

An Interview with Qaisra Shahraz

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Since the mid-eighties writers from the Indian subcontinent have contributed significantly to the genre of fiction. Much of this writing has come from those who have settled in the West but have not severed ties with their native country. Qaisra Shahraz is one such writer who was born in Pakistan but left her country at the age of nine to settle in Manchester, England. This British-Pakistani writer combines many roles with élan. She writes novels and short stories, pens scripts for television, works as inspector of colleges and universities, trains teachers and works as education consultant, and also tours and lectures in different cities of the world. Qaisra Shahraz first stepped into the literary scene with her highly acclaimed story “A Pair of Jeans” (first published in 1987), which is now a prescribed text in many universities, such as the University of Rabat (Morocco), Aligarh Muslim University (India) and South West University of Technology (Mianyang, China). Many of Shahraz’s other stories, such as “The Elopement” (1988), “Perchanvah” (1994), “The Goonga” (2008) and “The Slave Catcher” (2014) have also won her critical acclaim. Her first novel *The Holy Woman* (2001) confirmed the arrival of a major literary talent. This novel, essentially set in

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Sindh (Pakistan) and representing the interplay of power, patriarchy and religion in an agricultural society, opens a window to an unheard of world. Passionately devoted to her art, Qaisra Shahraz loved her characters in *The Holy Woman* so much that she continued with them in her next novel *Typhoon* (2003), which can be considered both a prequel and a sequel to *The Holy Woman*. Though the two novels share a certain ambience and value system, their technique and pace set them apart. Both these novels have been translated into different languages, including Bhasa Indonesia, Dutch, Hindi, Malayalam, Mandarin and Turkish. Shahraz's third novel, *Revolt*, published in February 2014, has further enhanced her reputation as a writer.

Pakistani fiction in English is noted for its intensely political character. Almost as a rule, Pakistani Writing in English does not shirk political questions. Qaisra Shahraz's writing, though occasionally political, can be best approached for her social concerns. Unlike some of her contemporaries who discuss issues like the Partition (Maniza Naqvi, Kamila Shamsi), Bangladesh Liberation War (Sorayya Khan) and terrorism (Mohsin Hamid, H.M. Naqvi, Maha Khan Philips), Shahraz's work engages with social and philosophical issues. A very striking feature of her art is the presence of complex and powerful women characters, both in her stories and novels. In keeping with her thematic concerns, her style of writing is a total departure from the likes of Hanif Kureishi and Mohsin Hamid.

Qaisra's work has attracted the attention of critics from different parts of the world and from different critical orientations. If Pakistani critics Sana Imtiaz and Shirin Zubair bring postcolonial theory to approach her work, a German critic Karin Vogt reads *The Holy Woman* from the Western female perspective. If Masoodul Hasan, an Indian critic, considers the edification of Western opinion on Muslim issues an important concern of Qaisra Shahraz, Mohammad Ezroua, a Moroccan critic, analyses the response of Moroccan students to the conflict between tradition and modernity in the work of this British-Pakistani writer. In fact, Qaisra Shahraz's oeuvre is still evolving.

Readers familiar with Milan Kundera's interviews in his classic *The Art of the Novel* may agree that it is always fascinating to hear a writer talk about his or her own work. In this freewheeling interview, the British-Pakistani writer Qaisra Shahraz talks about various aspects of her writing. She speaks about influences on her writing and elaborates on the role of the publishers. She discusses her motivation in writing *The Holy Woman*, her love of the character of Zari Bano, her eagerness to present strong women characters and her desire to raise awareness about Islam without compromising on her art. Qaisra does not shy away from speaking on some contentious issues like the confusion of the tribal and the Islamic in popular imagination, the importance of India for Pakistani writers and the challenges before a writer in the face of the threats posed by the conservative elements in Pakistan. Interestingly, Qaisra Shahraz turns a literary

critic when she talks about her work, especially in her discussion of the pace and movement in her narratives and her highlighting of village life in her novels. Shahraz also records her reaction to the criticism that has appeared on her work, especially in a book titled *The Holy and the Unholy* (eds. Abdur Raheem Kidwai and Mohammad Asim Siddiqui). It comes as no surprise that she was intrigued by the multifarious interpretations of her work in the book. Finally, she provides a rare peep into her private world of writing: her work hours, her struggle to find time for writing from her tight schedule, her inspiration, her being addicted to technology and social media and her motivation to go on and on. All through this interview her candour and curiosity shines forth.

When did you begin writing?

I had wanted to write since I was 15. I don't know why. My school friend tells me that I had a vivid imagination, loved making up stories and enjoyed telling them to my other friends. I was first published at the age of 19, whilst still a student at university, with an article I wrote on Greek vases for the glossy international magazine, *SHE*.

Writers often complain that there are not many avenues for publishing stories. How difficult was it finding publishing platforms for your work?

I started my fiction writing career with short stories. It was quite easy back then, but I think it is even easier now in the internet age. I was published in many anthologies in the UK, and later abroad. Two of my stories, "A Pair of Jeans" and "Elopement," were selected for use in German schools. I found that entering short story competitions was a great way to get my work published, and also to develop my creative writing skills. For example, I would sometime use the same story and reduce it to fit the required length of a competition. The more I shortened, the sharper the story became – this was a great discovery for me in my early career.

I think at that time there were fewer avenues for publishing poetry, and this partly explains why I never wrote poems as publication was very important for me. I wrote not just for pleasure, but for publication too. "A Pair of Jeans" eventually became part of a collection of short stories entitled *A Pair of Jeans & Other Stories*, and was recently published as an E-book on Kindle. Some of these stories, including "Elopement," explore the cross-cultural issues of what it was like growing up as a migrant in Britain leading two lives – one within home and one outside – walking in and out of the two cultures of being British and a Pakistani Muslim.

When did the idea of writing The Holy Woman first strike you? How did you nurture that idea, and did it require research?

I got the idea for *The Holy Woman* whilst watching a TV documentary on a British channel. It was about a feudal tradition in a small part of Sindh, where women were being forced to become nun-like figures and heiresses of land by being married off to the Holy Qur'an. This situation happened when there were no other male members in the family to inherit the land, and the family's sole intention was to stop the land passing into other hands. I knew nothing about this un-Islamic tradition – it is practically unheard of, even in Pakistan – and now it has been stopped by the government. I was deeply disconcerted and horrified as a woman to learn about this custom. It was that very evening, nearly 18 years ago, that I decided to write about this issue and the "Holy Woman," Zarri Bano, my chief protagonist, came alive in my head and heart. The documentary was my main form of research, and the rest was pure imagination. The story was set in Sindh, but in reality it could have been anywhere in Pakistan. As I had childhood memories to rely on from my many visits to Pakistan, I enjoyed creating the world of Zarri Bano's family. It became a powerful love story and also a window into other cultures and societies for a Western audience. *The Holy Woman* also became a valuable platform for me to explore the many issues relating to women's lives in patriarchal communities.

It is a voluminous work. In retrospect, do you think you could have reduced its length?

Indeed it is. *The Holy Woman* became a blockbuster of a novel. In fact, it is two novels in one. I had two storylines in my head: the story of Chaudharani Kaniz, the tyrannical village queen; and Zarri Bano and her family in a small town in Pakistan. I found that there were parallels between the two stories and decided to interweave them through the character of Zarri Bano's grandfather, who also lives in the same village as Kaniz. So, the story grew and the number of characters increased. As I followed the journey of Zarri Bano's life as a "holy woman," I took her on travels to other countries, and this enabled me to set my book in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and a chapter in London.

The book ends in the lush jungle of Malaysia. I fell in love with Malaysia when I first visited it in 1994 and promised myself that I would set my future work in this country. I really wanted to introduce this country to my readers. My family and I enjoyed our time in Kuala Lumpur and other places nearby. We visited the famous gorgeous mosque in Shah Alam, the wonderful central market, the batik factories and of course places like the Batu Caves and the nearby jungle. These places mentioned are all faithfully depicted. I loved writing the last chapter, the poignant scene between my heroine and hero in the lush beautiful setting in Malaysia.

Having written two blockbuster novels (*The Holy Woman* and the recent *Revolt*), I am not inclined, nor do I have any more time, to write such long books. *Revolt* took me 8 years to complete. It is the most ambitious of my literary projects and managing the storylines of a whole village and the multiple redrafting of the story took a lot of writing and a long time.

This novel is praised for taking up the cause of women, and is considered an important feminist text, albeit very different from the Western understanding of feminism. It also self-consciously discusses feminism. Was it a deliberate choice to present strong women characters, and to offer a particular kind of discourse on feminism?

Yes, it was a deliberate choice on my part to present strong women characters. My novels have many women who initially become victims of male tyranny or patriarchal communities. However, they are resilient women who fight back and assert themselves and their rights. In *The Holy Woman*, I have female characters who challenge their male family members, such as Zarri Bano saying defiantly to her grandfather: “I’m not a *puthley*, a puppet that you can dangle to your whim.” Her grandmother, Zulaikha, who appears in the sequel, *Typhoon*, says to her husband, Siraj Din: “I am your equal, treat me with respect. I will never be dominated by you.” The women at the lower end of the social scale, such as Kulsoom, Massi Fiza and Naimat Bibi in my three novels, are all enterprising women, economically independent and ironically leading lives free of the strain of male tyranny and control compared to the mistresses for whom they work.

We also hear about some terms, such as Islamic feminism. Your novel is critical of some patriarchal customs, and yet does not indulge in Islam or Muslim-bashing.

Yes, my intention was to inform and raise awareness. There is no Islam-bashing in my work. I definitely use my writing as a platform to promote a better understanding of Islam, and the Muslim world at large. In particular, to combat the negative images that are often hogging Western news headlines about Muslims. I hope that through my work the audience, readers and listeners can gain a better understanding of issues relating to Islam and the Muslim worlds. *The Holy Woman*, which was set in four Muslim countries, was aimed at presenting the everyday lives of Muslims to non-Muslim readers so that they can learn about a number of issues, including the veil which is often conceived as a tool of oppression. In reality, thousands of Muslim women are wearing it as a symbol of freedom – freedom from vanity. As my heroine informs a female friend, wearing a burkha had freed her from the worry of having to dress up, and the pressure of “having to look good or presentable.”

What do you have to say about the East-West motif that occurs quite prominently in your work, from “A Pair of Jeans” to your latest offering, Revolt?

I wrote a number of stories at the beginning of my fiction writing career, which explored cross-cultural issues and the lives of migrants and their multiple identities. “A Pair of Jeans” has a focus on the cultural clash relating to dressing and clothing, and “Elopement” tells the story of a young woman eloping with her lover and the catastrophe that ensues in her home. Both stories were written to raise awareness about the need for understanding different cultures, and both are still being studied in schools in Germany and England. When I visit schools to discuss my stories, I reach out to them with the appeal to respect other cultures, customs and ways of lives, and to look beyond their own Western norms. It’s so interesting to note that people will read the same story through their own cultural prism. In other words, they will have their own interpretation of what is going on and of the themes and motifs in the story, depending on the cultural framework through which they are viewing and assessing it. As you know, Dr. Asim, more than three academic papers have been written on my story, “A Pair of Jeans”: one by the German Professor Liesel Hermes, who introduced my story to Germany; one by Mohammed Ezroua, a Moroccan professor from Rabat; and another by Shuby Abidi, an Indian academic. Then another Indian academic Sami Rafiq also wrote on this story. All four relate the story through their own cultures, norms and personal understanding. I found this so intriguing, for it overtly demonstrated to me that literature is often read in the context of the reader’s world, and not within the cultural world that is being portrayed in the literary text. For instance, the scene of Miriam showing part of her naked midriff raises no eyebrows in the Western context, as it is acceptable for women to show a lot of flesh, such as when dressed in a bikini on a public beach. However, where female modesty and covering of the body is the norm, as in a Muslim society, that same scene would have a very different interpretation for those readers.

In *Revolt*, I have taken the debate further with a mixed race marriage, appealing to a global audience that as human beings we are all the same. Religions, cultures, ethnic groups, colour prejudice and racism should not divide us. Unfortunately, they do and the results are intolerance and hatred. It was a challenging theme to tackle, and I wanted to explore the stereotypes from both sides. For example, the situation of Daniela, an English woman who marries a Pakistani man, and the ensuing racism that occurs between the two families as they wrestle with their own prejudices and stereotyping, and subsequently learn to cope with the reality of having an “outsider” in their midst. Daniela’s mother, Elizabeth, finds it difficult to accept her daughter marrying a man of another colour and faith. His family also refer to Daniela as a “Gori,” a “white woman,” and expect the worst from her in terms of sexual behaviour.

A partial reading of the many customs followed in Pakistan and Afghanistan may confuse the tribal with the Islamic. Do you think that The Holy Woman is more about tribal than Islamic customs?

Yes, you are correct. People do have a tendency to confuse the two, and indeed *The Holy Woman's* character, Zarri Bano, is pivotal to relating the tribal Sindh custom followed by a select few – wealthy and very powerful landowners. As discussed earlier, the custom has no base in Islam. In fact, throughout my novel I use my characters as a mouthpiece to remind the reader that these practices are against the teachings of Islam.

There is a very dominant view in literary criticism that a novel has many intertexts; to clarify this view, a novel cannot come into being without other novels. Typhoon reminded me so much of The Scarlet Letter. Your villagers, particularly in Revolt, remind one of Hardy's rustic characters in The Mayor of Casterbridge. In what way has your reading influenced your writing?

As I have studied literature from around the world – American, Greek, Roman, Russian, French and British – I am bound to be influenced by the works of fantastic writers that I thoroughly enjoyed reading. *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of my favourite books. When Dr. Asim in your article you compared the feelings of guilt portrayed in that book to those felt by my characters in *Typhoon* – such as how my heroine Naghmana is ostracised by society when she is caught in the arms of another woman's husband – I did recall the fate of Hester Prynne wearing the letter "A" stitched onto her dress. There are also distinct parallels with Thomas Hardy. I have been very much influenced by him, and his work hooked me from the age of 15 after I read *Far From the Madding Crowd*. I truly loved his work, and in particular enjoyed reading about rustic life in 19th century Dorset, England. This must partly be responsible for my interest and fascination in portraying rural life. Village life plays a major part in my work, in short stories like "The Zemindar's Wife" and "Perchanvah," published earlier this year in *A Pair of Jeans and other Stories*. By the way, I am delighted to inform you that my story "The Zemindar's Wife" was first published by Professor Quayum in his edited collection of Asian short stories, *A Rainbow Feast: New Asian Short Stories* (Singapore, Marshall Cavendish), in 2010.

What led you to writing Typhoon?

I wanted to write a novel based on a short story that I had written many years earlier. Interestingly, when I came to write this novel, soon after the *Holy Woman* was completed, a strange thing happened. I fell in love with some of my

characters and I really did not want to part with them. So much so that I decided to take them with me into *Typhoon*, and it became a sequel and a prequel. In this novel, readers meet Zarri Bano again as an adult, and also as a child, as the main action of the novel takes the reader to an event that created a storm, a “tofan,” in the village of Chiragpur. I enjoyed writing this novel – it covers many serious themes, including rape, remarriage and infidelity. As a juror I witnessed an incident of a young British woman bringing a case of rape in her childhood to court. The effect of seeing that poor woman, so deeply mortified and devastated by what had happened to her, resulted in me wanting to explore the silent suffering of rape victims, particularly in societies where talking openly about it is not possible because of the feelings of shame.

Compared to The Holy Woman, the sense of movement and pace in Typhoon is distinctive, and your prose achieves great pace and urgency, especially at the beginning of the book. Do you agree?

Yes, there is a brisk pace and sense of urgency in *Typhoon*, and the pace of *The Holy Woman* is much more leisurely. The canvas of the novel is also much broader as it covers five years and is set in several countries. At the time of writing *Typhoon* I was also writing a drama serial, so that may have affected the sense of urgency, drama and conflict in the novel.

The city has taken over the village in our books, and also in our films. You seem to bring some focus back on the village in your writing.

I am so glad that you have picked up on this aspect of my writing. I don't know why, but I love writing about ordinary people, from all walks of life, and I can relate to them very well and on the same par as those from higher classes. Since childhood I have been fascinated by class divisions, particularly in Pakistan. In my work I explore how these divisions impact on human beings and their relationships. Class division is a theme that runs through all my three novels, and some of the short stories in *A Pair of Jeans & Other Stories*.

In my novels – *Revolt*, *The Holy Woman* and *Typhoon* – the minor characters become almost major characters, and one reviewer even wrote: “The minor characters have their moments to shine too.” As noted by many readers, my affection for them is obvious, and one of my favourite characters in *Revolt* is the gossip monger Massi Fiza, the local washerwoman.

The rural world that I have created in all three novels, and several stories, is far removed from that of Manchester, my home city, and it has captured my imagination since I was seven and still continues to fascinate me. A friend from my school days marvelled as to how I could have created such a world – “It is so real!” she exclaimed – having lived most of my life in England. The imagery

comes from my childhood memories, and of travelling with my maternal grandmother. My parents' family home was in Lahore, but my early life rotated around two other cities – Gujrat and Faisalabad. My mother often angrily bemoaned that I was missing out on my education, but my grandmother once scoffed back: “Don’t worry, she’ll be a professor one day!” I did not become a professor, but her trips sowed the seeds of my writing career. A great traveller, she was often on the move – had to visit some place or other – and I, her beloved young companion, happily hopped along everywhere with her, visiting villages and famous religious shrines.

This other world simply enchanted me. It was Pakistan, but so different to me. The class divisions were so obvious, and the landowning families dominated the rest of the village householders, who were made to know their place in society, and adhere to it. This is a world of inequality and male domination, where patriarchal tyranny strictly controls people’s lives, and yet results in tight-knit relationships between men and women. It is a place where huge imposing marble villas dominate the rural scene, dwarfing the humbler dwellings where people offer you infinite warmth and wonderful hospitality, rushing out to offer you my favourite drink of *lassi*. I am an outsider, peeping into this serene world of infinite beauty with its green fields and fresh air. It is the world of my imagination and where my heart is, and to where I have been returning over and over again in my work. And, I tenaciously hold on to it!

While editing a collection of articles on your work, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that The Holy Woman could be seen from so many different perspectives. Were you surprised? How did you react to these various interpretations of your work?

Yes, I was surprised. When writers write, they are not thinking primarily of how their work will be used or in what context it will be interpreted, they just write. It’s fascinating to see readers’ observations. Not only do they make me review my work and assess how accurately the points of my stories have been identified, but I often find myself asking, “Did I write that?” “Is that what I meant?” It was indeed a humbling experience for me to have academics writing articles on different topics from my novel, and from many different angles and themes. In Professor Karin Vogt’s article, “Reading *The Holy Woman* with German Readers,” her interpretation was totally different from that of Professor Abdul Kidwai, who homes in on the focus of the modern Muslim woman. Prof. Vogt saw my heroine primarily as a victim figure, of male tyranny. My heroine is much more than that.

The writing scene in Pakistan is very busy, and there are many women writers who are predominantly focused on political themes. Do you think that this makes it slightly one-

dimensional? Where do you place your own writing in this corpus? Do you find any difference between work by writers settled in Pakistan and those in the West?

Indeed, the writing scene in Pakistan is very busy, and there are many women writers – and men – writing in both English and local community languages, including Urdu. I don't think that the work of those authors who focus on politics is necessarily one-dimensional, but my situation and context of writing is quite different, and my work focuses on social and women's issues. I was born in Pakistan, but have lived in England for most of my life. I have studied primarily Western literature, and did not have the opportunity to read or study Indian and Pakistani literature; therefore, the language barrier has been an issue for me. My main everyday language is English. I really wish that I could write drama serials for Pakistani TV in Urdu, but my previous drama script was translated by someone else in Lahore.

Manchester is where my home is, where *everything* is. I'm a Mancunian in every way, and I've lived here practically all my life. I went to the local school and three universities – University of Manchester, Salford and Metropolitan. Manchester is where I live as a writer, and where I write. Although my creative mind is elsewhere, it's all really happening here in Manchester. The scene here is rich and vibrant with so much going on. However, as a reader from an early age my mind travelled further. I loved to read books set in other countries, like Nigeria, India, France, China and Russia. Those books opened out new worlds to me, and encouraged a sense of intrigue about those countries.

Later, I questioned myself as a writer that surely there were people out there who wanted to read about Pakistan and other Muslim countries. I felt it would be boring to write about my local scene, and that is why I started to write stories set in Pakistan, particularly within the villages that I experienced as a child. Yes, there is a difference in the writing scene for those based in Pakistan as compared to writers from outside. We write about what we know best; our local values, settings and ideas that influence us. I am sure that my novels would be quite different if they had been written by a woman living entirely in Pakistan.

Would you agree that India is usually absent from your work, and yet there appears to be some ambivalent attitude towards India in Revolt?

Yes, India is absent from my novels, but there are two stories to be published in the future – “The Journey” and “The Courtesan” – that are both set in India. One is about the partition, and the other is about the tragic tale of Anarkali, the courtesan who wanted to marry the Mughal prince, Salim.

What is the readership for Pakistani-English fiction in Pakistan?

I can't say for sure, as I don't live in Pakistan and so I am not familiar with the reading trends. I do know that English is a major language, and a lot of educated people read works written in English. There is a lot of good work coming out of Pakistan, by both male and female writers of Pakistani origin, and they are enjoying huge readerships and winning prizes on an international scale. I am sure that Pakistani readers are delighted to know that mainstream Pakistani writers, and those living elsewhere, are doing well on the international scene.

Considering the serious threat posed by many conservative elements and their noticeable presence in Pakistan – also evident in India – do you think that writers' artistic expressions are being affected?

Writers need to write what they feel strongly about, without the fear of repercussions. However, if their aim is to deliberately offend people, incite hatred or write pure sensationalism to become famous, I think that is acting irresponsibly. But then, who decides on the parameters of what is possible and not possible creatively? Writers need to have the freedom to explore any topics that they feel strongly about, but written with sensitivity, honesty and maturity.

Yes, that is very well said. My next question relates to India. You know, despite India and Pakistan sharing a troubled relationship, writers from Pakistan are routinely published in India. In what way is India important for writers from Pakistan?

I think that for writers like me, India is very important as it offers great opportunities for publication and a large readership. I am delighted to have been published in India by Penguin Books, Yatra Books, HarperCollins and DC Books, including the translation of some of my work into three Indian languages. I am also delighted that the University of Aligarh, and you, Dr. Asim, edited a collection of essays in the academic textbook, *The Holy and the Unholy; Critical Essays on Qaisra Shabraz's Fiction*. So, India has indeed become a very special country for me. I have toured and given lectures at many major universities in several Indian cities, including, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai, Delhi, Jaipur, Lucknow and, of course, Aligarh. Pakistanis and Indians share so many ties, including cultural and historical. After all, it was once one country that was divided into two parts.

I have loved being in India – a fantastic place. Blatant animosity and heated politics between the two countries over the years have not affected me as a person or a writer. I have many Indian friends, and India has also offered me the great potential of a large readership, which I enjoy. Also, I have a lot of

respect and admiration for all Indian writers who have succeeded so well on the international scene, including the status of winning Booker Prizes.

Your books have appeared with two different titles. Was it your choice, and do you think it may have caused some confusion to readers?

No, it was not my choice. In India they decided to change titles for publicity and genre reasons. I was not totally happy about this, but I had faith in their decision and went along with it. Yes, the decision probably caused confusion for some readers, but I am hoping to soon have my novels published under the original titles. Vani Prakashan, a publishing house based in New Delhi, will soon bring out the first two novels in Hindi, translated by Zakia Zaheer (*The Holy Woman*) and Sheba Rakesh (*Typhoon*).

Oh, that is great news for Hindi readers. You also have a busy job in education. That must consume a lot of your time and energy, so how do you manage to find time for your writing?

This is a question that I am often asked. My life is plotted out on a weekly basis, depending on my different roles and commitments. If it is an inspection week in a college or university, I am normally away from home and travelling to other cities. My working day starts early and finishes late – usually from 7am until around midnight. I am busy with meetings, observations of activities, reading of various documentations, gathering and recording of evidence, and writing up inspection reports. If I am leading an inspection, then I have to support and supervise the work of the team members.

If I am at home, I try to get in a short spell of writing in the morning, followed by lots of admin tasks related to my inspection work or literary tours, and tweeting. In the afternoon, I am busy with household chores, cooking meals, meetings, reading or a gym class, and checking emails. The evening is my time to catch up on editing manuscripts, tweeting, connecting with friends, watching TV or a movie with my family, and the odd Indian and British drama serial.

Then there are the “tour weeks.” I do a lot of travelling to many countries, attending literary festivals, book fairs, giving university lectures or launching my novels in different languages. In July, I will be in Singapore for the *Asia Pacific Writers* annual gathering/festival, and I am really looking forward to it. I am also busy preparing for a multi-city literary tour of Australia, where I will take part in the Byron Bay Writers Festival, and give lectures at universities such as Flinders, in Adelaide and the University of Western Australia.

Yours indeed is a busy life. But your readers would be curious to know more about your writing. You know that writers tend to have preferences for a particular time when they work,

a designated area, pen and paper, laptop or tablet, etc. Some revise their writing a great deal, and others can get it right the first go. Some fend off writer's blocks with ease and others have to fight it. In this last question let your secrets be out!

I write mainly in the morning and edit some parts late at night, as the middle of the day and evenings are taken up with other commitments and family life. When I do inspections, I'm afraid that there are long spells of no writing time.

I have no particular place for writing – it could be on a sofa or if I want some quiet time I will go to the bedroom. If deadlines are to be met and there's a lot of word processing, then I will have to use the desk in my study area. A decade ago it was difficult for me to think creatively in front of a computer screen. My earlier work was written in longhand, but I wrote *Revolt* on a laptop and this was a major milestone for me; I was also in better control of my material. Now I am delighted to say that I can write, even my first draft, straight onto the computer screen. It has not only saved me in word processing costs, but I am now able to edit my novel as I go along – a totally different process to my first novel.

My head is always crammed with so many matters that there is often little space for pure creativity. This is worrying at times, but it means that I have no time for writers' block. Another distraction which significantly eats up my creative time these days is social media. I often find myself being lured onto either Twitter or Facebook! When I wrote my first novel, 17 years ago, I had more quality writing time as there were fewer distractions and no world literary tours or promotional events to plan.

I am trying to finish the first draft of my fourth novel – my fifth work of fiction – set in Morocco. The writing of the first draft, setting the scenes, formulating dialogue and creating descriptions from the head to the page is the most challenging part of writing. It is also very exciting as the story begins to take shape and the characters come alive. The novel is “shaping” up well at the moment especially after my research trip to Morocco recently; new characters and scenes have entered and changed the dynamics of the plot and the relationships between the characters. It's all so fascinating! You can follow the writing “journey” of my new novel on my web page under the posts, *Writing Diaries*: <http://qaisrashahraz.com>.