
The frame tale of Jaspreet Singh’s *Chef* follows the narrator, Kip, on a train journey into his past in Indian-controlled Kashmir where he worked as a military chef in the General’s kitchen some twenty years earlier. The General has sent him a letter requesting that he return to Kashmir to prepare the upcoming wedding feast for his daughter, who is shockingly engaged to marry a Muslim. The wedding, like the stories of the other characters’ lives, will not end happily-ever-after. Kip has also just learned that he has a brain tumour and is given only three months to live, a prognosis that sets the tone for the entire novel. Kip’s personal tragedy is held up as a mirror for the hopeless political situation in Kashmir. Warning: this is not a book for casual bedtime reading, or for those who are easily overwhelmed by bleakness.

But while the outcomes are bleak, the stories themselves – the individual lives of the characters – are vibrantly narrated and emotionally charged. And strangely, amidst so much pain and conflict, beauty infiltrates this novel: scenes are described like paintings, poetry fills the final pages.

Since Partition Kashmir has been the subject of intense dispute and armed conflict. Although a ceasefire was agreed upon in 2003, the future of Kashmir is still largely regarded as uncertain. Pakistan controls the northwest regions of Kashmir, while India controls the central and southern portions, but the areas belonging to Pakistan are largely uninhabitable, and the regions ruled by India are still predominantly Muslim. The Siachen Glacier stands at the centre of this conflict as both sides stake claims for possession of it (the 1949 Karachi Agreement wrongly presumed neither side would want the glacier and stopped drawing the line of separation at its edge). Siachen is the world’s largest non-polar glacier, and is also the site of the world’s highest military base camp and battlefield.

In 2005, Jalil Abbas Jilani, Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson told a reporter from *Time* magazine, ‘If India and Pakistan cannot solve a dispute over a chunk of ice that is of little strategic value, then how can we fix more complex issues like Kashmir?’ A similar sentiment runs through Singh’s novel.

It is not surprising, then, that one of the main figures of the story is the glacier itself – viewed as a place of banishment by soldiers. An estimated 5,000 soldiers have died atop Siachen in the past twenty years, but more men die from avalanches than from gun battles. The novel recounts how soldiers suffer from a lack of oxygen and see djinns, fall into deep glacial crevices and have no possibility for rescue, and how some would rather die than spend another night on the glacier. Chef Kishen, who trains the younger Kip in the General’s kitchen, is exiled to the army kitchen at Siachen as punishment for serving a dish of halal lamb to a group of imams who did not eat meat.

The variety of dishes and dietary regulations (veg, non-veg, halal) that spans the subcontinent keeps Kip on his feet in trying to please everyone – a job not unlike that of a diplomat involved in debates on Kashmir. At its worst, *Chef* spells out its symbolism and sounds cliché: “‘Chef, are you trying to lump all Sikhs into one,’” I said. “As if there is only one kind of curry powder? One kind of mango? One kind of Rogan Josh?” The book insists too obviously on the comparisons between curries and nations, and between those who demand ‘veg’ or ‘non-veg’ and those who would

draw borderlines because of it. ‘In Kashmir the Hindus eat goat and mutton,’ Chef proclaims. It is no wonder he mistook the imams for halal meat-eaters: no one can agree on what ‘right’ is, few live up to their stereotypes. Even the narrator, a Sikh, cuts his hair.

The reader may feel insulted by these too-easy parallels between food and politics, but a more complex problem also presents itself in the novel: our tastes for food are trained according to national dishes. Chef Kishen praises French cheese and Greek olives, and bemoans the fact that Indian food does not contain olives. Would it cease to be Indian if it did? It would certainly not be considered ‘authentic Indian cuisine’. And yet Kip reminds the reader that tomatoes – the staple of nearly all Indian dishes – were introduced to India only one hundred years ago from Mexico.

Chef allows its readers to recognize that the double-edged sword of cultural purity, the very attempt at making nations, is that it categorizes each group of people by their own flavour, by a sense of authenticity, while at the same time demands that it be kept that way. Mixing spices works in curries, but it only produces something heavenly with the right combinations. When Kip becomes head chef his assistant’s constant questions about origins and authenticity irritate him, but he realizes that he, too, was once preoccupied with such details. He now prefers to base his judgments on taste and not ingredients.

One of the most gripping stories of Chef is that of Irem, a Pakistani Kashmiri woman wrongly suspected of terrorist activity and imprisoned in India (based on the true story of Shahnaz Kauser). In an ineffectual attempt to win over the woman’s heart with good food, Kip tries to show her ‘real Indian hospitality’ with his dishes. When he proudly serves her a halal version of Rogan Josh, she responds: ‘One never uses tomatoes in Rogan Josh.’ Kip does not believe her – where does the red colour come from? Kashmiri chillies and mawal flowers, she tells him, revealing ingredients so unique and local they are unlikely to be available elsewhere.

This episode seems to encapsulate Singh’s view of the situation between India, Pakistan and the Kashmiri region: all attempts at coming together are thwarted because of national pride, an insistence on the right way of doing something. Years later Kip must come to terms with the gruesome other side of ‘Indian hospitality’ when he learns what happened to Irem after she suddenly disappeared from the prison.

Frequently throughout the book Singh writes, ‘But.’ – a single word so full of possibility, instantly cut short by a tiny black full stop. In one of the last lines of the novel, Kip remembers wanting to tell Irem that her cure of using lemon to remove the garlic smell from his pores did not work: ‘It has not worked, I almost say to her.’ Does he refrain from telling her in the hopes that she will continue to believe it might work? But Irem, like the other characters in the novel, has no hope, no possibility for changing the situation that is; she only knows how to endure, a situation brilliantly, and heart-breakingly mirrored in the novel in the lives of the characters, including the soldiers trapped on the Siachen Glacier who meaninglessly fight over a giant block of ice that is of no real use to anyone.

Jena Habegger-Conti