

Food imagery in the reluctant fundamentalist



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Mohsin Hamid's *Reluctant Fundamentalist* explores the life of Changez in the United States as a young Pakistani man. Throughout the novel, the author switches between two distinctive cultural settings: the United States 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, Hamid shows the different views cultures have on alcohol and during which occasions it is used.

Even though Changez may seem like a character with strong religious morals, he is not. While talking to Erica, he mentioned that "alcohol was illegal for Muslims to buy and so [he] had a Christian bootlegger" (27) deliver alcohol to his house. Changez's relationship with alcohol does not stop there, since he "[polished] off a third of a bottle of whiskey before [he] was able to fall asleep" (100) after watching television and feeling down. Additionally, this was not a usual nor regular occurrence for Changez as he has received the news that Americans were invading Afghanistan, which infuriated him. The use of alcohol in the Pakistani culture is used in a secretive way, yet in Changez's case it is used as a method to relieve stress or fall asleep. The author highlights the fact that Changez's morals and loyalties are not straight as a Muslim man, which could also influence the way his character is perceived. Contrarily from the Pakistani population, Americans use alcohol as a form of celebration or in a special event. When Changez went to have dinner with Erica and her parents, the father's first suggestion was to ask if Changez drank as "he lifted a bottle of red wine" (53). On the other hand, Erica's mother replied "He's twenty-two (...)" in a tone that suggested, so of

course he drinks” (53). Since Erica’s father thought that none of the Pakistanis drink, both of the parents’ replies were stereotypical assumptions towards Changez and his culture. One thinking that as a twenty-two year old, it is obvious that he will drink since it is passed legal age in the United States. The other parent saying that since he once had a Pakistani working for him who did not drink, then all Pakistani men were non-drinkers. Although something that Erica’s parents may not have known is that “ many Pakistanis drink; alcohol’s illegality in [Pakistan] has roughly the same effect as marijuana in [America]” (53). Hamid suggests that not knowing cultural background, it could lead to assumptions and misunderstandings, which happened in this case with Changez and Erica’s father. This leads to how the author uses alcohol to represent different cultural values throughout the story: Changez, a representation of Pakistani men, does not have his morals straight with alcohol as Americans do, who drink as a form of enjoyment.

The author, during many occasions in the novel, makes use of food imagery to connote the different ways food is valued and shared in both backgrounds. The Pakistani culture is shown to have authentic food and have people to have pride in it, too. Changez explained to the American the significant role food played in his hometown, and generally in Pakistan. Changez mentioned how “[the American] must not pass such an authentic introduction to Lahori cuisine” since it was a “ purely carnivorous feast” (101). The author illustrates that “ Pakistanis tend to take an inordinate pride in [their] food” (101) which shows the value of food in that culture. The traditional meals such as “ kebab of mutton, the tikka of chicken, the stewed foot of goat...” (101) express the value that Pakistanis have for their meals. On the other

hand, although not quite as sophisticated, Changez recalls him sharing “tea and cucumber sandwiches” (59) with his family in the foothills of the Himalayas. This emphasizes the idea of the value of sharing food with those close to you, since it is a precious gift. However, in the United States, sharing meals and food is not viewed as a value, but more as a common thing to do. For Changez, the fact that Erica “spread jam on a croissant, gave half to [him]” (19) seemed quite normal, since he got used to the American culture. Erica seamlessly shared her croissant with him, which exemplifies that it is something she does without thinking, and is not viewed as a ‘value’ but more as a norm. A gesture as small as sharing a sandwich or croissant has different meaning behind it in different cultures. Hamid shows the importance and value of sharing food in the Pakistani culture since they pride their food as opposed to the Americans, who share theirs without having second thoughts.

Furthermore, Hamid uses the quality of the food to express the value of it between the two distinctive cultures in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The Pakistani culture does not value the appearance of the food, but more the inner quality and what it brings to a person. The author evokes this through Changez, who has experienced both the luxury and simplicity of food in different cultural areas. At Erica’s house one night, he “ate only bread and drank only water, a tasteless meal” (107) that eventually kept him full. Even though his family was said to be wealthy, he enjoyed “tea and cucumber sandwiches” (59) with them although it was not a lavish meal. In contrast, Hamid makes the American culture value the sophistication of their food more than its quality. Changez described how “the setting was superb, the

wine was delicious, the burgers were succulent” (54) in the home of Erica’s parents. Changez describes the settings and food in a particularly formal way, which demonstrates how sophisticated the food is to Americans. Erica and Changez have also experienced a quite fancy picnic with “ wine, fresh-baked bread, sliced meats, several difference cheeses and grapes – a delicious (...) and a rather sophisticated assortment” (58). 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.

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.