

Shadow play

Publish in the Guardian, October 2002

Maya Jaggi is absorbed by tales of intimacy and exile in Aamer Hussein's *Turquoise*

"Electric Shadows", a short story in Aamer Hussein's absorbing third collection, takes its title from the Chinese phrase for images captured on film. These shadows become a metaphor for both the imperfect grasp of memory and the mutation of autobiography - emotional "fragments" - into fiction. "Though every word I write here is as true as memory can make it," says the narrator Aamer, in a story resembling memoir, "I'm merely chasing the flickering of light."

These stories are set mainly in the Pakistani cities of Karachi (Hussein's birthplace) and Lahore, and in London, where the author has lived since his mid-teens. Karachi in the 1960s is evoked as a lost city fringed by ochre beaches, already in the throes of transformation. With the re-claiming of land, "the sea was receding, giving way to tall structures of concrete and glass".

The characters' lives are riven not only by migration but partition, war and military rule. "As a Muslim I know I have the God-given right to protest against unjust rulers," a detained journalist insists, while a woman bemoans the conflict over a breakaway Bangladesh, a war to "keep a country they've never seen, for the glory of a nation split at birth". Yet the predominant tone is of intimacy and introspection, sometimes tinged with sadness, sometimes with joy. In "Electric Shadows", the narrator reflects on his early life and loves, "how I'd started then the pattern of stillness that wasn't yet erased, of stepping back and letting someone else speak for me, of writing secret words of love to which I would never admit... And my stories, too are happenstance; electric shadows of chance encounters and changing love."

Many of these chance encounters are between "birds of passage", like the autobiographical persona Sameer in "What Do You Call those Birds?" and Iman, who has spent a restless life in Britain, Uganda and Pakistan. "Their contentious conversations are in English; for affection they move to Urdu." In a Little Venice of canalside cafes, they swap intimate stories, Iman of an ex-husband who learns "to settle and love only after battering one woman almost to death". Like other women here, Iman is divorced and self-sufficient, yet aware of the lingering costs of independence, from the mores of a past age to Karachi men who prey on divorcees.

Turquoise celebrates a sensibility in which borders are permeable, and sounds of the sarangi mingle with Dylan songs played on a guitar. In such a world, not only friendship and intimacy, but language and literature are a home. Also an assured critic, and editor of an anthology of Urdu prose by Pakistani women, *Hoops of Fire* (1999), Hussein pays homage to the "lush, vivid language" of Urdu novels. In one story children catch sight of the great Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz in his garden. In "Adiba: A Storyteller's Tale", a widow whose husband died fighting the Japanese curses the Raj and crosses the new frontier in 1947, from Delhi to Lahore, to become an Urdu writer, the "last chronicler of a lost world". Yet displacement can be a boon, as to Tabinda in "A Needlewoman's Calendar", who sheds both her faithless husband and her burqa on the train to Karachi.

In the most haunting tale, "Cactus Town", the "old dragon" Aunty Mehri, whose desert garden never blooms in the salt air, uses her nubile orphaned niece as bait to lure her son away from his foreign wife, the Ilford-born Brenda. Its postmodern alternative endings nod to time-honoured ways of telling, where rumours ensure there are "as many tales as there are heads to tell them".

The texture of these stories varies richly, from the Arabian-Nights sensuousness of "The City of Longing" to the title story, its encounters taut with deferred passion in a mundane campus London of coffee and seminars. Yet the poetry is abundant, from epiphanies of birds and flight, to a woman's ambivalence at parting: "She taps my cheeks with her fingertips; little slaps in lieu of a caress." The sea recurs, as a faraway glimmer of unattainable fulfilment or an image of contentment and surging joy.

These stories offer profound relief from the clamour of some sprawlingly over-ambitious sub-continental novels. Guarding moments of stillness in which metaphors resonate, they are no less imbued with history for their intimacy and obliqueness.