

Myriad Hues of Culinary Experiences in the Novels of Khaled Hosseini

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Culinary experiences in literature are mines of personal and social trends. They enrich the readers with the cultural aspects of the places where the novels are set. Food fosters a deep bond among people. At times food becomes symbolic of the state of mind the characters are in. Khaled Hosseini's novels, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* offer myriad ways of exploring food metaphors. They enhance the readers' comprehension of personal, social and ethnic mind frames of the people of Afghanistan. The Diaspora in *And the Mountains Echoed* takes culinary experiences to a different level. The therapeutic value of food needs to be ascertained in this context.

The communal aspect of Afghan life revolves around the common *tandoor* (stove), where the women get together to cook food for themselves and their families. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam's transformation from a girl to a wife happens when she takes the dough to the common fireplace to bake bread. The women of the area come together, exchange stories of their lives with the *tandoor* as the backdrop. Mariam is transported from her native village Herat to the vibrant city life of Kabul. This has great significance as she was born a *harami*, an illegitimate child and was living with her mother in the outskirts of Herat, as a social outcast, before being married to Rasheed from Kabul. So, from a marginalised girl, she gains acceptance when she becomes Rasheed's wife. Here culinary experience becomes a source of support and strength for her. The *tandoor* is the focal point of communal living in Kabul. It becomes an initiation ground to city life for Mariam though initially she is intimidated when the women of the neighbourhood swarm to her, all of a sudden to get details of her personal life.

Communal living in Afghanistan is yet again exhibited during *iftar* (breaking fast) during the month of *Ramadan*. After her marriage, Mariam relishes consuming bread and a date during *iftar*, "tasting for the first time in her fifteen years the sweetness of sharing in a communal experience" (77). It has great significance in her life, as being a *harami*, she lived on the fringes of mainstream society so far. Her father, Jalil, used to get back to his real family consisting of three wives and a number of children for the real *Eid* celebrations after bringing gifts for Mariam and having tea with her and her mother. But due to her outcast status, she dreaded *Eid* as it is the time of hospitality and ceremony.

The role of food during both happy and unhappy occasions cannot be underestimated. Food takes the centre stage at any celebration. Even though Mariam lived on the outskirts of Herat, Mullah Faizullah, her Quranic tutor and well-wisher, used to present her with chocolate candy, dyed boiled

eggs and cookies on the occasion of *Eid-ul Fitr*. In Rasheed's household also, many dishes are prepared for *iftar* - rice, lamb and okra *qurma* besides bread and radishes to name a few. The rich and the poor alike do their best by preparing various dishes to mark happy events. On an unhappy occasion like death also, food has a key place in Afghanistan just as in other parts of the world. Laila's brothers, Ahmad and Noor become martyrs fighting with the Mujahideen against the Soviet invasion in their home country. Women flock to the household to console Laila's mother. A *khatm* dinner is organized where people from the neighbourhood come together in Laila's home to mourn the deceased.

Later on, in the novel, Rasheed stresses the need for family members to eat together. When he marries Laila, there is friction between Mariam and her. Rasheed points out that Laila could not avoid Mariam as they have to sit across the table when they have their meals. Laila used to enjoy having food at her friend Tariq's home before at peaceful times. She mentions how they ate together with light hearted talks going around. She disliked eating alone at her own home. All these point to the fact that food is a binding factor which keeps families and communities together. Consumption of food as a community is part of the ethnic identity of the people of Afghanistan.

Cooking becomes a pleasure or pain according to the attitude to the person for whom the food is being cooked. The reverse is also true. If one does not like a person, one tries to find fault with the food he/she prepares. Mariam's first attempt at cooking for her husband is detailed by Hosseini with great care. She makes *dal* (lentil) and white rice. She is very much worried about the consistency of the *dal* she has made. Her fears are allayed only when Rasheed approves it with his words, "A little under-salted but good. Maybe better than good, even" (68). Mariam falls from Rasheed's heart as a result of failing to give him a child. The food she cooks becomes too salty or too bland, too greasy or too dry under the changed circumstances. Mariam no longer looks forward to cooking for her husband.

Personal mood swings and political turmoil contribute to the way one perceives food. Long hours of fasting during the month of *Ramadan* throw Rasheed off gear. He is irritated and finds fault with the food prepared by Mariam. He accuses her of undercooking the rice and as punishment, he makes Mariam chew some pebbles which he forcefully puts on her mouth. As a result, two of her molars are broken. Here food becomes a source of oppression. Even political unrest in Afghanistan adds to Rasheed's state of mind. The civil war has taken its toll on his mental health. Finding fault with food becomes his means of coming to terms with his own life.

Another character who extends her mood to culinary experience is Laila's mother. She projects her mental state through cooking or abstaining from it. When her sons die for the cause of driving away the Soviets from Afghanistan, she withdraws from life by not taking any interest in cooking. She does not think about the well being of the two surviving members of her household – her husband and Laila. But later, when the Soviets are finally uprooted from Afghan soil, Laila's mother celebrates it by re-entering the kitchen after a long gap of five years. She cooks a lot of dishes, "*aush* soup with kidney beans and dried dill, *kofta*, steaming hot *mantu* drenched with fresh

yogurt topped with mint” (159). Thus, there is a huge transformation in the mindset of Laila’s mother, the outward expression of which can be seen in her enthusiastic cooking. Thus, food becomes a symbol.

Food is also a symbol of patriarchy in the novel. Rasheed asserts his power on Mariam through food. She is scared, at the beginning of her married life, whether she will be able to please her husband through her cooking. In the initial years, there are only a few complaints about her culinary skills. Later on, Rasheed complains on a regular basis about Mariam’s cooking depending on his state of mind. He even inflicts physical pain on her, accusing her of not preparing the dishes according to his preferences.

The simple activity of enjoying food as a sign of normalcy can be seen towards the end of the novel. After a lot of turmoil in Laila’s life, she carries on her life with Tariq in a near normal way as a refugee in Pakistan. Once again there is mention of eating meatball sandwiches with cucumbers and drinking cold ginger ale (377). The characters try to lead a normal life even though their status in Pakistan is that of refugees. But it is a huge relief for them to be away from the battle field of Afghanistan. They find comfort in the simple pleasure of eating familiar food. When Tariq and Laila with their children go back to Afghanistan, they eat at a *kebab* house. They count their blessings and enjoy their food. “It’s a small place, with sticky, vinyl tablecloths, smoky and loud. But the lamb is tender and moist and the bread hot” (392). After finishing their food at the joint, they go out and the children enjoy rose-water ice cream from a street vendor. All these point to the fact that human beings since time immemorial and across borders have found comfort in food.

In Hosseini’s *And the Mountains Echoed*, the therapeutic value of food is endorsed. Abdullah migrates from his native Afghanistan to far away US. As a means of livelihood, he starts a restaurant and names it “Abe’s Kabob House”. The dishes on the menu are reminiscent of his native land – Caravan *Kabob*, Khyber Pass *Pilaf*, Silk Route Chicken. The dishes are prepared by Abdullah’s wife. When each table is served, he rings the copper bell placed behind the register counter. It is supposed to add to the Oriental charm. The ambience of the place reminds its visitors of Afghanistan. All these are Abdullah’s ways of keeping his mother land close to his heart.

The restaurant has therapeutic use not only to Abdullah but also to other Afghan people displaced from their homeland. Idris, a doctor by profession, visits Afghanistan with his cousin Timur to sort out some property matter. When he gets back to the US, he rushes to Abdullah’s restaurant in an attempt to hold on to his memories of homeland. He orders ethnic food such as brown rice, *bolani* and *chapli kabobs* for his family (161). Ethnic identity is reinforced even in far-away US through food. Afghans fondly visit ethnic food restaurants in the hope of salvaging their memories of homeland through tickling their taste buds. On occasions of grief also, the Diaspora community finds consolation by consuming ethnic food. When Idris’ father passes away after a long bout with cancer, his relatives gather in his home to pay homage to the departed. Idris orders rice and lamb from Abe’s Kabob House. Khaled Hosseini, himself being part of the Afghan Diaspora population in the US, would have become nostalgic while portraying Abdullah and his eatery.

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Culinary experiences have a major role in defining people, communities and nations. Food offers comfort to people on a personal level. It becomes a solace to a community at trying times. Moreover it offers an identity to ethnic groups outside their native lands. Thus the therapeutic value of food cannot be ignored in creative works. Hosseini has portrayed these areas minutely in both the works under discussion.

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