

**Longing, Belonging and Gender Relations in Bina Shah's Novel;
Where They Dream in Blue.**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyse the quest for identity as revealed in Bina Shah's first novel "Where dream in Blue". South Asian reality is not static but dynamic. Shah's orientalist glamour and hybrid dialogue affirms her knowledge of the cultures and societies being depicted in the novel. This novel is significant as it discusses the ambivalent representation of her central characters. She focuses on the issues of immigrants living in USA and their collision and collusion with the culture of the country of their origin. This interaction of immigrants with their own culture and that of their acquired culture produces identity-crisis, displacement, differences with their parents and the ongoing battle within themselves. Karim and Afsar being the victim of double civilization learn to deal with their expectations, disappointments, aspirations and achievements. Unveiling the power relation between the genders, the representation of women is interesting as they adopt various courses of action to counter discrimination and bias. The hero also refutes fixed notions of the West and the standardized practices of the East. By challenging the set norms, the protagonists contest fixity and create safe third space for their survival.

Key Words: Identity-crisis, Culture, Belonging, Difference, Hybridity, Ambivalence

Introduction

The question of identity, identity crisis, belonging, assimilation, displacement is at the heart of The debates in Postcolonial Literature, and its criticism. Smith says, "*this has been the century of great immigrant experience*" (2000:326). The immigration towards the West and the eruption of postcolonial diasporic Literature has introduced new themes in the literary canon that touch

disciplines of History, Gender studies, Media studies, Politics and so on. Diasporic Literature has given considerable attention to issues relating maladjustment, self-questioning, cultural displacement and the phenomenon of plural and fluid identities. Chris Weedon in *Identity and Culture* (2004:30) argues that “*a sense of national identity*” is created, based on generalizations that in reality is a “selective and simplified account” of a much complicated phenomenon. Contrary to Weedon, McDowell and Sharp state “*Cultures are fluid and temporary social constructions, made and remade over time*” that involves “*the remapping of cultural identities and practices for all those involved*”(1997:210; emphasis in the original). Liz Bondi believes that identity and space are directly related. The question “Who am I” depends on “where am I”(1993: 85). The problematic representation of the East and specially the Eastern woman as oppressed, simple and incapable of development has become one of the major debates in Postcolonial Literature. Bhabha (1994:129) has developed the concept of “hybridity or third space” and puts forward the thesis that postcolonial writers write from third space which is “interruptive, interrogative and enunciatively”. In his view this mimicry of the colonizer would create difference and similarity with the colonizer and would result in creating resistance identity for the colonized. Spivak asserts subaltern and the Indian woman are doubly colonized since they have been silenced by colonizer, patriarchy and are the victim of ‘epistemic violence’. Mohanty’s contribution is remarkable in this regard as she talks about the biasness of Western feminists in depicting the Eastern woman. As a postcolonial feminist critic she throws light on the crippled status of woman represented by colonial texts and deconstructs the essentialist category of third world muslim woman by bringing to light the “question of native or indigenous struggle (1999)”. She draws our attention towards globalization which being a part of capitalism is no less problematic for feminist and minorities since it exacerbates racist, patriarchal and heterosexual relations of rule. Islamic feminists also contest such representations that Muslim women have ‘fixed monolithic identity’ but rather keep on changing according to the social, political and economic realities. Identity deconstructs fixity and keeps on shifting and changing.

Multiple identities is the result of multiple affiliations and positioning of the person in relation to history, culture, ethnicity, religion and nationality. This identity layering at times may create contrasts and conflicts in nature. Pakistani fiction in English analyzes the issues and problematic of identity from various angles. The literary artists struggle to define the word and the meaning of the experience which is highly subjective and the evaluation of the experience makes it essentially objective: thus, making sense of experience and giving uniqueness to it.

Bina Shah is from Karachi but brought up and educated in USA. Like her predecessor Sidhwa, Shah has also chosen a certain city for her. Karachi is the place she knows well and has become the location for her stories. Writers commonly portray the experiences of those Pakistanis who go abroad and face cultural shocks that shake them to the core. Regarding the city of her birth she says, “Karachi is the place I know best and it’s where I live. I wanted to write something about this city because London, Paris and New York have already been done. Also Karachi is a very colourful place. It is a constant inspiration” (Interview, Chowk). Being the largest city of Pakistan it also mirrors the problems of the nation. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the crosscurrents of identity in the individuals raised in the first world and the way they yearn to establish connection with their roots and at the same time champion plurality or diversity. Furthermore, this paper also aims to reflect on the situation of western educated working woman who is trying to build bridge between home and the public world.

Negotiating Identities: Trauma and Re-Emergence

Pakistani fiction with the passage of time is becoming a dynamic and vibrant body of knowledge. Special recognition is due to the women writers who showcase the diasporic experiences as well as capture the image of tradition, identity, belonging, resistance, cultural integration and women representation. The issues of nationalism, ambivalence, Diaspora, cultural imperialism, consumerism, isolation, transnationalism, and identity crisis have become

everyday postcolonial realities and occupy much of the post-colonial Literatures. Bina Shah's first novel, *Where they Dream in the Blue* (2004) is mainly about a young man who plans to visit Pakistan (his ancestral land) to connect with his roots and visualize a world which once was his parent's abode. However, the mother shows some reservations regarding this visit due to unstable political situation of Pakistan. The scary stories relating Pakistan disturb her. Karim insists and announces, "Oh, Mom! ---. The tickets were booked, the arrangements all made, you're the one that is always reminiscing about Pakistan. How great it used to be, How wonderful. How much you miss it. Your family home in the old part of Karachi. The old house with the almond tree. I think you will be happy to see me go back there finally" (13). Realizing the assertiveness in his tone she gives up saying "your mind's made up" and it is a good thing that you are going, you've had no exposure to your home country-our country-so in that way, I'm glad. But what I read is so dangerous. I'm just concerned for you. I am your mother, after all" (13). Sushila Nasta clearly explains the migrants situation as such (2000:7) "*not only an unrequited desire for a lost homeland but also a homing desire to reinvent and rewrite home as much as a desire to come to terms with an exile from it*". According to Weedon (2008) "*in many diasporic texts, dreams and memories of the lost homeland play a positive role in securing identity and survival*". In the context of space and identity Peterson and Rutherford have rightly quoted Monod,

Modern man is the product of that evolutionary symbiosis, and by any other hypothesis incomprehensible, indecipherable. Every living being is a fossil. Within it, all the way down to the microscopic structure of its proteins it bears the traces if not the stigma two of its ancestry. This is even truer of man than any of other animal species because of the dual evolution-physical and ideational-to which he is heir (185).

Commenting on the word "fossil" Wilson Haris (cited in Bhabha) says, "The word fossil is used in an idiosyncratic i.e. sense to invoke a rhythmic capacity re-sense contrasting spaces and to suggest a curious rapport exists between ruin and origin as latent to art of genesis"(185)

The peculiar reality of assimilation, displacement and cultural behaviours begin with Karim's arrival in Pakistan. His friend and relative (Akbar) tries to convince him and encourages him to establish connection with the 'Sufi thought' that matches with Akbar's personality. Belonging to upper class and therefore, to beautify and exoticize his brand of beliefs Akbar offers 'Charas' a drug to Karim. He reacts to this offer quite wisely saying, 'that drugs are haram (forbidden) in Islam. Even I know that much (37). These behaviours highlight contradictions and complexities that diasporic experiences bring to light. The conversation between Akbar and Karim indicates that the Pakistani youth though even after studying from abroad can follow different directions. An important point emerging from the conversation is that Pakistani's and Muslim may interpret the religion in different ways. Akbar depends on drugs to develop intimacy with God to which Karim clearly declares haram or forbidden in Islam. This shows various shades of religion, culture and identity. Karim and Akbar are different in many ways. Pakistan for Karim lies between familiarity and difference. Karim feels other Pakistani boys of his age were more confused whenever they returned from Pakistan. The question that disturbed their minds the most "were they American or Pakistanis? Where did they belong? Who owned their loyalties? When the Gulf war erupted, should they have supported the Iraqis, because they were Muslims or Americans because they were born in America" (35). The notions of identity lead characters into conflicts with their environments. This shows that the protagonist is cognizant of the opposed pulls and is fully conscious of his "slippery position" in terms of choices i.e what to choose and reject. At times they resist American influence by sticking to traditional beliefs as Karim points out in the above quote from the text. Furthermore, this mind set is so typical of the identity crisis faced by second generation diaspora characters. Bhabha (1995) in his article 'Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences' cite Fanon who powerfully evokes, a time of cultural uncertainty, and most crucially, of signification or representational undecidability: "but (native intellectuals) forget that the forms of thought and what they feed on, together which

modern techniques of information, language and dress have dialectically recognized the people's intelligences and the constant principles (of national art) which acted as safeguard during the colonial period are now undergoing extremely radical changes...(we) must join the people in that fluctuating movement which they are just giving, a shape to... which will be the signal for everything to be called into question...it is the zone of occult instability where the people must dwell that we must come" (206-207).

In some cases, the *self* displaced and dislocated from its roots has the desire to rediscover its past and go beyond the issues of self to those of culture, language, food, living style and so on. In the novel under study, Shah has delineated the interrogations of cross-cultural rapprochement and the enigmatic processes of life that put her characters in various situations. In this context Jopi Nyman lucidly observes, "Rather than searching for roots and authenticity, migrant writing constructs itself in the space of in-between's between different cultures, societies and homelands. In this process, it reflects on both old and the new, and questions existing political and cultural binaries." (Atlantic Literary Review, Oct-Dec.2002:53). Shah's focus is on Pakistani youth whether living in Pakistan or growing abroad, journey in their lives sometimes in one direction or other and the peculiar realities they come across. Modern and post-modern conditions in association with globalization have created a very complicated scenario. According to Bhabha (2004) "The enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address. It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated, and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic. That iteration negates our sense of the origins of this struggle. It undermines our sense of the homogenizing effects of cultural symbols and icons, by questioning our sense of the authority of cultural synthesis in general (207). Born and brought-up in USA,

Karim expresses unease when taken to a party in Karachi, “that appears to be just like the one he had attended in New York, Boston or Los Angeles. There was beer, barbecuing, disco lights, music and of course girls with their boyfriends”. A girl with her boy friend is depicted through his eyes as such, “Her eyes were raking him up and down, and he couldn’t help noticing her legs long and slim in the black mini skirt----- This was certainly not how he thought Pakistani girls dressed. He ‘d seen enough of them in short skirts back in Boston, but they dressed more conventionally” (85). This points towards “a “homing instinct” as the new identity emerges accentuating the tri-markers which includes the country of his ancestors, his religion and cultural values. Therefore, Karim disapprovingly views the girl’s dressing, the use of alcohol and the whole party environment. In *Displacement and Diverse Experiences* Homi Bhabha says, “*the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily, private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as dividing as it is disorienting*”(9). This party challenges Karim’s ‘comfort zone’ of acceptance. An American national is seen to be adhering to the traditions of the East that has national colour. Ironically, he breaks the confines of Western-centric subjectivity of dislocation on that particular spot which in the words of Bhabha is ‘un-homely’ moment rooted in identity. Particular moments and the reaction to them, disillusionment with the image of Pakistani Muslim women in mind, forces Karim to question the shallowness of the moneyed class, and the insensitivity of the bourgeoisie woman.

To make his visit fruitful to the fullest, he decides to look for jobs. His efforts are acknowledged in the form of a job offer from an NGO which works on environment protection water conservation. This NGO introduces him to a girl whose charming personality ensnares him entirely,

She seemed to be about his age, and as he peeped at her round the corner of the door, he was surprised to realize that he found her pretty. He noted her wide-set eyes, small face, and dark hair. Her skin was the colour of milky coffee, her eyes like chocolate. He didn’t usually think of Pakistani girls as pretty or even as girls in any obtainable sense. Too many of them were hidden

away by protective families exhibited only at weddings and other social occasions. They said you always hungered for forbidden fruit, but to Karim, Pakistani, girls, shy, giggling, nervous, were unripe rather than forbidden. And in America, they all had one thing in common: they had undying aversion to Pakistani man. Those that did enter into relationship preferred men of all other races to their own kind. It was not an attractive proposition (53).

Being the product of two cultures Karim's description of Nazli is from the Western Perspective. He compares her to coffee and chocolate, that are most used products in USA and as such typically Western in nature that one enjoys all the time. Mc Dowell and Sharp argue, "Cultures are fluid social constructions, made and remade over time" (1997:210). Karim's sudden use of these metaphors suggests multiplicity of identity formation in characters. His colleagues' personality and looks fascinate him to the extent that he immediately falls in love with her. Taking an opportunity to talk about the plight of the working women, Shah throws light on gender discrimination at government offices and workplace. The workplace becomes a site where women are exploited and cannot raise their voice to contest discrimination and subjugation. Few women writers depict women being harassed at workplace and not many organizations have formulated policy against such derogatory practices. Women situation at workplace has become a highly sensitive issue in Pakistani culture and the society has ambivalent position on issues relating them. In this context Mitra and Kumar (2004) state, "The Pakistani society is one of its kinds. Where on one side it places woman as the centre of attention and life, it then on the other, gives secondary status to women." (115).

Luckily, with the passage of time awareness regarding women rights is changing and their role at workplace is becoming more acceptable. The personality of Nazli reflects plurality in terms of identity formation. Introducing herself to Karim Nazli says, "Since last year, I come back from London and well, it was either this or get married. So here I am" (24). She wants to correct the wrong impression about opposite sex. The charm of the female sex in their capability of self-sacrificing affection for their family and those around. Nazli yearns to rupture this impression

and challenge these norms of the society where woman is considered merely a vessel. She dares to challenge this malignant attitude of the society and rejects this ready-to help expectation from women. The author is putting forward her thesis that Pakistan could not remain impervious to new winds of change. Ironically, at the same time working women are labelled as neglecting homes and families for things that carry no value. Their intellectual, vocational interests are ignored. This attitude at times negates gender integration into national development programs and institutions. Disillusionment with societal norms occurs at a point of time when Nazli and Karim visit a government department. Nazli in particular becomes the victim of the satirical remarks of these officers. One of the officers says, One day when you have given up all this business of being a career-woman and you are in your rightful place as mother of a lovely family, you will understand that people do what they can to support their families. What is a few tons of beach sand, a few dead fish here and there, when it means people can have roofs over their heads (113).

Simone De Beauvoir in her challenging book *Second Sex* (1989) writes, “She (woman) is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her: she is the incidental, the inessential. He is the subject, he is the absolute, she is the other” (xxii). Woman is defined in terms of wifhood or motherhood. Their aims and ambitions in life are misestimated and shattered. It is the motherhood that empowers woman, secures her future, and awards her with the uncontested space of power in identity formation in a society. Therefore, the slogan that “femininity is maternity” is very true in the South Asian context. Nazli and Karim then possess fluid identity. They continue to negotiate between two opposed cultures. She combines both Eastern and Western traits in her personality which also at times creates crisis in her life. Shah represents the contrast as such, “Karim smiled wryly at her. She broke the look by reaching in her bag for a cigarette: her nails, as she worked the lighter, were painted purple. They stood out from her otherwise ordinary,

somewhat conservative attire, but at the same time, seemed strongly comforting to him. He could relate to purple nails, they spoke to him of home, of America where girls sported purple, blue, green, black nails. He hasn't felt homesick until he saw her hands. She offered Karim a cigarette, but he refused. They looked at each other then, suddenly out of thing to say (56).

The novel has many autobiographical elements in it. The heroine Nazli goes to London and on completion returns home. Nazli's feelings after returning from abroad manifests the novelists own sense of trauma. Shah does not delve into the mind of her characters therefore, her portrayal is more sociological. Both of them (Nazli and Karim) carry Western paraphernalia unconsciously. Nazli's nails remind Karim of home (USA) whereas, Nazli's smoking and offering of a cigarette to Karim is also reminiscent of her connection with the West in past. This portrayal marks constant redefinition of *self* as Nazli's nails remind him of 'home' and he feels 'home sick. Close observation of Nazli and interaction with her connects him to USA. Such moments shake notions of uniformity of selfhood and geographical boundaries of 'home'. Numerous threads of identity keep on interfering in the lives of the hybridized. Same is the case with Nazli and Karims' families. Their identity status keeps on wavering between forces of Belonging and exclusion. Hence, in a way they are forced to create and recreate spaces for themselves while remaining within geographical and national frame-work of their dual culture.

Thinking about the wedding in USA Karim portrays the situation as such, "Pakistani – American who lived their lives in the Western world by day time suffered from a peculiar type of nostalgia that caused them to turn their wedding at night into mini-representation of the land they'd left behind long ago. The woman competed with each other by donning the most ostentatious, brightly-coloured clothing and jewellery they could find, and bragged to each which designer they'd manage to get the outfits from, and at what price". To this Bhabha (1995) refers that, "Cultural difference is a process of signification though which statements of cultural

or on culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorized the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity”(206). Karim narrates that how dress and cultural differences play an important role in creating exotic image of the rituals and customs which at the same time produce problems for the younger generation born and brought-up in USA. He shares his friends’ frustration in these words,

I can’t stand this man, growled Saeed to Karim, watching Zohra, in a silk peach shalwar kameez from across the hall at the Richmond Ramada Inn banquet hall. I should be just able to go up to her and hold her hand show the world that we are together. But I think her parents will kill her, and then me. And my parents will have to let them do it, for honours’ sake. I thought that we left all that behind back in Pakistan. He was half-joking, but both of them knew none ever escaped the rituals and limitations of Pakistan stretching out like tentacles across seas and oceans (155).

Shah remaps the identity of the characters when born-bred and educated in the West return to Pakistan with different aims. Karim’s reaction is so interesting when, “Akbar takes Karim to a party in Karachi that appears to be just like the one he had attended in New York, Boston or Los Angeles. There was beer, barbecuing, disco lights, music and of course girls with their boyfriends” (85). There is significant correlation between Westernization and upper class status. Since, Capitalism favours the wealthier society therefore, the upper class tends to westernize more and have the resources to travel and study abroad. But this may also create reaction against such thick Westernization. Akbar being Karims’ close friend and cousin is highly inspired by Sufism he excitingly tells Karim, “Yeah, you know Sufis Islamic mystics, Saints devotional songs, unity with God, the search for the beloved... no terrorist just love. It’s... peaceful” (35-36). Akbar is very much Pakistani, proud of his identity. “He was unashamed, unabashedly, unerringly Pakistani. He makes no apologies for who he was or where he came from. When people criticized Islam, he defended his religion energetically although he could barely remember the last time he had read the Quarn.” Karim born and brought-up in USA secretly

always longed for that kind of belonging, that kind of confidence”(36). For Akbar identity did not pose any problem. His philosophy of life did not match with his beliefs but his concept of identity is never threatened and dependent on anyone. He has secured the option to choose or reject without any inside or outside influence.

Multiple identities, maladjustment, discrimination and representation of the dynamic identity remain the focus of *Where the Dream in the Blue*. Karim Afsar being a Muslim living in the United State also a Pakistani -American male who can have multiple affiliations at the same time. Similarly his cousin Akbar also has multiple identities. He is a Pakistani Muslim male, belonging to upper middleclass having Sufist leanings. However, time is shaping and processing working woman’s identity. At workplace she is expected to do her job like any other male counterpart but at home she is expected to run all household chores and remain subservient to home and family needs. Such expectation further limits woman’s independence and is left with no time to freely move out into social sphere. Though being in love with Karim, the heroine lacks the courage to tell her parents that she cannot marry a person of their choice. Her engagement is arranged as per norms of the society. She has to reconcile her autonomy with traditional values. Despite, living a modern life she is expected to adhere to norms of the culture. She is expected to balance her career with marriage and family life.

Luckily, both Nazli and Afsar are rewarded for their patience and get engaged towards the end of the novel. In a self-exploratory courageous act, she decides to break off her engagement with Asif feeling, “This society wants happy ending, they want to see everyone paired up so nicely with everyone else, but they don’t care what really happens afterwards. ‘What is this live-shove, beta? Love can come after marriage too. You know but that’s just too much of a risk for me” (311). She overcomes the initial fright of annoying family and the re-discovery of her confidence pushes her into a dynamism that leads her to negotiate with the struggles,

associations and experiences which build her into a person that what she has become and freed her from dependency, giving her a new-sense of belonging. She translates herself into a new being; a space over which she commands. This decision shocks Karim. “But he had already started to worry about the consequences of her declaration. Her family would protest, Asif’s family would be insulted. He wanted her love, but not if it meant to damage to her reputation, grief for her anyway” (312).

In a society where the cultural values collide with an individual needs and desires, this situation sometimes compels women to explore the possibilities for their existence and for female autonomy. Zaidi (2012: 313) rightly says that Shah creates a woman who is assertive and self-assured. Nazli decides to redefine herself in tune with her circumstances and position by gathering the courage to reject the choice of her Parents and marry Karim Afsar to create ‘third space’ for herself and her ‘love’.

Conclusion

Neo-colonialism in its various manifestations continues to dominate the third world countries. Though not claiming it openly, the Occident with persistence propagates the idea of reaffirming the values of the West over the East. The novel shows the way globalization has created various ideologies hence, creating identity crisis in the lives of people living abroad. Understanding the ground realities, it is imperative that post-post- modern waves require tolerance in the interest of world harmony and peace. All religions and cultures advocate peaceful co-existence, pluralism and aversion to violence. Shah being a diasporic writer at times sides with the Colonizer’s discourses yet, covers all aspects of life which in return provides space for tolerance and forgiveness. It is within the context of globalization that she displays cultural conflict in a society to compete with the prejudiced and stereotyped images being framed by the West. The novel *Where They Dream in the Blue* Shah throws light on the experiences of a Pakistani-

American who yearns to see the land where his ancestors lie buried. Karim's experiences how various identities of religious affiliation, socio-economic class, poverty, education justice create a society so diverse and yet so unified in many ways. To him Pakistan appears to be the miracle of God. He critically views the rich people copying Western way of life and trying to exercise formidable influence through their use of English Language and the superior values they practice. For them Westernization signifies all that is positive and have whole heartedly accepted cultural imperialism. Another group is also identified which borrows from tradition and modernity according to the demands of time, need and society. The hero and the heroine belong to this group. Being brought-up and educated in the West however, they do understand the benefits of tradition and values. "Tradition writes Menon, offers a refuge from the alienation and co-modification set in motion by modernity. Therefore, there are no hard and fast rules being offered in societal discourses or cultural studies. This problematizes the situation for women. Sometimes the cultural constructs are imposed with draconian measures"(211) This has become a problematic issue for women. Rahman observes, (2012),"Muslim women of Pakistan are both oppressed in some situations and in relation to some women, while at the same time are privileged in other. Goal should be to situate Pakistani women within their multiple contexts that more accurately reflects and confronts the oppressive power structures-----what is required is to accept and respect Muslim female identity and her struggle within the framework of her belief"(112). Mernissi (1987) in the same vein contends" Women, illiterate and educated alike, are coming to diagnose and verbalize their problems-previously identified and labelled as being emotional-as being essentially political, and that this is the sort of revolutionary process that is taking place".(10) Nazli's education and work experience empowers her. She along with Karim Afsar emerges as independent beings

In this novel Shah shows second generation characters occupying 'third space' which in the words of Bhabha (1990:211) possess 'fluid or liquid identities'. They learn to negotiate with the two cultures they inhabit and completely dismantle the binaries of home and abroad. As Wilson

Haris (1995) (cited in Bhabha) points out “Only dialogue with the past can produce originality”. This search for identity is characterized by Hybridity (1994: 112) (cited in Rutherford) which instils in them the ability to negotiate with multiple identities in diasporic space. The characters attempt at creating a third space which appears the best strategy to survive in multicultural world. Ultimately, Karim and Nazli reconstruct their own modernity which contests Western notion of modernity and Eastern sense of dignity.

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