

Review of Dastarkhwan: Food Writing from Muslim South Asia, edited by Claire Chambers, Beacon Books, 2021, pp 200, ISBN-13: 978-1912356614 (Hbk), £ 22.95, \$32.37.

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Dastarkhwan: Food Writing from Muslim South Asia (2021) is a collection of Anglophone essays and stories assembled under the central assertion that food is intrinsic to the fabric of South Asian Islamic communities, metaphorically embodied by the collection's title, which refers to a tablecloth spread before a meal. The collection is edited by Claire Chambers (2021), who describes its various fictional and nonfictional contributions as universally ap-

peeling, differing from the “issue-based or problem-centered topics Muslims are often expected to write about” (xxii), and contends that *Dastarkhwan* presents a variety of experiences that defies monolithic representations of Muslim identity. Indeed, the authors collected in this text are from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kashmir, the US and the UK, and the thematic threads which span the eighteen pieces range from the most ubiquitous-- identity, love, death, religion, gender, and nostalgia-- to the most food-specific-- leftovers, food waste, or hunger.

Part essay collection, part anthology of fiction, part cookbook, *Dastarkhwan* often blurs the lines between the genres it is positioned within. Its opening, a series of epigraphs from Mohsin Hamid to the Quran, promises a conventional literary collection, but the following page, several measurement tables including conversions from Imperial to Metric to US cups, both reflects the wide audience of the text and reveals its hybrid nature. The collection begins with an “Appetizer” forward by Bina Shah, a highly topical, wisely conversational introduction by editor Claire Chambers, then moves into “Part One: Essays” and “Part Two: Stories,” with a “Dessert” afterward by Siobhan Lambert-Hurley rounding out the culinary-literary contents. Each chapter is followed by a recipe, ostensibly supplied by each author, such that dishes mentioned in the text’s body can be reproduced by readers at home.

Though individual perspectives vary across the collection, topics reappear regularly, lending a sense of cohesion to the project. Of these, the relationship between gender and food is the most commonly broached, in essays and stories alike, with authors from Claire Chambers to Nadeem Aslam, Rana Safvi, Sauleha Kamal, Kaiser Haq, Asiya Zahoor, Farah Yameen, and Sophia Khan all entering the conversation. They consider the ways women develop unique culinary styles (Aslam, “The Homesick Restaurant”), or the still-common practice across South Asian religious traditions of serving the patriarch first (Safvi, “Qissa Qorma aur Qaliya Ka” and Yameen, “The Night of Forgiveness”), or the ways in which cooking, “as a largely female occupation” traditionally, “has not been associated with power” (Kamal 2021, 19) despite the control inherent to deciding what another person will consume. Though South Asian women traditionally have been involved in every stage of food production-- from sowing seeds and tending crops, to harvesting, preparing, cooking, and serving--there remains a scholarly inattention to issues related to women’s experiences necessarily raised by discussions of food and hunger within postcolonial literature. *Dastarkhwan* is a notable exception.

This consistent meditation on gender almost necessarily leads to another one of the collection’s major themes: nostalgia. As authors, such as Bina Shah, Farahad Zama, and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, reflect on the way food

transports one to a particular time or place, they are simultaneously reminded of the mothers, aunts, grandmothers who prepared the food of their memories. Essays and stories oscillate between desire for crystalized tradition and childhood nostalgia, as is the case in “The Homesick Restaurant,” by Nadeem Aslam, to those which emphasize the adaptability of cuisine, such as Sarvat Hasin’s “Stone Soup,” without landing on any single conclusion about the role of food in South Asian Muslim culture or writing. In their ruminations on food-infused memories, these authors join the existing dialogue perhaps first demonstrated by Salman Rushdie’s (1981) chutnification of memory in *Midnight’s Children*, which later manifested as food memories of the homeland--tortillas, menudos, and tamales-- in Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and was further theorized in food-centric monographs such as Sidney Mintz’s (1996) *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* or Anita Mannur’s *Culinary Fictions*, whose first chapter “Culinary Nostalgia” highlights women as arbiters of national consolidation of food nostalgia (2010, 30). This is to say, *Dastarkhwan* contributes to the dialogue surrounding nostalgia, a long-standing one in both postcolonial and food studies, whose multivalent contributions are relevant for scholars of either field.

Most pieces included in *Dastarkhwan* are characterized by realism. While this is to be expected in the essay section of the anthology, where the mode of writing re-

quires verisimilitude, many fictional pieces also remain firmly ensconced in realistic representations. A large portion of the stories might fall into psychological realism (Dastgir, “A Brief History of the Carrot”) or social realism, (Zahoor, “The Hairy Curry”), but there are two memorable exceptions, “Hungry Eyes,” by Sophia Khan and “The Origin of Sweetness,” by Uzma Aslam Khan. The latter depicts a young woman who begins to travel through space and time after her father, a mithai shop owner, commits suicide. In each place she travels, Zulekha encounters food, such as condensed milk, almonds, cardamom, later revealed to be ingredients of her father’s barfi recipe and, as she recreates the recipe herself, her time-traveling comes into focus as a profound connection with her lost father and her cooking both a registering of his death and ceremony in celebration of his life (Khan 2021). It is a message delivered by a slow drip of magical movement and is all the more poignant for its extra-realist genre elements. As two of the stronger fiction pieces in the collection, “Hungry Eyes” and “The Origin of Sweetness” stand a testament to what is gained not just when differing experiences are juxtaposed, but varietal genre features as well.

Dastarkhwan’s strengths lie in its refusal to accept a single notion of Muslim South Asian identity, so often codified and enshrined in food. Some essays, as in the above example of nostalgia, productively contradict one another, and recipes range from the most straightforward

imperative style to those which read as extensions of the text's body. Some recipes also establish rules that others break: where Rana Safvi's "Qissa Qorma aur Qaliya Ka (All about Qormas and Qaliyas)" mandates that a garnish of coriander leaves must be "reserved for those dishes which use turmeric as an ingredient" (2021, 13), Tabish Khair's recipe flouts the prescription, garnishing a turmeric-less broth with coriander leaves (2021, 59). Approximately equal space is given to authors from India and from Pakistan (with an additional two from Bangladesh and one from Kashmir) which promotes Chambers' goal in presenting a variety of experiences by offering a regional selection, rather than one defined by national borders. Both the selection of voices and inconsistencies among them emphasize the heterogeneity of South Asian Muslim food traditions and leave room to extrapolate outward; as *Dastarkhwan* demonstrates that South Asian Muslim food is no monolith, essentialized notions of the larger geographic and religious community are similarly undermined.

Within the exception of the collection's accompanying materials, and one essay, "Jootha," by Tabish Khair--who cites both B.R. Ambedkar and Sidney Mintz, and broaches the underrepresented topic of "jootha," an untranslatable term whose meaning is perhaps closest to leftovers-- most contributions do not explicitly enter theoretical discussions within food studies. As such, it is likely to be more useful for those interested in the selec-

tions as primary texts. In fact, almost the entirety of the pieces included in *Dastarkhwan* are previously unpublished, marking a conscious, and refreshing, break from food anthologies such as *The Table is Laid: The Oxford Anthology of South Asian Food Writing* (2007), or *A Matter of Taste: The Penguin Book of Indian Writing on Food* (2004), which tend to gather previously published, though often lesser known, works by well-known authors. Scholars of Postcolonial studies, of the Global South, and South Asian literature will take interest in themes of identity, domesticity, hunger, national identity, and questions of religious difference that pervade these newly minted pieces. If, as Tabish Khair identifies in “Jootha,” “food has become a marker of South Asian fiction” and, to an extent, “is a marker of postcolonial fiction in general,” *Dastarkhwan* should find a large audience indeed (52).

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