

WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

When Patriarchy Strikes: Exclusive Interview with Qaisra Shahraz

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Qaisra Shahraz is a UK-based novelist, activist and educationist. She was born in Pakistan and has spent most of her life in the Western world. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, former Director of Gatehouse Books and an advisor for the University of Lancaster six-year writing project entitled 'Mediating Marginalities/Moving Manchester'. She has another successful career in education as an inspector, consultant and teacher trainer. Qaisra was recently recognised as one of 100 influential Pakistani women in the Pakistan Power 100 List of 2012. Qaisra has appeared at many international writers' festivals and book fairs, and her work is on the curriculum in schools and Universities around the world. A critical analysis of her work features in a book entitled The Holy and the Unholy: Critical Essays on Qaisra Shahraz's Fiction (2011). Her award-winning drama series, Dil Hee To Hai, was broadcast on Pakistani television in 2003.

Through her work she presents to us the multiple voices of Pakistani society. Qaisra's best-selling novel, The Holy Woman (2001), which is set in the vibrant traditions of Sindh, tells an unusually powerful love story which takes readers to some of the little known traditional territories of Pakistan. It was awarded the title 'Best Book of the Month' by Waterstones. Its sequel, Typhoon (2003), is set in the same fictitious village of Chiragpur. Revolt (2013) is her latest novel, set in England and Pakistan. She has also published a collection of short stories A pair of Jeans and other stories (2013) covering 25 years of fiction.

Qaisra Shahraz as an author and intellectual represents the New Age Muslim Woman who has started exploring the theme of 'the suppressed half' in traditional societies. She explains that all Muslim women, veiled or unveiled, suffer a similar fate within certain forceful societies in Pakistan. Qaisra tries to uncover the ways in which 'women are being held captive; physically, socially, and culturally' in a prevailing feudalistic atmosphere of 'not-cosmopolitan' areas like Sindh, Pakistan. She shares her experiences of living as a Muslim woman with multiple identities in Britain.

Q. How do you locate the debates that have been happening across the Muslim and non-Muslim world over the 'identity' of Muslim women? Absence of Muslim women in the public arena, especially in traditional societies in Africa, Middle East, and South Asia has been construed as a great concern in the liberal world. So, what is your experience as a writer and activist with regard to aspects like 'controlled identity' or 'controlled public space' in traditional Muslim communities?

A. First of all, what I want to clarify is that my identity is based on what I have acquired from having lived for most of my life in British society. However, I was born in Pakistan and still carry childhood memories, which have served me well in my writing of my three novels. I am equally proud of my other identities of being Pakistani and Muslim. I have personally and very fortunately not experienced what you speak of ‘controlled identity’ or ‘controlled public space’. If I was living in Pakistan as an adult woman, I might experience something like that but not in Manchester. Yes, in the present political and global contexts Islamophobia is on the rise and a lot of negativity is aimed at Islam and Muslims at large, including heavily against women. The issue of the veil is always regularly brought up. With people like myself devoted to the equality issue – I have to remind others that women have a right to dress the way they want. Also I point out that the women who wear the veil especially in western societies are not oppressed or forced to wear the veil. I cite the example of my own sister, born and bred in Manchester, a practising Muslim and a professional dentist, who never leaves her home without her ‘hijab’ (head scarf).

Q. You said you are a Pakistani Muslim woman living in Britain. How was your experience of Pakistani women as a ‘liberated liberal woman’ during your many visits to Pakistan?’

A. I don’t like labels such as ‘liberated liberal woman’ but understand what you mean. There are women of all backgrounds in Pakistan just as there are in my novels, ‘The Holy Woman’, ‘Typhoon’ and ‘Revolt’ belonging to both the upper, middle and lower section of society. As described in these texts, the upper class women are privileged women who are more able to control their life through certain socio-economic factors. Chaudharani Kaniz in the ‘Holy Woman’ and ‘Typhoon’ is a classic example. She is a ‘queen’ of her world, running her own life and her business, helped by her social status, influence and wealth. Shahzada, the wife of a feudal landlord on the other hand is totally dominated by both her husband and father in law. She tries to battle against the tyranny of these two men but cannot stop her daughter Zarri Bano from being forced to become her clan’s ‘holy woman’. Lower class and less well-educated women in Pakistan are more likely to have less freedom, and lead lives controlled by the men of the household, whether it is a father, brother or a husband. This is what I have observed first-hand.

Q. Question of identity has been in the forefront of discussions; academic and non-academic for many decades now. Do you think the sense of an exclusive Identity or quest for it gives you a sense of confidence and personal location?

A. Yes – certainly. But I don’t have an ‘exclusive identity’. I have multiple identities. I describe myself as a British Muslim woman of Pakistani origin, who was born in Pakistan and has lived in the UK, in Manchester, since the age of 9. Like other human beings my identity ‘package’ is the result of and has been influenced by these factors; where I have lived, who I am, my gender, my social and educational background. My western British upbringing



combined with a Muslim identity have also helped to shape and influence the sort of person I am and have become. I am proud of my multiple identities including being a Muslim woman. I have been to Indonesia, Singapore and presently I am doing lots of interviews with women in India; regarding their domestic situations, education, work, family life and so on. Interviewing and writing about real people, including women from around the world, is quite an experience. Each woman is unique - a product of and life shaped by the world in which she lives.

Q. Marginality of women has always been an accusation in the discussions around Muslim communities across the globe. When the defenders of traditional Islam defend this absence, Post-colonial Islamic intellectuals relocate this 'absence' in a different garb. In these contexts, how do you visualise the 'forced absence' of Muslim women in Pakistan, your birthplace?

A. Yes, marginality of women has always been an accusation in the discussions around Muslim communities across the globe. Sometimes I resent the heavy focus on this. In all fairness to Pakistan, over the years there have been concerted attempts by ruling governing parties to bring more women into education, employment and including into politics. There is a good proportion of women represented in the Pakistani parliament. However it must be said that these women belong largely to the elite, educated or feudal class (backed by their families). They are the so called 'privileged' women in Pakistani society and enjoy a lifestyle alien to thousands of other women in Pakistan. They are not representatives of the masses. I do not want to generalize, but I am sure many women in Pakistan like other developing countries including in India are suffering from poverty and male and social subjugation.

It is not only class, education, wealth and home backgrounds that play a distinct role in women's lives but also very importantly their regional identities – as *Sindi* women, *Baluchi* women or *Punjabi* women. What language women speak, the way they dress and the social and cultural norms they follow is strongly related to the woman's immediate social and regional environment. For example the upper and middle class women of the Gulberg district in Lahore are a different sort of women, leading entirely different lives to those in the rural areas of Pakistan or in the Peshawar region, where a more strict social upbringing is enforced. Imagine the region that Malala has come from or where the Taliban have a stronghold where absence of education and technology is also a major factor.

Q. The North western parts and the Baluchistan regions of Pakistan appear to be a 'state within a state', certainly not just in your novels. The picture emerging from the media is very disturbing. Failure of the state apparatus to act is visible and discernible in a situation where there is a patriarchal power structure based on clans and ethnicity. Could you share some thoughts?

A. Yes the North western parts and the Baluchistan regions of Pakistan appear to be a 'state within a state' and 'there is a strong patriarchal power structure based on clans and ethnicity'

as you point out. And yes, over the years when we travel in Pakistan, through the different provinces we can see entirely different cultures at work. In Karachi, Islamabad, Lahore and other cosmopolitan areas you can see for example women participating in almost every area of work. However, it is not on the scale or the wide context that I am used to in England. On the other hand women of Baluchistan, NWFP [North Western Frontier Provinces] and Sindh are more likely to lead sheltered lives, under the control and patronage of their male kin. My first novel, 'The Holy Woman', takes as its theme, the importance of patriarchy in feudal communities like in Sindh; in particular I have focused on the issue of how men become main decision-makers in women's lives. My heroine at one point says 'We are beads in a tapestry that our fathers and grandfathers weave.'

South Pakistan is underdeveloped, more feudal in character and patriarchal. But the situation in Punjab is different. It has a cosmopolitan way of life and the rich and elite live there. It is more developed and society at large automatically affects women's life.

Q. Let me ask you something about Muslim society in Europe in general and Britain in particular. Media talk about a 'clash of identities'. Recent terrorist attacks, Islamophobia and the 'Otherisation' have been decisive in the creation of a peculiar psychology within and outside the Muslim Diaspora. How, as a writer and an activist, do you pursue these issues?

A. OK. These are very valid points. Yes we are experiencing a major shift in attitudes, including so-called 'clash of identities, cultures and civilisations'. I have lived in Britain for a very long time and noticed the change. Over the last decade or so there has been a rise in Islamophobia, marginalisation of Muslim communities and hatred towards Islam and Muslims at large. But it has also been a shocking wake-up call for Muslim societies too. They are undergoing some serious introspection. The polarisation was explicitly visible in British society immediately after 9/11 and the 7/7 bombing in London. There has been suspicion, withdrawal and confinement in the community. However I still insist on saying that Britain is one of the best countries in the world from a migrant's point of view, the way that migrant communities are treated. It's a fair, tolerant society devoted to equality issues and celebration of diversity.

Q. You say that there is a panic button in the Muslim community; a feeling of being 'marginalised' and 'looked at'. By saying that, do you mean that there has been a conscious attempt in the Muslim society towards creating an exclusive religious identity in Europe?

A. I did not say 'there is a panic button in the Muslim community' nor is there a conscious attempt in Europe for 'exclusive religious identity' as you term it. There is however a strong sense of Muslim identity and pride in being Muslims at the present time. This has manifested itself in for example more women taking to the 'Hijab', wearing the veil than twenty years earlier, including in western countries. The families of migrant Muslims like myself, who often consist of three generations are faced with a dual challenge. They accept the need to

integrate well within the host society, but also to stop being and feeling marginalized and constantly being 'looked at.' Muslims resent being closely scrutinized by the media and very often in negative terms. For some this could result in 'self-imposed exclusion.'

People like me are voicing the need for integrating more with the wider British society. At the same time we recognize the need to halt this process of marginalization and to speak up about our experiences; to build bridges between different faiths and the host community and above all to aim for community cohesion. We try to convince the wider society about Muslims' stand on terrorists and terrorism and also not to call or try to portray all Muslim as terrorists. Terrorists are terrorists. Killings and suicides are against the foundation of Islam. Those doing it cannot justify it in the name of religion. Their actions are criminal in nature. We have been trying to say to people, 'Look this is not Islam, we are peace loving people and this has nothing to do with the terrorists. They are doing it for their own reasons; economic and political'. For instance when I visit schools in Germany on my literary tours where one of my stories 'A Pair of Jeans' is being used as a literary text, I always leave them with this statement. 'I love my country – England. I am proud to be a Muslim. And I love my faith but I am not a terrorist. Please identify with Islam through Muslims like me – not those criminals.'

Q. If you look at South Asia; Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, there has been considerable amount of polarisation happening among communities which is a highly disturbing trend. In this light tell us about the attitude of Asian non-Muslim migrants towards Muslim Diaspora, especially Pakistan Muslims in Britain?

A. One of my current aims is to promote community cohesion amongst the minority communities settled in Britain, including from the sub-continent of India. On the whole, going by my experience the relationships between the Indians, Pakistanis and Bengalis is very positive and strong. There are many commonalities i.e. culture, food, clothing, languages, Bollywood etc that binds these south Indian countries. I find it an enriching experience and have many Indian and Bengali friends. I have very strong ties with India through my work as a writer. I have visited it twice and love the country and its people. I noticed many similarities between Delhi and Lucknow in India with Lahore in Pakistan and laughingly had to remind myself that it was one country.

Q. Do you think that the generally understood 'integration' is necessary? If so, how do you see the role of Muslim organisations of various ideological footing in Britain regarding confidence building and integration?

A. Yes integration is an absolute necessity. I have already partly discussed this. Currently with a lot of negativity shown towards Muslims due to the terrorist activities of a few, Muslim organisations recognise the importance of their role in 'confidence building and integration.' Their goals and those of individuals like myself who is a trustee of a Manchester Multi-Faith

Centre, a writer and an educationist, is to speak up about our experiences; to build bridges between different faiths and the host community. Above all to aim for community cohesion.

Q. We have seen multiple methods of integration when a community is a social/ethnic minority. Imposition 'from above' (assimilation) and the much celebrated 'natural process of evolution' are part of this integration process. Having lived in Britain for a long time, which one do you experience as a person belonging to an ethnic minority?

A. By any measurement I will say no to assimilation and yes to integration. The process of integration is very necessary. In order to integrate with mainstream society I don't have to give up my other identities, which as a human being is my right. We cannot be a clone of anybody. Every human being is different and we need to celebrate our differences rather than see them as a problem. I cannot become you or you cannot become me. Nobody has the right to make others look like, act like or believe like somebody else. What we need to aim for is mutual respect. Respecting others and their worlds and looking beyond our own norms and worlds. One of my messages to my German audience is 'Respect me for what I am. Respect my roots, faith, language, customs and culture. These are very important to me as yours are important to you.' Expecting to be just someone's mirror, a 'clone' of that being is not possible. It is inhuman as well. Assimilation and the need for it still remains a debatable issue in countries like Germany and France

Q. You mean a kind of 'imposed multi-culturalism'?

A. Yes absolutely. Ethnic minorities and other religious groups often face a lot of discrimination and hatred in many countries; on grounds of race, religion, culture, and for reasons economic. In France interference of the state in religion is rampant which is against the very foundation of modernity and secularism. Britain is more multi-cultural in character than some other European countries. As I said earlier, I value the British values of equality and its fair and just laws.

Q. There are many communities in Britain from South Asia. All these communities remain largely male-centered and patriarchal. How do you describe the ways in which South Asian communities function in Britain? Can you still see a 'dominating other' over South Asian diasporic women with certain agencies for control, especially with sexuality?

A. Not so much now. What I want to say is that people change with the times and the environment they find themselves in. They have to change or adapt to their new surroundings. As to how much depends on individuals. For example migrant women including Muslim and South Asian women go out to work in Britain more than they would normally have done in their country of origin. Other factors also effect change. We have to



move on in time and space. I think it is harder for men to be so overtly chauvinistic in a society which does not tolerate it.

Q. 'Outspokenness', especially by a woman, is resented or put down by the traditional religious communities. You know that people like Irshad Manji, the controversial critic of fundamentalism and conservatism within Islamic communities, are being threatened with death in the West. What kind of response do you get when you question the protected norms of traditional culture in Pakistani societies?

A. I discuss other elements of culture and am very careful about the issues of religion. It is a very sensitive issue anywhere in the world, not only in Pakistan. My novels discuss some negative issues in the societies there but they have nothing to do with the religion. Overall I have had a very positive response to my work both in Pakistan and in England including by the Pakistani communities there.

Q. When you talk about culture I don't think that you can talk about that without actually taking religion into consideration. Religion and its symbols as tools have always been used by feudalistic/patriarchal agencies.

A. Probably. But I am not talking about the religion as such. I am talking about some cultural practices and customs of the interior part of the Sindh province in my novel 'The Holy Woman.' The control over women exercised by the men has little to do with the religion but everything to do with the patriarchal need to dominate women. They would say that it is the religion but this is not correct. It is the men. Culture perpetuates itself in a male-centric society. If it had been the religion we should have experienced the same fate in developed societies as well, like in Britain. There are strong believers of Islam and their women are not controlled or their lives regulated with a chauvinistic fist. They have far more freedom and choice in their lives. Women like myself can do what they want. This control has much to do with a certain specific geographical identity and the social and cultural practices of that place. Faith often has little to do with it.

Q. You have a large readership in Pakistan. You are questioning the established customs and values in Pakistani society. Naturally, there will be responses; negative and positive. What kind of responses you are getting from your readers and the media?

A. Absolutely encouraging. Civil society and media as well as the readers are really wonderful to me. Not only in Pakistan at all levels. I have toured Pakistan three times as a writer and given lectures at all the major Pakistani universities in 5-6 cities. The experience has been very positive. I have also visited many places like Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Singapore and India. There have been tremendous positive responses from across the world. The universality of the novels is very interesting – binding readers together, including my latest novel 'Revolt.'



Whether you live in India or Indonesia the situation is the same, no matter what the geographical distance. In India I have been invited by many universities like Hyderabad Central University, Calicut University and by different civil society initiatives and found the interaction and experience very rewarding.

Q. The situation is not very different in India, especially in the interior. The plight of Muslim women at the hand of *Mahel* committees and domestic patrons is reflected in the poems of Shajahana and Salma, the new generation Muslim women poets. They explore the vulnerability of Muslim women and ask women to come out from the boundaries of tradition and atrocities. What is your experience in the Indian context?

A. I have heard these names and about their writings during my visit to Chennai. I am very glad that they have started to talk and write about issues relating to their lives and social issues. I have met and interviewed many women across class, ethnic and regional differences in India as part of my project on Muslim women. Varying pictures emerge - of different kinds of women and leading different lives, in different contexts. Of course, I know there have been changes in India over the last six decades. The intervention of the government and civil society is really appreciated in this regard. Education is the main solution. Every person has the right to education and education for life. Educating the women is equivalent to educating the whole nation, because of the possible positive impact they have on their families.

Q. Your experience in India as a whole?

A. Amazing! I have been meeting with people, organisations and media. This country is so diverse and beautiful. I am interested to know more about India; its cultures, religions and Gods. Its diversity fascinates me. I love and am genuinely interested in India. It is like Indonesia, really multi-cultural. Wonderful!

Yasser Arafath P.K. is a young historian and an assistant professor at University of Delhi, India. He has published research articles in journals and edited volumes, and has presented papers at various national and international conferences. Arafath's articles on important socio-cultural issues have appeared in leading Malayalam newspapers and periodicals. He is presently working on an edited book titled Muslims of Malabar: History, Texture, and Mindscape.

