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Infection rebellion in Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps*

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ABSTRACT

In her 2018 novel *Before She Sleeps* Bina Shah depicts an oppressive, dystopian society. This has emerged as one consequence of an uncontrollable virus outbreak which resulted in a disproportionate ratio of men to women. In such a gender-imbalanced world intimacy is commodified, allowing women some means of revolt in a misogynistic and fertility-obsessed world. Shah explores the horrifying aftermath of pandemics, identifying opportunities for the emancipation of citizens living under discriminatory policies. As the COVID-19 pandemic causes economic and human devastation across the globe, its repercussions, aside from fatalities, are clear. Entrenched in complexities surrounding employment, political liability, and stretched healthcare systems, the pandemic has challenged society to respond adequately and ethically. Although it pre-dates coronavirus's ravages, we argue that Shah's novel imagines apt spaces for rebellion. Both in her imaginative universe and the wider society, transformative action and liberation are identifiable in the aftermath of infection outbreaks.

Introduction: Dystopian fiction

Well before the emergence of COVID-19, pandemics had spread through contemporary dystopian writing. Disease outbreaks and their aftermaths are proving an increasingly attractive area for dissection in fiction – a trend that seems set to accelerate. Over a similar time frame of the last 40 years, dystopian fiction itself has been growing rapidly in popularity. Typically, this fiction depicts nightmarish settings, offering up chilling distortions of current realities. We will argue that dystopian fiction, which often depicts devastating disease outbreaks, is instrumental in portraying women and their bodies as subject to cruel structural coercion. Although feminist dystopian fiction paints gender inequality as exacerbated by pandemics, it also envisions the ways in which women rebel against their oppression, finding opportunities for liberation. Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, the issues facing women in dystopian fiction no longer seem premonitions of a distant future or a reflection of past inequality. Instead, COVID-19 has shed light on the idea that the dystopia, and its manifestation in forms of persistent misogyny, is already here.

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Women in dystopias

Dystopian fiction often provides the convenient mask of fictive settings and imagined events for authors to articulate their frustrations with current realities. Expressing her own exasperation with Pakistani politics and misogynistic attitudes, in her dystopian novel *Before She Sleeps* (Shah 2018), Bina Shah explores authoritarianism and incessant surveillance, which result in the violent oppression of women. Routinely compared by critics (such as Kirkus 2018; Maguire 2018) to *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood 1996) the novel reflects on the unjust limitations which 21st-century women face, just as Margaret Atwood did in 1985. That said, Shah writes about a more recognizable and intersectional world than Atwood's. As the Pakistani author notes (Shah 2017, n.p.), her imaginative universe reflects the everyday lived experience of women in orthodox religious (especially Muslim) communities around the globe.

A country decimated by a contagious, deadly disease is a common trope in much dystopian fiction. Plagues, incurable illnesses, and the fallout of nuclear explosions form the backdrops for many authors' explorations of communities struggling in post-apocalyptic landscapes. Dystopian novels commonly explore two forms of demographic change: overpopulation or population implosion (Domingo 2008, 732). These factors express intertwined fears: of a loss of identity among teeming crowds or of mass deaths. Such desolate and terrifying scene-setting is reminiscent of our present circumstances. Many people have experienced unprecedented precarity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, hit by bereavement, ill health, vast job losses, or shaky future prospects. In her article on reading fiction during the pandemic, Margaret McCartney (2020, 526) notes that dystopian novels harness a similar unpredictability in their depictions of disease. Recent dystopian fiction dramatizes today's confusing cacophony of misinformation and general anxiety, which has engendered a popular malaise and a worldwide sense of distrust in governments.

Written and published before COVID-19, Shah's text appears to prognosticate the current pandemic. The defiance to which women resort in Shah's novel results from the stark gender imbalance caused by the "Virus" she conjures up.[1] Within a foreboding, dark landscape, women are subjected to brutal, restrictive patriarchal control. Authoritarian governments implement unjust policies which subjugate women in the name of society's recovery or to maintain their own totalitarian leadership, rendering half of the population silent. Thanks to its televised adaptation, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has in recent years become an even better-known example of a feminist dystopian novel. Indeed, *The Handmaid's Tale* and its Netflix adaptation have been harnessed by pressure groups as a means for revolt against misogyny. Women activists in the US and beyond resorted to wearing the red cloaks and white bonnets of the novel's protagonists in their protests during Donald Trump's far-right presidency of 2016–20. *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a base on which feminist dystopian authors can build as they explore/deplore regulated reproduction mandates, which reduce women to objects in systems of capitalist exchange. Such exploitative systems place women's capacity to bear children at the centre of the economy. However, the rise of dystopian fiction should not be misconstrued as only responding to landmark cases in North America such as *Roe vs Wade* and, more recently, Trump's attempt to defund Planned Parenthood. As Nudrat Kamal (2018, n.p.) highlights, South Asia also has a long, well-established tradition of

science fiction writing. This spans the oral realm of djinn narratives and *dastangoi* to a later concentration on short stories as a cheap and accessible method of textual storytelling.

Often theorized as the antithesis of utopia, dystopia nevertheless "opens up a space of contestation and opposition" for women and other marginalized groups, according to Raffaella Baccolini (2004, 520). Self-reflexive, resistant dystopian fiction is not intrinsically dismal, instead encouraging the reader to question the status quo. Writing before Baccolini, M. Keith Booker (1994) anticipated her thesis, arguing that dystopia fiction is popular with feminist authors as it is concerned with the fault lines between unorthodox lifestyles and conformism. Citing Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*, Booker shows that sexuality is often a tool of "social control" in dystopian texts (337). He later contends that feminists can appropriate and reclaim dystopia, a genre which as his examples illustrate was long dominated by male authors (348). Expanding on this, Elisabetta Di Minico (2019, 5) establishes a feminist theoretical framework for dystopia, asserting that dystopian governments organize, limit, and subjugate linguistic utterance, places, and people – especially women. She explains that feminist dystopian texts often depict cities created for the use and advantage of men, so that women find themselves on the receiving end of the male gaze, robbed of any autonomy. Of course, not all dystopian fiction concerns women. However, dystopian feminist writers including Naomi Alderman (2016), Ling Ma (2018), Larissa Lai (2018), and Thea Lim (2018) as well as Shah are creating a corpus of intersectional dystopian novels in which women articulate and counter gender inequalities amid crises caused by disease outbreaks.

Shah's (2017, n.p.). early interest in dystopian fiction, like Booker's, was sparked by reading Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. However, the classic text's women characters are defined in terms of their passive sexuality (Patai 1984) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s focus is Eurocentric. Departing from Orwell's model, Shah recognizes totalitarian control in the "deep-rooted patriarchal traditions" of South Asia, which limit her movement and behaviour (2017, n.p.). Her writing is a form of resistance to pervasive social constraints, shown by the clandestine revolt of the women in her novel who refuse to marry or have children. While much dystopian criticism has drawn connections between dystopia and feminism, less research has focused on the role disease outbreaks play in this relationship. Triangulating the three factors, we argue that dystopian fiction, which regularly poses women's bodies as subject to violent social control, demonstrates how pandemics exacerbate gender inequality. Women become the victims of multiple "viruses", the most virulent of which are physical disease and an infectious social degradation.

This emphasis on gender is not intended to downplay (neo)colonialism, its fallout, or resistance to race and class-based discrimination. From the perspective of Euro-America, while it is true that women (as caregivers, mothers, and workers in service industries, etc.) have been significantly affected by COVID-19, there are more striking racial inequalities manifested by disproportionate death rates among Black, Asian, and Latinx populations. One of us is exploring public health crises and deeply unequal access to vaccines and medical care in forthcoming research (Chambers, forthcoming). However, as this novel is so focused on women's rights, our critical attention is particularly drawn to gender.

Reflecting on suffering in Pakistan, Shah published an essay in December 2020 about Pakistan's response to COVID-19. In the piece, entitled "Déjà Vu in Pakistan", she argued that danger and lockdowns were nothing new for Pakistanis, accustomed as they have been since the nation state's inception to regular army rule, and more recently to terrorist attacks and urban violence. This familiarity with crisis has been both a help and a hindrance for the South Asian country. Pakistanis struggle to contain the virus amid some laudable local community and voluntary initiatives but also show a tendency, "maddening and comforting all at once", to leave everything to God (Shah 2020, n.p.). In an email interview with the authors in March 2021, Shah provided this insightful suggestion:

> There are parallels between how casually Pakistan has treated the pandemic, and how casually and carelessly it treats misogyny and all its manifestations – the gender-based violence, the domestic violence, the rapes and assaults. We do and say all the right things – on paper, or in real life, for a little while. But then attention, money and motivation peter out and we revert back to the status quo: social gatherings, unmasked and undistanced in the case of the pandemic; ignoring or accepting the harm that is done to women in the name of patriarchy. Both are deadly, but while we expect Covid to disappear after a couple of years, the endemic violence against women in our society seems more of a permanent plague. (Shah 2021, n.p.)

This is instructive for our reading of Shah's novel as an exploration of misogyny as a disease. It should not escape our notice, though, that in *Before She Sleeps* men's treatment of both the Virus and women is not casual but rather defined by a deliberately coercive micromanagement.

Shah recognizes in her interviews and essay that the Virus is a figurative rendering of misogyny, which is the real societal sickness gripping nations and regions today. Shah told us that she had been especially influenced by the work of Kate Manne (Shah 2021, n. p.). In *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, Manne (2018) defines misogyny not as blanket hatred of women by individual men but the control system that has developed to keep women in their place. This system, as Manne explains, includes but is not limited to individual acts of violence:

> My approach to misogyny [...] tries to avoid two extremes that I take to be mistaken here: the first being to think about misogyny as a blight spread by individual "bad apples", and the second being to think about it in terms that are *purely* structural and social, to the exclusion of the distinctively agentic and interpersonal. (Manne 2018, 74; emphasis in original)

The rules and prohibitions that come as a result of the Virus in Shah's novel, amid the near-total wiping out of women and the severe curbing of their reproductive rights, are effects of the control structure. In other words, these deleterious effects on women belong to the larger global system of misogyny which is at once personal and nightmarishly structural.

The synergies between COVID-19 and the novel notwithstanding, in *Before She Sleeps*, Shah is more concerned with what a post-pandemic world might look like, and what social, economic, and political legacies will be left for survivors. Shah explores ways that women can unite to challenge the unequal circumstances imposed upon them. The novel thus encapsulates covert but necessary collective rebellion. By examining Shah's key

literary themes, such as sleep and intimacy, fertility and medicalization, and the suffering of women within patriarchal social structures, readers can perhaps better grasp the role of pandemics in a society already diseased by misogyny.

A diseased society

A significant and recent postcolonial dystopian novel, Shah's *Before She Sleeps* is set in and around the semi-autonomous Green City. This city is located in a southwest Asian country that shares some of its topological and climactic features with Muscat in Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and rich cities of the Gulf such as Saudi Arabia's Riyadh. The so-called Green City is in fact desert territory, whose corniche (similar to that found in Abu Dhabi) is frequently buffeted by sandstorms. Originally called Mazun, meaning "permission", the fictional metropolis was built around a grid system. Here initiatives such as Plant Your Future, a tree cultivation programme which parallels the UAE's One Million Trees scheme, seek to reclaim verdure in a parched land. Explaining the conscious infusion of Green City and the wider fictional country with geographical elements from the Gulf region and social aspects from Pakistan, Shah (2021, n.p.) told us that over the last five decades Pakistani women began to be treated poorly in emulation of Gulf practices. The rights of women in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait were severely restricted in the 1970s and 1980s. When Pakistani workers, both middle- and working-class labourers, went to work in the Gulf during that period's oil boom, they saw Arab women being segregated and made to wear veils. Many of these male migrants were impressed, and imported these values and ideals back to Pakistan (Waterman 2014). In an instance of the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2014), this was the time when some Pakistani women began wearing black abayas, niqabs, and other garments associated with Gulf women.

In the 1980s, the Pakistani President Zia-ul-Haq was notorious for his edict "Chador aur char diwari", prescribing for women a veil and the four walls of the house. Zia's slogan derived from the teachings of the South Asian purist Abul A'la Mawdudi (1903–79), who himself had been influenced by these ways of thinking from frequent trips to Saudi Arabia. This importing of how women should be treated had not previously been characteristic of Sufistic Pakistan. Before that, such sequestration was unusual, reserved for Sayed families and other upper-class women of Muslim South Asia. Shah submits that such restrictions on women should be considered "a virus that jumped national borders, thanks to air travel and globalization, and came to infect the Pakistani psyche" (2021, n.p.). Once again, misogyny is positioned as an infection: unseen, contagious, mutable, and hard to recover from. Shah subverts the well-worn, damaging military tropes associating disease with war (Sontag 1977), twisting such imagery to expose women's unequal status.

The veil has long been contested in Muslim feminist debate (Ahmed 2012; Babar 2017, 42–75; Tarlo 2010). Yet just as chadors and niqabs can enable women to leave their houses under cover, so too the women in Shah's novel cloak themselves with the glittery veil-like substance of "gold silicon powder" to evade surveillance (2018, 7). This allows them to roam outside their refuge, secretly carrying out activities in a hostile cityscape. Veils are frequently referenced, with Lin, the leader of a women's rebel group, appearing "spectral and shapeless in her full black veil" (131). The veil of Sabine, the novel's most

pivotal character, lies abandoned on the pavement when she is transported in an unconscious state to a hospital (137). Veiling not only adds to the women's secrecy but suggests the power they retain in choosing who can see them and when.

Gender inequality is inscribed into Shah's disease-ridden fiction world. For all its opulence and glittering skylines, Green City's gender politics are germane to the present-day Pakistani nation state. Shah's imaginary country is war-weakened, 50 years after a nuclear winter cast its chill across the region. In the wake of atomic detonation, a human papillomavirus has decimated the female population via a new strain of cervical cancer. The mutation Shah envisages has selectively killed off most women, leaving men untouched. Polyandric marriages are imposed to rebalance Green City's precariously lopsided gender ratio. To bolster the population count, the government has introduced legislation which assigns multiple "Husbands" to one woman. These "Wives" are pumped full of hormones and forced to have the maximum possible number of children, echoing the Nazis' Lebensborn programme, Ceausescu regime's pronatalist policies, and the violent enforcement of China's one-child policy, among other real-world examples.

Green City's men behave as if they are the ones suffering to protect women: "They had been noble enough to make the sacrifice of sharing wives" (Shah 2018, 167). Meanwhile, they wink at the terrible mistreatment of women as they control and enforce degrading reproductive policies. The polyandry system suppresses monogamy and sexual jealousy. Substituting intimate human relationships with clinical multiperson households, it ultimately encourages men's violent, degrading behaviour. As an example of this, Reuben Faro, the wealthy and powerful man Lin is intimate with and relies upon, is described as having some level of humanity: "Faro was no monster, he was a man trapped in a life that promised him absolute power but in return had stripped him of everything good and honourable" (234). Reuben has exchanged his softer side for a life of power and privilege, thus indicating the detrimental impact of Green City's regime on men as well as women. At the end of the novel, Sabine explains that Green City, and not the men within it, is the real monster (246). In *Down Girl*, Manne (2018, 211–212) debunks the idea that rapists are monstrous with reference to Hannah Arendt's (1958) notion of the banality of evil. Similarly, Shah portrays a hackneyed society that is nonetheless capable of causing great pain, corrupting men and leaving women passive and victimized.

Some of the novel's women and girls independently mutiny against the legislated system of childbirth, seeking shelter in a hidden sanctuary for defiant women. This subterranean society is called the Panah, a noun for "refuge" in Urdu (itself a loanword from Persian). It had been founded by Fairuza Dastani and her best friend the enigmatic Ilona Serfati, whose voice notes punctuate the narrative in an instance of e-epistolarity (Jolly 2011, 158). Following first Fairuza's and then Ilona's deaths, the Panah is led by Ilona's niece Lin. Lin helps those women who have escaped from enforced polyandry to live an underground life. They earn money by furnishing government officials like Faro with non-sexual intimacy, furtively spending whole nights simply holding them. They therefore survive off the grid by providing comfort without sex to men of power.

However, the women's secret emancipation in Shah's text hinges on their becoming products in yet another exploitative system. If they submitted to the authorities their lives would revolve around procreation, but in the Panah they are used by men to provide a lost intimacy. Clients sign contracts to affirm that they will only go to the Panah's women for help with sleep and not for sex. In parallel, the women are

forbidden to indulge in alcohol or narcotics that might be a conduit to their seduction. Despite this business-like arrangement, they are often prey to the men's sexual advances. Indeed, Sabine is impregnated during her rape when in a drugged stupor. It therefore becomes clear that with its rigid system and secrets, the Panah is almost as repressive as the government of Green City. What is more, even women like Ilona and Lin who set out to create an escape from oppression eventually foment hierarchical oppression.

The novel dramatizes the unassailable spread of infection, which causes the outbreak of stringent misogynistic policies to render women victims both to the pandemic and a patriarchal government. Shah writes presciently of three waves in the collapse of global society, which pre-empt the devastating restrictions placed on her novel's female characters:

> The first wave came from the east. The middle of the twenty-first century saw devastating climate change in South Asia, bringing floods and unprecedented torrential rain for months on end.
>
> The shock waves juddered both eastward and west, claiming not just lives, but also millions of acres of arable land and drinkable water. The second wave destabilized the economies of all the countries in the region, shutting down major trade routes that stretched from China to Europe, as if a part of the world was simply amputated from existence.
>
> Every student knew what the third wave was, hearing about it straight from the mouths of their parents and grandparents, when the women [...] began to die. (2018, 123–124)

This account is timely given the climate emergency, ongoing disruption to trade, and infection-related deaths around the world. Women have been adversely affected on all three fronts. First, they are vulnerable to climate change, being more likely than their male counterparts to live in poverty or reside in places badly affected by natural disasters (*ActionAid* 2021, n.p.). Second, they have a good chance of being impeded by trade disruption, as sectors in which women work have experienced worse effects from the pandemic (World Trade Organization [WTO] 2020, 1). Finally, restricted access to sexual and reproductive health services because of pressures on hospitals during the pandemic have left women lacking the necessary health services (United Nations [UN] Women 2020, 2). The ongoing challenges facing women as a result of COVID-19 are not about to dissipate, as new waves and strains continue. Shah's diction also intentionally evokes feminism's three waves. In the west these comprised the suffrage movement, followed by the so-called women's liberation and post-feminist movements. In Pakistan they were the immediate post-Partition women's movement; Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship countered by the Women's Action Forum; and the present digital-activist wave.

The Virus in *Before She Sleeps* arrives in the wake of multiple wars. Noxious and life-threatening, this contagion damages people's respiratory systems and curtails the lifespan of unborn children (Shah 2018, 34). Shah's description of citizens "emerg[ing] like ants out of [...] subterranean sanctuaries" (34) into their war-scarred homes is evocative today as populations surface from multiple lockdowns into a different world, facing crumbling economies, grieving families, and struggling education systems. Later, Shah describes the chaos wreaked by the Virus. Riots tear up the streets, and cases of murder and suicide are on the rise.

Shah shines a light on how an infection's killing spree can make human death a matter of practical nonchalance. In quarantine situations, the novel's dead bodies are disposed of by dousing them in liquid nitrogen. Despite his position as a junior doctor, the male protagonist Julien blanches at the thought of his own cadaver eventually being dissolved, since "the idea of being irreversibly turned into powder made [him] shudder" (Shah 2018, 189). This recalls Zygmunt Bauman's (2004) discussion of global capitalism's emphasis on surplus and disposability that gives rise to vast numbers of "wasted humans" (5). The bodies that litter the pages of *Before She Sleeps* are made abject – in Julia Kristeva's (1982) sense of a struggle with "a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the […] tolerable" (1) – being thrown like rubbish onto heaps. The treatment of bodies during the pandemic was not dissimilar, and in April 2021 corpses were cremated, without the presence of mourners, on mass pyres in terrible scenes from Pakistan's neighbour India. Amid the terror caused by disease, memories, family ties, and personal dignity are all discarded.

Such fear and degradation also seem infectious, spreading like "tentacles" into Green City (Shah 2018, 35). The Gender Emergency, prompting the restrictive legislation which some of the novel's women try to escape, is greeted with urgency and panic. Women become an "endangered species" (35), this image associated with the animal kingdom fixing women as objects for scrutiny and safeguarding in Green City's regime. The Virus thus legitimates the Perpetuation Bureau's emphasis on marital fidelity. Because of women's vulnerability if infected, would-be husbands are tested for the Virus before being allowed to marry them. Men were originally complicit in passing on the Virus to their Wives, but are reluctant to recognize this history. Still, in a post-Virus society, adultery's potentially harmful consequences for their Wives is enough to make "ordinary men fearful enough to respect the boundaries of marriage" (186). This so-called respect leads the city's men to bestow on woman the responsibility "to bring an entire nation back to life" (35). What this apparent idealization really denotes is oppression and the cloistering of women within a harsh and constraining governmental regime.

Pandemics and inequality

The devastating effects of COVID-19 have been seen on a global scale. However, the impact of the virus has been experienced very differently according to a country's geographical position, its government's preparedness, and the political conditions and existing healthcare. In *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*, Fareed Zakaria (2020) calls for "investing more time, resources, and energy toward stopping" present and future pandemics (8). Akhtar Sherin (2020), in a study of Pakistan's response to the COVID-19 outbreak, stresses the Islamic Republic's proximity to countries that experienced high virus-related death rates in the early phase, namely China and Iran (79). Shah's Green City is similarly part of a network of countries which were previously ravaged by the fictional pandemic. However, Green City is "encircled by desert" (Shah 2018, 12), and is thus one of the few places in the novel that survived the climate emergency and consequent disease outbreak. As people emerge from protective bunkers, women enter a new kind of isolation imposed by the city's authorities. These leaders make Green City a cocoon of restrictive legislation which supposedly protects the people living there. Also looking inwards to protect itself, Pakistan closed its borders soon into the pandemic, with

initial positive effects. Nevertheless, Sherin highlights how a lack of scientific awareness and an openness among ordinary Pakistanis to myth-spreading and conspiracy theories soon became detrimental to the country's handling of the outbreak. Furthermore, he suggests that a widespread and understandable lack of faith in the government has made it difficult to enforce social distancing or other necessary measures, culminating in a dramatic rise of COVID-19 cases across Pakistan in summer 2020 (Sherin 2020, 79). Green City is a harbinger of the turbulent response to the pandemic. At first the West Asian country's designated capital is celebrated as a natural, luscious ecosphere (Shah 2018, 13). However, wars give an excuse for turning the city into a "police state" (35). Despite the metropolis's initially positive rejuvenation (like Pakistan's initial suppression of the virus's spread through protective measures), the fictional city state descends into a fearful, oppressive, and corrupt dystopia.

Meanwhile, Shah's fictional society seems to function well, as it is "blessed" with the "great responsibility" of leading the newly founded region in which it sits (Shah 2018, 34). Motivational political slogans interpellate women as a "precious resource" (167). Female subjects are nonetheless most at risk in the power dynamic where they carry much more than their share of the burden to help society recover. Women are invited to sacrifice themselves for the cause of social revivification: "if you willingly give your bodies to us in trust, we are honor-bound to return your trust a thousandfold" (93). However, just as Imran Khan's seemingly progressive leadership functions as is a smokescreen for repression and misogyny in Pakistan (Singh 2018, n.p.), Green City's patriotic overtones are tinged with threat. Any women who dare to rebel against the new rules will be imprisoned or executed. Since high birth rates are seen as the key to Green City's recovery, rebellious women are painted as a "malignancy" (42), a cancerous growth in an otherwise orderly and healthy society.

As Green City is dysfunctional underneath its veneer of stability, so too Pakistan's government has long been accused of fostering dystopia. A semi-visible reliance on constrictive legislation and military machinations has lent the state authoritarian undercurrents since its inception. Pakistan is notoriously dangerous for its politicians and journalists. The murders of premiers including Liaquat Ali Khan (in 1951), Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1979), and Benazir Bhutto (2007) are well known. Tending to oscillate between elected governments and army rule, whoever has taken power in the Islamic Republic over the last 40 years has sought to quash criticism. Successive leaders have thus helped to drag Pakistan into what Saad Hafiz (2012) calls "a dystopian era" (n.p.).

The dystopian censorship encouraged by recent political leaders is replicated in Shah's novel, within which women are "bowed down, shrunken and meek" (2018, 23). Fearing reprisals, they are too afraid to speak out against their oppression. For instance, early in the novel a dead woman is described animalistically, her "arms and legs splayed in grotesque angles, blood pooling around her body, trapping her like an insect in a circle of red amber" (11). While the authorities attribute her death to suicide, reporting of her violent death is intended by the Bureau to show what happens "when human nature isn't contained" (12). The victim is depicted as a criminal, her Husbands and children being compensated for experiencing such tragedy. They are given a new Wife to take the deceased one's place, women being replaceable like products bought, sold, and exchanged. The authorities thus send out the sinister message that without leadership and guidance, people fall astray, leading to violence and societal turmoil.

Women and sleep

At the heart of Shah's text, sleep is a source of frustration, dissent, and even revolt for many of the female characters. Shah identifies slumber as a flashpoint issue when it comes to the infectious rebellion of her female protagonists. The Panah's women hire out "a type of contact and comfort", which had been prohibited ever since the Virus's spread, when they sleep alongside their Clients (Shah 2018, 158). Yet one of their most popular members, Sabine, suffers from debilitating insomnia and cannot sleep. Even so, she and her colleagues give wealthy men nocturnal but chaste company to fund the Panah's social reclusion. In a world where sex is supervised, Shah indicates, oneiric embraces and the possibility of love are hot properties. Their semi-innocent bed-sharing contrasts with the hormone-fuelled multiple marriages and procreation imposed by the controlling leadership.

Insomnia is a psychophysiological affliction, and thus as an insomniac Sabine might be seen as having a disability. Indeed, because of her chronic insomnia, Sabine calls herself "Morpheus" as if she were a dreamlike apparition (Shah 2018, 14). She often refers to her sleeplessness as a "lifetime's curse" which incessantly plagues her (5). The other Panah women wish to relieve Sabine from the insomnia which she wears "like penitence; guilt over her mother's suicide lingered like poison in her blood" (46). Sabine's damaged past, her mother's death, and her own escape from one repressive society into another make her life seem diseased. The stigmata of her suffering prevent her from surrendering to the refuge and renewal of sleep. And yet her insomnia also makes Sabine even more of a rebel. Under the cover of darkness, secretive and intimate activities take place. This allows the Panah's women in general and Sabine in particular to regain vestiges of an independence which has been stymied by their repressive society. Sabine transforms her sleep disorder into a "weapon of the weak" (Scott 1987), remaining wakeful and sometimes turning the tables on the usually watchful men in power.

Sleep has been a disruptive influence during COVID-19, which has impacted negatively upon many people's circadian rhythms. Women's sleep cycles have been worse affected than men's (Pérez-Carbonell et al. 2020, 172). Laura Pérez-Carbonell et al. suggest that sleep disorders during the pandemic have caused increased anxiety, stress, and depression. Their research participants, especially the women, attested to a change to waking times and sleeping rhythms, as they experienced worse sleep overall. Hence, the authors drew the conclusion that sleep disorders have increased throughout the pandemic, with insomnia and nightmares heightened as symptoms of a virus-incited trauma.

In the novel, too, via Julien the doctor's musings, Shah links Sabine's chronic insomnia to hypervigilance. Shah thereby portrays Sabine's fight against a restrictive and punitive society as causing her symptoms similar to soldiers experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder in war's aftermath. Sleep is, moreover, a site of stress and anxiety, with the novel often linking it to violence. For example, Sabine is raped while she is unconscious after unwittingly ingesting an anti-insomnia drug with the telling name of Sleep. Rape is a violation which she compares to a burglary committed under cover of darkness: "I may have fallen asleep long enough for one of them to steal his act of sex from my body. That makes him a thief, not just a rapist" (Shah 2018, 151). Sleep may be prohibited or stolen, and under a drug-induced sleep the worst crimes can occur. Yet rest is also something valuable, as a source of

recovery, comfort, and escape. The description of sleep enabling a thief to steal from Sabine shows how Shah often treats sleep like a commodity. For example, Sabine says a deep, unbroken sleep feels "wrong, as if I've stolen it from someone, and now I'm probably going to pay" (84). Sleep is presented, therefore, as a valuable resource, just as the women themselves are products circulating in a capitalist service industry.

Although in relation to her rape Sabine might seem an unwitting victim, the women arguably retain some agency. They can control their own behaviour with a level of decision-making as to who they work for and when. Clients necessarily become vulnerable during their time together with the Panah's women, underscoring the inherent fragility associated with a person's lack of consciousness during sleep. Usually commanding men become temporarily dependent on the women, reversing the power dynamic that is in play for much of the narrative. As a source of rebellion, rest also connotes secrecy. The Panah is located in the darkness of the underground, giving the women a "twilight life" (45). Night-time can therefore prove liberating, furnishing a much-needed cover for these marginalized figures.

Women and rebellion

Shah limns social rebellion as liberating some victims of a diseased society, which has become increasingly isolationist and exclusionary following a pandemic. The women in the Panah refuse to submit to political corruption. Their reluctance slowly seeps out into virtual networks as they encourage other girls to follow them. They rebel against the experiments on their bodies, refusing to act as compliant "incubators" (Shah 2018, 63) within a fertility-obsessed patriarchal society. Sabine had spent years imagining her mother's traumatic inability to conceive more children, calling her a "martyr to infertility" (113). Eventually she realizes that her trailblazing mother faked her barrenness to create a nuclear family. At the time, psychological counsellors reported that her mother, driven by mental ill health, had made an "impulsive, impetuous decision" to kill herself (114). But Shah implies that Sabine's mother didn't really kill herself but was instead "eliminated" by the authorities because she refused to take another Husband. The mother had rebelled against patriarchal policies, which are grounded on women's subordination as an "essential" precondition for reconstructing the society ravaged by a woman-killing Virus.

The women in the Panah start their non-compliance from a young age. Seeking out ways to evade their parents' watchful gaze, they "resorted to things that had become almost obsolete; scrawled notes dropped in places only girls would search" (Shah 2018, 21). Gestures of subtle and overt insurgence are evident, from Sabine's ripping of toilet paper in a hospital's bathroom (148) to Lin's declaration on first meeting Reuben that "I refuse to be part of your system" (135). Acts of rebellion are fostered in youth. Some young girls grow up to join the Panah, stubbornly refusing to be chattels in an exploitative system. Early on, from Sabine's focalization, readers are told: "We do not consent to their conspiracy, first to decimate us, then to distribute those of us who remain [...] as if we were cattle or food" (12). The women's rebellion puts them in constant danger from the authorities, who threaten renegades with strict punishment or "elimination" (35). Yet their dissension also creates a fragile sanctuary where the women can form strong bonds.

In her voice notes for Lin, Ilona criticizes "the prison of their so-called peace and security" most of Green City's denizens choose to remain in, commenting on the hypocrisy that if caught, "it's the Wives who would shout for our execution the loudest. We pay for their complacency, for the complicity of both men and women in a system that is as unjust as it is unnatural" (Shah 2018, 36). In an instance of what Deniz Kandiyoti (1988, 274) calls the patriarchal bargain, this society has encouraged women to internalize the rhetoric that they are irreplaceable objects of fertility for the recovery of post-pandemic Green City. Lin describes Green City's women as "winsome puppets" who attest to "the happiness and success of their blended families" through "breathless, saccharine testimonials to the perfection of life in Green City" (Shah 2018, 170). The women moulded by the Bureau to reinforce its policies' value are powerless marionettes. The patriarchal voice is ventriloquized through them, and they are controlled not only by their Husbands but also the city's leadership.

The Panah's women, by contrast, forego any hope of security. Instead, they revel in small moments of solidarity, autonomy, and power, seldom enjoyed by women outside their community. However, even the Panah has extremely strict and limiting rules. Rupa, a sensual and sceptical member of the Panah, regards these laws with disgust. She thinks scornfully that the other women in the refuge have "swallowed all the restrictions and the secrecy without question. The rules have become a part of their bodies, clinging as leeches do to their flesh" (Shah 2018, 50). She pushes against the Panah's regulations through small acts of rebellion like flouting its dress code by wearing a nose pin and larger ones such as having a sexual relationship with a Client. The latter she must keep secret for fear of censure and punishment. Even within the Panah's secretive sanctuary, it remains debatable whether the women are free at all.

Comparably, during COVID-19 stringent rules have protected many citizens against the spread but simultaneously raised questions over how far personal liberties should be curtailed. These rules have proved controversial, as lockdowns endanger the economy and separate families. The reverse, however, could be much worse, as early relaxation of restrictions results in spikes in deaths and hospital admissions. However, the social restrictions imposed in 2020 and 2021 have exposed the fragility of many women's social and economic stability since more women than men have caring responsibilities or face financial precarity at home (Berkhout and Richardson 2020).

One of Green City's initiatives, aimed at stabilizing and strengthening its society, deems pregnancy indispensable to society's survival. Pregnant women are "treated with the reverence assigned to only the most complicated, challenging diseases" (Shah 2018, 97), handled with extreme caution and care due to the need for children to bolster the population. Contrastingly, COVID-19 measures have resulted in a media focus on pregnancy being undervalued, with women sharing their experiences of giving birth with limited support. Furthermore, women have expressed anger over IVF treatments being delayed, evidencing growing levels of perinatal depression and anxiety. In Pakistan and elsewhere, during the pandemic women have faced not only threats to their reproductive rights but also other dangers. These first attach to their maternal health and second relate to a repressive and sometimes violent domestic sphere. Baig, Ali, and Tunio (2020) state that both physical and sexual abuse can be common in Pakistani marriages, as abuse is "considered a private family matter" and thus not often prosecuted (525). The COVID-19 lockdown measures, which have increased the

amount of time people spend at home, mean that women in Pakistan and across the globe face "a lethal virus outdoors and abusers at home" (525). This is similar to how Shah's characters confront both the aftermath of physical disease and a debilitating, diseased social order. Demonstrating the threatening environment facing women, seen both in Shah's text and in its context, Baig, Ali, and Tunio give the sobering statistic that there were 399 women murdered in domestic cases in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the northwest Pakistani province, after the first lockdown was announced in March 2020. Despite this high number, only a few calls were made to the relevant authorities (525). Moreover, as Abdullah Sarwer et al. (2020, 1307) highlight, gynaecology and obstetrics have become health services of secondary importance during the pandemic in Pakistan. This gives both maternal and infant mortality rates the potential to increase, with an especially detrimental impact on rural communities that lack sufficient access to healthcare facilities such as hospitals.

Analysing the way political leadership often revolves around women and their bodies, Aneela Zeb Babar draws on multiple examples of famed Pakistani women to paint a picture of both gendered oppression in Pakistan and feminist resistance to it. There are tensions between women who oppose gender discrimination and those who endorse a tightening of Shariah law (Babar 2017, 2–3). One example of the latter is Apa Nisar Fatima, a religious scholar who campaigned for "the state to curb her personal liberties and those of fellow Pakistani women as they were vulnerable to temptation and vice" (4–5). By contrast, Benazir Bhutto, the slain former prime minister, became the first world leader to give birth while in power and defied narrow conceptions of decorous female behaviour. These two Pakistani women embody a dual aspect to constructions of femininity, encompassing traits in opposition to one another: passive and active, weak and strong, obedient and rebellious. These dichotomies are often personified in Shah's novel through her different women characters. For instance, Sabine's quiet gratitude to the Panah contrasts with Rupa's rebellious spirit, and Lin's fortitude opposes the sad passivity of many of Green City's women. Through polarities, Shah shows how women's bodies, manipulated and coerced in the novel, are subject to constant political (mis) interpretation.

Despite the disturbing landscape of contemporary South Asian politics, explored in an upsurge in dystopian texts, there are signs of positive advances which resonate with Shah's protagonists' courageous rebellion. These are reflected in the hopeful ending of her novel, which seems to allow her protagonists an escape from violence and oppression. As Sabine contemplates finally escaping Green City, she suggests that her last word should be sorry. "I have broken every rule", she admits, "transgressed every limit" (Shah 2018, 246). Sabine feels the urge to apologize, as she has been conditioned to obey strict rules to keep the Panah's dangerous secrets. Nevertheless, she drives the ambulance in which she and an unconscious Julien escape at speed towards the Semitia Border. Sabine is determined to be imprisoned no longer by either the Panah's subterranean precarity or her current fugitive status, thinking: "I've had enough of cages" (246). This final act of rebellion secures Sabine and Julien their freedom, and it is executed by the woman while her man lies asleep. Therefore, despite its dystopian framework, Shah's novel offers hope for its protagonists' future, as Sabine finally breaks away from the violence and oppression she previously faced.

Arguably, Shah's women rebels have fled a world in which most people bury themselves in legacies of hatred and accept the violent imposition of oppressive restrictions. However, in the Panah these women gravitate towards seeking new avenues for dissent and creating a sanctuary in which they find some measure of liberation even as they construct new hierarchies.

Conclusion

Shah's novel explores the residues of rampant disease, exposing durable negative aftershocks for women within the affected populations. In particular, it pinpoints sleep as a source of defiance, illness, and anxiety, making night-time a focal point. Even after the Virus has diminished and reality has started to return, Green City society remains diseased, its flaws on display like a patient on the operating table. As a symptom of this ongoing disease, women's fertility is maximized and manipulated, forcing the novel's female characters to seek furtive passages towards autonomy. Our present pandemic, similarly, is encouraging micromanagement, corruption, and inequalities to proliferate. COVID-19 is reversing women's hard-won rights because of the types of service work, caring responsibilities, and emotional labour women tend to shoulder (Chambers and Gilmour 2020; Preskey, Gallagher, and Hall 2021). Fitting its dystopian genre, the novel warns that unless we act soon, the pandemic's afterlife will be post-apocalyptic. Even when the virus has long disappeared, we may be left with systemic oppression, intrusion, and inequality infecting society at its heart.

Note

1. Throughout this article, the capitalization of words such as "Virus", "Wives", "Husbands", and "Clients" follows the conventions of the novel. In *Before She Sleeps*, Shah draws attention to her dystopian storyworld's unusual social relations by using capital letters. References to "Husbands" and "Wives" indicates the importance Green City accords to polyandry (just as the countercultural Panah gives "Clients" primacy), while the "Virus" indicates this contagion's potency as well as its metaphorical aspect.

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