

The “Edible Identity” in Michelle Zauner’s *Crying in H Mart*: A Memoir

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Abstract. Michelle Zauner’s *Crying in H Mart* is an evocative memoir of an Asian-American woman who struggled to accept her mixed heritage. A major turning point in her life was having to deal with grief over the loss of a loved one through the help of food. While food has frequently been studied in relation to grief and identity, the ways in which these intersect is less common and warrants further exploration. Given the multiplicity of identities embodied by the protagonist and their often-conflicting nature, the researchers employed Herman’s dialogical self theory (DST) as a framework to better understand her journey towards self-discovery and acceptance. With each identity being given a voice of their own, the constant negotiation among them became apparent and the role played by food in the process was also highlighted. Findings indicate that food as a primary marker for Michelle to reclaim her own heritage and identity was emphasised repeatedly in the memoir. It reinforces the notion that food is affective in nature because it is capable of evoking emotions and memories that could (re)shape one’s identity. While Michelle initially rejected her Korean (Asian) heritage, she begins to reclaim and embrace it while reconnecting with her ailing mother through their shared affection for Korean food. It is through her love of Korean food that Michelle is able to gradually embrace one of the major changes in her life and subsequently overcome the identity crisis that has been troubling her.

Keywords and phrases: Korean culture, memoir, food, dialogical self theory (DST), identity, memory

Introduction

Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart* (2021) is an evocative memoir about loss, grief, identity and family (i.e., mother and daughter relationship). The memoir details her struggles growing up as an Asian-American woman who depended entirely on her mother for access to her Korean roots. Living in between the spaces of two dichotomies of cultures often puts Michelle in a conflicted position and causes a very challenging equation between the mother and daughter. Although there are a lot of disagreements between them, Korean food binds them together. Zauner's memoir emphasises resilience and fortitude in the face of adversity. Through her narrative, she discusses her personal journey of healing and growth, demonstrating the power of embracing change and finding solace in cultural traditions. As an Asian-American, Zauner navigates the difficulties of cultural identification and focuses on the ways in which her cultural heritage has affected the journey of resilience and emotional empowerment that she has taken.

Throughout this memoir, food serves as an identity marker for Michelle and typically helps her gain a visceral connection to her Korean roots that she had previously tried to sever. This is especially true as Eagleton (1998, 205) asserts that "eating combines biological necessity with cultural significance". Therefore, food is affective in nature because of its capability to incite strong emotions that help Michelle to bridge her past experiences through the food her mother prepared for her. Through food, Johnson et al. (2010) claim that mothers' decisions and considerations in planning and preparing meals do affect children's present and future food choices. Similarly, Moisiu, Arnould and Price (2004, 109) also highlight the contribution of food meanings and practices in fostering a sense of identity. Young (2005, 109) also highlights the connection between food and organic identity by indicating that "you are what you eat, or you eat what you eat because of who you are".

While most past studies on food memoirs look at the notions of authenticity (Sprague 2022), intergenerational trauma (Hagi-Mohamed 2022), intersectionality (Suchacka 2020), the nexus of food, memory and grief remain scarce. Through Herman's dialogical self theory (DST), this study intends to examine the dialogical negotiation of several conflicting voices that exist within the I-narrator due to her mixed heritage and the ways in which food contributed to her process of self-discovery. According to Den Elzen (2021, 3), "DST provides a useful methodology for investigating the autobiographical construction of identity following grief". Based on this theory, the self is not a static entity but rather a dynamic system consisting of various I-positions or voices that interact with one another to form an individual's identity (Hermans 1996, 31–50). These I-positions have conversations

with one another, share information with one another and influence one another, which ultimately results in a complex, narratively structured self (Hermans 1996, 31–50). The multilayered significance of food further unfolds an individual’s sense of self and delves into the notions of memory and identity.

In an increasingly globalised world, the imperative of embracing different cultures has never been more pressing. As borders blur and the exchange of ideas, people and goods becomes more fluid, the diverse tapestry of cultures interweaves to create a rich and interconnected global society. Recognising the importance of embracing different cultures is not merely a noble endeavour but a pragmatic necessity that underpins peaceful coexistence, effective communication and sustainable development. When different cultures meet, however, conflicts may arise and this is true not only on an interpersonal level but also an intrapersonal one. It is therefore crucial that we examine the ways in which individuals navigate such a challenge and this study focuses on the experiences of Michelle Zauner as detailed in her memoir. Through the application of DST, we get to see her I-position shifting from one that is more American to one that is more Korean while dealing with the grief over the loss of her mother. As a significant cultural marker, the role played by food in the process of her identity (re)construction is given special emphasis. The insights from an analysis of the memoir could shed light on the importance of being open and accepting towards other cultures – a challenge that the global community has to face in times of rapid and sometimes drastic changes in the social, political and economic landscapes due to globalisation.

Literature Review

Food memoirs are a rich source of information about the cultural, social and personal aspects of people’s lives, as well as their connections to food and identities. Watson and Caldwell (2005) assert that there is a surge in the study of food identities, mainly due to the growing interest in food and eating. Although the consumption of food may seem to be a common process to all human beings, Di Giovine and Brulotte (2014, 1) claim that:

How we eat and what we eat and when we eat and with whom we eat, all uniquely vary from place to place, group to group, time to time – thanks to longstanding geographic, economic, social and cosmological differences throughout the world.

According to Tsujimura (2018), the study of food memoirs is of great value in a variety of academic fields, including anthropology, history, literature, sociology and geography. A deeper knowledge of the ways in which food forms and

reflects cultural practises, traditions and experiences by reading food memoirs and analysing the content of these accounts. This perspective presents a rich and multifaceted avenue for exploration that enhances our understanding of diverse aspects of human life. As such, one cannot overlook the substance in the argument that food memoirs extend beyond mere recipes and culinary instructions. Waxman (2008, 363) asserts that food memoirs are about:

The treasury of metaphorical associations that link food with love and emotional nourishment that are often present in the personal histories and confessions of food memoirists; these resonances are purposefully, creatively used by most food memoirists to elicit feelings from readers and evoke their memories.

Food memoir is also capable of inciting sensory experiences and stimulating peculiar sensations. Through the lens of food memoir, this genre further documents the memoirist's personal experiences with food. The memoir typically displays the memoirist's instinctive recollections of communal food experiences that provide a glimpse into their cultures. The potential of food memoirs to evoke sensory experiences and peculiar sensations is an exciting proposition. This characteristic not only enriches the narrative but also grants readers a tangible and immersive journey into the author's culinary experiences. The documentation of communal food moments adds depth to the genre, providing readers with glimpses into diverse cultural settings and further emphasising the universal language that food represents.

Furthermore, food memoirs enable us to gain insights into the cultural and historic relevance of food in the context of traumatic experiences and memory work. Food memoirs play an important part in the maintenance of cultural and intergenerational recollection, particularly in the setting of tragic occurrences (Vasvári 2018). By shedding light on intergenerational aspects and cultural preservation, these memoirs play a pivotal role in commemorating historical events through personal narratives, bridging the gap between past and present.

Besides, food memoirs have important ramifications for the fields of identity, migration and multiculturalism. An examination of the autobiographies of Indo-European people indicates how a person's acceptance or disapproval of traditional Indonesian cuisine might serve as evidence of their membership in a particular cultural group (Mogot 2018, 59). Food memoirs are able to provide insights into the negotiation of cultural boundaries and the complexity of identity development in the context of migration (Bardhi, Östberg and Bengtsson 2010, 133–157). These texts provide a fresh viewpoint on the ways in which individuals negotiate their

cultural identities through the medium of food while navigating the difficulties associated with migration, just like Michelle, who came to terms with the complexities of her identity as a Korean American through traditional Korean food. Nevertheless, memoirs on food can also shed light on the manner in which food acts as a bridge between different groups and cultures. As such, food becomes “a site of intersectionality” (Suchacka 2020). When people move to new locations and lay down roots there, they frequently come into contact with new culinary traditions and cuisines. The experiences of individuals as they negotiate these new culinary environments are documented in food memoirs. Memoirs of this genre investigate the manner in which individuals adopt new cuisines into their lives while simultaneously maintaining their cultural heritage (Bardhi, Östberg and Bengtsson 2010, 133–157).

In addition, there is a long history of understanding the connection between food and memory in literature. International belles-lettres have acknowledged and regularly used the ability of tastes and smells to evoke memories of the past. For example, Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* is one of the most notable and well-known instances. Ory (1997, 450) claims that since traditional cooking “invariably involves a collective ritual (the meal and its menu), a tradition (recipe and style) and critical discrimination (the product, the commentary)” any type of traditional cooking may be viewed as a means of remembering, as “the fruit of interaction between history and environment” (ibid., 443). It is also possible to view keeping cultural culinary traditions in a foreign country as a question of maintaining a connection to one’s ancestral homeland, with the passing down of family recipes serving as evidence that cultural memory is preserved through routine use.

The connection between food and bereavement is complex and nuanced and its manifestations might shift according to cultural, social and personal considerations. People who are going through a difficult time may find comfort in using food as a way to connect with others and to remember the deceased. Grief for instance, has an intimately intertwined relationship with food due to the fact that the experience of loss and bereavement can have tremendous impacts on an individual’s relationship with food. Ando et al. (2013) unanimously concur that grief is a multifaceted and complicated emotional process that involves a wide variety of cognitive, emotional and physical responses. For example, those who have recently experienced the loss of a loved one may have shifts in their appetite, eating behaviours and preferences for food (Oliveira et al. 2014). Brien (2013) claims that the simple act of cooking and sharing food with others can be a means for folks to both honour the memory of their loved ones and continue to feel a sense of connection with them. In this sense, food can become a physical manifestation of love, care and remembrance for the recipient. This is extensively reflected in the selected memoir, as Michelle

reconciled with her mother through Korean food, which functioned as the only connection left between her and her dead mother. Michelle's tribute to her mother honours her memory and manifests Michelle's love.

Grief undoubtedly has the potential to disturb an individual's connection with food and the act of eating. The emotional and psychological impact of loss might lead to changes in appetite, taste preferences and motivation to eat (Høeg et al. 2016, 1851–1861). Some people may discover that they have lost interest in food and struggle to find pleasure in eating, which can result in accidental weight loss and malnutrition (Furnes and Dysvik 2010, 135). Others may use food as a form of coping, finding solace and emotional release via the act of eating (Høeg et al. 2016, 1851–1861). It is essential to keep in mind that the experience of sorrow and the ways in which it influences one's relationship with food and eating can vary widely from person to person. This understanding thus opens avenues for empathy and sensitivity towards diverse responses to grief.

Thus, it is undeniable that *Crying in H Mart* assists in reclaiming and acknowledging one's past and the cultural elements embedded within. This memoir can be viewed as a story of subject creation and self-discovery, of personal agency and self-reflection, of historical perspective within a larger context and of the chance to question pre-existing theories about human history. Memoirs provide a crucial societal role by frequently exploring the boundaries of memory and emphasising its effects on society. The past is explored and interpreted through personal human experience. They aim for “emotional truth” since they are founded on “intimacy with [the] reader” (Murdock 2004, 137), which is a claim made in numerous studies. Michelle's journey to her emotional truth is a road to rediscovering herself and her heritage, which is closely bound to her mother. As asserted by Hooks (1998, 431), “the longing to tell one's story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture to recover the past”.

Theoretical Framework: DST

The present study is grounded in Herman's DST, explaining how the I-narrator in the memoir negotiates her multiple conflicting and dialogical positions. Many scholars perceive the concept of “the self” and dialogue differently and they are seen as “different on the internal-external axis” (Hermans and Gieser 2012, 2). While the self highlights the internal processes that occur within the person, the dialogue refers to the external processes that occur between a person and another person. Hence, Herman and Gieser (2012, 2) argue that under the concept of “dialogical self”, which is a combination of “the Self” and “dialogue”, “the between is interiorized into the within and reversibly, the within is exteriorised into the

between”. Herman and Hermans-Konopka (2010, 6) define the term “dialogical self” as “the extension of the self in space and time, which forms the basis of the DST”. They further elaborate that “dialogue refers not only to productive exchanges between the voices of individuals but also between the collective voices of the groups, communities and cultures to which the individual person belongs”. This gives a space for someone who thrives to negotiate between diverse senses of Self and embrace the changes in order to find a sense of belonging. Michelle Zauner explores the challenges of cultural assimilation and the tension between preserving one’s cultural heritage while also embracing new experiences and opportunities.

This framework will enable an investigation of the various I-positions that arise throughout Zauner’s narrative and how they interact. DST considers the self to be a dynamic system of multiple I-positions or voices that interact and form the identity, allowing an examination of the dialogical relationship between Zauner’s cultural identity and her personal experiences with food within the context of the memoir. The dialogues between her Korean American identity and her American upbringing, as well as the tensions and negotiations between these various cultural influences, can be analysed (Ligorio 2010, 93–107). In addition, the intricate relationship between grief and food can be explored and that would lead to a myriad of insights on how she employs food as a means of connection, remembrance and healing (Ozer et al. 2017, 294–318).

Zauner’s memoir highlights her dialogues between different people from the community and also her “voices in her self” or “multivoicedness”. Stemplewska-Zakowicz et al. (2012, 265) argued that “the concept of multivoicedness, referring to the variety of inner perspectives which can be taken by a person, allows us to find and understand the manifestations of multiplicity of the subjective self in different contexts of our lives”. However, the term “dialogical self” is not to be confused with self-talk or “inner speech” (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010, 7). Hence, this present study conceptualises the concept of dialogical self in terms of internal and external positions. According to Batory et al. (2010, 47), the internal position refers to “those aspects of the self that are perceived as parts of one’s self (e.g., I as a teacher; I as a troublemaker; I as an optimist)”; while the external positions symbolise “everything from the outer world, which is internalised and perceived as significant (e.g., My mother/father; My peers)”. Batory et al. (2010, 47) further mention that the “internal and external dialogues intertwine and we often switch between them in daily life, occasionally releasing our internal divagations”.

The dialogical perspective in the memoir is reflected through Michelle and her mother’s constant negotiation with the multiple and conflicting voices. According to Bhatia (2002, 57), “such negotiations involve multiple mediations with a larger

set of political and historical practices that are linked to and shaped by the specific cultures of both one's homeland and one's hostland". Michelle's constant acts of positioning and repositioning of the selves in her memoir help her to rebuild her identity.

As many researchers have pointed out, the depiction of food in literature—be it classical or modern—is beyond incidental and warrants further examination due to its rich meaning potential (Piatti-Farnell and Brien 2018; Shahani 2018). Therefore, food is given special emphasis in this study as it is depicted as being pivotal in the identity formation process. In the memoir, food serves as the main connector between Michelle and her Korean roots. The connection remains strong even after the death of her mother – an incident which she initially feared would have compromised it. A parallel can also be drawn between the dynamic nature of identity formation under dialogical self and eating as a means of self-sustenance. Nicholson (1987, 37) explained that “to exist is an activity of daily transformation” and it is through eating that humans form and transform themselves daily. This further justifies the emphasis on food in the analysis.

Understanding the Conflicting “Selves”

Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart* details her struggles growing up as an Asian-American woman in the United States of America. Being born and raised by her Korean mother and an American father, the memoir generally articulates her dilemma in negotiating with her multiple conflicting voices. This memoir illustrates the constant tension between Michelle and Chongmi, her Korean mother, that displays their incompatibility with each other. The notion of dialogical self exemplifies Michelle's multifaceted I-positions that constantly complicate her identity, as portrayed in this excerpt:

I [Michelle] didn't have the tools then to question the beginnings of my complicated desire for whiteness. In Eugene, I was one of just a few mixed-race kids at my school and most people thought of me as Asian. I felt awkward and undesirable and no one ever complimented my appearance. In Seoul, most Koreans assumed I was Caucasian, until my mother stood beside me and they could see the half of her fused to me and I made sense. Suddenly, my “exotic” look was something to be celebrated. (Zauner 2021, 33)

The lack of sensitivity in those who assumed her to be Asian or Caucasian based on appearance alone, either out of ignorance or otherwise, contributed to her feeling of otherness. Being misidentified on a regular basis gave her the uneasy feeling of perpetually existing in a liminal space as wherever she goes, people tend

to focus on the parts of her that are exotic rather than those that are conventional. Therefore, Michelle constantly claims that she is being marginalised due to her biracial identity. She continuously experiences conflicting internal and external dialogues while growing up in the United States. When she was younger, Michelle adopted different self-positions to understand herself better. In the memoir, she highlights her conflicting self-positions, labelling herself as “some kind of alien or exotic fruit” (Zauner, 2021, 95). It is interesting to note here that, out of all the possible nomenclatures, she has chosen to describe herself as a type of food. The constant shifting and conflicting I-positions illustrate the complexity that arises from the multiple viewpoints within the Self. She places emphasis on the notions of displacement and marginalisation as she claims that she constantly feels “stuck out”, unrecognisable and she gradually starts to question her biracial identity. She indicates that “I’d always been proud of being half Korean, but suddenly I feared it’d become my defining feature and so I began to efface it” (Zauner 2021, 95). In addition to her appearance, Michelle also takes issue with her name that she deems to betray her Korean heritage.

Worst of all, I pretended not to have a middle name, which was in fact my mother’s name, Chongmi. With a name like Michelle Zauner, I was neutral on paper. I thought the omission chic and modern, as if I had shirked a vestigial extremity and spared myself another bout of mortification when people accidentally pronounced it “*Chow Mein*”, but really I had just become embarrassed about being Korean. (Zauner 2021, 96)

Not only does she omit her Korean middle name, but she even came up with rationalisations for doing so unprompted. This is an indication of the extent to which her desire to be identified as an American to fit in has been internalised. Her sense of alienation is further exacerbated by the strained relationship with her mother as both of them are “unintelligible to the other’s expectations” (Zauner 2021, 169). There is seemingly an unbridgeable gap between them due to major generational, cultural and linguistic differences. As described by Michelle, her Asian mother is a bit reserved to show her love to her daughter. Michelle sees her mother as a homemaker who is vigilant and protective and yet she is not what you would call coddling. Despite their disagreement, they bond through their mutual love for Korean food. According to Johnson et al. (2010), mothers are considered “the nutritional gatekeepers” of the family as mothers are the ones who are responsible for choosing and providing eating behaviours for their children. According to Michelle, “food was how my mother expressed her love” (Zauner 2021, 4) and it is an “ultimate display of a Korean woman’s tenderness” (Zauner 2021, 10). Michelle further mentions that:

No matter how critical or cruel she could seem—constantly pushing me to meet her intractable expectations—I could always feel her affection radiating from the lunches she packed and the meals she prepared for me just the way I liked them. (Zauner 2021, 4).

At one point, however, her mother was asked to stop making lunch for her to bring to school as it would make her stand out among her schoolmates.

A parallel can be drawn here between the attitude she has towards Korean food and her Korean identity in that she rejected both not due to more exciting or promising prospects, but merely for the sake of blending in with the crowd. Yet after her mother's death, she confesses that she misses the kind of motherly "love" conveyed through homemade Korean food, "a taste of home" (Zauner 2021, 46) that alleviates the tension between them. Indeed, as Michelle's attitude towards Korean food changes as the story unfolds, so does her attitude towards Korean culture. The memoir documents their ambivalent mother-daughter relationship, as well as Michelle's journey in rediscovering her sense of Self.

The titular H Mart—a hypermarket that sells Korean goods—is an important location for Michelle as it embodies the memories that Michelle seeks solace from after her mother's passing. Michelle claims that "H Mart is where parachute kids flock to find the brand of instant noodles that reminds them of home", where "you'll likely find me crying by the banchan refrigerators, remembering the taste of my mom's soy-sauce eggs and cold radish soup" (Zauner 2021, 3). As the story progresses, the hypermarket would become a site where she rediscovers her Korean roots. Michelle claims that "I can hardly speak Korean, but in H Mart it feels like I'm fluent" (Zauner 2021, 4). Even though Michelle could not identify herself as Korean at first, she could spontaneously and vividly recall her memories about the Korean food and eating activities with her mother. Korean food, ironically, becomes the signifier to her Korean identity.

(Re)Discovering the Self through Grief

The loss of her mother is a major turning point in Michelle's life, so much so that it results in a paradigm shift. Food is frequently discussed throughout this intimate memoir but nowhere is its pivotal role more prevalent than in helping Michelle to cope with the loss of her mother and subsequently rediscover her sense of identity. It used to be the case that Michelle would have access to Korean culture via her mother, yet she now fears that such a connection would be lost. The only thing keeping that connection alive is food as it is affective and thus capable of inciting strong emotions, ones that might otherwise have faded away over time. Therefore,

food, as argued by Holtzman (2006, 364), should be considered as a “cultural construct” as it holds its significance beyond being human’s basic needs and “how people perceive food impacts upon how they view themselves and their national identity” (Ichijo and Ranta 2016, 2). Similarly, Chung et al. (2016, 178) also claim that “eating is a cultural experience for every day or every meal. It is a one-of-a-kind experience that is shared with people eating together”. This is also supported by Chuck, Fernandes and Hyers (2016, 425) who assert that “shared meals can foster a sense of identity and connection within the familial unit”.

In the memoir, the multilayered significance of food further unfolds her sense of self, imminently delving into the notions of memory and identity. Michelle begins to confront her Asian American identity and seeks to regain her “Koreanness” after she learns about her mother’s terminal cancer diagnosis. When her mother passed away, Michelle shows her sense of remorse and states that “I was left alone to decipher the secrets of inheritance without its key” (Zauner 2021, 169). Michelle’s memoir foregrounds the reasons as to why food provides a personal and intimate arena for her in exploring the notions of grief and loss. Michelle goes through the grieving process after her mother’s death. At the earlier stage of grief, Michelle persistently experiences unrelenting grief symptoms. She indicates that “Sometimes my grief feels as though I’ve been left alone in a room with no doors. Every time I remember that my mother is dead, it feels like I’m colliding with a wall that won’t give” (Zauner 2021, 6). She also holds herself responsible for her mother’s death, expressing her guilt and remorse for not being aware of her mother’s symptoms when it first began to appear.

Michelle expresses her profound sadness and disbelief over the fact that she will never get to see her mother again. At the same time, she is worried of losing direct ties to her Korean roots and heritage. To cope with her sense of loss and grief, H Mart grocery store becomes a centre that unveils the different facets of food and memories that remind her of Chongmi. Michelle indicates that she always feels “connected” to her Korean roots at H Mart despite her mother no longer being there to guide her. She asserts that “I’m collecting the evidence that the Korean half of my identity didn’t die when they did” (Zauner 2021, 11). H Mart eventually becomes a place for people like Michelle who have been “displaced in a foreign country” to search for “a piece of home or a piece of ourselves” (Zauner 2021, 9) and H Mart acts as the “bridge” that connects her to Korean culture and heritage.

Hence, food becomes the only channel for Michelle to forge her biracial identity. In her own words, “we look for a taste of it in the food we order and the ingredients we buy” (Zauner 2021, 10). Subsequently, Michelle learns to negotiate and forge her own biracial identity through these transnational cultural practices. While the

American voice within her was the loudest before, she is now actively striving to amplify the Korean voice and her I-position has indeed shifted to the latter. In addition, this memoir also proves that food is personal and Michelle's food preference is deeply influenced by Chongmi. After all, it is through Chongmi's persistence in preparing Korean food that Michelle is partially exposed to Korean culture. In order to maintain that connection after her mother's death, Michelle begins to prepare Korean food herself and this is a form of enculturation capable of strengthening her Korean identity. Therefore, this memoir unveils Michelle's myriad layers of identities that are deeply associated with food.

Embracing the Biracial Self

Young (2005, 109) argues that "food is a medium of emotional bonding, social relations, community building, religious practices and is a battleground of cultures and politics". Gabaccia (1998, 8) also claims that "humans cling tenaciously to familiar foods because they become associated with nearly every dimension of human social and cultural life". As mentioned in the previous section, food is affective in nature as "the experience of food evokes recollection, which is not simply cognitive but also emotional and physical" (Holtzman 2006, 365). The following excerpt illustrates the notions of embodiment and cultural consciousness that revolve around senses and memories around food. Despite having a complicated mother-daughter relationship, the mother and daughter share their love for food. This is shown in this excerpt:

We'd [Michelle and Chongmi] giggle and shush each other as we ate *ganjang gejang* with our fingers, sucking salty, rich, custardy raw crab from its shell, prodding the meat from its crevices with our tongues, licking our soy sauce-stained fingers. Between chews of a wilted perilla leaf, my mother would say, "This is how I know you're a true Korean". (Zauner 2021, 27–28)

According to Johnson et al. (2010), mothers are considered as "the nutritional gatekeepers" and "a model for eating behaviour" of the family as they are the ones who are responsible for choosing and providing eating behaviours for their children. Moreover, Sutton (2001, 2) also argues that the "repetitive act of eating [serves] as a medium for the more enduring act of remembering" that helps diaspora communities reminisce about the smells and tastes of their homeland. Hence, during the period where her mother is undergoing chemotherapy, Michelle attempts to requite her mother by moving back home and taking care of her (i.e., cooking Korean cuisines that are familiar to her). Michelle asserts that "food was an unspoken language between us, that it had come to symbolize our return to

each other, our bonding, our common ground” (Zauner 2021, 98). Therefore, food becomes the medium of emotional bonding between Michelle and Chongmi. Michelle intends to prepare her mother’s favourite Korean dishes to lift her spirits and provide her the strength she needs to recover.

The process of preparing food, in general, could be a medium for recollection of a long past. The representation of Korean food is also linked to the notions of longing and desire and elevated the sense of nostalgia that is associated with her mother’s cultural heritage. For example, while Michelle is cooking *doenjang jjigae* (Korean soybean paste stew) she would ensure that the taste is “as close as I could get to the memory of my mother’s stew” (Zauner 2021, 164) similar to her mother’s way of cooking the dish. In this memoir, Michelle tends to re-experience her emotional pasts with Chongmi, typically recalling the time when they ate and cooked Korean food together. She states that “Now that she was gone, I began to study her like a stranger, rooting around her belongings in an attempt to rediscover her, trying to bring her back to life in any way that I could” (Zauner 2021, 168). Thus, the sense of nostalgia is evoked through the lens of food. The fact that Michelle insists on recreating her mother’s taste of *doenjang jjigae* shows her intention to reclaim her Korean cultural heritage. Michelle experiences the feelings of otherness when she was young that drives her to distance herself from her Korean roots. Although being half Korean, her socially-ascribed authentic self is being questioned by Kye, her mother’s friend.

I [Michelle] could never be of both worlds, only half in and half out, waiting to be ejected at will by someone with greater claim than me. Someone full. Someone whole. For a long time I had tried to belong in America, wanted and wished for it more than anything, but in that moment all I wanted was to be accepted as a Korean by two people who refused to claim me. You are not one of us, Kye [Chongmi’s friend] seemed to say. (Zauner 2021, 107)

Michelle is generally caught at the intersection for being “half in and half out”, she is rejected and perceived as “the other” in both worlds (i.e., United States of America and Korea). Her otherness presupposes “the sense of involuntary removal” (Lim 2001, 298) that connotes displacement and marginalisation. Michelle indicates that “there was a part of me that felt, or maybe hoped, that after my mother died, I had absorbed her in some way, that she was a part of me now” (Zauner 2021, 167). However, Michelle eventually realises that “part of Korean just exists somewhere as a part of my psyche – words imbued with their pure meaning, not their English substitutes” (Zauner 2021, 197).

Instead of denying her Korean roots, Michelle intends to embrace her otherness after Chongmi's passing. She tries to rekindle her connection with her Korean blood through Nami, her aunt living in Korea. To celebrate her birthday, Nami cooks her *miyeokguk*, a hearty seaweed soup that Korean mothers typically make for their children on this special occasion. She states that "It [*miyeokguk*] felt sacred now, imbued with new meaning. I drank the broth gratefully... It soothed me, as if I were back in the womb, free floating" (Zauner 2021, 201). Hence, *miyeokguk*—seaweed soup with beef—becomes a symbolic dish that is "imbued with new meaning". The renewed sense of identity and kinship with her Korean roots and relatives who shared the same lived experiences seem to be a form of therapy for Michelle. Instead of feeling guilty or blaming herself for being a failed caretaker for her mother, she finds it therapeutic to talk to Nami about the significance of sharing food, listen to her stories, make kimchi and cook other Korean dishes. She tries to re-establish the connection with memories of her mother through food.

The sensuality of taste further evokes her memories associated with Chongmi. Michelle asserts that "every dish I cooked exhumed a memory. Every scent and taste brought me back for a moment to an unravaged home" (Zauner 2021, 212). It is therefore essential to acknowledge the fact that the different flavours of food function as a powerful tool in our memory work. This is how she recreates the memories she shared with Chongmi. Michelle also follows a Youtube vlogger, Maangchi who teaches Korean cooking such as *doenjang jjigae* and *jatjuk* (pine nut porridge):

I followed her step by step, carefully measuring, pausing and rewinding to get it exactly right. Other times, I picked a dish, refamiliarized myself with the ingredients and let the video play in the background as my hands and taste buds took over from memory. (Zauner 2021, 212)

According to Strand (2022, 219), "memories of family meals, recipes passed down through the generations, the tastes of childhood – these are vital elements that shape our identities". It is only through cooking and eating that Michelle is able to navigate the social relations that shape her sense of self. Hence, she decides to continue her mother's tradition (i.e., cooking recipes) during the festive season. She states that "somehow my mother's [sweet potato tempura] had always come out perfectly crisp all around. Mine seemed unevenly battered, but they were close enough and it made me happy to maintain our family's little tradition".

It is undeniable that apart from consumption, food plays a very important role across cultures in defining one's identity. The fermentation process of kimchi is perceived as a form of "controlled death", where according to Chung et al. (2016,

182), “kimchi is a food that embodies the aesthetics of mixing, a leading principle of Korean food”. Michelle describes the fermentation process as follows:

Left alone, a head of cabbage molds and decomposes. It becomes rotten, inedible. But when brined and stored, the course of its decay is altered. Sugars are broken down to produce lactic acid, which protects it from spoiling. Carbon dioxide is released and the brine acidifies. It ages. Its color and texture transmute. Its flavor becomes tarter, more pungent. It exists in time and transforms. So it is not quite controlled death, because it enjoys a new life altogether. (Zauner 2021, 223)

The philosophy behind this fermented kimchi is parallel to Michelle’s situation as well. Koreans value their food culture and perceive that Korean traditional foods generally taste better with time. Chung et al. (2016, 183) further explain that “there are many traditional Korean foods that embody the aesthetics of waiting, where these foods taste differently according to the fermentation process”. Surya and Lee (2022) note that “the brined cabbages and radishes transform into kimchi” and “its flavour becomes enriched with new flavours”. Likewise, Chongmi’s death does not necessarily mean the end, but rather serves as a reminder to Michelle to persevere in rediscovering her authentic self. This notion of “controlled death” is thus justified when a regular vegetable could be transformed into a national cuisine that aesthetically represents Korean culture and its traditional heritage – something that Michelle’s journey of rediscovering her roots mirrors. It is then that she realises she needs to be the “cultural transmitter” (Tam 2015, 1261) in replacement of her mother.

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. The culture we shared was active, effervescent in my gut and in my genes and I had to seize it, foster it so it did not die in me. So that I could pass it on someday. The lessons she imparted, the proof of her life lived on in me, in my every move and deed. I was what she left behind. If I could not be with my mother, I would be her. (Zauner 2021, 223–224)

Throughout the memoir, it is evident that Michelle experiences fluctuations of on-going dialogues, both internal and external. These complementary and conflicting voices generally allow Michelle to reflect on her hybrid identity, resulting in the constant positioning and repositioning of the I. The memoir also constantly addresses Michelle’s negotiation on her sense of identity and belonging. Michelle also paradoxically worries that society might not be able to recognise her Korean identity that she previously tried very hard to conceal it.

The ongoing interaction between the multiplicity of I-positions helps Michelle to express her uniqueness and she begins to acknowledge the notion of alterity or Otherness within the Self. Michelle's notion of alterity or Otherness is often connected to food. She highlights her connection to food that evokes some vivid memories and experiences of her deceased mother. Thus, food, in this memoir, acts as a symbolic and powerful mediator that fosters a sense of belonging to her Korean roots, indirectly via her wish to remain connected to her deceased mother. The newfound affinity towards Chongmi and their shared love for Korean food seem to have eased her towards the side of her that she had tried hard to suppress. There is perhaps even the realisation that her Koreaness is one of the reasons that made her unique and is therefore worth celebrating. Such a discovery made the Korean voice within her stronger, a huge departure from what it was like previously as the conversation had always been dominated by the American voice.

Conclusion

Through the application of DST, this study aimed to examine the dialogical negotiation of several conflicting voices that exist within the I-narrator of *Crying in H Mart* due to her mixed heritage and the ways in which food contributed to her process of self-discovery. It reflects the concept of the "edible identity", where food, culture and eating experiences are integral to the construction of an individual's sense of self and cultural identity. What follows is a summary of the findings obtained through a thorough analysis. While Michelle Zauner's memoir centres on the notions of grief and loss over the death of loved ones, it also details her subsequent journey of self-discovery. As an Asian American woman residing in the United States, Michelle had to face numerous struggles and dilemmas before ultimately coming to terms with her mixed heritage. Initially, she tries to disassociate herself from her Korean roots out of the fear that it might put her in a disadvantageous position but things begin to change when her mother Chongmi was diagnosed with cancer. Chongmi's mortality spurred Michelle to reconnect with her and this was done in no small part through their shared love for Korean food. After Chongmi's passing, she begins to re-evaluate her state of being as well as embrace her "in-between" identity. Even though she was under the impression that her mother is the only access to her Korean roots and that this connection might be severed with her passing, she gradually became aware that she could not only be the "key" to decipher the secrets to her Korean inheritance but also its transmitter. The application of the DST reveals her internal and external dialogues, both highlighting the complementary and conflicting views that shape and construct her hybrid identity. The inner voices are a reflection of the multiple identities that she assumes simultaneously and these include but are not limited to that of a half-American, a half-Korean, a daughter and a niece. The quality of her

being introspective made bare the often-contentious conversations between these voices and how she finally managed to reconcile them. It is through her love for food mentioned throughout this memoir that Michelle gains a visceral connection to her Korean roots that she had previously tried to sever, having embraced the fact that it will remain an indelible part of her. Without the help of food, she might not have been able to cope with the death of her mother as well due to it being such an impactful event that changed her life forever. It might not have been as easy for her to accept her mixed heritage as well, especially her Koreanness if it was not for the love of Korean food shared between the two of them. Food is therefore a significant component that should be studied further, within and without the realm of literature, as it can provide valuable insights into the different cultures of the world. This memoir, detailing how Michelle deals with grief and identity, could serve as an inspiration to others who might be in a similar situation given the prevalence of globalisation. Sometimes, a little bit of kimchi might be just what we need to reorient ourselves when we feel lost.

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