

## The Woman Question in Qaisra Shahraz's Novel

### “The Holy Woman”

#### A Study of Qaisra Shahraz's Novel (The Holy Woman):

By

<sup>1</sup>Akbar khan, <sup>2</sup>Najia Asrar Zaidi

#### Abstract:

*Qaisra Shahraz is eminent Pakistani novelist, her effeminate works deal with Pakistani society, especially focuses women's issues in backcountry. Her novel “The Holy Woman” (2001) portrays patriarchal customs which are barriers for women at the crossroads of sylvan Sindh, Pakistan. Its theme is pertinent with women's social issues and describes patriarchy and protagonist's life. Further, Qaisra Shahraz with her expertise interprets victim, orthodox, cultural extremism, religious misconception and enchants scholars to debate more about gender equation. Moreover, the protagonist is highly educated woman with effeminate perception and behavior, who has been duped by patriarchal cultures. Thus, women yearn to get rid of patriarchal system. Only debate is not the solution to females' problems, women have to restore their status. Qaisra Shahraz endeavors to highlight gender discrimination and to corroborate transformation in women's life. Study's conclusion reveals that protagonist was confronting barriers and challenges which have begun from patriarchal family, where her dreams*

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<sup>1</sup>M.Phil. Scholar, Department of English Literature university of Balochistan Quetta  
Pakistan Email: [akbargahizz@gamil.com](mailto:akbargahizz@gamil.com)

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Najia Asrar Zaidi, Department of English Literature university of Balochistan Quetta  
Pakistan

*and desires were ruined; her aim was normal life without any external intrusion. Notwithstanding, it is sure that women have equal rights, status and opportunities. As a result, Protagonist marries her beloved man and begins normal life.*

**Keywords:** Patriarchy; Tradition; Gender; Islamic feminism & Islam-phobia, Etc.

**Introduction:**

Qaisra Shahraz is a distinguished writer and illustrious educationist born in Pakistan dwells abroad in UK (London) and she is popular for novel writing. Yet, she has affinity with Pakistan, knows Pakistani cultures well. She has strong correlation with Pakistani society especially with women, who live in bucolic regions of Pakistan. Qaisra Shahraz being a Muslim in the west knows the nature of Pakistani society well, therefore, depicts the conditions of all women. The novel (The Holy Woman) speaks about women's issues and rights and especially those women who cannot defend themselves, they might be helpless and may not have the power to defend themselves. It is a question mark for international community that why women's rights and status have been exploited? Qaisra Shahraz has written innumerable triumphant and lucrative novels. Her first novel "The Holy Woman" (2001) appries about the biography, memoir, civilization and cultural traditions, not only this, but also characterizes influence of patriarchy which have victimized women. She has briefly sketched entire patriarchal traditional cultures through the character of the protagonist (Zarri Bano).

"I always felt strongly about women's lives, because I am always comparing my life to other women's lives, and I think I'm so lucky because I live in the west, I have the education, I have a career and an opportunity, and I want other women to have the same, I am not a western feminist (I am) a feminist within a Muslim framework, I must be a feminist because I feel strongly about women's lives and women's issues" (Shahraz, 2001). Furthermore, Qaisra Shahraz focuses the downtrodden women, who confront ingrained patriarchal customs that flow from ancestors for decades.

This is fascinating phenomenon for readers, scholars and researchers. She briefly compares the women's lifestyle of local rural women with international women. Qaisra Shahraz's feminist work defines women, religion and culture. She skillfully interprets the entire structure of fundamentalist's cultures, but when she experiences the actual image of bucolic life style of women, then her joys turn into sorrows. Here the protagonist says,

"I woke up one morning to find out that books, feminism, campaigns and education are all utterly useless against the patriarchal tyranny of our feudal landlords. Stupidly I had convinced myself that as an educated, urban, upper class woman, I was different to those 'Poor' women, lower down the strata of our society." (The Holy Woman, 2001, p.171). Similarly, Women are indulged in stereotype customs, being second class, their roles in society have not been highlighted (Muthali, 2001:24-25). The women's liberation criticism highlights that, females have been suppressed through cultural practices globally (Bressler, Charles E, 185. 2006). Naturally Women are fascinating to be discoursed. They have fragile nature and their dignity, status, prestige, role and fundamental rights have to be recognized and vouchsafed. Human Performances and attitudes are extremely momentous in social living. In fact, in today's era, human cannot disregard and forget the activities accomplished by women in all professions, but perspective about women's status and role are regretful. Women experience unjust in male oriented society, even though they could not safeguard themselves, States (Mr. Walker, 2006). Narrated by (Syafitri, 2011, page. 08) women have been treated asymmetrically in family; they are being kept hopeless and incapacitated. It's sure, that consistently women have faced oppression and remained submissive. Consequently, unable to cope with inequity which ensues with them, undoubtedly, the male dominant concept puts women at risk resulting injustices which a woman receives over the generations. Like in the case of protagonist (Zarri Bano), she is asking her father "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<sup>7</sup>- a pawn in a game of male chess. Don't you know father, I have

hardly ever prayed in my life, nor opened the Holy Quran on a regular basis. How can I become a Holy Woman? I am not suited to that role. Father.” (Qaisra Shahraz 2001:85). Protagonist’s mother moves to rescue her daughter and rebukes her husband; “You and your father are the puppeteers, Habib; you hold my daughter’s fate in your hand. What choice do I have? I can only swing and dangle along in whichever direction you pull and maneuver my strings. What can I do to save my daughter from the fate you have destined for her? I am shackled to the chains of your male domination, your ressmeh<sup>8</sup>, your traditions.” (Qaisra Shahraz 2001:71)

**Objectives:**

- Identification of women’s problems in patriarchal traditional society.
- Define the Role of culture in constructing women’s identity.

**Questions:**

- Why the rights and status of women have been exploited?
- What is the role of culture in constructing women’s traditional identity in Pakistani society?

**Theoretical Framework:**

Although Karl Marx has not devoted much of his work to directly discuss the role of women within a capitalist structure, the lens through which he studies the exploitation of poor class has proved really valuable to social scientists later on. He himself was not much involved in discovering the origins of women’s oppressions but the work of his close friend Frederick Engels was considered as pioneer and ground-breaking in this regard. Marxist feminism is an emancipatory, critical framework that aims at understanding and explaining gender oppression in a systematic way (Holmstrom,2002). Marxist feminism refers to a set of theoretical frameworks that have emerged out of the intersection of Marxism and feminism. Marxism and feminism examine the forms of systematic inequalities that lead to the experiences of oppression for marginalized individuals(Ehrenreich,1976). Marxism considers the class inequality as the primary axis of oppression in capitalist societies whereas feminism esteems

gender inequality as the primary axis of oppression in patriarchic societies. Therefore, the ultimate objective of the Marxist feminist framework is to emancipate women by changing the circumstances of their exploitation and oppression.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels interpreted that the term patriarchy according to the book (The origin of the family, private property and the State) patriarchal cultures are the customs of a family. Further, patriarchy is the production of domestic social relation. Walby explains in the book of (Theorizing Patriarchy, 1990.p.20) the patriarchal concept is a system of social structures and practices in which men have dominancy and women have been oppressed and exploited. Indeed, Karl Marx interprets wealth, property, class division and oppressive social structure, through which women are exploited deliberately for the reason to fulfill personal benefits. Wherein, women's oppressions are associated with oppressive family structure. According to (The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the state.1884) Frederick Engels emphasizes that social hierarchy and wealth are the main cause of oppression from both ancient and contemporary review. Further, he says that women originally have exalted social position and equity in working place and could share their family name. Earliest men haven't shared the family name. According to Engels and Marx (1846) that "The first division of labor is that between man and woman for the propagation of children", to say, "The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male". Similarly, this theoretical framework is pertinent with the problem of the scholar of this article, and has been applied in accomplishing this research article. Habib khan emphasizes in The Holy Woman;

“Alongside our land, our wives and daughters, our Izzat-our honor- is the most precious thing in our lives. We never ever compromise on the issue of our women and our Izzat! No matter what age we live in; no matter what the world outside dictates; no matter what evil lies outside our door.... We will never let you sully our Izzat or our women's honor, Shahzada.” (The Holy Woman, P.37)

Men are sturdier in patriarchal society. Thus, this phenomenon has prominent position in the fiction of Qaisra Shahraz. Oppression and male supremacy caused women liberation globally with aiming to restore women's status. Likewise, this phenomenon is interconnected politically, socially, economically and psychologically. Undoubtedly, these circumstances have created oppressed milieu for women. Their fundamental rights have been disregarded. Women have been placed subordinate in family and are contemplated vulnerable in the society. Ignorance exists in public about women's rights; it needs to be clarified through knowledge, education and awareness campaigns. Women have been utilized by sturdier men for their personal benefits. Moreover, women are always considered dependent; deliberately their rights have been ignored by male folk. Furthermore, the rights of women have to be highlighted and interpreted publically. The novel "The Holy Woman" distinguishes the role of male and female and their position in society. Any how few women have satisfactory life in today's advanced community of the world according to history (Dr. Anjali Bhardwaj Datta, p.2229, 2006). Rafif mentions "Gender equality has important role in individual's life; it bestows equal opportunity to both male and female, and doesn't permit any one to violate the rights of women and create troubles". In fact, the general public is not aware of gender equality, they employ their own perspective. Now people don't act upon the law and religion, they use women for their personal purposes. (Burak Fazyl Cabuk and Edward).

Qaisra Shahraz has attempted to explore the real reasons behind the women's oppression phenomenon and describes Pakistani society. Indeed, Shahraz has played a pivotal role for west and east in order to clarify women's ambiguous position and created a platform for defining religion and culture. Her work is really impressive and helpful for researchers and readers. She has broadened the understanding of those women who were not allowed to speak about their legal rights and feelings. She clarifies the misconception of world about culture and Islam. Therefore, her novels have been published, read and appreciated internationally. She has carried out effeminate works in a fascinating way, which has really changed the mentality of west about Pakistani society and Islamic teachings, where

Islam was misunderstood. Women are ignored in every aspect of life. Women shall obey that, what the family elders decide about them, the jurisdiction is lying with fathers.

The protagonist is beautiful and she is the daughter of landlord, she is having very luxurious living standards and is an outstanding woman for her community, wherein, she falls in love with Sikander and wishes to marry him, but when her father Habib khan comes to know about her love, he rejects the love of his daughter, because his son is killed in an accident and he doesn't have any other son to be heir of his wealth. He imposes patriarchal culture on his daughter and forces her to get marry with the Holy Quran.

Yet in Sindh province people completely obey their ancestral culture in order to preserve the wealth and male dominancy and don't want transfer their riches to other hands. Qaisra Shahraz reveals the reality of society in her novel (*The Holy Woman*) interestingly. She interprets the customs made by landlords, which are totally against the women's rights. Wherein, these landlords are powerful and have major support from community. Same is the case of the landlord (Habib Khan) who tries to make his daughter sole heiress of his wealth and on the other side Sikandar is the sufferer. Habib khan fulfills his desires;

“She is not going to marry; I have decided... I have lost my son, and I am not going to lose my inheritance to a complete stranger, I want you to support me in this, which is your duty as a wife, if you don't do it, our ancient traditions will outweigh your opposition, so you had better get used to the idea. Remember what I said: I will divorce you on the spot if you rebel against us”. (*The Holy Woman*, 2001, p.69.70)

Abolishing such ingrained cultures and customs are not an easy task for female social activists, it needs continuous team work to eradicate such irrational customs from the community of orientalists, fundamentalists and orthodox. Yet, the patriarchal cultures are practiced especially in suburb regions of Pakistan; likewise, Zarri Bano who became heiress of her family to protect wealth and remain unmarried, where no purpose of her own life

remains. The misconception was that if a woman gets married, she would not be able to devote her life to Quran, for this reason patriarch (Habib Khan) forced Zarri Bano to become Holy Woman. Qaisra Shahraz took practical measurements to raise voice and awareness amongst the general public about the status and identity of women.

### **Discussion:**

This article is based on the novel (*The Holy Woman*, 2001) of Pakistani female writer Qaisra Shahraz. She captures the female figure's complexity and explains patriarchy in Pakistani society and describes the nature of women's experience in it. She explains; "This land is now like a millstone, a hated talisman around my neck, I have gazed at the acres of our land so many times over this past week, unable to take in the fact that my freedom, identity and womanhood have been bartered for acres of soil." (*The Holy Woman*, p.172). Qaisra Shahraz feels that Western society has created unnatural milieu and rejects erroneous understanding that Islam disregards human dignity. Protagonist ensures Sikandar that Shahzadi Ibadat would bestow emancipation which she didn't have in her student life. Protagonist travels Egypt to study religion and participate in Islamic religious sessions. She says "In fact, my role as a Holy woman, I will have greater freedom and independence as a woman. I will not be tied to any man, nor to any roles and commitment, only to my faith and that what entails like any other normal person. What can be better than commitment to our faith" (Shahraz, 2001:125). The concerned authorities don't avail the social and institutional opportunities to minimize women issues in their respective jurisdiction permanently. On the other side religion is misinterpreted. Islam doesn't allow anybody to violate women's rights. On the contrary, Islam identifies women's status and gives exalted position. Most Pakistani novelists have dealt with tribal, feudal landlords' class, orientalist and fundamentalists who use religion for their self-interest and to maintain their power forever. (Siddique, 2011, p.186). The subject is about the gender issues faced by the protagonist, who is the sufferer of the patriarchal traditions in her family. Here the writer identifies and reveals the patriarchal cultures and problems inherent in family. The writer reviews and interprets various aspects of Zarri Bano's life and tries to sort out the



solution to the issues of women, where woman is confined to domestic chores and to find out the core cause behind the circumstances. The novel of Qaisra Shahraz covers the attitudes of male and female. The protagonist (Zarri Bano) is well-mannered and obedient to her family members. Societies are transforming diurnally, where still the inherited culture is present in the society. Men's rules are applied on women without any confirmation from higher authorities. Some inherited practices namely: family honor, wealth preservation and obedience of ancient culture have badly ruined the women's rights in Pakistan.

### **Religious Perspective:**

Quran has described the entire code of conduct and lifestyle but unfortunately it is mis-interpreted in social structure of norms and values;

“You shall encourage those of you who are single to get married. They may marry the righteous among your male and female servants, if they are poor, Allah will enrich them from his grace. Allah is bounteous, knower”. (An-Nur 24-32)

Furthermore, Hazrat Mohammad (PBUH) said;

“The best of you is the best to his family and I am the best among you to my family.”

“The most perfect believers are the best in conduct and best of you are those who are best to their wives.” (Ibn-Hamble)

“Marriage is my (Sunnah), whoever disregard my (Sunnah) is not from amongst us.” (Ibn-Majah)

Here the male character is the Zarri Bano's father, he has been playing the role of the decision maker and is a strong figure in Zarri Bano's family. In his point of view, woman is just for carrying out the household chores. His selfish notions and forceful attitude has killed the women's feelings and desires. Moreover, he wants to preserve his property and follow patriarchal culture wholeheartedly. Anyway, protagonist Zarri Bano cannot

reject her father's proposal regarding Holy Woman. She cannot refuse the patriarchal traditions of her family, and cannot express her feelings, emotions and the right of living. Hence, her identification, role, physique, mentality and life style have been effected serenely and she has to cope with new style of living which is very difficult for her. Zarri Bano being a high class and normal girl who desires to get marry like other girls and wishes to spend her life with husband and have children. Until now, she is very upset about cultures and traditions of patriarchy. Her activities are confined and she has been forced to become Holy Woman, preserve her family's assets and keep reading the Holy Quran regularly.

World milieu has been transformed after 9/11. After this calamity new term has been introduced globally "Islam-phobia". Consequently, this devastation has limited Muslim's activities and their identity in the non-Muslim states specifically and contributed to the marginalization magnanimously, where Muslims live in very limited community. Thus, this was also a challenge for Muslim women to adjust themselves in the western regions. Anyhow, western feminists have played vital role in the restoration of women's identity in their countries. According to "Introduction to literature Studies" the ideology of feminist is combination of ideas that point out to review social life, ensuring the status itself in the defense of women perspective. (Dwi Susanto, 2016, p.183).

This review furnishes and strengthens our perception about women issues, that how Pakistani women have been severely victimized by the customs of orthodox in rural Sindh? Qaisra Shahraz supports scholars and readers to know women's lifestyle, position, domestic problems, cultural challenges and women's identity in Pakistan. This article is about women question with objective to identify women's problems in patriarchal traditional society and to capture the image of Pakistani women and the conflicting ideologies that govern their life. The suburb community is actually bored and unhappy with patriarchy. They want equality and justice for their women. And want their women to live happily and don't like such male made culture and understand the women's rights and injustice with women. The novel (The Pakistani Bride) depicts the women as very helpless not only in Pakistan but also worldwide (Dhawan & Kapadia, 1996, p.28).

Women cannot fight with male aims- oriented society. They become weak gradually and steadily and would be pressed further in life. Finally, the women also have feelings and they are humans. Qaisra Shahraz indicates and clarifies the women's repression in the regions of Pakistan and many women have been through the ordinary umbrella of victimization. She really cleared misunderstanding amongst the public about women.

The author focuses women's identity, marriage with the Holy Quran, maltreatment and its reasons. Qaisra Shahraz has brought some changes in the lives of women who live in rural regions. Positive changes have been taking place smoothly in rural society in Pakistan. The women of the mentioned society have been hijacked psychologically and physically by the patriarchal cultures. Qaisra Shahraz is thinking differently and she has strong and impressive personality with aiming to bring change in the lives of rural women in Pakistan. She indicates that the modern women have to create space for themselves and face the challenges with brevity. She forces the rural women to empower themselves with modern knowledge and information. She makes difference between Islam and culture. Now, women being marginalized body of the society, without their support society cannot run smoothly. Males need their help and support in every sphere of life.

### **Research Methodology:**

The scholar has applied qualitative strategy and approaches as this study has been performed in explanatory and amplification method to respond research problems. Consequently, accumulating specified rational and authentic information, therefore, this article has applied qualitative strategies which consist of relevant work, books, research articles, treatise, journals and websites.

Furthermore, this qualitative study has been analyzed with support of closed reading methodology too and according to (Cuddon, 1999), closed reading methodology is a best methodology to attain textual purposes. Similarly, readers can understand the purpose of a text by concentrating its specifics, symbols, words, characters and especially author's notions. Consequently,

in this entire process of interpretation, we struggle to expose the ingrained attitudes of patriarchy.

All women have suffered everywhere in the world regardless of class, caste and language. Furthermore, the victimization could be physical where female bodies are sold, exchanged, beaten and raped. Where these practices suppress women's intellectual growth and development and the women have been disregarded, that leave women in a conflicting situation and a constant perusal of their identification. The gender equality has been highlighted by the scholar. The patriarchal culture has effectively controlled and exploited the women's life entirely and suppressed women physically and psychologically. In the rural regions of Pakistan women are battleground upon which male fight wars to gain their objectives and prove their superiority. Thus the female figures are into sentimental battle to fulfill the men-oriented culturally perused objectives. In fact, women have some desires and dreams in life to get education and to choose a life partner. They simply want love and respect as equal individuals in the society.

Pakistani society is an Islamic society, and the Pakistani women must obey and decide their future works according to Pakistani laws, not only Pakistani women but also Pakistani men. The ambiguity is, neither they follow Islam and nor they follow Pakistani law especially in Sindh, Pakistan. The public have made their own laws and cultures, where such issues exist, like; marriage, divorce, rape and struggle for social general necessity. Here, oppressive circumstances and all sorts of abilities and courage have been depicted. Such crucial and tough situations have been observed in the study. Female are preoccupied with emotional conflicts unable to bring any transformation in lives. Where we notice the situation of protagonist in the study, women have been made helpless and compelled. Actually, the said novel (*The Holy Women*) is a source of solving the problems of women and struggle to normalize the situation of common female globally.

Eventually, this paper ascertains the genesis of women's rights violations and identifies their position and role in society, more recognized effects of patriarchy and role of Religion, social activists, female writers,

culture, public and concerned authorities, why women's issues are increased magnanimously in society? In addition, safe environment is necessary factor for any society, if it is secured and superintended, this will never be wielded adverse, means, to channelize the culture traditionally. (Robert Stanton, 2012, p. 35). After all, this has been clarified and becomes obvious that, women are wielded for self-regard and contemplated powerless. Knowingly they are being disregarded, religion is misinterpreted, and enlightenment of legal law implementation and practice, civil activists have skipped their actual liabilities. Anyhow, it needs actual and major transformation of the current posture of women in Pakistani society. In order to abolish and minimize the women's troubles permanently; there must be alliance and synergy against women's rights violations, the prime measurement is to raise awareness on community level, increase the educational ratio, define and interpret Islamic teachings in its true spirit, impose and make sure the implementation of law, discourage public made cultural system, motivate and active the social activists to deliver their social services, and the concerned departments should initiate small level intervention for women's empowerment.

The patriarchy must be discouraged and necessary action must be ensured against it, and the feminist work must be employed to empower women, to have equal juncture in life. "The Woman Question" the issues of women's identity and their rights' violations have been discussed. And more broadly their role in changing political, economic, and professional scenario have supported and enhanced the male social activities in order to ensure peace and stability for successful and prosperous life. Their pivotal role could not be disregarded. Hence, it's essential to empower women because their success is directly associated with males' success, males cannot survive and cope with problems individually; women are playing their key role in upbringing their children. Here, domestic chores have centralized but the actual scenario is the women's rights granted by Allah almighty. Not only these but also women have participated and supported males in battlefields. This paper abolishes the ambiguity that exists between male and female, to restore and maintain prosperous living standards.

Zarri Bano has strong Asian traits of devotion to family' norms and tradition, the Shahzadi Ibadat depicts. Consequently, her father (Habib Khan) repenting his decision and tells her, "I want to make amends. If now, or in the future you ever wish to marry, you will have my full blessings." (Shahraz 2001:187). However, Zarri Bano is not willing to marry. Unfortunately, her younger sister Ruby dies who had married Sikandar, it makes her sad. After that her mother requests to marry Sikandar for the sake of little Harris (her nephew) but she reacts "How convenient of you to remind me now, mother- now that it suits all of you, I am asked to marry. Do you think I am a wax doll (a putley) that you can mould to dance to your tune when and however, it suits you? I am a human being! A woman who can never contemplate wedlock." (Shahraz 2001:349). Qaisra Shahraz comments in her interview (2007) about Sikandar and Zarri Bano relations, "There was love-hate tension in this relationship, making the readers want to know what would happen and would they ever get back together again." However, she agrees to marry Sikandar for the sake of her nephew. Islamic religious knowledge helped Zarri Bano and cleared her misunderstanding about Islam. In result, Zarri Bano begins normal life with Sikandar and he assures her complete freedom. He says, "Let the passionate woman come to life again you can still carry on leading your life the way you have chosen to do. You can even run your own madrasas, go to conventions, hold seminars- whatever you want. I am not going to strip you of your religious identity, if that is what you are afraid of. I respect and accept you as you are. In fact, it is a great honor for me to have a pakeeza woman and a scholar for a wife. Do not see me as threat to yourself, but as a friend." (Shahraz 2001:488-89). Her decision of marriage depicts that she has full control on her body and life. Furthermore, she met and achieved her love again.

**Conclusion:**

Qaisra Shahraz's portrayal of women who live in rural community is ideal but she could be a bothering for women's liberations. She might be blamed for generating protagonists that are not recalcitrant. Furthermore, the flawless stance of her protagonists makes them imaginary figures. Qaisra Shahraz knows the continuous changes in society well. Generally, both urban and rural women do live in restrained communities. Anyhow, she trusts betterment but is no absolute. Her trust is differing from that of her associates. She emphasizes that today's women should generate position and capacity for themselves by self-determination and mingle the latest with cultural as in the incident of protagonist Zarri Bano. She considers culture the major cause of women's victimization in today's life. Therefore, women have been put subservient. Women's empowerment lies in knowing about women's rights in religion and evolving traditional cultural values accordance with the necessity of today's women. She safeguards religion extremely in her fictions and that traditional conditioning of religious practices and patriarch passion for strength and opulence cause ultimatum to women's freedom. Qaisra Shahraz feels that western feminism would not succeed in Pakistani society where elite class has access to modern technology and western paraphernalia. Major part of population likes the eastern lifestyle yet. Therefore, Qaisra emphasizes feminism and reanalyzes feminism for Pakistani women and makes sure that negotiation is important to be initiated between different era's women for the reason to have a thorough comprehension of similarities and dissimilarities. Differences must be valued. Such measurements could generate unity across feminist divides and assist confrontation of maltreatments of orientalism on one side and religious extremists on other. This notion gives her prominent status amongst Pakistani writers. She is an authentic writer and true analyzer. Her protagonists are not self-reliant; this is because females in rural community of Pakistan are particularly like that. Qaisra Shahraz doesn't have any particular motive to promote but endeavors to manifest situations and observations around her.

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