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Culinary Encounters and Family Bonds: Food, Travel, and Culture in Tahir Shah's *The Caliph's House*

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Abstract

Aims: *Central to Shah's portrayal of his year in Casablanca in The Caliph's House: A Year in Casablanca is the role of food as a binding force within the family structure. This paper explores how Shah uses food as a symbol of cultural exchange and a medium for navigating his relationship with Morocco, emphasizing food's capacity to offer connection, comfort, and negotiation with the unfamiliar.*

Methodology and Approaches: *The study employs Lucy Long's theory of culinary tourism, which highlights food as a gateway to understanding broader cultural and social contexts. Long's framework is used to analyze food as a vehicle for individual and collective identity formation, shaping Shah's perception of himself and his family within a foreign cultural setting.*

Outcome: *The analysis reveals that food in The Caliph's House operates as a cultural artifact, a medium of hospitality, and a means of belonging. The act of eating and sharing meals emerges as more than a physical necessity; it becomes an embodied practice through which tourists and residents can experience and engage with new cultures.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The paper underscores the interconnectedness of food, travel, and culture, suggesting that travel reshapes perceptions of home and family. By engaging with food as a cultural medium, Shah bridges the gap between his own identity and the unfamiliar environment, offering insights into how culinary experiences can foster deeper cultural understanding and belonging.*

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Food is a universal language, serving as one of the most meaningful ways to connect with a culture. Travel let the person navigate not only new places but also different foods. When travelers like Shah arrive in a foreign place like in Shah's case- Morocco, they navigate a delicate balance between observing differences and recognizing moments of familiarity.

In *The Caliph's House*, Shah's journey encapsulates the essence of cultural travel writing: he embarks on an adventure that's as much about learning Moroccan ways as it is about rediscovering his own preconceptions and values. Tahir Shah, born into a family of storytellers, seeks a tranquil and fulfilling life when he decides to settle in Casablanca with his wife and two young children. His move from London to Morocco is motivated not only by its serenity but also by his desire to escape the fast-paced life that stifled his ability to follow his heart. This paper focuses on exploring Shah's perspective as he experiences Moroccan culture and Oriental society through the lens of a traveler and interprets it for a Western audience. His narratives are particularly intriguing as he positions himself as a bridge between the East and the West, attempting to foster understanding and connection between the two worlds. In his narratives food also plays a very essential role in making readers gain a richly layered picture of both Morocco and the process of cross-cultural understanding, making it clear how travel can become a transformative experience, providing insights into the destination through the traveler's food choices in an alien land. Shah's work reflects this idea that cultural and social characteristics create both bridges and gaps, giving travelers a layered experience that is at once alien and comforting. His unique viewpoint lets readers see Morocco through both foreign and familiar lenses, highlighting the contrasts and overlaps between his upbringing and the Moroccan way of life. In all this, food plays a vital role both in viewing and understanding the place the traveler visits. *The Caliph's House* encapsulates the essence of cultural travel writing by Shah where he embarks on an adventure that's as much about learning Moroccan ways as it is about rediscovering his own preconceptions and values.

The current paper applies Lucy M. Long's concept of 'culinary tourism' a term which she borrowed from Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett who used the term 'gastronomic tourism' in her work *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage,* 1998. She wrote about travelers' interest in experiencing and consuming the local food and culinary traditions of the places they visit. Whereas Long in her chapter, "A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness," explores how food functions as a lens through which cultural differences or "otherness" are constructed, perceived, and communicated.

Lucy Long's folkloristic approach to food highlights its power as a cultural marker that helps define group identities and distinctions. According to Long, food is far more than a means of sustenance; it serves as a rich, symbolic language through which cultural values, traditions, and social norms are expressed. These values are often embedded in rituals and practices that signify who belongs within a group and who stands outside it, creating a dynamic of "in-groups" and "out-groups." Long argues that eating practices and food rituals—such as traditional dishes prepared on holidays, or specific ways of sharing meals—are integral to cultural heritage and identity. They reinforce social structures and collective identity by linking people to their cultural roots and emphasizing shared experiences. For example, when people from the same cultural group eat together, it strengthens their sense of belonging and solidarity. Conversely, when they encounter unfamiliar or "foreign" foods, it can highlight differences, setting up a boundary between their identity and that of others. This boundary can make some foods seem "exotic" and, therefore, more distanced or even misunderstood. Long also delves into the impact of tourism and travel on food practices and perceptions. In culinary tourism, food becomes both an attraction for visitors and a potential point of tension. For travelers, local food offers an accessible way to experience and appreciate the "authentic" essence of a culture, turning food into a form of cultural exchange. However, for the locals, this consumption by outsiders can lead to feelings of unease or resistance, especially if traditional foods are commodified and altered to meet tourists' tastes. Thus, food in tourism settings becomes a complex site where cultural boundaries

are negotiated- sometimes bridging understanding and other times reinforcing stereotypes or misunderstandings.

In short, Long's perspective highlights how food is central to cultural identity, serving as both a unifying force within communities and a boundary marker with outsiders. This framework is especially useful for understanding the role food plays in tourism and intercultural exchange, where it can simultaneously foster cultural appreciation and highlight social divisions. Food, therefore, becomes a powerful tool in the formation and negotiation of identity, community, and the perception of the "other" in various cultural settings (Long,1998, 20-46). Lucy Long posits that culinary tourism involves actively seeking out food experiences that are representative of another culture. In The Caliph's House, Shah encounters Moroccan cuisine not just as sustenance but as a cultural and social experience. His descriptions of the elaborate preparations for meals or the ritual of tea-drinking, offer an insight to the reader about Moroccan traditions, values, and social norms:

> Moroccan food tends to be as inferior in restaurants as it is superior in the marvels of real Moroccan cuisine. We ordered a selection of dishes. There was chicken tagine flavored with turmeric, honey, and apricots; a pair of sea bream marinated in a saffron sauce and served on a bed of couscous. After that came *bistiya,* a vast platter of sweet pastry, beneath which lay wafer-thin layers of pigeons, almonds, and egg. Zohra said the family was the center of Moroccan life, and that food was at the center of the family (Shah, 65).

The above example is from *The Caliph's House,* where Shah explains the Berber traditions and how food is used in the Moroccan households in day today lives and rituals which strengthen Lucy's claims. The detailed descriptions of how these dishes are prepared reflect the centrality of food in family life and hospitality. Shah's introduction to these rituals highlights the importance of community and hospitality in Moroccan society. In his narrative not only different foods but also the recurring reference of sweet mint tea provides an understanding as to how it is a medium to connect with people, whether it is with their own

people or with the strangers' even, which helps them to understand their culture well. This aligns with Long's assertion that food provides a tangible way to engage with the "otherness" of a culture, allowing outsiders to access its subtleties.

Long emphasizes that culinary tourism often involves a negotiation between the familiar and the exotic. Shah, as an outsider, grapples with his Anglo-Afghan identity while immersing himself in Moroccan life. Food becomes a space for this negotiation, as often places the traveler hesitates accepting the new tastes or something that has never been a part of his/her eating style. In Shah's case we find that he does not explicitly express discomfort with Moroccan food itself, but his narrative does reflect moments of cultural adjustment that involve food. His experiences often highlight the unfamiliarity and novelty of Moroccan culinary practices, which he approaches with curiosity and occasional hesitation:

> Then the orgy of death commenced. Every household in the land slit a throat, except for our own. The sound of dying animals was tumultuous. Ariane was in the garden when the killing began. She asked me why the animals were crying out, why they were so sad. I kept her at Dar Khalifa. All around the house the streets were red, soaked in blood, as the head man of each house butchered an animal and skinned it. The aroma of roasting mutton began to emanate from the shacks. It hung above the shantytown in an oily cloud. While the mothers cooked the meat, their children roasted the rams' heads on homemade braziers in the alleyways. They cracked the skulls, scooped out the sizzling brains, and gobbled them up. (Shah, 267).

Shah's vivid descriptions of bustling markets, where ingredients are fresh and sometimes unfamiliar (e.g., sheep heads or exotic spices), presents Moroccan cuisine as an adventure into the "other." His initial discomfort with certain Moroccan food habits such as communal eating or the open display of animals in butcher's shop or outside everyone's houses during annual religious slaughter of animal illustrates the tension Long describes between embracing the exotic and yearning for the familiar. Over time, Shah's growing acceptance of Moroccan

cuisine mirrors his deeper integration into the local culture, signifying his transformation from a visitor to a participant. According to Long, culinary tourism allows tourists to encounter "otherness" in a controlled, pleasurable way. In *The Caliph's House*, Shah frequently juxtaposes his perceptions of Moroccan food culture with Western norms. Also, the elements like the use of food in warding off djinns or as part of religious ceremonies highlight the spiritual and mystical dimensions of Moroccan life. These encounters demonstrate how food is not merely sustenance but a reflection of cultural practices, history, and values—an idea central to Long's theory. Long argues that culinary tourism fosters cultural exchange, allowing both locals and tourists to share experiences. In *The Caliph's House*, Shah's relationship with his staff and neighbors often revolves around food

> The holy month was supposed to be a time of pious reflection. But, like Christmas in the West, it was tinged by commercialization. Every evening families spent fortunes on providing delicacies for *iftour*, the breaking of the fast. There were trays of macaroons and a hundred varieties of biscuit, pastries, and sweetmeats, and dates from oases in the south, juicy figs from the mountains, honeydew melons, fresh yogurt, and plums. Each evening as the day's fast was broken by the *muezzin*, the guardians would nibble a handful of dates, sip a little milk, and rush out on patrol. For them, it wasn't a time for gorging oneself on food; rather, it was the time to go hunting—for thieves. "They come while people are eating *iftour*," said the Bear. "Yes, and they creep about like foxes," Osman said. "Like young, cunning foxes," Hamza added. "What would you do if you caught one?" The three guardians looked at each other furtively, then at me. Then they guffawed (Shah, 142).

Shah's willingness to participate in communal meals helps him build trust and camaraderie with locals. Also his difference in religious participation, despite of being a Muslim, did not let him or his staff get away from the camaraderie they shared. These practices may contrast with his own habits and require adjustment. For an outsider, adopting such customs can initially feel awkward or

uncomfortable, as much as Shah engages with Moroccan cuisine, his perspective remains that of an outsider, which limits his ability to fully integrate, yet the way Shah adjusts in the culture is worth appreciating. Also these interactions underscore Long's claim that culinary tourism can deepen intercultural understanding and appreciation.

The above analysis we find that using Lucy Long's framework, *The Caliph's House* can be understood as a narrative of culinary tourism where food serves as both a literal and metaphorical medium for cultural exploration. Shah's experiences with Moroccan cuisine illustrate how food can bridge cultural divides, foster understanding, and reflect deeper cultural values. However, his journey also reveals the complexities of navigating cultural "otherness," embodying the dynamic interplay of identity, familiarity, and exoticism that Long's theory encapsulates.

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