



Leitartikel

## Of Forgotten Foods and Gustatory Memory

Rakhshanda Jalil



Image Credit: Rakhshanda Jalil

Marcel Proust wrote an epic novel in seven parts called *In Search of Lost Time* or *Remembrance of Things Past* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*) where he dwelt on the notion of involuntary memory and how food is connected to one's past, especially one's childhood. In a passage that has made the Madeleine cakes immortal, he describes the petite cakes he remembers tasting as a child when he would visit his aunt Leonie in the small town of Combray. One day when his mother offers him the same cake, he is transported to his childhood; this is how he records his gustatory journey into the past:

'She [his mother] sent for one of those squat, plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines,' which look as though they have been moulded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell. And soon, mechanically, dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shiver ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory -- this new sensation having had the effect, which love has, of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature. Where did it come from? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it?'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Proust: *In Search of Lost Time. Vol. I: Swann's Way*. Transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. London: Vintage Books 2005, pp. 51-52.

This is an extract that merges two essays from a book by the author, Rakhshanda Jalil. The book is titled *But You Don't Look Like A Muslim* and was published by Harper Collins India in May 2019.

The purpose of this somewhat circuitous introduction is to recapture my own half-buried, half-forgotten memories of my childhood and youth triggered recently by a sip of am-ras made by my mother. One spoonful of that warm gruel of semolina, sugar and chunks of unripe mango spiked with cloves was enough to transpose me to my grandparents' home – 1 Shibli Road, Aligarh, the university town in western Uttar Pradesh– where my siblings and I used to spend the better part of two months during our annual school holidays. The days seem a blur of the blistering loo wind that sears and scorches its way through Upper India, mangoes kept in tubs of cold water and devoured by the dozen and afternoons spent gossiping amid a gaggle of female relatives who lolled about on white chandni-covered takhts in rooms redolent with the smell of wet earth wafting from water-drenched khus ki tatti. Forbidden to go out, we consumed vast amounts of kharbooze ke beej, kakdi and leechis in between raucous games of Ludo and Carom. The ladies would bestir themselves only at the time of the Asir prayer in the early evening to bathe, pray and return resplendent in their crinkled cotton dupattas trailing mini clouds of the attar of rose or sandal. In their absence, the minions would have gotten to work: spraying the aangan with water to 'settle' the dust, setting up a huge rattling 'pedestal fan' that provided a constant monotonous backdrop to the evening's proceedings (whose drone is as intertwined with my memory as the scent of damp earth emanating from the aangan), plucking handfuls of the mogra, bela and motiya flowers that grew all along the courtyard and piling them on the chowkis. Someone would fill water from the hand pump into the clay matkas, putting gleaming upturned katoras to cover the mouths from dust and flies. There being no RO water filters back then, I can't remember being any the worse for drinking ground water stored in earthenware pitchers!

By five or so, the family would gather in the verandah (or the poetic-sounding baramda as it was called). Amma, my grandmother, would hold court in her chintz gharara and white chikan kameez with a chuna-hua dupatta looped around her neck as the rest of us gathered to pay obeisance and enjoy the fruits of plenty she knew how to gather with great gustatory intuition. Looking back, I marvel at the native wisdom of the women of her generation who knew, instinctively, how best to use fresh, seasonal produce. Every morning, shortly after breakfast, she would open her ledger to write down the accounts, proceed to the pantry to portion out the provisions, then send someone to the local market to fetch whatever fruits and vegetables that were in season. This would be supplemented by what grew in her own garden – guavas would be turned into marmalade, lime into copious amounts of squash, unripe mangoes into chutney and murabba, and the gummy lasaunda (aka labheda) into a deliciously vinegary

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pickle. Early lessons in gastronomic improvisations were given when we, as children, played a rustic version of ‘house-house’ called hund-culiya. Boys and girls were encouraged to cook rice, dal or vegetables in tiny earthen pots and shown how two bricks and a fistful of dry twigs could be turned into a cooking stove, and chipped enamel plates and a bunch of gloriously mismatched spoons could be perfectly acceptable kitchenware.

However, looking back, those summer evenings of extended bingeing must have required long hours of preparation. In an age innocent of the tetra pack when everything was cut, chopped, pound, prepared afresh, when ice was bought in large slabs from the bazaar and stored on a bed of sawdust, when fruits were not peeled but washed in ‘pinkie’ (a solution of potassium permanganate), when the ladies of the house chose ingredients known for their thandi taseer or cooling properties, when ice-creams were hand-churned in a labour-intensive bucket-with-a-handle contraption that clanked and groaned with every crank, I marvel at the industry and ingenuity of our culinary traditions. Coming back to the evening repast, first, a sherbet would be brought in. Usually made of phalsa, a tart-sweetish purple berry that seems to have disappeared from urban India, it came spiked with rock salt and crushed ice. Some days there would be the glutinous bel ka sherbet made from wood apples that grew plentifully on the trees in this part of the country, but that was a strictly acquired taste for city-dwellers like us – as was sattu, a home-made concoction of coarsely ground pulses and cereals that for all its high-fibre goodness tended to be thick and gruelly and instead of sliding smoothly down one’s throat needed a fair bit of gulping and gagging. The sherbet would be followed by an array of goodies: kharbooze ka falooda (melon halves with the insides scooped out and the fleshy part mixed with crushed ice and a dash of ground cinnamon and sugar); chane ki dal ki kabooli (soaked and parboiled dal mixed with finely chopped onion, tomato, green chilli, coriander, salt and ground roasted cumin); dahi ki phulkiyan (small gram flour dumplings dunked in whipped curd, seasoned with crushed garlic, roasted cumin, red chilli powder and salt); and tiny aloo ke samosa (potato-filled samosas) eaten with chutney made from mint leaves and raw mango. Of course, there would be tea to follow but who cared for that in the heat?

As the younger children played energetic games of hide and seek and I Spy (always called ‘Ice-pice’), the older ones would be put to task: either cleaning out the paan-daan, rinsing out the muslin cloth for keeping the paan damp, occasionally even cutting the betel nut with the sarota at great risk of having a finger or two chopped off. The more industrious ones strung the bela, champa, mogra flowers into tiny garlands which would then be wound around the matkas. My memo-

ry of those summer evenings is redolent with the tremulous smell of these summer flowers. And of drinking water in silver katoras, water that smelt faintly of bela flowers, the same bela flowers that my mother wore braided in her hair and studded in her ear lobes like ornaments.

How distant that world seems now yet how real, still, in my memories!

This gustatory journey into my past would be incomplete without recalling my father and his great love for food, especially food cooked the right way and eaten in the correct manner. A doctor by profession, a practising Muslim who fasted during Ramzan and relished the special foods made in Muslim households during Ramzan, my memories of this holy month of fasting are intermingled with my memories of Abbu, my father.

My earliest memories of Ramzan are of Abbu, sitting at the dining table making kachalu. The odd part was that he began to assemble this rather simple dish in the late afternoon, in fact a couple of hours before iftaar (the end of fast at dusk). I guessed that is when he was most hungry and he chose to while the time doing mundane chores like peeling, coring, chopping. His version of the kachalu usually comprised: guavas, apples, bananas, oranges and grapes, though others have been known to add a dash of pomegranates for extra colour or a handful of chiku for extra sweetness. Once done, he would cover the bowl and let it sit on the table. Years later, I figured that the kachalu tastes much better if made ahead because the fruit soaks in the lemon juice, pepper, sugar and rock salt that is sprinkled on top of the cut fruit. The whole thing does become a bit pulpy, but since the kachalu is essentially different from its western cousin, the fruit salad, which relies on the crispy crunchiness of the diced fruit for effect, the mushiness is quite all right – you might even say, it is kosher.

Abbu has been gone for over 15 years. The rhythm of my mother's household faltered for the first few years but such is the inevitability of Time that some things soon fall back into place. Now my mother makes the kachalu, perhaps with less diligence (and I might add, using ordinary table salt instead of the rock salt that gave Abbu's version its unique pungency), but with unfailing regularity. Her flock is scattered in different cities but her home is still redolent with the fragrance of iftaari. She still sends tray loads of goodies to the local mosque and on any given day, when I walk into her home at iftaar time, I can still find a combination of the following on her table: pyaaz aur aloo ke pakode, chane ki daal, hari matar ki ghugni, dahi ki phulki, sonth ki chutney, chhole and/or qeeme ke samose!

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The holy month of Ramzan, as many would know, is a period of fasting and prayer, charity and piety, retreat and abstinence. Lasting one lunar month (roughly 29 or 30 days), it culminates with the festival of Eid. The faithful fast during daylight hours, abstaining from both food and water, and eat one meal before dawn known as sehri, and another upon sunset, known as iftaar. I try and keep as many rozas (fasts) as I can – time, weather and circumstance usually dictate the number of rozas I manage to keep during any given Ramzan; however, much though I have tried, I cannot match the culinary spread of my parents' home in my own at iftaar time. Nor have I always, I must confess, managed to send tray loads of home-cooked savouries to the nearest mosque, it being customary to feed the needy and the wayfarer during Ramzan; sending money, instead, seems simpler, even pragmatic.

Pragmatism aside, I am reminded of the years gone past when my siblings and I were still at home and my parent's nest was full. Ramzan then had seemed to us an extended period of fasting and feasting. I remember how the rhythm of the household changed; the kitchen slept through breakfast and lunch and geared up to provide iftaar and dinner, followed in quick succession by sehri. With different members of the household having different preferences for sehri, the table ended up looking like a buffet with something for everyone's taste. Some preferred to have the usual roti, subzi, ande aloo – foods with fibre that stay in the stomach for longer and provide sustenance all through the day. Hapshi Halwa – the political incorrectness of its name notwithstanding, considering its literal meaning is 'Negro sweet', is a richer version of Turkish Delight made with cornflour, nuts, sugar and ghee was also eaten for the same reason – being 'heavy' it stayed in the stomach longer and provided heat. A traditional sehri favourite used to be the sweet syrupy doodles known as jalebis left to soak overnight in milk, or pheni, an extremely fine version of vermicelli bought ready-made in what looked like monstrously large birds' nests, and were, like jalebis, dunked in warm milk. Others, who were squeamish about eating a large meal at that time of the night, usually ate toast, eggs or fruit. The smokers took care to have several quick ones and the tea and coffee drinkers similarly tanked up for the day! There was always some member of the household who invariably overslept and despite repeated reminders and incessantly-ringing alarms, invariably straggled in when everyone was nearly done causing a flurry of last-minute gobblings and gulplings accompanied with frantic glances at the wall clock because sehri timings were listed in an almanac and even a minute past the prescribed time was not permissible..

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As the night sky lightened and the proverbial white thread held out

against the sky would begin to show up heralding the end of sehri, some would snuggle back into bed, others stay awake praying or reading till it was time to go our separate ways. My mother, a librarian, would be the first to leave the house. Abbu, a doctor, would head for his clinic, and the four of us to our respective offices/universities/schools. By the evening we would rally around the long dining table waiting to open the fast (not break it!) with a date, followed by a sip of water and then gorge on a wide variety of snacks. Abbu, however, would prefer to eat just a little, go off to say the maghrib namaaz (the prayer offered just after sunset) and then return to concentrate on his dinner. The idea behind the iftaar foods, he believed, was merely to tickle the palate not fill the stomach with heavy foods. For the rest of us, iftaar was serious snack time, with dinner following an hour or so later. The spread usually included some, if not all of the following:

- Pyaaz aur aloo ke pakode: fritters made with onion and lightly boiled potatoes cut in rings and coated in a spicy gram flour paste; green ones with chopped spinach; or with whole green chillies or other seasonal vegetables encased in a spicy batter of gram flour.
- Kachalu: a pungent sweet and sour fruit salad
- Chane ki daal: a light salad of boiled chana dal (split Bengal gram/lentil) which, oddly enough, no one ever thinks of making at any time other than Ramzan;
- Ghughni: sautéed or steamed green peas, seasoned with crushed pepper corns and green chillies
- Dahi ki phulki: gramflour dumplings in beaten curd redolent with crushed garlic and roasted cumin seeds
- Chhole: boiled chick peas seasoned with garam masala and generously studded with chopped tomatoes and onion
- Kaleji: tongue-tickling bite-sized pieces of liver in a methi-flavoured thick sauce
- Qeeme ke samose: mince stuffed in samosas
- Sonth ki chutney: a tart concoction of tamarind, jaggery, chilly flakes, dried ginger. Usually thin and runny with sliced bananas floating on top, it is eaten as an accompaniment with most of the above
- Gallons of good, strong tea!!!

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Dinner, in my parent's home, was a serious business during Ramzan.

It had combinations of the following: shaami/seekh/galauti kababs, aloo-gosht, matar-qeema followed by phirni or some other equally substantial sweet. Another family favourite that made an appearance during Ramzan was shahi tukde (literally, ‘royal pieces’!) – a rather elegant way of presenting stale bread by frying up the slices, dipping them in a strong sweet syrup, then pouring cream (Milkmaid more often than not!!!) and topping the whole with strands of saffron and chopped nuts. A particular dinnertime favourite used to be nihari – a rich fragrant, flavoursome, full-bodied meat-on-the-bone curry cooked overnight over a slow fire. This was invariably sent over by some neighbour, friend or relative who ‘specialised’ in making this labour-intensive dish. The meat would melt during the slow cooking and dissolve and the marrow in the bones made the curry thick and gelatinous. This was “soul food” at its best and strictly not for the queasy or the weight watchers. Other winter favourites eaten during Ramzan for their heat-giving properties used to be paaye (trotters), chuqandar gosht (beetroot chunks cooked with beef or mutton in a rich ruby-red curry) or shab degh (literally meaning the ‘night dish’ though it comprised thick rounds of turnip cooked with meat).

But, for a truly memorable iftaar dinner there was nothing to compare with the divine haleem – a meal in itself – made by cooking together pound barley, oats and de-husked wheat kernels, rice, pulses and meat garnished with ginger juliennes, slivers of browned onions, chopped coriander, piping hot ghee. It had to be eaten with lots and lots of green chilly to make you go up in smoke and a small side dish of plain yoghurt to put out the fire. Incidentally, haleem was also an epicure’s delight and a one-dish wonder at special haleem parties. Ironically, it means ‘modest’ or ‘frugal’ in Arabic. There are many apocryphal stories surrounding the haleem and every family has its own closely-guarded version of how best to cook and, equally important, serve it. The one story that most seem to agree about is the one about its origins: that it was a camp dish, comprising whatever scraps of meat and lentils were at hand for the small embattled group fighting the epic Battle of Karbala in 679 AD. On the days that haleem or khichda, as it is also called (somewhat inelegantly one might say) in some parts of Upper India, would be made in our home, the Fasting Faithful could ask for no more.

Now, in my own home, when I gulp some tepid soya milk for sehri and rustle a sandwich or tear open a packet of chips or biscuits at iftaar time or air fry some frozen McCains, I am reminded of the old days that were good to the Fasting Faithfuls.

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