

September 2021

Is Women's Empowerment a Thucydides' Trap for Patriarchy in Pakistan? The Aurat (Woman) March-2020 and Bina Shah's Before She Sleeps

Malik Haroon Afzal

Muhamad Rashidi Mohd Pakri

Nurul Farhana Low Abdullah

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Afzal, Malik Haroon; Pakri, Muhamad Rashidi Mohd; and Abdullah, Nurul Farhana Low (2021). Is Women's Empowerment a Thucydides' Trap for Patriarchy in Pakistan? The Aurat (Woman) March-2020 and Bina Shah's Before She Sleeps. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(9), 111-127.
Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss9/8>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Is Women's Empowerment a *Thucydides' Trap*¹ for Patriarchy in Pakistan? The *Aurat* (Woman) March-2020 and Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps*

By Malik Haroon Afzal², Muhamad Rashidi Mohd Pakri³, Nurul Farhana Low Abdullah⁴

Abstract

The *Aurat* (literal meaning, “woman” in Urdu) March, first organized in Pakistan on International Women's Day in 2018, fanned the fire of feminist struggle in Pakistan. Since its inception, Pakistan's patriarchy has tried to suppress rising feminist voices. Last year (2020), the effort to suppress these voices reached an exceptional level. Feminists faced a storm of opposition in the form of counter-marches and counter-narratives which were motivated mainly by the patriarchal agency of the country. This situation provides the basis for a critical examination of the deeply rooted patriarchal mind set, with reference to the prevailing gender politics of Pakistan. However, this paper studies this recent development of Pakistani feminism by contextualizing it within Greenblatt's constructs of power, subversion, and containment, with particular reference to Bina Shah's novel *Before She Sleeps*. By contextualizing the selected novel within the recent feminist development, this paper unmasks the way patriarchy responds to it and tries to contain it. This paper relies on the New Historicist approach to examine the feminist voices in the selected novel. For this purpose, the novel has been read in the backdrop of the feminist narrative of The *Aurat* March as manifested in different slogans of the march. By doing so, the paper highlights the containment strategies that were employed by the patriarchal agency in Pakistan as well as its manifestation in the contemporary Pakistani Anglophone literature. However, the study finds that the patriarchal agency in Pakistan employs various containment strategies—in the form of narratives of honour and domesticity—to contain the subversion it faces in the form of The *Aurat* March, and Shah's novel textualizes the situation with utmost clarity. And instead of surrendering to the normative patriarchal structure, it offers the possibility of negotiation and change.

Keywords: Pakistani feminism, Aurat March, New historicism, Subversion, Containment

¹ Thucydides' Trap—the term first used by Graham T. Allison (2017) in the case of Sino-American rivalry—derives from the rivalry between Athens and Sparta. It connotes a threat felt by the already established power from an emerging power that ultimately results in war. This paper considers the rising Pakistani feminism as an emerging power that has threatened the already established patriarchal agency of Pakistan.

² Malik Haroon Afzal is a doctoral student in the School of Humanities at University Sains Malaysia. His current research interests include cultural politics, Pakistani feminism, and Pakistani Anglophone fiction. He has also taught literary theory and criticism, postcolonial literature, and Shakespearean literature at University of Lahore, Gujrat Campus, Pakistan. Email: mharoon176@gmail.com

³ Muhamad Rashidi Mohd Pakri is an Associate Professor of English in the School of Humanities, University Sains Malaysia. He earned his PhD from the University of Malaya, Malaysia. His research interests include colonial literature and history, postcolonial criticism, biographical writing, and Malaysian English Literature.

⁴ Nurul Farhana Low Abdullah is Senior lecturer in the School of Humanities, University Sains Malaysia. She received her PhD from the University of Malaya. Her research interests include Shakespearean studies and literary criticism.

Introduction

*Aurat*⁵ (literal meaning, “woman” in Hindi) March 2020 rejuvenated the spirit of feminists in Pakistan while infuriating patriarchal Pakistani society. The march was organized by educated liberal women in Pakistan (Asher, 2020). However, a theatre of hot debates among the women right’s activists and the rest of the Pakistani society yielded this important question about gender politics in Pakistan: Is women’s empowerment a *Thucydides trap* for men in Pakistan? The paper strives to answer this question by examining documents (newspaper articles, interviews of the social activists, and slogans of the *Aurat* March) produced in the wake of this movement. In addition to this, it also shows the way these very recent voices of Pakistani feminism are reflected in the contemporary Anglophone literary discourse of Pakistan, particularly by Bina Shah’s novel *Before She Sleeps*. The study uses the New Historicist approach to bring forth the textualization of Pakistani feminism in Pakistani literary discourse with particular reference to *Aurat* March 2020 and Bina Shah’s selected novel.

The first *Aurat* March was organised in the main cities of Pakistan on March 8, 2018 by the mainstream women rights’ organizations of Pakistan such as *Hum Auraten* (We the Women), Women Democratic Front (WDF), and Women Action Forum etc. (Azeem, 2020). The manifesto of these rallying organizations was claimed to be a standing against gender-based violence, gender disparity, and honour killing, but the taunting and gallantly unconventional slogans—*mera jism meri marzi* (My Body My Choice); *tired of dic(k)tatorship; my body is not your battleground* and many more—infuriated both men and women in Pakistan. Men considered these slogans to be an attack on socio-religious norms, whereas women viewed them as being against the sanctity and dignity of womanhood (Mohyidin, 2020). Last year, these empowered women who were fighting for the rights of underprivileged women organised a third successful march that bore the worst forms of criticism from people around the country (Asher, 2020; Jalil, 2020; Najeeb, 2020). However, criticism within the socio-political circles of Pakistan subsequently lead to a counter march—the *Hayya* (Decency) March—organised by *Jamat-e-Islami* (Islamic Organization), to counter the *Aurat* March narrative. Figures 1, 2, and 3 represent the main slogans of *Aurat* March that bore the brunt of fire and started allegations of indecency against its proponents for promoting Western culture and subjugating Pakistani cultural values. On the other hand, Figures 4, 5, and 6 have been taken from the *Hayya* March that was organized to counter the narrative of the *Aurat* March.

Figure 1



⁵ Women’s March 2020

Figure 2: A poster with a slogan that mockingly compares male chauvinism with dictatorship (Ghani, 2019).



Figure 3: A poster from the *Aurat* March with a portrait of a uterus on it that reads, “My body is not your battleground” (Khunsha, 2020).



The slogans “my body my choice,” “Tired of dictatorship,” and “my body is not your battle ground” (Figures 1, 2, and 3) justly called for freedom women to have personal space, but in Pakistani they were perceived as an attack on moral and cultural codes and therefore were declared obscene and vulgar (Khatri, 2020; Najeeb, 2020). Opponents of this movement considered them as an attack on the family system—where women provide the domestic care and men take care of the family financially—and considered this campaign as part of anti-cultural propaganda by some external force (Qamar, 2020; Khan, 2020). Another faction appeared and agreed that gender-based violence and honour killing were problems that demanded justice, yet they criticized the language used in these slogans as vulgar. (Mohyidin, 2020; Qamar, 2020; Khan, 2020). However, a group of women who utterly condemned the movement and considered it a shame and a curse on the dignity and sanctity of women appeared. That group, seemed to be motivated at large by the manipulated religious discourse about the role of women, marched against the allegedly left-wing feminists of Pakistan. Considering the slogans and demands of the *Aurat* March indecent and shameful, they named their own movement the *Hayya* March and rolled out to condemn them (Mohyidin, 2020). Below are figures that represent the manifestoes of the *Hayya* March.

Figure 4: A Poster of the *Hayya* March stating their demands (Post, 2020).



Figure 5



Figure 6: Rally organized by *Jamat-e-Islami* (Islamic organization in Pakistan) saying, “Accept woman as woman; *mehngai berozgari hatam kro, muj ko ghr me rehny do*(eliminate inflation and unemployment, so that I can stay at home); Man and woman have equal rights but not similar” (Express, 2020).



The slogans “our family our pride” (Figure 5), “*hum maen hum behnen hum baitian, qomoon ki izat hum se* –we the mothers, sisters, and daughters, we the honour of nation; *Aurat bigar Tehreek namanzoor* –women spoiling movement not acceptable” (Figure 6), and “*mehngai berozgari hatam kro, muj ko ghr me rehny do* (eliminate inflation and unemployment, so that I can stay at home” (Figure 6) negate the narrative developed by the proponents of the *Aurat* March.

The demand for the freedom of women's personal space was dropped completely by the women of the *Hayya* March (Mohyidin, 2020). Instead, the *Aurat* March was labelled "the immodest march" (*ibid*). Moreover, the slogans such as "eliminate inflation so that I can stay at home" (Figure 6) and "Men and women have equal rights but not similar" (Figure 6) draws a corollary about the demands of these women, that—keeping their domestic role intact—they wanted equity more than equality. One of the possible explanations for women's resistance and the resistance of the educated strata of Pakistani society can be found in Stephen Greenblatt's critique of "self-fashioning" in which he views the "self" as "a subject of sociology" (1980, p.4) and considers it a product of "language and ideology" (1980, p. 9), which in return reproduces hegemonic operations. The self, once created, replaces all kinds of physical forces to employ the normative ideological system and serves the interests of the normative. The women opposing the current feminism in Pakistan seem to be the selves that are constructed linguistically and ideologically in the deeply rooted patriarchal society, and are now serving the interests of the normative ideological system.

Albeit, both categories of women presented different ideologies in entirely different forms and language. One asked for personal freedom and the other wanted to live within the boundaries set by familial and social structures of Pakistani society. Critics called the latter movement a counter narrative produced by the patriarchal agency of Pakistan (Jalil, 2020; Mohyidin, 2020). This debate, however, cannot ignore the reality of gender-based violence, domestic abuse, and incidents of honour killing in Pakistan⁶. In the light of above discussion, the study suggests that the *Aurat* March has proven itself a fissure and disruption in the all-pervasive male privileging normative society where women weren't imagined to be independent, strong, and expressive. This paper hypothesizes that the over consideration of the language used by the proponents of the *Aurat* March and the under consideration of the real plight of the women in Pakistan unmasks a male dominated society that is threatened by the changed role of women. To substantiate this proposition, the study shows how the *Aurat* March has posed a threat to the patriarchy in Pakistan and has been perceived as a subversion. For instance, the narrative of the *Hayya* March was developed only to contain the subversion the agency experienced in the form of the *Aurat* March. Moreover, this paper also shows the way Pakistani Anglophone literary discourse, particularly Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps*, contributes to unveiling this power-resistance mechanism. In the backdrop of the New Historicist approach, on one side, this paper strives to unfold the patriarchal power structures of Pakistani culture and the resistance it has faced in the form of the *Aurat* March, and on the other side, it displays the textualization of this recent wave of Pakistani feminism in Bina Shah's selected novel.

The Fourth Wave of Feminism in Pakistan

Afiya S Zia (2018), in her book *Faith and Feminism in Pakistan* provides a diachronic investigation of women's suffering as well as their political standings since 1947. According to her, the political and social movements of women in Pakistan can be divided into three waves. The first wave of feminism appears in 1980 as the direct consequence of Gen Zia⁷'s misogynistic

⁶ According to Human Rights Watch's report published in 2019, violence against women continues to be a serious problem in Pakistan. Different forms of violence include rape, domestic violence, forced marriages, acid attacks, early marriages, deprivation of educational rights, and honour killing; It estimates the honour killings to be around 1000 every year; around 21 percent of the girls are forced to get married before 18 years of age and 3 percent before 15; and among 5 million primary school education deprived children, most of them are girls due to numerous reasons such as lack of educational and financial resources, child marriages, child labour, and gender discrimination.

⁷ Military dictator who ruled the country from 1977 to 1988.

policies disguised in the so-called Islamization in the country. Spearheaded by a secular organization—Women Action Forum (WAF)—it captured attention with their slogan “Men, Money, Mullahs and the Military” along with several street protests. This wave of feminism was considered to be secular in nature and stood for the rights of women irrespective of cast, creed, or religion.

The second wave that is said to be modern in its approach, was influenced by the promulgation of Postcolonial and subaltern studies in India. It became a subject of severe criticism due to its dependence on Western feminism. According to Afiya (2018), “It sparked and deepened feminist interests, contests, and regional debates in South Asia, over issues of cultural relativity/specificity and the worth of national versus universalist agendas and liberal versus traditional strategies” (p. 5). However, in the 1990s, the objections on the Westernised agenda forced feminists to appropriate the allegedly borrowed manifestos into the local context (Zia, 2018). This phenomenon divided the feminists into two groups: one secular and the other as the mediators between Islam and feminism. The latter strove to bridge the gap between Islam and feminism, and by doing so, they laid the stone of a post secular future of feminism. Collectively, they tried to propagate the feminist conscious among the general populace by referring to historically ignored feminism in Muslim societies (Rowbotham 1975; Mernissi 1997; Moghadam 2000).

The third wave of feminism appeared after the incident of 9/11. Due to its critical approach about the ideals of enlightenment, secularism, and Islam, it was declared post-secular in nature (Aziz 2005; Bano 2010; Cheema & Mustafa, 2009; Iqtidar, 2011; Jamal, 2013; Mushtaq, 2010; Quraishi, 2011). This wave advocated the politics of faith-based empowerment. However, comparison of all these movements with the current wave of feminism, that has appeared with the inception of the *Aurat* March debates, indicates an interesting shift from secular to faith-based politics and then again to secular again. The chronological study of all three waves of feminism in Pakistan shows that the current wave, due to its emphasis on the freedom of the female body and the abolition of all forms of domination, differs from the feminist movements in Pakistan that bloomed before and after 9/11. However, by comparing the waves of Pakistani feminism with the current feminist movement, i.e., *Aurat* march, the study suggests that this current development of feminism, due to its emphasis on the freedom of the female body and personal space, should be considered the fourth wave of feminism. Moreover, by comparing all the feminist movements in Pakistan, the study finds that this fourth wave of feminism is more demanding, vibrant, and dynamic than the secular moves of the first, second, and third waves of Pakistani feminism, and has potential to contribute substantially in changing the role and status of women in Pakistan.

Feminism in Anglophone Pakistani Literature

This section of the paper provides a brief survey of the recent debates about feminism within the contemporary Anglophone literature of Pakistan. Anglophone Pakistani literature displays a wide range of women characters, from traditional to rebellious, submissive to dominating, in order to substantiate and make the women’s existence realized. Writers like Bapsi Sidhwa, Kamila Shamsie, Uzma Aslam Khan, Rukhsana Ahmad, and Bina Shah etc, have made enormous contributions to Pakistani literature with the help of their strong and vibrant women characters. Similarly, critics have also contributed in making these voices heard within the academic circles of Pakistan by approaching their texts with different perspectives. On one side, these texts have been explored within the context of Gen Zia’s misogynistic policies and the

victimization of women in a patriarchal society (Kabir, 2011; Sharma, 2018); on the other side, these texts have also been approached to defend the cultural role and values of Pakistani females by castigating the Eurocentric monopolization of female roles (Kanwal, 2018; Kharral & Zafar 2020). For example, Aroosa Kanwal (2018) studies the feminist Pakistani discourse in the backdrop of “Eurocentric monopolization of a reductive one-dimensional image of the Muslim world by emphasizing the need to situate the subjectivities of Pakistani women within community based relationships and responsibilities” (Kanwal, 2018, p. 118). However, the current debate about feminism, that reached its climax last year (2020), hasn’t been contextualized by anyone in contemporary Pakistani Anglophone literature. Recent studies by Kabir (2011), Sharma (2018), Kanwal (2018), and Kharral and Zafar (2020), despite having encapsulated the latest debates of Pakistani feminism, are also devoid of this nascent but fertile feminist movement (the *Aurat* March). Similarly, Bina Shah, despite having a vibrant voice as a writer of the younger generation, has yet to be realized as a robust commentator of this current wave of Pakistani feminism. The study, therefore, fills this gap by showing the textualization of the *Aurat* March or the fourth wave of feminism in *Before She Sleeps* by Bina Shah, and contextualizes the recent development of Pakistani feminism within the constructs of power, subversion, and containment and the self by Stephen Greenblatt (1980; 1981).

A New Historicist Reading within the Context of the *Aurat* March

Brannigan (1998) defines New Historicism as a “mode of critical interpretation” that considers “power relations” as “the most important context for texts of all kinds” and treats “literary texts” as the sights of power politics (p. 6). Keeping in view this aspect of the New Historicist approach, this paper seeks to examine power relation of Pakistani society and its relation to the recent wave of feminism in Pakistan. This paper analyses the *Aurat* March and the responses it generated in society and exposes the engraved male chauvinism of Pakistani society for which any kind of feminist activism is a threat. By doing so, this paper is providing a critical analysis of the emerging voices of feminism by discussing them in the backdrop of the opposition they bore. It also shows the way this new wave of feminism is echoing in Anglophone Pakistani literature, particularly in Bina Shah’s *Before She Sleeps*.

This study evaluates Stephen Greenblatt’s constructs of power, subversion, and containment in Bina Shah’s recent novel *Before She Sleeps* by contextualizing it within the current wave of feminism in Pakistan. Borrowing from Foucault’s theory of the omnipotence of power⁸, Greenblatt attaches subversion and containment as the two potent branches of the power that aim to serve its interests. Putting Greenblatt’s critique in the context of the current wave of feminism in Pakistan, the *Aurat* March can be viewed as a form of subversion and resistance by the women against the normative patriarchal structure of the country; the *Hayya* March has appeared to be the containment strategy that aimed at containing the subversion that the patriarchy faced in the form of the *Aurat* March narrative. It can also be understood that with the help of the *Hayya* March slogans the powerful patriarchal agency of Pakistan tried to justify its position. Greenblatt (1980) maintains in his seminal work *Renaissance Self Fashioning* that once the ideological self is constructed, it polices and controls its own political and social orientations. According to him, when subversion appears, it is immediately contained by the power without the use of coercive force, and it happens with the construction of culturally groomed ideological selves. In alliance

⁸ “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault 1981, 93).

with Greenblatt's construction of the self, it can be concluded that the women who appeared in the *Hayya* March are the ideologically and linguistically constructed selves who have been capacitated by the power (patriarchy) to contain the subversion at the ideological level. Brannigan (1998) while commenting on Greenblatt's "self" says,

"the self polices and regulates its own desires and repressions. This removes the need for power to be repressive. No physical or military force needs be deployed or exercised for power to have operated effectively in the interests of dominant ideological systems when the self, ideologically and linguistically constructed, will reproduce hegemonic operations" (p.7).

This paper examines the working of Greenblatt's construct of the 'self' in Pakistani context and shows why the current wave of feminism has been perceived as a subversion, as well as how the *Haya* March is said to be one of the containment strategies deployed by the patriarchal agency of Pakistan.

Apart from ideological containment, exemplified in the above case in the form of the *Haya* March narrative, it can also be done at the level of representation. Foucault defines a system of "representation" as the "general set of rules that govern their objects" (1972, p. 115). It is the governing body that not only contributes to the construction of its objects but is itself constructed by its own objects—according to New Historicism. Foucault says that it is a system that governs the ways their objects are "institutionalized, received, used, re-used, combined together, the mode according to which they become objects of appropriation, instruments for desire or interest, elements for a strategy" (Foucault 1972, 115). Greenblatt links this governing body with the political and literary formations of a society and confers that they are used as a tool to form the linguistically and ideologically constructed selves to contain certain incidents of subversion. Deciphering and applying this scholarship of Greenblatt on the study at hand, we have come across this question: how is the recent wave of feminism, that has been labelled as a subversion, contained by the political and literary formations of Pakistani society? The first part of the question regarding political formations has been answered in this part of the paper which includes the anti-feminist narrative triggered by the intelligentsia of the country, particularly of Khalil ur Rehman Qamar—a renowned Urdu playwright—and the narrative of the *Hayya* March itself. However, the second part that the Anglophone Pakistani literature responds to or that has responded to this recent development of feminism, particularly the selected novel, has is answered in the next part of this paper. Khalil ur Rehman Qamar says in an interview to *Gourmet National News*:

"These thirty to thirty-five women are trying to capture my society for their ulterior motives. We have our own religious, national, and regional norms and customs. No one will allow you *mera jism meri marzi* (my body my choice). These women want to ruin our society by abusing men. Only the birth of a man is celebrated. After that he keeps on looking after the woman till his last breath. The first thing that he has been taught in this society is that he must serve his mother. Who is that mother? A woman! Then he must arrange for his sister's marriage. Who is that sister? A woman! After getting married he finds a wife for whom he is the only one who renders services. Who is that wife? A woman! Then he begets another woman in the form of his daughter for whom he works days and nights. This is what a man is doing. What else do these women demand from a man?" (Qamar, 2020)

Taking Qamar's argument as a case in point, we assume that the intelligentsia of Pakistan, who held the antagonist stance about this recent development of feminism, represent the selves who have already been contained by the prevailing patriarchal narrative and now, though impulsively, are serving the interest of the power. Similarly, the women who appeared in the *Hayya* March also show the same selves that have been contained by the patriarchal normative structure which is disguised in the manipulated religious discourse. They accept men as superior and, therefore, are happy with their domestic role. The condemnation of the *Aurat* March as a women spoiling movement (Figure, 5), and the demand for the sufficient employment opportunities in the country so that they can stay at home (Figure, 6), shows conspicuously the selves as those that are 'linguistically and ideologically constructed'.

In addition to this, this paper also evaluates Bina Shah's latest novel *Before She Sleeps* to view if the same act of containment has been justified at the level of representation in the context of the literary discourse of Pakistan. The chief characteristic of the New Historicist approach is that the self-evaluation and control mechanism of self nullifies the use of force by the power (Brannigan 1981, Greenblatt 1980). It implies that the 'self' controls itself and gets controlled by a specific cultural and political discourse (non-literary) prevalent during a particular time and that the basic narrative held by these cultural discourses is also possessed and represented by the literary discourse of that time. Greenblatt (1981) shifts the focus of his analysis to the containment within the "orthodox texts", restraining and controlling resistance without letting force and coercion come into play:

"My interest in what follows is in a prior form of restraint – in the process whereby subversive insights are generated in the midst of apparently orthodox texts and simultaneously contained by those texts, contained so effectively that the society's licensing and policing apparatus is not directly engaged" (p. 41).

Keeping in mind Derrida's notion of text that says everything that contains some kind of signification or represents some narrative is a text (1976), we consider the narrative presented by Khalil ur Rehamn Qamar, and many other socio-political activists, as those orthodox texts that aimed at containing the subversion that came forth in the form of the *Aurat* March in Pakistan. So far, it can be viewed that the patriarchal agency of Pakistan employed ideologically and linguistically created selves such as the *Hayya* March women and several social activists to counter and contain the subversion it encountered in the form of the *Aurat* March. At this point, we suggest that the anti-*Aurat* March discourse that appeared in the wake of this recent wave of feminism in Pakistan has served on the pattern of Greenblatt's "orthodox text" that tries to contain the subversive insights without engaging "society's licensing and policing apparatus" (Greenblatt, 1981, p. 41).

Until this point, it has become clear that the powerful patriarchal agency tried to dominate and control the subversion or resistance it faced in the form of this new feminist movement by using the counter narrative of respect, nation building, and protection. The ongoing debate turns here to another interesting question: to what extent can it control it? To answer this question, we need to further explore the critique of New Historicism. The godlike status of power undermines the power of resistance⁹, and for that reason, the possibility of change. If the subversion is always

⁹ "New historicism often makes for grim reading with its insistence that there is no effective space of resistance. Because no self, group or culture exists outside language or society, and because every language and society are self-policing, hegemonic systems, there is no possibility of resistance emerging unchecked" (Brannigan, 1998, p.8).

produced in the interests of power, then how is it possible to have a culturally diversified and transformed postmodern society? Greenblatt (1981) writes in *Invisible Bullets* that the “production of subversion is the very condition of power” which enables it to justify itself and make itself visible (Greenblatt 1981, p.57). However, due to this reason, the use of New Historicism is criticised by many critics due to its acceptability to the ineluctable and pervasive nature of power, the impotency of subversion, and the potency of the containment. Conversely, Brannigan (1998) makes a valid point about the potential of this approach by asserting that “New historicists usually see their practice as one of exposition, of revealing the systems and operations of power so that we are more readily equipped to recognise the interests and stakes of power when reading culture” (p. 8) and “It is one of the legacies of new historicism, then, to have recognised the ways in which power produces and contains what appears to be its opposite, or what seems to be a radical difference” (1998, p 150).

However, for some critics, there also exists some possibility of negotiation between power and subversion. It has been maintained that subversion is not as passive as it seems to imply, but it also creates the possibility of negotiation and therefore, change. Motlagh (2015), while referring to different critics, says, “Greenblatt does not render a totally pessimistic ideas through this process, however he represents a model in which there are chances for negotiations, thus there would be some opportunities for resistance and change” (215). Similarly, Grady (1993) in “Containment Subversion - and Postmodernism”, by putting Greenblatt’s subversion and containment in a new context, suggests a position that is also susceptible to the possibilities of “negotiations” (p.37). In the context of Shakespeare’s play *King Lear*, he says,

“the Renaissance theatre was both under the duress of power and able to escape from underneath it by virtue of the cracks and fissures, the confusions and contradictions, that constituted power in that (and every other) epoch” (p. 39).

Inferring from all these perspectives about resistance and negotiation, the article renders that the recent development of Pakistani feminism, in spite of the enormous attempts of containment by the patriarchy, is not ready to give in and has the potential to negotiate, and therefore, to offer a healthy change for the improvement of women’s conditions in Pakistan.

A New Historicist Reading of Bina Shah’s *Before She Sleeps*

This section of the paper views and analyses if the Anglophone literary discourse of Pakistan, particularly Bina Shah’s *Before She Sleeps*, complies to the mainstream power politics, or shows some resistance to the normative patriarchal structures of Pakistan. And in the case of resistance, how does it unveil and register the plight of Pakistani women as well as the actual debate of feminism in Pakistan? Before starting the in-depth analysis of the novel, it is important here to have a short synopsis of the novel first. The novel shows the victimization of women in the *Green City*—a dystopian city—somewhere in South West Asia. The novel is set in the post-nuclear war era, almost fifty years after the war. The region has suffered complete destruction of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Middle East, and the new boundaries have been drawn based on new economic zones. The *Green City* along with some of the other cities—like Gawadar, Chabahar, and Kolachi—has survived the nuclear war due to its location with the sea. *Green City*, taking the charge of the region, now considers itself responsible for the development of the region.

Keeping in view that the war has swallowed the population of the region, the *Green City* considers re-population as the last resort for development. The governing body of the city—the Agency—declares women as the main pillar of development as they are the only source of human resource: “women in Green City found themselves put on an eerie pedestal to bring an entire nation back to life” (Shah, 2018, p. 40).

The city forces its women to have multiple husbands. It has compiled a complete discourse in the form of “*The Official Green City Handbook for Female Citizens*”, to control the women emotionally and mentally. The city offers different courses in home economics and glorifies them as the real science in order to brain wash and domesticate its women. The desire for a domestic life is inculcated in them since their childhood with the help of domestic movies which heroify domestic work. Young girls and women are provided with a book—*The Official Green City Handbook for Female Citizens*—which contains the role and responsibilities of women and tells them how pregnancy is an act of service to the nation, and on the other hand, how reluctance and rebellion is a crime (Shah, 2018).

Unhappy with the custom of having multiple husbands, some women find suicide as their only escape. Every time someone commits suicide, the Agency manipulates and broadcasts the event as a criminal act that would set an example for other women. The protagonist of the novel Sabine—a girl of sixteen—being unhappy and reluctant to accept the existing state-imposed laws of female polygamy, rebels and chooses to flee the city with the help of her un-named female friend. The girls of her age are normally discouraged from making friends. They use the black server—an untraceable website—to communicate with each other by using unrecognizable nicknames, like rose, jasmine, chicken etc. From one of her black server friends, Sabine learns about Panah, an illegal female shelter house, that is being run far away from the eyes of Agency. She manages to communicate with Panah and begs them to rescue her. On the other hand, Panah, founded by two women—Ilna Serfati and Fairoza Dastani (Farmer Agency employees), and presently run by Ilna Serfati’s niece Lin—provides unsexed comfort services to the well-off men of the *Green City*, and in return they are promised safety, food supplies, and freedom from forced marriages and unwanted pregnancies.

Shah’s *Green City* and Pakistan

Despite its dystopian setting, the novel still holds great similarity with the current gender politics in Pakistan, especially with the recent wave of feminism in Pakistan. The plight of the women of Pakistan looked similar to the plight of the women of the *Green City*: for example, like the women of the *Green City*, the women of Pakistan too suffer from forced marriages, no abortion right, early marriages, domestic abuse etc. Interestingly, the comparison between the narrative espoused by the female rebels or Panah girls in the novel, and the narrative presented by the women of the *Aurat* March shows a great deal of similarity. Bina Shah has explained all of the controversial slogans of the *Aurat* March by putting them in the context of the *Green City*.

The novel also presents a fine contrast of two places, the *Green City* and the Panah: the *Green City*, where women can move freely but with forced multiple marriages and unwilling pregnancies where abortion is considered a crime, and the Panah, where they are caged within four walls and must survive only on canned food. But this is the place where they can enjoy their physical freedom and complete self-autonomy. Looking critically, a similar situation can be found in actual Pakistani society in which liberal and conservative groups are fighting for the above two scenarios. Liberal groups possess physical freedom but are always criticised, while others are

domesticated women with little or no personal space yet they are happily living in this way. The under-discussion development of feminism in the form of the *Aurat* March and the *Haya* March is a good example of this division. The women of the *Aurat* March represent the former while the *Hayya* March women represent the latter. Bina Shah shows a very fine contrast of ‘freedom’ and ‘constraint’ by painting these two opposite ideologies in a befitting manner.

Power, Subversion, Containment, and Negotiation

The opening note of the novel “From *The Official Green City Handbook for Female Citizens*” refers to the SOPs for its female citizens. By considering them the only mean to achieve the national goal—prosperity—the *Green City* demands its females to be understandingly acquiescent and selfless devotees. Women citizens are said to be the “foot soldiers working hard to fulfil” their “role as the mothers of the new nation” (Shah, 2018, p. 9). *Green City*’s SOPs for female citizens mocks the actual patriarchal narrative of Pakistani society in which women are promised an honourable status as mothers, sisters, and daughters, and are called the nation breeders; female respect, honour, and decency confines them within the four walls of the house. We maintain at this point that this narrative of respect, honour, and decency has bred a generation that, during the current wave of Pakistani feminism, has appeared in the form of female activists opposing the narrative of the *Aurat* March. This generation not only complies but also understands the ideology of female domesticity by heart and fulfils the condition as prescribed by Bina Shah: “for Green City’s girls and women, understanding is more important than compliance” (ibid).

According to Greenblatt (1980) Subversion is a resistance or a fissure within the normative patterns of a society. In the novel, the protagonist Sabine subverts from the normative pattern of Green City by escaping the domestic life of female polygamy. After seeing her mother’s suicide in her childhood, she couldn’t fit herself in the life that Green City offers to its females. She starts longing for freedom and finds a semblance of it in Panah. In the beginning of the novel, she confesses that she always “needed structure to push up against” and that Panah is the place that “provide[s] a halfway house between the structures of Green City and the complete freedom” (Shah, 2018, p. 20). Being completely aware of the worth of the female body that is not more than “cattle, or food” (Shah, 2018, p. 17), she subverts and choses Panah as her last resort for the fulfilment of her physical autonomy. She says further,

“It may be a life in the shadows, but at least no Bureau tells us whom to marry, whom to open our legs for. Nobody can experiment on our ovaries and wombs [...] but here in the Panah, we are humans again” (Shah, 2018, p. 69).

Looking critically at the discussions of fourth wave feminism in Pakistan, we come across the same realization of the suppressed status of the female body. The slogan “*mera jism meri mrzi* (my body my choice)” (Figure 1) is an opposition to forced marriages, honour killing, and domestic abuse and proves to be a subversion to the normative structures of Pakistan patriarchal society. It shows that the women in Pakistan have realized their rights and have come to understand the sanctity of their body. Consequently, they have started demanding rights to their own bodies that they had lost in the deeply engrained patriarchal norms on the pretext of forced marriages, domestic abuse, and obliged family lives.

As maintained earlier, the plight of women in the novel and the voices heard during the *Aurat* March are similar. In both cases, they pose a shocking threat to the patriarchy by disrupting

its peace. The textualization of the subversive voices such as “*mera jism meri merzi*” (Figure 1) and “*my body is not your battle ground*” (Figure 2) in Bina Shah’s *Before She Sleeps* is an indication of a change that has been set forth by both political and literary worlds in Pakistan. The argument can be substantiated further by the quoted interview of Khalil ur Rehman Qamar, who states that these slogans pose the same amount of threat to the patriarchy in Pakistan that the existence of Panah poses to the Green City. Shah (2018) encapsulates the pain and suffering of the women of Green City as:

“The leaders set the tone of morality for the rest of the citizens; they call their city Green, but the only color they’ve chosen for its women is white, a purity that only exists on paper. In truth, the color of Green City women is red: red for the blood that they bleed every month when they’ve failed in their duty to add another child to their tallies; red for the blood on which those precious fetuses are fed and nurtured for nine months; red for the blood that’s spilled when they’re born” (p.59).

The above passage unveils the actual side of *Green City*’s patriarchal traditions and shows the pain and suffering of its women. The expression of the plight of the female body in this passage as an object of reproduction, and the association of blood and red with it, indicates the physical abuse of the female body, mirroring the plight of the suppressed and victimized women in the rural areas of Pakistan who are deprived of their basic rights and are more vulnerable to domestic violence and honour killing. According to Brannigan (1998), New Historicism considers that power contains subversion without using coercion to justify its stance and policies. In *Before She Sleeps*, we come across numerous instances where the governing agency uses various discourses and methods to tame the female body. One of the containment strategies adopted by the agency is to educate the young females of the *Green City* about “housekeeping and the science of childcare” (Shah, 2018, p. 86). Sabine, while commenting on this containment strategy, says that “They thought that by calling us household engineers and domestic scientists, we’d be fooled into thinking our “jobs” were worthy of our intelligence and self-respect” (Shah, 2018, p. 86). According to Foucault (1980), the purpose of such education is to form a self that sets its ‘desires and wishes’ in alliance with the patterns and structures that are set by the power. In the novel, the character of Rupa—another Panah girl, who was sent to Panah by her mother—shows her desire for marriage, husbands, and the domestic life. She says,

“What if I had wanted to live on the outside, like a normal woman? What if I wanted to be a Wife, to bear a Husband a child?”, and that “My choice was robbed from me. Once I set foot inside the Panah, I became a criminal”. (Shah, 2018, p. 56).

Having the effects of *Green City*’s education, Rupa’s character represents Greenblatt’s culturally and linguistically constructed self that has been tamed and is allied with the normative pattern that has been set by the authorities of the *Green City*.

Similarly, the patriarchal discourse of Pakistan also propagates and motivates the same line of action for women. The subversion that the patriarchal society of Pakistan encountered in the *Aurat* March has been responded to with a counter narrative of domesticity, honour, and respect. Instead of coercion, the patriarchal agency introduced another group of women who can be seen espousing the narrative of female domesticity as sanctimonious, and of the *Aurat* March as going against the dignity of women. This narrative has been represented in the slogans like, “*mehngai*

berozgari hatam kro, muj ko ghr me rehny do (eliminate inflation and unemployment, so that I can stay at home); Man and woman have equal rights but not similar” (Figure 6); and “*Aurat bigar Tehreek namanzoor* –women spoiling movement is not acceptable” (Figure 6).

The second most important tool for containment in the *Green City* is the *Handbook for Females Citizens* that guides, controls, and tames its women according to its own interests. Similarly, the patriarchal narrative of male supremacy and female domesticity in Pakistan serves as a handbook for the female citizens of Pakistan that calls for women to behave in a certain way. Its most obvious example can be seen in the narrative presented by the *Hayya March*. Keeping women domesticized and from jobs and the outside world in the novel refers to the similar prevailing Pakistani patriarchal narrative. However, whether the narrative has become able to contain the subversion or not is another question. As Greenblatt (1981) says:

“My interest in what follows is in a prior form of restraint – in the process whereby subversive insights are generated in the midst of apparently orthodox texts and simultaneously contained by those texts, contained so effectively that the society's licensing and policing apparatus is not directly engaged” (p. 41).

In the light of this critique, it can be concluded that the subversion that the patriarchy of Pakistan has experienced in the form of the *Aurat March* has been confronted by an ideological opposition that appeared in the form of the *Hayya March* and the narrative of honour and respect which aimed primarily at containing the former. However, many columnists called this situation the defeat of patriarchy as it proposes negotiation among the outdated patriarchy and the freedom for women. According to Motlagh (2015) and Gardy (1993), as discussed above, New Historicism does not render only a pessimistic view about power, rather it also offers a possibility of negotiation which, in our view, is the possibility of change. We, therefore, propose that the recent development of feminism in Pakistan in the form of the *Aurat March*, notwithstanding the opposition it faced, shows some propensity to a healthy and positive change in the Pakistani society that would ultimately favour women in the long run.

Similarly, the novel also offers this possibility of negotiation by introducing some according-to-the-norm deviant male characters, such as Julien and Bouthain, who helps Sabine in her escape to Semitia, a country where women are treated equally. The only place where working women are mentioned is the Semitia border, where Sabine reaches after escaping the turmoil of the *Green City* while being accompanied by the doctor she falls in love with: “A man and a woman in the olive green uniforms of the Semitia Border Guards peer at me” (Shah, 2018, p. 254). Lastly, the strongest desire for negotiation and change can also be spotted in the valiant character of Lin who, despite having a chance to be forgiven and re-included in the *Green City*, commits suicide and prefers not to compromise on the idea of Panah. In other words, the situation affirms the potency of subversion and the demand for negotiation and change. In sum, the novel represents *Green City's* Agency as patriarchal power, and Panah as a subversion to it. And by not allowing the power (Agency) to contain the subversion (Panah), the novel highlights the possibility of change.

Conclusion

The above discussion has shown that the recent wave of Pakistani feminism in the form of the *Aurat March* has proved to be an ice breaking movement within the patriarchal trajectories of

Pakistani society; it has created a fissure in the set notions of gender politics in Pakistan. The New Historicist analysis of the movement as well as the selected novel of Bina Shah has contextualized the actual play of power by the patriarchal agency of Pakistan in its struggle to contain the subversion it confronted in the form of the under-discussion development of Pakistani feminism. In addition to this, the fight between the narrative of honour and the narrative of women's empowerment has been contextualized within the critiques of power, subversion, and containment, and it has been found that the power has tried to use the narrative of honour and decency to contain and suppress the narrative of women's empowerment that emanated in the form of the *Aurat* March in Pakistan.

In light of the above discussion, we also conclude that power does not always contain subversion, and the event of its failure offers the possibility of negotiation that ultimately provides room for change. Moreover, the detailed analysis of the selected novel has shown that Bina Shah, like other feminist writers of Pakistan, displays and exposes the patriarchal tapestries in her novel and puts forward the narrative of women's empowerment while seeking positive and healthy change in Pakistani patriarchal society. This study also suggests reevaluating orthodox beliefs about the female body and demands the acceptance of women as women. By studying the contemporary Anglophone literature parallel to the current wave of Pakistani feminist movement, in the backdrop of the New Historicist approach, this study also invites future researchers to delve in this area of investigation due to its contemporary, practical, and explicatory nature.

References

- Allison, T. G. (2017). *Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides's trap?* Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Asher, S. (2020, March 7). Aurat March: Pakistani women face violent threats ahead of rally. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51748152>
- Azeem, M. (2020). The Aurat march and Pakistan's struggle for women rights. *International Center for Non-Violent Conflict (ICNC)*. Retrieved on November 20, 2020 from <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>
- Aziz, S. (2005). *Beyond petition and redress: Mixed legality and consent in marriage in Pakistan*. Lahore: Simorgh Publication.
- Bano, M. (2010). Female Madrassas in Pakistan: A response to modernity. Retrieved from http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/1571/1/Bano_FemaleMadrassas.pdf.
- Brannigan, J. (1998). *New historicism and cultural materialism*. (pp. 56-82, 133-155). Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Cheema, M. H. & Mustafa, A. (2009). From the Hudood Ordinances to the Protection of Women Act: Islamic Critiques of the Hudood Laws of Pakistan. *UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law*. Vol. 8, 1-48.
- Express, M. (2020). Islamists Hurl Stones: Women's Day Marchers Pakistan. Retrieved March 9, 2020 from <https://www.rappler.com/world/regions/south-central-asia/253824-pakistani-womens-day-marchers-hit-stones-sticks>
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge* (A. M. Sheridan Smith, Trans.). (pp. 105-125). London: Routledge. (Original work published 1969).
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (Ed. Colin Gordon; Colin Gordon et al, Trans.). London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Ghani, L. (2019). Haters are trying to gaslight the Aurat March. Retrieved November 18, 2020 from <https://www.propergaanda.com/haters-are-trying-to-gaslight-the-aurat-march-co-organiser-leena-ghani/>
- Grady, H. (1993). Containment, subversion, and postmodernism. *Textual Practice*, 7(1), 31-49.
- Greenblatt, S. (1980). *Renaissance self-fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. (pp. 11-33). Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Greenblatt, S. (1981). Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion. *Glyph*. Vol 8. pp. 40-61.
- Iqtidar, H. (2011). Secularism Beyond the State: the 'State' and the 'Market' in Islamist Imagination. *Modern Asian Studies*. 45 (3), 535-564.
- Iqtidar, H. (2011). *Secularizing Islamists? Jamaat-i-Islami and Jama'at-ud-Da'wa in Urban Pakistan*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Jalil, X. (2020, March 10). Women on the march. *DAWN News*. Retrieved on November 20, 2020 from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1539139>
- Jamal, A. (2013). *Jamaat-e-Islami women in Pakistan: Vanguard of a new modernity?* New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Kabir, A. J. (2011). Deep topographies in the fiction of Uzma Aslam Khan. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. 47(2), 173-185.
- Kanwal, A. (2018). Apology or No Apology: Indigenous Models of Subjection and Emancipation in Pakistani Women's Fiction. *Journal of International Women's Studies*. 19(6), 118-131.

- Khan, M. (2020). Mushahidullah speech in Senate on Aurat March [Video]. Retrieved September 20, 2020 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOz4CwnTWTI>
- Kharal, A. A., Zafar, Z. (2020). Vision and Blurriness: A Postcolonial Study of Uzma Aslam Khan's Novel *The Geometry of God*. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. 8(4), 185-190
- Khatri, S. (2020, January 22). Should feminists claim Aurat march's vulgar posters? Yes, absolutely. *DAWN News*. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1469815>
- Khunsha, T. (2020). Posters. Retrieved March 8, 2020 from <https://auratmarch.com/2020/posters/my-body-is-not-your-battleground/>
- Mernissi, F. (1987). *Beyond the veil: Male-female dynamics in modern muslim society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Moghadam, V. M. (2000). Hidden from history? Women workers in modern Iran. *Iranian Studies*. 33(3/4), 377-401.
- Mohyidin, R. (2020, March 16). The Immodest March. *Amnesty International*. Retrieved on November 20, 2020 from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/the-immodest-march/>
- Motlagh, H. M. (2015). The tempest: A negotiable meta-panopticon. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*. 6(2), 212-219.
- Mushtaq, F. (2010). A controversial role model for Pakistani women. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*. Vol. 4: 1-17. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/samaj-3030.pdf
- Najeeb, Z. (2020, March 8). A case for 'scandalous' slogans. *The News on Sunday*. Retrieved from <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/624735-a-case-for-scandalous-slogans>
- Post, B. (2020). Pakistan's 'biggest feminist' under fire after sexist tirade. Retrieved March 7, 2020 from <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/1873624/pakistans-biggest-feminist-under-fire-after-sexist-tirade>.
- Qamar, K. A. (2020). Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar lashes out at feminists [Video]. Retrieved January 24, 2020 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guvq7YbqtRQ>.
- Quraishi, A. (2011). What if Sharia Weren't the Enemy: Rethinking International Women's Rights Advocacy on Islamic Law. *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law*. 22 (1): 173–249.
- Rappler (2020). Pakistani Women's Day marchers hit with stones, sticks. Retrieved March 9, 2020 from <https://www.rappler.com/world/regions/south-central-asia/253824-pakistani-womens-day-marchers-hit-stones-sticks>.
- Rowbotham, S. (1975). *Hidden from history: 300 years of women's oppression and the fight against it*. London, UK: Pluto Press.
- Shah, B. (2018). *Before She Sleeps*. California, CA: Delphinium Books.
- Sharma, A. (2018). Victimization of Women: With particular reference to Bapsi Sidhwa's novels. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*. 5(4), 464-468.
- Times, D. (2020). Slogan 'Mera Jisam, Meri Marzi' is 'immoral': NA. Retrieved March 6, 2020 from <https://dailytimes.com.pk/571123/slogan-mera-jisam-meri-marzi-is-immoral-na/>
- Zia, A. S. (2018). *Faith and feminism in Pakistan: religious agency or secular autonomy?* Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press.