

Food and Culture in Karuna Riazi's *The Gauntlet* (2017)

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Abstract:

Karuna Riazi's *The Gauntlet* (2017) falls under the middle-grade fantasy genre. This novel narrates the adventure of Farah Mirza, together with her friends, to save her little brother and other children who are trapped in a mechanical board game called The Gauntlet of Blood and Sand. The fast-paced narrative adds its appeal with a rich portrayal of food in a South Asian Muslim culture. This study, then, examines how the culinary elements in the story serve as the markers that connect the protagonist, Farah Mirza, to her cultural identity. Employing a qualitative textual analysis, this research collects the data from any depiction of food and the situation in which the food is served. The data analysis identifies food depictions related to family gatherings, tea time, and breakfast. The analysis reveals that these food scenes reflect cultural values such as hospitality, resilience, and familial warmth. These findings suggest that Riazi's portrayal of food emphasizes Farah's Muslim identity while fostering intercultural appreciation.

Keywords: food; culture; identity; values; children's literature

Abstrak:

The Gauntlet (2017) karya Karuna Riazi termasuk dalam genre fantasi untuk kelompok usia sekolah menengah. Novel ini menceritakan petualangan Farah Mirza dan teman-teman menyelamatkan sang adik laki-laki dan anak-anak lain yang terjebak dalam permainan papan mekanis bernama The Gauntlet of Blood and Sand. Alur cerita yang cepat ini semakin menarik dengan penggambaran makanan yang kaya dalam budaya Muslim Asia Selatan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana elemen kuliner dalam cerita berfungsi sebagai penanda yang menghubungkan tokoh utama, Farah Mirza, dengan identitas budayanya. Dengan menggunakan analisis teks kualitatif, penelitian ini mengumpulkan data dari setiap penggambaran makanan dan situasi ketika makanan disajikan. Analisis data mengidentifikasi penggambaran makanan dalam konteks acara keluarga, waktu minum teh, dan sarapan. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa adegan-adegan makanan tersebut mencerminkan nilai-nilai budaya seperti keramahan, ketahanan, dan kehangatan keluarga. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa penggambaran makanan oleh Riazi menekankan identitas Farah sebagai seorang Muslim sekaligus mendorong apresiasi lintas budaya.

Kata kunci: makanan; budaya; identitas; nilai; sastra anak

INTRODUCTION

The Gauntlet is Karuna Riazi's debut novel, first published in 2017. The book is published by Salaam Reads, an imprint of Simon and Schuster, which provides books for

Muslim children by Muslim authors (*Review: The Gauntlet, Karuna Riazi, 2017*). Many reviews praise the book for its spot-on and amazing world-building (Alex, 2017; Bui, 2017) and the vivid description of South Asian delicacies (Bui, 2017; *Review: The Gauntlet, Karuna Riazi, 2017*). Despite all the positive reviews, not many researchers address this novel in their academic studies. One among the few is Nadkarni and Subramanian (2020), who discuss *The Gauntlet* as the intertext of *Jumanji* (1995).

This study aims to address how food and culture are harmoniously represented in Karuna Riazi's middle grade novel, *The Gauntlet*. Middle grade books belong to one category of children's literature whose target readers and the story's protagonists are around the age of eight to thirteen or fourteen (Langston, 2021; Sullivan, 2021). In the context of children's literature, any discussions on food have become common topics among the researchers in the last three decades (Gasperini, 2022). Gasperini further argues that studying food in children's literature provides insights on how children absorb their born-culture through what, how and when they eat.

Although studying food in children's literature is nothing new, most discussions are still clustered among Western, American, or African culture. Therefore, the researchers believe that it is significance to examine the topic within the context of South Asian Muslim culture as *The Gauntlet* represents. This study, thus, is expected to enrich the discussion of food and culture in children's literature in terms of diversity and multiculturalism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children's Literature

In a very simple definition, children's literature is defined as "books which are good for children" (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1999, p. 15). Further, Lesnik-Oberstein elaborates that the term 'good' particularly refers to emotional and moral values. In another definition, Lynch-Brown et al. (2014) specify the books as "good-quality trade books." A trade-book, add Lynch-Brown et al., is primarily for the purposes of entertainment and information by its design and content. Grenby (2008) provides four clauses to texts to be called children's literature. Those clauses agree with Lesnik-Oberstein and Lynch-Brown et al. as they require the texts to be in book form, intended primarily for children, intended to entertain and instruct them, and have a high textual.

Concerning the reading audience, Lynch-Brown et al. (2014) limit the age range from birth to adolescence. The age limit refers to the categories of children's literature based on the age of the readers. The categories mostly matter to librarians and booksellers on where to shelve books so that the readers can find the appropriately (Langston, 2021). They may range from concept books to young adult, with one type among them is middle-grade (MG) books.

The main pointers of middle-grade books include the age limit of the target readers and the protagonists, the word count, the content, and the themes. Langston (2021) details that the target audience of this category commonly falls between eight to twelve year old. In lower middle-grade sub-category, the age limit range between seven to ten year old and eleven to fourteen year old for the upper middle-grade. Meanwhile, the protagonists in middle-grade books are commonly a year or two older than the age of the target readers. The word count varies from 25,000 to 45,000 words, with ten to fifteen thousand words shorter for the lower and fifteen to twenty thousand words more for the upper MG. Furthermore, the content should be free from profanity, graphic violence, or sexuality with themes commonly highlight the issues of friends and family, the character's immediate world and their relationship to it.

Food in Children's Literature

'Food is culture,' thus writes Massimo Montanari (2006) in his book devoted to propose that all food is cultural, started from when it is produced, prepared, and eaten. This proposition implies that food is 'never just something to eat'. It carries meanings of 'fundamental preoccupations, ideas, and beliefs in society' (Daniel, 2006). Montanari's proposition reflects that food is fundamental to culture, therefore, to life (Keeling & Pollard, 2009).

Since food is fundamental to life, Keeling and Pollard (2009) further argue that food may also recur throughout literature. In children's literature, food can be omnipresent as a motif. Daniel (2006) also asserts that food fantasies are good vehicles to deliver cultural messages, with one of it teaches on how children should eat correctly.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis to examine the representation of food as a cultural marker in Karuna Riazi's *The Gauntlet* (2017). The primary data are narrative

depictions of food and food-related contexts selected from the novel. Supporting data include scholarly references on food studies, children's literature, and cultural representation to contextualize and support the interpretation. The analysis is guided by the assumption that food functions not only as narrative detail but also as a symbolic device reflecting identity, belonging, and values. Drawing from Montanari's (2006) and Daniel's (2006) frameworks on food as culture, the study focuses on the socio-cultural meanings attached to specific food events such as family gatherings, mealtimes, and hospitality scenes.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Karuna Riazi's *The Gauntlet* started with Farah Mirza, a young Bangladeshi Muslim girl, celebrating her twelfth birthday. She could not really enjoy her birthday party since the only guests her age were her two best friends, Essie and Alex. Also, Farah still had to carefully watch Ahmad, her seven-year-old baby brother who suffered from ADHD. The situation takes an unexpected turn when Farah mistook a mysterious board game called *The Gauntlet of Blood and Sand* as her birthday present from her aunt. When Farah and her friends activated the game out of curiosity, Ahmad was pulled inside the game and disappeared without a trace. To save Ahmad, Farah, Essie and Alex went to the treacherous, puzzle-filled world of the Gauntlet. Inside, they had to face mechanical creatures, tricky riddles, and dangerous challenges set by the game's mastermind, called *The Architect*. Farah and her friends should rush against time to win the game or else they would be trapped forever.

In addition to the central adventure, the story presents various descriptions of food as part of the narrative technique to introduce cultural values. Through these food descriptions, the novel not only shows Farah's Bangladeshi Muslim background but also reflects the culture's perspective on when, what, and how food is consumed. Concerning the timing and what food to eat, the researchers identify at least three food events in the story: family gatherings, tea time, and breakfast time.

Family Gathering

The example of family gathering depicted in Riazi's *The Gauntlet* is Farah's twelfth birthday party. During the party, the first serving introduced in the story is chenna murki, Ahmad's favorite snack. It is the Bangladeshi treat made from the soft, tender, marble-

sized morsels of sweet cheese that the rest of her family likely to devour (Riazi, 2017, p. 6). Unlike most members of her family, Farah did not eat sweets. Later, during her adventure in the Gauntlet, Farah also expressed her reluctance towards sweet treats and preferred savory and spicy snacks like samosas or pakoras, other treats her family commonly had for snacking.

Her friends were drooling, but Farah had an ache nuzzling its way into her jaw just looking at the treats. They were far too sweet for her. She preferred her mother's savory and spicy snacks: the various arrays of vegetable pakora that was fried on Ramadan nights to break their fast, potato and pea filled samosas, ... (Riazi, 2017, p. 236).



Figure 1: Chenna murki (left), Samosa (middle), Pakora (right)

Chenna murki is very popular in India and Bangladesh. The sweet treat is commonly served in special occasions like birthday parties or festivals (Amrita, 2023; Cate, 2021). Meanwhile, both samosa and pakora are fried dishes, commonly plated as evening snacks or appetizers (Abitbol, 2021; Benayoun, 2021). This selection of culinary items signifies traditional snacks commonly associated with festive South Asian gatherings. Farah's preference for savory items like samosas and pakoras over the sweet chenna murki favored by her younger brother Ahmad reflects individual taste as a marker of personal identity within familial settings.

Tea Time

Another food events described in the novel, is tea time. It is when Farah and her friends were inside the Gauntlet, trying to save her brother from the game. On their way of entering the city of Paheli, the three friends met Madame Nasirah, who invited them to her tea stall and shelter them from the sand storm. She then brought “a silver tray towards them” and “set a small gold-rimmed glass before each of them.” Each of the kids magically got different kind of tea; “the herbal, amber-golden mint tea” for Alex, creamy chai with a faint scent of milk for Farah, and ginger tea for Essie. When asked how she knew their

preferences, Madame Nasirah answered, “the teapot knows what the guest needs,” then provided the fresh cookies with dates for them (Riazi, 2017, pp. 47–48).



Figure 2: Mint Tea (left), Chai (middle), Ginger Tea (right)

Serving tea to welcome guests, says Taylor (2025), is a cultural practice that fosters a sense of warmth, friendship and hospitality between the hosts and the guests. It is what Madame Nasirah did to welcome Farah, Essie, and Alex who were struggling for help in the middle of a sand storm. Madame Nasirah wanted to ensure the kids that she was a friend who could help them to face the challenges of the Gauntlet. Therefore, she thought that “introductions and tea are a fine place to start” (Riazi, 2017, p. 46).

Furthermore, Taylor (2025) also asserts that the serving of tea to the guest has become a tradition that dates back centuries and stretches across country and continent. Therefore, the types of tea may vary for each country and people’s preferences may also differ. In the novel, the magic teapot knew the tea preference of each kid. Alex was very fond of mint tea, the one their Moroccan friend’s mother used to make for them. In Morocco, mint tea is a symbol of warmth, hospitality, and deep-rooted tradition, where sharing a cup is a gesture of friendship and respect (Massouri, 2024). It is the same with chai, the one Farah got. Chai is seen as a traditional South Asian custom, perceived as a sign of hospitality (Arora, 2022). Meanwhile, the ginger tea Essie received is well known for its health benefits, providing relief for digestive discomforts and other common ailments (*Ginger Tea Benefits*, 2024; Luna, 2024; Mike, 2020).

Breakfast Time

The other food event that the novel portrays is breakfast time. The event is depicted before Farah’s adventure in the city of Paheli with Alex and Essie to find Ahmad. In the morning after spending the night at Madame Nasirah’s place, the three friends decided to depart to the city when Madame Nasirah served “proper breakfast” to feed them. The breakfast was fresh spinach pies with warm milk to firm their bones (Riazi, 2017, p. 70).



Figure 3: Spinach Pie (left), Warm Milk (right)

Breakfast represents a healthy habit and is associated with positive health outcomes (Agostoni & Brighenti, 2010). It is said to be the most important meal of the day (Fortini, 2008), especially for children since they need essential nutrients to fuel their bodies and minds for the day ahead (NewHorizon25, 2024). Therefore, breakfast for children should have balanced composition. In other word, it should be healthy and proper as Madame Nasirah said. A healthy breakfast should be nutrient-dense, low in sugar, and high in protein and fiber (Hershey, 2013). The breakfast madame Nasirah served the kids might meet these requirements since she provided them with fresh spinach pies and warm milk. An easy spinach pie has fresh spinach, fat-free cheese, and egg among its ingredients (Farmer, 2020). All those ingredients, along with the milk, are included in the food pyramid rebuild based on the principles of high-nutrient eating (Fuhrman, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of food representations in Karuna Riazi's *The Gauntlet* reveals how culinary elements serve as more than narrative embellishments. They function as significant cultural markers that ground the protagonist's identity in her South Asian Muslim background. The novel integrates cultural values such as hospitality, familial warmth, and resilience into its adventurous storyline by highlighting food scenes in family gatherings, tea time, and breakfast. These moments do not only provide comfort and familiarity for Farah but also become meaningful sites where cultural memory and belonging are affirmed.

Furthermore, the study shows that food operates as a narrative device that supports the protagonist's journey both emotionally and strategically. Farah's ability to draw strength from her cultural knowledge reflects the empowering potential of heritage in overcoming adversity. In this regard, *The Gauntlet* offers young readers portrayals of identity while inviting broader audiences into a space of cultural empathy. The novel thus contributes to the growing body of children's literature that emphasizes diversity,

inclusion, and the importance of everyday cultural practices such as food in shaping one's sense of self.

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