

Aamer Hussein

Aamer Hussein was born and brought up in Karachi, Pakistan in 1955. His father, Ahmed Hussein settled in Karachi, his family home, after completing his studies at Oxford and Aligarh in the early 1940s. He married Sabiha Malik, Aamer Hussein's mother, in 1948.

Hussein grew up bi-lingual amongst a privileged English-speaking minority and was educated at an international school. Although he spoke his native Urdu growing up, Hussein's grandmother in India refined his language skills. This augmented his appreciation of contemporary Urdu literature. At fifteen years old, Hussein left Karachi and flew to London via Bombay with his mother and sisters to join his father who had already moved to Britain. Not having officially completed his secondary education, Hussein spent his teenage years in London. He embraced three vividly different cultural contexts, the upper class Karachi of his parents, the feudal India of his maternal grandparents and his own adopted London. Being culturally inquisitive by nature, it was not hard for the young Hussein to find his feet in the multicultural metropolis. Hussein left his undergraduate degree mid-way and travelled to Italy and Spain, learning three new languages in his early twenties before deciding to return to higher education. After a short period working in the banking industry, Hussein returned to his studies. He graduated from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London aged 25, having read Urdu, Persian and History.

Upon graduating, Hussein began worked as a researcher on films and television documentaries for several years before he began writing short stories in earnest. At university, he had come to deepen his appreciation of Urdu poetry and the 'ghazals' of poets Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Mirza Ghalib. In the mid-eighties, Hussein began to write and to attend writers' meetings and readings in London where he observed the discussions, works and testimony of writers who were born abroad and who dealt with cultural alienation and personal experiences in their fiction. These writers included the Egyptian-born Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir from Jordan, Japan's Kazuo Ishiguro and Indian born Salman Rushdie.

Hussein's stories were published in anthologies edited by writers such as Merle Collins and Joan Riley. During this period, the 'Asian Women Writers' Collective', encouraged new writing talents and published pioneering anthologies. Aamer Hussein was influenced and affected by several authors; the Urdu fiction writer Ismat Chughtai, Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz and the Indonesian Pramoedya Ananta Toer. He looked to these writers for an echo of his own experiences. In an article he wrote for the literary magazine, 'Wasafiri' in 2002, Hussein said, *"I suppose writers begin by reading themselves into other people's stories, to locate their own home in the world of fiction...many of my London stories, coming from lived experience, couldn't have come from anywhere else...it's in London that I read the books I read, met the people I met and found a corner to put it all down on paper."*

Hussein describes himself as *"a product of modern Asia, with its Partition and post national squabbles"* and *"not a child of Empire or English Literature"* (Cactus Town, viii: 2002) and interprets his own cultural identity as set within the Islamic world, along-side European, Middle Eastern and South Asian cultures. In light of this, Aamer Hussein's fiction focuses on inter-cultural experiences, migrations and relationships. As Muneeza Shamsie states in her article 'At the New Threshold', in Dawn, Pakistan's daily broadsheet, (2000) about the new generation of English writers of Pakistani origin, *"All Pakistani English writers live between East and West, literally or intellectually and express it through their work. This is most certainly true of Aamer Hussein's prolific short stories"*.

Hussein's fiction focuses on and brings together a myriad of cross-cultural experiences, which all draw on his love for the cosmopolitan nature of London. A number of recurring themes have evolved in his short stories, including exile, alienation and loss. Many of the human relationships he depicts illustrate estranged loves, lost homelands and frustrated desires. Hussein writes about the political upheavals, which have led to multiple migrations from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Using poetic language and imagery, events such as the division of India and creation of Pakistan at Partition in 1947 and that of Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1971, are told through individual lives and their particular circumstances.

In 1986, Hussein began publishing his fiction and reviews in arts journals such as 'Artrage' and 'Bazaar'. He completed his first collection of short stories 'A Mirror to the Sun' (Mantra Publishing), in 1990; however, it was not published until 1993. Since then, Hussein has published three further collections of short stories. 'This Other Salt' (Saqi Books, 1999) develops the predominant themes of betrayal, bereavement, exile, belonging and the role of the writer. 'Cactus Town and Other Stories', is a collection of sixteen stories published by Oxford University Press in 2002. It includes an introduction written by Pakistani editor and literary journalist, Muneeza Shamsie and four semi-autobiographical stories, which explore the question of cultural hybridity in a variety of international contexts. Hussein's most recent short stories are published in a collection entitled 'Turquoise' (Saqi Books 2002). The stories are set in troubled times in Karachi, Lahore and London - amid war, partition and military rule. Themes include the anticipation and anxiety of changing homes or cities, the mixed blessings of family life and the hopes and failures of love and work.

Aamer Hussein's short stories are studied within the contemporary literature curriculum at universities across Europe, North America and in Pakistan. He is a well-known reviewer and literary critic and a regular contributor to English national newspapers such as The Independent and The Times Literary Supplement as well as to several Pakistani national newspapers. Hussein has also published translations of Urdu poetry and fiction in English. He has co-edited 'Hoops of Fire: Fifty Years of Fiction by Pakistani Women' (Zed Books, 2000) including pieces by Mumtaz Shirin and Jamila Hashmi and holds several visiting posts at various universities including the University of Southampton and the University of London. He was the Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow at Imperial College for 2003-2004.

Hussein is a contributing editor for the multicultural literary journal 'Wasafiri' and is currently working on his fourth collection of short stories. He was recently awarded a Fellowship of the Royal Society of Literature (FRSL) in May 2004."