

Exploring The Magical Reality Of Food In Culinary Fiction

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Abstract:

Culinary fiction often features genres and sub genres in addition to the culinary mode in it. One such genre which frequently occurs with the culinary mode is magic realism. Magic realism in culinary fiction is analysed through the book *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* by Aimee Bender, taken for study in this paper. Texts existing with this dual nature of culinary and magic realism feature food as a medium of magic where supernatural occurrences happen either through the ingredients or the cooking process. Such texts focus on the relationship between the protagonist and food, thus portraying food as a living medium outside the cultural reality of the text.

The novel chosen for this study highlights the presence of an alternative reality known as magical reality. It also brings to light the complex nature of food which exists as sustenance as well as defining one's identity. Through the novel it is seen that food as a magical medium possesses the ability to affect the protagonist's relationships with others and her own life. The merging of food and magic in literary texts provides an opportunity for the genre of magic realism to evolve.

Keywords

CulinaryFiction; MagicRealism; Food; Anorexia; Culture;

1. Introduction

Culinary fiction is a rapidly growing literary genre which highlights food and cooking as the central theme of the novel or novella. The progression of the novel is driven by the influence that food wields over the characters. The main characteristic feature of culinary fiction is the relationship between the protagonist and food but as food is a non-living entity it cannot exist as magical in a realist setting. Hence the genre of magic realism bodes well with the culinary mode of texts as it showcases food in a magical reality. The aim of this paper is to establish food as a means of communication in a magic realist setting. Magic realism can be defined as "A term used to describe a style of modern fiction in which the recognizably

realistic mingles with the unexpected and the inexplicable, and in which elements of dream, fairy story, or mythology combine with the everyday" (The Oxford Companion 626). The term is an oxymoron combining two alternate realities the magical and the real into one, making them co-exist with one another.

In Aimee Bender's novel *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* the setting is an urban home in America where the protagonist Rose is able to understand and experience people's emotions through the food she eats. This unwanted means of communication brought about by food causes grief in her life as most of the emotions are negative. This supernatural trait of the protagonist and her experience is validated through the magic realism genre in literature which does not privilege the rational over the unexplainable. "Novelists are committed not to the philosophic or the scientific or even to the factual, but to the whole range of human experience, contradictory, mysterious, ambiguous, rational and illogical as it may be" (Robinet 8). Bender's novel as a magic realist culinary text follows a plot where the protagonist realises she has a magical gift with food which embarks her on a journey of rediscovering people through food.

2. FOOD AS A PHENOMENON RATHER THAN SUSTENANCE

Rose's peculiar relationship with food isn't completely out of the author's imagination. The religion of Wicca also known as contemporary witchcraft believes in the transfer of energies from the cook to the dish. The cook's emotions affect the outcome of the dish as well as its consumers. According to the author Leanna Greenaway in her book *Simply Wicca* she states,

Fast food and other pre-packaged cuisines are created and prepared by strangers. You have no way of knowing what environment your food has been prepared in; nor do you know where the ingredients have come from. I am a firm believer that each and every one of us projects an energy from within, and just as it is so important to be in the right frame of mind when we perform spells and rituals, so is it also vital that we prepare our food when our mood is calm and tranquil. (Greenaway 62)

Rose's unique ability is being susceptible to the energies projected by the cook onto the food. While others may experience these energies in moderation or not at all depending on their level of sensitivity, Rose possesses the gift of hearing people through their food. Not only does Rose identify the emotions but also experiences what the cook had been feeling while preparing the dish. She also accurately deduces where the produce in making the dish is from. The act of eating thus becomes a phenomenon rather than a routine task and Rose is constantly burdened with having to experience emotions which aren't her own.

These negative emotions lead to her getting upset as she has to undergo the same emotional trauma as the cook underwent while making the dish. "The chocolate chips were from a factory, so they had that same slight metallic absent taste to them, and the butter had been pulled from cows in pens, so the richness was not as full. The eggs were tinged with a hint of far away and plastic. All of those parts hummed in the distance, and then the baker, who'd mixed the batter and formed the dough, was angry" (Bender 69). This drives Rose's family and others to worry about Rose's mental state and whether she is anorexic.

3. MAGICAL REALITY VS CULTURAL REALITY OF THE TEXT

The genre of magic realism gives allowance to Rose's peculiar plight of experiencing people's emotions through the food they cook, due to the presence of magical reality in the text. Thus the reader accepts Rose's condition as an acceptable phenomenon even though it is not rational. However as magic realism is the occurrence of the magical in the real, Rose has to deal with skeptics around her who do not believe in her supernatural ability to taste emotions. When she tries to communicate her anguish over this phenomenon, nobody believes her except George. The nurse at her school and the doctors at the emergency room try to diagnose her as being anorexic due to her aversion towards food and eating.

This hasty diagnosis is due to the fact that the disease 'Anorexia Nervosa' is becoming common in society. "The condition of self-inflicted starvation, without recognizable organic disease and in the midst of ample food, is usually diagnosed as anorexia nervosa" (Bruch 104). For a while in the novel, Rose starves herself and loses weight due to the inability to eat and even tries to communicate her anguish only to be accused of being anorexic as her aversion towards food is not considered as rational by the medical profession. Since anorexia is a mental illness it makes sense for the doctors to file Rose as a patient under this category. In the past, anorexia was a rare disease but due to the influence of media and a sudden desire for skinniness, many teenagers and

young adults have been found to starve themselves to become thin. Hence without the presence of a magical reality, Rose is subject only to the cultural reality and would be deemed as an anorexic patient due to emotional illness.

4. FOOD AS A MEANS OF NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Rose's mother cooks out of love for her family but she isn't happy with her life and this is evident through into her cooking. It is through her mother's food that Rose understands how unhappy her mother is and learns of her extra-marital affair later on. Thus though Rose's mother does not share her feelings with her daughter there is an unspoken communication between them. The mother's cooking also brings to light the reality of the strained relationships between Rose's family members. "There are many other things that go along with the food itself- the time that you spend at the table, the family gathering, dress code, etiquette of the table and other things that encompass a whole life. It's not only food" (Stacey 10).

Rose's ability to experience her mother's emotions through her food provides her with insight into her dysfunctional family. The irony in the novel is that in today's world, fast food and processed food are gaining a bad reputation and are being avoided by many people who want to make healthier choices in life. Rose on the other hand is forced to rely on such foods even though she does not enjoy them. "I did best with a combination of the highly processed gummy fish, peanut-butter crackers, potato chips made by no one, plus occasional fast-food burgers, compiled by machines and made, often, by no one" (Bender 78).

The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake adds to the prevalent contemporary confusion over food as it now adds a magical theory to it that the cook's energy levels affect the food. The food in the novel not only acts as a recipient of emotions but also broadcasts those emotions, to the person consuming it.

5. CONCLUSION

The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake is a bildungsroman where the protagonist Rose's development is driven by her complex relationship towards food. Towards the end of the novel, the protagonist learns to stop fighting her supernatural gift towards food and learns to work with it by becoming a food critic. In the light of magic realism genre, food is a magical medium and in the absence of a magical reality food has no specific significance. Thus the presence or absence of the magic realism genre in culinary fiction makes a huge impact on the way the novel progresses and how the protagonist is perceived. In the novel taken for study, the absence

of a magical reality leads to the conclusion that Rose is mentally ill and is experiencing a form of anorexia. Magic realism also showcases food as a means of communication.

6. References

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