

Lesson 3

Food and Culture

A. Read the following excerpt from Syed Mujtaba Ali's travelogue. Work with a partner and discuss the following questions:

1. What is your favourite dish?
2. How is the dish prepared? Give a recipe for preparing the dish.
3. Why do you like this particular dish?

Syed Mujtaba Ali, was an acclaimed Bengali author, academic and linguist. He was a travel enthusiast and his travelogues are regarded as precious gems in our Bangla literature. At some point of time between the two World Wars, Syed Mujtaba Ali set out on a ship from India on a journey to Europe. Leaving Sri Lanka behind, he sailed across the Arabian Sea, then along the coast of Africa, before reaching the Suez Port. Syed Mujtaba Ali's time in Egypt was punctuated by a number of funny anecdotes, both about the people and the pyramids. The following excerpt is from Syed Mujtaba Ali's travelogue, *Tales of a Voyager (Jolay Dangay)* where he gives a charming and insightful description of Egyptian food and language. Nazes Afroz translated the following excerpt.

Our Bengali meals consist of five flavours of food—bitter, savoury, hot, sour sides and desserts. The English eat only sweet and savoury preparations. They cannot stomach the hot stuff, and even less the sour. And possibly never even know that bitters could be consumed. Hence English cuisine seems bland and tasteless to us. But the English can bake good cake-pastry-pudding, something they learned from the Italians. In my opinion, our sandesh and rasogolla are such delicacies that there is no reason to go bananas over those desserts.

Egyptian cuisine is a close cousin of Indian food of the Mughlai variety. I might not be able to prove the theory but after tasting food in many countries, it is my firm belief that imitating the Taj Mahal of cooking, that the Mughals perfected after coming to India (one should not forget that they could not master it in their own land as the Indian spices were unavailable in their motherland of Turkestan), the people in Afghanistan, Iran, the Arab land, Egypt, even Spain, have been trying to build their own little Taj of cuisine. The reach of this gastronomy has spread to East Europe's Greece, Hungary, Rumania, Yugoslavia, Albania and even Italy.

I discovered all these theories many years later. At present Abul Asfia and Claudette Chenier brought back samples of various dishes on a platter. I saw there was *murg musallam*, *sheesh kebab* and five or six kinds of unknown items. The known ones did not really carry the aroma of Kolkata food but it mattered little. After eating Irish stew and Italian macaroni on the ship, our palates had lost all taste; so seeing these dishes made our mouths water. My heart was craving for a little boiled rice, fried bitter gourd, *sonamoog daal* or yellow lentil, fried *potol* [pointed gourd] and fish curry—why was I daydreaming? Just rice and fish curry could do, but these were not available outside Bengal. So what was the point of such mourning?

So I showed them the items from the platter I did not want.

Peeking at the next table, I saw one man was about to start eating two cucumbers on a plate. How could two cucumbers, whatever the size might be, be enough for someone's dinner? I could not solve that puzzle by wracking my brain. That too, he was sitting at a table in an eatery supplemented by sauces and chutneys. Even in a sophisticated country like England, people would bite into an apple right after buying it off the street. They did not have to enter a restaurant to eat it with a fork and knife with sauces and chutneys...

At that point I saw, instead of chewing the cucumber, the man just pressed it in the middle and some polau-like substance mixed with a few things oozed out. I was surprised to no end. I told the restaurant owner that whatever be my luck, I ought to eat those cucumbers.

Two cucumbers were served. After pressing them a little with a fork, the polau came out. The polau was mixed with small pieces of meat (what we call keema), slices of tomato and grated country cheese. I realised that all the stuffings had been put inside the boiled cucumber and finally it was fried in ghee. The same principle as our dolma of fish and potol—the only difference was here they had stuffed the cucumber with polau, meat, tomato and cheese. Thus this was a truly superlative creation.

And what taste! It melted the moment it touched my tongue.

I had never eaten such a five-in-one dish.



I also tasted another unique item—Egyptian broad bean seeds. You must have seen the massive kegs of oil in the Alibaba film. In two or three such kegs, they put broad bean seeds and boil them overnight. After adding olive oil and some spices, they serve them from the morning. We ate them at midnight. What taste! I can still feel it in my mouth. Our pumpkin seeds are no match for this delicacy. Even Paul and Percy agreed that the soybeans of China would be far behind, never mind surpassing it.

We heard that the king and the poor—everyone ate those beans twice a day. The restaurant owner told us that some pharaoh liked it so much that he had forbidden his subjects to eat these beans! Hence the reason why people talk about the whims of the pharaohs.

I picked up its Arabic name—fool.

The following is an incident from the following morning but as it is related to this item, I will narrate it here.

Dozens of nationalities like the French, the Greeks, the Italians, the English lived in Cairo. So the city was adorned with signage in languages from around the world. The following morning when we were exploring the nooks and crannies of the city, I came across a signboard that said:

Fool's Restaurant

Paul, Percy and I noticed it together. We were lost for words and finally we burst out laughing.

‘A restaurant for stupid people?’

What did it really mean?

At that point I suddenly remembered the word fool had been used in Arabic for the broad bean dish. Not meaning stupid people. It meant this shopkeeper sold broad bean seeds. The three of us peeped inside the shop to see that all the customers had a plate of fool in front of them.

Source: <https://speakingtigerbooks.com/blog/excerpt-syed-mujtaba-ali-in-egypt/>

B. Now work in groups and answer the following questions.

- a) What are the differences between a Bengali cuisine and a British one?
- b) How was Syed Mujtaba Ali feeling after checking the menu of the restaurant? What was his heart craving for?
- c) What were the ingredients in the “five-in-one” dish?
- d) What did the signboard “Fool’s Restaurant” actually mean?

C. Write the meaning of the following phrases and discuss them in pairs.

go bananas, break the ice, beat around the bush, break a leg, get out of hand, cry over spilled milk, piece of cake, pass with flying colours, hold your horses, spill the beans, couch potato

D. Write a summary of the story in 100 words.