

Crossing continents

Published in New Statesman, April 2007

By Sameer Rahim

Aamer Hussein is a Pakistani-born writer who lives in England. The 52-year-old has previously published three collections of short stories and edited an anthology of short stories by Pakistani women. His first book, *Mirror to the Sun* (1993), whose subjects range from romance and scandal in a Muslim family to the death of an Indonesian boy protesting against the first Gulf war, is written in an exquisite yet lyrical style influenced by Urdu and Persian literature. Hussein's next two books, *This Other Salt* (1999) and *Turquoise* (2002), explore both his position as a migrant writer and his rich Islamic heritage.

His new collection, *Insomnia*, is similarly themed. The narrator of "Hibiscus Days: a story found in a drawer" lives in London and translates the Urdu poems of his friend Armaan, who lives in Karachi. He feels that "Armaan's delicate wordstrings powerfully captured the claustrophobia, repression and loneliness" of living under a military dictatorship. Armaan, on the other hand, envies the narrator's "freedom to write, think, imagine without the constant stimuli of political events". Although the translator is nourished by Urdu, he makes the English versions his own. ("Sometimes I feel I write English from right to left," says another writer in *This Other Salt*.) Yet the story is emotionally as well as intellectually charged.

Alongside the self-conscious and experimental stories are more traditional kinds. In "The Crane Girl", Murad, a Pakistani boy living in London, falls in love with Tsuru, a Japanese girl with "a nearly perfect oval face" and skin "like smoked cream". Although she likes him, he is intimidated by her unwelcoming friends. After she goes abroad suddenly, Murad loses his virginity to her flatmate. Later, he regrets this, realising that both he and the girl were somehow taking revenge on Tsuru. He makes friends with Shiego, a boy who once dated Tsuru. Their contact is a way of staying close to the girl they both love, but when she returns, Murad must choose between them. "The Lark", a lovely story that ends the book, is about an Indian student who spends his final days in 1930s England with his friend Oliver and his sister Lucy.

A character in the title story reflects on "how the love of friends came in fragments: it could be confusing, and after initial intensity follow the usual sequence of delays, cancellations, eventual neglect". You could say the same of the love of a country or religion. The story's narrator (another writer) cannot sleep while he sees images on television of "an earthquake in his native country". Living in England, he is exiled even from the collective mourning back home. When someone tells the narrator of "Nine Postcards from Sanlucar de Barrameda" that "Muslims in

Europe are a demographic problem", he replies: "I guess I'm a Muslim in Europe too . . . and foreign everywhere I go."

Hussein writes beautifully about Islam. In "The Book of Maryam", a poet called Oliver tells his friends about a dream in which he gives a reading in "a country where everybody wore a veil and bowed a lot and talked about a great leader". Tahira, a fellow poet, presents a different kind of Islam by reading a poem about Maryam (Mary), who in the Koran gives birth to Jesus under a palm tree. In a single, perfectly controlled sentence from "The Angelic Disposition", a bereaved woman describes being comforted by prayer: "I remember how, more than once, the words 'Compassionate and Merciful' with which we begin our prayers had brought tears to my eyes, tears that hurt and left me shaking though they were, in a way, tears of joy, and I had to distance myself from that passion but afterwards I'd feel as if I'd been in a cool, cool torrent of rain, or bathed in a waterfall after a very hot day, then dried my wet skin on a piece of the bluest sky."

Whether they use poetry or prayer, the fractured selves in Hussein's stories are united through words.