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Clash of Modernity with Theocracy and Tradition: Changing Scenario of Pakistan in Qaisra Shahraz's *Typhoon*

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Abstract:

Qaisra Shahraz is one of the most prominent Muslim women writers of the Pakistani origin. She is known to explore the issues related to gender, class struggle, religious identity and aspects of tradition and modernity in her works. She tries to portray the life of contemporary Muslim society in developing Pakistan, which is continuously affected by the juxtaposition of Islamic regulations and primeval feudal and cultural traditions. Her novel *Typhoon*, the sequel to her widely acclaimed novel *The Holy Woman*, revolves around the similar issues. In this research paper, I will be focusing on the aspects of the modernity in the backdrop of religious and traditional values of the Pakistani society as portrayed by Qaisra Shahraz in the novel *Typhoon*. My focus will be to study *Typhoon* to explore the theme of the changing scenario of Pakistan in the wake of modernization due to educational and technological revolution. Reclaiming of social position by, until recently, suppressed and dominated women of the Pakistan, will also be my subject of concern.

Keywords: Pakistan, Muslim, Religion, Theocracy, Tradition, Culture, Modernity, Gender, Patriarchy

The word “Muslim” was, and in fact still is in some places, stigmatized as barbaric, uncivilized, oppressors of women, culturally and socially backward. And after the infamous incident of 9/11¹ one more feather in their defamed cap was added which branded Muslims as terrorists. Muslims all over the world were under the scanner and considered to be a threat to world peace. This prompted some concerned Muslims to present their real situation to the whole world and best way to do this was through writing. They narrated their versions of stories through fiction and non-fiction. It was men, like in all other communities, who started to confront the world but with the course of time Muslim women too commenced to write their experiences despite being more marginalized because of their position as Muslim as well as women. Qaisra Shahraz is one of those women. According to a newspaper report, the motive of her writing was to portray a peace-loving picture of the Muslim woman to the world.

“All I was trying to do was introduce a Muslim woman to the world. The life she leads, the struggles she goes through,” she says, especially in the post 9/11 world where

Muslims are looked upon with suspicion. "I am trying to tell the world that I am just a peace-loving Muslim and not a terrorist," she says. (Menon)

Qaisra Shahraz is the Pakistani born British novelist, script writer, freelance journalist and an educationist. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and in 2012 she was listed in *Pakistan Power 100: The Most Powerful and Influential Men and Women in the World Today*² as one of the hundred most influential Pakistani women. Her works have been translated into several languages and published in numerous countries. The main area of focus in her works is the depiction of religion, culture, traditions, and gender biases in the wake of modernization. *Typhoon* is the sequel to Qaisra Shahraz's first and the best-selling novel, *The Holy Woman*, where the protagonist of the novel Zarri Banno, an intelligent young woman, is forced to become the "Holy Woman"³ by her father after her brother's death. *Typhoon* followed this powerful tale of a primitive tradition of Pakistan with the almost equally sensitive theme. *Typhoon* narrated by the strong, omniscient, female narratorial voice probes into the life of common people of the particular Pakistani village, Chiragpur. In the analogous fashion of the other Pakistani women writers like, Bapsi Sidhwa, Kamila Shamsie and Uzma Aslam Khan, Qaisra Shahraz tries to give us the lucid picture of the Pakistan through her works.

Pakistani writing in English offer western readers a glimpse of Pakistan's unique history narrated through a broad spectrum of women's voices. Here are grandmothers, mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, housewives, working women, maid servants, students, women in love, women grieving, abandoned women, outrageous women, women negotiating new worlds -- the list goes on. (Devi 24)

Qaisra Shahraz's 2003 novel *Typhoon* is the story of guilt and pain. It starts with the scene of the village feudal lord, Baba Siraj Din, on his death bed and ends at his funeral. It records the four days in the village of Chiragpur but through the well-used technique of flashback, Shahraz covers the expanse of twenty years. It is the story of assumed adultery of Haroon with Naghmana who are caught embracing each other in the middle of the night by Haroon's wife Gulshan, who is devastated and torn apart by this sight.

A sense of unreality and disbelief crashed over Gulshan. Caught up in the nightmare, she found her feet held to the ground. Whilst her senses reeled with a kind of deadly fascination, her eyes stayed fastened on the pair. (Shahraz 20)

When Hajra, Gulshan's mother comes to know about wounds wreaked on her daughter, she appeals to the village *Buzurg*⁴, Baba Siraj Din, who thereby calls for public *kacheri*⁵. The news of this public trial spreads like fire in the forest and the whole village assembles to witness the historic moment of trial regarding the exceptional incident of adultery in their village. But to the disgrace of everyone present in the trial, it turns out that Naghmana is actually the first wife of Haroon whom he had married five years ago when they were in college but due to some discord they had drifted apart without divorce. Haroon after returning to Chiragpur from college had

married Gulshan and started to live with her until Naghmana on an advertising project comes to his village. Their old love reawakens and they decide to meet near the village well in the middle of the night, where Gulshan sees them and the whole drama of the novel unfolds. In the *kacheri*, Haroon is forced to divorce Naghmana and resume his life with Gulshan which eventually turns cold after the day of the trial. The whole village is hurt by the injustice done to Naghmana, even Baba Siraj Din is guilt ridden for his decision. So, at the beginning of the novel, he is waiting on his death bed to ask for the forgiveness of Naghmana. If Naghmana would not have committed suicide at the end of the novel, readers would not have been wrong in assuming the concept of 'poetic justice' was well used in *Typhoon*.

Qaisra Shahraz is a well-known writer who talks about the radical shift in the Pakistani society from traditions to modernity. She deals with the issues of its modernizing society, with its primitive feudal laws governing religion of Islam and life in general. She tries to expose the un-Islamic innovations leading to ignorant rituals and oppression of women. Abdur Raheem Kidwai, in his article entitled, 'Recontextualization of Muslim Society and Modernity in Qaisra Shahraz's *The Holy Woman*', says, "As part of her depiction of the rural Pakistani interior, Shahraz points to certain superstitions and fatalistic notions of the locals there" (101). Through the works of Qaisra Shahraz readers can peep into the life of the people in Muslim societies who have faith in their cultural traditions which, often negatively, form an important part of the religion in such societies. Islamic laws are distorted with the traditional rites and rituals. Shahraz wanted to give the basic presentation of how religion meddles with traditions. By talking about how un-Islamic rituals like Zarri Bano made as *Shahzadi Ibbadat*⁶, in her first novel, *The Holy Woman*, in order to retain family property, is given the shape Islamic religious ordinance. Qaisra Shahraz like most other writers from Third World background wants to depict true essence of her native culture and modify conceptions and misconceptions related to their ethos.

Representation of culture is one of the major concerns of the postcolonial writers. Postcolonial writers often revisit the past to recreate and reclaim the culture of a place or community to provide the self-confidence and dignity that they lost during the colonial period. Sometimes they set their writing in the contemporary world to represent aesthetically the aspects of culture that go unnoticed by the corporate media or have been erased from the public mind by continuous stereotyping and distortions. (Islam 146-147)

Qaisra Shahraz is not against the Islamic laws but the misuse of these laws. In *Typhoon*, the scene of *kacheri* is the focal point and through this scene, Shahraz portrays the arrogance of feudal lord Baba Siraj Din and his inappropriate use of the concept of triple-*talaq*⁷. When it is revealed in course of trial that Naghmana and Haroon are married, so there is no case of adultery, Baba Siraj Din instead of considering the possibility where under Islamic law man can have more than one wife, he orders Haroon to give Naghmana divorce immediately. The concept of triple-*talaq* has been much hyped in recent times; it has been wrongly used as a tool for oppressing women. Haroon uttered three *talaqs*⁸ to Naghmana in one go and divorce was completed but as it is believed that according to proper Islamic way, there should be considerable

time between each *talaq* which gives husband and wife, time to reconsider their decision and increase the possibility of reconciliation. Omar Rashid in a newspaper article "Debate over triple *talaq* stems from ignorance" says that the booklet titled *Problems Facing Muslim Women and their Solution*, which was released to create awareness about Muslim Personal law, proclaims, "That is a 'great sin' for a man to pronounce three-*talaqs* in one go", he further adds that "the booklet says it is not desirable if a man makes haste in bringing his matrimonial life to end" (Rashid16). Thus, Qaisra Shahraz shows the influence of feudal traditions and ideology which greatly influence the wrong portrayal of Islam.

Qaisra Shahraz favours sanitized modernity, advocates liberal Islam, unencumbered by superstition, obscurantist deductions or tendentious accretions. She disfavours a non-contextual, mechanical application of *Shariah*⁹ regulations to new complex situations in our technology-ridden world. (Hasan 77)

The village where the story of *Typhoon* takes place is an archetype of a closely knit society which is broadly composed of two social classes -- Feudal class and Working class, people from both the classes have great influence on each other. The village is headed by the Feudal lord Baba Siraj Din but unlike the most common image of feudal lords depicted in the Pakistani literature as associated with leisure, money and decadent desires, Baba Siraj Din is a deeply religious and sympathetic person. He is the richest person in the village with no rival at all. There is other comparatively less prosperous but important feudal household in the village and that belongs to Chaudhrani Kaniz. Villagers consider Baba Siraj Din as their owner, who has supreme authority over them. That eventually made him think about himself as the highest of all the people. The main theme of *Typhoon* around which the whole story is interwoven is linked inextricably with dominating social set-up. Like every society, Chiragpur has been divided into two broad groups of classes, which in simple terms are the "rich" and the "poor". According to Lois Tyson:

From a Marxist perspective difference in socioeconomic class divide people in ways that are much more significant differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or gender. For real battle lines are drawn between the "haves" and the "have-nots", between the bourgeoisie --- those who control the world's natural, economic, and human resources --- and the proletariat, the majority of the global population who live in substandard conditions and who have always performed the manual labor --- the mining, the factory work, the ditch digging, the railroad building --- that fills the coffers of the rich. (Tyson 54)

But an important aspect which Qaisra Shahraz tries to portray in the novel *Typhoon* is the progress of class-ridden society towards a classless society. There is the rise of the new class in the society and that is the middle class. Moreover poor of Chiragpur are not actually so underprivileged. The land is important to the source of income for upper classes but lower classes make their living by doing other kinds of jobs or serving upper classes. So, in the village of Chiragpur, it is not only feudal class who is rich but Qaisra Shahraz has tried to distribute

wealth to her other characters as well. Modernity, as an important aspect of the *Typhoon*, is also shown through middle-class people imitating upper feudal class and trying to update them in order to become nearer to the feudal class in terms of wealth and be treated with the same respect and make an end to their subordinate position in the society. As is the case with Jamila, her house is made of the similar architectural design as of Chaudhrani Kaniz's house. Shahraz loves to write about ordinary people and gives them decent space in the society through her works. When asked, "What is it about the lives of ordinary people that inspire your writing?" by Farhana Shaikh, Shahraz replied,

I am so glad that you have picked up about this aspect of my writing. I don't know why but I love writing about ordinary people, from all walks of life and can relate to them very well on a par as those from the higher classes. Since childhood, I have been fascinated by class divisions, in particular 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 my short stories in my new collection 'A Pair of jeans and other stories.' In my novels – in *Revolt* as well as *The Holy Woman* and *Typhoon* the minor characters become almost 'major' characters. As noted by many readers my affection for them becomes so obvious to the reader; for instance one of my favorite characters in *Revolt* is the character of the gossip monger Massi Fiza, the local washerwoman. As one reviewer points out, "The minor characters have their moments to shine too." (Shaikh)

Qaisra Shahraz's stories chiefly revolve around women folk. *Typhoon* is also focused on the life of women in the Pakistan especially in the village of Chiragpur. Representation of the women in post-colonial countries has been usually of "distressed damsel" deeply set in the patriarchal societies. They are considered as suppressed and subjugated, which is unfortunately true to a great extent. Women in the guise of representatives of family honor are oppressed and dominated. Qaisra Shahraz attempts to write about such women. Most of her works revolve around such women, who are victimized by the society. She feels such women need someone to voice their concerns as in traditionally conservative societies they are not able to confront the world themselves. She is known to have said in an interview that:

I never forget that I am a product of a privileged society, having lived in Britain all my life, I am extremely aware that there are women out there for whom writing a book is a luxury. Forget a book; they can't afford a scrap of paper. (Menon).

According to Qaisra Shahraz traditional values and ideals of most of the places around the world, which consider women as lesser being, are among chief sources of subjugation of women. Qaisra Shahraz intensely presents such traditional tenets in *Typhoon*. In this novel, the representation of women is also as being subordinate to men. Dr. Sherin Shervani describes the society of Chiragpur as;

In fact, most of the traditions are brutal, barbaric, primitive and taking away the rights of others; especially suppressing the women. The women were subjugated and governed as per their whims and fancies. Baba Siraj -ud-Din was the powerful landlord of the village and he governed his household with an iron hand. He treated his wife as his subordinate and a lesser being. He had tried his best to make her feel that she had the secondary status in his household. (Shervani 10)

But instead of the subordinate position of women in Chiragpur as shown in *Typhoon*, women are also empowered in their own way. Even in the backdrop of patriarchy, the position of women is changing. Though women are still dominated by men but they have some fair share of freedom in terms of education and work. Qaisra Shahraz through the characters, like Naghmana and Zarri Bano, tries to portray weakening clutches of patriarchy in modern Pakistan. These women work in various modern set-ups like Naghmana works in an advertising agency and owns a car which is quite a modern notion in traditional society of Pakistan. On the other hand, Zarri Bano owns a publishing house; she is praised for doing house work as well as office work efficiently, which shows emerging confidence of women. Even other women, who are included in the list of minor characters, are also working and empowered for example village milk-woman Sardara Jee or the village nurse, Mary. Furthermore, there are women like Zulaikah, wife of Baba Siraj Din, who are trying to stand against patriarchy and fight it back with an unbending spirit. She challenges her husband by saying that;

*Allah pak*¹⁰ is my master! You are a human being, only a mortal – like me. Treat me with respect and equality. We are a cloak, a garment unto one another, and complementing one another. You do not have any special power over me, Siraj Din, just because you are a man... (Shahraz 125)

There has been the prominent shift in the position of the women in the recent times. Women are breaking their cages and coming to forefronts, they are trying to claim their social position on the bases of gender justice. Similar is the case with Pakistani women. In a recent report in an Indian national daily, *The Times of India*, it was reported that on April 2, 2017, a Pakistani based NGO organized a “women only bike race” in Islamabad; the motive behind this race was to challenge male dominance of public spaces and to reclaim those spaces (pp. 12). Qaisra Shahraz has aptly described this kind of audacious perception of women in *Typhoon*.

With the detailed description of effects of class division in Pakistani society on women folk in *Typhoon*, Qaisra Shahraz does not fail to show the growth and development of women of poor families. Though women are commoditized in both upper and lower classes but women from humbler backgrounds enjoy more freedom while women from upper-class societies, like Chaudhrani Kaniz and Zarri Bano, are more ensnared in traditions. Women from poorer backgrounds are working hard to change their social status and strive to give good life and education to their children, which have to some extent already paved the way for the new class of women, who are free to live their life on their own terms. Firdaus, daughter of a lowly village

woman Fatima, is the symbol of this new class of women who emerge from poor family background to the high and respectable position. Her denial to marriage proposal of Chaudhrani Kaniz's son shows her newly gained power and confidence. The main impetus behind this confidence is education which has started to shake the foundation of the feudal system in the novel as well as in the original Pakistani society. Qaisra Shahraz has given much focus on the power of education in changing the lifestyle of Chiragpur in the novel, *Typhoon*. Most of the characters endorse the pursuit of education and modernization.

Typhoon sets out to mark such changes in Muslim society which were earlier looked down on. With the concept of remarriage of Naghmana to professor and remarriage of the middle aged widow, Chaudhrani Kaniz, Qaisra Shahraz points towards the progressive nature of the modern Pakistan. Another hint in the direction of modernism in *Typhoon* is Naghmana and Haroon are supposed to have met in college which has perhaps been the co-educational college, unlike the traditional boys-only or girls-only colleges. Moreover, they were married without informing their parents and even drifted apart, without any formality of divorce, when they did not feel cordial anymore, both of these situations were near to impossible in traditional feudal Pakistan. These illustrations refer to an upsurge of a new era in place of the old one.

In the novel, *Typhoon*, although the scene is of the local rustic village but Qaisra Shahraz beautifully presents the effects of transformation from traditions to modernity on the countryside of Pakistan. She gives the true depiction of rural areas which have their share of modernity, unlike the set presumptions which consider rural areas backward in every aspect. People of the countryside are using modern technology to ease their work as is the case with Sardara's large dairy where buffaloes are milked with aid of modern appliances. Qaisra Shahraz also talks about good roads and transportation in Chiragpur which is an unlikely concept in rural areas. So, she presents the picture of a kind of model village in *Typhoon*. Urbanization also forms the significant part of this novel, some important characters of *Typhoon* live in a city to get a better life, like Habib, son of Siraj Din has moved to some town which is far away from Chiragpur in order to give better educational facilities to his children.

Qaisra Shahraz by writing *Typhoon* makes an attempt to change the poor image of Pakistani women who are considered to be, both wrongly and rightly, oppressed by Islamic patriarchal society. She tries to deal with stigmas related with gender and religion in wake of modernity. She probes into the psychological realms of her characters that are in right kind of balance between good and evil with no one as an epitome of goodness or evil. Every character acts like a normal human being, who feels guilty and has realization after committing mistakes. Thus *Typhoon* is the blend of psychological, humanistic, traditional, modernistic and religious values. It on and on portrays the clash of theocracy, culture, and tradition with modernity. Qaisra Shahraz has the vivid imagination which she puts to the best use in *Typhoon*.

Notes:

1. 9/11- Infamous series of four terrorist attacks on the United States, coordinated by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda on the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001.
2. *Pakistan Power 100: The Most Powerful and Influential Men and Women in the World Today* - Annual list of 100 most influential Pakistani men & women published by The British Pakistan Trust.
3. Holy woman- Woman married to the holy book of Muslims, it is a primitive practice of retaining family's property if there is only the female heir. It is done under the pretense of religion.
4. *Buzurg*- Respectable elderly man but in the context of this novel, it refers to the village headman.
5. *Kacheri*- Court of justice.
6. *Shahzadi Ibbadat*- The holy woman who has been married to Quran.
7. Triple-*talaq*- Process of divorce where the man needs to just utter word " talaq" three times to complete the divorce.
8. *Talaq*- Divorce.
9. *Shariah*- Islamic code of law.
10. *Allah Pak* - Holy God.

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