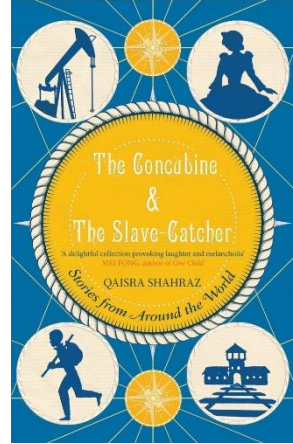


Qaisra Shahraz in Interview with Claire Chambers

Claire Chambers¹
University of York, UK



Qaisra Shahraz is a popular and acclaimed Pakistan-born and Manchester-resident screenwriter, educationalist, novelist and short story author. She was recently recognised as number 1 out of the 50 most influential women in Manchester. Last year she won the National Diversity “Lifetime Achiever” Award for services to literature, education, women’s rights and interfaith relationships. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and advisor to Asia Pacific Writers & Translators partnerships. Her novels have been translated into many languages including Mandarin.

Her debut novel, *The Holy Woman* (2001), takes as its protagonist a Sindhi virgin called Zarri Bano. In this novel, when her brother dies suddenly, Zarri Bano’s father breaks off her engagement, since she is now his heir. He forces her to marry the Qur’an and retain her inherited land for the family’s patriarchs. This cruel practice occasionally occurs in parts of Sindh and elsewhere in Pakistan.

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The Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Bill 2008 (passed in 2011) made the practice illegal, but this does not stop it from intriguing writers.

Her second novel *Typhoon* (2003) is a fascinating family saga about deception, social class, and women's pasts coming to haunt them. It is a kind of sequel to *The Holy Woman*, again set in the imaginary Sindhi village of Chiragpur, but the protagonists of the debut novel resurface again as only as peripheral players in *Typhoon*. The theme of guilt and secret suffering is inextricably linked to the oppressive social set-up in the story. The social-set up is home to forces of conservatism, patriarchy and authoritarianism.

In *Revolt* (2013), Qaisra Shahraz's third novel, she deals with the issue of cross-class and cross-racial marriage in rural Attock, north Punjab. The blurb states that it is "a portrayal of the nature of change, freedom, pride and prejudice." Certainly, *Revolt* has the texture of a Jane Austen novel, replete with intricacies of fashion, gossip and relationships. But it soars much beyond that.

Her *The Concubine and the Slave-Catcher: And Other Stories from Around the World* was published in September this year (2017) with Hope Road Publishing. And a similar publication in Bahasa Indonesia by Mizan in October under the title, *Train to Krakow*. It collects Qaisra's well-known stories, such as "A Pair of Jeans" which was anthologised for example in Muneeza Shamsie's *And the World Changed*, and has become a global phenomenon proving especially popular in Germany where it is widely taught in schools. It brings these together with much newer fiction, such as "Our Angel" and "The Concubine" written this summer. In this interview I discussed *The Concubine and the Slave-Catcher* in detail with Qaisra Shahraz, as well as asking her to give readers a sneak peek of her current work.

In the collection's first story "The Escape" Samir, an old Pakistani man who has been based in Manchester for decades, dreams of his previous life in Pakistan. On returning there, Samir realises he is no longer sure where home is. It seems to me that much of your writing is about home, homecoming (especially in The Revolt), belonging and unbelonging. Indeed, the epigraph to this book by Madeleine L'Engle speaks of "not quite knowing where home is." Why does this issue of home intrigue you so much? Do you yourself also experience confusion about where to call home?

As a migrant, living in the UK with multiple identities (British, Pakistani and Muslim) it is natural that the idea of home, homecoming and a sense of belonging should interest me. In my novel *Revolt* I wanted to explore cultural clashes, in particular those relating to a mixed-race marriage.

In *Escape*, my focus is on the first generation of migrants, people like my father who have lived in the UK for 50 years or so. The idea of "not quite knowing where home is" is very pertinent to Samir's story of loss and confusion.

Where does this person belong? Where is his homeland? The place of birth or where he has spent a mighty big chunk of his life? I believe it's the latter, despite the fact that one continues to maintain emotional links with one's country of birth.

In relation to "The Escape," "A Pair of Jeans" and other stories, I wanted to ask you about Manchester. I love this rich quotation from "The Escape":

A lot had changed, the area now thriving with different migrant communities – the Pakistanis and the Bengalis living side by side with the Irish and the Somalis. Many Asian stores and shops had sprung up. The Bengali sari and travel agent shops jostled happily alongside the Pakistani ones and the Chinese takeaway. Mosques catering to the needs of the Muslim community had sprung up, from the small Duncan Road mosque in a semi-detached corner house to the purpose-built Darul Uloom Centre on Stamford Road. (2)

Please could you say something about the city's changing face and many layers of migration?

"Escape" shows my love for Manchester, my home city and where I have lived since the age of nine. I have seen it grow, flourish and the residential areas change over the decades (as they are bound to) with the arrivals of refugees and migrants from around the world and many layers of migration. Having said that, and as is often the case with urban areas, Manchester has become congested, with more buildings going up. I am very proud of Manchester; it is truly a vibrant and a diverse city. For me this is a great form of enrichment.

The famous curry mile in Rusholme is no longer only for Pakistani restaurants, but has become a vibrant hub of food from around the world. As migrant communities establish roots and grow, prosperous families move out to leafier suburbs in the outskirts. My father, like the character of Samir, followed this pattern. With his hard-earned savings he moved from Manchester to the outer suburbs of Cheadle and Gatley.

The next story, "The Malay Host," features two married couples, one British and the other Malaysian, who come into conflict over tourism, disability and betrayal in Malaysia. The Southeast Asian setting struck me as something new to feature in your fiction, although I know that you've been there many times and that your writing is especially popular in Indonesia. Could you talk a bit about this region, your decision to write about it, and the impact of tourism there?

I love Malaysia. The story, "The Malay Host" came out of my visit to a traditional Malay home in the countryside. We were shown around the house by a gracious man who looked like my character. The rest, however, is entirely fictitious. Interestingly, I began the story on the plane journey going back home.

Disability is an issue I feel very strongly about and wish to raise awareness about, including through my literary work. My earlier story “The Gunga” was published in a previous collection and is about a couple in a Pakistani village who are unable to speak; the story recounts how they often became the butt of light-hearted ridicule by fellow villagers. In “The Malay Host,” the main character locks his disabled brother into a room when visitors arrive.

In many countries people shy away from the topic of disability. People with some form of disability are either neglected or in extreme cases shunned. For example, I remember being saddened when I saw a grandmother play happily with an able-bodied baby but totally ignored her grandson with a disability.

Yes, I have mixed views about tourism. As tourists we have a wonderful time visiting other places and countries, but we also end up prying into other people’s lives, which constitutes an invasion of their worlds and their privacy.

Then we have “A Pair of Jeans,” which has been widely anthologised, translated into a plethora of languages, and is on the curriculum in many German high schools. How do you account for its ongoing success after nearly three decades?

In 1990 my first short story, “A Pair of Jeans” was picked up by Dr. Liesel Hermes, a well-respected German teacher-trainer for the German publisher Cornelson. She found the story’s multicultural themes relating to migrants’ lives and clash of cultures very interesting and decided to add it to the curriculum as a literary text to use in German schools.

Twenty seven years later it’s still very popular. I get regular literary invites to German schools. I love Germany; it has almost become my second home. My hosts are wonderful. Its success can be attributed to its themes which remain topical. “Jeans” has provided me with a wonderful platform to hold intercultural dialogue, to build “cultural bridges” and raise awareness about the Muslim world. During my talks I try to debunk the stereotyped myths about Islam, Muslim women, extremism and so on.

I remind German and English students that there are extremists in all faiths. And my parting remark to them is: “I am a Muslim. I love my faith, but I am not a terrorist. Please connect with ordinary Muslims like me.” Currently there is a lot of hatred against Muslims in the West. To promote messages of peace and tolerance I always carry my banners “Spread Hummus Not Hatred” and “We Stand Together” to speaking events, including in Germany.

How did you find the experience of writing about the African American context and moving back in history to the nineteenth century in “The Slave-Catcher?”

“The Slave-Catcher” was conceived in very special circumstances whilst watching a film about slavery in Boston’s Museum of African American History a few years

back. In my writing life that moment remains the most amazing, iconic, creative moment. Can you believe it? Within ten minutes of watching the film, I had the idea, the characters and the complete storyline there and then. The challenge for me was American history, let alone the history of the black slaves! It led to a hard month of research about the slave trade and about life in nineteenth-century Boston, where black people lived free lives. The slave owners of southern states were chasing their slaves who had escaped decades earlier, forcefully taking back entire families, including those born and working as free people in Boston, back to their cotton fields. I was completely horrified by this.

*“The Evil Shadow” was originally written nearly 20 years ago and deals with what happens when two women transgress the superstition and stigma that shrouds miscarriage in a Pakistani village. This then fed into a subplot of *Revolt*. The issue of South Asian women being thought to bring bad luck and being ostracised attaches to infertility (the “barren” woman is shunned) and widowhood, as well as miscarriage. It’s brave and positive that you break the silence around miscarriage that exists across cultures, in West as well as East. Is this a problem you feel strongly about?*

I am not into superstitions myself and therefore feel strongly about the impact of superstition including relating to female matters of child birth and miscarriage on people’s lives. Superstition in some form or another exists in all cultures around the world. “The Evil Shadow,” set in a fictitious Pakistani village, was written several years ago and won Ian St James Award. It’s also one of the themes in my third novel *Revolt*. I abhor how superstitious beliefs can hurt, victimise, demonise or ostracise people.

The next story “Our Angel” features a male British protagonist who catches a glimpse of the precarity of Afghan workers in the Gulf. It strikes me that this collection has more masculine focalisation than I’m used to in your writing. Is it hard to write from a man’s point of view? Would you call yourself as a feminist? And finally, what do you make of the confluence of cultures in the Gulf states, brought together as they are by the oil industry?

“Our Angel” is based on a chat I had with an Afghan taxi driver whilst I was on my way to Abu Dhabi Book Fair. I learnt about his working life in the Emirates. I am fascinated by the amazing confluence of cultures in the Gulf States. I focus on the plight and treatment of migrants, from Asia and Third World countries, who are separated from their families for decades. Of course there is economic growth for the families of these migrants, but it can hardly compensate the pain of separation and the emotional wellbeing of families living without fathers, husbands and sons. My story is about the poignant friendship between an Englishman, Nigel and an Afghan worker.

No it's not hard to write about men but writing about women comes more naturally to me. And there are overall more women in my work than men. Yes I am a feminist, however I don't subscribe to any particular school of feminism. I feel very strongly about women's lives. My novels and drama serials do relate to women's issues, including about women's oppression in patriarchal societies. Currently I have become internationally active in fighting the discrimination against Muslim women wearing the veil. I am outraged that particularly in the west Muslim women are consistently being victimised for their attire. The famous Burkini fiasco in France still comes to the forefront of my mind. Two police men with guns, demanding that the Arab woman sitting on the beach in her burkini remove it. I remember asking myself, "What has the world come to?" It was a stark example of Islamophobia. Did the woman's human freedom and dignity not matter? I am shocked by this weird and negative obsession with a piece of cloth, a modesty garment which is part and parcel of a woman's faith. For me it's a human rights and an equality issue. I believe we women have a right to dress the way we wish to. We neither wish to have her head tapped to cover up as in Iran or be forced to remove a garment as in this French example or be treated differently.

I have interviewed over a hundred women from around the world in several countries with 32 hours of taped recordings. Through my research based on various themes, including education, marriage, work and the veil. I have categorically discovered that every single Muslim woman I interviewed whether in Indonesia or Pakistan was unique; she was a product of her world, home background, social class, culture and education and the support she received from her partner and family male members. These women from the humble tea pickers and university professors from Indonesia, business women, politicians and housewives in India, migrant women in Manheim in Germany, and Manchester in the UK were definitely not the passive and oppressed women as they are often portrayed as or stereotyped in the western media. Eleven Muslim Singaporean women interviewed came out the best, as they were leading very fulfilling lives overall.

In this, India and Pakistan's seventieth anniversary of Independence, I think it's so powerful that in "The Journey" you write about a Muslim boy being adopted by a Hindu family during the chaos of Partition. Could you discuss this story alongside the ongoing hurt caused by Partition?

"The Journey" was written several years ago. It's about a Muslim child called Riaz who is tragically abandoned by his parents in India as they flee to Pakistan. I learnt about the horrendous reality of the partition of India and Pakistan from an aunt. She narrated her heart-wrenching story about how she wept for days after she

had parted from her best friend Gopi, a Hindu whose family had to flee south to India.

The whole process surrounding the partition horrifies me to this day: imagine a line being drawn on a map of India, thereby making millions of people refugees overnight. I just knew I had to write this story as I was gripped by the scale of the human tragedy.

“Last Train to Krakow” deals with the unspeakable suffering of the Holocaust from the perspective of one deported pregnant woman. How did you go about researching and writing this story? Was it juxtaposed with the Partition story deliberately? (They do seem to speak to each other well.)

I visited the concentration camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Poland with some Jewish friends several years ago and I came face to face with the horrors of the Holocaust. Like “The Slave Catcher” a great deal of historical research had to be undertaken. I learnt a lot, including about the gassing of people. My Jewish friends also helped in checking for accuracy of historical detail. It became the story of Hela, a young pregnant Jewish woman who had written a letter to her mother urging her to buy train tickets for resettlement in Krakow. The juxtaposing of the two stories was done by my editor, Joan Deitch. They are both about journeys and human suffering.

Why did you choose to close the collection on a panoramic story based in sixteenth-century Peru?

The stories in this international collection span 25 years of my writing life and cover different time lines and countries. “The Concubine” is my latest story. It was completed literally three months before the publication date. It was conceived and the first scene was written whilst sitting on the top summit of Macchu Picchu mountain in Peru with a group of women writers as part of a writers retreat. What a marvellous and memorable moment that was! My story is set in Cusco and goes back to the sixteenth century – the period of Spanish conquest of the Incan Empire of Peru. This story too entailed a lot of research. I was fascinated by the idea of Spanish brides travelling to join their men in Peru, and by the lives of the native concubines.

Finally, please tell us something about your latest work or project you are working on.

I am working on my latest novel set in Morocco, as well as a very exciting and ambitious project: the setting up of a Muslim Arts and Culture festival (MACFest) in Manchester. There will be four strands to this festival, celebrating literature, education, art and culture. *Insb Allah* it is to be hosted in November 2018.

Muslims and non-Muslim speakers and artists (with specialist interest in the Muslim world) will be invited from the UK as well as from abroad.

I have devoted my life to building cultural bridges and holding interfaith dialogue with the aim of bringing Muslims and non Muslims together. Such work is of utmost importance in current times when Islamophobia is on the rise. The mission for this art and culture festival is to bring all faith communities together, to remove barriers, educate, raise awareness and celebrate the rich Muslim heritage. In Manchester we have many thriving and well settled Muslim communities from around the world, from Azerbaijan to Timbuktu. We want those communities to come together with the indigenous host community to celebrate their world, traditions and cultures.

Qaisra Shabraz, thank you.