

Culinary Markers of Cultural Difference in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

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Abstract:

Food is a significant element of culture. Culinary habits are culturally determined. Different communities and nationalities have their respective culinary choices and inhibitions. Further, culinary cultural differences become prominent in the case of the individuals in diaspora. In the basic, homeland – host nation paradigm, food assumes a defining role as cultural assimilation in diaspora, also demands culinary assimilation. An immigrant's ethnic cultural identity is also defined by the culinary practices. Further, food also is linked with psych-sociology as Roland Barthes observes.

This paper is an attempt to analyse Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, to identify the culinary markers of cultural differences between Pakistani ethnicity and the culture of the host nation – the USA. The paper uses tenants and tools of Cultural Studies and Food Studies to examine the cultural context of the novel. Further, the paper will also focus on the central character, Changez and his efforts to negotiate his identity through a series of culinary situations.

Keywords: Culinary culture, diaspora, ethnicity, migration.

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Food is one of the important means to retain cultural identity of the people. Food patterns help one to connect with their cultural or ethnic group. One's plate is influenced by the cultural background one comes from. People's food preferences are also a result of the food choices rooted in their cultural background. This paper tries to identify the culinary markers in the narratives of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* which clearly shows the cultural difference between two countries.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is the second novel of Mohsin Hamid, who is a Pakistani author. He completed his education in Lahore and went on to attend Princeton University and Harvard Law School. He worked for many years as a management consultant in New York. His essays and journals have appeared in Time, The New York Times and The Independent, among others. Mohsin Hamid currently lives, works and writes in London.

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* explores the life of Changez, a young Pakistani man who currently stays in Lahore but who had the experience of staying for almost four years in the United States. Throughout the novel, the author switches between two distinctive cultural settings: the culinary culture of the United States of America and a tea shop in Lahore, Pakistan. Additionally, the author also explores the value of food and beverages in certain cultural backgrounds. Hamid uses food imagery to convey cultural values throughout the novel. Throughout the novel, he shows the different views, cultures have on alcohol and during which occasions it is used.

Hamid uses food and drink as cultural devices to show the different culinary cultures. Food habits, meal pattern, cooking and memory, the language of food, culinary culture, how sharing of food is considered differently in diverse cultures and how man-woman relationship is perceived in both the cultures using food are explored by Hamid in this novel.

The novel opens with a scene where Changez is approaching an American at a tea stall and he offers him tea, making selection of tea for the stranger and hot orange jalebis. He uses food to build rapport with the stranger. He tells the stranger about his own stay in USA and how he used to cook his own meals in a dormitory to save money. Throughout the novel, Changez shifts between the present and the past. Both the situations provide us with ample opportunities to study how food is playing a role in the novel.

Roland Barthes in his article, “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption”, maintains that, “For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour” (Barthes 24). Barthes states that food may create multiple meanings which can indicate diverse behaviour among humans. Barthes indicates that food is a sign, that communicates more than itself. He also maintains that culture has many ways of communication and food is one of them. Like human beings, food culture is also related to national and territorial identity. When food travels across borders, it raises certain cultural issues. The belief system related to food can vary from nation to nation and culture to culture. Also, the way food communicates may also vary in different cultures. The nationality, ethnicity, habits can be perceived through food.

The narration opens with Changez trying to approach an American and helping him by finding a decent tea stall to have tea. Food here becomes a means of starting a conversation with a stranger:

...and that is the quest for the perfect cup of tea. Have I guessed correctly? Then allow me, sir, to suggest my favorite among these many establishments. Yes, this is the one. Its metal chairs are no better upholstered, its wooden tables are equally rough, and it is, like the others, open to the sky. But the quality of its tea, I assure you, is unparalleled. (pg. 5)

Changez takes it on himself to select the type of tea for the stranger. He also suggests a fragrant Kashmiri tea along with a plate of jalebis: “Would you prefer regular tea, with milk and sugar, or green tea, or perhaps their more fragrant specialty, Kashmiri tea? Excellent choice. I will have the same, and perhaps a plate of jalebis as well” (pg. 7). Taking initiative in selecting tea, deciding the snacks by Changez, is looked at with suspicion by the American. Understanding the look of the stranger, Changez tries to assure the stranger that he will not face any discomfort due to food. The foreign food also becomes a point of suspicion for the stranger as Changez tries to become over-friendly with him. Changez also assumes that the American must be wondering about having a cup of tea on a warm day:

Ah, our tea has arrived! Do not look so suspicious. I assure you, sir, nothing untoward will happen to you, not even a runny stomach. After all, it is not as if it has been poisoned. Come, if it makes you more comfortable, let me switch my cup with yours. Just so. How much sugar would you like? None? Very unusual, but I will not insist. Do try these sticky, orange sweets—jalebis—but be careful, they are hot! I see you approve. Yes, they are delicious. It is curious how a cup of tea can be refreshing even on a warm day such as this—a mystery, really—but there you have it. (pg. 9)

In this instance, the cultural difference through culinary practices is shown by the author. In the USA, making culinary choices for a stranger will be considered as interfering in somebody’s personal matter. Also, the combination of tea and jalebis is strange for the American as it is not the way they have their tea. As the jalebis are combined with tea, the stranger opts for a sugarless tea.

As Changez is talking to the American about his past, he makes sure that the stranger understands that he has not forgotten his roots. Even though he has studied in a foreign university where most of the comforts were available, he had not forgotten certain culinary delicacies like a tea with full fat milk: “Princeton made everything possible for me. But it did not, could not, make me forget such things as how much I enjoy the tea in this, the city of my birth, steeped long enough to acquire a rich, dark color, and made creamy with fresh, full-fat milk. It is excellent, no? I see you have finished yours. Allow me to pour you another cup” (pg. 11).

In this conversation, Changez mentions certain culinary practices of the young crowd of Lahore, like having a cup of tea with friends at the tea stall is quite a common site in Lahore: “The National College of Arts is not far—it is, as a matter of fact, only around the corner—and its students often come here for a cup of tea, just as we are doing now” (pg. 11).

Along with the cultural difference, food is also a marker for financial difference. As Barthes mentions that culture and class influence taste. In Changez’s stay in Princeton University, he observes the difference between the eating habits of rich students and those who have come to study with financial aid: “She and the others were members of the university’s most prestigious eating club, Ivy,... I had cooked my own meals in the basement kitchen of my dormitory” (pg. 11).

Culinary markers are prominently visible when Changez goes for a picnic with Erica and her group. Changez believes that sharing food is a mark of intimacy. On the other hand, for Erica, it is just something which she would do with any person who is sharing the table with her. Erica respects Changez for his well-mannered behaviour, but Changez misunderstands it as Erica’s soft feelings towards him: “She spread jam on a croissant, gave half to me,” (pg 12).

Erica, as Changez is not a native American, assumes that he may not be very comfortable using cutlery, helps him on a dinner table. Again, Changez thinks that Erica is doing this because she has special feelings for him. This is also a very remarkable culinary difference between the two cultures: “I felt—despite the presence of our companions, whose attention, as always, she managed to capture—that she was sharing with me an intimacy, and this feeling grew stronger when, after observing me struggle, she helped me separate the flesh from the bones of my fish without my having to ask” (pg. 17). One can see that since the two nations have difference in their culinary culture which is rooted in the belief system of Erica and Changez, he misinterprets events giving way to misunderstanding. Lahore is very far from the sea shore; hence Changez did not expect this kind of outing when he was staying in Pakistan: “... never in my life had a vacation like this one. We rented motor scooters and purchased straw mats to spread on beaches of black volcanic sand, which the sun had made too hot for bare skin; we stayed in the rooms of quaint houses let out in the summertime by elderly couples to tourists; we ate grilled octopus and drank sparkling water and red wine” (pg. 13).

Many a times, culture or religion related assumptions and prohibitions are also shown through food. When Changez is invited by Erica at her home, the culinary markers become all the more evident. As Changez is from Pakistan and a follower of Islam, Erica’s father assumes that he won’t consume alcohol. On the other hand, in America after a certain age, the person is allowed to consume alcohol, so Erica’s mother feels that since Changez is already twenty-two, he must be drinking. Most of the time, food becomes one of the important criteria to judge a person with certain religious and cultural background: ‘As we took our seats for the meal, he lifted a bottle of red wine and said to me, “You drink?” “He’s twenty-two,” Erica’s mother said on my behalf, in a tone that suggested, so of course he drinks. “I had a Pakistani working for me once,” Erica’s father said. “Never drank.” “I do, sir,” I assured him. “Thank you”’ (pg. 27). Changez

tries to remove the misunderstanding from Erica's father's mind about the drinking habits among Pakistanis: "In truth, many Pakistanis drink; alcohol's illegality in our country has roughly the same effect as marijuana's in yours. Moreover, not all of our drinkers are western-educated urbanites such as myself; our newspapers regularly carry accounts of villagers dying or going blind after consuming poor quality moonshine" (pg. 27).

Americans give emphasis on how the food is presented. As Deepali Verma states in her article "The Cultural Background of American Gastronomy", Americans place a high priority on appearance and like foods that enhance it. Changez observes this when he has dinner with Erica's family:

I was telling you of my first meal with Erica's family. It was a warm evening, like this one—summer in New York being like spring here in Lahore. A breeze was blowing then, again as it is now, and it carried a smell of flame-cooked meat not dissimilar to that coming to us from the many open-air restaurants in this market that are beginning their preparations for dinner. The setting was superb, the wine was delicious, the burgers were succulent, and our conversation was for the most part rather pleasant. (pg. 28)

One more point gets highlighted here, at Erica's home, meat is cooked in the barbeque on the roof top of her house and in Lahore, it is road side eateries which emit the smell of flame cooked meat.

Food consumed during outings or picnics is also different in different culture. Erica invites Changez for a picnic in a park. She is from the elite group of the society, who have a special menu for picnics as well: "Erica wore a straw hat and carried a wicker basket containing wine, fresh-baked bread, sliced meats, several different cheeses, and grapes—a delicious and, to my mind, rather sophisticated assortment" (pg. 29). She assumes that being from Pakistan, it must be a new experience to Changez: "'So this must seem very foreign to you, then,'" she said' (pg. 30). Changez defends this point by stating that he had experienced such types of picnics in his days in Lahore, but the difference in culinary assortments can be clearly observed: "'No,'" I replied, "in fact it reminds me of when my family would go up to Nathia Galli, in the foothills of the Himalayas. There we often used to take our meals in the open—with tea and cucumber sandwiches from the hotel'" (pg. 30). Once again, in a picturesque background, the author shows the value of the American culture by luxurious food and contrasts it with Pakistani's value of simplicity. This demonstrates the author's opinion on the importance of sophistication in the United States as opposed to Pakistan.

Vaibhav Baweja in his presentation on "Pakistani Cuisine" states that: "Pakistani cuisine can be described as a refined blend of various regional cooking traditions of South Asia. Pakistani cuisine is known for its richness and flavour. Within Pakistan, cuisine varies greatly from region to region, reflecting the country's ethnic and cultural diversity" (Baweja). Changez is from Lahore, which is a part of Punjab province of Pakistan. Baweja elaborates on the cooking style of this part of Pakistan:

'Punjabi cuisine consists of food from the Punjab region of north-western India and eastern Pakistan. It can be non-vegetarian or completely vegetarian. One of the main features of Punjabi cuisine is its diverse range of dishes. Home cooked and restaurant Punjabi cuisine can vary significantly, with restaurant style using large amounts of ghee, clarified butter, with liberal amounts of butter and cream, with home cooking concentrating on mainly upon preparations with whole wheat, rice and other ingredients flavored with masala.' (Baweja)

Pakistanis pride in their food. Changez shows the culinary difference in the dishes offered in Pakistan, India and America when he says:

...we Pakistanis tend to take an inordinate pride in our food. Here in Old Anarkali that pride is visible in the purity of the fare on offer; not one of these worthy restaurateurs would consider placing a western dish on his menu. No, we are surrounded instead by the kebab of mutton, the tikka of chicken, the stewed foot of goat, the spiced brain of sheep! These, sir, are predatory delicacies, delicacies imbued with a hint of luxury, of wanton abandon. Not for us the vegetarian recipes one finds across the border to the east, nor the sanitized, sterilized, processed meats so common in your homeland! (pg. 47)

Americans are used to fork, knife and spoon while eating; on the other hand, in Pakistan, people prefer eating with hand. As Vatika Sibal states in "Food: Identity of Culture and Religion" that culture plays an important role in food related etiquette. People in western countries prefer using cutlery like fork and spoon. In Asian countries, some people prefer using chopsticks and some eat with their fingers. An American looks for cutlery before having food. Changez informs the American why one should eat with fingers:

Will they provide us with cutlery, you ask? I am certain, sir, that a fork can be found for you, but allow me to suggest that the time has now come for us to dirty our hands. We have, after all, spent some hours in each other's company already; surely you can no longer feel the need to hold back. There is great satisfaction to be had in touching one's prey; indeed, millennia of evolution ensure that manipulating our meals with our skin heightens our sense of taste—and our appetite, for that matter! I see you need no further convincing; your fingers are tearing the flesh of that kebab with considerable determination. (pg. 56)

At the end of the dinner, Changez offers rice pudding to the American traveler. He states that may be the American is not familiar with it as this dish is not consumed in the western countries. But he does mention American soldiers carrying chocolates to the war field:

I will, however, order us some dessert, a little rice pudding with sliced almonds and cardamom, the perfect sweetener for an evening such as ours, which is taking a turn towards the grimmer side. Such dishes may not normally be to your taste, but I would encourage you to have, at the very least, a tiny bite. After all, one reads that the soldiers of your country are sent to battle with chocolate in their rations, so the prospect of sugaring your tongue before undertaking even the bloodiest of tasks cannot be entirely alien to you. (pg. 62)

The novel ends in uncertainty. It is for the readers to imagine whether the American tourist is taking out a business card holder or a gun. The identity of both the people is also quite ambiguous, if the American visitor is a CIA agent or Changez is a member of some revolutionary group?

All in all, by using specific food and beverage imagery, the author manages to create and convey specific cultural values throughout the novel. Hamid explores different ways alcohol is valued, as either a way of celebrating or a way of relieving stress. Moreover, food sharing was also portrayed as an important value for both cultures in different ways, showing that they are somehow similar despite their differences. Also, the plainness and the finesse of the food also brought up the idea of the importance of quality in America versus Pakistan. Hamid conveys different aspects of how food is valued in the United States and Pakistan by creating important scenes where it is used to explore distinctive cultural values and backgrounds.

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