

Food and Self in Aimee Bender's *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* and Judith M Fertig's *The Cake Therapist*

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ABSTRACT-- *The paper aims to locate the presence of Food and Self in Aimee Bender's "The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake" and Judith M Fertig's 'The Cake Therapist.' Aimee Bender is an American short story writer and novelist, celebrated for her surreal plots and Judith M Fertig is an award winning cook book author. The Cake Therapist is her debut novel. The novels explore the connection between food and personal identity. The novels portray the protagonists' journey from awareness to self- discovery through food. Food is the central theme in both the novels. Food is used as a metaphor in literary texts because of its universality. The novels abound in magical menus and gastronomic metaphors which engage all senses of the readers. In the novels, an analysis of a character's attitude towards food reveals their identity.*

Keywords--*Food literature, Food and identity, Gastronomic metaphors.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In "Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature," Scott Pollard and Kara Keeling mentioned "If food is fundamental to life and a substance upon which civilizations and cultures have built themselves, then food is also fundamental to the imagination and the imaginary arts." (Keeling and Pollard 5) Even though food has, for long, been part of literature, food as a focus in literature originated in recent times. Food related images in literature, enhance the realism of the work by appealing to the reader's senses, when used with rich descriptions and details. Brad Kessler asserts, "Food in fiction engages all the reader's senses (taste, touch, feel, sight, and smell)." (Kessler 151) He asserts that food serves as memory triggers, awakening past experiences in the characters by taking them to a bygone time where they had a similar sensory experience. In this way, food offers instruments of powerful imagery which helps in creating a peculiar mood, conveying an idea and thereby expanding the realism of the context.

Kessler states that food in literature serves as a cultural signifier. He defines food as "freighted with meaning. Just as in life, food in fiction signifies. It means more than itself. It is symbolic. It opens doors to double and triple meaning." (Kessler 156) Food is used in literary texts because of its universality. Since food is central to life, meanings

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can be easily conveyed to the readers. Food and drink have a long-standing relationship with literature. Food is used as a metaphor in literary texts from time immemorial. In the Book of Genesis in the Bible, “forbidden fruit” stands as a metaphor. Adam and Eve consume the “forbidden fruit” of “Tree of Knowledge” which resulted in man's first disobedience to god as the fruit stands for temptation and sin. In Indian epics too, food is associated with rituals and acts as metaphor. “Sweet food, gram, and Friday have always been associated with Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune, while sour food has always been associated with Alakshmi, the goddess of misfortune.” (Pattanaik 33)

Aimee Bender’s wordplay and use of metaphors set her apart from her contemporary writers. She combined the psychiatric and artistic techniques to enhance her writing and converts the ordinary into extraordinary. She used surreal metaphors to portray intimate relationships and emotions. This is evident in her novel “The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake.” In the novel, she gives a touch of magic to convert the ordinary life situations into extraordinary. In an interview with LitReactor, she said, “I like metaphor and I like strangeness as a way into emotion. It's just something I respond to very viscerally[...] the surprise for me was that people responded better to that than my faked-out, tricked-up realistic fiction.”

Bender uses food as a powerful metaphor to unveil the feelings of her characters in the novel. She uses magical realism to explore the importance of food in a person's life. The protagonist of the novel, Rose discovers her uncanny ability to taste the emotions of her mother in her ninth birthday cake. Sickened by this unusual power, she seeks out food from vending machines, from cans- food that tastes of the emptiness of factories and not the pungency of human emotions. Rose's family possesses secrets; with her magical power to taste the feelings of people in the food they have prepared is easily transferred as the dilemma of a kid among insensitive adults. In Aimee Bender's “The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake” and Judith Fertig's “The Cake Therapist,” food bears various meanings that help to drive the actions of plot. The writers use food as symbols of narrative history, emotions, memories, relationships.

Judith M Fertig is an award-winning cookbook author. *Saveur Magazine* described her as “heartland cookbook icon.” The idea for her book, *The Cake Therapist* came from her Midwestern roots. She once said: “My old Ohio hometown really has transformed itself into a bridal district, where the old five-and-dime has become a wedding dress boutique, an old shoe store now plans honeymoon travel, and so on.” The Millcreek Valley represents her home town where the protagonist, Claire 'Neely' Davis comes back to start over her life. In the first chapter, the author introduces Millcreek Valley as 'a bridal district'. Neely's friend Roshonda Taylor is a wedding planner and the “old brick five-and-dime had become an upscale boutique.” (Fertig 3)

The novel tells the story of a pastry chef, Claire O' Neil, who returns to her hometown of Millcreek Valley to open a new bakery of her own. Her magical talent of being able to read people's emotions helps her to figure out the mysteries and sorrows in their life. She uses it effectively to customize the perfect cake for her customers thereby earning reputation and profit. When Neely begins to taste a strange flavour, it leads her to a story from the past. She is a woman searching for answers in her own life but she also helps others to find answers in their own life. With her magical talent, she unearths a mystery buried deep in her home land. Judith shows how family, food and compassion can reunite the people and that love has the power to heal any wound.

“Davis crafts exquisite cakes and pastries, but her real gift is 'seeing' people as flavours,” says Fertig. “For her, a flavour is a hyperlink to a feeling, which is the heart of someone's story.” Food is central to the plot of the novel. Each month, her bakery, called Rainbow cake, features a different pair of flavours. January for example, is “dark chocolate and coffee, those pick-me-ups we all needed to start the day-or a new year.” (Fertig 13) Fertig has found a new writing style to narrate imaginative stories. She said, “I've always believed that food is a way to tell a story through all five senses. The Cake Therapist adds a sixth sense.”

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research undertaking tries to analyze the theme of food and self in Aimee Bender's “The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake” and Judith M Fertig's “The Cake Therapist.” This study is carried out by keeping Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's masterpiece “The Physiology of Taste” as a theoretical reference. Brillat-Savarin's famous statement, “Tell me what you eat and I shall tell you what you are” is the basis for the research on the bond between food and self.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Metaphors are powerful tools used by writers to convey a deeper meaning. In literature, food represents various things like relationships, identity, social status, and family. In “Curry at Work: Nibbling at the Jewel in the Crown,” Mark Stein describes the different functions of food metaphors:

“In the world of fiction they are a reminder of the material world; they can also serve to remind us of the history (and presence) of exploitation; as we all need food, food metaphors point to a shared humanity, if under greatly variegated circumstances; food metaphors therefore often contain the power to affect sensually... At the same time, food and eating are symbolic practices... food metaphors . . . help texts to reach out.” (Stein 147-8)

In Aimee Bender's and Judith Fertig's novels, metaphors are fuelled with images associated with food and drink. In *The Cake Therapist*, each food stands for different metaphors. Cinnamon makes one remember, orange is a wakeup call, coffee and chocolate for bitterness or loss, and spice for grief. Neely says, “Every flavor, I knew, was a shortcut to a feeling. Sorrow. Joy. Anticipation. Fear.” (Fertig 11) When the bride-to-be Ellen approaches Neely for cake tasting, what she feels is a hint of spice. According to her, spice symbolises grief. Soon she finds out that it was the grief she felt for her father's lost and thus Neely prepares the perfect cake with a slight hint of spice. This spice feeds the grief of the bride making her choose that cake for her wedding. In “The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake,” each food offers an experience to Rose. The food carries the message or emotion of the cook. Rose's mother's food is filled with sorrow, guilt, pain etc. Food in the novel acts as metaphors of the cook's oppressed feelings. Rose says; “food is full of feelings,” (Bender 49) when she eats her mother's home-made food.

In many cultures, people have expressed gender differences through the “production, distribution, and consumption” of food. Women are universally in charge of cooking. Until twentieth century, majority of women were confined to the four walls of their home. They lacked the freedom enjoyed by men, thus they took advantage in the household duties through which they could exercise power. Bynum says:

“[b]y means of food, women controlled themselves and their world. Bodily functions, sensations, fertility, and sexuality; husbands, mothers, fathers, children;... the boundaries of one’s own self were all controlled by abstaining from and bestowing food. “(Bynum 193-94)

Several female authors have identified and described the complex relationship between food and women in their novels. Judith Fertig, in her novel *The Cake Therapist* uses cooking as a symbol to portray the positive side of domesticity of women. Neely, the protagonist makes a business out of her culinary talent. She says with pride, “Rainbow Cake was better than I could ever have imagined it.” (Fertig 15) The novelist emphasizes women’s special bond with food that plays a role in shaping her identity.

In “The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake,” Rose’s mother unknowingly uses her food to express her feelings. When Rose tastes the food made by her mother, she says “it seemed that my mouth was also filling with the taste of smallness, the sensation of shrinking, of upset, tasting a distance I somehow knew was connected to my mother.”(Bender 11) This can be an indication of how women use food to control others. Mothers have a very crucial role to play in the food consumption of the family. Mother’s identity formation as “informed caretaker, not an imaginative chef” refers to the depiction of a wise mother who seeks for serving “proper” food to her children. In *The Cake Therapist*, Judith Fertig shows the intensity of a person’s desire for the food made by his or her mother. “Food and cultural studies” point out the connection between the private and public consumption of food:

“Home-cooked meals are seen as imbued with the warmth, intimacy and personal touch which are seen as markers of the private sphere and in opposition to foods which are the products of the public, industrialised and anonymous system of food production.” (Ashley, Hollows, Jones and Taylor 124)

When Neely receives her mother’s phone call to invite her for a dinner at her mother’s place, Neely says: “tapped my phone off and felt as if I had just been enveloped in a warm, familiar sweater. My mom’s home cooking.” (Fertig 46)

A. Food and Identity

In “Introduction: Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures,” Gardaphé and Xu explains, “Ethnic identity formations have been shaped by experiences of food productions and services, culinary creativities, appetites, desires, hunger, and even vomit.” (Gardaphe and Xu 5) He describes the French sociologist Claude Fischler’s argument in “Food, Self and Identity” that states “that food constitutes the self. . . . The saying, 'You are what you eat', bespeaks not only the biochemical relationship between us and our food but also the extent to which food practices determine our systems of beliefs and representations.” (Fischler 7) Food and its consumption processes are ways of explaining a culture’s rooted ethnic identity. Food has proved to be is one of the most fundamental and quotidian ways by which one can differentiate his identity from others or for an entire community to make a distinction from the other. In the novels, when a character is portrayed as eating, serving or cooking, it means something deeper. The food a character eats or refuse to eat, the dining mate, and the role of food in the character’s life describes the cultural identity of the character.

Psychoanalytic theories state that eating habits plays a prominent role in developing self-identity and in describing a specific role as in a social class or family. Even though food imagery has long been acknowledged as a part of literature, psychological theories have headed to the analysis of food and its consumption as a universal experience. The theme of food is not bound by social limits, thus many writers selects this topic to work on.

Judith M Fertig's *The Cake Therapist* is a story based on a woman's quest for her own individuality and happiness. Neely returns to Millcreek Valley, her home town when her life seems to fall upside down. When she reached her home-town she achieves self-confidence. She returns to Millcreek Valley in order to pursue her own identity. She discovers it there in food, in preparation of cakes in her bakery, Rainbow Cake. She says in the opening chapter when she reaches Millcreek Valley; "As I unloaded the smaller boxes of bakery gear from the truck and started putting everything away, I had that soothing sense of making order out of chaos." (Fertig 8) Roberta and Thomas Edgerton, the bride and groom who visits Neely for cake tasting for their wedding portray how food choices denote one's personality. Sweetness as an emotional experience is often craved when we are unable to process sadness; when we are looking for 'sweet' experiences in life. Thomas Edgerton's attitude towards life is evident in his craving for sweet. Thomas was satisfied with Neely's every cake: he says; "They have all been delicious." (Fertig 134) When Neely gives him extra cupcakes, he smiles gratefully. His craving for sugar symbolises his happy and sweet personality. Neely says; "That was what had made Thomas happy over the years. Anything sweet." (Fertig 131)

While Roberta was indifferent to every sweet cake made by Neely. The first thing she asks Neely is to give carrot cake. The carrot cake prepared by Neely had a saltier flavour from both the batter and the cream cheese frosting and the flavour Neely felt was salty when she saw Roberta. A craving for saltiness is often associated with individuals with high stress levels. Salt cravings indicate that we are trying to solidify ourselves because we are overwhelmed and afraid. This becomes evident when Neely says, "The salty flavour I was getting from her was all about her fear of being discovered." (Fertig 132) When Neely sprinkled a little salt in every cupcakes, Roberta was pleased. Soon her fear gives way to contentment and she discloses her personal fear to Thomas and Neely.

In "The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake," Aimee's writing address critical matters of food and eating which are especially used in connection to identity and freedom. The story is composed of three periods of time. Each differs in Rose, the protagonist's perspective to food and eating. Her attitude towards food is same as that of an ordinary nine year child in the first part. In the first chapter, when she sees her mother cooking lemon cake for her birthday, she experiences great joy. Not able to control her extreme desire to taste the cake, she steals a piece from the cake without her mother knowing. But as soon as she tastes it, her life turns upside down. From this moment, her innocence of a child is given way to confusions and traumas of an adult. In the second chapter onwards, she develops an anorexic attitude towards food and eating. She skips meals from her home and completely relies on vending machines and tinned food for her survival. When she tastes a pie prepared by her mother, she shouts, "I tasted you, get out my mouth." (Bender 85) Even though the theme of identity is portrayed throughout the novel, it is emphasized prominently in the last part of the novel when Rose discovers her identity and regains her appetite. She uses her talent to analyze the subtle layers in a food. Food, being central to our identity, determines the way in which a human being is psychologically, socially and biologically constructed. This is portrayed through the novels. The protagonists in both the novels have an irreplaceable relationship with food. By examining what and "how much a character eats, as well as how food is prepared, shared, served, or avoided, readers can probe into a character's ethnicity, status, and all segments of their cultural and personal identity." The relationship with food varies upon person to person. In "The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake," the protagonist Rose has a troubled relationship with food but by the end of the novel, she accepts the reality and evolve as a matured person as she

leaves her routine of starving and eats food without any hesitation. While Neely in *The Cake Therapist* uses food as a powerful tool to regain her self-confidence and to rise as a dominant figure in the society.

IV. CONCLUSION

This article is written to respond to the hypothesis about the importance of the theme of food in contemporary literature, namely, Judith M Fertig's *The Cake Therapist* and Aimee Bender's "The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake." It explores the extent to which the chosen novels deal with this issue. The theme of food in contemporary literature symbolizes embodiment of a private relationship. The topic of food is represented in a more complex form nowadays. Food is used as a symbol in the novels. Through this symbol, the personal identity struggles, as a frustration and secret fears, are revealed. In "The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake" and *The Cake Therapist*, the novelists, with the help of food explore the personal life of the characters. In the novels, the food is used more than just a literary detail which provides a realistic visual image to the readers and establishes the relationship between food and self.

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