

It is surprising to know that Aamer Hussein, author of several collections of short stories and a novel, a meticulous translator of Urdu poetry and prose, a scholar and teacher, was actually a late bloomer. Although dabbling in poetry and writing since childhood Aamer seriously started writing when he was 29. Even then he wasn't sure whether he should write short or long fiction, starting to write a novel before finally deciding on his calling – the short story form. His published works include short story collections 'Mirror to the Sun' (1993), 'This Other Salt' (1999), 'Turquoise' (2002), 'Cactus Town' (2003), 'Insomnia' (2007), a novella 'Another Gulmohar Tree' (2009) and a novel 'The Cloud Messenger' (2011). His latest endeavour 'Electric Shadows' published by Bengal Lights Books has been showcased at this year's Hay Festival, Dhaka.

ASSERTING A SOUTH ASIAN IDENTITY

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Aamer Hossein

But the decision to turn a passion into a profession came after much deliberation. "It really took 2-3 years to know that the short story form was my form" recalls Aamer, "and that I was wasting my time trying to write a novel." His writing has earned him much acclaim in the literary world. His book 'Another Gulmohar Tree' was short listed for the Commonwealth Prize in 2010. He has been awarded creative writing fellowships at the University of Southampton and Imperial College London. He has been invited to judge many international literary prizes. In 2004 he became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Ironically for someone whose work has attracted so much recognition Aamer has always been shy of public attention. So much so that he gave up his first love – singing. "The paradox is that though I loved singing I didn't love audiences, always nervous about hitting the right note," he says. Through writing he adds, he could continue the solitary experience of reading and yet remain connected. "I think it was the

exuberance of reading that led to my writing and I found I was writing more and more and the writing began to take the shape of stories."

His stories reflect his extensive travel all over the world and his deep understanding of different cultures. His characters could be anywhere from Karachi to Rome. They could be Pakistani, British or Indonesian, man, woman or child. Often they are writers or poets and always they are characters who have a story to tell. There is a recurrent theme of loss, longing and nostalgia.

His narrative is often dreamlike and mysterious. His fluency in seven languages including Persian, Italian, French and Spanish, may have something to do with this.

Even this – the ability to speak in different tongues blossomed at a later age. "I found out at 21 that I was good at languages," explains Aamer, "I must have known before but never paid much attention to it. When I found myself walking around the streets of

Rome having to speak Italian – I began to speak it. It was as simple as that." This is how he picked up most of the other languages though Urdu and English were languages learnt from childhood. Aamer admits that he thinks mostly in English but chides himself in Urdu and thinks in Italian when in Italy.

He perfected his Urdu and Persian while studying those languages at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) delving into writing and translating in Urdu in his 50s. He has edited a volume of stories by Pakistani women writers, 'Kahani', which includes his own translations from Urdu stories of Pakistani writers. He remarks that much of his literary inspiration came from Qurratulain Hyder, a woman writer and family friend who wrote mainly in Urdu, famous for her novel 'Fireflies in the Mist' – a history and fiction of East Bengal from the 1890s up until the late 70s.

Though he grew up in Karachi, he spent most summers with his family in India where he also went to school for two years. At 15 he went to London and has been living there ever since.

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So does he feel Pakistani or British one cannot help but ask. Neither would be Aamer's answer as he prefers to have a 'South Asian' identity as many writers of the subcontinent living abroad do. "It's the way people see it and the way we converse with each other," he says, "we have common causes as writers particularly."

Being of Pakistani origin it is hard for a writer to be oblivious of the volatile situation in the country of his birth. But Aamer writes about these things more subtly than his fellow Pakistani writers, being more concerned with how these developments are affecting European mindsets. "Europe you know, it's in a mess," says an impassioned Aamer, "What is this mess in present day Europe? It's xenophobia. The predominant mess in Europe is that they will not disinvolve themselves from the wars that they wage in the name of freedom... People are now allowed to say things about Muslims as a kind of race or ethnicity which we are not. It's a religion people follow at will." Aamer adds that the growing Talibanisation in Pakistan (and other countries) are part of the problem.

Aamer writes about these things obliquely through the experiences of people and their lives though it is more about being marginalized or threatened as a result of their identities. They may be Iraqi, Turkish, Pakistani or a person of Bihari origin with a sense of being stateless.

But it is the complexities of human relationships defined by love, loss and displacement that Aamer predominantly writes about. Many of his stories seem autobiographical, in 'Electric Shadows' the title of his current collection, he even uses his own name for the central character. Aamer however, is reluctant to say that these stories are all about his own life. Rather they are drawn from personal experience he clarifies. "Personal experience is everything you experience," he explains, "your friend's life, your family, the history of your time, the place you live in whereas autobiography is the chronology of your life. Whether I write from pure imagination or experience I'd say certainly the second one – it's experience of people around me... So even if it seems sensual or magical it's very much something that's based on fears or fantasies that we have in our lives."

Bangladesh for Aamer is familiar territory not because of his South Asian identity but for more tangible reasons. His sister who is married to a Bangladeshi lives in Dhaka and Aamer has been to visit many times. He empathises with the sensibilities of a nation still feeling the wounds of Pakistani occupation.

"When I read books that were set here (Bangladesh) – whether they were Bangladeshi or non-Bangladeshi writers it made me realise that I had a different kind of mission – to understand what my role would be as a post 1971 person of Pakistani birth; that the fact that I was sympathetic towards Bangladeshis did not necessarily make me seem to be sympathetic. I was quite aware of always carrying a historical burden."

He is clearly appreciative of the progress Bangladesh has made over the years. "What I'm happy to see is that as much as we perceive Bangladesh to be in turmoil or trouble, it's still a lot more stable than many countries in Asia or South Asia."

"You have the spectre of fundamentalism but nowhere near as rabid as it is in Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan and India. You don't have a sectarian government. So it's rather than changes, I see what you have managed to hang on to, to keep, in terms of stability and progress."

Aamer goes on to give the example of a billboard in Pakistan with an ad in Urdu that says: 'Look at Bangladesh, they have educated their daughters and because their daughters are educated the country has moved ahead... Learn from Bangladesh, educate your daughter, educate your child.'

Young Pakistanis, moreover, says Aamer, see Bangladesh "as a nation that's parallel in terms of history and development, they see it as a neighbour they want to have ties with, as a culture they want to discover and know about."