
Unspeakable Hunger

Author(s): Kamila Shamsie

Source: *The Massachusetts Review*, Spring, 1998, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Spring, 1998), pp. 21-32

Published by: The Massachusetts Review, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25091393>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Massachusetts Review*

JSTOR

Kamila Shamsie

Unspeakable Hunger

DURING ALL THE YEARS MY AUNT, Mariam, lived with us she only spoke to order meals.

I should explain—she wasn't exactly my aunt, nor related from my mother's side, though I always called her "Khalala." Cousin, I believe, would be more accurate a term. Her grandfather and my grandfather were first cousins, but while my grandfather was at Oxford, studying how to be an Englishman and do well in the world, her grandfather decided to protest the British colonial presence in the subcontinent. He did this by leaving home without warning and nearly giving his mother a heart-attack.

Two weeks after his disappearance he wrote from someplace with an indistinct postal stamp to say that he was in the employ of an English army officer, as a valet. This act showed, he wrote, that he had accepted his historical role, and the only real difference between him and all his relatives who were Civil Servants or businessmen in English-run companies was that he was required to wear a grander uniform. The family would not hear from him again because he was repudiating English and—alas!—his tutors had never seen fit to teach him how to write in Urdu.

This letter was passed around the family, who returned the unanimous verdict: he's lying. I'm still not sure if this conviction arose from a knowledge of my great-uncle's character, or a mere unwillingness to accept that a scion of such an old feudal family would demean himself so far as to become a valet.

This was all before my father was born. He grew up in Pakistan thinking of his uncle as a family legend; one whom he mentally put alongside the ancestor who had committed suicide by swallowing one of the largest diamonds in the world, and his grandson, the one-armed an-

cestor who killed a tiger with his bare hand (the tiger-skin hung in the library of the family home in India as proof).

So it was something of a surprise, to say the least, for my father to receive a letter informing him of his uncle's death, and asking him to please do his family duty and look after his niece Mariam (his uncle's orphaned grand-daughter) who would be arriving at his house shortly. At the bottom of the page was an official-looking signature. That is, an indecipherable scrawl.

Hollywood-style, he had just finished reading the letter out to my mother when the gate-bell rang. My parents gaped at each other, assured themselves no, it must be coincidence, probably the milkman with the monthly bill. But then Masood entered the room to say a begum sahib is here . . . she is waiting in the drawing room . . . she did not give her name, but she's brought two suitcases.

"Well," my mother said, "if she comes up to the servants' snobbish standards sufficiently to be seated in the drawing room she clearly isn't a valet's daughter. Even my cousin Shehla only made it to the TV room, and she likes to think of herself as a princess!"

I have so often imagined that first meeting between my parents and Mariam Khala that I sometimes feel I must have been there. I was, but only in a foetal way. My parents entered the drawing room, pausing in the hallway outside only long enough to see that the suitcases were of a fine quality.

Mariam Khala stood up as they entered, quite self-assured, as though she were the gracious host, they the needy relatives. She was wearing her blue chiffon sari, three gold bracelets on her left arm, a gold chain with a diamond-studded pendent in the shape of an Arabic "Allah" around her neck. Her black hair, parted to one side, fell halfway down her back and swayed ever so slightly, though she was standing still.

"Oh, er . . . hello," my father said.

Mariam Khala just smiled that exquisite smile of hers that caused roses to burst into bloom, and my mother rushed

Unspeakable Hunger

across the room to hug her. It is always possible to measure my mother's reaction to a person by multiplying the time, in seconds, that she speaks for without pause, by the number of words she utters in that time. The greater the result, the greater her affinity for the person. When she met Mariam Khala she went into seven digits. So my father says, and he's always been good at calculations. At any rate, the warmth of my mother's reaction to Mariam Khala's smile was so overwhelming that nearly ten minutes went by before my father realized that Mariam Khala hadn't said a word.

He stopped my mother's monologue with a tap on her shoulder and said, "I was so sorry to hear about your grandfather. What happened?"

Mariam Khala looked heavenward and raised her hands and shoulders in a gesture of resignation to a higher will.

"Well, yes, of course there's that," my father said. "But can you be more specific?"

Mariam Khala tapped her heart.

My mother reached over, grabbed Mariam Khala's hand. "Can you speak?"

Mariam Khala nodded.

"Oh," said my mother. "Well . . . well . . . oh. I suppose I should show you your room. We only found out . . . so the bed hasn't been made up but it's a lovely room, my favorite in the house actually, I prefer it to our room but he doesn't like it because of some reason he's never seen fit to share with me. But I know you will . . ."

That's when Masood walked in. He had come to work for my parents when they got married a year earlier, and had been hailed by all who had sampled his cooking as "a cook to be hired but never fired."

"Begum Sahib," he addressed my mother in Urdu. "What should I make for dinner tonight?"

Before my mother could answer, Mariam Khala said: "Aloo ka bhurta, achaar gosht, pulao, masoor ki daal, kachoomar."

And my parents knew she was part of the family, for she

had ordered their favorite meal. By the time I was born five months later Mariam Khala's silence in all matters unrelated to ordering meals had become part of the norm in our household. My father still tried to coax out of her some details of her grandfather's life, convinced that if he guessed correctly she would nod and let him know as much. So, "He was a spy!" he would exclaim after watching the latest James Bond movie; "A pimp!" after he had drunk too much and sung bawdy songs with his friends; "A Shakespearean actor in Papua New Guinea." No-one ever knew where that came from. But Mariam Khala always shook her head, and to this day I don't know what my great-uncle did after he left home.

But for some reason I still cannot quite explain no-one ever asked her why she never spoke except to dictate menus. And that too, only to Masood. She spoke only to him, ate food only that he had cooked. The two days he was in hospital, when I was five, she did not speak a word, not even to the substitute cook, and she did not eat a bite.

Once I asked my parents, "Why? Why is she this way? Why does she only speak to order meals?"

My father shrugged. "If you ask me she's taking the whole goddamn notion of a woman's traditional role a little too literally."

But my mother laughed at this and reminded me of Mariam Khala's encounter with Dr. Tahir.

I must have been about eight when that happened. It was December, and Karachi's social elite were feverishly getting married and throwing parties before the hot weather and riots and curfew returned and impeded social activity. (Mariam Khala was, incidently, extremely popular in the social milieu, praised for being discreet, a good listener and for never interrupting anyone's flow of loquaciousness.)

My parents and Mariam Khala were at a party, the last of their social stops for the evening. Mariam Khala was draped in a sari that was covered in intricate sequined designs. As she and my mother wandered to the buffet table, a liveried bearer tripped on the uneven ground and sent a

Unspeakable Hunger

dozen glasses of pomegranate juice crashing to the floor to splatter Mariam Khala's sari with red blots.

"Oh, too bad," a male voice exclaimed, and she turned to see Dr. Tahir—the man infamous for diagnosing mosquito bites as measles bumps—standing behind her. "Well, you'll never wear that again," he said cheerfully. "That's the problem with these fancy sequined clothes. Can't wash them. I always say, you want proof that men are more practical than women? Go compare their clothes."

Mariam Khala did not sleep that night. She sat in the TV room and unstitched every single sequin in the area around the stained section of the sari. When I woke up to get ready for school she was in the bathroom handwashing the sari. And when I returned home that afternoon she had just finished stitching back every sequin in its original place. That night she did the unthinkable and re-wore the sari to a dinner where she knew she would see Dr. Tahir.

"So you see," my mother told me. "She has this, I don't know, determination, stubbornness, whatever, that allows her to do things that most people wouldn't. I have a feeling her silence and choice of when to speak is connected to that, maybe a result of something that happened in her past."

I never found out which of my parents was right, or if they were both as far from the truth as my younger cousin who said, "Maybe she doesn't know any words that aren't related to food." To be quite honest, I didn't really care.

It was enough for me to sleep curled beside her in the afternoons, our heads sharing the same pillow; enough to watch her fingers rise, curl, tap, fall in the hand-dance of music as she listened to Beethoven played or Ghalib sung; enough to know she was watching me as I did my homework, watching me for the simple reason that I was not invisible in her world. And enough to eat the meals she ordered.

Poor Masood, I suppose I should give him some credit. He was the one who cooked, after all. But my parents maintain that although he was a fine—indeed superior—cook from day one, he only became a magician after she arrived.

Never more so than in the month of Ramzan.

Officially the month of fasting, Ramzan always seemed to me synonymous with feasting. Abstaining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset had less to do with religious devotion than it did with culinary devotion. For in order to truly appreciate the Iftar meal that Mariam Khala ordered we had to build ourselves up to a pitch of hunger that enabled us to sit and eat and eat for an hour-and-a-half without pause.

In drawing rooms across the country frazzled Begums complained that all this fasting, combined with the heat-wave, made their cooks so horribly bad-tempered—and, of course, one felt guilty asking them to stand over a stove and cook under these circumstances. Masood, however, loved it. He liked nothing so much as to shoo us out of the kitchen with the warning, “If you smell my food you will be so overcome with temptation that you’ll break your fast on the spot. Leave, leave, before you make me into an instrument of Shaitan and send you to hell.” The only person he allowed in was Mariam Khala who would chop and stir and watch, as she never did during any other time of the year.

And oh! the meals that resulted! We started with the requisite date, of course, to symbolize fidelity to the first Muslims in the deserts of Arabia, but then . . . on to gluttony! Curly shaped jalaibeas, hot and gooey, that trickled thick sweet syrup down your chin when you bit into them; diced potatoes drowned in yogurt, sprinkled in spices; triangles of fried samoosas, the smaller ones filled with mince-meat, the larger ones filled with potatoes and green chillies; shami kebabs with sweet-sour imli sauce; spinach leaves fried in chick-pea batter; nihari with large gobs of marrow floating in the thick gravy, and meat so tender it dissolved instantly in your mouth; lassi that quenched a day long thirst as nothing else did and left us wondering why we ever drank Coke when a combination of milk, yogurt and sugar could be this satisfying; an assortment of sweetmeats—gulab jamoons, ladoos, b’rfi . . .

Unspeakable Hunger

There were always at least ten people at our house for Iftar and, at some point, someone would look up from his or her third helping and say, “Mariam, have you finished eating? That’s an insult to the food. It’s divine!” And Mariam Khala would make a gesture as though plucking the words from the air and swallowing them, to indicate, “I am eating your praise.” Then she would look across at Masood who had walked in with hot naan to go with the nihari, and smile her smile of congratulations. Masood would incline his head in a gesture that was half salaam of deference, half acceptance of well-deserved praise.

The only meal that ever surpassed those Ramzan meals was the one Masood and Mariam Khala prepared for me the day I was accepted at a college in Lahore. Half-way through the meal I burst into tears to say, “But who will cook for me when I’m there?”

Masood almost touched my shoulder, said, “Don’t worry, *bibi*, when you come home for the holidays I’ll feed you so much they’ll have to roll you back on to the plane.”

“Promise?” I said.

“Promise,” he smiled back.

The next week he was gone.

I knew something was wrong the moment I returned from school and the only smell to assail my nostrils as I walked up the driveway was that of the manure recently delivered to my neighbor’s garden. My mother was standing in the kitchen as I ran in, staring in mystification at Masood’s rack of spices.

“What’s happened? Where is he? Is he ill?”

“No, no, he’s not ill. He had to leave. His father just died. Masood’s the head of the family now. He has a mother, sisters, a daughter—did you know that? Hmm . . . his wife died in child-birth just before he came to us—but, yes, all these women, and he’s the head of the family now. So he went back to his village.”

“For how long?”

“*Jaan*, he’s gone. They need him there. It seems his fa-

ther was the cook at the home of the feudal landlord, and Masood will be taking over that position. He said to tell you he's sorry he didn't have time to say good-bye, but he had to catch the morning train."

"But . . . how could he . . . how will we . . . what about Mariam Khala?"

My mother shook her head. "I don't know. We've already found a new cook—the one who worked for your Nani when Mohommad was on leave—and he's starting tomorrow, but I don't know if Mariam . . . what . . . I just don't know."

"Where is she?"

"In her room. When Masood was leaving he told her to keep eating, otherwise she'll fall ill and cause him much pain. And she just smiled and . . . hugged him. Briefly. She hugged him goodbye."

I stared. A hug—across class and gender! And he wasn't even much older than she! Before this had their fingers even touched as they passed a tomato from one to the other? I doubted it. A hug! I wouldn't have, and Masood had carried me piggy-back style when I was a child.

But when I walked into Mariam Khala's room she looked as she always did, seated on her bed, reading the afternoon papers.

"Will you eat?" I burst out, as I flung myself across the bed. She ruffled my hair, shook her head, and handed me the comics page.

A week later she still hadn't touched a morsel of food, and my father was raging through the house, railing against the stubbornness of women. He was looking for a fight, of course, but my mother and I were too despondent to rise to the challenge.

In the silence that followed his latest outburst we heard the door swing open. Auntie Tano, an old family friend, walked in.

"Guess who I just met?" she said, after proffering her cheek all around to be kissed.

Unspeakable Hunger

“Why don’t you just tell us,” my father said.

“Pinkie!”

“I thought she was in London.”

“No, no. The other Pinkie. Rash’s wife.”

My mother attempted interest. “Oh, really? How is she?”

“Why do we care?” my father asked.

“You care, my dear man, because she has just spent a week on the family lands with her brother, Jahangir.”

“Jahangir! How is he?”

“Why, really, why do we care?”

My mother slapped my father lightly on the wrist. “Of course we care. Haven’t seen him in what? . . . three years. Even since his wife died. He just stopped coming to the city. I don’t know why. You’d think he would get so lonely on the lands.”

“Such a tragedy,” Auntie Tano murmured. “So young. I have a picture of them at our New Year’s party. They look so happy.”

“Yes, well, it was a masquerade party,” my father observed.

“Honestly! What a thing to say! They were quite happy together,” Auntie Tano said.

“Happy? Come on! It was common knowledge he was having it off with any number of women.”

“Ye-es. But that was his habit, you know.”

“What?”

“Yes, yes. He acquired the habit before he got married. You can’t expect a man to change his habits just because he gets married.”

A long pause followed this remark. Finally my father said, “Why are we having this conversation?”

“Well, this is what I’ve been trying to tell you! Masood is Jahangir’s cook!”

Next door, in Mariam Khala’s room, the bed creaked.

“Of course,” my mother said. “How stupid of me. That’s why the name of Masood’s village sounded so familiar.”

“Don’t you see?” Auntie Tano said. “Don’t you see

how you can solve Mariam's problem. Jahangir, widower. Masood, his cook. Mariam, single and starving to death."

No, I screamed to myself. No!

"Are you mad?" my father yelled. "Do you think I would send my cousin off to be married to a man she barely knows, in some remote village, and . . . and . . . and . . . to a man of those habits! Just so that she can dine well! Over my dead body."

"No," my mother whispered. "Her dead body. She's not going to eat anyone else's food, you know. Not at all."

"Can't she just . . ." I had to say something. "Can't she just, you know, live there or something. Or buy a house in the area."

"Alone?" Auntie Tano raised her eyebrows.

My father waved his finger in the air to indicate a Thought. "No, of course not that. Buy maybe . . . now that we know where Masood is . . . perhaps, yes, why didn't we consider this before . . . we can pay him to send a supply of food over every week. Send it by train. We could arrange that."

Mariam Khala glided into the room, a newspaper in her hand. She lifted my mother's hand, pointed to her wedding ring, then pointed to her own unadorned finger, and nodded.

"No," I said. "You can't."

For the first time ever she ignored me. She held the newspaper out to my father, pointing to something on the page.

"What's this? Train schedules? Wh . . . ? Mariam, you can't be serious."

But she was. I knew it immediately by the sudden burning at the back of my eyes. I could not stay then. Could not stay for Auntie Tano's attempt to achieve self-obliteration now that one of her ridiculous schemes was being taken seriously; could not stay for my father's baffled rage; could not stay for my mother's pleas to wait a while, don't be hasty, even if you decide to marry, not him, and if him, not now, wait, weddings have to be planned, this is just

Unspeakable Hunger

not the way things are done. I could not.

I ran to my bathroom, locked the door, curled myself into a ball inside the tub and wept dry tears, my fists banging against the wall's pink tiles. And when half-an-hour went by and Mariam Khala did not knock on the door, I wept some more. But when I heard my father dragging suitcases down from the store-room shelves, I pushed myself out of the tub, out of the room, into her room where she was waiting for me, arms open just wide enough to fit me in. Something of the fierce tension inside me uncoiled then, for though I knew she would leave, I also knew he—Jahangir—would not be able to help but love her.

“There was a boy in my class called Jahangir,” I gulped between sobs. “We used to call him Jangia—Underpants.” And then we both laughed, our heads thrown back, our shoulders shaking, our arms still around each other.

She and my father left a few hours later, by the evening train. She had packed all her clothes, much to the consternation of my mother, who kept saying, “But you're only going to meet him now. That's all. The wedding, if there is a wedding, won't be for a while yet.”

But she knew Mariam Khala well enough to know there would be no planning and preparation and attention to custom and drawing up guest lists that would include everyone whose shadow had ever crossed paths with Mariam Khala and her closest relatives.

There was a strange silence in the house when they left. My mother and I both retired to separate rooms to try and imagine what would await Mariam Khala at the end of that train-journey. But I could not imagine the Underpants Man as anything other than a caricature, and found myself wondering over and over how she would greet Masood, and would she hug him again? And why, why, I wondered, why was it that when we tried to think of ways to save Mariam Khala there was one we never mentioned?

My father returned, two days later, alone.

“Well?” my mother and I greeted him at the door.

“Well, she’s married.”

I looked at my mother, and she looked at me, and I knew she was thinking what I was thinking, only she was thinking it with greater horror, and we both wondered how? how can we say it? and so we just said it the simplest way we knew:

“To whom?”