

SALIL TRIPATHI

# NO PLACE LIKE HOME

THIS OTHER SALT

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By Aamer Hussein  
(Saqi Books 201pp £9.95)

AAMER HUSSEIN'S SECOND collection of stories can be read at two levels. It can be taken as a critique of contemporary Pakistan and a comment on its literary politics. The Bhuttos, Ayubs, Zias and Yahyas provide the backdrop, reminding us of the period in which the stories are set, which ends with the tragic criminalisation of the author's beloved city of Karachi.

But at another, more interesting level, it can be read as a canvas of memories, divided by borders, political and human. The tone of the ten stories is meditative and the images painterly yet controlled. They evoke the moods of a past left behind, a restlessness with the present, and the displacement caused by migration in the post-colonial world.

Writing about the film, *The Wizard of Oz*, Salman Rushdie gave a new meaning, special to immigrants, to Dorothy's remark that there is no place like home. Hussein presents the corollary: you can't call two places home. The migration Hussein writes about is different: it is not like the forced migration of Punjab or Bengal. The individuals who populate the stories do not face the harsh physical discomfort of life in tents, the fear of lost passports or of armed bands that stalk refugees.

Outwardly Hussein's characters are often at peace with themselves and their immediate surroundings: walking on the bridge connecting the South Bank Centre to the Embankment Tube station, rich enough to afford spices at Harrods if Drummond Street won't oblige, and charitable enough to buy the *Big Issue*. But his similes reveal more. London's sky is like a grey tin bowl; the Thames is like dishwater. London is a city 'with no cuisine of its own to boast of, which ha[s], in its usual, grudging and off-hand way, taken to guzzling the delicacies of its erstwhile empire and [is] even developing an increasingly discerning palate for them.'

Tastelessness, dullness and colourlessness are contrasted with the vivid hues of the Subcontinent, where the sea is like melting platinum, and Rajasthan's sands shine like hills of gold; where the trees gleam like emeralds, and there is an ocean of sand. We can't eat gold, silver or platinum, but they signify riches, unlike the tin bowls and dishwater.

Arguably, there is an element of dishonesty in the immigrant's memory. The nostalgia is selective; he remembers the past without the pain. But honesty follows later, when the city left behind changes its character

so completely that it makes the returning prodigal less welcome. In the autobiographical experiment, 'Skies', the narrator visits Karachi and returns to 'remembered lanes', where 'light floods forgotten corners, darkness envelops once-lighted spots'. Today, Karachi has 'made refugees of people who resemble us the most', he says ruefully in the coffee shop of a five-star hotel, in the beam of a flickering video of a singer who looks like 'a smart clerk in a mirror-encrusted Sindh jacket'.

Each city has a special meaning for the person who grows up there. Karachi is not New York, nor Hong Kong; and it is most certainly not Bombay, but forty-five minutes away, on the same coast. A rigid border separates the two cities. The winds, which carry the salty smell of that sea, are powerless to dislodge it. Yet it crumbles easily on a human scale. When a father dies in faraway London, he is mourned by many: telephones ring and ring with calls 'from the land he had loved so much, erasing all the borders that the partition had drawn'.

The stories long for that simpler past without borders. Life is comfortable in the new home, London, but something vital remains elusive in this other place, whose salt the migrants have now eaten. The heart remembers 'the fragrance of the rains, when the earth smelt of crushed jasmine before the rain fell, like a split papaya while it was falling, and after the storm, like a potter's kiln'. Appropriately, a collection called *This Other Salt*, which hankers for the sea and its salty smell, has a jacket with a painting of cacti under the glare of a harsh desert sun. The hills aren't golden, and there is no place like home.