

**Healing Power of Food in Erica Bauermeister's
*The School of Essential Ingredients***

**Dr. V. Sangeetha
S. Dhivya, II M.A. English Literature**

=====
Food is an essential part of human life as shelter and clothing and it is necessary for survival. A person's basic drive for food is to satisfy hunger because it gives the required energy for all kinds of human activities like growth, repair and reproduction. Food acts a tension reliever too. Different levels of food consumption help people to feel free from loneliness, boredom, anger and frustration. Moreover, food is interlinked with the physical, economic, psychological, intellectual and social activities of a person. Therefore, nothing could be possible without food because it makes human beings to stay strong and be active in day to day life. "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well" (Woolf 14).

The importance of food in making human beings to stay healthy is well expressed in the novel *The School of Essential Ingredients* by Erica Bauermeister. The entire story progresses with 'food' as its centre which is expressed through the character Lillian and her eight students of the cooking school. The common theme of the novel is the ability of food and cooking in connecting people together. Through this novel, Erica suggests that the act of cooking gives opportunity to people to stay focused, which people miss in their day to day life. She also adds that those who pay attention to their senses are leading a fulfilled and a happier life. Through her evocative cooking terms, Erica Bauermeister has added flavours to her characters in the novel and to the reader's appetite.

The emotions of Erica Bauermeister in describing 'food' has helped her to describe the characters in the novel. For example, the character Lillian sees that the softness and warmth of the cookies satisfies the need of the human beings than the food which is crisp and cooled. Erica also adds that the spices are the carriers of emotions and memories and it plays a vital role in generating the reactions of the people towards their fellow beings. "She discovered that people seemed to react to spices much as they did to other people, relaxing instinctively into some, shivering into a kind of emotional rigor mortis when encountering others" (Bauermeister13).

Food is considered as a natural healing substance which is proved in the novel through the character Lillian. Lillian has a strong belief in food as some people have in religion. After the death of her father, Lillian's mother hid behind the pages of a book. During that time, Lillian discovered that a perfectly prepared dish and a few 'essential ingredients' has the ability to bring her mother back to reality. So, Lillian with the help of Abuelita, who is the owner of the grocery shop treated her

mother's illness by giving her potatoes, adding milk chocolate in coffee and apple in her meal. Gradually, Lillian started the cooking school and restaurant. Her students brought their complicated lives to the class and got healed with the help of food.

The students of Lillian's cooking school include Claire, a young mother who struggles with her family conditions; Antonia, an Italian kitchen designer who is struggling to adapt to American life; Tom, a widower who lost his wife because of breast cancer; Isabelle, who suffers from short-term memory; Carl and Helen, a married couple whose union seemed to be a surprise to the other students in the class; Chloe, a young woman who is working as a busser at the restaurant and Ian, a computer programmer who is socially isolated. Chef Lillian's flavours and techniques in creating new dishes transformed the lives of her students because she has made food as a solution and a source of diversion for her students' problems.

Isabelle, who suffers from short-term memory loss in her old age got recovered from her illness when she consumed the nourishing and delicious food from Lillian's restaurant. Claire acquired the ability to take control of her life and herself while preparing the crab dish. In the same way, the lessons on baking cake brought back Helen's memory that helped her to join with her husband.

Food heals not only the body but also the mind. In the novel *The School of Essential Ingredients*, kneading a dough is compared to swimming and walking, which keeps part of the mind busy and allows the rest of the mind to go anywhere it wants or needs to go. The art of cooking teaches the lesson that the simple things can become an extraordinary one if it is prepared with great care. Cooking comforts not only the people who cook but also the people who taste the cooked dishes. The food cooked by a loved one for someone special exhibits the love and care shown for their fellow beings. Thus, food helps to create bonding between people which is similar to the union that happens in Lillian's cooking school.

The characters in the novel has entered the cooking school for various reasons and they find there the 'essential ingredients' that help to change their life and analyse what they lack in their life. Thus, it proves that food acts as a medicine for people in day to day life.

Many people in the world are eating just to fill their stomach and satisfy their hunger, without taking care to choose the right food. The right choice of food gives energy and vitality to a person. So, the food should be a nutrient rich one. "The food you eat can be either the safest and most powerful form of medicine or the slowest form of poison" (Wigmore 9). Eating food either heals or harms a person. But harmfulness of the food too can be avoided by consuming right quality and quantity of food. Thus, food should be eaten as a medicine from the early years of life otherwise medicine should be eaten as food during the last years of life.

Works Cited

- Bauermeister, Erica. *The School of Essential Ingredients*. Berkley Books, 2009.
Wigmore, Ann. *The Hippocrates Diet and Health Program*. Avery Publishers, 1909.
Woolf, Virginia. *The Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*. Oxford University Press, 1992.
-

Dr. V. Sangeetha
Professor and Head
Department of English
Periyar University
Salem 636 011
sk19@periyaruniversity.ac.in

S. Dhivya
II. M.A. English Literature
Periyar University
Salem 636 011
jothisengodan191@gmail.com