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Food and Culture in Kashmiri Writings

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the intricate relationship between cuisine and cultural preservation in Kashmiri literature, with a particular focus on Shahnaz Bashir's *Scattered Souls* (2017). Through evocative descriptions of cooking rituals, traditional dishes, and communal feasts, Bashir's narratives showcase the Kashmiri kitchen as a site of memory, identity, and resilience. The article explores how culinary practices, such as the preparation of Wazwan or the careful recreation of everyday meals, serve as mnemonic devices that connect individuals to their ancestral heritage and familial bonds. By highlighting the sensorial richness of food—its taste, aroma, and texture—the narrative underscores how these elements trigger memories and sustain cultural continuity, especially in times of displacement or social change. Rather than relying on overt declarations of cultural identity, the literature uses the subtleties of domestic life to reveal the enduring power of food in shaping collective memory. This study argues that food in Kashmiri writings functions as a silent but potent symbol, fostering belonging and anchoring tradition within the evolving landscape of Kashmiri society. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that cuisine is not merely sustenance but a vital repository of meaning and identity in Kashmiri culture.

Keywords: Kashmiri Cuisine, Literature, Scattered Souls

INTRODUCTION

Cuisine, as both a daily necessity and a repository of tradition, plays a pivotal role in shaping and preserving cultural identity. In Kashmiri literature, food becomes far more than mere sustenance; it acts as a powerful symbol of memory, continuity, and communal resilience. This article examines the ways in which culinary practices and the domestic sphere are woven into the fabric of Kashmiri writings, with a central focus on Shahnaz Bashir's acclaimed collection, Scattered Souls. Through detailed depictions of the kitchen, cooking rituals, and the ceremonial preparation of dishes like Wazwan, Bashir crafts a narrative landscape where the act of preparing and sharing food asserts cultural values and preserves heritage against the backdrop of social and political upheaval.

The introduction situates the Kashmiri kitchen as a space where the emotional and sensory dimensions of food intersect with collective memory. It discusses how Bashir's subtle literary technique uses fleeting references to traditional dishes to evoke an entire world of ritual, nostalgia, and belonging. Rather than explicit commentary, the stories rely on the evocative power of food: the order of dishes on a Trami, the careful preparation of delicacies like Tang, and the sensory triggers of taste and smell that anchor characters in their familial and cultural past. By drawing on scholarly perspectives—such as Sandhya Tiwari's insights on food and memory—the article explores how food mediates identity, especially for communities grappling with displacement or transformation. Ultimately, this introduction frames the article's central argument: that Kashmiri culinary traditions, as represented in literature, are subtle yet profound vessels of cultural preservation. The kitchen emerges not just as a physical space but as a cultural archive, where inherited recipes, cooking techniques, and communal meals sustain a sense of belonging and affirm the resilient spirit of Kashmiri life.

One of the most vivid illustrations of this appears in the memory of an engagement feast. Sandhya Tiwari argues that food is a crucial medium through which cultural memory is maintained, especially in communities facing displacement or transformation. She notes that the sensory aspects of food—its taste, smell, and

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texture—can trigger memories and sustain a sense of belonging in changing environments (Tiwari 2020). Bashir's depiction of Kashmiri cuisine aligns with this perspective, demonstrating how culinary practices help maintain continuity amid uncertainty.

A young narrator recalls watching the trami—a large copper platter shared by four people—being prepared with utmost care. The order of dishes, as customary, reflects both culinary discipline and cultural pride. The platter is first arranged with Kaabab, followed by vibrant red Rista, the tender and rare Dani Phoul, and crispy golden Tabakh Maaz. These are succeeded by deep, flavorful curries like Rogan Josh, the fresh coriander-fragrant Daniwal Korma, and the creamy, regal Gushtaba. There is also Wazi Kokur, spiced chicken cooked with saffron, and Aab Gosht, lamb simmered gently in milk. Each dish is prepared with reverence, drawing upon inherited techniques and ingredients measured not only in quantity but in emotion and memory (SS 45).

The Tang—a pear-shaped delicacy crafted from a carefully carved portion of meat—is not served first but placed with intention in the middle of the Trami, marking a peak moment in the feast. Traditionally reserved for elite gatherings or significant ceremonies like Nishani Saal, Tang symbolizes both culinary prestige and emotional grandeur. Its presence on the platter elicits admiration from the elders and awe from the younger ones, reinforcing how food operates as social expression. This dish, along with Cxarvan—a mixture of liver and lung typically served on Mehendiraat (the night before a wedding)—invokes the relationship between ritual, memory, and taste. As David Sutton notes, food practices are deeply rooted in embodied memory, where taste and smell activate personal and communal narratives (Sutton 27).

Bashir subtly weaves this relationship between food and memory into several narratives. A widow preparing Methi Maaz on a quiet afternoon does not speak of her grief, but her deliberate stirring, her careful sprinkling of dried fenugreek, become gestures of remembrance. In another story, the smell of Nadur Palak—lotus stem cooked with spinach—leads a character into a childhood recollection of her grandmother's kitchen. There are no lengthy flashbacks, just the sharp precision of taste conjuring time, place, and person. These culinary flashes operate like mnemonic devices, linking past to present with emotional fidelity (Assmann 39).

The presence of seasonal and ceremonial foods further enriches the narrative. Dishes such as Aloo Bukhara curry, with its tangy plum sweetness, evoke spring festivities and familial joy. Gadi (fish curry), though less common in urban weddings, still appears in traditional households near rivers or during specific seasonal gatherings. Its mention situates the narrative in time, reminding the reader of food's connection to seasonal cycles and environmental knowledge. Similarly, dishes like Palakh, Haakh, and Tamatar Chaman anchor the kitchen in daily life, balancing the grandeur of Wazwan with the intimacy of home-cooked simplicity (Appadurai 15).

These moments also reveal the gendered nature of culinary preservation. While the wazā dominate ceremonial cooking, it is the women—mothers, grandmothers, daughters—who maintain the rhythm of the kitchen in everyday life. They pass down recipes orally, adjust ingredients instinctively, and sustain rituals that ensure continuity across generations. Their culinary labor, often invisible, holds immense cultural weight. This aligns with Ann Rigney's notion of "embodied cultural memory", where non-verbal practices—like cooking—serve as crucial modes of transmitting cultural identity (Rigney 128).

Bashir also acknowledges the changing nature of culinary tradition. In one story, a family includes dishes like Chicken Badaam Korma and Safeed Rista, both newer additions to the Wazwan repertoire, reflecting how adaptation does not negate authenticity. Instead, it shows that culture is a living practice, evolving through time while retaining its essence. Even Halwi, the traditional sweet made with semolina and dry fruits, carries this duality: it is both a closure to the meal and an opening to memory (SS 88).

By presenting food as both literal and symbolic, Bashir allows the reader to understand how Kashmiri culture is preserved not only in texts and traditions but also in taste. Food is not just nourishment; it is a language—spoken through the sizzle of oil, the aroma of saffron, the quiet concentration of a woman in the kitchen. These narratives, while simple on the surface, offer profound insights into how culinary heritage anchors cultural identity, especially in times of uncertainty or silence. In *Scattered Souls,* the kitchen becomes an archive, and Wazwan becomes a text—both storing and transmitting a culture that lives through its people. The memories

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attached to dishes like Gushtaba, Modur Pulao, Shufta, and Zafrani Kehwa do not exist in isolation; they echo in the characters' gestures, silences, and longings. In this way, Bashir's literary use of food deepens our understanding of how cuisine functions as cultural preservation, affirming that what is cooked, remembered, and shared is never just food—it is history, emotion, and identity served on a platter.

The wedding songs echo in the background, but the soul of the celebration simmers quietly in the kitchen. As platters of saffron-laced Rista and carefully shaped Tang are arranged, a deeper ritual unfolds—one that speaks of legacy, love, and Kashmiri identity. Bashir's *Scattered Souls* (2017) delicately evokes the emotional gravity of food-centered ceremonies, where the act of sharing a meal during Nishani Saal or a wedding becomes an act of cultural transmission. These feasts carry meaning far beyond their ingredients, linking generations and histories with every bite.

One of the most culturally resonant ceremonies represented in Scattered Souls is the Nishani Saal, an engagement celebration that involves not only symbolic gestures between families but also the presentation of a full Wazwan feast. The trami, brought out with formality and pride, is an archive of traditional culinary artistry. Dishes like Kaabab, Rista, Tabakh Maaz, Daniwal Korma, Wazi Kokur, and Aab Gosht fill the copper platter before the richly marinated Tang is gently placed in the center. This mid-course highlight, shaped like a pear and prepared by expert wazā, marks the ceremonial height of the event (SS 67). The moment of its arrival is steeped in quiet reverence. The younger members admire it with wide-eyed respect, while the elders exchange approving nods, aware of its symbolism. As Arjun Appadurai notes, rituals around food often reflect the "ideology of respectability, status, and cultural values" (Appadurai 5). In this context, Tang is more than meat—it is a statement of honour and tradition. Such ceremonial cooking also reinforces social relationships and family structures. The Nishani Saal is not just a private agreement but a communal display of generosity, cultural pride, and familial bonding. In Bashir's world, this ceremony is remembered not for speeches or gifts but for the smell of saffron, the steam rising from Gushtaba, and the comforting sweetness of Halwi served at the end. These food memories become emotional repositories, keeping the event alive in the minds of participants long after the celebration ends. According to Jan Assmann, cultural memory is constructed through ritualized repetition, and food in ceremonies plays a vital role in this process (Assmann 39). The repetition of dishes at every engagement, wedding, or festivity helps embed traditions into the cultural psyche.

Weddings in Kashmir are deeply entwined with culinary rituals that serve as expressions of memory, community, and identity. From the Mendiraat—a pre-wedding celebration filled with Wanvun (traditional singing) and joyous gathering—to the grand finale of the Wazwan feast, food shapes the rhythm and emotion of each phase. In *Scattered Souls*, Shahnaz Bashir evokes this ceremonial richness through vivid glimpses into Kashmiri life. One such delicacy is Cxarvan—a finely minced mixture of liver and lung—traditionally prepared by wazas, the hereditary chefs responsible for ceremonial cuisine.

Seasonal foods, too, play a vital role in this ceremonial ecosystem. The arrival of spring is marked by meals that include Gadi (fish), cooked with tamarind or dried plums, representing renewal and abundance. During harsh Kashmiri winters, families prepare Haakh, Mooli, and dried vegetables like Hokh Syun, all cooked slowly over clay ovens. Bashir mentions a scene where a character recalls eating Modur Pulao—a sweet saffron rice dish studded with dry fruits—during an Eid celebration. These dishes are tied not only to family but also to weather, landscape, and seasonality, further rooting them in cultural memory. David Sutton explains that food linked to seasonal changes often becomes mnemonic—triggering emotions tied to time and place (Sutton 56). When a narrator in *Scattered Souls* smells Palak frying in mustard oil, it is not merely a sensory moment but a portal into a cherished winter memory.

Importantly, Bashir's treatment of ritual meals is never overt or decorative. He allows food to emerge organically, within the emotional texture of the scene. This is evident in stories where the mere act of heating Kehwa or serving Phirni during mourning gatherings carries immense emotional resonance. In these subtle inclusions, he reinforces how ritual meals sustain both individual and collective identity. Even in grief, food is served with care—an affirmation of cultural continuity despite emotional loss.

The symbolic value of food also helps encode gendered roles within ritual. While male wazā dominate public culinary performances during weddings, women hold spiritual and practical authority over every day ritual

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food. During Nishani Saal preparations, it is the mother who checks the masala, the grandmother who ensures the Gushtaba is tender, and the daughter who carefully layers Tamatar Chaman for the vegetarian guests. This interplay of roles is subtle but powerful, reflecting the unspoken hierarchies and cultural labor that sustain Kashmiri tradition.

Gender is not defined biologically; thus, it should not be limited to one's biological aspects or perceptions. It is a cultural creation, and the notions concerning femininity or masculinity serve to maintain gendered identities. It represents socially acquired and acceptable forms of being either male or female. It defines our clothing pattern, habits, likes, choices, career, education, business, desires, etc. This stereotypical notion of gender is common across cultures and societies throughout the world. Gender occupies a predominant position in Indian society. It is heartbreaking to mention that education could not eradicate social evils, and they still cause havoc in some form or another. (Tiwari, 2023)

Bashir's Scattered Souls illustrates how Kashmiri culinary traditions serve as vessels for cultural memory and resilience, particularly among women. Everyday acts like preparing Safeed Rista or Haakh become powerful forms of intergenerational storytelling, maintaining heritage through gesture, taste, and ritual. Kitchens are depicted as spaces where women hold authority and pass down knowledge without written recipes, relying on observation and oral instruction. These food-centered ceremonies not only connect generations but also preserve identity and history, aligning with concepts such as Bourdieu's habitus and Rigney's embodied cultural memory. Ultimately, Bashir shows that food, rather than written words or photographs, keeps Kashmiri culture alive across time.

In *Scattered Souls*, women pass down culinary knowledge through daily habits rather than formal instruction. Daughters learn by observing mothers and grandmothers perform tasks like folding Cxarvan into yogurt or timing spices for Gushtaba, exemplifying Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus—knowledge embedded in routine actions (Bourdieu 72). The kitchen becomes a cultural archive where unspoken practices hold meaning. Bashir presents this domestic labor without romanticism, depicting women as both confined by roles and empowered within them. For instance, an elderly mother prepares Safeed Rista despite her pain, using food to process grief and memory after her husband's death. These gendered culinary practices in Kashmiri culture are adaptive and seasonal. Women utilize preserved vegetables in winter and prepare special dishes for spring festivities, reflecting deep connections to land and tradition. As David Sutton notes, memory is encoded not just in ingredients, but in taste, season, and rhythm.

Bashir highlights women's kitchens as crucial spaces for maintaining Kashmiri identity through silent rituals and food preparation. Acts like serving Kehwa or Modur Pulao become storytelling, and even grief is expressed through cooking, emphasizing remembrance over display. This often-overlooked culinary labor, according to Bashir, deserves recognition for its role in cultural survival. Simple tasks such as peeling garlic and boiling rice represent forms of "cultural memory" (Assmann), preserved through communal and domestic practice.

Humor and improvisation also feature in this memory work, with unique family habits—like a grandmother's shaky-handed extra seasoning—demonstrating both affection and individuality in cooking. Food memories in Bashir's work are shaped by social and emotional relationships. Teaching traditional recipes becomes a rite of passage, preparing daughters to sustain cultural heritage. Recreating family dishes serves as both nourishment and a way to relive formative moments.

Shahnaz Bashir uses food as a narrative device that triggers memory and emotion. Sensory experiences with food evoke past events more powerfully than words, aligning with Sutton's theory of "embodied memory." Food in these stories communicates love, loss, and longing, sometimes more effectively than dialogue. Bashir structures his narratives around the rhythms of cooking, where culinary routines reflect the characters' inner lives and memories. Emotional contrasts are explored through food scenes; for example, eating sweet Phirni during mourning creates an unsettling juxtaposition of comfort and sorrow. Food also initiates flashbacks in the narrative, echoing Proust's "madeleine effect." A single taste or smell can recall lost homes, relationships, and identities—what Ann Rigney terms "portable memory."

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Family legends and humor appear in recurring kitchen stories, reinforcing Assmann's concept of cultural memory formed through repeated, shared rituals around food. In Bashir's writing, food memory moves in cycles—meals spark recollections that return to the present, echoing traditional Kashmiri storytelling and the seasonal rotation of dishes. Food in Scattered Souls is central to identity, emotion, and remembrance, serving as a way for characters to connect with time, place, and each other. Kashmiri cuisine acts as a living calendar, its rhythms dictated by the seasons. Winter brings Hokh Syun (dried vegetables) and hearty meals made in preparation for cold months, reflecting endurance and tradition. Spring signifies renewal, with fresh greens and celebratory dishes marking events like engagement ceremonies. Summer is dominated by Wazwaan weddings, where elaborate meals such as Tabakh Maaz and Gushtaba embody cultural pride. In autumn, slow-cooked dishes prompt reflection and nostalgia. Food rituals are central to social and religious life. Dishes have symbolic roles at ceremonies such as Nishani Saal and during Ramzan, when simple, reverent foods unite families at Iftar. Bashir uses food not just as sustenance but as a vessel for memory, emotion, and cultural practice—each meal is both ordinary and sacred, passing tradition across generations. Ultimately, Bashir depicts Kashmiri cuisine as a dynamic record of heritage, connecting people through seasons and stories. Cooking and eating become acts of remembering and preserving culture—a history lived and shared through flavor and ritual.

CONCLUSION

The intricate layering of food, memory, and identity in Scattered Souls by Shahnaz Bashir reveals the quiet, enduring power of culinary practices in preserving Kashmiri culture. Through domestic rituals, seasonal dishes, and traditional wedding preparations, food emerges not merely as sustenance but as a deeply symbolic archive of emotion, continuity, and belonging. In the absence of grand political narratives or overt resistance, it is the kitchen—a space often overlooked—that becomes the heart of cultural preservation. Food in Bashir's narratives is not merely descriptive; it is performative—it does the work of remembrance. By focusing on food as both material and metaphor, Scattered Souls captures a dimension of Kashmiri life that resists erasure—not through loud protest but through quiet persistence. The cuisine, layered with history and feeling, becomes a language of resilience and cultural pride. Through it, Bashir documents how a people continue to taste their past, preserve their present, and gently feed their future.

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