

## Ameena Hussein (Sri Lanka)

Friedrich Nietzsche once said: *The author must keep his mouth shut when his work begins to speak.* I wish I could follow Nietzsche's advice, but obviously I must suppose that my work is not speaking as of yet, and therefore in this age of the sound bite, media campaigns and hype, authors first write and then they must talk, talk, talk. So let's get on with the business for now, and soon, one day I hope my books will indeed speak for themselves and then I can just shut up!

Until now I have been a short story writer. I have published two collections of short stories and I write in English. Once, early in my writing career, an enemy of mine whom I had thought of as a friend till then told another enemy/friend that she didn't think I had the attention span to even write a short story. I mulled long and hard on that tidbit of information. It revealed a lot to me about what others thought about me. I am still not sure if they were wrong.

My first book, entitled *Fifteen*, was short-listed for a national award but didn't receive the prize because it was described as being man-hating! It was not man-hating—I actually love men. It simply told tales from a strong feminist view point and questioned age-old beliefs and traditions, most of them stemming from patriarchy—and for that reason I believe, it was labeled as being anti-man. My second book, entitled *Zillij*, dealt with questions of identity and the ethnic conflict from a minority perspective. That book caused less of a stir, even though the Muslim community in Sri Lanka was rather annoyed that I had chosen to air some dirty linen, and ignored the book.

Now why do I write the things I do? I write about things that interest me and occupy much of my thinking time. Some of them are issues that I deal with on a daily basis, they are part of me and therefore I write about them. They can range from religion to gender, social mores, war and peace. I am a sociologist by training who specializes in issues of gender and ethnicity, and therefore my fiction writing is very much influenced by my work as well. I write about places I have lived in and visited, I write about what I know, and if I don't know it I will make damn sure that I do a lot of homework before writing about it. In my writing I hope that I can show an alternative face of a subject.

For example, Islam is not the domain of the Arab world. The majority of Muslims lie outside the Arab region—the largest population of Muslims in any one country in the world is in Indonesia. And therefore the non-Arab Islam is as valid as any Arab's—for it is a matter of interpretation in both cases. I write to stake my claims of ownership on the multiple identities that I possess. And if my stance is slightly askew from the mainstream, it does not mean that it is any less valid. I write to make people think.

I live in a complicated country. It is a country, while being primarily Sinhala Buddhist, still respects the rights of its minorities—Hindu Tamils and Muslims to a fair if seemingly superficial extent. It is a country where Eid ul Fitr is as much a holiday as Vesak or Deevali. In that seeming strength lies its weakness, for in its effort to accommodate all cultures and religions, the government sometimes takes the line of least resistance on certain problematic issues. For example, the age of marriage was raised from twelve to sixteen for all citizens of

Sri Lanka except the Muslims. The reason for this was that Muslim politicians, using a religious argument, said that in Islam there is no minimum age of marriage and therefore Muslims should be exempt from this law. The government acquiesced and thus Muslim girls can be married off at any age with parental permission.

Issues like the above make me want to write about them. I fictionalize events and situations in order to reach a wider audience than the usual suspects in academia, who may read my sociological reports and articles.

I also live in a marvelous country that makes a sambol of our collective religions, traditions and culture. It is an amazing experience to live on a street where at five in the morning the muezzin sings you awake, at ten the one hundred year-old church bells ring, at noon the Hindu pooja trumpets and beats its rhythms into your heartbeat and at sunset the Buddhist temples are silhouetted with oil lamps that soothe your soul into a timeless serenity.

Therefore, I also write to preserve culture in an odd way. Sri Lanka is a developing country that has a developed country's complex. Our youth think they are American, our yuppies want the status cars and country houses and our villagers want MTV. All this means that the way of life has changed and is still changing at a rapid rate. While not wanting to romanticize a bygone era, I do want a sense of continuity with regard to traditions and customs that reflect our civilization of 2,500 years. I want to document our unique sense and style of life which allows sky-walking loin-clad toddy tappers to live side by side with muscled surfer dude beach boys who speak English with Australian accents.

When I began writing in my late twenties, I remember having a conversation with a protégé of Edward Said at Columbia University, who in response to my statement that I hate politics said: If you are a writer you have to be political. Today, almost fifteen years later, I see the relevance of his statement. I realize that almost everything I write is political. Not political in the ordinary sense of politics, though that is present as well, but political in taking a sometimes controversial stance on my subject matter. For example, some of my writing explores the notion of religion and culture as being oppressive and limiting rather than celebratory and rewarding. In a traditional society like that of Sri Lanka, that in itself is a departure from the usual laudatory treatment that is given to these subjects.

Right now I am at work, or rather supposed to be at work on a novel. In fact I am writing two novels and have written the same number of pages for both books—around seventy-five pages for each. And this is where my short attention span comes into play. I am not a writer who works on one piece at a time. At any given time on my computer there will be a dozen pieces that are being worked on at the same time. Maybe this comes from leading a schizophrenic life. I am a sociologist, editor, publisher, fiction writer and sometimes even travel writer all at the same time. They all involve realms of writing, reading and critiquing and therefore I find it very stimulating to work on many pieces of writing at the same time—the danger being that I do not have the obsession to finish them unless I have a Damoclesian deadline.

I would like to think that my writing voice is contemporary. I invent words if I do not find them in standard dictionaries. I write about modern day issues, albeit from a very South Asian context, and yet I think the stories can transcend geographical and cultural boundaries.

Some of my stories are fantastical, imaginary and sometimes plain improbable. I have written stories about suicide bombers, about illegal immigrants and displaced migrants from the West.

I would not like to think of myself as a woman writer or a Muslim writer or a Sri Lankan writer, for I am all of them and none of them. It is only recently that I have even begun to think of myself as a writer as my primary designation. I will continue to write as long as I have something to say, and as my friends can attest, I always have something to say—so I hope that I will be writing for a long time.