

1997

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Recommended Citation

Hussein, Aamer, Sweet Rice (For Yasmien Abbasi who suggested a final, vital ingredient)., *Kunapipi*, 19(3), 1997.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol19/iss3/11>

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Abstract

A few weeks after her fortieth birthday (unremembered, unsung), Shireen underwent a brief crisis and then received an unexpected gift. This is how it happened.

AAMER HUSSEIN

Sweet Rice

(For Yasmien Abbasi
who suggested a final, vital ingredient).

A few weeks after her fortieth birthday (unremembered, unsung), Shireen underwent a brief crisis and then received an unexpected gift. This is how it happened.

Jamil, her husband – one of those dedicated bankers who spent his life between his office, his associates, his business trips and his bed – announced to her one Sunday from the shallows of early morning sleep that he had important people visiting from abroad and others to whom he desperately owed a seasonal invitation. In short, she had to cater for more than a dozen guests at less than a week's notice. The dinner, Shireen grumbled silently as she lowered herself deeper into the depths of Capricornian gloom, was to be next Saturday; and she knew she would have to excel herself, for even her best was never good enough for Jamil's Libran discernment.

And so it had always been. In this impossibly difficult city of London where even a powerfully-situated husband did not guarantee a work permit or a job for a doctor with a Third World (read by the British as third class) degree and experience, her medical expertise – so many years, and so much of her widowed mother's savings spent on it – had been displaced to an ongoing culinary struggle to keep her husband tied to her table, with sundry colleagues (for deals meant more to him than domestic life) in tow.

Such was life. Take Timur – now seven, and growing away from his mother – to school; do the shopping at Safeway and Marks & Spencers on Edgware Road; go to Marylebone library for some Han Suyin books in which other Asian lands far from her own were reflected in a doctor's eyes; come home and desultorily clean up. (She'd dispensed with the idea of an au pair a while ago, for she needed something besides shopping to fill up the time that reminded her of the globe of her days which was filling up with sand, taking her further and further away from any chance of regaining her fine hospital job in Karachi. Or, indeed, of adding to her qualifications the required British degrees; Jamil had always found some excuse saying Timur was too little and medical training here expensive. And then he didn't know how long this English stay, sojourn for her and idyll for him, was going to last. If Shireen asked him for what

she called a time-table – ‘How long will we be here, when will we go back? My job isn’t going to wait forever, you know’; he’d respond, ‘Don’t be silly, you have to understand the New Economics; professionals like us don’t have front doors in one place any more.’ She didn’t know whether to be insulted at his negation of her profession, or flattered by his inclusion of her in his bracket. And now a Malaysian woman, who’d soon become more of a confidante than a cleaner, came in once a week to do what Jamil called the heavy jobs.)

Then she’d cook for Jamil and his guests as well, for this, too, she insisted upon. But lately he’d often suggest they order food from one of the fancy Pakistani lady caterers who were proliferating in London, because once she’d said in irritation that she wasn’t brought up to cook for armies when he’d sprung a dinner for six on her. And now he thought her home cooking wasn’t quite fancy enough for his guests though he thrived on it himself. But she wasn’t going to subscribe to his theory of two weights and two measures – more than good enough for him but not for outsiders – and refused even to consider food from elsewhere. This, he claimed in contradiction to his earlier protests about her elitist disdain for polite feminine values, was due to what he called her elemsee upbringing ... And once she’d seen a poster for an orchestra called LMC and wondered aloud why an orchestra would name itself Lower Middle Class until her friend Yasmien with whom she was walking down High Street Kensington shoved her in the ribs and said no, silly, that’s a typically Pakistani term, LMC stands for the London Musician’s Collective ... one did still laugh with one’s friends sometimes, usually, though, when Jamil wasn’t here. And that was more and more often. Then she’d follow her daily routine with the addition of a visit or a walk with one of her two close friends, and come home and still persist in cooking, against modern dietary prescriptions, the dishes she loved like spinach with meat or potatoes, oil-rich courgettes and aubergines, rich buttery breads and dry, fragrant pea-speckled rice tinted yellow. Since that was the role she’d been allotted by life’s scene-shifters, she’d be a housewife with all the perfectionism of her medical training. But all too often she couldn’t eat alone, and her friends were occupied with their matrimonial tasks, so she’d freeze the food for some day when it rained or snowed. Then, in her favourite armchair, late into the night, she’d read and reread the stories of Han Suyin’s life among the women of China and Malaya.

Now, this party. This time most of the expected guests would be associates or prospective clients from Asia-Pacific and the Americas. Monday today; Jamil had gone off to Brussels earlier this morning, flying from the City Airport which he found most convenient for flights to Europe (but all too often it was to the Asia-Pacific region he went, for that, he said, was where the economy was booming, and other Asians, too, should make sure of their slice of the cake). Though Shireen dreaded

his guests, with their wives who looked suspiciously at the clothes she'd had sent to her from Pakistan and snooped around her fixtures and fittings, she was determined to prepare something really special, and outdo those society hostesses whose homes he dragged her to every sixth week or so when he was here. She'd already run through her repertoire of homely fare; after all, as a medical student and then a practitioner, she'd hardly had time to acquire the skills of her family's women; some passive knowledge, some pragmatic tips and some inherited skills had so far sufficed. But now, with the frustrated and frustrating perfectionism that constantly chilled her bones, she wanted to cross the final boundary and cook one of the feasts she'd heard her grandmother describe with such chop-licking ecstasy.

Sweet rice. A delicacy remembered from the day she'd kept all her Ramzan fasts for the first time. Not the insipid sweet yellow stuff speckled with shaved nuts, but something lush and golden orange, laden with succulent pieces of chicken and ripe with the subtle and suggestive perfume of fruit. Grandmother had made it for her and named it – or so, in her eight year old's arrogance, she'd imagined – after her. Shireen pulao. Sweet rice.

Shireen's father was from Multan, but her mother's parents – as they'd loved to remind her – had come from some small town in what were now the United Provinces in Northern India. They'd settled in Lahore many years before Partition, but retained the gentle gestures, the sweet tongues and the richly aromatic cooking of another era, another land. After 1947 the landholdings which had given them a small revenue and some claim to feudal graces had vanished; and unlike many others, they'd never applied for recompense, which would have been a futile endeavour, as those who complained of properties lost were so many and there just didn't seem to be enough to go around. Her grandfather had lived all his life on his physician's earnings, and her father, too, was a doctor; simple people who'd fallen in a world that continued to respect material manifestations of heritage, but hardly elemsee as Jamil put it. That term, she thought in catty moods, suited him better; and what was worse, his family had the mentality of shopkeepers with new money. But that was the way things were these days in Pakistan ...

Enough reminiscing for now, she thought as she turned the corner from Seymour Place into York Street, which led her home. (Above her, the inverted grey tin bowl of sky.) Grandmother was no longer there, and Mother had probably long since forgotten a recipe of such absurdly luxurious pretensions. Now where could she find it? Hardly any chance of recovering it from the exercise books filled up with recipes her mother had copied out in her arthritic hand, or Shireen had painstakingly translated or transcribed – her Urdu, so fluent when she was younger, had grown almost rusty from years of disuse. (Medical textbooks in Urdu? Don't make me laugh. They're written in untranslatable

gibberish.) Then there were the volumes of Madhur Jaffrey cookbooks that Jamil had bought for her, probably as a burdensome hint – they'd been placed on a corridor shelf and proudly forgotten; though friends had told her the recipes were authentic, timesaving and good, her vanity, the vanity of a good daughter, rich in the dowry of a thousand recipes tested and proved, forbade her from turning to them. Once upstairs, in the comfortable sitting room of her flat, feet tucked up beneath her in a favourite pudgy armchair, she swallowed her lumpy, irksome pride; a pile of discarded notebooks beside her, she inspected Jaffrey's tomes as if in search of some obscure remedy in a respected encyclopaedia. But to no avail. What should she do? Her goat-like determination refused to allow her to give up.

Sweet rice. It would have been a gesture so grand, so uncharacteristically flamboyant, a celebration of her home, and above all a defiant signature (named after her, the sweet rice, the indulgent grandmother had deceitfully said, the indulged child had gullibly believed). What have I ever signed with a flourish? Shireen said to herself, do I even remember my signature? And this son of mine is his father's child, an English child, who prefers dubiously prepared hamburgers and chips fried in the greasy remains of god knows what forbidden animal to his mother's wholesome cooking, give him a fresh, sweet lassi and he asks for an artificially flavoured yoghurt ...

Then a picture teased her visual memory. She went to the hall cupboard – in use this season, as their coats and winter things were stored there – and retrieved a chest in which some ancient objects of sentimental value (don't look back and above all don't smell or sniff, it only takes you to places surrendered) were stored. She knelt there on the carpet, rummaging, foraging. A red scarf. Two saris. And the bundle of books. They tumbled out – first those novels of A. R. Khatun that had delighted her between the ages of twelve and fifteen. ('Chaste, pragmatic romances', as a Frontier Post columnist, Shahnaz Aijazuddin – who'd recently written about the creative apathy of Western-educated Pakistani women, too – had described them, in a fulsome tone that amazed her because, as a teenager, she'd finally, regretfully relegated them to a corner, submitting to the senior schoolchild's unwritten law of Westernization which decreed that anything local or ethnic, except the odd piece of mystic music, was suspect, unworthy, elemsee, while English was chic and desirable.) Then, some romances of Islam and of colonialism and the '57 uprising by Abdul Halim Sharar, whom the Urdu scholars of today considered as dated as Rider Haggard. Here, now. The classic book of recipes she'd been searching for. She'd taken the bundle of books from her grandmother's cupboard when the old lady died, aged eighty-three; a sentimental gesture, followed by the contradictory, even furtive, action of hiding them, once she'd carted them to London, under piles of gauzy unusable garments behind her husband's sports gear and

her son's array of sundry school things. A moth-eaten, mildewed book. The Urdu script was old-fashionedly pure and clear, faint now with time but still legible. On the frontispiece, under the title, the year of publication – 1911. Naimatkhana, the book was called ... the traditional larder. She had never, when she took it away, imagined she'd have use for it in these labour-saving days and even the name, weights and terms in it, as she browsed, were archaic. But after a false and disappointing start, since it wasn't included in the book's list of contents, and she couldn't locate a familiar heading, the recipe appeared. On page 89. Orange rice, the author had called it. Chicken or lamb, rice, clarified butter, onions, coriander, garlic, salt, cummin, black pepper, cloves, cardamom and sugar. And then, for the remembered fragrance (heady, like playing the circle game with your favourite boy cousin in the sun), she had to turn to recipe number 249, on page 192. A sauce of orange peel, almonds, pistachoes, cardamoms, water and – for the final, special, touch – crystallized rock sugar. All ingredients so easy to find nowadays, in this city with no cuisine of its own to boast of; which had, in its usual grudging and offhand way, taken to guzzling the delicacies of its erstwhile empire and was even developing an increasingly discerning palate for them. Little Asias of restaurants and eating places had taken over the city – the revenge of the spice islands, as she and Yasmien jokingly said when they chose places to shop and eat. The rock sugar, perhaps, would be difficult to locate – but Drummond Street, for a sturdy walker like her (she walked for hours in post-autumnal, leaf-bare Regents Park sometimes) was only a short walk away, though she hated its dinginess and its stalely spicy smells. And if not, then Harrods or Fortnum's would be sure to stock it ... In the end, she'd have gone even beyond the remembered delight to create something new, something lavish and wonderful, a festive concoction that bore her name ...

Later, though. For now she had found a companion. (Jamil always said, when he saw the increasing pile, in her usually orderly surroundings, of medical digests and newspapers, imported Heralds, Shes, and frontier Posts, free handouts, Big Issues, and mail order catalogues she saved because there was always something she wanted to read again, that Shireen would even find something to devour with her eyes on the back of a cereal pack, an airline ticket or a postage stamp. It was a joke she was sure he'd picked up from one of the American men's magazines that were his only leisure reading, or from an inflight journal, this tasteless description of the kind of passionate, indefatigable reader she was). The book would keep her engrossed, amused, transported, for hours.

When she reached the last of the recipes (homesickness sometimes is closer than anything to happiness), she still had half an hour before it was time to pick up Timur, who she'd remembered had football practice after classes today, from his school near Marble Arch. She discovered an index of recipes at the end of the book; no point now regretting that she

hadn't located it earlier, for half the fun of finding the recipe for sweet rice had been the search for it. Beyond the index was a list of books published by the same house. She realized that they were all by the author of this book, whom she's imagined as a semi-literate bourgeoisie, a turn-of-the-century housewife. Her ignorance astonished her, for this woman, Muhammadi Begum, had been the editor of the first influential Urdu journal for women, which her husband had founded in Lahore in 1898. She had written at least a dozen books in the span of just ten years. Some were guides to housekeeping and good manners, but the titles of others, with the short, pithy blurbs below, made her long for a grand library. A book for children: a young girl seeks a magic fountain, tree and bird to free her brothers from captivity; they have turned to stone. (Will Jamil, too, free his limbs one day, from their pervasive torpor?) A tale for adolescents: a poor but highly learned young girl works day and night, setting up a school for girls, using her intelligence and wits to pay for her brother's schooling and her mother's recovery from mental illness. (And here what do I do but complain?) Two novels for adults: one about the evils of forcing an educated young woman – interested in the study of medicine and the art of herbalism – to marry her incompetent, dissipated cousin, and driving her to despair and death. (And what have I done? Jamil was not my cousin, but I didn't love him, and settled for a marriage of convenience because my work didn't give me time and I was afraid and over thirty). A biography: of a role-model, an impoverished widow who'd become the principal of a vernacular girls' school in colonial Lahore, well over a century ago.

Muhammadi Begum. Who was she then, this master cook who'd stirred the ingredients of romance and realism into platters of parables that had nurtured generations of women, secluded or newly emergent from the confines of four walls and veils, adding a special prescription for those women who, almost a century later, were doctors and lawyers and opposition leaders and even prime ministers? Dead – so the prefaces written by her stepdaughter and stepdaughter-in-law told Shireen – in 1908, at the age of thirty (and I am already forty, and still alive, and have abandoned my years of useful training and service to languish and moan in a luxurious central London flat), finding time to leave behind this keepsake of herself, this cookery book, the only work for which she was remembered, by a multitude of women who continued to share her bounty (and sharing bread is the closest form of love), taken from this naimatkhana she left behind her.

Naimatkhana. Simply translated, a larder or storehouse. Literally, a house or chamber of bounty. And it was from this chamber of bounty or blessings that Shireen would draw sustenance. She would share what she had, give unstintingly, take what was offered, laid out on the dastarkhan, the fresh white banqueting tablecloth of life. All the way to Timur's school, she pondered, she brooded. Yes, the dish that bore her own

name, that she would prepare; but she'd do much more. She'd go to the India Office library and excavate, reclaim whichever of Muhammadi Begum's writings she could find; she'd spend her remaining fallow years in this foreign country recreating a forgotten time from her own past, giving back to this amazing woman – of whom no photograph existed since, as a traditional Muslim woman, she had never forsaken her purdah – her purloined history.

On her way home, holding Timur's unwilling hand in the bus (like his father, the child didn't like to walk), Shireen paid little attention to the child's customary pampered nonsense. Muhammadi Begum's husband Mumtaz Ali had encouraged her endeavours – a radical religious scholar, Mumtaz Ali was a fighter for the rights of women to choose their own destinies, to emerge into the light of education and the dignity of unveiling, to marry and to divorce whom they chose, to walk and work in the world as men's equals. Recognizing her superior talent, he had set up a press for his youthful bride, published her books, and kept them and her memory alive for many, many years after her death ... (and will Jamil think of me when I go? Or has living abroad pushed him back into some realm of the colonized, the spineless, who fear the vocal freedom of their equals and partners as the ruler fears the mocking songs of his subjects? Does this city allow freedom only to those that fill its treasuries with borrowed or stolen pounds? Who will support me if I spend years researching the life of a woman whose potent writings are probably interred, by a trick of history and idle conservation, in the mildewed and mite-infested coffers of empire?)

Shireen had decided. When she'd finally settled Timur in front of one his interminable Mario games – a special favour, on a weekday – she picked up the phone and dialled Yasmien's number. Yasmien's machine switched itself on. Resignedly, Shireen said: 'Call me when you can, it's nothing important – Well, actually, I wondered if you and your husband are free on Saturday, for dinner ...'

'My husband's not here,' Yasmien's voice interrupted her, 'and I'm free all week. Sorry about the machine. I was avoiding Tehmina, you know how long she goes on ...'

'Listen, I'm thinking of compiling a recipe book. You know, based on those recipes from our grandmothers' time? I'm thinking of calling it Sweet Rice.'

Half an hour later (or maybe two hours, for she hadn't looked at her watch when she called Yasmien, and they'd traversed a century and more in their conversation), she had a collaborator, a fellow conspirator. Yasmien knew of someone who knew a publisher in Pakistan, who may be interested in assisting Shireen in her project of writing about her new heroine's life. With the fashionable status of Asian food in Britain, they'd have no major problem in finding an outlet here for Sweet Rice. The fancy Pakistani lady caterers, once they'd wept their kohl in streams

down their faces, would throng to the spectacular launch, and afterwards claim that the recipes they'd copy originated in their mothers' kitchen. And Yasmien had suggested a subtitle, and a vital ingredient for their Bountiful Feast: there'd be lots of bright illustrations, and between the recipes, to refresh the palate like cool sweet water, they'd serve whatever stories they could uncover of the life of Muhammadi Begum, and as condiments they could recount their own experiences of living and cooking at home and in alien lands.