



# Food and Memory: Tracing Identity through Cuisine in Merlinda Bobis' *Banana Heart Summer*, Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart*, and Nina Mingya Powles' *Tiny Moons: A Year of Eating in Shanghai*

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(i)

The act of eating is fundamental to human lives and relationships - not only does it satiate hunger and acts as a stimulus for survival, it is also essential in elucidating cultural identity and practices. Food imagery makes a delightful base when it comes to prose, as it can evoke a sensory experience through words. It has the ability to render feelings of relish and ache. Writings about food and culinary traditions are intricately intertwined with memory and identity, as food and the art of cooking act as a powerful tool for self-expression and embracing one's culture.

This paper will attempt to explore the relationship between food and identity through Merlinda Bobis' *Banana Heart Summer*, Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart* and Nina Mingya Powles' *Tiny Moons: A Year of Eating in Shanghai*. All three texts explore how food imbibes a joyful celebration of love and loss. Gustatory writing runs through these texts and makes room for readers to traverse through the depth and meaning behind the cuisines mentioned.

(ii)

*Banana Heart Summer* is a tale of a young girl named Nenita. Merlinda Bobis writes lyrically and uses food imagery to portray Nenita's hunger for food, and for her mother's love. Set in a street between a church and a volcano in the region of Bicol, Philippines, this novel shows us an eventful summer in Nenita's childhood. To Nenita, cooking good food is equivalent to being a good daughter, and she wants nothing more than to receive a sliver of her mother's attention. Every chapter opens with a recipe and the flavours and ingredients that make the meal are symbolic of love and anger, Nenita's longing to belong, the heart and the spleen. This novel tells of Filipino cuisines, the provincial life, family dynamics and young hearts as they channel their way through cruel realities. Nenita navigates through the challenges of adolescence, while grappling with her own dreams and identity. The story is told through the eyes of much older Nenita in her forties,

who is then a migrant worker and looks back on her childhood and tries to make sense of her current state, her self-identity – a feeling of pride in her heritage in the host country.

Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart* is a memoir that primarily focuses on Zauner's relationship with her mother, who was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Zauner reflects on her upbringing, the connection she shared with her mother through food despite their rocky relationship, and how that connection further binds her to her traditions. Zauner expounds her experiences growing up as a biracial Korean-American, feeling caught between two cultures and struggling to find her identity. Zauner talks of the grief that engulfed her in the process of losing her mother and after. It chronicles her attempts to reconnect with her Korean heritage, both as a way to honour her mother's memory and to better understand herself. Zauner's writing beautifully captures the complexities of grief, the search for identity, and the power of food and music to evoke memories and heal old wounds.

*Tiny Moons: A Year of Eating in Shanghai* is a collection of essays in which Nina Mingya Powles pieces together her experiences in Wellington, Kota Kinabalu and Shanghai through childhood snacks, family feasts, dinners at universities, cooking classes and street food. Her powerful writing is ingrained and traced by food and Powles navigates through loving memories of food that has come to define her, to uncover and further embrace her Chinese-Malaysian heritage.

(iii)

This paper will be approached through Deconstruction.

J. Hillis Miller, an American deconstructionist, has explained in an essay titled *Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure* (1976), "Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself."

Deconstruction as a literary framework involves the process of a close reading of texts to illustrate that a text is not just a unilateral whole, but entails several meanings that sometimes stand in contrast with each other.

Deconstruction owes its theory to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose essay *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* (1966) began a new critical movement in literary criticism. Derrida implies that any text can have layers of meanings and can appear to say something deeper and more profound than what is on the surface, and that it may read as saying different things which are contradictory to each other, which is seen by criticism as a single, stable 'meaning'.

Applying Deconstruction to Merlinda Bobis' *Banana Heart Summer*, Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart* and Nina Mingya Powles' *Tiny Moons: A Year of Eating in Shanghai* allows us to critically examine the underlying assumptions, binaries, and hierarchies within the texts, ultimately revealing the complexities of cuisine laced with grief, personal narratives, identity and belonging.

In *Crying in H Mart*, Zauner explores her experiences as a Korean-American woman and the profound impact of her mother's illness and subsequent death. Deconstruction would encourage us to interrogate the binary constructions that exist within the text, such as Zauner's Korean-American heritage, grief and healing, and the mother-daughter relationship. Zauner grapples with her Korean heritage and her American upbringing, often feeling like an outsider in both worlds. By breaking down the binary of Korean versus American, deconstruction reveals how these categories overlap and intersect in nuanced ways, allowing for a more inclusive understanding of cultural identity. So is the same for *Tiny Moons: A Year of Eating in Shanghai* in which Powles is a Malaysian-Chinese who finds herself going back and forth between Wellington, Kota Kinabalu and Shanghai mapping her identity through food and memory.

Deconstruction encourages us to question the assumptions that underpin our understanding of human relationships and to recognize the diverse possibilities and complexities that exist within them. In *Banana Heart Summer*, Bobis presents a multi-layered narrative set in a rural Philippine village, where the protagonist, Nenita, navigates the challenges of adolescence, cultural traditions, and societal expectations. Bobis explores the tension between traditional Filipino customs and the influences of a globalised world. Deconstruction then questions the assumption that these identities are fixed and mutually exclusive, exposing the fluidity and interplay between them. By breaking down the binary of tradition versus modernity, Deconstruction reveals how these categories overlap and coexist, challenging the notion of a homogeneous cultural identity. Bobis incorporates both English and Filipino languages, often blurring the boundaries between them. Deconstruction challenges the hierarchical positioning of languages, emphasising their interdependence and the ways in which they shape and are shaped by culture. It encourages a critical examination of linguistic power dynamics and the limitations imposed by language in representing diverse experiences. Just as in *Crying in H Mart*, a complex mother-daughter relationship exists in *Banana Heart Summer* and through Deconstruction, this relationship can be navigated through in a more assembled manner.

By applying Deconstruction to these texts, we gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies of food interlaced with memory, identity, human relationships, and language within the narrative. Deconstruction opens up space for a more nuanced and inclusive interpretation of the texts. It highlights the complexities and contradictions that exist within these categories, ultimately enriching our engagement with the themes and ideas presented by the authors.

(iv)

Paz Verdades M. Santos describes Merlinda Bobis as “the most prolific, most awarded, and most skilled of all the Bikol women writers and the youngest of the region's new balyanas or female writers.” (*Hagkus*, 2003).

*Banana Heart Summer* is a lyrical novel that delves into the complexities of Filipino food, culture, identity, and the aches that come with growing up. Merlinda Bobis skillfully intertwines elements of magical realism, folklore, and personal narratives to create a story that is both deeply rooted in its cultural context and universally resonant. Through her exploration of cuisine, tradition, gender dynamics, and the evolving nature of Filipino society, Bobis offers a nuanced and thought-provoking examination of the human experience and the search for meaning and belonging. The narrative follows the protagonist, Nenita, as she embarks on a journey of self-discovery and finds herself in a society that is ever-changing and brutal. The novel is the exploration of the Filipino diaspora and the tensions between tradition and modernity. Bobis vividly depicts the rural landscape and the bond the characters share with their natural surroundings.

“Close to midnight, when the heart bows from its stem, wait for its first dew. It will drop like a gem. Catch it with your tongue. When you eat the heart of the matter, you’ll never grow hungry again.” (*Banana Heart Summer*, p. 239)

Through the symbol of the banana heart, Bobis presents a metaphor for the resilience and fragility of Filipino culture in the face of globalisation and societal transformation. The heart of the banana, which represents tradition, is both vulnerable and essential, mirroring the challenges faced by the characters in preserving their cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world.

The narrative is interspersed with magical realism and folklore, highlighting the importance of storytelling and oral traditions in Filipino culture. Bobis weaves myths and legends seamlessly into the fabric of the story, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy. These elements serve to emphasise the enduring power of narratives in shaping personal and collective identities, as well as the ability of storytelling to transmit cultural values and preserve history.

*Crying in H Mart* is a captivating memoir that combines personal storytelling with broader cultural insights. Zauner explores themes of grief, cultural identity, and the healing power of food. Through her lyrical prose and honest reflections, she offers a nuanced and insightful examination of her relationship with her mother, her Korean heritage, and her own journey of self-discovery. Zauner explores grief and the profound impact it has on her life. She opens the memoir with the heartbreaking loss of her mother to cancer, setting the tone for the emotional journey that follows.

Through vivid descriptions and raw emotions, Zauner captures the complexities of her grief, from the initial shock and denial to the prolonged sadness and longing that accompanies her loss. The narrative is a meditation on the universal experience of mourning and the unique ways in which it is shaped by cultural influences and personal relationships.

Zauner also delves into her Korean heritage and the intricate connection she shares with her mother through food and their shared cultural identity. H Mart, a Korean grocery store, serves as a symbol of familiarity and a reminder of her mother's presence.

“That food was an unspoken language between us, that it had come to symbolise our return to each other, our bonding, our common ground.” (*Crying in H Mart*, p. 98) Zauner skillfully weaves in memories of her mother's cooking, emphasising the significance of food as a means of preserving cultural heritage and fostering a sense of belonging. Through her exploration of Korean cuisine, Zauner not only connects with her roots but also finds solace and healing in the act of preparing and sharing meals. Zauner goes from someone disconnected from her family and identity to someone who now bonds with her family and shares her love of cooking with them.

*Crying in H Mart* offers a critical analysis of the complexities of identity and the challenges of navigating between different cultural worlds. As a biracial woman, Zauner grapples with a sense of displacement and a constant search for belonging. She candidly reflects on her experiences of feeling not ‘Korean’ enough or not ‘white’ enough, highlighting the often conflicting expectations and stereotypes placed upon individuals of mixed heritage. This introspective examination sheds light on the broader issues of cultural assimilation and the pressures to conform to societal norms.

The poet that she is, Powles manages to bring forth a gustatory and evocative collection of essays written in a poetic prose. *Tiny Moons: A Year of Eating in Shanghai* spans a year in Powles’ life in Shanghai as a student while also tracing memories of her childhood through food.

“What does it mean to taste something and be transported to so many places at once, all of them a piece of home?” Dumplings carry different names in different places and Powles finds herself constantly discovering new words and expressions in different languages, - Cantonese, Mandarin, Hakka - all spoken by her mother and her family.

Powles lists out words in both English and Chinese, to show how one word can vary from one place to another, and how beautiful each language can be:

huntun                      irregular-shaped dumpling

yuntun                      cloud-swallow

chaoshou                    to fold one’s arms

Powles is a Malaysian-Chinese who finds herself going back and forth between Wellington, Kota Kinabalu and Shanghai. Powles explores one's sense of loneliness and the joys of eating in big cities, each bite transporting her to the different places she grew up in, as well as her connection to her heritage. "...there are still days when language fails me, when food feels like the only thing I have to tie me to this other home my family brought to me from far away." (*Tiny Moons*, p. 7) Powles' essays meditate on the relation between food and cultural hybridity, and the sense of belonging somewhere.

Like Zauner, Powles struggles to fit in because of her biracial roots. "Sometimes I feel like I have no right to claim any part of my Asian-ness, given that I mostly look and sound white." Powles carries with her fragments of places she grew up in and tries to make herself a home out of all these fragments along with food and the art of cooking, which is the closest she has to home.

(v)

Reminiscent descriptions of food run rampant in the texts – Adobo, Sinigang, and Halo-Halo in *Banana Heart Summer*, Japchae and Gamjatang in *Crying in H Mart*, and Banana Fritters, Dumplings and Pineapple Buns in *Tiny Moons*. Nenita finds herself seeking her mother's love through learning to cook, while Zauner cooks to mourn her mother and cope with her loss, and Powles tries to find a connection to her roots through the taste and memory of food. Each dish and its flavours evoke a memory in the narrators and brings forth nostalgic and emotional connections to people and places they love.

The texts start off heavy but grow lighter as the narrators slowly find themselves. Nenita learns to accept that her mother is ever so stagnant and makes peace with the fact. *Banana Heart Summer* ends with the lines, "How do I tell you that we were good kids? That there was no need for your sad, furious hands to set us to rights? That I knew how they longed to multiply the meagre rice and fish to feed our thousand yearnings? And that they could have done so, easily, had they held my limbs with a little more tenderness? How do I say that I have kissed those hands again and again in my dreams, and now I understand? And it is all right." (*Banana Heart Summer*, p. 266)

Zauner goes from someone who had an unstable relationship with her mother to understanding her and cherishing her memories. She uses her grief to not just remember her mother, but to embrace her Korean roots. She writes, "The memories I had stored, I could not let fester. Could not let trauma infiltrate and spread, to spoil and render them useless. They were moments to be tended." (*Crying in H Mart*, p. 223)

"I starved myself of language, but I couldn't starve myself of other things. Wonton noodle soup, Cantonese roast duck, my mother's crispy egg noodles and her special congee." (*Tiny Moons*, p. 3) Powles went from feeling alienated to finding bits and pieces of herself in different recipes.

Memory and food interlace and to help the narrators navigate through their emotions and act as a catalyst to connect them with their personal and cultural identities. *Banana Heart Summer*, *Crying in H Mart* and *Tiny Moons* underscore the link between food and identity and explore human experiences and connections through memory and cuisine.

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