Theresa Barton

Event Reflection

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*On a warm September night, Pomona College gathered with Samina Baig and her brother Mirza and the greater inland empire Pakistani community to view their film Beyond the Heights, and discuss it afterward. Samina Baig is the first Pakistani woman to summit Everest and the Seven Summits.*

Unlike, I think, many of my classmates I found the Samina, Mirza, and the film uplifting and inspiring. I grew up in a remote mountain town and lament the fact that for so long the unfortunately colonial space of the outdoor stewardship, along with economic constraints that have kept Shimshalis from their mountainous surroundings. In a land American and British climbers spend tens of thousands of dollars to visit, it is a testament to their character that the Baigs, self-made in every way, achieved such success as international climbers. The content of the film, and the speaker’s presentations, demonstrated their inspiring character, while inadvertently bringing to light some of the intricate barriers facing Pakistani outdoorswomen.

Beyond the Heights was shot and cut artistically. While shocking to many audiences, this is a very modern trend in outdoor filmmaking, and Mirza was likely inspired by outdoor adventure documentaries shot with fisheye lenses and atmospheric vibes. Moments of sentient content, interviews with Samina and fellows climbers, shots of the final ascent, were all interspersed with panoramas of the view, snow at night, and memories of Samina collecting firewood and singing folksongs. The effect of this treatment of the narrative, nonlinear and hallucinatory, immerses audiences in the psyche of a mountaineer.

A salient conversation to be had about this film and its makers their feminist statement. The literacy rate of rural Pakistani women is quite low, numbers from the Pakistani Government estimate that Just over one-quarter (28%) of the population 10 years and over is literate, with males 39% and females 16%. The sustained Maternal Mortality Rate is alarmingly high, especially in rural areas. Against this backdrop, empowering messages, taken from the Beyond the Heights official Facebook page, including “Girls don’t bring dowries, they bring records,” and “Women Should Climb Their Own Mountains,” seem to be disconnected with the structural and economic issues the average Pakistani woman faces. That being said, the effect of having figures to take pride in, national stories to tell, and stories to emulate cannot easily quantified.

Feminist analysis also leads into questions about the political usage of the film’s uncontroversial presentation. In class, many students objected to the blatant nationalist message of the filmmakers in the form of flags, appeals to common pastoral ancestry, and in statements by the filmmakers about their intents. When asked about the risks she takes climbing, Samina replied: "My courage keeps me going and I think my country is worth the risk."[1] While these accusations hold, I think it is important to remember the important role sport stars play in the national pride of numerous counties, as exemplified by contests such as the Olympics and the World Cup. American sports stars regularly invoke American Identities quite publically, and I cannot say how big of a problem this is. If it applies to the Baigs then it would also apply to Athletes worldwide.

[1] "Pride of Pakistan : Samina Baig." *DailyTimes*. N.p., 30 Aug. 2015. Web. 19 Nov. 2015.

[2] [Pakistan Education Statistics (Summary) 2005-06](http://web.archive.org/web/20111018072054/http://www.moe.gov.pk/Pakistan%20Education%20Statistics-2005-2006T1.pdf), Government of Pakistan.