Multicultural Short Stories

Short Story by Qaisra Shahraz, *A Pair Of Jeans*

(1988, revised 2005)

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Short Bio

Born in Pakistan and brought up in Manchester, England, from the age of nine, Qaisra Shahraz has studied English and Classical Civilization at the University of Manchester and went on to gain two Master Degrees at the University of Salford - in English and European Literature and in Scriptwriting for Television and Radio. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a director of Gatehouse Books, publishing books written by students for Skills for Life classes. She is advisor for the University of Lancaster for a three-year writing project entitled 'Mediating Marginalities', and has hosted and led many workshops and seminars in creative writing, abroad and in the UK.

She has worked as a freelance journalist, contributing features and articles to various magazines and newspapers and has also had several short stories published in the UK and abroad, in particular in schools anthologies in Germany. Her short story, “Perchavah”, won the Ian St. James Award in 1994. She has also written plays for radio and television, including a screenplay adaptation of her first novel. Her award-winning drama serial Dil Hee To Hai (The Heart Is It) was broadcast on Pakistani Television and on Prime Television in 2003.

She is the author of two novels and is working on a third one. The first, The Holy Woman (2001), is a powerful love story, introducing the reader to the traditions of a vibrant world of four Muslim countries. It was awarded the title 'Best Book of the Month' by Waterstones. Her second novel is Typhoon (2003), a sequel set in the village of Chiraghpur.

Qaisra Shahraz has another successful career in education, working as a Quality Improvement Manager for the Manchester Adult Education Service and a consultant in education, teacher trainer and registered college inspector for the Adult Learning Inspectorate and OFSTED.

She was shortlisted for the Asian Women of Achievement Awards in 2002 and for the Muslim News Awards for Excellence in 2003. She lives with her family in Manchester.

Short Synopsis

"A Pair of Jeans" is about the rejection of Miriam by her prospective parents-in-law just because by a quirk of fate they catch her in a pair of Levi's jeans, a vest shrunk after a wash, and a skimpy leather jacket, the entire ensemble revealing 'an inch of bare white flesh' at the midrib. So what if the story is set in England. The writer analyses how just a pair of jeans and an inch of flesh, nothing unusual for a university student in the West, leads to Ayub, the boy's father, questioning Miriam's moral character. Begum, his wife, does put up a spirited defence but only to capitulate, because she had always wanted a 'conventional daughter-in-law, the epitome of tradition'.
Muslims in the UK

The UK has a long history of contact with Muslims, with links forged from the Middle Ages onwards. In the 19th Century Yemeni men came to work on ships, forming one of the country's first Muslim communities. In the 1960s, significant numbers of Muslims arrived as people in the former colonies took up offers of work. Some of the first were East African Asians, while many came from south Asia. Permanent communities formed and at least 50% of the current population was born in the UK. Significant communities with links to Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and the Balkans also exist. The 2001 Census showed one third of the Muslim population was under 16 - the highest proportion for any group. It also highlighted high levels of unemployment, low levels of qualifications and low home ownership. The UK favours multiculturalism, an idea shared by other countries which, in general terms, accepts all cultures as having equal value and has influence over how government engages with minorities.

A typical structure for an Asian Pakistani family in Britain prerequisites different roles for men and women; many families are extended or joint (that means all married brothers and their families, as well as all unmarried members of the family), retaining a traditional form where the eldest male of the family socially represents the family as he is its head, while women are to be dealing with household matters. This leads them to a certain level of isolation from the British society, they rarely speak fluently English and they prefer to stick to their tradition and roots, stabilizing their identities as members of the Pakistani Muslim community.

Another common idea is marriage considered as a league between two families, rather than the seed of love among a couple. Marriages are mostly arranged and support the families morally, economically and coherently. The whole family clan is involved and may provide suitable candidates. However, this kind of marriage has shrinkaged, as the government control got stricter. Most Muslim women and men nowadays have the feeling of being able to reject candidates they don’t like, even if they are ideal to their parents’ point of view. Well educated girls have better chances of getting married, although this education does not necessarily stand for an equivalent professional career.

The role of traditional clothing remains indispensable for women, yet the tendency of youngsters to fashion has lead to the creation of many Muslim

“In England you marry the women you love, in India we love the women we marry. You fall out of love after the marriage. We fall in love after marriage”

Anglo-Indian saying
fashion centers covering a wide variety of clothing styles, from traditional to fashionable adaptations, variations on the basic shalwar kamiz.

**Miriam and Multicultural Identities**

Jeans is the way for Miriam to swap from one culture to another, to alter her identity according to the situation. Wearing her shalwar kamiz means she is Muslim, abandoning, even for a while, her English part. Yet the notion of identity (on the individual psychological level) is one of a never completed process which is constructed through difference and ambivalence: any identity (or representation of self) requires an Other, "the self as it is inscribed in the gaze of the Other." Everyone at her age has experienced similar feelings; the feeling of tragic awareness of her in-laws' horror at seeing her bare midriff and their rejection of her; the feeling of someone who sees his "Otherness" being misinterpreted, trespassed and violated. It is only when she decides to no longer play the role of the obedient daughter in the second ending that she transgress the borders prescribed by her traditional Pakistani Muslim culture and moves towards an acceptance of Western female individualistic self-confidence, while at the same time not rejecting her Muslim identity.

**Our Objectives**

Using multicultural short stories in general, and "A Pair of Jeans" in particular, in our classroom, we have aspirations of succeeding in:

A. **Interpreting other cultures as a great source, a huge database.** A multicultural approach allows us to increase our world knowledge and be positively aware of the Other. In our own case, this can work not only for Christian Europeans, but conversely too, focusing on the Muslim point of view.

B. **Developing the cultural awareness of our pupils.** Developing a cultural sensitivity which illustrates itself as mostly important, makes the approach towards other cultures more alive and wakes our own system of beliefs, of values, of being. We relativize our closest reality and learn how to swap places with the Other.

C. **Training our students in issues of cross-cultural context.** These issues are sine qua non, if for our students to become positive towards multiculturalism. The teacher must be, of course, persuasive, which means true belief in the value of multiculturalism.

D. **Raising awareness towards cultural differences.** Difference must be accepted as a friend, rather than an enemy, if we want to understand Self.
E. **Developing our students’ ability to critically think.** Learners will approach multicultural issues in a more thoughtful and effective manner and we are responsible for enabling them to ask more and better questions concerning other cultures, participating in the learning process itself. Students will also become competent in their evaluation of sources used to become acquainted with multicultural issues.

F. **Approaching multicultural literature from a humanistic perspective.** Placing the focus on the Self, we make students aware of the importance of their own perception of their experiences, enhancing personal growth and change.

G. **Giving an end to the transmission of dangerous stereotypes** (cultural or gender ones). This is why our stories must be picked wisely and carefully.

H. **Moving students from informing to empowering.** Far from simply inform them, we expect to make multicultural literature an important part of the curriculum, rather than an add-on.

I. **Growing students multicultural friendly.** We are partly responsible for future generations with bearing respect, understanding and warmth.

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**Premises and Target Groups to Work With Multicultural Literature**

As far as the aspect of age is concerned, we must always bear in mind that one is never too young to become aware of multiculturalism. It is common truth that one may be old in order to change his way of thinking about other cultures. Students, however, are always ready to be inducted in multiculturalism; the younger the better.

For those who want to truly understand the substance of modern society, multiculturalism can function as the true basis. It is a passport in gaining equality, keeping your own identity, priding your ancestry and having a sense of belonging to a group. There is the barrier of mainstream culture as the only acceptable that has to be demolished, in order to develop feelings of affectionate esteem and self confidence. Experience shows us that harmony races and nations, as well as mutual understanding can be succeeded through multiculturalism.
In the ever challenging task of growing a society multiculturally friendly, we need to take into account several factors. First of all, teachers have to believe in multiculturalism. From our point of view, this is the basic pillar in the process of developing positive attitudes. If we don’t believe in what we say, then we are doomed to fail in the raising of multicultural children. Secondly, we have to feel what we say. Children need to experience that the teacher’s feelings are in accordance with his or her thinking. Finally, the third pillar would be behaving multiculturaly, i.e. putting into practice all you believe and feel in the theory. If are able to encompass these three key elements of an attitude, then we can say we are coherent selves.

Each culture “lives by and through” the stories it “creates and preserves”. (Henry Louis Gates, Jr)

Teaching Methods

The vocabulary and structure of the text are quite simple and students can easily relate themselves to Miriam, the central person of the story, due to age proximity among them. The story is short enough to be dealt with within 3-4 lessons and be read in advance. The overall analysis will focus on Miriam’s awkward situation and suggest possible solutions. An afterward activity can focus on multiculturalism and intercultural awareness, which is our main interest.

Drawing Focus

The whole story derives stems from Miriam’s dressing code; a discussion about clothes makes a good starting point. An interesting idea could be even bringing a sari in class and asking female students to express their feelings wearing it, after we have provided them the necessary instructions on how to wear it. Classmates then can discuss about their feelings when seeing someone they are familiar with dressed unusually. Although this idea is intriguing and promising, occasionally it may prove hyperbolical.

Visual stimuli is another, adoptical method, illustrating the dressing differences between Eastern and Western cultures. An effective and sapid way is film, easy to watch and electrifying. Scenes from movies such as East Is East, Bhaji On The Beach, Bend It Like Beckham or Not Without My Daughter can provide an adequate basis for a discussion on differences and similarities between young white British females and young females from ethnic minorities.
Working With The Text

➢ Three students (preferably one male and two females) work on an adaptation of the opening scene of the story, where Miriam meets future parents-in-law in front of her house (p. 239-243). The other classmates describe what the protagonists may be thinking during this ‘frozen moment’.

➢ We ask the students to work in pairs and find one term or expression which they think best describes the theme of the story. All terms are written on cards which are attached to the board.

   o Possible answers: Conflict between East and West, Rigorism of Tradition, Generation Gap

➢ Students search the text for passages which indicate:

   o The way she feels about her Western part
   o The way the others see Western Miriam
   o The way she feels about her Eastern part
   o The way the others see Eastern Miriam

➢ We ask students to concentrate on the first ending of the story and to imagine themselves in this awkward situation: Miriam cannot talk to her mother, as she already knows her answer; she should accept what happened. She cannot talk to her friends either, as they would never understand why she still insists on getting married to Farook. Therefore she decides to write to an aunt of hers to recount what happened (it is also a nice way of going over the story once more). Students have to write this letter.

We then gather the letters which the students wrote, scramble them and handle one to each student. They now become Miriam’s fictional aunt and are asked to answer to her letter.

Afterwards, we handle the answers back to the original writers of the letters and ask the students to make a summary and evaluation of what they have been advised.
We distribute handouts with quotes from the text which refer to Miriam’s both Western and Eastern identity and ask our students to draw conclusions as to the point of view and the effect it achieves, as well as identify the narrative perspective.

- Possible quotes:
  - ‘All day she had kept pulling it to the midriff. Strange but she felt odd in her clothing’,
  - ‘She wanted to quickly rush inside her home and peel them (her jeans) off’,
  - ‘The jeans… stood out brazenly on Miriam’s body, tightly moulded’,
  - ‘She pulled the jacket close to her body, becoming suddenly very self-conscious about her jean-clad legs and the short vest she wore beneath her jacket. It had, unfortunately, shrunk in the wash. All day she had kept pulling it down to cover her midriff. Strange, but she felt odd in her clothing’,
  - ‘They have seen another side of you – your other persona’,
  - ‘Muslim girls do not go out dressed like that’,
  - ‘It was amazing how she was able to move around the room at ease, in her shalwar kameze suit’
  - ‘God knows who has seen her. Would you like any of your friends and relatives to have seen her as she appeared today’,
  - ‘Often accompanied by their parents, they too took a liking to each other. They found they were very compatible in their interests and personalities and had a lot to laugh about’,
  - ‘She could not deny the fact, however, that having them on her back she had embraced a new set of values; in fact, a new personality. Her body was now modestly swathed in an elegant long tunic and baggy trousers’,
  - ‘She felt sudden relief. It was her Farook. She greeted him first with “hello” and then with the Arabic “Assalam-a-Ailakum,” “May peace be upon you! She then reverted to speaking in English’

- A. Narrative technique: although the point of view is not clearly defined, it mostly externalizes Miriam’s way of feeling, switching at times to this of her mother and Begum.
B. Effects:
  - Miriam feels both as Western and Muslim
  - She clearly distinguishes between the two of them
  - She reflects on how other people perceive her
  - She hates being judged just by her appearance
• She switches identities by switching clothes
• In the first ending she regret having worn jeans, whilst in the second one she stands up for her decision
• Begum knows just the Eastern Miriam and judges her by the clothes she wears
• Ayab is afraid of broadened freedom for women, which he sees a threat to men superiority. That makes him prejudiced about the way of dressing of Western girls
• Miriam’s mother decides to vote for her daughter’s happiness, as she knows both sides of her character

➢ Another interesting aspect of the text is Sharaz’s opt of vocabulary; she uses Arabic words, many of which are not translated, apparently affecting the readers’ feelings. At first, our students have to isolate these words:
  o Non Translated words:
    ▪ Shalwar, kameze with a chadar (p. 241)
    ▪ Wa laikum Assalam (p. 242)
    ▪ Sari (p. 245)
    ▪ Salam (p. 259)
  o Meaning drawn from the context:
    ▪ Rebellious hoydens, who did not respect either their husbands or their in-laws (p. 245)
    ▪ Dupatta scarf (p. 246)
    ▪ Sharif, a very modest girl (p. 251)
    ▪ Mehndi party (p. 254)
    ▪ Assalam-a-Alaikum (p. 264)
    ▪ Izzat, our honor (p. 266)
    ▪ A good kourmani, a mother-in-law for her daughter (p. 268)

➢ Pakistani readers become aware of their distinct culture and realize the possible conflict between the two cultures.

➢ Non-Muslim readers are prelusively introduced to the different for them Muslim culture and realize their alternative rules and behavioral code of honor, making them even feel familiar with this foreign way of clothing.
A Final Glance at the Text

The text itself offers no conclusion, so what comes naturally is a role-play. We ask the students to split in four groups, each of them concentrating on one role: Farook’s, Mirriam’s, Begum’s and Ayabs. A member of each group undertakes a role, while the others form an audience. Then they perform their sketch as plausible as they can.

To further deepen into the real cultural differences between these characters and the students acting them, all students, including the acting ones, comment on the feeling they gained from these roles, whether they were realistic or not and on the possible development of Mirriam’s situation.

Some attributes of the characters mentioned above ought to be taken into consideration:

A. Mirriam decides, after having talked with Farook, that they meet his parents, in an attempt to make them alter their decision. They have to decide about their behavior and work out an acceptable excuse, persuading them that she has never ceased to be a good Muslim, although in Western dress-code. They must stand up for their feelings for each other and prepare their reactions against Farook parents’ skepticism.

B. Begum must decide on which stance she really wants to assume, as she really likes Mirriam, although she is afraid to object to her husband’s unrelenting decision.

C. Ayab has contacted Farook contra his wishes. How is he to behave, as the kids take a real liking into each other? How is it possible to persuade Farook that Mirriam will not make a good wife for him and how rigorous can he be? Can Begum’s liking to Mirriam influence him?
Bibliography and Featured Internet Websites


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