

A rich tapestry

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A short story is far harder to write than a novel. In a novel, the author has hundreds of pages in which to meander from beginning to end; she can take creative license with text and style, and do it with a cast of characters large enough to populate a five-star hotel. The short story is, by contrast, a tightly disciplined affair that, to capture the reader's attention, must be brilliant from the opening sentence. But in an era where the short story is considered nowhere near as hip as the novel, Aamer Hussein's *Insomnia* proves that the Pakistani-born writer has not only mastered the form, but elevated it to a level of high art, taking it to places that novelists can only aspire to reach.

These stories vary in place and time but have a common thread of being rooted in or linked to Pakistan. The opening story, 'Nine Postcards from Sanlucar de Barrameda', sketches an unnamed Pakistani man vacationing in Spain, forced to ponder his identity in Europe and in relation to his lover. 'The Crane Girl' follows a young Pakistani student in London as he loses his heart to an elusive, capricious Japanese girl. Four intellectuals from Pakistan travel to different points of the globe but remain connected through their personal and political lives in 'Hibiscus Days'. 'The Angelic Disposition', by far the most complex story in the collection, is a paean to a Pakistani writer written from the viewpoint of his fellow Pakistani, female, disciple. It is both a comfort and an exploration to see a writer make so firm a decision to view the world through the eyes of Pakistanis in these finely-constructed narratives.

Hussein's gift lies in being able to create subtleties upon subtleties, in language, imagery, and style. Never once does he flex his literary muscles; instead preferring to wield them delicately, weaving a tapestry of fine silk threads rather than the barbed wire fences of writers with something to prove. He is in no rush to hurry the reader from one point to the next; instead, he rests his narrative in one place and allows a meditation to develop, in which memories, connections, resolutions gather and grow in an organic process. In this way, when the reader reaches the end of the story, she is left with a sense of having travelled a long way in the narrator's mind, a gentle meandering through rivers of time and remembrance. It is a style unique to Hussein, his and his alone.

Another unique trait of the stories is commitment to portraying women with unflinching honesty and accuracy. He shows tremendous empathy and admiration for women: apparent in 'The Book of Maryam', where a Pakistani poet attempts to express herself through the parable of Maryam in the Quran, only to meet with disdain from westerners who invalidate her experience

in ways both subtle and unsubtle. 'The Angelic Disposition' brings to mind the relationship that Manto and Ismat Chughtai may have had in the early heady days of the new Pakistan. 'Insomnia' features a male protagonist who is prodded to capture his definition of happiness by Sri Kunti, an Indonesian poet who is as devoted to the arts as he. Never once does Hussein take a false step in describing the thoughts, dreams, and motivations of the women that people his stories. They serve as friends, collaborators, lovers and muses, but from a position of strength and equality, not weakness or sexual objectification.