story unfolds in Green City, a city in Southwest Asia set almost half a century ago. It is a place marked by the residual effects of a chemical explosion and the aftermath of a devastating nuclear conflict. To reinstate a semblance of order, Green City adopts stringent measures in response to the chaos and illusion that have ensued. The "Emergency Years" witnessed the emergence of a hallmark: "Obedience becomes a Green City hallmark by the time the Gender Emergency had come about" (Shah, 2018). The dwindling population of women renders them the most endangered species, forced to exist under draconian conditions. They are coerced into a role devoid of spontaneity, compelled to prioritize procreation above all else, serving as incubators to replenish the population in times of crisis.

The 'Perpetuation Bureau oversees the enforcement of rigid, military-style rules, primarily targeting women. Their sole objective is to revive the nation through rapid reproduction, and the authorities are ruthless in maintaining control. The slightest infraction by women leads to swift termination, as the Bureau values compliance above all else ((Shah, 2018). Even men are not exempt from this draconian regime, with their leisure time, marriages, working hours, and plans all subject to manipulation. Surveillance is pervasive, extending to drone cameras, robots, and bugs monitoring their movements in public spaces. Life for women, however, is marked by even harsher conditions. The official Handbook for Female Citizens becomes an integral part of the school curriculum, and women are compelled to memorize it. Friendships, even among women, are strictly forbidden, and multiple marriages are imposed by the Bureau, sealing off any prospects of escape with tightly controlled borders. The despair becomes irresistible, leading some women to choose suicide as the only escape from a life of indignity, disrespect, and the torment of multiple husbands ((Shah, 2018).

The lack of security and freedom in Green City drives women to take their own lives. The Agency leaves them feeling suffocated, with the curtailment of their freedom of thought. Tragically, the lifeless bodies of those who succumb to this overwhelming despair are publicly displayed, serving as a haunting reminder of the authorities' unrelenting control over the city and its inhabitants. This bleak and unlawful dominance over the urban space squarely fits the idea of "urban dystopia" (Hicks, 2014, p. 7). The stark contrast between the privileged and the oppressed, the restrictions on freedom, and the brutal enforcement of policies paint a vivid picture of a dystopian world where the few powerful reign over the downtrodden masses.

As the third phase of Lefebvre's spatial triad suggests, the residents of Green City experience a deep sense of alienation and a rift within their society. This inequality is manifest in policies that discourage interaction among those suffering from poverty, including a prohibition on girls befriending or even talking to one another. Lefebvre's framework provides a powerful lens through which to comprehend how Green City serves as the breeding ground for an abstract space firmly rooted in contemporary capitalism. It is a space that thrives on difference and heterogeneity, marking clear boundaries that segregate various segments of society. This division ultimately shatters the integrity of both the individual and the social body, as well as the corpus of knowledge (Lefebvre, 1991).

Both Lefebvre and Foucault concur that urban space, particularly in the context of Green City, is never neutral. Lefebvre argues that space is not just an empty container but an active force that shapes the future. It is wielded as a potent tool in the hands of the wealthy elite who manipulate the very ideology of the marginalized to further their own interests. This manipulation of space, under the influence of the Agency and the Bureau, creates a profound dissonance in the city, a vivid reflection of the larger societal issues at play in *Before She Sleeps*.

4.2 Spatial Resistance and Postmodern Urban Space

In *Before She Sleeps*, Bina Shah illustrates how the manipulation of urban space directly impacts the lives of the city's residents. In this dystopian setting of Green City, two authoritative entities, the 'Agency' and the 'Bureau,' wield tremendous control over the citizens, orchestrating every facet of their existence. Nowhere is this power more evident than in Shifana Hospital, a microcosm of the wider city. Within its sterile walls, the Agency's watchful eye scrutinizes and meticulously documents every minute detail of patients' lives, leaving no aspect, no matter how minor, to escape its all-encompassing gaze. From the surgical chambers to the medications, needles, and bandages, nothing is beyond the reach of their surveillance. Even the medical professionals, the doctors themselves, are mere pawns in this orchestrated chess game. They are unable to diagnose or prescribe treatments without first obtaining the imprimatur of the authorities.

Green City's population is irrevocably divided into two strata: the privileged and the underprivileged. As Shah states: 'The Green City survived on hierarchies' (Shah, 2018). This division establishes a stark binary where the powerful and the powerless are in constant juxtaposition. One segment describes how the privileges revel in the city, the other describes how the deprived languish, burdened by the system's inequities. This division is encapsulated in Joseph's dismissive assurance to Sabine when confronted with the fear of police intervention: "Nothing is going to happen to you or me if you know me" (Shah, 2018, p. 6). Reuben, another influential figure within the Agency, underscores this duality: "I can afford to be confident" (Shah, 2018, p. 38). As a prosperous tax businessman, Joseph's life is one of opulence, a stark contrast to the grim existence of those in the underprivileged class. He acts as both guardian and consumer of the possessions of others, living a life of extravagance that remains a mere dream for many. About his indulgences he coldly retorts: "There is nothing in this city that is not available to me" (Shah, 2018, p. 85), highlighting the gaping chasm between the privileged and the deprived. Sabine's own experience as she gains admission to a multi-story hospital further exposes this divide. She marvels at the towering skyscrapers that house the city's elite, and it dawns upon her that these edifices are reserved for the affluent and influential. The remaining populace remains confined to the lowlands, figuratively crawling near the earth (Shah, 2018). This stratification is not limited to geography; it seeps into the very mindset of the privileged class that looks down upon those below as insignificant insects.

Before She Sleeps propels the discourse on space into a new dimension, using its evocative narrative to underscore the pivotal role space plays in the complex interplay between power and human existence. By utilizing Lefebvrian spatial theory, Shah demystifies the illusion of free and open city spaces, revealing the clandestine machinations of those in power. In doing so, she adds her voice to the ongoing dialogue about the transformative nature of space, urging us to view the urban landscape not merely as a backdrop but as an active force that can either liberate or oppress. Shah's novel thus stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of spatial theory in understanding our modern world. In the case of the Green City, this manipulation of space and the lives of its inhabitants is starkly evident. The government and its enforcers, the Agency, have drawn a tight net of control over the lives, movements, and actions of the city's denizens. This suffocating grip extends to the prohibition of friendships among women, the curtailment of freedom of thought, and the meticulous engineering of marriages. Women are mandated to marry multiple husbands, with the explicit purpose of repopulating the city. These callous measures, imposed with unwavering ruthlessness, eventually transmute the city into an urban dystopia (Hicks, 2014). Through the portrayal of the Green City's governance, Shah's work serves as a poignant reminder of the oppressive nature of power, etching a vivid narrative of its ramifications on the lives of the city's residents.

5. Conclusion

In postmodern literature, the discourse on space ignites fresh contemplation regarding its profound influence on individual lives. Spatial concepts and ideas continue to captivate our modern sensibilities and it is within this intricate web of spatial dynamics that Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018), wades, diving deep into the significance of spatial paradigms and raising thought-provoking questions about physical space. Various scholars have ventured into the multidimensional exploration of space and its impact on human existence, it is notable that Foucault's theory of heterotopia has not enjoyed the widespread attention it truly deserves among researchers. In this context, Shah's novel steps in as a beacon, seeking to bridge the existing gap and proffering a distinct perspective. Shah also employs a Lefebvrian spatial framework to construct a vivid portrayal of a postmodern city. The interplay between perceived space, conceived space, and lived space, coupled with the deliberate fragmentation and construction of urban landscapes, forms the sturdy foundation of Lefebvrian spatial theory. Shah's exploration, at its core, underscores a pivotal conclusion - city spaces are not inherently free, open, and unbiased

canvases one might imagine. Rather, they serve as malleable clay in the hands of those in power - the government, officials, legislators, and the privileged elite - shaping and controlling the future of their citizenry through tools of exploitation cleverly veiled as laws. These laws, cloaked in sacrosanctity, frequently bear down on the vulnerable while safeguarding the vested interests of the powerful.

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