

Dig down to the roots

Tabish Khair admires Siddhartha Deb and Aamer Hussein, two storytellers who combine the cosmopolitan with the provincial in *Surface* and *This Other Salt*



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The Guardian, Saturday 23 April 2005

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Surface

by Siddhartha Deb

262pp, Picador, £12.99

This Other Salt

by Aamer Hussein

201pp, Saqi, £9.99

The narrator of one of Aamer Hussein's stories invokes the familiar exilic image of trees and roots. Only he is not talking of rooted trees but of transplanted ones: "A tree removed from its native soil and planted elsewhere puts down new roots, twisted ones, perhaps, but its trunk grows heavy." This oblique use of a familiar image says a lot about Hussein's subtle art; it also reveals a link between Hussein and Siddhartha Deb. Their roots might twist through many cultures and histories, but the foliage of their storytelling is remarkably lush - and not just cosmopolitan.

That Hussein comes from Pakistan and Deb from India might enable some critics to cobble them together under the rubric of "Commonwealth" or "post-colonial", but such tags are little more than terms of convenience. Neither is the fact that they write in English or live (mostly) in the "west" significant on its own. What is significant is that they often write about people, regions, affiliations or texts that might not always be visible in the west or in English. They are cosmopolitan writers with many regional interests, but these supposed opposites - the cosmopolitan and the regional - meet so easily in these two books that one almost fails to find the meeting remarkable.

What surfaces, to begin with, in Deb's *Surface* is a photo. It features a woman flanked by two masked, gun-wielding "insurgents" and on the back is the caption: "The MORLS leadership today exhibited a porn film actress as an example and warning to the people of the state. They shot her as punishment to impress upon the people the importance of desisting from all corrupt activities encouraged by Indian imperialism ..."

The photo is recovered from an old news file by Amrit Singh, a turban-less, Calcutta-based Sikh journalist, who has been surfing the bubbles of daily journalism for years and now wants to dive deeper. The photo (and other factors) takes Amrit to the "region" - unspecified but easy to locate generically in the northeast of India - where he uncovers a story in which nothing is as it appears on the surface. To tell more of the story would be to spoil the suspense, but it needs to be added that there are two sorts of surface in this novel - that which has to be dug under, as with a spade or a pen, and that which is put up or on, as wallpaper is, or a film set, or, for that matter, a public face.

Taut with dramatic tension and teeming with vivid characters, *Surface* is not only a literary page-turner but also a telling commentary on some of the socio-political structures in India today. The comparison to Naipaul, Conrad and Graham Greene that the publicity material suggests is, for once, justified, though for various reasons it is Greene who, with his possibilities of redemption in a bleak world, comes most often to mind.

If the conspiracy of coincidences and various accounts in *Surface* create a narrative that

is focused without becoming thinly single, nightmarish without ceasing to be realist, Hussein in his stories also grapples successfully with the problem of narrating coherently in a world in which no one story can claim to be definitive, no version the only authentic one. Perhaps this is more of a problem in the genre of the short story than in the novel, for the modern short story began (as in O. Henry and Guy de Maupassant) as a focused singular narrative while the modern novel was always the site of various voices, many stories. Today, it is no mean achievement to write short fiction that is not a fragment of a novel: the text has to be open to various narratives and voices without losing its own generic identity. Hussein is among the few contemporary writers of English fiction who manage to achieve this.

Unlike *Surface*, Hussein's stories in *This Other Salt* do not take us to a region that is remote even to most South Asians. But they serve a similar end of not letting the reader remain confined to fashionable cosmopolitan platitudes and attitudes. And yet they are rooted in a cosmopolitan ethos and narrated in standard English of poetic perfection.

One example of this is the delicate, aromatic story "Sweet Rice". It tells of Shireen, once a doctor in Karachi, now a housewife in London, and her discovery of purpose in new surroundings. However, this discovery does not come by way of the "freedom" afforded by England (as it does in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, for instance), but through a personal, historical and textual archaeology that throws up the names of authors like Perveen Shakir and Muhammadi Begum. These Urdu associations seep into Shireen's life in London and help to redefine it.

Drawing on legend, history, memoir, literature and film, Hussein's stories are meant to be cupped in both hands and savoured slowly, like a cup of cardamom chai.

• Tabish Khair's novel *The Bus Stopped* is published by Picador.