



Title: **Dates and Masala**

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Illustrations: Yasser Jueisa Year of Publication: 2021 Pages: 207

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About the book

Dates and Masala was one of three novels shortlisted for the Young Adult category of the 2021 Etisalat Prize for Arabic Children's Literature. The novel, aimed at readers aged 10 to 16, is a culinary travel coming-of-age set between Sharjah, UAE and Kochi, India, which includes twelve Emirati and Indian recipes at the end. Mohamed Nabulsi is a Jordanian author and disability-rights trainer who lives in Sharjah, UAE.

Sample translation

Translated from Arabic by Marcia Lynx Qualey

The day we moved into our new house was massively busy. The complex details of the move—which were managed by my father and older brother—caused headaches for the whole family. But our relocation to that house was just temporary, until they finished construction on our new home. That meant we had to leave all our memories behind in my grandmother's old house, which was going to be demolished. It had become too expensive for us to keep up, so we were building a big modern house, which was a lot more exciting than settling into this temporary place.

We lumbered into that temporary house in the Sharqan neighborhood of Sharjah. Since all our furniture had already been dropped off, the house was a total mess. Mama supervised getting everything in its correct place, which was a big job when you thought about it, but it was an even bigger job to work under her eagle-eyed supervision, as she repeated her famous saying, "Mark my words . . . It's worth it. Wallah!"

Mama divvied up the tasks: she assigned my sisters Mira and Maithaa to take care of the bedrooms, while my brother Mansour was told to help Sharaf set up the majlis and the living room. My father didn't need any prodding to get to work on his office and library, which was full of books and didn't require Mama's supervision. As for me, I volunteered to help our housekeeper Sarah in the kitchen, with all the kitchen stuff. This had been my favorite place in the old house, and I'd



memorized every corner of it. Plus, if I helped arrange the kitchen today, that would make it easier for me to know all its nooks and crannies in the future.

When I saw the space for the first time, I gasped. "What a kitchen! It's enormous!"

As for Sarah, she just smacked her forehead, since the task of cleaning the house would fall to her. Cooking mostly fell to Mama, and sometimes to me. Like my grandmother—may God have mercy on her soul—Mama was keen to cook the food herself, since food brought the family together, and I'd picked it up from them. I was the only one who could stand in for Mama when it came to cooking; she wouldn't rely on Sarah or even my sisters in the kitchen.

While it was true that the kitchen cabinets looked a little old-fashioned, they were made of a sturdy oak, and there was a big marble table in the center of the room, which could be used by whoever was cooking. Fortunately, the cleaning company had gotten in ahead of us, and the kitchen was already spotless. So all Sarah had to do was scan the shelves and put the dishes and utensils in them in some orderly fashion, so that they'd be easy to reach. I was lucky to be tall enough to handle the top shelves without any trouble. I put my cooking utensils in the lower cabinet near the stove, for easy access, and then I put the serving dishes in the upper cupboards. That way, it would be easy to take them down when the food was finished. As for the cups, they were classified according to their use, and either went above the kitchen sink or next to the water cooler. I arranged the spices and a wide assortment of dried herbs according to how often we used them, putting them in a cupboard close to the stove. Then I cleaned the fridge and organized the food inside, quickly checking to see what was available now . . .

It occurred to me that—after such a long day— what the family needed was a quick, light meal. I mulled over several options.

All that was left to take care of was the box with spoons, knives, and forks, and a few other smaller items that had to be put away in drawers. As I opened the drawers, I noticed a fork in the depths of one of them.

What's this? I wondered. A fork attached to the drawer?

The fork looked as though it were the handle of a secret compartment, hidden beneath the bottom of the drawer!

I thanked Sarah for everything she'd done and asked her to go help my mother. I wanted to find out what this secret drawer was hiding all on my own. If I hadn't found these things in a secret drawer in the kitchen, I wouldn't have been particularly impressed by the small objects I found when I opened it. There was an old, embroidered journal made from handcrafted paper, and inside were handwritten recipes in English. Alongside it, I found a small, beautifully decorated wooden box that contained ground spices and dried herbs that gave off a pleasant smell.

I looked for the name of the person who had owned the notebook and found it written on the first page in elegant English handwriting:

*This notebook belongs to Fahmida Aragal
Cochin – Sharjah*

There was no other information. But every recipe was written with care and had a few illustrations. Plus, under each recipe there was the name of the recipe's author and address, and some of them had different dates—maybe the date that the recipe had been cooked for the first time, or maybe the date that she'd met the person who had given her the recipe. Some of the dates



went back as far as the 1980s.

All of this sat in front of me for a while. Then I took everything out of the secret drawer, setting these things in another small bottom drawer for the time being, while I finished arranging things and cooked something.

Maybe it would be simplest to cook hamsa nakhi "hummus," since it was easy, light, and healthy. Hamsa nakhi was a popular Emirati dish that could be eaten in a bunch of different ways.

I had to take out a bowl for the chickpeas and wash them well. Then I put them on the burner for a while, until they were boiled. At the same time, I fried up some onions and pine nuts in a little olive oil until they turned a nice golden brown, and I chopped up some potatoes and parsley, and then mixed those ingredients in with my chickpeas. Following my grandmother's recipe, I added salt, turmeric, cardamom, cinnamon, plus red and black pepper. Then I added some raisins, which I bought in bulk from the Iranian market in Sharjah, and a bay leaf. I stirred these ingredients on a low fire, and even though I was focused on my cooking, the notebook still loomed large in my mind. A notebook that was put together like that must surely have a story!

When the delicious smell of the chickpeas started to spread through the house, Mama came into the kitchen. Like me, she was surprised by its size and style. It didn't take her long to figure out how I'd arranged everything, and she started to prepare Arab coffee and karak chai tea. She called Sarah, and then the three of us set the wide marble table that stood in the middle of the kitchen. I put out a few dishes with Lebanese labneh drizzled with olive oil and a basket of toasted black-sesame rusks.

It was enough for Mama to call out a single time: "The food's ready!" In seconds, everyone was gathered around the round marble table. They all ate ravenously, praising the nakhi, saying it was just like our grandmother's. They were all talking and laughing while I was in another place completely, with the decorated notebook.

What was the secret of this notebook? Whose was it? What were her stories?

Recipe from the end of the book

Hamsa Nakhi

Ingredients

- *Two cups of boiled chickpeas, or "nakhi"
- *1/2 cup raisins
- *Half a bunch of chopped parsley
- *One onion, finely chopped
- *One teaspoon turmeric
- *One teaspoon cardamom
- *One teaspoon ground red pepper
- *One teaspoon cinnamon powder



- *One potato, cut into cubes
- * $\frac{1}{4}$ cup pine nuts
- *One quarter cup vegetable oil
- *One tablespoon lemon juice
- *A few bay leaves
- *Salt, to taste

Method

1. Sauté onions in oil with salt and black pepper.
2. Add potatoes and raisins and stir.
3. Add chickpeas, parsley, chickpea water, spices, and bay leaves, and leave to boil until soft.
4. Serve hot and garnish with coriander leaves.