A situated cosmopolitanism

Turquoise

By Aamer Hussein

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Aamer Hussein is an uncompromising writer. In an age dominated by novels, he writes short stories. While South Asian English-language writers tend to write thick convoluted about-to-burst narratives (whether magic realist, a la Rushdie, or domestic-social realist, a la Mistry), he fashions contained narratives. While postcolonial writers play around with language(s) or try to sail to international stardom on the dinghy of some local Creole, Hussein writes elegant Standard English. While young novelists have been beating down the doors of everything from incest to bestiality, Hussein actually writes (at times) of heterosexual love in all its variously ordinary shades of desire, dejection, despair and, of course, dying.

You have to read Hussein on his own terms. A story like 'The City of Longing' might be a red rag to a professor of the sort the immigrant of John Agard's poem, 'Listen Mr Oxford don', addresses, though it would be loved by a postcolonialist assistant professor. On the other hand, the postcolonialist assistant professor may run out of ammunition—hybridity, creolisation, mimicry would lie unexploded and exile would give a hollow boom—when confronted with a story like 'What Do You Call Those Birds?', revolving around a protagonist who, as Hima Raza puts it in *Wasafiri*, "straddles 'three worlds and three languages' with seeming ease." It is not that Hussein is not concerned with issues of identity or exile. Being—as he has described himself elsewhere—a "new Londoner" who "thinks of otherwhere," his fiction has to confront issues of identity and migration. However, the identities of his fiction are not strung out on the usual East-West or English-and-the-rest axis: other elements, like various historical and religious inheritances and some of the hundreds of linguistic and cultural identities that comprise South Asia as well as the South Asian experience elsewhere, are brought in almost unconsciously. Similarly, the 'exile' of his narrators/protagonists is not the exile from a theorised cultural formation that is often related in postcolonial literature; it is a physical displacement from actual people and sensations.

Hussein also seems to be drawing sustenance from traditions other than those of British or American story writing. It is not insignificant that the word 'tale' is used to describe the narrative of four of the stories in this volume of seven stories: Hussein's narratives seem to belong to a transnational romance tradition more than to the anglocentric short story mode. Not only their self-description as 'tales', but also the presence of multiple narrators and certain stylistic elements point to the influence of varied writers and traditions: Kleist, Pushkin, Karen Blixen, Tennessee Williams, Sufi legends, Mughal *masnavis* etc. For instance, the ghost of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the radical Urdu poet, haunts a number of stories, and in particular 'Electric Shadows.'

Hussein's undoubtedly modern craft and sensibility can be at times deeply rooted in the past: a story like 'The City of Longing' is basically a rewriting of one of the night-narratives in *'Haft Paykar'* (Seven Beauties), a Persian medieval poem by Nizami of Ganja. Hussein has changed the tale subtly by using the imperative/conditional tense and other features, but the changes have not been incorporated to draw attention to their presence. In that sense, Hussein's past flows into his present: it does not stand out either as heavy nostalgia or as a fantastic element (as in some so-called magical realist texts). Here is a cosmopolitan writer who is by no means 'rootless' and whose cosmopolitanism does not necessarily cohere to the anglocentric (or at least Eurocentric) contours of cosmopolitanism mapped in much of 'post-colonial' literature. This complex and situated cosmopolitanism can be best understood by quoting a paragraph from an Introduction by Muneeza Shamsie to one of his other collections:

"To find his literary identity, Aamer Hussein had to struggle hard to free himself from labels such as 'colonial' and 'post-colonial'. At first, he found it difficult to express himself, because the narrative and literature of Empire dominated English. Aamer's determination to write stories in English which were 'real stories' and not 'Western-with-an-Asian flavour', led him to a journey of self-discovery..."

This 'voyage of self-discovery'—aided, no doubt, by Hussein's knowledge of not only English and Urdu but also languages like Persian and French—took him to various fountain-heads of inspiration: American literature from the South, European literature, Arabic, Japanese and Chinese literatures in translation, contemporary Urdu fiction, other Indian literatures in translation, classical Persian literature. These stories show some of these influences, though lightly and unobtrusively.

The best stories in *Turquoise* contain many layers. For instance, 'Cactus Town', the first story in the collection, can be read as a story of the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war and the creation of Bangladesh. The Muslim symbol of *Karb o bala* (Agony and affliction)—central to the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala and particularly significant in the Shi'a tradition—can be read in that political context. But it can as easily be read in the more ordinary context of the loves and losses of humankind. Abbas, the soldier, who dies in the Bangladesh War is also a rejected lover and the narrative holds other (aborted) possibilities—though those other possibilities also lead to the death of Abbas (by drowning, in the imagination of the storyteller):

"...But that's another version, in which Abbas never went to war: he wouldn't have understood what he was fighting for, why he should give his life to stop a strange country from breaking away or changing its name and keeping its language. Too grey an ending for me. I'm a teller of stories. I want to dip my finger in a war wound and spell the name of a hero. I have no time for an insignificant boy who mourns lost loves and gives his life to the sea."

However, as the narrative indicates, this "insignificant boy" is also the storyteller, who has been in love with the woman who rejected Abbas, and who, towards the end of the narrative, slips into Abbas's skin. This 'slippage' of not only narrative voice but at times even characters and narrators is distinctive of much of Hussein's work. It consolidates the feeling that not only are memories unreliable but even identities and meanings are capable of sliding.

Hussein's sliding identities, however, also remain firmly rooted in contexts and circumstances—in that sense he does *not* make a post-structuralist statement. Identities, so to say, are both seen as real and constructed, rooted and mobile, given and gained. This comes through not only in narratively complicated stories like 'Cactus Town', but also in simpler narratives like 'The Needlewoman's Calendar', where Hussein succeeds in narrating a middle-class Muslim woman who is not the result of textual discussions of *purdah*, two living spaces, three *talaqs* or four marriages. In fact, Hussein's women probably come alive even more than his men—perhaps because they are cast within the social limits that might be imposed on them in a particular society without being derived of agency.

The slippage of narrative voices and identities is also central to the subtext of the collection: the stories are also about telling stories. Most of the stories approach this subtext tangentially—as can be seen in the lines from 'Cactus Town' quoted above—so that it does not become part of the actual narrative. But at least two of the stories are directly about Hussein's own art of storytelling: 'Electric Shadows', which provides the reader with an insight into Hussein's notion of his art, and 'Abida: A Storyteller's Tale', which records a debt of gratitude towards the popular Urdu writer, A R Khatun (who has largely been ignored by serious critics).

I began this review by noting that Hussein expects to be read on his own terms. The implication is that a reader who picks up his stories with preconceived notions might well be disappointed. For instance, if you are expecting the language of the narratives to be highly dramatic, you will be forced to notice that at times Hussein plays down the drama of some of the events narrated. His narrative voice is precise and poetic, but it maintains a regular tone intended to focus attention on the depths of the events related rather than on their surface turmoil. There is much political and psychological turmoil in his stories, but it is narrated in a strangely quiet manner. Similarly, his stories are neither political nor apolitical: suffused with the recent history of, in particular, Pakistan, they nevertheless relate that history through private stories.

Hussein also does not conform to the standard image of the anglophone Muslim writer in Britain: people like Rushdie or Kureishi who exude a cosmopolitan irreligiousity. Hussein's stories are deeply rooted in an ethos that can only be termed 'Islamic' (Islamic in a lived and practised sense and not the symbolic, sceptical-revisionist sense of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*). However, this is a cultural ethos—sharing nothing with Islamic fundamentalism except perhaps recognition of the links that exist(ed) between Muslim peoples around the world. While Islamic fundamentalism reduces these links to basically one reading of one book, Hussein's Islamic ethos expands it to the multifaceted play of culture, literature, art, politics and personal experiences. That might be the reason why, in spite of being highly sceptical of religions, I could read Hussein with interest and enjoyment—though, again, on his own terms. ■

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