

Distinguishing Islam from Cultural Practices: Conversations with Qaisra Shahraz

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The South Asian community in Britain is perhaps one of the largest diasporas in the modern world. The sheer size of this ethnic group, and the palpable vibrancy of their cultural life and literary production, mark their presence both demographically and intellectually and distinguish them from other ethnic groups in the United Kingdom. The creative accomplishments of South Asian diaspora writers in Britain have elicited worldwide acclaim and recognition. Marked by its striking diversity emerging from colonial roots, this literary tradition has come to prominence over the last few decades, continuing to grow and glow.

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South Asian writers both in diaspora and in the homeland are “currently experiencing an explosion of popular Anglophone forms” and are “being recognised by mainstream commercial publishers, and finding readers outside the traditional literary fiction market” (Chambers). In terms of the volume of writing being produced, and its critical reception, British writers of South Asian origin have already made an indelible mark on mainstream British literature. However, there is a caveat to the recognition of well-established writers from South Asia in Britain that other “equally great writers” of considerable artistic output may have been neglected (Chambers). Qaisra Shahraz (1958-) is one of those neglected writers whose greatness has not been adequately recognised and whose work has not received comparable critical attention. It is in this spirit that I introduce her and set forth the following reflections in order to delve deep enough into understanding the ramifications of her work.

A number of Muslim writers narrativise different aspects of Muslim experiences and talk about the issues affecting Muslims living in Britain, particularly in the post-9/11 era. Many focus on religious beliefs, social traditions and cultural practices of their countries of origin. In this sub-culture of British literature, the number of Muslim women writers possibly exceeds that of their male counterparts, which goes against the grain of the Orientalist view that Muslim women are passive beings and voiceless subjects. The vibrancy of Muslim writers in Britain, along with the range and content of their literature, continues to flourish and play a pivotal role in the cultural identity and representation as well as social struggles of the faith group. Qaisra Shahraz is one writer who has made the Muslim voice heard, and who has helped to establish the foundations of a modern British-Muslim literature movement. Even though many of her works “deal with Pakistan’s rural life with special focus on women’s situation” it may not be correct to characterise her simply “as a regional novelist” (Zaidi 209), because her role in debunking the myths surrounding Muslim women has international relevance, not just to Pakistan. In one of her responses below, Shahraz explains why she should be taken globally.

Qaisra Shahraz embodies plurality on many levels. Her childhood memories of growing up in Pakistan connect her to the three cities of Lahore, Gujrat and Faisalabad, and then, since the age of 9, Manchester. Since she moved to Britain with her parents she has remained a true Mancunian. Thus, together with her childhood memories of Pakistan, both the East and West (specifically Pakistan and Britain) pervade and influence her writing.

Shahraz studied English and European Literature at the University of Manchester and Scriptwriting at the University of Salford. A fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a member of the Royal Society of Literature, Shahraz is a writer, education consultant, college and university inspector, teacher trainer, journalist and scriptwriter. She manages to shuttle between some of these careers on a regular basis, and gives almost equal attention to them without

compromising her role as a wife and mother. An active member of the Faith Network 4 Manchester and a trustee of the Manchester Multifaith Centre, Shahraz is deeply engaged in social and community activities including interfaith dialogue. Thus her writing career is enmeshed with social and educational activism and is distinguished by wisdom culled from these experiences.

The urge to write dawned on Shahraz during her mid-teens. The inclusion of her short story “A Pair of Jeans” in the anthology *Holding Out: Short Stories by Women* (1988) marked her literary debut, and since then she has been anthologised in other collections. It was in 2001 that she finally gained international recognition as an important writer of literary and social interest with the publication of her acclaimed novel, *The Holy Woman* . Regarded both as a prequel and sequel to *The Holy Woman* , her second novel, *Typhoon* , was published in 2003. The year 2013 saw the publication of her third novel *Revolt* and of *A Pair of Jeans and Other Stories* , a collection of her short stories written over two decades. The following exchange with Qaisra Shahraz is meant to inform the reader more about her thoughts, ideas and writing career.

How different are your experiences as a British-Muslim woman writer of South Asian background from those of white British women writers?

There are vast differences. Where does one start? My ethnic background, my way of life as a British-Muslim woman – enriched by two different cultures, as well as having strong ties to another country, Pakistan – are bound to make my experiences different from that of a fellow British white woman writer.

My background and multiple identities have shaped my life and me as a person, and therefore, by extension, my writing in both fiction and non-fiction. There is a common saying that writers write best about what they know and about the worlds that they inhabit. I think that is entirely true in my case. The world I have created and depicted in my fiction is significantly different from that of fellow British women writers who were part of my writing group several years ago. Whereas their work was primarily set in Britain, mine crossed borders, reflecting my migrant background. In three of my novels and several short stories, I have taken my Western readers into the urban and rural worlds of Pakistan as well other Muslim countries.

As a writer, I have felt a natural compulsion to write about and share the Pakistani-Muslim culture and the migrant experience with my Western and international readers. I have done this with my earlier stories, such as “A Pair of Jeans” (1988) and “The Elopement” (1988), both studied in German schools as literary texts. Much of my work, however, covers universal themes that all readers can identify with, no matter where they live, such as the issue of rape in *Typhoon* . The theme of patriarchal tyranny, now the topic of a book about my

writing (Noreen, *Gender Power and Patriarchal Hegemony in Qaisra Shahraz's Novels*), for instance, would never have featured in my work if it were not for regular visits to Pakistan. During these visits I absorbed the realities of women's lives across different classes, which led to the depiction of so many female characters, including wealthy, powerful women from the feudal land-owning clans.

As a significant South Asian literary voice, what do you think defines and distinguishes the South Asian community in Britain from other ethnicities in the country?

The South Asian community is one of the largest migrant groups in Britain. Most of the Asian migrants, whether from Pakistan – like my family – or from India or Bangladesh, arrived in the late '60s and '70s. Now, all these communities are well-established by a few generations. The Indian community primarily settled and clustered itself in the southern cities and towns around the Greater London area. In contrast, the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities settled primarily in the North, particularly in the Northwest region in cities like Manchester, Bradford and towns in Lancashire.

However, there are many commonalities between these groups through faith, language and cultural practices. There are language similarities too, such as the use of Hindi which is similar to Urdu. Although all three groups are well-established, they have all experienced problems and issues that most migrants experience, primarily racism. Obviously, in our current difficult times, the problem of extremism has manifested itself by the DAESH group, and Islamophobia has become an issue for the Muslim members of various ethnicities.

Pakistani characters and settings are quite prominent in your work. However, you once said: "I am sure that my novels would be quite different if they had been written by a woman living entirely in Pakistan" (Siddiqui 224). Since you lived in Pakistan for only the first nine years of your life, do you think there can be a question of authenticity in your representation of Pakistani society and culture?

Yes, indeed. I have never pretended that my work would be 100 percent authentic, especially as you point out that I live and write from Manchester. However, let us not forget that I carry precious childhood memories and visit Pakistan regularly for holidays or research trips, as well as relying on my vivid imagination.

The Pakistani locale, the social mind-set and customs are quite familiar to me. I seem to have a natural affection and affinity with the rural life of Pakistan. This is despite having lived in the urban setting of Lahore when I was a very young girl, and then Manchester for most of my life. I love writing about rural

life. My former school friend said of my novel *The Holy Woman* when it came out: “Qaisra, I can’t believe you have written this. It’s so real! How did you do it? You’ve lived here in Manchester all of your life.”

I am currently working on a novel set in Morocco, and as it is not my world, so to speak, writing this novel has become a challenge, indeed. A lot of research is necessary. There can be a question of authenticity in my representation of Moroccan society and culture. Even after a research visit, interviews with local Moroccans, I am still worried that there will be something that I might not get right, and which may impact negatively on my writing and credibility as a writer.

Women’s issues and feminist concerns pervade your body of work. In academia, as well as popular culture, feminism is a vital realism. However, do you think interests of the poor, the orphaned, the peasants, the subalterns and other marginalised groups in society are largely unacknowledged and underrepresented in media and literary discussions?

In general terms, I totally agree with you. The groups that you mention, as far as I know, are under-represented. I also agree that there is far more discourse on gender themes and issues. I am personally very interested in the world of the poor or those marginalised in society. In my novels, especially those set in rural areas, I draw upon a cross-section of all the classes, including the downtrodden or those looked down upon by their fellow villagers.

For example, in all three of my novels there are women like the humble laundry woman and Kulsoom Bibi the matchmaker in *The Holy Woman* and *Typhoon* respectively, and Massi Fiza in *Revolt*, who represent the lower classes, working women barely eking out a living. As proud women, however, they are very vocal about their life experiences and resent the treatment they receive from those above them in the social ladder.

I have travelled to India three times and loved my visits. One thought that struck me was that New Delhi and Lucknow could be Lahore, the city I originally come from. It was a stark reminder to me that it was one country, geographically divided into two parts. In my short story “The Gunga,” published in the *Day and Night* anthology in India, Gunga is a main character in the village who cannot speak, and who along with his wife is regularly ridiculed by the fellow villagers, so much so that even his own son begins to reject him out of shame.

On your official website, you have identified yourself as a Muslim woman writing about Muslim women. Does it not limit your perspective and impede your potential to reach out to a much wider audience?

That information is partly incorrect and, indeed, very limiting, and I need to amend the details on that page. My work covers many themes, countries and nationalities. For example, my new collection of short stories, due to come out this year, includes a vast range of characters from different countries and times. As I travel a lot, I am picking up ideas all the time. My “The White Angel” set in Abu Dhabi is the story of an Afghan taxi driver and his relationship with an English worker on an oil refinery. “The Train to Krakow” depicts Polish and Jewish characters, victims of the Holocaust. “The Slave Catcher” focuses on black slaves and their white owners in nineteenth-century Boston. “The Courtesan” describes the famous love story of the sixteenth-century Indian Emperor Salim and the courtesan, Anarkali. “The Malay Host” depicts an elderly Malay gentleman and his family. I will soon be working on two new stories: one set in Palestine, describing the experience of people living in the West Bank, and the other set in Srebrenica, focusing on the mass genocide of Muslim men and the mass rape crimes that took place about twenty years ago.

Through the translation of my work in several languages including Mandarin, I have a wide readership across the world; so it is imperative to increase and maintain my readership across all faiths, ethnic groups and cultures.

In The Holy Woman, Zari Bano's predicaments are mainly because of the cultural norm of haqbakshawana, the little known practice of forcing celibacy on woman to keep family inheritance from going to a male stranger. You came to know about this hugely bizarre cultural phenomenon only through a television documentary and I did, through your novel. In Typhoon, you depict a lesser form of karo-kari or honour killing, as the protagonist Naghmana undergoes indescribable mental torture and indignities because of her alleged adultery. Your latest novel, Revolt, depicts the superstitious belief of perchanvah, as Faiza's miscarriage is attributed to Salma's supposedly evil shadow. In all three novels, you successfully separate such cultural practices from the religion of Islam. Perhaps, it is through your works that a broader, international audience has come to know about the existence of such practices. However, do you not think that your representation of these aspects of Pakistan society may spread the wrong notion that these practices are common, and be used by those with vested interests to entrench cultural caricaturing and stereotyping of Islam, Muslims and Pakistan?

The observation “to entrench cultural caricaturing and stereotyping of Islam, Muslims and Pakistan” may be valid, but not quite true in my work or in my intention as a writer. I am very sensitive to, and loathe, the idea of deliberate stereotyping and caricaturing of either people, practices or ethnic groups, especially if done for reasons of sensationalism. I deliberate and think very carefully about what I write, whether in a novel or for a TV drama serial. My intention is always to write responsibly. For example, as you point out yourself,

I make it very clear that the cultural practices I have discussed have nothing to do with Islam. So there is no stereotyping of Islam, so to speak, in my work.

As for superstition, I feel very strongly about this topic and want to raise awareness about it, especially in my second drama serial, *Taubeen*. I do not think we have to be defensive about it. Intelligent readers can decipher what is happening in fiction. They can make up their own minds and see that these ideas are not so common, and hence should not result in either caricaturing or stereotyping.

Superstition is rife around the world, be it in Africa, Asia or Europe; and many lives are adversely affected because of this. I got the idea for this storyline from an actual incident several years ago. There was a young woman, born and bred in Manchester, who would not enter my house because the 6-week confinement period was not over after I had given birth to my second son. I stood there in the doorway in a state of shock, whilst she stood out in the rain, getting wet and reluctant to step in. She had been primed to this viewpoint by her elders who believed in the old superstitious customs from the subcontinent of India. I was outraged, saying to myself, "What utter nonsense!" I vowed there and then to write the story, "Perchanvah" (1994), meaning evil shadow. It won the Ian St James Award, and later became a secondary sub-plot in *Revolt*, as well as in my second drama serial.

A number of feminist writers of Muslim background talk about oppressive, patriarchal values and structures. One prominent name that comes to mind is Nawal El Saadawi who describes the practice and psychosexual effects of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Egypt. How different is your representation of gender issues from that of writers like El Saadawi?

I have huge respect for Nawal El Saadawi. I regard her as a great role model, and she has definitely left a mark on me and influenced my work. I remember reading her famous inspirational book, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (1977) in the 1980s. I thoroughly enjoyed reading about Arab women's lives and experiences, and the book shaped my own feminist views. I learnt from her, including her criticism about the objectification of women and female bodies. I recognised her as a fearless woman who has solidly stood up and fought injustices against women in Egypt and challenged social and cultural systems that blatantly discriminate against women. Through her book, I learnt for the first time about female genital mutilation, especially as it is prevalent mainly in African countries.

Nawal El Sadaawi and I have a lot in common; we both write passionately about women and their lives. However, there are major differences too. My work is set in Pakistan, El Saadawi writes about Egypt, Arab women and the barriers and issues that they face. We write about what interests us personally or what affects us as human beings. For example, whilst she has written

passionately about female genital mutilation (which is unknown in Pakistan), I write passionately about patriarchal practices and how they affect women's lives.

Our views also differ in other ways, for instance on the issue of the hijab. Nawal El Sadaawi has reputedly described the Islamic dress code for women as "a tool of oppression of women." I disagree. That could be true or valid for some women in countries like Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan or Iran, where there are women who are forced to wear it. However, that would not be the case for all the Muslim women around the world, especially those living in non-Muslim countries, say in Europe. My views, as demonstrated in my novel through the heroine, Zarri Bano, show that many Muslim women in the West, including in Britain, regard the hijab as a form of freedom from vanity – definitely not a form of oppression.

In order to escape from being a Shahzadi Ibadat (holy woman by virtue of getting married to the Qur'an), Zari Bano in The Holy Woman says to her father, Habib Khan:

I want to be a normal woman, Father, and live a normal life! I want to get married! I am not a very religious person, as you know. I am a twentieth century, modern, educated woman. I am not living in the Mughal period – a pawn in a game of male chess. Don't you see, Father, I have hardly ever prayed in my life, nor opened the Holy Quran on a regular basis. How can I thus become a Holy Woman? I am not suited to that role. (62)

Through the content of this thought voiced by your character, are you suggesting that the practice of haqbakhshawana is more prevalent among the more religious section of society, and that devout women are the main victims?

Not at all. As you yourself have pointed out, *haqbakhshawana* is a "little-known cultural practice of forcing celibacy on woman to keep family inheritance from going to a male stranger." I think that is the real situation – a custom adopted for convenience.

As I said earlier, you do not attribute the sufferings of your protagonists Zarri Bano, Naghmana and Salma to the teachings of Islam. However, as regards Naghmana's tribulations, the practice of triple divorce in one session also contributes to her susceptibility to the authoritarian nature of patriarchy. According to Siraj Din's wishes, Haroon releases Naghmana from the bond of marriage by simply uttering talaq (divorce) three times in one go. This practice of triple divorce is not only a cultural fact or social construct, but is deeply imbricated in theological discourse, as many conventional ulama endorse this form of summary divorce. In this respect, do you not think that the theological approval of triple divorce is also partly responsible for, or at least exacerbates, Naghmana's gendered hardship, subordination and social exclusion?

Whilst writing *Typhoon*, I had to consult the *ulama* on this topic of triple divorce to make sure that I understood the ideas behind it properly. I know that triple divorces, if given at one go, are invalid and it is this very issue that forms the crux of injustice done against my heroine, Naghmana. I have shown through Naghmana's story that Siraj Din abuses the *talaqs* because of his personal dislike of Naghmana. Instead of offering the three stages of divorce proceedings, enabling them time to rethink or reconcile, he forces Haroon to give his wife all three at one go so that he can be rid of her. That is why his audience, his listeners and spectators in his court, the *kacheri*, are shocked into a stillness, traumatised by the whole experience, and burdened under the guilt. For they recognise that what the judge has done is wrong. The judge's decision in forcing the three *talaqs* on Naghmana makes her vulnerable to her second husband's accusation that she could still be married to her first husband. As I show in my novel, this has catastrophic repercussions for the pair and their relationship.

The *Holy Woman*, written in 2001, is set in various countries (Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Britain and Malaysia) and provides a narrative of Muslim life to a global readership. Interestingly, V.S. Naipaul in *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981) recounts his journey through four Muslim countries – Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia – and he is often charged with seeing and portraying Muslims through the prism of Orientalism. In both your and Naipaul's representation of Muslim society, at least two countries are common – Pakistan and Malaysia – and the gap between the publications of the two works is twenty years. Does *The Holy Woman* provide readers with an alternative narrative of Muslim experiences, even though you used a different genre and did not allude to Naipaul's travelogue?

The Holy Woman is set in five countries, four of which are Muslim-majority – Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. In my first novel, I wanted to introduce the Western or non-Muslim reader to Muslim countries. I wanted to present a window into another way of life, in particular through the story of Zarri Bano and her journey into a new identity as a holy woman, and learning about Islam. I explore a number of themes through her story, in particular that of the hijab – my aim, as discussed earlier, is to debunk the perception that all women are invariably oppressed by wearing the Islamic dress.

On the contrary, when my heroine Zarri Bano begins to adjust to her new life as a holy woman, she wholeheartedly takes to it and feels naked without it in the presence of strange men. Similarly, through her spiritual personal journey I was able to take my readers on a pilgrimage – the Islamic *hajj* to Makkah in Saudi Arabia – so that they can learn about this wonderful experience.

Do you agree that Muslim women are perceived and treated as passive beings and voiceless subjects within the Orientalist view? How are you and your contemporaries – in literature, education and everyday life – eroding such a perception?

Yes, I agree that, unfortunately, negative perceptions are often held about Muslim women. I try to erode and challenge this perception through my literary work, my novels and short stories. Through my lectures, talks, interactions with non-Muslims and wherever possible I have endeavoured to raise awareness about the positive aspects of our lives. Over two decades I have been very actively engaged in this process of debunking myths relating to Muslim women.

My international women project resulting in 32 hours of tape-recorded interviews of Muslim women of all ages and backgrounds in several countries around the world was an eye opener for me. Through my interactions with Muslim women in India, Singapore, Germany, Indonesia, UAE and in the UK, I learnt that no two Muslim women were the same. Each is a unique individual, whose life has been shaped by various factors: background, class, work, education and social values and customs.

I wanted to present achieving and strong women in my work. In the *Holy Woman* Chaudharani Kaniz, the wealthy queen of the village is a successful businesswoman and oversees acres of her land. Zarri Bano, my young heroine is an aspiring publisher. The two minor characters work for themselves and take no nonsense from anyone. Even the passive mother of Zarri Bano, Shahzada, rebels against her husband. Zulikha in *Typhoon*, Zarri Bano's grandmother, strongly tells her husband that she will not be bossed by him. Instead she calmly asserts: "I am your equal, I will not be dominated by you." Saher, the heroine of *Revolt*, is a highly successful lawyer. The female domestic help Jamila in *Revolt* revolts against her mistress' ill treatment. Women very rarely remain passive in my work! They emerge as strong women – winners often.

As a writer, journalist, education consultant, fellow of the arts, social activist, wife and mother, you have many different careers and roles. What role do all of these activities and beliefs play in your writing?

My work in Education has played a strong part in my fiction. In my first drama serial, *Dil Hee To Hai*, I focused on the issue of dyslexia to raise awareness about this reading problem where many children and later in adulthood are dismissed as being stupid, when really there is a reason for, and a solution to, this problem.

In the *Holy Woman* I have my second heroine as the headmistress of a school and two of the minor characters, Naimat Bibi and Kulsoom Bibi bemoan their illiterate status, wishing that they too had education and their lives would be much better.

Family life and human relationships play a major part in my life, especially as I enjoy the full benefits of sibling love and extended families. My fiction is full of families and amply focuses on relationships including between sisters and husbands and wives. As I feel very strongly about women's lives, gender therefore plays a crucial role in my work.

About your writing career you once said: "However, there is the added challenge -- the duty of writing responsibly and with humility" (British Council, 2016). Would you expand on this statement, please?

It is very important for me to write responsibly. I love books, I love writing, and I love literature. However, the thought of a "duty to write responsibly" came to my head when Salman Rushdie had published his *The Satanic Verses* (1988), and the furore that followed. A robust inner debate took place, where I wondered about many things and asked myself many questions. Was anything sacred? What was freedom of speech, and was it limitless? Could we actually abuse that very freedom of speech with the sole intent to hurt, mock and ridicule others, and then glibly excuse it as only satire and expect to get away with it? Should there be a limit or a cap on the use of freedom of speech, especially when it is evident that there is the sole attempt to malign a certain faith or section of society? Do we, as writers, have total free rein to write about anything without due consideration to the impact that our writing could have on others, including the possibility of deep offense to millions around the world?

I write openly and fearlessly about issues or social problems that I feel strongly about, such as those relating to women's lives. But whatever I have written is written responsibly, and never with the intent to write gratuitously or deliberately setting out to mock or ridicule people's beliefs just for the sake of it. If I did that, I believe I would be abusing the freedom of speech which I regard as my entitlement as a human being living in the free democratic society of Britain.

Would you mind telling us about your current writing project, please? What is it about?

My main current writing project is my fourth novel, set in Morocco, and it is quite a challenge as I have to do a lot of research. My themes in this novel are disability, infertility, sibling love and hatred, and tangled love and marital relationships. Also, I am working on a new collection of stories, many of which are set in different countries and covering many themes, as discussed earlier.

What would be your advice to young, aspiring creative writers? More specifically, how can they join the published writers' club?

Write, above all. Make time for writing. Believe in yourself and your writing. Make sure to polish your work well before sending it off to publishers or editors. They are busy people. Mistakes, or clumsy text, spelling or grammar mistakes will definitely put them off from reading further or considering your work.

Take advice from others and get your work read. Be humble and take on board what feedback you have been given, learn from it, do not reject it, and never be defensive about your work. Do not be disheartened if your work is turned down – that is normal as a writer. Learn to accept rejections and move on.

Join writers' groups – I cannot say enough how important that is. There are many writing workshops, clubs or groups for writers to join. That is how I started, by joining a women writers' group. It motivated me. The encouragement I received from fellow aspiring writers was terrific, and helped me to write new stuff and share it with them on a weekly basis. It was so exciting to write a new story each week. Nowadays, there are hundreds of opportunities for new writers, particularly through the Internet.

The first group of aspiring writers I joined was at the University of Manchester, led by Michael Schmidt who is currently professor of poetry at the University of Glasgow. The other was Common Word Community Publishers in Manchester, a wonderful group which enabled me to produce many stories, many of which were published in different anthologies over the years. The first story from that group, "A Pair of Jeans", has been published several times, in three languages, and is studied in schools, particularly in Germany.

Thank you so much!

You are welcome!

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