

Psychological Reflection on the Role of Gustatory Emotions in Aimee Bender's *The Particular Sadness Of A Lemon Cake*

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Postmodern culture has been greatly stimulated by food images and the use of food as a metaphor. Current studies have opened doors in literary studies to look at how the employment of food imagery and metaphors symbolise multifaceted thoughts and profound meanings in literature. Literary food studies evaluate food symbolism to echo the cultural identity which comprises of assorted topics from societal position to sexual desire to gender relations. Food carries numerous meanings that serve to coerce the action of the plots, typify the characters, and replicate the culture. The writers use food and eating to signify cultural matters of reception, resistance and protection of civilisation. They also employ motifs of memory, emotions, relationships, power, and consumption.

Aimee Bender's *The Particular Sadness of a Lemon Cake* portrays the family of Rose Edelstein and her family members who undergo some disorder and confusion. The protagonist's mother has insomnia, her father detaches himself from the family, her brother Joseph disappears into wooden chairs, and Rose (protagonist) is left alone with the food psychic disorder. Literature has seen the rise of several fiction works that employ the use of food images. But in this novel, Aimee Bender brings out the unusual and unheard side of food preparation and the emotions carried by those who prepare it. In the shoes of Rose, the readers can see how the simple routine task of having a proper-meal turns out to be dreadful for a child of nine.

The food we eat has a dramatic influence on our physical and mental health. Recent research on the topic has depicted that our diet can have an impact on our mood. There is a strong relationship between food and atmosphere in emotionally distressed individuals. The neurotransmitters and neuromodulators are considered to be the basic units of chemical communication in the human system. Most of the neurotransmitters are deemed to be present in food, and they have a direct influence on our brain. Research has found that most of the people consume large quantities of food that are rich in carbohydrates. Consumption of foods that have high levels of carbohydrates helps people to elevate their mood with the rise of the serotonin levels in the brain.

Bad tastes and dislike towards a particular food item develops easily than good tastes and likes. An acquired distaste towards a specific dish is termed as food aversion in which the individual always associates a negative consequence (example: nausea and vomiting) of eating a particular food. Food aversion is said to be found common and remain persistent in both young and old individuals. The aversions have been reported to be long-lasting in a few individuals. The initial

rejection of new food is termed as ‘food neo-phobia’, and the condition can be reduced by exposure and consumption of a specific food item often. This condition is common with young children as an aversion towards a particular food item has a substantial impact on them. There are also futuristic possibilities of disgust shown towards that specific food item even after they are grown.

Taste is usually considered as being composed of four basic sensations – sweetness, saltiness, sourness and bitterness. Apart from the other senses, taste and smell are deemed to be highly subjective senses. The pleasure and displeasure of a particular sensation provided by any food are always stored in the subconscious level of the mind. Physical disgust towards food is linked to the cognitive, behavioural and physiological processes. The consumption of mother’s homemade lemon-chocolate cake for Rose Edelstein’s ninth birthday created a strong impact and made her realise the birth of the highest and most disturbing potential. The Los Angeles spring week of March made Rose associate her birthday with the bright sunny days that lay ahead of her. The pleasure of watching the stirring of eggs, sifting of flour and the bowl of chocolate icing and rainbow sprinkles made Rose realise her mother’s love and the challenges that involved in the process of baking a birthday cake.

Rose had developed a strong liking for sourness, and the whiff of warm citrus baked cake sprinkled with sugar invaded her senses. The first bite of the lemon-chocolate cake made her recognise that she has turned into a food sensor since she was able to identify the mood and emotions of the person who prepared the food. Here, the cake beneath the layers of chocolate and lemon zest prepared by her mother made her feel hollow and empty. A feeling that she has not experienced ever in her life, “in each bite: absence, hunger, spiralling, hollows” (Bender 10). For children, cakes baked for birthdays are always extraordinary, but Rose was not able to sense any happiness after eating her birthday cake. This identification of her extra-sensory proved to be an unnecessary load for a child who wanted to savour her birthday cake.

Rose was able to smell her mother’s attitude and mood in which she baked the cake. She was not able to recognise whether it was because of the bad lemon or old sugar or her mother’s woes that made her ninth birthday cake taste sorrowful: “I could feel the mountain swelling in my throat, an ache spreading into the lining of my neck” (Bender 11). Rose confessed to her mother that the cake she baked for her with love tasted ‘empty’ and made her feel deserted. The child was filled with anxiety and fear to eat her mother’s food and experience the same feeling of hollowness and emptiness. Rose’s relationship with her father was more like that of a stranger whereas her brother Joseph rarely interacted with her. Rose’s mother comforted her with soothing words, but her favourite child was Joseph. Her mother listened to Joseph keenly and nodded with encouragement whenever he spoke. Her brother and mother shared a special kind of intimacy which she did not receive from her mother and father.

Loneliness in an individual is also said to result in eating disorders. The deterioration of relationships and solitariness in life lead people to find comfort in food. They assume that the particular food item will present them with the sense of warmth that no human has provided them

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with in their life. Throughout the novel, Rose seemed to be detached from her family members and had a difficult time to express her strange disorder of tasting people's feelings to them. Her mother's roast chicken tasted weird, and Rose was left unnoticed by her family members at the dining table. At school, Rose spent the entire hour without any company by drinking the warm metallic water from the fountain pipes to erase the taste of the previously consumed foods. Day by day, she was able to feel the dominance of sadness in all the foods that she consumed. It was overbearing for a nine-year-old kid to go through this range of feelings and emotions. This food psychic disorder only made her feel out of the box and secluded her from people.

According to Fischler, consuming particular food objects is one primary way in which individuals can exercise "control over the body, the mind and therefore over identity...it is the first and probably the main means of intervening in the body, the favoured instrument of control over the self" (p 5). Her brother's best and only friend George Malcolm gave her company and lighted up the journey of ups and downs with her food choices. She confessed that something was wrong with her and George helped her to realise her extraordinary potential. His kindness and support gave Rose the capacity to bear with the emotions caused by her mother's cooking. Her brother Joseph reached out for her "the same way the desert blooms a flower now and then" (Bender 54). Rose craved for attention and love from her parents and brother, but it was George who offered it to her generously.

George made her taste varied foods produced by sellers in the city since she would be able to tell different things with unfamiliar people who created it. To name a few: he took her to a bakery on Beverly which produced the best batch of homemade cookies. She was given the chocolate chip cookie which tasted of 'tight anger'. Only now George and Rose identified her potential when they realised that the baker hated his job and did not like to bake cookies since he started his job. Next on line was the oatmeal cookie which tasted of hurriedness, prepared by a woman who was always late. Throughout the process of tasting and identifying each emotion and mood, George had much patience which made Rose develop a strong bond with him. She was then made to taste a yelling for love and loud homemade ham-and-cheese mustard sandwich prepared by the girlfriend of the shopkeeper. It was George who gave her the name 'magic food psychic': "I am a food psychic, I told myself, even though the thought of it made me want to crawl under the buildings and never come out" (Bender 67).

The food habits of children can be assumed to be influenced by the food choices and practises of their parents. Parents play a significant role in the pattern of food habits and preferences of young children. They can influence their children's food choice by making specific foods available and by acting as examples by their behaviour in particular situations. Usually, children tend to be afraid of new foods, and they do not readily accept to eat whatever is offered to them. Earlier experiences of a particular food are the primary determinants of the development of the acceptance pattern in children's menu. The concept of 'gatekeeper' denotes that in all families there is usually one person

who takes the primary responsibility for deciding which foods are to be served. The gatekeeper takes the job for the provision of food preparation in the family.

The food choices and preferences of a woman in the household are said to influence the family members and particularly children. Thus, we can see the significant role of parents and their food choices on children's eating pattern. People seem to have an innate preference for sweet tastes and avoidance of bitter flavours. The infants and their facial expressions are studied by giving them the flavours of sweetness and bitterness. Both adults and children seem to reject specific foods based on perceived taste, and the best predictors of individual willingness to try foods are the perceived taste and earlier experience of the food.

Rose's Mom loved to cook whereas Rose somehow wanted to skip the meals prepared by her at home. The result of Rose's super sensory power made her lose weight and also created an obsession over the emotions of strangers. The smell of fruit and leaven made her realise that her mother was preparing summer pie: "the taste was so bad that I could hardly keep it in my mouth" (Bender 73). Rose detested the preparation of baked goods by her mother, but she consumed all her cooked dinners without any sign of sadness and frown. She was burdened by the continuous thoughts of her next meal and the emotions that went into while preparation: "And, day in and day out, I had been faking enjoying faking at home, through the weekly gaps and silences between my parents, through my mother's bright and sleepless eyes, and for whatever reason, for that one time, I could not possibly pretend I liked her pie" (Bender 75).

After having a bite of her mother's summer pie, Rose confessed that she was able to feel her sadness and was desperate to get over the taste. Later, Rose was taken to the hospital, and the doctor's diagnosis was of no help to her, and she felt the same 'hollowness'. Rose had the immense pangs of loneliness in her heart since she was not normal like other people. Rose envied the people who were able to relish their meals without tasting any emotions in it. She did not know whether it was a boon or bane in her life. In her twelfth year, Rose found her mother's illicit affair by eating the family dinner of roast beef and potatoes. As a child, Rose was able to sense thick waves of guilt and romance of her dear mother in the dish. At the first bite, Rose instantly identified her mother's secret relationship. She locked this painful experience to herself and never wanted to confess it to her stranger father.

At the dinner table, the family rarely conversed with each other, and there was always an air of detachment between them. Rose's complicated relationship with food had steady growth every day. She became a surveyor of the meals cooked by her mother to know about her current mood status. Her gustatory senses were active and alert and she now attained the power of tracking and identifying produces that came from more than fifty states in the US. With the produce, she was able to locate Larry, the co-op president of the furniture company and the reason behind her mother's new romance. Her mother's work trip to Nova Scotia made Rose converse with her father and spend

some quality time with him after nearly twelve years of her birth. She craved for her father's attention which she never received from him since he was like a stranger in his own house.

Rose's mother used cooking as her pastime to forget her own disappointments and miseries in life. Her sleeping disorder made her to cook vigorously and serve her baked products to her family members. Her mother too like Rose craved for attention and appreciation for her meal preparation. The individuals use food to provide comfort during periods of stress and sadness. Foods are distinct from other objects that people may use to derive comfort because they are incorporated and taken into the body and so they produce physical, as well as psychological and emotional effects. Women with disorders associate food and eating with emotions and social-psychological expectations and needs. The feelings of anxiety, anger, disappointment, disgust, frustration, guilt, happiness, love, hate and nostalgia are readily associated with food. The selection of particular food objects for consumption may appear to be a highly personal choice, and it is also deeply rooted in substantial cultural and social systems.

The twelve-year-old Rose was overburdened and stuffed with information about her mother's relationship with Larry (president of the co-op). It was too strong and early for her age to know that her parents were flawed and messed with their personal lives. Rose chose to hide it from her father because her mother was her only source of comfort in the family. Contrary to the pie and her birthday cake, her mother's pretzels outstood as the best one for Rose. At one point in time, Rose was entirely drained because of the constant tasting of people's food to judge their moods. Joseph's strange behaviour of disappearance into the chairs diverted her to think about him. Few years after the total withdrawal of Joseph, Rose decided to use her superpower for a purpose. She spent her money on meals by travelling to different parts of the city as a food psychic. At the end of the novel, Rose came to know from her father that his father had a particular disorder where he was able to sense whether people were happy or unhappy just by entering into a room. She then realised that this sensor disorder runs in their family.

Taste also refers to the personal dispositions and preferences. The sensation of tasting involves registering the impression as pleasant or unpleasant. This impression provides the humans to judge the quality of their food experience through the immediate approval of the gustatory. Gustatory gratification is invoked as a prompt, sensed, hopeless pleasure. It also involves the pacification of hunger and the satisfaction of a bodily appetite. Food cannot be judged based on the gustatory taste because eating is bound to be an activity with private interests. Flavour is counted to be an individual experience, and it may vary from person to person. Flavour and tastes were the two things that Rose was never able to relish in her day-to-day meal after the consumption of her 'empty' birthday cake.

Barthes in *Empire of Signs* explains that "Food serves as a sign not only for themes, but also for situations; and this, all told, means a way of life that is emphasised, much more than expressed by it" (p 171-172). We can see that food connotes the images of a familiar and soothing way of life and

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also brings in nostalgia through consuming particular food objects. The conditions of postmodern society have made it increasingly difficult for individuals to form and sustain meaningful personal and social identities. At the same time, people feel compelled to engage in self-help behaviours to make themselves feel better. The notion of comfort food has become increasingly prominent. Food prepared in a traditional style has nostalgic or sentimental appeal and it provides one with psychological comfort - any food consumed by individuals, often during periods of stress evokes positive emotions and is associated with significant social relationships. For some cooking is a leisure activity that they like to do at all times while the other few do it due to their circumstances in life. Aimee Bender has struck the readers with the idea to love what we do or it will affect the people around us.

This article emphasises on the importance of active parental participation in the life of young children. Neglecting and being inattentive to the evolving psychological changes in children will create a permanent scar on them. Aimee Bender sketches the alternate traumatic side of eating through the depiction of the range of emotions underwent by Rose Edelstein. Food and eating plays an increasingly central role in individuals' lives. We rely on objects and particularly food objects to define who we are as individuals and as groups. The media and advertisers of consumer goods use this social function of food to their benefit. The past decade has seen the notion of comfort food appearing regularly in popular magazines, television, literature, and advertising. Daily life in the modern world with its stress, psychological discomfort, and personal dislocation has given rise to the need for comfort foods. In this novel, we can see that the innocent phase of Rose is lost due to the dark side of gustatory effects on her body and mind. Tasting each and every emotion gave her enlightenment and maturity about adulthood and life. The delicate young age of her life seemed to be a torturous one for her since she was made to carry a heavy weight on her shoulders without the support of her family. Further research in the novel can be done to study the symbolism of food signs and their meanings.

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