

Food as Cultural Identity

As societies become more globalized around the world, recognition and emphasis are increasingly being placed on the diversity of cultures. Among the many different characteristics and symbols that represent each culture, food is one of the most universal and appreciated aspects that people use to identify the different cultures. In the short stories “Simple Recipes” by Madeleine Thien and “Red Bean Cakes” by Janice Shinebourne, both authors demonstrate how the next generations deal with their inherited cultures through the role of food. Thien conveys how forcing cultural identities upon the children creates negative emotions and broken relationships, whereas Shinebourne emphasizes the value of cultural preservation, illustrated through the role of food in representing positive emotions and healthy relationships.

In the two short stories, food evokes emotions from the protagonists’ past. For the main character in “Simple Recipes,” making rice evokes memories of her home and the feelings of fear and surprise. When her brother makes inappropriate comments to his father about not wanting to eat the fish and rice his father cooks for dinner, the father physically punishes the brother. Upon seeing her father beat her brother with a bamboo pole, the narrator describes how her feelings are permanently hurt: “the unconditional quality of my love for [my father] will not last forever, just as [my] brother’s did not” (Thien 17). For the narrator, rice is associated with unpleasant emotions from her childhood, which originates from the father’s desire for the brother to accept the parents’ culture, against the brother’s protests. On the other hand, in “Red Bean Cakes,” the protagonist associates the different restaurants in London with positive emotions from her past. When she visits The Canton, which is reflective of her grandmother’s Chinese cuisine and eats “roast duck and Chinese greens,” (Shinebourne 497) the protagonist describes herself as “a secure child again in British Guiana ” (Shinebourne 497). She recollects the time when she and her siblings used to play in her grandmother’s garden chasing around ducks, which summons feelings of security and belonging. In “Red Bean Cakes,” food plays an essential role in enabling the narrator to connect to and identify herself with the Chinese, Indian, and African cultures that she inherited. Lee-Loy proposes that “[d]espite the apparent vast ethno-cultural differences between the restaurants, Shinebourne’s narrator claims that their individual dishes evoke memories of her childhood in Guyana that construct her literal and emotional past as a site of ethnic blurring” (306). The food from the cultures that the protagonist inherits from her grandmother, grandfather, and mother, fills the narrator with fond emotions from the past, which ultimately shapes her sense of self. Contrary to “Simple Recipes,” Janice Shinebourne affiliates food with positive emotions from the past, and the primary difference between these two stories is the contexts in which the children are placed, regarding the former generations’ expectations and attitudes towards the children to adopt their inherited cultures. In “Simple Recipes,” unpleasant emotions arise due to the conflict between the brother and the father over food, whereas in “Red Bean Cakes,” positive emotions are evoked from pleasant memories of food and the contexts in which the character was placed. From these two different instances, it can be noted that “contextual characteristics of memorable meals [exert] many influences on the emotional associations, and... contribute[s] the most in making that meal occasion memorable” (Piqueras-Fiszman and Jaeger 243).

The contexts in which meals take place and the emotions experienced in such contexts play a critical role in determining whether one associates the food with either positive or negative emotions. This association suggests that previous generations should be more mindful of how they

exert their cultural influences on the children concerning food and consider that forcible imposition of the former generations' culture upon the children will not likely be successful.

Both authors also use food as symbols of the relationships that the characters have with others; however, relationships are damaged in "Simple Recipes," whereas they are shaped and strengthened in "Red Bean Cakes." In "Simple Recipes," the protagonist watches as "a fish in the sink [dies] slowly" (Thien 19). The dying fish, which her brother refuses to eat, is a symbol of the character's damaged relationship with her father because she "[cannot] turn to look at [him]" (Thien 18) after seeing her father beat her brother with a bamboo pole. Similarly, in "Red Bean Cakes," the different kinds of food that the protagonist enjoys represent relationships, but the connections are strengthened. For instance, when the protagonist is in Chinatown, New York, searching for red bean cakes, she "end[s] up having a conversation about the differences between the cakes [she] buy[s] in London's Soho and the cakes on display in his shop" (Shinebourne 499) with the owner of the Chinese cake shop. In a strange and foreign place in which she felt she did not belong, she is able to engage in a conversation and form a new relationship over food. As is demonstrated in "Red Bean Cakes," food is a universal concept that "globalises while it localises, thereby crossing national boundaries. It links [people] through exchanges and shared ideologies and diversifies over time and space" (Tupai Francis and Lee). When people of the same culture come together, they are bound over their shared cultural identities. Also, not only does food unite people of the same culture, but food also plays an essential role in "engender[ing] social relations...[and] conversations about food seem[s] to happen simultaneously" (Haeney 12) even among people from different cultures, as was displayed in "Red Bean Cakes." Despite the role of food in unifying people, however, when the acceptance of food is foisted upon, as was portrayed in "Simple Recipes," it will likely result in adverse consequences. Therefore, depending on the context, food has the ability to either unite and strengthen relationships, or damage relationships.

Although both short stories use food to symbolize culture, "Simple Recipes" illustrates how culture disappears, while "Red Bean Cakes" shows how it is preserved. In "Simple Recipes," the narrator's father teaches her the "simple recipe for making rice," (Thien 3) which manifests the father's desire to pass on his culture to his children. In many Asian cultures rice has traditionally been a regular component of daily meals and is by and large considered to symbolize the culture itself. Haeney suggests that "traditional food and food occasions... carry meaning and provide a significant medium for sharing culture and 'times past'" (29). Similarly, because rice is one of the most essential elements in many Asian traditions, the father's imparting of the recipe for making rice is of great cultural significance as making rice signifies the cultural tradition. Furthermore, the rice and fish that the father cooks for dinner symbolizes the family's Malaysian culture. When the brother refuses to eat the rice and fish his father cooks for him, he is not simply expressing his dislike for the meal, but is distancing himself from his culture. This rejection of his Malaysian identity is what angers his father. Correspondingly, in "Red Bean Cakes," food symbolizes culture as the protagonist preserves her childhood cultures through the food she discovers and enjoys. When she finds the African-Guyanese restaurant in London, she

claims that it is "evocative of [her] mother's tastes and lifestyle" (Shinebourne 498). This food represents her mother's African-Guyanese culture. The character's attempts to keep different cuisines as an important part of her life illustrate how she tries to preserve her childhood cultures.

On the topic of food and culture, Haeney maintains that “what we eat, the foods and foodways we associate with the rituals of childhood, marriage, and parenthood, moments around the table, celebrations- are critical components of our identities” (Haeney 16). Since different cultures have different rituals and traditions when it comes to food and celebrations, children growing up immersed in such customs associate their cultural identity with food, which some preserve and some lose over the course of their lives. In “Simple Recipes,” the brother refuses to accept his inherited cultural identity by displaying a strong dislike for the food that represents the Malaysian culture, whereas the narrator in “Red Bean Cakes” values her cultural identity by preserving the traditions and rituals associated with the food from her childhood.

All in all, in both of the short stories, food signifies emotions from the past, relationships, and cultures. However, these elements are illustrated in two different lights: one positive and one negative. In “Simple Recipes,” the symbol of food depicts a damaged and disappearing culture as a result of the conflict between the brother and the son over their differing attitudes towards their Malaysian culture.. On the contrary, in “Red Bean Cakes,” food paints an optimistic and joyful preservation of culture as the narrator strives to keep her inherited cultural identities as an important part of her life.. From these two stories, it can be concluded that trying to force cultural identities upon the next generations adversely affects the children.