

KAMILA SHAMSIE

MANGOES AND PAPAYAS

TURQUOISE

★

By Aamer Hussein

(Saqi Books 180pp £7.95)

IN THE OPENING pages of *Turquoise*, Aamer Hussein's lush collection of short stories, we are told of 'fruit trees heavy with green mangoes and papayas'. This is precisely the sort of phrase South Asian writers are cautioned against using if they want to avoid having the word 'exotification' hurled at them. Imperial texts, so the argument goes, with their clichés of dusky maidens and cruel, lecherous princes, are redolent with the fragrance of mangoes and papayas — and so mangoes and papayas are strictly to be avoided when writing in English. Hussein's writing exposes beautifully the fallacy at the heart of such thinking: if you abjure the right to mention any part of the world you've grown up in then you've been tricked into believing that outsiders have laid so great a claim to that world that it is no longer yours to use or ignore as you choose. Aamer Hussein recognises no territory in the lives of Pakistanis as being outside the realm of his imaginings, and the stories in *Turquoise* encompass urban Pakistan, urbane Pakistani expats, the past and the present, fairy tales and politics.

It would be unfair, however, to call Hussein's short stories post-colonial. They are wonderfully, refreshingly, *un*colonial. They reclaim mangoes, papayas, tales of princes and of needlewomen; they insist, gently but firmly, that though they use English they are most influenced by Urdu stories. This influence is overtly acknowledged in 'Adiba: A Storyteller's Tale', which has as its protagonist a woman, widowed after her husband died fighting for the British in the Second World War, who writes short stories in Urdu to support herself, and who survives all vagaries of taste and fashion in the literary world by her simple ability to tell stories that win readers' hearts.

It is characteristic of *Turquoise* to focus on the widow who writes stories 'about the wives of heroes ... of heroic wives' rather than on the husband who died at war. Hussein finds his stories in the battles of hearth and heart rather than in the loud narratives of war, and almost always it is women who fight their way through his pages, armed with stories and sewing needles and indomitable wills. So in 'The Needlewoman's Calendar' Tabinda, deserted by her husband, develops a flourishing career as a seamstress in Karachi, and later, when she marries a politicised journalist, it is still her story we remain most engaged with: Hussein knows that the man dragged to jail is not more important than the woman who doesn't know if he'll ever return. In 'Cactus Town', we move to a more affluent world within Karachi, but at the heart of the story is Nuria, the poor relation whose beauty plays havoc with men's hearts. In the haunting