

## *Praise*

'Qaisra Shahraz movingly depicts the tensions for those caught between cultures old and new. Characters struggle with the concept of homeland, relationships between generations, and changing roles for women, and often triumph. A subtle and important insight.'

Elizabeth Baines, Author of *The Birth Machine* (Salt)

'Qaisra Shahraz is in a position to bring to readers issues that most of us in the West are scarcely aware of at such a human level. She has the ability to bring East and West together through her writing.'

Jane Camens, Executive Director, Asia Pacific Writers & Translators, Australia

# **A Pair of Jeans**

## and other stories

Qaisra Shahraz



HopeRoad: London

### *Dedication*

This collection is for my lovely nieces, Sumer, Sophia, Sara, Zarri Bano, Sana, Safa, Maryam and Alissa.

## *Acknowledgements*

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## Preface

I first came across the name of Qaisra Shahraz when I bought the anthology *Holding Out* (Crocus, 1988), and read her short story called *A Pair of Jeans*. Its subject caught my attention: a young Muslim woman in England is torn between Western values and her loyalty to her family with its very different attitudes and value system. Teaching it successfully at my university, I found that it met with a very favourable response and gave rise to lively discussions.

I wrote to Qaisra, who invited me to come to Manchester - which I did in the same year that I included her story in my anthology *Writing Women: Twentieth Century Short Stories* (Cornelsen, 1991). And I experienced her overwhelming hospitality. Incidentally, another of Qaisra's stories *The Elopement*, which I had come across in the anthology *Black and Priceless* (Crocus, 1988), was co-published by myself and two other editors in: *Invitation to Literature* (Cornelsen, 1990).

Qaisra has become a well-known and well-loved figure in Germany, not only in our schools, but also in our Universities of Education. Teachers find her descriptions of her own background and writing engaging and stimulating, and she has visited Germany on a more or less regular basis.

Today it seems remarkable to me that we have known each other for 23 years and never lost touch. I have witnessed a young woman grow into an internationally acclaimed and respected author, who moved beyond short-story writing to try her hand at highly ambitious novels. *The Holy Woman* (2001) and *Typhoon* (2003) won international acclaim, and I felt gratified when she invited me to contribute to the first monograph about her literary output: *The Holy and the Unholy, Critical Essays on Qaisra Shahraz's Fiction* (2011).

Although she has spent most of her life in England and works professionally as an education consultant and college inspector, I perceive her to be living in both worlds - the British as well as the Pakistani Muslim world. Her short stories may therefore be set in either location, but she peoples them invariably with characters of Pakistani background or origin, like Noor in *Zemindar's Wife*, the disillusioned village elder in *The City Dwellers* and Samir in *Escape*, lost between his own two worlds of Manchester and Lahore.

I regard Qaisra as an author who is loyal to her faith and at the same time tries to bring home her values to readers of different backgrounds and different faiths - to bridge those two different worlds. She never preaches, but she opens doors to let us see new and unfamiliar scenarios and to meet unexpected characters who invite our response. And I am happy that we have been friends for such a long time.

*Dr. Liesel Hermes, Karlsruhe*

Former President of the University of Education, Karlsruhe, Germany

# **ZEMINDAR'S WIFE**

“Aren’t you going to the *Zemindar*’s dinner, my son?” Kaniz asked her twenty-year old son, Younis, reading a book at his desk. She waited; fearing his answer. The rest of the family were ready to shoot off to the *Zemindar*’s *hevali*.

The *Zemindar*, the feudal Landlord, following the century old custom of his family, had invited the fellow villagers for a sumptuous dinner. Since the invitations arrived, a hubbub of excitement had reigned in each household. This morning there was a feverish tension running amongst the young women and girls about clothes, glamour and who would be wearing what. Above all, today they would gain a rare glimpse of their proud, youthful and very beautiful Chaudharani, the *Zemindar*’s wife – what a climax to good feasting. Always, a great honour to be invited to the *Zemindar*’s palatial residence, especially to eat, but what was the occasion this time, quite a few villagers mused, gossiping.

“You go! I need to read!” Younis, studying for a Bachelor of Arts degree at the Lahore Punjab University could not hold back the sarcasm from his voice.

“It will only take an hour or so, my son. Quickly eat and then return home.” Kaniz regretted her words, seeing his face redden.

“Mother, I am not starving! My studies are far more important than eating a sumptuous dinner off the *Zemindar*’s special china plates! You go if you must. You’ve talked about nothing else since the invitation arrived. It makes me sick the hold that he, and the proud bitch of a wife he has, have over you all”. Kaniz stepped back, shocked.

“My son, what terrible language! How can you call the Chaudharani that?”

Troubled, she left her son. Education had changed him. Above all, he had become very abusive when he talked about the *Zemindar* and his wife. Younis hated the feudal system, disliking the feudal clan in their village, their wealth and the power they had over the villagers. Kaniz wondered how the haughty Chaudharani would receive them; still bitterly able to recall queuing up excitedly with the village women under the *hevali*’s veranda. Their simple loving hearts were swelling with warmth to welcome the new wife. She, with one look of disdain from her cold emerald green eyes, dismayed them. They quickly learnt the lesson; she was of a superior breed, they were nothing but country bumpkins. They had no roles in her life, only as servants, inferior mortals to do her bidding. Rebuffed and humiliated, Kaniz and the other women had retreated from the *hevali* and into themselves.

Younis looked out of his bedroom window, with a cynical twist to his lips. The street was packed with men, women and children, all dressed in their very best, hastening towards the *hevali*, a large whitewashed imposing building on the top of the hill. It was and was meant to be different from the rest of the humbler village dwellings. Even men who had migrated out to the West or to the Arab countries, hadn’t been able to build a *khoti* to compete with the splendour of the *hevali*.

Younis returned to his book on Karl Marx and note taking for his seminar. He wondered whether the *Zemindar* would miss his presence.

The object of his thought, Sarfaraz Jhangir, a man of thirty-seven years, was sitting on his horse, on the outskirts of the village, inspecting the sugar cane fields on his land. Apart from a few plots, most of the land around the village belonged to him, and before that to his forefathers. He gained his income from the cash crops that the land produced. Most of the villagers, apart from those who owned the land, worked for him. He paid them good salaries, but the profit from the crops was his, as the owner of the land.

Sarfaraz checked his watch. He’d better get back to the *hevali*, to welcome the villagers. After handing his horse to the stable boy, Sarfaraz crossed the courtyard to



make his way to his private quarters. There in his bedroom, he stood still against the door, lips parted. Staring at Noor, the light of his life.

His wife, sitting in front of a large mirror, was making up her face. Her long hair fell in loose auburn waves around her shoulders. With the afternoon sun streaming through the window, it glinted like flames of fire.

He tiptoed across the room to stand behind her, holding her gaze in the mirror and letting his fingers thread through her hair; momentarily closing his eyes, revelling in the sensuous feel of it. Bending down he kissed the bare skin of her shoulders around her neckline, his eyes dipping to the voluptuous curves of her breasts, outlined against the crepe of her tunic.

“Allah Pak, how gorgeous she is!” He marvelled; his heart beat quickening as it always did when he saw her dressed in her wedding finery and in a state of undress.

His passion was suddenly checked, by the cold glint in her emerald gems for eyes. She was angry with him, as she had been for the past fortnight. Ever since she had heard that he was giving a party for all the villagers. She couldn’t make sense of it. What was the special occasion? This wasn’t the time of Eid or any other festival.

In fact, she was furious. Why was her husband wasting his wealth? The dinner was costing a fortune. It wasn’t a minor affair to feed over two hundred people, providing two meat dishes. The slaughter of dozens of lambs and sheep would stain their *bavarchikhanah*, kitchen. What was worse, it sounded as though Sarfaraz wanted this dinner business to be a regular event.

She had wanted to go to her parents’ home as a sign of protest, but he had insisted that she stay and host the dinner with him, arguing that it wouldn’t be very good for his *Izzat*, his honour, not to have his wife at his side, especially a wife like his, an asset to show off.

By nature she was a proud, haughty woman. Her beauty, wealth, and upbringing as the daughter of a rich influential *Zemindar*, had all contributed to that haughtiness. Today, however, that haughtiness had a dangerous element to it. The last thing she wanted to do was to entertain hordes of village bumpkins. Nevertheless, if she was going to be the hostess at the dinner party, then she had to look the part. She had her reputation at stake. It was almost as if she was going to be put on show – she mustn’t, therefore, disappoint them.

She didn’t!

The village guests were sitting at round tables. All heads and eyes were riveted on Noor as she entered. A hushed silence fell on the courtyard; even the birds seemed to have stopped singing, entranced by her appearance.

Noor walked gracefully to her seat; a tall, elegant, beautiful woman, fully aware of the spell she had cast over her audience. A shadow of a smile played on her full, luscious, glossy lips. Since her teenage years, when she had become aware of her beauty, she knew how to exploit it and to command attention, respect and authority. In her case all three went hand in hand. What she hadn’t realised and wouldn’t have cared about anyway, was that it was her beauty which intimidated people.

She sat down, and let her gaze indolently fan over the groups of people assembled, all gazing at her. She smiled at everyone, but at no one in particular. Manners and breeding had been drilled into her from an early age. The coldness that emanated from her green eyes, and the stiff composed manner she adopted, intimidated her guests and further heightened the barrier between them, her husband, and herself.

The men tried to resist the impulse to keep looking at her. It was wrong and immoral for a man to look at another man’s wife, no matter how attractive she was.

The women, on the other hand, didn't take their eyes off her, nor, for that matter, did they make any pretence to do so. Dinner was one thing, but to be able to feast their eyes on their elegant, beautiful but haughty Chaudharani, their mistress, was an added bonus. They had to admit that she had done justice to her looks and the occasion.

Their eyes kept wandering to her beautiful, well sculptured features. It was almost as if Allah had been carried away when it came to Noor. She was different. They had never seen such beautiful green eyes – cold though they were, nor hair of such colour. It cascaded down in open waves over one shoulder. It was all visible from under the delicate pink chiffon *dupatta*, the scarf which was draped casually around her shoulders and over her head. It formed a becoming frame for her hair and face. Her rounded milky white wrists were covered by delicately designed gold bangles. The women tried to count how many she wore – there were at least two dozen on each arm. Probably she had more gold on her arms than all the village women put together.

The bangles matched the delicately designed beautiful necklace, which lovingly embraced her neck and the ear studs hugging her ears. Her shalwar kameez suit was flowing and classically cut. It had obviously been cut by fine *derzi*, the tailors from the city rather than those in the village. The women's eyes almost hypnotically wandered from her beautiful long hands with well-manicured and polished nails, to the attractive feet, visible in elegant, and dainty black mules, which showed off the fairness of her skin. It was almost as if they had been kept wrapped in cotton wool. She had probably never been out in the hot afternoon sun in all her life.

They all waited for her to say something. They had already listened to the *Zemindar* welcoming them to the dinner party. The waiters had begun to lay the tables and to place soft drinks and salad bowls on the tables. Somehow the tense, electric atmosphere that had prevailed since the *Zemindar's* wife had entered, had affected everybody. Nobody spoke, but they waited uneasily for somebody to say something.

Suddenly something did happen. A four-year-old girl, managed to wriggle off her mother's lap, and dash straight towards the Chaudharani. Everyone was startled out of their unease. How would the Chaudharani react?

Noor too was surprised when this gorgeous four-year-old bounded straight forward towards her lap. Much to the surprise of the onlookers, her luscious pink lips spread out into a broad smile, and she held out her hand to the child. She had always been partial to beauty, in particular to beautiful children. She held onto the child and smiled down at it, but she resisted the urge to pick her up and put her on her lap. Alone, she might have done it, but not here in front of over two hundred people. She didn't want to be seen giving more favour to one child than to others. It had been bred into her from an early age, that one must treat everybody the same, and never show favouritism amongst the villagers – otherwise they forgot their place, and began to exploit the situation, and it was also unfair.

She could see the mother's cheeks glowing with happiness and embarrassment. Later that same mother would be boasting to all the other village women, how the Chaudharani had taken to her child. So Noor restrained the impulse to ask the child to sit with her, but the warmth she displayed towards the child had a miraculous effect on the people in the courtyard. They all relaxed. Her eyes were now warm, matching the genuine smile on her lips. Noor took the child as a cue.

Getting up, she spoke! Her voice was attractive, which complimented her physical looks.

"Welcome everybody. I hope you'll show your appreciation of our hospitality by doing justice to the food, prepared by our clever *halwais*, the chefs."

The welcome speech was music to the villagers' ears. Her speech, though formal and short, had brought her closer to them. She told the little girl to return to her mother. The girl, smiling, turned to go to her mother. Noor sat down again, next to her husband, and kept watch over the proceedings. She wanted everything to run smoothly and as planned.

When the food was being served, Noor took her leave. She had done enough! Her husband watched her go. He wished she had stayed a bit longer but he was grateful and couldn't complain. She could have thrown a tantrum and stayed inside. No, he was married to an intelligent woman, with good breeding, and one who would never let him or his *izzat* down, no matter what she was like in private. She had performed her task much better than he had anticipated.

He hosted the dinner right to the end, talking to each and every family and making small talk. In particular he spoke with Younis's family. He enquired casually as to why Younis hadn't come, as he had seen him since he had returned for his summer holidays. Kaniz, Younis's mother, replied that he wasn't feeling well. The *Zemindar* naturally made the right response to Younis's mother, but his mind was buzzing with ideas; he was certain that her son had deliberately not come. Who the hell did Younis think he was anyhow? He was a village upstart, just because he had gained some college certificate. The boy's arrogance even surpassed that of his wife's. Did he think that he could challenge the authority of the village *Zemindar*, a person of class, status and wealth? All of Younis's degrees couldn't compete with that. Nevertheless it nettled him that Younis had not come. It was a deliberate snub and it troubled him. He wanted men like Younis to be on his side and not opposing him; after all Younis could thwart all his plans!

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In every household that evening, when the villagers returned home, the talk centred not on the dinner, but on the *Zemindar's* wife. Her beauty and haughtiness were both already subjects of everyday conversation, but now they talked about her amazing warmth. She wasn't so bad after all, and she was human like anybody else – she too smiled genuinely just like normal people. Now they all looked forward to next week's dinner, not just because of the wonderful food that they were sure to get, but that they would surely catch another glimpse of their landlady. They wondered what she would be wearing then. As the Chaudharani stayed inside the *hevali* most of the time, and travelled to and fro in a car, it meant that they rarely came in contact with her. It was generally the custom of the rich and high bred families to make their women folk, in particular the young women, inaccessible to the general public. They were too precious to be soiled by coming in contact with ordinary people or people of a lower status. They weren't to be ogled at by any *Nethu Pethu*, any Tom, Dick or Harry.

Noor had obeyed the customs of her family and made very few public appearances. When she did, however, she didn't quite flaunt herself, but on the other hand she didn't attempt to hide from the public gaze, as some of the elder women did in semi-*purdah*. No *purdah* for Noor. Her beauty was there to be seen and enjoyed, and not to be hidden from the public gaze.

When the following week approached, people began to wonder, amongst themselves, as to why their *Zemindar* was inviting them to dinners? One occasion was enough, but not week after week. Why was he doing it? Why would any man in his position do it, they mused.

Younis, with his typical cynicism, had already managed to cast a shadow over his parents' eagerness to visit the *hevali* for dinner. Their eagerness had nauseated him. He thus sowed the seeds of doubt in their minds, which cast a gloom over their visit.

Again the Friday afternoon proved to be a great event for the villagers. The *Zemindar* had invited a *tamasbeen*, with a bear, to entertain them. Everybody, especially the children, loved the bear's antics. To top the event, Noor made her spectacular appearance. Again she was beautifully dressed in elegant clothing. This time the smile actually reached her eyes, when she greeted and welcomed her guests. Moreover, she stayed a few minutes longer than last time. Again her guests were honoured, gratified and humbled by her presence.

Noor had drunk in their openly speculative and admiring glances – she was used to them, particularly when she was out shopping in the city's shopping parades. Here it was a gratifying experience. This is what it felt like to be a Chaudharani, the mistress of this rural community. You gained admiring glances, but you worked to gain respect. To perform the role of a landlady, a Chaudharani, is what she had been trained to perform well. In Noor's case, her beauty had given her that extra edge. It enabled her to have almost a charismatic influence on the people she came in contact with.

Later that evening, Noor sat reading some magazines, but the pictures escaped her notice. She was thinking about her husband and the feast they had been putting on and would be on future occasions. He hadn't mentioned next week's feast, but she knew that it was on the cards. He had already ordered lambs to be transported from the neighbouring village. Why was he doing this? What was the purpose behind this goodwill? His innate generosity couldn't be the underlying factor. There was a limit to one's generosity.

Her attention was caught by the voices she heard in the hall. She remembered her husband's solicitor going with her husband into the office. Apparently he was now leaving. They had been locked in that room for over an hour. Throwing the magazines aside, onto the chair, Noor arose and headed for the office. The servants were nowhere to be seen. Her husband had gone out with the solicitor. She went straight to his leather-topped desk and rifled through the papers. A tight knot was beginning to form inside her. Surely her husband had not gone mad and decided to do something rash with his inheritance. Her curiosity was getting the better of her. Finding nothing of importance on his desk, she took the key from his drawer to open the safe. There she sifted through some documents and took them out. She returned to the desk, and sitting down, began to read them.

There was a report saying that there were substantial deposits of bauxite in the area of the village. There was a recommendation that the bauxite should be mined by open cast methods. That's what he was up to; he needed the villagers' land to mine for bauxite. She had seen the devastation which opencast mining had caused, in other areas. How could he be planning to do the same for their beautiful fertile valley! As she read document after document, her mind somersaulted into action.

She sat back in his leather swivel chair and rocked to and fro while staring into space. Then in a clean deliberate move, she tore each document one by one. There had been eleven altogether and she had torn them at such an angle that they couldn't be put together again. She felt no repugnance for what she had done. She didn't fear her husband's anger as her inner integrity was more important than his anger.

With a steely look in her green eyes, she waited for her husband to return. The torn documents lay strewn on the floor around her. An hour later, he came into the



office, and was surprised to see her there. He was further surprised to see the torn pieces of paper on the floor. He looked questioningly at his wife. He bent down to rummage through the torn bits on the floor, and on seeing what they were, his eyes shot at his wife. Her own steely gaze didn't waver under his.

"What have you done, Noor?" He said, with his voice trembling with anger. She noticed, with satisfaction, that even in anger he called her with respect, her full name. "Have you gone mad?"

"No, I haven't gone mad. I think that it is you who have lost your head. Is that what the dinners were in aid of? So that you can psychologically blackmail them to sign those documents for you?"

"Well I would be paying them!"

"What would you be paying for? For them to lose their livelihoods? It's a form of moral and psychological blackmail. You are feeding them so that they cannot refuse to sell their plots of land to you. I find that despicable. I may have my faults, but this is something that I will not let my husband stoop to."

"You do not understand, Noor. It would only be for three years; they could have their land back after then."

"What sort of land would they be getting back? The land would be sour and no longer productive? How could you destroy so much of what your family has protected for generations?"

"We will make a lot of money! We could choose to live somewhere else! You just don't understand! Fortunately these documents could be reproduced", he snorted as he left the room.

"Well, I'll just have to rip them up again!" she shouted after him. "And" she continued, "You are not going to host any more dinners, unless you can guarantee that you will not do this again."

She couldn't quite understand her feelings. It wasn't just about her repulsion for opencast mining, but why did she feel so bad about her husband doing what he intended to do. It was the prerogative of landlords to buy and sell land from and to the village people. Why did it, therefore, seem such an underhand thing to do - for her husband to buy the land. It wasn't the buying of the land from them that she objected to but the psychological pressure he would impose on the villagers, who didn't want to sell, but would feel obliged to do so, just to please the *Zemindar*, especially as he had feasted them. Her mind revolted from the idea. It was too demeaning and it was against the grain of their traditions and reputations.

Sarfaraz, as he walked back to his bedroom, did not know what to do. Her look of scorn had touched a raw spot in him. He was passionately in love with his wife, and had gone to extreme lengths to win her hand in marriage. He couldn't, therefore, jeopardise his relationship with his wife. Her action in tearing up those documents and the way that she had reacted didn't bode well for him. He was placed in a very difficult situation. The desire to buy the land and use it for mining, vied strongly with his desire to stay on good terms with his wife. He still wasn't sure whether she loved him. She had never said so. On the other hand, she had never said that she didn't. Their relationship was not on an equal footing. He had given everything to her, including his innermost thoughts and feelings, and she, on the contrary, had remained coolly detached from him, although she humoured him in every way. What he couldn't bear was to estrange her further over the land issue. Already she had been on frosty terms with him since the idea of the dinners cropped up - who would have thought that his wife would be such a self-righteous woman. He had married her for her looks and her beauty, but he feared that one day she would get

the better of him. It seemed that there was more to her than he had been led to believe. Now what about the dinners? He didn't know whether he should go ahead with Friday's feast or not. It was a question of saving one's face. He waited patiently for his wife to join him. She came one hour later and seemed once again her normal self. The matter was not raised again.

During the afternoon of the next day, while Noor was preparing to watch a new Indian film on their video, her woman helper, Bilkees, came running to the room, looking worried.

"What's the matter, Bilkees? Has something happened?"

"Yes, Chaudharani-ji. Younis, Kaniz's son has died."

"The one who was studying at the university in Lahore?" Noor asked. Although she never met any of the villagers personally, she knew most of them by name. Younis and his family in particular, were brought to her attention by her husband, especially about the interest he displayed to the family and the animosity he had against the educated young man. Noor's human intuition had enlightened her to the fact that her husband saw the young man as a sort of threat to himself and his plans. More than anything he feared his education.

"Yes, Mistress, the same one. He was their only son, and so very precious to his family."

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that. How did he die?"

"The coach carrying him collided with a car, while he was returning to Lahore."

"Does the *Zemindar* know?"

"Yes. He has already started to make arrangements to have the body returned home. He has been to see the family to express his sorrow and to tell them that he would be looking after and provide food for the guests who came to offer their condolences."

"Thank you, Bilkees, for telling me. Can you also tell me when my husband returns home?"

He didn't arrive until much later, and by that time she had gone to sleep. When she woke up the following morning – he had already left. She had wanted to talk to him and to ask him some questions.

The *Zemindar*, as befitted his role, headed the *poorie*, the gathering of the relatives and neighbours to express their sorrow at Kaniz's home. He saw men crying for the young man. He, on the contrary, could not shed a single tear. He tried, but he couldn't. He was aware that this man had had enough education to realise what would happen to village, if it was going to be used for bauxite mining. He had feared him as his only threat. But now he was dead and a threat no longer, and although he knew it was the thing to do, he couldn't cry for him. He had cried for a young girl who had died a few months ago, but here his tear ducts failed him. This was a time when he needed to cry to show that he shared the sorrow felt by the young man's family and friends.

The guests were thrown into a dilemma by the *Zemindar's* invitation. They didn't know where to go. They had to offer their sympathy to Younis's family, yet the meals were being prepared at the *Zemindar's hevali*. It was an awkward situation. To be seen going to the *hevali* was tantamount to stating that they were keener on the rich meals they would have at the *hevali* rather than the simple food they would be offered in Kaniz's home. Some guests found it more diplomatic to stay in Kaniz's home, even though they knew they would be offered *dhal* - lentils rather than lamb.

By the second and third day, the number of guests going to the *hevali* had dwindled to a few. The funeral had been held. The guests still kept coming, but most stayed in Kaniz's home. There were so many guests that they had spilled over into her neighbour's guest room and courtyard. After all it was their son who was dead; it had nothing to do with the *Zemindar*.

As the *Zemindar* remained out of the village most of the time for the following three days, Noor had very little time to communicate with him. She watched the proceedings in the village with interest from her window in the *hevali*. She had sent her condolences to the young man's family. By the fourth day, nobody came to the *hevali*, although full meals had been laid out and it had been well announced in the village by Bilkees herself. Noor learned that Kaniz had got the local village chef, to cook two *daigs*, huge pots, of meat and rice. Whether they meant it or not, it was a snub to the *Zemindar* and his dinners, nevertheless. Noor identified with the situation keenly; what would she do in their situation?

That evening she decided that she would do something that she had never done before. It wasn't the done thing for a Chaudharani to do nor encouraged. She decided to visit Younis's family's home to pay her respects and offer her sympathy in person. Landlords often visited the homes of their villagers – that was the done thing; for a landlady, however, a Chaudharani, as young, beautiful and haughty as Noor, it was unthinkable. An ocean lay between her and the village women. For a Chaudharani to visit any villager's home was an honour indeed. It almost set a stamp of respect on the family which she visited. Noor, the proud lady from the city, going there personally doubly affected their reputation.

She went unannounced, with Bilkees, in the twilight hours of the night – no pomp or ceremony. When she entered the threshold, her tall, heavily shawled figure visible to all, a hushed silence fell on the crowd of people gathered in the small courtyard. Mouths and eyes gaped open. Hushed whispers floated from mouth to mouth in disbelief.

"The Chaudharani is here! The Chaudharani is here!" were the strange words.

There was an uneasy and eager shuffling of feet and bodies, as the village women awkwardly looked around as to where the Chaudharani could sit. Which place in that shabby courtyard, heaving with human bodies? There was no ideal place for her to sit to do her justice, even if they vacated the whole courtyard. They gazed up at her in awed admiration. Even in the semi-darkness of the courtyard, her beautiful face shone out from the cowl hood of her outdoor black chiffon overcoat. It was bare of makeup, but still incredibly beautiful.

Kaniz came forward with dignified confidence. Even in her sorrow, her eyes brightened with satisfaction. The Chaudharani had come to her home. It was an honour and a humbling experience. Very befitting her son's status – her five foot body stood tall indeed.

Having come this far, Noor was not in a mood to flaunt her class and cultural differences and her innate pride. In fact, she found it irksome and was very much aware of the havoc her arrival had created. She whispered gently to Kaniz, as she stood in the middle of the courtyard, surrounded by women, of all ages, sitting on rugs on the ground – all temporary struck dumb. She didn't want any fussing.

"*Assalama-Alaikum*. I have come to pay my respect and offer condolences on the death of your beloved son." She offered, before quickly whispering "Listen, it doesn't matter where I sit, but not here in the courtyard." She wanted to get away from the crowd of gaping women and the claustrophobic smallness of the surroundings.

“Yes, yes, of course!”

Kaniz quickly led her to her *bethak*, the lounge, blushing, hurrying to dust the sofa for the Chaudharani. The sofa was always reserved for very special guests. And who could be more important than their young utterly beautiful Chaudharani – she was their Benazir Bhutto.

With her beautiful manicured hand she gracefully slipped off her chiffon overcoat and sat down. She was wearing a shalwar kameez in subdued colours which, as with everything she wore, seemed to etch and show off the contours of her body.

Squatting on a small footstool, with her daughter hovering shyly beside her, Kaniz welcomed the young landowner’s wife. Bilkees stayed outside; it was her opportunity to meet up with and gossip with some of the village women. They talked about Younis. What a tragedy it was for him and his family. He had so much going for him. It wasn’t fair for somebody so young, their only son, with so much potential to die – just like that.

“Yes, Chaudharani Sahaba, he was our future. He was all we had. Apart from the land we own here, we have nothing.” Kaniz was openly weeping, sniffing in the folds of head shawl. At the back of her mind she noted the dazzling green of the Chaudharani’s eyes as they shone with unshed tears. Her chest bowed with pride. The landowner’s wife was shedding tears for her son. Gratified, she swallowed in the sight. Her son had labelled her as a ‘proud haughty bitch’ and now she was shedding tears for him. “He was our means of livelihood. We had invested our futures in his education. He was going to graduate this year, and then get a job in the city, and we were going to live in Lahore. Now we have nothing! No son. No livelihood. No future. Not even the documents for the land. Our son said that we should ask for them, but we were always embarrassed to do so.”

“Who has your documents?”

“Our *Zemindar*, your husband”, Kaniz stuttered after a short pause.

“Oh!” Taken aback, Noor averted her gaze from Kaniz. In her mind, images of her husband’s plans leapt back, the solicitor’s visit and the documents she had ripped up. Knowing what her husband had been planning, she was troubled to learn that he had their land documents. She wanted to find out as much as she could, without arousing Kaniz’s curiosity or animosity.

“How long has my husband had those documents?”

Kaniz was lost in thought, she hadn’t expected this question. “Oh, a very long time; and before him, his father had them. It is a village tradition to keep them safe in the *Zemindar*’s safe. Most of us have never owned such a safe, and there is always a fear of them being destroyed or stolen.”

“I see”, answered Noor, feeling more and more uncomfortable.

With decades of maturity behind her, Kaniz had noticed the mistress’s unease and decided to speak more boldly to Noor, even though she feared offending her.

“My son told us that perhaps the *Zemindar* might not wish to return them to us, especially if he was interested in buying the land himself. Most of the villagers had always been afraid of that possibility. The land means so much to us... Our lives are entwined with that land... We eat from it. Yet if ever the *Zemindar* wanted to buy the land, we couldn’t refuse him. He is always so good to us; how could we refuse him – it is unthinkable.” She paused, scanning the landowner’s wife’s face. The latter was looking down. “Yet without the land we have no future, especially now that we have lost Younis.” Kaniz’s eyes swelled with tears, and she drew the fold of her head shawl to wipe her eyes again.



Noor sat awkwardly on her hostess's sofa and held out her hand to her; it was a spontaneous movement borne out of human empathy and concern. Kaniz took it, holding onto the beautiful hand and drawing comfort from the contact with the Chaudharani and reaching forward. It was a novel experience to hold her delicate hand, a hand so soft and smooth. It was worrying to that her own chapped hands might chafe the soft skin of the other woman's. For her hand had never done any form of physical work. Did such hands actually exist?

"If it makes you feel better, I'll get the documents returned to you – you have my word on it. My husband has so much land already, why would he want yours? He even inherited some from my parents as part of my dowry, when we were married two years ago." Noor smiled at her hostess, attempting to reassure her.

"Oh, I think that would make us all feel much better." Kaniz beamed back. "Do you know, Chaudharani Sahaba, I hope you are not offended by what I am saying, but some people were afraid of losing their land." Her eyes suddenly dipped. "They couldn't see any reason for the dinners, and felt that by going to them, they were being put into a position where they were obliged to sell him their land."

Noor coloured in surprise as to how much of her husband's intentions and plans had become known to the villagers. Noor felt that she must reassure them. Did her husband think they were all blind to his devious plans?

"Oh dear, no! I am not offended. I can assure you that my husband will do no such thing." She responded with a tone rising to lofty heights. "He is just trying to act his role of *Zemindar*. You should not be afraid of his generosity and hospitality – there are no strings attached. I can assure you." Now she stared into her hostess's eyes with a challenging look. In her head, she just hoped that her husband had, by now, changed his mind.

"I must be going. You have other guests to attend to." She politely informed – ready to leave. It was then that a four year old girl bounded into the room and saw Noor. She dashed towards her and embraced her body. Noor stood frozen as she looked at the young child. The humanity asserted itself as she looked down at the child on the floor and swung her into her arms and hugged her against her chest. It was at that moment that the girl's mother stepped into the room. Seeing her daughter in a tight embrace with the with the Chaudharani brought immediate tears to her eyes, Three other women peered over the woman's shoulders too and glimpsed this rare sight.

Noor was oblivious to the reaction around. All she knew was that she wanted to go on hugging the child against her body. It felt so good. At the back of her mind the words tapped "I want a child of my own." Her husband had been pressurising her – but she had resisted so far. Now she knew – she needed the maternal fulfilment of a baby in her arms and against her breast.

The seconds ticked away, everyone watched as the Chaudharani held on to the four year-old in her arms. "Please don't go yet!" Kaniz asked gently but boldly. "Have something to eat." Noor looked at her hostess above the child's face, unsure of herself.

"You must have something to eat – it is only *saag*, spinach, I'm afraid, but you are most welcome to join us. "Kaniz offered tentatively, desperately hoping, yet knowing that the landowner's wife would politely decline.

Noor stared into Kaniz's eyes and read the appeal and the message in them accurately and the human appeal for equality. Noor capitulated, stepping out of the armour of her class, material wealth and background that divided her from these

women. She gently lifted the child back to its mother, as she smiled at her hostess. “Yes, I will stay for a little longer and taste your *saag*. I love the village *saag*.”

Kaniz sat back in surprise, for that wasn’t the answer that she and the other women, hovering about, had expected. A ripple of whispering went through the women that the landowner’s wife was going to eat with them.

She quickly beckoned her daughter, who was also taken aback, and gave her some instructions. They had never dreamed that the Chaudharani would have something to eat in their home. There was a scuffle to get the best china to serve to their honoured and unexpected guest. A table was pulled aside and a lock was opened. Kaniz’s face glowed in disbelief and pleasure to think that the Chaudharani Sahaba was actually going to taste her *saag*. Noor sat down and watched the proceedings calmly. She knew that she had bestowed an honour by accepting their offer, but she didn’t want them to go to any trouble as she watched their movements to serve her. She didn’t quite know why she felt like that, as normally she would have expected it and took delight in all the pomp and ceremony relating to an occasion. But not today, for she felt guilty for causing them trouble. If anything, now she felt a little embarrassed by it all.

Kaniz’s teenage daughter, Miriam, shyly placed things in front of their elegant, beautiful and very special guest. Mother and daughter couldn’t take their eyes off her. They were full of adoration – for they wanted to hold onto this moment for eternity. They only felt embarrassed that they could only offer her such a humble dish. Noor was touched and heartened by their warmth and hospitality, and she smiled sincerely from her heart and felt deeply happy in herself. Bilkees, who had stayed out in the small corridor, also couldn’t believe her eyes, when she came in and saw her mistress eating. A special three-course dinner had been prepared in the *hevali*, as Noor’s parents were coming to visit her and she should be eating with them. Instead, she was quietly ploughing her way through the humble village spinach, the food that most of the villagers ate twice a week.

If she had entered without pomp and ceremony – she left with both, as well as leaving a happy, cheering audience behind. Seven chattering women, trailing behind, accompanied her all the way back to the *hevali*, looking after her and guiding her, making sure that she reached her home in safety, and with her elegant sandals didn’t trip on any of the stones on the cobbled lane. They were riding on the high tide of the occasion and gratified to be in her company, each vying for attention, each one wanting to say something personal to her but lacking the courage. What could a simple villager talk about to a Chaudharani – everything and yet nothing. Her higher station in life forestalled natural discourse between them.

On reaching the *hevali*, Noor kindly and politely thanked them for their company and sweetly said her goodbyes. She disappeared, with Bilkees, through the lamplit gates of the *hevali*. The women turned back down to the village, now freely chattering amongst themselves, still overwhelmed by her charismatic personality. They all agreed on one thing, that the *Zemindar*’s wife seemed a kind person, with a warm heart and understanding personality. At least Kaniz now thought so. She was so unlike the person that they had first met.

Noor, too, had undergone a unique experience. She had enjoyed her visit and learned a lot from it. In her heart, she knew that she wouldn’t think twice about visiting them again, even if her husband forbade it. Above all, she felt as if she had matured, as a woman and a human being. She would now fulfil her husband’s wish for a child – for she ached for it too.

After she had entertained her parents, she returned to the subject of the visit. She knew one thing, she thought as she cleansed her face in the mirror and brushed the long tresses of her hair. She wouldn't let her husband buy their land. "Over my dead body" she thought. Her beautiful mouth twisted cynically. She smiled into the mirror – the villagers weren't the simpletons, her husband took them for. In fact, if anybody, it was her husband who was the simpleton. They had seen straight into his drama and they weren't going to part with their land, for all the dinners he was offering them!

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It was *Eid-Ul-Fitr*, the first Muslim festival that the village was celebrating and the one everybody looked forward to – especially the young women. As had become the custom, the *Zemindar* gave each daughter from every household in the village a present. Normally it consisted of fabrics, for *shalwar kameez* suits. This time the Chaudharani had taken this task onto herself and with a relish. She had carefully chosen the materials; she had ordered rolls of fabric.

Since her last visit down to the village, she had made three other visits. On each occasion it was a death that had prompted her visit. It was the cue for her to mingle with them; social barriers and her husband's etiquette still prevented her from mixing with them all the time. During those three visits, she got to know some of the younger women and took a liking to one in particular, because she was well educated and intelligent. She refrained however from inviting her to the *hevali* although she wanted to, but it would be showing favouritism. She didn't want that at all. She did, however, send some magazines and two novels down to her. The woman had been truly gratified.

On the morning of the Eid, the daughters, accompanied by their mothers had been called to the *hevali* to receive their presents. They were all assembled in the large drawing room. They were especially honoured to be allowed to come into such a room, with wall-to-wall carpeting. All barefooted, they were afraid to tread on the soft carpet pile in the large airy room, not wanting to crush or soil it. Normally they received their gifts in the large courtyard or out on the verandas. This time, the Chaudharani had insisted that Bilkees should open up the drawing room for their guests. Her woman helper's eyes had widened.

"Why do we have rooms, if we are not to use them, Bilkees?" Noor waspishly reminded her.

"But Chaudharani-ji, do you know what will happen to the carpet? What if they spill anything on it? And their feet – half of them will be coated with dust!"

"They won't spill anything and never mind their feet. Anyway, they will be offered refreshments outside in the dining room."

"What! In the dining room?" exclaimed Bilkees, thunderstruck. "Why, you only use it for your family? You are not allowing these gauche village women to sit at your wooden walnut designer suite? I think you are going too far, Mistress. It will go to their heads; they will boast to everybody at having sat at your table! In your seat!"

"Let them, Bilkees, if it gives them pleasure – all the better. Now come on."

Bilkees just shook her head in dismay. What had happened to her Mistress? Had she taken leave of her senses? Parameters had to be maintained and social barriers fenced in place. That was how there was order and how things worked. The Mistress was going to create chaos, where nobody knew the social boundaries. She shrugged, for she would leave it to the Master to sort out his wife, after all it was not her job or role to do so.

The girls and women waited in the drawing room in a state of uneasy excitement. The *Zemindar* and his wife the Chaudharani Noor Sahaba entered. The *Zemindar* welcomed all the village women politely and told them that this time his wife would do the honour of presenting the gifts. Noor stepped forward, looking as breathtakingly beautiful and elegant as ever, making some of the young women envious. "Yes, I hope the young ladies will like the fabrics I have chosen for them from the city. For some girls, I have included something else. It is something that their fathers left with the *Zemindar* for safe keeping, but I am sure that you all can look after your own property now." She paused. "It is your documents and deeds", she uttered softly lifting the folds of the fabric and holding out the papers. As she did so, she cast a quick challenging glance towards her husband. He had paled, losing some of his poise. He caught her steely glance and something flashed in his eye, and the smile on his face ebbed away, replaced by a look of anger. She stared at him for a further few seconds and then before everyone's eyes she handed the first gift to Kaniz's daughter and then to the others. Kaniz's face beamed as she stood next to the wall. In each case, as she did so, she took out the document, read out the name, and showed it to the woman and then handed it the daughter.

By the time the twelfth and final document had been given away, the *Zemindar* felt that he was losing his composure entirely and turned away to look out of the window into the courtyard. He didn't want to face the group of women when he was not in control of himself. When he was able to pin a smile to his face, he turned and joined his wife. He felt that he needed to say something to save face. His wife had given away, back to their owners, the deeds away that he wanted, and he felt it would look strange if he didn't mention them. After all they were supposed to be in his safekeeping. She had very adeptly destroyed his plans, but he had to do something to save face. He had to give the women the idea that the documents were coming from him, otherwise the villagers would think it was his wife who was giving them away. Who ruled this household – he or his wife?

"Thank you everyone for coming!" he uttered with authority. His shoulders stiff with anger, he had turned to the women and stepped in front of his wife, shielding her from them. She had very neatly usurped his role. "I hope you will keep these documents safe. These are your properties, and we thought that we would take this special occasion to return them to you. Please take them home and hand them to your menfolk. If you do, by any chance, wish to sell them, please sell them to your neighbours, rather than outsiders." He deliberately refrained from saying that they should sell them to him. He stepped back and moved to the window and looked out onto the lawn of the courtyard, expecting the women to leave.

Summoning a smile, Noor stepped forward again and thanked the women for coming and wished them *Eid Mubarak*, a happy Eid. They returned the greeting and Bilkees, who was standing near the door, led the women out.

Closing the door, Noor turned to her husband. He was still standing near the window with his back to her. She surveyed his tall, tense, body, as she went to sit on the sofa. She waited for him, expecting him to explode.

He was aware of her presence in the room, and the tense silence that reigned in the room after the departure of the women. He didn't trust himself to turn and face her. He was unsure of what he was capable of or how she would react. He waited and when nothing was forthcoming from her, he turned and stood two yards from his wife. He seemed to be towering over her seated body. Exuding aggression, he looked down at her face and into those cold green eyes. They were at their coldest now and just stared defiantly in return. He tried to dominate her with his manly glare, but her eyes



didn't waver nor fall away. They just calmly stared into his. He stepped back disconcerted and dumbfounded.

Noor patiently waited for his explosion. He was owed that and he had the right to it, but she was determined to stare him out; after all she was in the right. She had done the right and humane thing, even though it had angered her husband. For sure, she knew that she had ruined his plans, but now she was a defender of the villagers. Was the choice to be the villagers or her husband? Had she already jeopardised her marriage and her relationship with her husband.

The towering *Zemindar*, in his turn, was holding a tight rein on his temper. His eyes scanned her beautiful face. He had never been so angry in his life, and with his wife it was the first time. She had done an unpardonable thing! His mind was also signalling and flashing all sorts of troubling images; above all, that of his wife's capacity to undermine his authority and to usurp his role: the master, the *Zemindar*, of the village. He struggled with the concept again. Who was the master in his marriage? Who was in control, he or she? By her action, her *juruth*, in doing what she had done, she posed a direct threat to him as a man, as a husband and as a *Zemindar*. His head filled with the thought that she wasn't just the decorative wife he had chosen, but she posed a greater and more dangerous threat, one that he had been hitherto unaware of. His heart sank.

He had ignored her previous action in tearing up the documents in the office – indulging her. This time what she had done went far beyond tolerance and indulgence. She had not given any form of indication of what she was going to do, nor had she consulted him. He had almost lost face in front of the village women. But the most alarming thought which thundered through his mind was what would she be capable of doing next? Would he ever get to know her mind? Would she ever open up to him?

Noor had an inkling of what he was thinking; she was both very intelligent and astute. As the seconds ticked away on the large clock on the wall, they both tried to read each other's mind as to what was to happen next. Both were fighting from their own corners and both were struggling. Both were proud and neither of them saw themselves as compromising. She knew that if it came to the crunch, she would have to leave his home as a matter of principle. He struggled with the reality of the situation of living with such a wife, trying to weigh one side against other. He recalled his own obedient mother, always looking up to his father. He remembered one incident when she had spoken in front of another man in a slightly disparaging tone, and his father had never let her forget it. He had thundered and verbally lashed out at her. His mother had literally shrivelled and didn't come out of the room for two days. His father had established who was the Master, and whose words held power and authority. And in the old days, he had heard about his grandfather beating his grandmother over minor things – that was his brutal way of controlling his wife.

He, on the contrary, was finding himself powerless, even to verbally abuse her, let alone assert his male dominance, as a husband, and as a *Zemindar*. His mind reeled from the thought, that if he let her get away with this action, she would always go against his decisions and undermine his authority. Would he then end up as a puppet in her hand? He didn't know what to do; he just stared down at her in utter despair.

She had now averted her gaze, and was looking out of the window. He continued to gaze down at her beautiful face, which was now in profile. His eyes swept, almost with hypnotic compulsion over the slim column of her beautiful neck, the soft curtain of hair framing her face. The strong beautiful features of her face were

almost chiselled to perfection, and he longed to touch them, even if he wanted to strangle that slim neck of hers.

He could explode. He had read her signals right. She would leave him, rather than compromise her principles. He could abuse her or woo her. He knew this wasn't just a whim on her behalf. She had done this on humanitarian grounds. Life without her loomed empty. Not to have her in his room, in his arms, before his eyes – it was an unimaginable thought. She was the light of his life – the *noor*. Did he want to live in darkness?

It had taken him seven years to win her hand in marriage. He had lost the best years of his life in being infatuated with her, and wanting nobody but her; turning away so many eligible women, just waiting for her – watching her grow into womanhood. When he finally won her hand, and she agreed to marry him, he was thirty-five years old while she was still twenty-three. He had heaped present upon present on her family and her, and had to compete with many suitors, some even from her clan, her *baraderie*. He loved her madly, but he had no inkling as to whether she felt anything for him, if at all? She was a good wife, performed her marital duties well, but had emotionally kept herself remote from him. Her haughtiness still remained. It had both repelled and attracted him simultaneously. He still didn't know why she had accepted him in the end, and he didn't want to know either.

Now, at this moment, it crashed upon him that she was the centre of his world. The land and bauxite mines paled into insignificance, but he must keep that fact a secret. All he knew, at the moment, was that he was walking along a tightrope. His marriage and his relationship with Noor were hanging in the balance. She wouldn't be bullied by him - he knew her well. She would have no second thoughts on leaving him, especially as she believed that she was morally right and he was in the wrong. Those deeds did belong to the villagers and not to him. Her defiance seemed to spill out of the curves of her lips. Her body too, cried out its own language in defiance.

What was he going to do? Could he cope with a wife like Noor, who threatened his social and patriarchal order? Yet he could not give her up. Life without Noor was tantamount to dying. He caved in.

He bent down on his knees in front of her and levelled his face to hers. She turned to look at him, surprise colouring her face. Then his hand went to the nape of her neck. An alarming thought dashed through her head that he was going to strangle her. Instead, he gently brought her face closer to his, his eyes on her lips. His fingers moved upward to thread themselves in the silken folds of her hair. Could he bear to give all this up?

She looked into his eyes, the coldness ebbing away from hers, surprised at his action. Then he laughed. The rich, masculine laughter rang and echoed round the room. Then in her firm, strong voice, with no trace of humility and fear, she asked him.

"Is there anything to laugh at, my *hazoor*?" She had used the word *hazoor*, denoting respect, deliberately to reinstate his position, his authority, as her husband. The use of the word wasn't lost on him. It gratified him and his body relaxed with it.

"I think so, my beautiful and wonderful wife. I have spent a fortune on dinners and feeding the whole village just to get them to sign their deeds over to me. Then my wife just hands them back on a plate!" He stared down into her face, his fingers now moving over her mouth.

"Aren't you angry, anymore?" She tentatively asked, holding her breath slightly.

“Exceedingly, but there is more to life than bauxite. You are right about the devastation that the mines would cause. I don’t want anything to come between us. Having spent seven years in winning you, do you think I am ready to lose you so that you will probably be snapped up by another man before a month passes? I am not stupid nor a simpleton. I don’t want anything to jeopardise our marriage and our relationship. You looked after the needs of the villagers, when I was blinded by the thought of making money. I nearly made a fool of myself, but you saved me – I am honoured in having a wife like you. I now have the feeling that you will be the making of me yet, my beautiful Noor.”

Noor smiled. The warmth flooded into her eyes, now glowing like gems. The facial planes of her face relaxed, as she accommodated it against his fingers. She had just managed to jump a great hurdle in her life. She was in no hurry to leave her *hevali*, her village, her people, and above all her *hazoor*. Live was about giving and taking – she had gained but also given. Respect for him had outweighed her pride.

Without thinking, Noor’s hand went to his face in the form of a caress.

His eyes widened slightly. It was the first spontaneous movement she had made towards him – for he had always reached out to her. He was deeply moved. He looked down, to hide the look from her. Those twelve land documents had brought her closer to him. He caught her hand in his and brought it to his lips. She bent forward towards him and revelled in the feeling of his lips against her palm. It was another humbling and wonderful experience. Instead of abuse, she had received warmth and love from her husband. How she loved him. She breathed shyly into his ear, “I want a child of my own!”