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## THE PALATE OF PAIN: EXPLORING FOOD AS A SENSORY MANIFESTATION OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA.

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### ABSTRACT

*‘The particular sadness of a lemon cake’* by Aimee Bender is a novel that depicts the themes of food, memory and trauma to portray how sensory experiences represent and transmit intergenerational suffering. The study employs a qualitative approach within the framework of trauma theory to analyze the transmission of psychic wounds through food culture. The current study investigates various characteristics of intergenerational trauma in the chosen work. The study intends to show how the trauma is passed on from one generation to another in the name of food culture. Furthermore, the importance of this study rests in the fact that the role of woman in passing the generational trauma through care giving and unconscious transmitters of trauma. The analysis tries to discover how each character in *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* struggles in their own unique way, symbolizing the pain of persons in the real world in the aftermath of World Wars especially in the perspective of food. Through this text, Bender tried to portray intergenerational trauma encoded in sensory experience revealing pain even within the ordinary act of eating.

### Keywords:

Intergenerational trauma, sensory memory, food culture and trauma

### INTRODUCTION

Intergenerational trauma means the transmission of unhealed pain and unresolved emotional wounds from one generation to another. Cathy Caruth (1996) and Marianne Hirsch (2012) highlighted how trauma is not restricted to the individual instead it can extend across time, shaping ancestral and cultural memory. The Concept of “Postmemory” plays an important role in theorizing how trauma persists in an individual beyond the generation that suffered it. Hirsch defines postmemory as memories that are, “transmitted to us so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.” (Hirsch 22) Postmemory operates through gestures, stories, sensory imitations and emotional atmospheres that enclose the offspring’s of trauma survivors. Although these descendants required lived experience, the pass on memories are so deeply felt which looks like the actual memory.

In the novel, "*A particular sadness of a lemon cake*" Bender uses food acts as a literal medium through which trauma circulates within the Rose family. By examining the central character Rose Edelstein's skill to "taste emotions" in food, the study shows how food acts as an archives of unspoken grief. Aimee Bender shows how the ordinary acts of eating becomes strange encounters with the intergenerational wounds revealing the palate as a site of embodied pain. Here postmemory offers the theoretical foundation for understanding how trauma is expressed deeply and sensorially, shaping Rose. The trauma of Lane is not expressed by her verbally is articulated through the food which she prepares. Rose, as the next generation absorbs the unspoken emotional remains through her sensory experience. Cathy Caruth explains trauma as, "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known, and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of survivor" (Caruth 4)

The novel "*A particular sadness of a lemon cake*" was written by Aimee Bender. Aimee Bender was born on June 28, 1969. She received an Alex Award in 2011. Bender, who was born into a Jewish family, received her undergraduate degree from the University of California, San Diego, and her Master of Fine Arts from the University of California, Irvine's creative writing MFA programme. Her first book, a collection of short stories called *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*, was published in 1998. Doubleday published her novel *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* in 2010. Her novel *An Invisible Sign of My Own* was named a Los Angeles Times Pick of the Year in 2000. Her last two novels are *The Color Master* in 2013 and *The Butterfly Lampshade* in 2020.

In the novel, *The Particular sadness of a lemon cake*, bender used elements like sensing emotion by tasting food, through smelling, metamorphosing into anything to show the pain and misery of the characters in the real world. Bender used the element of the characters in the protagonist of the novel Rose Edelstein who can sense emotions by tasting it. Rose first feels it on her ninth birthday, she mentions like. "It seemed to happen in springs, the revealing of things." (Pg 136)

When she eats the cake that her mother prepared for her, that moment she could feel the emotion of emptiness of her mother. The cake becomes the sensory manifestation of her mother's grief, guilt and dissatisfaction in life. What should be a celebratory dessert becomes an archive of unspoken truth and dissatisfaction. This is the place where it shows how food acts a medium for transmitting trauma in everyday's life, encoding sorrow, loss and disconnection into the sensory experiences of taste and smell. According to Sara Ahmed, "Emotions do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation." (Ahmed, 2004, 112) Similarly in this novel, the trauma is not shared through words but through the sensory transmission. Rose's brother Joseph can metamorphose into anything, and he feels so peaceful. Again his turning of an object shows the dissociation often seen in those influenced by intergenerational trauma. The unhealed pain of his family members is evident in this character is seen through his behavior, an act of escaping from human form, imitating the hopelessness of dealing grief directly. Judith Herman states that dissociation as an essential mechanism in trauma, "Dissociation is the most common and most effective defense in situations of extreme danger, where the ordinary functioning of consciousness would be overwhelmed." (Herman 42). Rose's grandfather has a sense to know the emotion around him through smelling things.

In this paper, food, memory and intergenerational trauma are analyzed. This paper focuses on

Rose's Psychic ability, Joseph's metamorphoses and the family's inherited burdens reveal how unresolved suffering. Bender used these elements of magical realism to show that knowing more about people around us can really create misery in life. She depicts that these elements tend to show the inner emotions and the real hidden feelings of other characters in the novel. The revealing of emotions through the taste of a food item appears to be a bizarre phenomenon, but it has significance in the novel because it is a magical realist text. Most people tend to hide their feelings, especially parents, they often hide their pain and hurt they go through even if it affects their mental and psychological state, and people pretend to be fine. It shows that those who look like they're having a perfect life sometimes they also lose their mind. Everyone cannot stay sorted out all the time. The novel's content depicts Rose's experience, in which she learns about her mother's true emotions while creating her birthday cake. Rose saw grief, irritation, and upset in her mother's cake, but when reading the text, it was discovered that her mother greeted Rose with a grin when she returned from school. Marianne Hirsch defines Post memory as, "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to personal, Collective, and Cultural trauma of those who came before - to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (Hirsch, 1997, Pg 22) Bender prefers to depict the reality of her culture by the technique suggested by Faris, namely, employing magical realism to perceive reality more realistically, resulting in a distinctive and terrifying composition.

Rose had the sense of knowing the emotions more than the taste of the food ingredients, initially she could taste the sweetness of the cake but gradually she drifts to sensing the strong emotions in the food. When she eats a piece of cake that her mother made for her birthday, she could strongly feel the disappointment, guilt and sadness in the cake and she could feel that it's the emotion of her mother, rose says after eating the cake follows:

"I'm just going to lie down....

None of it was a bad taste, so much, but there was a kind of lack of wholeness to the flavors that made it taste hollow, like the lemon and chocolate were just surrounding a hollowness." (Pg 15)

Rose did not feel that the food tasted bad, but the emotional imprint of her mother made her feel empty, and she could not eat the food. Rose suffered much having food made in home because of her mother's emotional imprint. Bender put up the power in the rose's character when she was nine years old. She made sure that it would be acceptable for the nine years old kid to understand everything in her future that her mother has been through. Rose is unable to understand what kind of psychic experience she is going through, that she complained that the food tastes bad. Lane thinks that she's been doing mistake in cooking because rose could not have the food she makes. Rose suffered and even managed to eat the food made by her mother even though she could feel that dump of emptiness.

On the other hand, rose's brother, Joseph who metamorphoses to anything around him, he often disappears and raised notes as, "...Joseph would be home and then not home." (Pg 99) Nobody knows that Joseph has this ability to change into anything, rose, her mother and her dad thought that Joseph is being disappeared but does not exactly know about his ability. Joseph is usually an anti-socialistic person who does not want to be around people, so he is always studying. The ability he got was actually a gift for him that he used it to disappear from the real world. Joseph finds it as an escape from the

reality. He has been changing himself into a 'chair. 'He just closes his eye and focus on the thing he wanted to transform. It clearly depicted that it is so much better for him to be in the illusion he created rather than the real-world misery. Joseph wants a separate house for him to disappear in long stretches, due to his weakness and the disappearing he faints. But Joseph somehow manages to cope up with his life. Rose's mother lane adored Joseph more that she says, "Joseph, she said, is like a geode- plain on the outside, gorgeous on the inside" (Pg 54)

Joseph is a beautiful person inside though he looked simple and boring. Joseph had always had a different perspective of life. He did not show much interest towards food, he sometimes want a pill instead of food like, breakfast pill, lunch pill, dinner pill!! Joseph liked his mother's cooking that he used to mention that she can get into some contest or should start a restaurant. Rose's father bonds with her at the end of the novel where she tells her father about her "food psychic" ability, in the beginning, he did not understand and goes like, "I know you are trying to tell me something, but I have no idea what it is. Okay? I do not think like that. What are you trying to tell me?" (pg 173)

Though he cannot understand her, but he tries the best to feel what rose was going through. After knowing about rose, he opens up that his father also had a power to smell death, so he had to cover his face to escape from his ability to smell death. Rose's father, his entire life trying to be normal so he was not living his life to the fullest. He was conscious that he had a phobia towards hospital. He suspects that he might have ability like his father, so he avoided going to hospital, he did not go to hospital even when his wife gave birth. By knowing the ability of her grandfather, rose was relieved. This happens at the end of the novel.

Rose's mother lane might have had her own book; she is a person who is engaged in things that make her forget about her pain. She did her best to raise her children. She adored Joseph, but he was needier, possibly autistic, and needed her more. Rose was the "typical" child. Rose stated that,

"Mom loved my brother more. Not that she didn't love me - I felt the wash of her love every day, pouring over me, but it was a different kind, siphoned from a different, and tamer, body of water. I was her darling daughter; Joseph was her it." (Pg 47)

Lane loved her family so much, especially her children. Lane adored Joseph more, that she called him geode that he looked simple and boring on the outside but he's a gem inside. She also loved rose, she thought rose was the normal child compared to Joseph. When rose complained about the food when she sensed the emotion of her mother, lane thought she made fault in cooking. Lane was always looking for unintentional direction, and when she discovered at her engagement that what she thought was destiny, on her first date with her husband was actually all arranged by him, she was unable to connect with him again. Rose's mother is a self-centered person. In the beginning, she was lost and did not know what she was doing. But later she could find her own way when she started doing her furniture work and found her new love, Larry. She found herself back. The mother finds happiness in her carpentry, handcrafting furniture; the brother's abduction is linked to a frigid metal chair that the mother despises. Her mother's silence, father's detachment and Joseph's withdrawal from human form shows the impact of transgenerational repression. "The trauma that cannot be spoken is passed on as an absence, a silence that becomes part of the psychic life of the next generation." (Laub 64)

George is Rose's crush and Joseph's only friend. He's the only normal character in without the bizarre. George understood rose better than anyone else. When rose revealed about her intuition

towards food, Georgie tests rose to say about intuition she gets when she eats food. George believed rose, he told Joseph, “Your little sis. She’s like a magic food psychic or something...” (Pg 62)

George is the only person who truly listens to Rose and to whom she may turn for assistance over the years. She, like the others, learns to keep the truth buried, a survival mechanism that keeps her from suffocating in her family's secrets. Rose had a strong infatuation on George, but she never told him or married him. They both kiss at a point but rose was not in the situation to get married instead, she was trying to accept her flaws. So, George marries someone else. He is the only person who’s been supporting rose and Joseph throughout the novel.

Aimee Bender’s *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* reveals how common everyday act of eating becomes a medium of inherited suffering, representing that trauma is not limited to one generation instead it is passed on to the next generations. Rose’s skill to “taste emotions” shows how, as Hirsch states, “the Child becomes the carrier of a parent’s unspoken trauma” (Hirsch 31). The father’s silence, mother’s repressed pain, and Joseph’s dissociative nature represent what Laub terms “a trauma that cannot be spoken and is passed on as an absence” (Laub 64). Bender converts food into what Caruth explains as “an unclaimed experience that returns repeatedly” (Caruth 4) presenting how sensory memory becomes a site of lasting. Rose’s character represents the family’s emotional residue. This novel asserts that intergenerational trauma rooted not only in memory but also in taste, smell, and emotion, reminding us that, as Avery Gordon explains, “What is suppressed eventually makes itself known” (Gordon 63). Through Rose, Bender exposes the hidden emotional legacies that shape the next generation, showing that pain, like flavor, remains long after its source has vanished.

This study shows that the transfer of trauma in *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* is gendered, as mother’s emotional repression, and everyday chores such as cooking becomes an unintentional channels through which unhealed pain is passed on to the next generation. By analyzing the character’s struggle by using the trauma theory, this paper focuses on the sensory experiences symbolically echo the lingering effects of large - scale historical and familial wounds often seen in real world post war contexts. Through qualitative approach of the novel shows that food functions not merely as sustenance but as a repository of unexpressed emotions, displaying how intergenerational suffering is absorbed, personified and expressed through taste, smell, and affect. In the end, this novel demonstrates that trauma goes on not only through memory but through sensory experience, highlighting how hidden emotional legacies persist to shape the psychological lives of future generations.

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