



RESEARCH PAPER

Beyond Biological Determinism: A Comparative Study of Female Situated Identity in Plath's *The Bell Jar* And Shah's *Before She Sleeps*

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ABSTRACT

The scholarly article presents a feminist inquiry to examine how the medical and biological sciences have shaped the experiences of women in Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Shah's *Before She Sleeps*. Feminist theorists of medicine argue that considering men independent due to their bodily anatomy is the one side of the coin. Women should not be defined on the basis of their biological functioning and gender. They argue that such a framework ignores the importance of culture, knowledge, geography, and power relations. To support the analysis, the study draws upon Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledge where she questions deterministic and universal claims of traditional science. Haraway proposes a feminist model of knowledge that values situated knowledge which states that meaning is produced from a specific culture, history, and social standpoints in which an entity resides. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood's encounter with psychiatric institutions exposes how women's emotional and intellectual struggles are pathologized under the guise of medical authority. Dr. Gordon carries out electric shock therapy which is devoid of understanding of Esther's personal and social context. In contrast, Dr. Nolan, who is a female psychiatrist, approaches Esther's condition with empathy and care. Similarly, in *Before She Sleeps*, Shah envisions a dystopian society where women are reduced to their reproductive functions by medical and political powers. The only purpose of women in the Green City is to produce children to maintain the population but this causes extreme distress and psychosis in women. On the other hand, the women of Panah resist this reductionist logic by creating a community that values autonomy, solidarity, and acknowledgement of personal histories.

KEYWORDS

Feminism, Medical Humanities, Biological Determinism, South Asian Literature, American Literature

Introduction

The gender roles in Pakistan have been carried out through a biological or nature based lens because here men are seen as naturally dominant, rational, and suited for public life. On the other hand, women are viewed as emotional, nurturing, and confined to domestic spaces. However feminist movements and academics challenge this view. But history suppresses women as Mishra (2018) observes, the Greek philosopher Plato advocates for equal social roles for men and women in the ideal state except where physical strength is required (Mishra, 2018, p 188). Therefore, Plato's stance normalizes nature argument in relation to nurture.

In the 18th century, authors like Edward Clarke persisted with this essential view. In his book *Sex and Education* (1873) Clarke opposes women's admission to Harvard

University and claims that intellectual labor damages their reproductive health. He pathologized women's ambitions by citing cases of female graduates with "underdeveloped ovaries" who "were sterile" (Clarke, 1873, p. 39). Such assertions linked women's worth to biological function. Even in contemporary society, remnants of biological determinism persist in public and political discourse. During the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, Donald Trump remarked that Hilary Clinton lacked the physical "look" and "stamina" to be the President (BBC News, 2019). This rhetoric reflects that men's masculinity is associated with leadership, rationality, and strength. On the other hand, femininity is reflected with weakness, misogyny and irrationality. Therefore, in order to talk about women and their biological functioning, one needs to look at women's problems from a feminist theorist point of view.

One of the novels discussed in the article is *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath. She remains as one of the most influential American poets, novelists, and short-story writers of the twentieth century who is celebrated for her emotional intensity and confessional literature. Through her protagonist Esther Greenwood, Plath illustrates the impact of cultural pressures, and biomedical authority on young women's mental health. In the novel, Esther's depression, therefore, is not approached as a response to existential conflict and societal constraint but is instead medicalized and treated through impersonal interventions. Betty Friedan's landmark text *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) shows this critique by stating the problem that has no name because there was a widespread psychological dissatisfaction experienced by American women in the 1950s. Friedan observes that "each suburban wife" suffered in silence as cultural experts instructed them "how to catch a man", and "how to breastfeed children" and insisted that real feminine women "do not want careers" (Friedan, 1963, pp. 15-16).

Bina Shah is a distinguished Pakistani author and columnist as her work is marked by Pakistani feminist lens. Over the years, she has authored six novels, each exploring themes of gender, identity, and power. Her dystopian novel *Before She Sleeps* (2018) stands as one of her most notable contributions to contemporary feminist literature. The plot of the novel is set in the dystopian future of Green City that imagines a society devastated by nuclear warfare and a catastrophic pandemic that results in a huge gender imbalance. Men are vastly outnumbering women, the state responds by creating the authoritarian Perpetuate Bureau which is a regime that enforces strict reproductive policies. By using mechanisms of biometric surveillance, clinical experimentation, forced hormonal treatments, and reproductive assignments, women are compelled to bear children for multiple government-selected partners. Shah, in her recent column in the Dawn presents a very fresh perspective of women and their roles in the present time Pakistan. She argues that gender debates have entered a new phase where television dramas, YouTube, Tiktok play a vital role in shaping minds. She points out that recent dramas like Jama Taqseem courageously expose the emotional complexities of Pakistani marriages and the suffocating system of joint family. Moreover, dramas like Case No. 9 show the failures of prosecuting sexual abuse (Shah, 2025). All these instances reflect that people in Pakistan are very well aware of these ideas, but they are too afraid to discuss them as their tradition doesn't allow them to move beyond their past and accept changes.

Literature Review

Biological determinism rests on the assumption that human identity is shaped by evolutionary processes. However, in literature, a shift emerges with figures like Henrik Ibsen who portrays a powerful female character Hedda Gabler; she is a symbol of assertiveness and agency. Eventually many female writers such as Aphra Behn and

Virginia Woolf played a foundational role to depict the female characters with subjectivity. In the South Asian context, Pakistani literature in English began taking shape before and during the partition era. Writers such as Bapsi Sidhwa foregrounded women's struggles in fraught sociopolitical environments. The first wave of feminism originated from the struggle of women's suffrage and the demand for political and voting rights. Alongside political activism, feminist thought was developed through intellectual works such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft wrote this work in response to philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who wrote *Emile* (1762) to dismiss women by arguing that women's only purpose is to serve and please men. Therefore, Elizabeth Blackwell in her essay *An Appeal on Behalf of the Medical Education for Women* (1856) suggests that male doctors neither fully comprehend women's health concerns nor possess the ability to address them because they would be "quite unable to supply them" (Blackwell, 1856, p. 6). Moreover, Virginia Woolf's influential essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), highlights the importance of creative space for women in order to produce intellectual work. Woolf noted that without proper physical and mental nourishment, an individual can't "think well, love well, and sleep well" (Woolf, 1929, p. 12). Second-wave feminism expanded the objectives of the first wave by moving beyond legal and political equalities. The intellectual roots of second-wave feminism can also be traced back to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) in which she challenges the idea that womanhood is a natural or biological destiny. On the other hand, she asserts that one is not born a woman but "rather becomes one" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 330). By the late 1980s, many commentators proclaimed that feminism has accomplished its mission but writers such as Rebecca Walker crystallized the third wave of feminism. In her 1992 essay, Rebecca Walker declared herself part of a "third wave" (Walker, 1992, p. 3). She wanted to evolve the concept of feminism by taking it beyond traditional struggles. Furthermore, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler argues that "gender is always a doing" (Butler, 1999, p. 33). Lastly, by the early 2010s, a fourth wave of feminism began to emerge which is led by Millennials and Generation Z and it is characterized by digital activism and hashtag campaigns. Moreover, the fourth wave of feminism expands into multiple strands of feminist theorists such as ecofeminism and black feminism etc.

In American literature, Sylvia Plath remains a central figure in feminist literary circles. Her selected work *The Bell Jar* (1963) has been a part of the discussion for many years. Shae Kirkus et al. (2022) interpret the novel through the framework of femininity as disability. They argue that these identities are represented as "abnormal" or undesirable not because of inherent deficiencies but due to restrictive cultural definitions of normality (Shae et al., 2022, p. 18). Using a psychoanalytic approach, Lina Bendris (2022) argues that Esther Greenwood's psychological breakdown arises not from cultural forces but from cultural forces that constrain women's identities (Bendris, 2022, p. 38). However, her studies narrows its focus to the theme of madness and overlooks the personal development, decisions-making and life circumstances that are equally important. Furthermore, Laura Anderson offers a comparative literary analysis of Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and covers the socio-political climate of Cold War America. She reveals how both characters grapple with "doubleness", a fractured sense of self and uses the theoretical framework of W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of Double Consciousness and Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. Through this lens, she contends that the protagonist experiences "identity crossroads," a condition in which they just negotiate multiple identities (Anderson, 2023, p. 2). Similarly, Yōko Sakane's comparative study of Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Takako Tanahashi's *Congruent Figure* (1971) examines how writers from distinct cultural backgrounds engage with themes of selfhood, motherhood, and womanhood (Sakane, 1998). Although the novel has generated

extensive scholarship on trauma, depression, and post colonial themes, the novel's critique of biological determinism remains untouched. Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018) resonates strongly with real-world histories of South Asia where political instability, military regimes, and patriarchal structures have instrumentalised women's bodies for ideological and institutional gain. Naseem et al. (2023) identifies the presence of "polyandry and pain in women" as central debate of the text (Naseem et al, 2023, p. 842). Their analysis is mainly guided by the theoretical framework of scholars such as Tiwari, Goldstein, and Peter to argue that Green City simultaneously marginalizes and commodifies women. Clare Chambers and Freya Lowden (2022) argue that the novel depicts a dystopian society shaped by severe gender imbalances and the commodification of women's intimacy. According to them, the novel portrays a world governed by misogyny and an obsessive fixation on fertility which compels women to develop forms of "rebellion" against the systems of control (Chambers & Lowden, 2022, p. 1). These scholarly works give a diverse perspective, but the role of biological determinism remains unexplored with respect to the selected novels.

Theoretical Framework

Donna Haraway opens her essay *The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1988) by affirming that feminist scholarship has questioned the traditional ideals of scientific objectivity. She critically views the dualism of male/female where the "imagined 'they'" are granted epistemic privilege by virtue of being neutral observer and male scientists while the "imagined 'we'" are denied objectivity because of their bodies and biological roles and treated as "inevitably disqualifying and polluting bias" (p. 575). Furthermore, she notes that during the Reagan era, feminist scholars and other marginalized groups were seen as special-interest groups who were driven by narrow subjective concerns.

Haraway discusses the 1980s computer-generated character Max Headroom who is an example of objectivity because he exists without a body. Similarly, in medical practice patients are mere entities to be diagnosed or repaired, and they aren't seen as individuals with social, historical, and personal contexts. Moreover, to explain the same point further, she draws on social constructionist perspective and asserts that science doesn't merely uncover pre-existing facts; rather it's also shaped by cultural values, political interests, and linguistic structures. Scientific objectivity has been a universally valid method for producing truth and shaping narratives. Feminists on the other hand have contested this view by arguing that even objective knowledge is cultural and political. It includes patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, colonialism, and capitalism which shapes not only what counts as truth but also whose voices are granted legitimacy.

Donna Haraway argues that scientific knowledge is always entangled in a web of power, authority, and persuasion. According to Haraway, science functions as a "rhetoric" and consists of "efforts to persuade relevant social actors," (p.577). In contrast, she gives the example of a new kind of feminism that gives importance to bodies by saying that bodies are real and consequential. Therefore, she rejects biological determinism that reduces identity and destiny to biology alone. She supports Sandra Harding's notion of "successor science", a reconfigured scientific practice that is ethical, contextual and attentive to positionality (p.579). She also rejects totalizing theories that claim universality and imagines "earthwide connections," a web of partial, situated knowledge capable of connecting across boundaries through translation, connections, and accountability (p.580). Such knowledge is unequal in power but can build meaningful alliances and reveal how scientific discourses have built universalism to silence women.

Haraway questions the dominant assumption that science can observe the world with complete clarity and without bias. She named this assumption god-trick which means that scientific knowledge can be produced from a position that is simultaneously nowhere and everywhere. This vision of knowledge conceals its own location and power by presenting itself as universal, detached, and all-knowing. Therefore Haraway searches for a kind of vision that is non-dominating and accountable. In contrast with god-trick, Haraway suggests a kind of situated vision that emerges from a specific subject, in a particular location, shaped by historical, cultural, and political conditions. Haraway calls for "feminist objectivity" which simply means "situated knowledge" because knowledge is shaped by the subject's position in the world (p. 581). Furthermore, she argues that marginalized and oppressed groups have more honest insights into systems of power, because they have lived experiences. Haraway suggests that if science claims to produce universal knowledge then it must include all people for experiments and trials regardless of gender.

Results and Discussion

Biological determinism refers to the belief that women's roles and identities are naturally fixed due to their biology. This kind of ideology doesn't take into account the individual experiences of women. Therefore the texts reconstruct women's identity.

Reconstruction of Women's Identity in *The Bell Jar* (1963)

In *The Bell Jar* (1963), Sylvia Plath reconstructs women's identities by resisting biological determinism. The novel is set in 1950s America which is a period dominated by conservative and patriarchal ideals where women are expected to own purity, chastity, and domesticity. In that time period, marriage and motherhood are presented as the indication of fulfilment. Plath reconstructs this through the character of Esther Greenwood who has intellect and creative ambition. Esther is academically gifted and selected for a prestigious internship in New York City, but she experiences alienation due to the narrow futures available to women. On top of that, she is labeled neurotic by the male dominant figures such as Jay Cee and Buddy Willard. Consequently, she internalizes the label and remarks that she is indeed "neurotic as hell" (Plath, 1963, p. 84). Furthermore, Plath criticizes representations of femininity through Esther's reflection on 1950s cinema. Popular films of the era reward virginal women with happiness but punish sexually autonomous women. The same logic doesn't apply to men because Buddy Willard values chastity in women despite his own sexual experiences. Therefore, when Esther learns of Buddy's hypocrisy, she maintains distance herself from him which is a form of resistance. Moreover, Esther exposes the logic that after being married, women are "brainwashed" into becoming "numb as a slave" in a totalitarian social order (p. 76). Even though marriage should offer fulfillment, it emerges as a mechanism that erases women's ambition and urges them towards submission and domestic labor. The character of Mrs. Willard is a depiction of this erasure. She is well-educated but her value is measured through her service to her husband and family. Moreover, under Dr. In Gordon's care, Esther goes through electroconvulsive therapy which is administered without explanation and empathy. This reflects a psychiatric model that treats women's suffering as a biological defect to be corrected. In contrast, Dr. Nolan gives treatment based on an ethical process which embodies feminist objectivity. Spatial dynamics also contribute to Esther's alienation. The critique of biological determinism reaches to its best during Esther's suicidal crisis when she realizes that what she wants to destroy is not her body but something "somewhere else, deeper, more secret" (p. 133). Similarly, the biomedical model locates all suffering in the physical body but

Esther's pain isn't biological but psychosocial, epistemological, existential, arising from systemic misrepresentation and epistemic silencing.

Reconstruction of Women's Identity in *Before She Sleeps* (2018)

In the novel *Before She Sleeps* (2018), women's bodies are subjected to intense state control. In the regime of Green City, women's values are reduced to their reproductive capacity. Even the official handbook for women in Green City reflects this logic because its regulations are designed to suppress women's agency under the mask of protection and moral responsibility. The handbook instructs that "each individual girl" must act selflessly as a future "mother of the new nation" (Shah, 2018, p. 3). This choice of words naturalizes sacrifice, caregiving, and reproduction as inherent female traits and imposes biological determinism. However, the emergence of Panah destabilizes these state-imposed roles by asserting that bodies are not destiny. Furthermore, Sabine mentions Nurya Saleem, a woman assigned five husbands, with the possibility of a sixth. When she dies by suicide, her step is criminalized rather than understood as a mental health crisis and her family is simply "reassigned a wife" (p. 11). Even though the state frames her death as a crime, Nurya's suicide acts symbolically as a refusal to be reduced to her womb. Among the women of Panah, Sabine reconstructs women in a better way by saying that women of Panah are not wives, not because they live outside Green City, but they refused "to distribute" themselves "as though they were cattle, or food" (p. 12). Sabine's reconstructed identity is grounded in lived experiences, resistance and situated knowledge. Moreover, Ilona Serfati whose narrative is revealed retrospectively plays a crucial role in this reconstruction as well. As the architect of Panah, she ensures that her niece Lin grows up outside Green City. Fertility becomes a pathway to economic mobility as "her womb was a ticket from poverty" to middle-class security (p.24). These depictions expose a system of reproductive biopolitics in which women's bodies are treated as sites of national investment. Moreover, Sabine also realizes that a woman's body is not meant to exist in a state of continuous pregnancy. The Perpetuation Bureau rewards families for "raising a healthy girl" while the continuous examination of women's bodies goes on (p.27). The presence of the words like menstruation, childbirth, blood, and sacrifice shows that women is the colour red, not white. Reproduction is no longer scared and voluntary but disciplined, resourced, and forced.

Psychological resistance in *The Bell Jar* (1963)

One of the most powerful forms of resistance in *The Bell Jar* (1963) is psychological as Esther Greenwood internally rebels against the gender roles of 1950s America. The protagonist Esther is a challenge to those views as she resists, sometimes persists, but redefines herself in the end. Like Panah in *Before She Sleeps* (2018), in this novel, there is a place called Amazon hotel which is a women-only residence and describes society's efforts to preserve female purity. However, Esther finds this environment oppressive. Through the contrasting figures of Dorean and Betsy, Esther is pressured to choose between two extreme models of womanhood. Haraway also warns not to fall into the trap of binaries as they give importance to one part over the other. The second part of the binary is as much as important than the first part. Sometimes the later one represents the subjugated standpoints that are necessary to build an accountable society. Esther harbours a deep dissatisfaction with her own mother whom she perceives as a symbol of passive conformity. Her mother pressures her to abandon her literary dreams and pursue practical skills like shorthand. In contrast, Esther admires Jay Cee for her intellect, ambition, and clarity of purpose. Therefore, her psychological resistance is fueled not only by society but also by her personal experience with a maternal figure.

The Body as Site of Resistance in *Before She Sleeps* (2018)

The regime in *Before She Sleeps* (2018) operates through an authoritarian and patriarchal system based in Green City. Women are no longer recognized for their individuality, intellect, or emotional depth; they are valued as vessels to bear children for state survival. The few women who escape the system like Sabine, live in hiding, where even their acts of breathing, sleeping, and choosing not to reproduce become forms of resistance. Therefore, Sabine says that they refused to be “cattle, or food” of the regime (p. 12). This refusal to be called a wife is more than linguistic, it is a rejection of a state-imposed, biologically determined identity. Panah gives epistemology that is rooted in female agency. Therefore, Panah is a place of hope, resistance and rebellion for women. Ilona's resistance is rooted in both experience and care. Her influence is echoed in her decision to protect Lin as she affirms that Lin “will be spared” from becoming “anyone's wife” (p. 19). Rupa asserts her right to want motherhood on her own terms. This is not because she is in favour of the state's ideology, but she desires the freedom to choose her destiny on her own. Her resistance questions both forced reproduction and forced non-reproduction and reveals that autonomy is not about what one chooses, but about having the right to choose at all. Additionally, Lin, the most senior member of Panah, delivers one of the novel's most radical moments of resistance. Even while talking to Reuben who is admiring Green City's system of handling affairs, she says that the regime is exploiting women. Her words are bold, rebellious and full of resistance as she says that “You pump us full of hormones,” but this is like “we are cows” who are only there to produce children (p. 134).

Psychological Rebellion and the Medical Gaze in *The Bell Jar* (1963)

The novel explores how psychiatry in the mid-20th-century America becomes a tool of patriarchal control. The response of Esther varies differently from time to time with the god-trick and society. At the start of the novel, she is just a scared young lady who is afraid of the cadaver's head. Esther's disintegration of self is also captured in the metaphor of shadows as she felt herself melting deeper into it. She doesn't feel just invisible; she feels unreal as if her existence has been reversed. This fragmentation continues as she adopts the false identity of Elly Higginbottom from Chicago. It's a gesture that her existence as Esther Greenwood is under the god-trick of society that judges her for her choices. With fragmentation, she also feels disappeared as she remarks that she “felt herself shrinking to a small black dot” (p. 15). No matter what Esther does, she feels invisible, valued not for who she truly is, but for what she can offer as a woman. The environment also imposes its cultural constraints. Furthermore, the standards of purity imposed on women are also questioned through Esther's interaction with Buddy Willard. Buddy appears very perfect until he confesses to his own impurity and is very proud of that. Therefore, when he tries to come closer to her, she uses her hair as a physical barrier between herself and Buddy. That's where she wants to protect herself from that judgemental male gaze. Esther Greenwood's life, until this point, followed that very logic: a trajectory of academic excellence, writing accolades, and social recognition that reflect a system of external validation. She remarks that “my life branching out” in front of my eyes “like the green fig tree” (p. 68). This means, her life initially appears to represent boundless possibility. Each fig symbolizes a different future: poet, professor, mother, lover. Yet Esther finds herself paralyzed, unable to choose because she knows that each choice forecloses the others. Esther's journey in particular reflects a feminist epistemological struggle: to assert her own voice in a world that silences her through psychiatry. Esther's own story becomes a way of knowing. Her depression, pain, and rebellion help her understand herself more clearly than professionals ever do.

Bodily Rebellion and the Medical Gaze in *Before She Sleeps* (2018)

All the women in the Panah come from various backgrounds and they have individual battles to fight but what remains common between them is their individual struggle to save their bodies from the oppressive regime. Women are even called “foot soldiers” who will work hard to fulfill their roles as the “mothers of new nation” (p. 3). Women like Sabine and the members of the Panah rebel not through open warfare but by reclaiming ownership of their physical presence. Starting from Sabine, she develops a survival strategy rooted in silence, vigilance, and emotional discipline. As compared to others, her insomnia and calculated behavior reflect not weakness but strength. Her performance of femininity like smiles, gestures, and silence is strategic as she said that she spent hours in “perfecting that smile” (p.16). When meeting a client, she doesn't show much emotion and even her smile is calculated. Moreover, the women of the Panah react to Nurya's death not with ritualistic grief, but with bodily and emotional recoil as Sabine's “mouth tastes bitter”, “Rupa clutched my arm” and Lin “stiffened” (p. 11). Moreover, Sabine says that she has not “whispered prayers” and didn't weep for the woman who died (p. 11). Her refusal isn't a lack of feeling but a feminist epistemology as she knows that death is not isolated and weeping won't change the fate of all women in the Green City. Rupa, on the other hand, breaks these rules as she would like to have children. Therefore the response of women may vary as it is shaped by each woman's position within social order, her experience, desires, and access to a support network. Therefore, they must not be defined solely based on their biological functions.

Conclusion

To put it in a nutshell, in both novels, women's bodies are rendered as resources to be observed, regulated, and utilized within patriarchal scientific systems. This research demonstrates that in *The Bell Jar* (1963), Esther Greenwood's psychological suffering is interpreted by doctors and society as the inevitable result of female biological weakness and chemical imbalance. However, the novel also portrays that the same society that gives favour to biological determinism simultaneously produces figures who challenge it. Similarly, in *Before She Sleeps* (2018), the biological determinism is normalized through medical surveillance, hormonal regulation, forced polygamous and reproductive testing. Yet the existence of Panah challenges biological determinism geographically, socially, and institutionally. The study finds that Esther's resistance is psychological and intellectual. In *Before She Sleeps* (2018), resistance manifests through emotional resilience, ethical choice, and relationship care. Finally, the response of women is varied due to historical, cultural, and geographical contexts. Esther's resistance is characterized by introspection and individual healing. In contrast, *Before She Sleeps* (2018), depicts a society where women respond through solidarity, survival, and mutual care.

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