

An Interview with Bina Shah

By Iqra Shagufta Cheema

Bina Shah is a Karachi based writer, columnist, and blogger. She has published five novels and two collections of short stories: these include *Animal Medicine* (2000), *Where They Dream in Blue* (2001), *786 Cybercafe* (2004), *Slum Child* (2010), *A Season for Martyrs* (2014), and *Before She Sleeps* (2018). She pens a regular column for Dawn as well as contributes to The New York Times, Al-Jazeera, The Huffington Post and few more. She writes about women's rights in Pakistan and across Muslim world. Bina Shah answered few questions for Pakistaniaat.

Q. What is the biggest challenge that you had to overcome as a female writer?

Bina Shah: Nothing whatsoever. Being a woman is no impediment to writing. I have no doubts as to my ability, visibility, or any other aspect of writing. I expect to be taken as seriously as any other writer, male or female, and I generally am. I don't mind being classified as a woman writer, on the other hand - it's as valid a perspective as any other. I'm lucky to live in a day and age where I can declare myself a writer openly. There were centuries and eras when a woman was not allowed to write, or even put her name on a book she had written.

Q. Is the publishing industry same for men and women? If not, what are the some major issues that publishing industry could/should try to resolve for more gender equity?

Bina Shah: It's true that the publishing industry is biased against women - far fewer women get published, reviewed, sold or promoted than men do - and perhaps this has affected me in an abstract sense, but not in any way that impeded my career.

There persists this myth that women's writing isn't as worthy as men's (I just wrote a column for the Dawn Books and Authors section about the myth of the women writer), and another myth that men won't read women authors the way they do men, while women read both female and male authors. These are

misperceptions that have more to do with the bias in the minds of those who run the publishing industry than any actual fact.

Take the example of writing about the home and family life, for example. If a woman writes about these subjects, the writing is dismissed as “sentimental” or concerned only with domesticity. But when Jonathan Franzen writes about the same subject, he’s considered the greatest American novelist (I personally think the greatest American novelist is Donna Tartt, the author of *The Goldfinch* and *The Secret History*, with Marilynne Robinson and Jennifer Egan also in the running). Greatness seems to be the domain of men, but I’m glad to see that’s changing.

Q: We live in politically precarious times. We are witnessing a regression in terms of human rights, gender equity, religiosity etc. in a lot of countries. What role do you think fiction writers can play in this, if you think they should assume a role at all?

Bina Shah: The role of a writer, as always, is to record and witness first of all. The human experience involves progress and regression. We chronicle it all, we channel the emotions of anxiety and anger evoked by regression, we give expression to what a generation of people are feeling and thinking. We aren’t supposed to offer solutions, though, we offer something different: hope.

Q. In your new novel, *Before She Sleeps*, you venture into this relatively less explored genre of apocalyptic or speculative fiction. What made you venture into this genre/style? How did you come to make that choice?

Bina Shah: I was so tired of the usual writing from Pakistan about terrorism, politics, religion, migration to the West. I wanted to do something completely different, tell a completely different story and in a different way. The idea for the book came to me in bits and pieces. What if there was a society in which there were no women? How could that come about? What about a type of prostitute who offers companionship, where sex is completely off the table, in such a society? It was an experiment that turned into a book.

We have seen some canonical Urdu fiction by female writers like Quratulain Hyder and Ismat Chughtai etc. But our writers has not experienced a lot in vein of postmodern fiction (since this a contested term, let's just call it experimental, surreal, absurd literature in this question) -- your new novel, Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* are few recent novels which I see experiment with

genres. What, do you think, are the prospects for postmodern fiction in Pakistani literature? Both politically and aesthetically?

I find that people who write about Pakistan from abroad are more interested in realism, but everyone who lives and writes about Pakistan uses some form of surrealism. That's because living in Pakistan is a surreal experience. Mohammed Hanif's newest novel *Red Birds* is a fine example of that.

Another Pakistani writer has been very experimental with form is Nadeem Farooq Paracha. He wrote a novella on the Web site Chowk called *Acidity* back in 2003. I admired that work a lot - it used a technique called "cut up" which was popularized by William S. Burroughs; unfortunately it seems to have disappeared when the Web site was discontinued. He's a very political writer, but in this work, he put his critique of the state and the system into a dystopian cyberpunk genre.

I was just reading that this is what's driving literature in other authoritarian countries like China. I think that there's scope for the same movement in Pakistan, but it will probably remain niche for now.

Q. Women and their presence/access to public space has always been somewhat of an issue. What are your thoughts on the ideas of spaces and places in relations to women's issues in a more digitized age?

Bina Shah: When the Internet first came to Pakistan, it was a great relief for women, who were able to have some sort of a private life online. They could access information relating to health and their bodies, sex and sexuality, relationships, marriage, children, everything that was kept from them or just not available to them. They were able to form online friendships with whomsoever they wanted. It was a liberating experience to have that kind of space, away from prying eyes of family, neighbors, society in general. Unfortunately what we have seen is that the violence and harassment they face offline has followed them online; they are subjected to the same constant badgering for "friendship", attention, and worse, threats and blackmail. Men get women to trust them, then abuse that trust by threatening to reveal photos and chats that they have shared in confidence. As a result, we now have to contend with online violence against women, which often translates into violence in real life: some young women were honor-killed because videos of them dancing in the rain were shared on the Internet. The FIA in Pakistan now

has a cybercrime unit that goes after these harassers and predators, but it's hard to get women to report the crimes because of the shame and embarrassment that goes with them. The Internet is a mirror of our society, and the worst elements of our culture continue to be a torment to women and girls.

Q. We have seen an increased discussion about women's rights, (and confusion amongst some people), about feminist movements recently. What are your thoughts on people's reaction to these movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp in Pakistan? What could be done to make people, especially men in the street, more aware and less afraid about human equity?

Bina Shah: I have no patience for men who don't accept that women are equal human beings, and deserve the same rights, opportunities, and protections that men do. I think everyone is aware of this and understands the concept quite well. They simply don't want to give up their male privilege. It's very gratifying to think of yourself as superior to half the population just by default of your genitals. You didn't have to work to earn that privilege: it was just granted to you by God. Nobody gives up their slaves voluntarily, least of all men. No matter how many laws we have or how well-implemented they are, a change of mindset has to come from within. Only when men see their mothers, sisters or daughters discriminated against in society, feel the pain of that discrimination, and listen to their consciences will we have any change that really matters.

Q. Are you working on any new projects?

Bina Shah: At the moment I am taking a well-deserved break.