

MUSHTAQ AHMAD YUSUFI

## A Fine Madness\*

IT IS INDEED an auspicious day when a new cook enters the house and even more auspicious is the day on which he quits. Since such auspicious days which try our palate with a bitter pill come and go many times during a year, so, as the poet says, one can heave a sigh of relief on two occasions alone: “Before your coming and then after your going.”<sup>1</sup>

It is commonly felt that it is educated begums alone who excel at the art of cooking ill-tasting food. But I can prove statistically that professional cooks are second to none in this art. The fact of the matter is that in our society everybody imagines themselves to be good at laughing and eating. This is precisely why these arts have not made any progress during the last hundred years. I complained to my friend Mirzā ‘Abdu’l-Vadūd one day that these cooks who could prepare seventy kinds of pilaf are gradually becoming extinct as a class. He said something exactly the opposite.

He said, “It is not the cooks or their likes that are disappearing, what is disappearing is the class which relished those seventy kinds of pilaf, who employed cooks and butlers who would eat a homey food like lentils in a dinner jacket. Now, the members of this tradition-loving class would rather take a second wife than employ a cook. Even the lowest category of cook demands to be fed, clothed and given a salary, whereas a wedded wife agrees merely on terms of food and clothing. In fact, most wives even bring cooking pots and pans and dinner sets along.”

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\*“Junūn-e Laīfa,” from the author’s, *Āirāg Talē* (Karachi: Jāvēd Press, 1976), 89–103.

<sup>1</sup>Contextual parody is among Yūsufi’s favorite methods for creating humor; in other words, the deployment, in comic contexts, of well-known lines of poetry, mainly from ghazals, with heavy romantic or lyrical content.

Mirzā often says that it is easy to manage your own work but extremely hard to get other people to work. In exactly the same way, it does not require much expertise to die oneself, but to persuade others to die is very hard. This is just the difference between an ordinary soldier and a general. Call it my harshness as employer or plain incompetence or whatever else, but no cook lasts with me beyond a week. It has even so happened that the dish may have been put on the stove by Shabrātī but sautéed by Ramzānī and finally served by Bulāqī Khān. It is possible that the above-mentioned gentlemen may say in their defense: “Loyal we may not be, but you too are heartless.”

Therefore, I’ll refrain from giving the details; though I feel tempted to describe the dismay that I feel, in addition to other problems, when I’m asked to do the arithmetic of a servant’s pay for nine hours without board if he has been contracted at a pay of thirty rupees with board for thirty-one days. On such critical occasions I have often put forward this sound suggestion, with a view to simplifying the question, that he ought to be fed in the first place. But firstly, he would not concede to this plan by any means. Secondly, it is still an hour and a quarter before the food would actually be ready and you too would probably agree in principle that calculating the wages for a nine-hour period is, in any case, simpler than doing so for a ten and a quarter hour period.

I neither desire praise, nor seek justice—partly for fear that the one I look up to for appreciation may turn out to be even more badly bruised by the sword of maltreatment than me, and partly for the fear that: “It was I who turned out to be guilty of the crime for which I had blamed them.”

At present, my purpose is to introduce you to those cooks whom I have had the honor to serve in the past. If you should find a trace of bitterness in my narration, please attribute it to the bitterness of my tongue and forgive the poor cooks.

One has to learn from Mirzā ‘Abdu’l-Vadūd Bēg the artful ways of affirming the promise of loyalty and making a cook one’s perpetual slave. Mirzā, in any case, has a countenance which spontaneously inspires anyone and everyone to preach to him. But one day I discovered his long-time cook talking to him in an extremely familiar manner. I was quite amazed since, amongst well-bred people, such a manner is permissible only with one’s best friends. One always talks to illiterate individuals in ponderous tones. When I drew Mirzā’s attention to this, he replied, “I have deliberately made him impudent and insolent so that he cannot survive in any other home but mine.”

A few days ago a junior high school failed cook appeared looking for employment and at once asked me my name and profession. Then he asked for the addresses of all my former cooks; also, why did the last one quit his job? As we were talking, he tried to get me to tell him how many times a week I dined out, as well as the impact the sound of crashing china in the kitchen had on my nerves and temper. Another of his conditions was that if I went to the hills during the summer holidays I would have to furnish him with a substitute master.

After a lot of discussion, I began to get the feeling that he was searching for the same qualities in me that I was searching for in him. After we had finished with this blindman's bluff and it was time to discuss his work hours, I said that, in principle, I liked hardworking persons and that Begum Sahiba herself is busy at household chores from five o'clock in the morning till ten in the evening. He said, "Sir, let's not talk about her, she is the mistress of the house, whereas I am a mere servant!" He also made clear, along with all this, that he would not scrub dishes, sweep the floor, or clear the ashtray. He would not lay the table nor would he pour water for guests to wash their hands. "What will you do then?" I asked in bewilderment. "This is for you to say. You have to get me to work. I will obey your orders."

When everything had been decided according to the will and requirement (requirement mine and will his), I hesitantly told him that there wasn't anyone at home to shop for groceries except him. So, for now, he would have to do it for a few days. He should fix his salary accordingly. To which he replied, "Sir! Don't worry about the pay. I'm an educated man, I'll be happy enough with less wages."

"So?"

He said, "I'll take seventy-five rupees a month, but if I have to shop for groceries, it can be forty rupees!"

After him we got a trained cook, but he seemed extremely stuck up. In order to bring him down a peg or two, I asked, "Can you cook Mughlai and English food?"

"I can cook all kind of foods. To which region does His Honor belong?"

I told him the truth. He could not contain his elation. "I have also spent a year there. The millet khichri from those parts is known far and wide."

I did not have the nerve to stand further questioning. He therefore appointed himself to our house. The next day he revealed while making the pudding that he had been the dutiful servant of English gentlemen for

a full twelve years and therefore would not cook sitting on his haunches like Indians. I had no option but to provide him with a stove on which he could cook while standing.

The cook who followed him announced that he would make chapatis while sitting on the floor only on a sawdust stove. I got an iron stove made accordingly. For the third one, I got a stove made of clay. I bought a kerosene stove on the demand of the fourth. And the fifth cook ran away at the sight of so many stoves.

I can't recall that wonderful fellow's name, though I still remember his face and how he looked in general. From day one on the job, I noticed that he would not eat the food he cooked himself, but would religiously sit on his haunches in the Malabari Hotel and eat two paise's worth of spicy lentils and one anna's worth of tandoori roti. Finally, when I could restrain myself no longer, I asked him a little sternly, "Why don't you eat the food cooked at home?" He replied peevishly, "Sir, I have sold my hands, not my palate!" He made it clear in short, and in no uncertain terms, that if he was forced to eat the food that he himself cooked, he would resign immediately. Furthermore, his manner made me wonder whether he was really a bad cook. Ultimately, I arrived at the logical conclusion that in Hell sinful women would be made to eat their own cooking. By the same token, the guardians of Hell, armed with fiery maces, would strike executives of radio stations and make them listen to recordings of the programs they had aired.

I have a taste for food, but I'm not hungry for flattery (though I won't deny that on hearing praises of myself my vest begins to feel tight). I have never expected that the cook should sing my praises rather than cook the food, but this does not mean that he should sing hymns of praise to his departed and erstwhile employers—especially when this eulogy is meant to make me feel jealous and conscious of the absence of those very qualities in me. Often I get an overwhelming desire to also be a dear departed so that my stories would be told so lovingly as well. Some very competent cooks had to be removed from service simply because of my foresight that in the future they would eat another's salt yet carry out propaganda on my behalf. Whosoever comes by searching for a cook's job claims that his previous employer had put him fully in charge of everything (it would not be out of place to mention here that, in principle, I too trust others at all times, but also believe in counting the change). One cook informed me that his previous boss was so decent a fellow that he did not even know how to swear. I retorted, "Well then, why did you leave him?" He responded passionately, "Who says that Khudā Baksh quit his job? Well,

the truth of the matter is that my salary has been overdue for five months now. And why should I hide anything from you? The truth is that I was managing their household expenses only by selling off their old newspapers and empty beer bottles. He never asked me for the accounts. Then one day, looking at me, he said, 'Khudā Baksh! You really appear tired. Take a couple of days off and get some rest.' When I returned two days later having rested up, I found an empty house. The neighbor told me that my boss had packed all his belongings and left the day before yesterday himself."

After narrating this tale, that faithful creature asked me for his salary in advance so that he could go and pay the rent of his previous master's house.

Last year, taking pity, one of my kind friends sent me an experienced cook specializing in the cuisines of all the different regions of the country. I said, "OK, everything else is fine, but please tell me why you left ten jobs within the space of seven months?"

He replied calmly, "Sir, where does one get a loyal master nowadays?" The activities of this inventor of cruelties resulted in the appearance of the novel dishes of every state, or rather every district of the Subcontinent on the table of this poor naïve, long-suffering soul. For instance, at lunchtime I saw baby mangoes floating up and down in a watery sauce, and the sauce itself was so tangy and tart that if one's eyes were open they would close, and if they were closed, they would pop open. When I asked him about it, he informed me the nobility in the Deccan relished sour dishes. God knows what the common folk eat?—I wonder.

In the evening I asked, worried, why the lentils seemed to smell of old shoes? He gave a fiery speech on the subject, the sum and substance of which was that the secret behind the prosperity, physical well-being and expansion of the Marwari seths is to be found in asafetida.

And the next day, when I inquired, "For God's sake is it a chapati or a tablecloth?" he laughed and said, "In my beloved country this is the very shape and dimension of rotis."

After many days of going hungry, I said by way of encouragement, "You have made a very good pickle of the rice today."

Lighting his biri against a hot griddle, he observed, "Your kindness sir! They put *qorma*<sup>2</sup> spices in the Kathiawari pilaf!"

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<sup>2</sup>A highly spiced and flavorful meat curry whose sauce may be thin or thick depending on the recipe.

“Great, but this does not taste like *qorma*.”

“They put pickle spice in *qorma* there.”

Then one day, over dinner, my friend Mirzā screwed up his nose and said, “Man! Have you sautéed the kheer with bedbugs?”

Scribbling accounts on the white wall with a piece of coal, he sneered, “Don’t you know? The Nawabs of Awadh preferred kheer which was burned at the bottom?”

“But don’t you know what happened to the Awadh Kingdom in the end?”

In short, for a month and a half, morning and evening, our “raw” taste and palate was subjected to refinement as the cook continued to spread the message of taste and a lesson in multiculturalism through an assortment of drinks and eatables. Towards the end, Mirzā started to suspect that the cook was a foreign agent who was trying to spread regional misunderstanding by means of food.

If you are especially fond of a particular dish which you can’t give up eating, the newcomers to the table of cooking will immediately solve your problem. The liberty which our cooks have to experiment with edible things and with the human digestive system has frequently led to discoveries in chemistry. To give you an example, I am very fond of okra, but it was revealed to me about ten hours ago that if fresh okra is cooked on a slow fire in a specified quantity of water which has been brought to a certain temperature (both known only to my cook), it can produce a gooey mixture that can be used in offices to seal the mouths of envelopes and uncontrollable officers forever.

Last Thursday the same gentleman had the whole house in a noisy tumult. I sent the maid over to say that there were visitors and he need not pound on the grinding slab for the moment. He replied that, actually, he was grinding minced meat on that slab to make kebabs for those very guests. After some time, when I took a bite of the kebab, I felt as if I was eating spiced sandpaper, quite envious of Mīr Ṣāḥīb who was busy relishing the kebabs with his false teeth instead of fretting and fuming like me at the grittiness of the food. Everybody came down with dysentery by morning except for me. And that was because I was already suffering from it.

Not that, God forbid, I’m scared of illness or death. I belong to the old order and, therefore, it is the new lifestyle that truly frightens me. Death is the Truth and is bound to come one day for sure. The only problem is that, in order to summon death, I don’t want to spend fifty or sixty rupees per month out of my hard-earned money. I would not mind at all being

killed off by an incompetent hakim. But by no means am I prepared to allow some cook to extract the life out of me in installments, as I think that this is the sole prerogative of only hakims and doctors.

Since illness is now the theme, let me tell you the case of that heavily built cook who was called Ağā by us all (this is because he really was a Kabulī Ağā). The very thought of him sets the stomach ablaze with fireworks. Till the moment he left, his manner of cooking and serving food was the same as the manner he used for selling *asafetida*<sup>3</sup>—meaning, he would make you acknowledge its benefits by all kinds of threats. Normally he would wake up in the morning well past breakfast time. For a few days, I tried to wake him up early, but when he started fisticuffs under the pretence of sleep, I gave up the thought of reforming him. Other than this, he was, by nature, quite obedient. By obedient I mean that oftentimes he would ask, “Want tea?” and I would reply formally, “Yes, if you wish, otherwise not.” Then he would actually get the tea at times, or he might not. The day he took over the kitchen the house began witnessing the constant coming and going of hakims and doctors. In any case, one felt like beating (one’s own) head on seeing the food he cooked. “One’s own” because, though all of us were fed up with his cooking, nobody could figure out a way to send him off in a peaceful manner. Employing him proved to be like riding a tiger.

One day, when I was lying in bed baffled, nursing my aching stomach with a hot water bottle and cursing him with every dose of medicine that I took, he came with bowed head and, contrary to his usual manner, folded his hands and said in his Pashto accented Urdu, “Sir, you fall ill repeatedly. I have earned a bad name amongst my people and this is killing me.” Then he begged forgiveness for all that he had said or done and left without collecting his pay.

Let me tell you about another such dinner party to which some friends and highly-placed officers were invited. The curry prepared by the new cook was so watery that if one held one’s nose and dived into it, one might have found a piece of mutton or such. Even if one odd piece became visible it was like: “Neither concealing well nor revealing well.”

But this was still better because, after reaching a guest’s mouth, the situation, as Ġālīb has it, became something like: “It stretches itself as much as you pull.”

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<sup>3</sup>Traditionally up until the 1950s, the Pathans from Afghanistan were journey-men hawkers of *asafetida* and dried fruits.

During the meal the guests advised in full seriousness, “Buy a refrigerator. You will rid yourself of the daily bickering. Have delicious food cooked just one day and comfortably enjoy it yourself, as well as feed others, the rest of the week.”

After buying the refrigerator on installments, I did indeed experience a great difference. And the difference was that the tasteless food that I ate for a single meal before, I was obliged to eat for the whole week now.

When I complained about this perpetual torture, the same friends preached, “Be patient when you have spent money, for this is the way it is.”

When I complained about my multifarious problems to Mirzā he said, “You have created these difficulties yourself because of your gluttony, otherwise long ago simple living and high thinking would have solved this problem. This is what the law of nature is and also the foundation of a free society! Have you not read that chaste verse from Ismā‘īl Mēra hī:<sup>4</sup> “The dry crust earned in freedom / Is better than the pudding earned by fear and debasement.”

I submitted, “I do not object to anybody’s freedom, even if it means poetic freedom. But the objection that I have long held against this verse is that it praises the dry crust more than freedom. High quality food might possibly not give birth to a superior culture, but a superior culture can never tolerate poor quality food.”

He commanded, “What do you mean by tolerance! Not getting a bad taste in the mouth after eating badly-cooked food is the very mark of good birth.” I submitted, “Real manliness is to eat high quality food for a lifetime and still not lose the mantel of decency.” He flared up, “Oh! OK, but what decency is it that one should talk of food all the time. Don’t get me wrong, but some of your essays read like the family recipe book of a royal chef who has lost his beans. No wonder semiliterate women read them with such zeal.”

I interrupted, “You forget that cooking is regarded as one of the fine arts in France.”

He lost his cool, “But you, you’ve given it the status of a fine madness. If you are really concerned about the reform of our innocent community, then talk of something worthwhile and show us the ways and means of progress.”

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<sup>4</sup>Maulvī Ismā‘īl Mēra hī (1848–1931) was a nineteenth-century poet well known for his didactic verse for children.

Just to savor his discomfiture, I said, “Once a community is captivated by elegant dress and fine food, the road to progress will become evident on its own. Mahatma Gandhi used to say that in a country where millions of people can’t afford two square meals, even God couldn’t dare to appear in any other shape than that of the Provider. For the hungry, food is God’s avatar and ...”

Without apologizing for interrupting me, he said, “But Gandhi’s diet consisted of goat’s milk and dates, and you’re mistaking the art of culinary consciousness for the philosophy of God consciousness. Even your favorite Greek philosopher who believed in living life to the full felt with his mind and thought with his heart. But you think with your stomach. If one gives it some thought, one could see that you are giving the same advice today which Marie Antoinette gave a long time ago. When a courtier submitted to her that thousands of people were dying on the streets of Paris for want of bread, she enquired in amazement, “Why don’t the fools eat cake?” □

—*Translated by Baran Rehman*