

Sweet Rice by Aamer Hussein

Writer's Introduction

Aamer Hussein was born in Karachi, Pakistan, in 1955, and moved to London in his teens. He has been writing fiction since the mid-'eighties, and his work has been widely anthologised in many languages including Spanish, Arabic, Japanese and Urdu. He is the author of the short story collections, *Mirror to the Sun* (1993); *This Other Salt* (1999); *Turquoise* (2002); *Cactus Town and other stories* (2002); *Insomnia* (2007); *Another Gulmohar Tree* (2009), a novella, shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia Region, Best Book); and *The Cloud Messenger* (2011). He is also the editor of *Kahani: Short Stories by Pakistani Women* (2005), a revised and extended edition of *Hoops of Fire* (1999). His discovery and interpretation of Muhammadi Begum's early novels broke new ground in Urdu scholarship and inspired his story 'Sweet Rice' about literary memory. Furthermore, his Karachi trip with its combination of the familiar and unfamiliar provided the imaginative landscape for several tales in his second collection *This Other Salt* (1999).

Q1: Critical Analysis of *Sweet Rice* w.r.t plot, character building, and themes.

Sweet Rice, a delicate and aromatic lyrical prose from Aamer Hussein's short story collection *The Other Salt*, tells the tale of Shireen. Shireen, once a doctor in Karachi, now resides as a housewife in London with her husband and son. The central idea of the story revolves around Shireen's tumultuous struggle to find a new purpose and lease of life at a foreign place. The story reveals her experience as a diaspora in a foreign country and also focuses on her nostalgia and longing for her native country and culture. She wishes to stay connected with her native culture even after having come thousands of miles away from her motherland.

Sweet Rice can be treated as a sort of bildungsroman because it focuses on the moral and psychological growth of its protagonist. As the plot moves forward Shireen becomes more and more aware of her weaknesses. And by the end of the story, she transforms from an alienated and subjugated woman to a self-aware woman who knows what she wants. The plot of the story can be divided into three parts. In the first part, she is portrayed as an alienated and discontented woman at a foreign place which she describes as **"an impossibly difficult city, where even a powerfully-situated husband does not guarantee a work permit or a job"**. The second part focuses on Shireen's identity crisis and quest for her identity. She is out of place in the alien soil, and having spent all her years in tending and satisfying the demands of her matrimony and motherhood, she now feels a need to search for her lost identity. And the final part of the story focuses on the growth of Shireen's character and self-fulfilment which represents the culmination of her emotional journey from an agitated and confused woman to a self-aware woman. She finds salvation in editing and publishing the *Naimatkhaneh* - an old cookery book, compiled in 1911. Moreover, the flat characters, Shireen's husband and her son, are given element and substance through Shireen's narration and it is deliberate enough to keep the story revolving around Shireen, and not meandering around the other characters who are

only minor part of the story. All we get about the other characters, are the borrowed ideas from Shireen and that's enough to feel the story.

The most significant themes of the story are alienation, lost identity and lost tradition, nostalgia, and woman empowerment. Shireen's **sense of alienation** is evident in her loss of connection between her inner world and world around her. She feels isolated and estranged in London. Her **lack of self-awareness** is also associated with her alienation from her native culture. Her story reveals that the more a person tries to fit in a foreign culture, the more he loses his essence. Shireen has also denied herself every opportunity of emerging as a self-conscious person by going away from her native culture. Her **estranged married life** has also created a void in herself. The sense of alienation and isolation is evident in all of her dull and monotonous activities. She feels remorse over having to sacrifice her professional career for her marital life. She tried her best to excel in her domestic life but **"even her best was never good enough for Jamil's Libran discernment"**. Even her seven-year-old son, Timur, is also growing away from her. And her husband always negates any prospect of Shireen's career as a doctor. **"She didn't know whether to be insulted at his negation of her profession, or flattered by his inclusion of her in his bracket."**

Lost identity with lost tradition is an important theme of the story. A person's identity is crucially dependent on his culture and tradition. One's culture and tradition act as a compass for one's activities and experiences in life which in turn shape one's personality. Culture gives a sense of belonging and a perspective to see the world to a person. It makes a person realize that he is not living in a vacuum and that he is a part of a shared history which shapes his identity. A person needs to cling to his culture to support the shaking foundations of his existence. Shireen goes through an **identity crisis** because her connection with her native culture is not strong enough to support her native identity. That is why she is unable to achieve self-fulfilment. She also expresses remorse over having her son brought up in a foreign culture,

"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,".

Moreover, **colonial subjugation of minds** is a very significant theme of the story. It refers to controlling the thought process of people by instilling foreign ideas and values in their minds as "better" and "superior" to their native values. Shireen regrets submitting to the modern wave of thinking and neglecting her own cultural heritage. Acknowledging one's native culture enables one to break the shackles of colonized mind-set and live in a foreign country on one's own terms. Shireen's father was from Multan but her mother's family had migrated from the Northern province. Despite having abandoned their native land, her mother's family **"retained the gentle gestures, the sweet tongues and the richly aromatic cooking of another era, another land"**. Shireen feels a deep sense of nostalgia for her cultural roots and wants to connect to her native culture again. And that connection comes in the form of a food item called "Sweet rice". Shireen calls it an **"uncharacteristically flamboyant"** gesture, **"a celebration of her home"**, and a **"defiant tradition"** as it connects her with her tradition. The journal "Sweet Rice" written by Muhammadi Begum provides her a way to self-fulfilment. Shireen still takes pride in her lost tradition and **"her vanity, the vanity of a good daughter, rich in the dowry of a thousand recipes tested and proved,"** forbids her from following any recipe book while cooking.

Hussein shows how a serendipitous finding becomes a source of empowerment and self-fulfilment for Shireen. Shireen was once a doctor in Karachi, who made her own living and earned her respect, but is now reduced to a posh banker's wife in London. One who throws dinner parties and hosts conversational evenings for her husband's wealthy friends and colleagues. She is irritated to live cheek by jowl with these people who become the routine in her nondescript life. She finds ways to fill her days. For an upcoming dinner night, she plans on digging into her roots by making a traditional recipe, 'Sweet Rice'. Shireen decides to make sweet rice for Jamil's guests because she believes this food item serves as her signature dish. It was a speciality of her grandmother which the latter had named after Shireen. It serves as a new goal for Shireen to assert her existence before her misogynist husband. She goes through old books which give her a glimpse of her lost childhood and tradition. Along with a host of ancient objects of sentimental value, she finds her lost treasure which takes her to places surrendered. Shireen gets engulfed in nostalgia. **"Don't look back and above all don't smell or sniff, it only takes you to places surrendered..."**

Hussein has incorporated a story within the story which brings a change in Shireen's life. Shireen draws strength from the story of Muhammadi Begum. Muhammadi Begum herself lived a fulfilling life by choosing her own destiny. Hussein breaks the stereotypes of religious scholars through the character of Muhammadi Begum's husband, Mumtaz Ali. Mumtaz Ali is a religious scholar as well as a fighter for women rights. He helps his wife recognize her talent. Hussein describes Mumtaz as

"a radical religious scholar, --- 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".

Whereas Jamil is a modern man but he subjugates his wife. Shireen draws strength and confidence through Muhammadi Begum and which becomes the source for her empowerment, and the re-kindling of her hibernating **empowerment**. One women's empowered state becomes the stimulation for the other to start living and stop complaining. Shireen's struggle comes undone with the finding of *Naimatkhana*. Hope sizzles, and for the first time, living in an alien land hoarding a non-entity crown stings a little less. Sweet Rice becomes a turning point and Shireen's plan on reinventing herself tells a story of women's triumph over patriarchy and social norms.

In a nutshell, *Sweet Rice* not only unfolds Shireen's luxurious yet mundane happenings but also propels a message. **Reinvention** stays unseen in the matters of empowerment and to empower oneself, sometimes reinvention is necessary and should be grabbed from all corners. Through Shireen's tale, the readers get a new outlook towards empowerment. Empowerment not only means enabling oneself to re-join the workforce or breaking barriers or glass ceilings or even talking and endorsing feminism in every step, but also reinventing oneself and working with focus towards that chosen path. Finding one's second-best skill and working hard in that direction is reinvention. Exploring something which is not known to one or falls under one's comfort zone, yet having the zeal to learn and unlearn is reinvention.

Q2: Food Imagery in *Sweet Rice*.

Food serves as a central metaphor for the lost culture and tradition in Aamer Hussein's *Sweet Rice*. There is a pervasive and poetic web of food images in the short story. The protagonist of the story is thousands of miles away from her native land and feels a deep sense of nostalgia for her lost tradition. The food items from her native land keep Shireen connected with her cultural roots. Shireen was once a doctor in Karachi, who made her own living and earned her respect, but is now reduced to a posh banker's wife in London. One who throws dinner parties and hosts conversational evenings for her husband's wealthy friends and colleagues. She is irritated to live cheek by jowl with these people who become the routine in her nondescript life. She finds ways to fill her days.

Hussein puts emphasis on monotonous activities of Shireen and how she tries to find purpose in her life. Shireen hates eating alone and loves to invite her close friends to her home and persists on cooking **"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"** by going against the modern dietary prescriptions. These dishes serve as a metaphor for the kind of life and culture that Shireen has left behind in Karachi and now misses.

Shireen feels a deep sense of nostalgia for her cultural roots and wants to connect to her native culture again. And that connection comes in the form of a food item called "Sweet rice". Shireen calls it her **"defiant tradition"** as it connects her with her tradition. The journal "Sweet Rice" written by Muhammadi Begum provides her a way to self-fulfilment. Shireen still takes pride in her lost tradition and **"her vanity, the vanity of a good daughter, rich in the dowry of a thousand recipes tested and proved,"** forbids her from following any recipe book while cooking. Hussein uses vibrant and sensory stimulations to invoke the image of sweet rice in the reader's mind. He describes the rice as **"something lush and golden orange, laden with succulent pieces of chicken and ripe with the subtle and suggestive perfume of fruit"**. The **"lush and golden orange"** colours represent the vibrancy of Pakistani culture and invoke the sense of sight of the reader. And **"suggestive perfume of fruit"** caters to the olfactory senses of the reader, and the **"succulent pieces of chicken"** stimulate the reader's sense of taste.

Hussein also offers his readers with a variety of food images which are exclusive to the South Asian culture. When Shireen opens Muhammadi Begum's journal, along with a host of ancient objects of sentimental value, she finds her lost treasure which takes her to places surrendered. Shireen gets engulfed in nostalgia. **"Don't look back and above all don't smell or sniff, it only takes you to places surrendered..."** The reader comes across the images of food ingredients such as **"Chicken or lamb, rice, clarified butter, onions, coriander, garlic, salt, cumin, black pepper, cloves, cardamom and sugar"**. Shireen realizes that these ingredients are so easy to find in a place like London which has no cuisine of its own to boast of. Thus, Hussein has incorporated vibrant, fragrant, and rich food imagery which has turned his short story into a delicate and aromatic lyrical prose.

