

Qaisra Shahraz, *Revolt*. London: Arcadia Books, 2013. 431 pp. ISBN 9780957-330498.

Qaisra Shahraz's first novel, *The Holy Woman* (2001), won wide acclaim for its very many merits, including its laudable attempt at raising and answering questions about gender justice, female sexuality and human relationships in the traditional Muslim society impacted by the challenges and pressures posed by the modern globalised world. Her forte consists in her recontextualisation of Muslim society and late modernity. It is indeed gratifying that her latest novel, *Revolt* (2013), accentuates her dexterous affirmation of the Islamic value system and the panacea for tiding over the plethora of problems afflicting both individual and community life in today's rural Pakistani society ravaged by superstition, materialism, class distinctions, breakdown of family life, generation gap and erosion of values. Swayed by selfishness and other base desires, most of the characters are found transgressing the centuries-old conventions and family values, prompting this blunt observation: "Why is everyone rising in revolt against the norms?" (406). It is indeed disturbing to note the deep distrust, even hostility between parents and children, husbands and wives, and sisters, friends, and neighbours. Most of them being "aggrieved" are seen unabashedly snapping ties – marital, familial and social. Yet, amazingly enough, *Revolt* does not degenerate into a cynical, pessimistic, or nihilistic work. A clue to its redemptive feature, perhaps, lies in its passing, casual reference to the Greek master Euripides's *Hippolytus*. Artemis, the *dues ex machine*, in *Hippolytus* resolves even apparently unsolvable problems. In *Revolt*, the Islamic value system, or more precisely, the Islamic values of temperance, forgiveness and compassion accomplish the role of Artemis in regenerating the recalcitrant, errant and deviant characters. Notwithstanding rifts, clashes, hatred and hostility among them for most of the novel, they do attain self-knowledge and undergo a genuine change of heart and sincerely forgive and forget. They learn their lesson, as towards the end of the novel, there is "making-up" and "reunion" and they lead life imbued with generosity, magnanimity and love for fellow human beings, cutting across all social labels and distinctions. The most instructive instance in point is the acceptance of inter-racial marriage between Ismail and Daniela by Ismail's feudal, convention-bound father, Liaquat in Pakistan and by Daniela's racist mother, Elizabeth in the UK. Equally edifying is the eventual reconciliation of the patriarch Haider to his daughter, Laila's marriage with Jubail, the university educated and flourishing professional son of a lowly local potter.

Although *Revolt* grapples with a range of socio-cultural, political, religious and economic concerns, ranging from terrorism, the lives of Muslims in the post-9/11 West, to economic migrants, it is anchored deep into the rural

Pakistan, with its unmissable, local content and context. Not only does one encounter in its pages the inevitable figures of feudal landlords with their opulence and arrogance, one comes across also an array of those perched apparently low on the village social hierarchy. More remarkably however, the latter are not depicted as mere types, a retinue of domestic servants at the beck and call of their masters and existing only to serve them. Rather, they are found moving up the social and economic ladder, and getting gradually equipped with modern education, life-skills and economic independence. More prominent among them are women who are self-employed, economically empowered and working hard towards their brighter future. In demolishing this stereotype, *Revolt* heralds the emergence of the strong-willed, self-confident, resilient Pakistani woman. It is not only the landlord's son, Ismail, studying in the UK, who chooses his life partner – a white, non-Muslim Daniela and thus jeopardises his parents' plan of his grand wedding with his cousin, Saher. Haider's daughter, Laila, and Rani's daughter Saher too, select their marriage partners, though much to the chagrin and even disapproval of their parents. Other village girls also appear asserting and exercising this basic right of theirs – freedom to lead their own lives. Most of the village women are delineated with reference to their professional designation – goldsmith, washerwoman, bricklayer and sweet-maker. Besides these self-employed, economically independent, middle aged women, *Revolt* presents this gratifying, inspiring spectacle:

Teenage girls from the girls' school, dressed in their demure blue and white starched uniforms with matching white chiffon *duppattas* draped across their chests, or over their heads, walked in groups of two or three on their way home. (232)

The spread of female education with its social engineering project in this small, interior village in Pakistan, underscores the recontextualisation of today's Muslim society. The scarves on these girls' heads or across their chests signify their adherence to tradition. Qaisra Shahraz excels other novelists on this particular count – of suggesting a smooth transition from an anachronistic to a positive, forward-looking outlook on life, without denouncing Muslim clergy or Islamic law.

The redemptive power of *Revolt* resides in its tackling of some of the sensitive socio-cultural issues of honour, female sexuality and gender parity. Needless to add, the egalitarian Islamic teachings on these and related issues have been eclipsed down the ages by the patriarchal code of masculine power and honour. Qaisra Shahraz does well to lay bare the latter's untenability. Her sense of mission is most palpable in her denunciation of the superstitious, un-Islamic notion of *perchamah* (the supposedly evil shadow cast on other expecting

women by a woman who had miscarriage). Salma is blamed for causing Faiza's miscarriage in that she had dared to meet the latter even in the face of the superstitious belief rife in the village that she must not interact with any pregnant woman. The lady doctor, however, refutes cogently this outrageous notion in a gathering of village women, employing both religious and medical arguments:

‘What utter nonsense! There is no such thing as a woman's evil shadow. This poor woman has miscarried because of a medical condition.... Also, is this not *shirk* [ascribing power to someone other than Allah] and against the teachings of Islam?’ (205-06)

Apart from the lady doctor, Zeinab, an ordinary village woman too questions the validity of this preposterous notion: “Where does it say in the Holy Quran or Hadiths about *perchannah*? These are the sources of our belief and anything else is *shirk*, against the teachings of our faith, as you well know” (115). The same drive for social reform is at work in Qaisra Shahraz's forceful condemnation of class and caste boundaries which do not have any sanction in Islam. She champions the cause of domestic servants whose “breathing is [also] controlled by their masters” (234). Significantly enough, her argument is once again couched in distinctly religious terms as she proclaims the egalitarian message of Islam:

‘In the eyes of our Allah *Pak* [the All-Glorious Lord], we are all equal. Doesn't everyone pray together in mosques and perform Hajj together in Mecca?’ (375)

Revolt raises another burning issue – the collapse of family, even in the traditional Muslim society. The novel teems with failed parents and rebellious children. Paradoxically, this falling out is not caused by the arranged marriages imposed by patriarchy; it is incurred by children's love marriages. Their self-centredness and recklessness wreak havoc on family life. The servant, Begum's outburst, articulates the same: “Laila, on that night, when you eloped with your lover, you killed your parents with your cruelty! Stamped on their joy of life!” (72)

Elsewhere, parents' misery is stated more tellingly: “Parents become such vulnerable creatures when their children grow up” (230). It is not therefore surprising that words such as “aggrieved,” “hatred” and “betrayed” recur in the novel (248, 251, 266, 317, 339, 366, 375 and 420). What is however comforting and reassuring is that there is reunion and rapprochement by the end of the novel. As already stated, in doing so, these characters are guided by the Islamic teachings of temperance and generosity.

Notwithstanding its locale in a remote Pakistani village, *Revolt* is alive to the problems and challenges thrown by modernity and globalisation. The Prologue (1-3) alludes to “suicide bombing, Indian drama serials on TV, Italian coffee, American drones, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and the children’s hopping to New York and London.” For its addressing such concerns and reiterating the Islamic value system, *Revolt* stands out from and much above the pulp fiction that routinely appears, claiming to portray Pakistani/Muslim society.

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