

Book Review

Aroma of Memories

Elana Benjamin. *My Mother's Spice Cupboard: A journey from Baghdad to Bombay to Bondi*. (Melbourne, Hybrid Publishers, 2012). X + 226 pages. ISBN: 9781921665554.

Review by Luke Whitmore

In this elegant and poignant account, Elana Benjamin traces the lives of her Baghdadi family across time and space. She lucidly and painstakingly documents the lives and travels of five generations of her family across the locations of Iraq, India, America, Israel, and Australia. She is drawn particularly to the experiences of the women in her family. As she traverses these pasts and presents, she evocatively brings the reader along with her on her journey as she pieces together, for example, what life must have been like for her grandmother Hannah as a young married woman in Bombay, or for her mother Sheila who as a new wife in Sydney learned how to cook the Indian and Iraqi dishes of her new family.

One central emphasis of this book is the way in which food grounds and embodies memory and meaning in a way that language-based memories do not. Benjamin's daughters do not understand much Arabic or Hindi but they still ask for more *chapatis* (218). She begins her journey into the world of her family by describing *aloomakala*, the Arabic-Hindi hybrid term – meaning fried potato – which her grandmother used to describe a popular snack (5). She uses *aloomakala* as the springboard for a set of stories that begin with the departure from Iraq and the making of a home in Bombay. From India, many of Benjamin's family members found their way to Australia, some via the United States and Israel. Benjamin draws on an impressive number of primary and secondary sources and deftly foregrounds how the decisions of her great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents fit into the larger political, economic, and social dramas of their times.

Another central emphasis is on the ways that specific foods, foodstuffs, food practices, recipes, and meals connect women and provide arenas for agentive action. Benjamin writes "My kitchen doesn't contain a dedicated spice cupboard like my mother had while I was growing up. But my pantry doors are lined with spice racks containing all the spices I need to prepare the Indian and Iraqi food I grew up eating. And it is my daughter who can name all my spices and who loves to smell their different aromas." (218) It is through a description of her spice cupboard and what it means to her daughter that Elana Benjamin connects herself to the transnational pasts, presents, and futures of her family. When her grandmother Hannah says "I'm too tired to cook" (187), it serves as a marked indication that she is no longer able to live on her own but will need to move into a nursing home, a nursing home where significantly she would complain about the "mass-produced food" (204). The kitchen of the Sephardi Synagogue in Sydney served as an important site of connection and solidarity for Sephardi Jewish women (160).

There is an elegiac sense to this book. Benjamin has charted textures of taste, place, language, and time that she sees vanishing into the thinner air of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She wrote this book with the intent that it would be there for her children when they are old enough to appreciate it (xii). Yet in placing this work before the reader she has performed a service to the broader public as well. Elana Benjamin has offered a precise, accessible example of how a focus on food and lived experience illuminates the ways that specific women make homes for themselves and their families in a constantly changing world.