

Feasting alone on sweet rice and bitter tears

Shusha Guppy goes into exile with lyrical tales of loss and restoration

AAMER HUSSEIN'S first collection of stories, *Mirror To The Sun*, was a poetic exploration of the condition of exile. It was an impressive debut: a rite-of-passage into the distinguished rank of writers from India and Pakistan who have chosen English as their language. Nearly seven years later, he returns to penetrate deeper into the same terrain. The characters in these stories are as varied and original as the corners of the world they come from, while the first-person voice of the storyteller links them in a cohesive whole.

There are those exiles who flourish, and those who founder: all suffer from a rupture in the psyche that distinguishes them from "natives", however integrated they may be. The psychological equivalent of a slight accent, or a skin hue gives the game away. And the exploration of how each copes makes this intricate tapestry of emotions so moving.

Many stories are about the loss – of parents, lovers, opportunities, the self – brought about by dislocation. They echo that unrecoverable loss of the homeland and the protective



This Other Salt
by Amer Hussein

Saqi Books, £9.99, 201pp

shield of a native culture. The title story tells of the death of a loved woman, a migrant like the narrator; but from another part of the globe. His search for consolation in a new love proves impossible, and leads to more tears with a different, but equally bitter, taste.

Problems of exile are compounded by class distinctions. Losing a country, one also loses a social position. Shireen, the heroine of "Sweet Rice", is a Bangladeshi doctor whose banker husband has been posted to London, "this impossibly difficult city, where even a powerfully-situated husband does not guarantee a work permit or

a job". Cooking for his high-powered guests seem to be her only role. She finds salvation in editing and publishing the *Naimatkaneh* – an old cookery book, compiled in 1911.

The location of my favourite story, "The Blue Direction", is a boarding school in an idyllic mountain village by a pellucid blue lake, where "camellias and magnolias produce a sweet faintly venomous smell". The pupils and teachers come from all over the world, and from different parts of India. You can tell by their names: European, Sinhalese, Hindu and Muslim.

Memories of Partition, of the first exile to Pakistan from Bombay, are still fresh in the mind of the boy-narrator. Lonely and vulnerable, the boys form passionate friendships, only to be accused of "unnatural feelings" and expelled. Hussein skillfully weaves delicate strands of emotion as they evolve in this greenhouse atmosphere; while, all around, immutable Nature seems impervious to human desolation.

In "The Actress's Tale", the migration is reversed. Helena, hitting a sticky patch in her ca-

reer in London, maltreated and abandoned by husband and lover, runs away to India. Here the dislocation, the splendours and ruins, and the attention of an aristocratic Indian, help her to recover her sense of self.

These stories of displacement are raised to the metaphysical plane through the fairy-tales incorporated into their narratives. In the end, we are all exiles – from history, politics, love, life itself. Yet once a writer has found a voice, then language itself becomes the homeland. But periodic returns to the original culture enrich both writer and language. In several stories, the narrator goes "home" to the Subcontinent, in memory or in reality.

Aamer Hussein writes with the charm and grace that comes from his knowledge of Persian and Urdu poetry, especially in the Sufi tradition. He is particularly good in the evocation of landscape, of aching nostalgia, of love's hopelessness. My only caveat is that, sometimes, elliptical writing gets in the way of clarity. But that is a small price to pay for such an unusual bag of goodies.