

THE EPHEMERAL FEAST: FOOD AND THE FRAGILITY OF THE HUMAN CONDITION IN FAE MYENNE NG'S BONE

Dr Harsha Viswanath

Assistant Professor of English, M. S. M College, Kayamkulam, University of Kerala, Kerala,
India.

Abstract: In contemporary literature, food serves as a powerful metaphor for exploring existential crises, cultural identity, and the immigrant experience. In *Bones*, Fae Myenne Ng uses food to symbolize the complexities of displacement, memory, and cultural adaptation. The novel follows a Chinese immigrant family in San Francisco, focusing on themes of loss, longing, and generational conflict. Food, particularly the act of sharing meals, becomes a means of preserving cultural identity, while also reflecting the emotional and physical toll of migration. Through the experiences of the narrator's family, Ng explores the double-consciousness of bicultural and bilingual identities, as well as the racialized, gendered labour of immigrant women. Drawing on sociological theories, such as Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of food practices and Lisa Lowe's notion of a "flexible workforce," the paper examines how food rituals both anchor and fragment cultural traditions, and dramatizes the challenges of assimilation, cultural negotiation, and the bittersweet realities of the immigrant journey.

Key words: Food Imagery, Cultural Identity, Immigration, Existential Crisis, Displacement

Food transcending from its basic role of sustenance has transformed into a powerful lens to explore existential crises, particularly those arising from migration, collective memory, war, and conflict. Beyond its basic role, food becomes a profound symbol of cultural identity, connecting individuals to their communities and heritage. Theories of food in literature and culture investigate its symbolic, social, and cultural significance, revealing how it influences identity, relationships, and power dynamics. Drawing from sociology, anthropology, and literary criticism, these theories examine the ways in which food shapes human experience in complex and often unexpected ways. Food often serves as a metaphor for human struggles, helping individuals navigate issues of displacement, historical trauma, and the lasting effects of conflict. In this context, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of food practices provides a valuable framework for understanding how eating habits are influenced by both internal social structures and broader societal forces, revealing how food acts as a form of cultural and social capital that reflects and reinforces societal stratifications.

According to Bourdieu, eating habits and food preferences are deeply ingrained in individuals through their social and cultural contexts. Food becomes a marker of class, identity, and social distinction. Bourdieu's theory suggests that food choices are a reflection of one's social position, upbringing, and cultural capital. The concepts of food habits offer a framework for understanding how individuals' practices are shaped by both internal and external social structures. By examining the history of food practices, one can uncover how food strategies serve

as a means of navigating the complex interplay between material and non-material capital, thereby contributing to social, economic, and cultural stratification. Food is theorized as a symbolic system in which it serves to communicate values, ideologies, and social roles. In literature, food can symbolize social hierarchies, cultural norms, and power structures. For example, food rituals in many cultures highlight hospitality, social bonding, and hierarchy, while in literature, food often marks significant cultural or moral boundaries.

Food has long been a powerful symbol in fiction, serving as a key connector in social rituals and functions while offering deep insights into the human psyche and the endurance of existence. The patterns and symbols associated with food reveal its fundamental role in human life and culture. In literature, food comes to represent a wide array of human experiences—festivity, health, deprivation, trauma, alienation, longing for homeland, and existential despair. Writers often use food as both a visual and verbal device, crafting imagery that communicates themes of cultural identity, belonging, and the collective experiences of the characters or communities they depict. Each society's unique cuisine and eating habits serve as reflections of its traditions, heritage, and the lived realities of its people.

Food has played a significant role in ancient literature, serving not only as a source of sustenance but as a powerful symbol and a tool for exploring themes of identity, culture, and human existence. In many early texts, food represents divine favour, power, and the relationship between gods and humans. In Greek mythology, food often carries symbolic weight, as seen in the myth of Ambrosia and Nectar, the food and drink of the gods that grant immortality. This divine food symbolizes the elevated status of the gods and their separation from mortal concerns. In Homer's epics, such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, food functions to mark social hierarchies, hospitality, and human mortality. Banquets and feasts, often central to these stories, serve as sites of political alliances, displays of wealth, and moments of social solidarity. For example, the Feast of Achilles in *The Iliad* symbolizes warrior culture and the sharing of communal bonds through food. In ancient Roman literature, food often represents luxury and excess, as seen in works like Petronius' *Satyricon*, where elaborate banquets emphasize the decadence of the ruling classes. Conversely, in biblical texts, food serves as a metaphor for divine providence, suffering, and moral choices, such as the story of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit in *Genesis*.

Food imagery has been a recurring motif in literature for centuries, from *The Canterbury Tales* to contemporary works. As Brad Kessler observes, "Food in fiction engages all the reader's senses" (151). Shakespeare's plays are rich with food imagery, whether it is the celebratory feasts in his romantic comedies like *As You Like It* and *The Tempest*, or the ominous banquet scene in *Macbeth*. In English, French, and American novels, food often symbolizes love and sexuality. In *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens links food with both the formation of identity and the complexity of human desire. Many literary works explore eating disorders as a metaphor for the repression of sexuality. In *A Christmas Carol*, the Christmas feast not only symbolizes familial joy and unity but also plays a pivotal role in transforming Ebenezer

Scrooge's character, highlighting food's symbolic power in shaping personal redemption and social connection.

In the nineteenth century, food references in literature often served as a means of conveying cultural insights, particularly in relation to class distinctions and environmental factors such as soil quality and agricultural practices. Writers like George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, and Jane Austen depicted everyday life with a focus on domestic routines, including the preparation of food. For these authors, food preparation became a symbol of women's empowerment, as it was often women who managed the household budget and used food to nurture both family bonds and social connections. However, from a feminist perspective, this emphasis on domestic duties was seen as a tool of patriarchy, reinforcing the confinement of women to the private sphere and limiting their roles to the boundaries of the home.

Feminist theorists have focused on the gendered dimensions of food, particularly on how food production and preparation are often linked to women's roles in the domestic sphere. Writers like Laura Esquivel and Margaret Atwood explore how food functions as a tool for women's empowerment or, conversely, as a means of confinement and control within patriarchal structures. These writers have employed food as a powerful metaphor to explore gender dynamics, passion, and desire, with the kitchen often serving as a space for female creativity and agency. In contrast, authors like Toni Morrison have used food to signify civilization and cultural identity themes. In some novels, female characters resort to self-starvation as a means of suppressing internal rage, leading to self-destructive consequences. The use of food imagery in literature is undeniably significant, and the study of food in literary texts is increasingly recognized as a valuable tool for understanding character development, social dynamics, and the cultural contexts within which these stories unfold.

Food is theorized as a means of preserving cultural identity and memory. In diasporic and postcolonial literature, food often represents the homeland, a source of nostalgia, and a means of resisting cultural erasure. For example, in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, food becomes a metaphor for the preservation of immigrant culture and identity. Fae Myenne Ng was born in San Francisco, the daughter of a cook at the University of California. While writing *Bone*, her debut novel, Ng was living in New York and working as a waitress. The novel explores themes of displacement, identity, and cultural conflict within the immigrant experience, focusing on a Chinese family grappling with the emotional aftermath of Ona's suicide. The story, structured as a fictional autobiography, examines the tensions within the family before and after this tragic event. Ng's own experience living in San Francisco's Chinatown, an insular, culturally distinct community, deeply influences the novel, reflecting the generational dynamics and challenges of immigrant life.

Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', which refers to ingrained dispositions and practices shaped by one's social environment, is key to understanding the food rituals in *Bone*. For the Chinese immigrant family, food practices reflect both their cultural heritage and the pressures of

their new life in the U.S. In the novel, food becomes a form of 'habitus' that bridges generations, allowing the family to maintain a connection to their past. By preserving traditional Chinese food rituals in a foreign land, they assert their cultural identity and resist the pressures to assimilate into American society, reinforcing the continuity of their cultural heritage amid the migration challenges.

In her work, Ng explores the double-consciousness of being both bicultural and bilingual, offering a nuanced portrayal of the cultural and historical dimensions of displacement. She highlights the marginalized experience of ethnic minorities, shedding light on the complexities of their identity and sense of belonging. Through ordinary symbols, Ng addresses profound existential issues, capturing both her character's individuality and collective identity. Bone intricately weaves together themes of personal struggle, family conflict, and the ongoing cultural dilemmas faced by immigrant communities. As critic Tindall suggests, many of the novel's concealed symbols "go beyond reference and the limits of discourse, embodying a complex of feeling and thought" (Symbolist Movement 231). The title "bone" itself serves as a potent symbol, referring to the core structure of the body and by extension, the integral parts of identity. The novel traces the immigrant experience through the lost bones of Grandpa Leong, symbolizing the loss of homeland, and concludes with the broken bones of Ona, a poignant reflection of the emotional and cultural fractures that mark the immigrant journey.

The narrator reflects on a childhood memory that highlights the symbolic significance of bones in her family's food rituals. Mah's control over these rituals underscores her role as the custodian of cultural traditions. Her act of giving her daughters the "meaty" portions while consuming the "bones" herself can be seen as a form of self-sacrifice, reinforcing her position as the emotional and cultural anchor of the family. By continuing to prepare traditional meals, Mah ensures that her children stay connected to their heritage, even as they navigate the influence of American culture:

She filled our bowls high with little pigeon parts: legs, breasts, and wings . . .
But Mah always sat alone in the kitchen sucking out the sweetness of the
lesser parts: the neck, the back, and the head. "Bones are sweeter than you
know," she always said. (30-31)

Bourdieu contends that food is not just a biological necessity but a symbolic practice intricately linked to social status and power dynamics. For the Leong family, their food practices transcend personal or cultural significance, reflecting the broader socio-economic realities they face. The family's poverty is mirrored in their consumption habits—Mah's act of "sucking the sweetness from the bones" becomes a metaphor for deriving pleasure from hardship. The bones, typically discarded or ignored, transform into symbols of resilience, representing the ability to find joy even in scarcity. The kitchen emerges as Mah's domain, symbolizing her role as the family's nurturer, particularly during times of financial struggle. This space serves as both a practical refuge for survival and an emotional sanctuary. Similarly, Mah's act of filling her

daughters' bowls with the "meatiest" portions reflects her unwavering strength, love, and determination to care for her family, ensuring they are emotionally and physically nourished, even when resources are scarce. In this context, food becomes an act of resistance. In a society that values economic and cultural capital, the Leong family's food rituals represent a reclaiming of dignity, a refusal to be defined by their marginalized status. As Bourdieu suggests, food practices are a subtle yet powerful way to navigate social hierarchies. For Mah, feeding her family with love, particularly from the humblest parts of the meal asserts her maternal power, a statement of resilience in a world that denies her economic authority.

Mah embodies the experience of many immigrant women from third-world countries, whom Lisa Lowe describes as part of "a racialized, flexible workforce" (160), a group of women trapped in low-wage, labour intensive jobs, often with few technical skills and little opportunity for advancement. These women work in grueling, unhealthy conditions, either in the home or in workshops, their labour exploited for surplus value while their bodies endure physical and emotional strain. Despite legal frameworks promoting equality, they continue to face systemic racialization, exploitation, and gender subordination, existing within a structure that marginalizes them both economically and socially (156).

Mah's experience as an immigrant working in such conditions reflects the lack of both 'economic capital' and 'symbolic capital' in the dominant society. This absence of capital forces her family to adopt a survival-oriented, flexible form of cultural capital, one that enables them to navigate their marginalization. In this context, food becomes a key way for Mah to negotiate the tension between cultural preservation and the need to adapt to a new social reality. Through food, Mah not only sustains her family physically but also maintains a connection to their heritage while adjusting to the demands of their current socio-economic situation.

Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital", the knowledge, skills, and cultural practices valued in a given society, illuminates how food practices can shape immigrant experiences. For the Leongs, traditional Chinese dishes hold deep cultural significance, embodying their heritage and values. Yet, in the broader American context, these food practices may be viewed as "foreign" or "primitive," contributing to feelings of marginalization and cultural alienation. Thus, food serves as both a link to their heritage and a source of disempowerment in a society that often devalues their cultural identity. Leon Leong, the narrator's stepfather, dreams of building a noodle factory in San Francisco, driven by the promise of the American Dream. Yet, despite his hard work, he becomes disillusioned by his inability to achieve success, finding himself like many immigrants, cut off from his homeland by restrictive immigration laws. His children, torn between their parents' attachment to China and their immersion in American culture, struggle with their identity. For Leon, the smells of traditional Chinese dishes offer fleeting moments of connection to a past he cannot fully reclaim.

Kessler suggests that food serves as a powerful trigger for memory, transporting characters to another time by evoking past sensory experiences (157). Both literature and food

play crucial roles in preserving and transforming social and cultural traditions, with food often functioning as a metaphor for national customs. In *Bone*, food becomes a vital means of preserving the cultural identity of immigrants, symbolizing both their loss and longing for their homeland. The novel weaves an American immigration history that reflects themes of cultural resistance, negotiation, and adaptation. At the same time, it reclaims and dramatizes the history and lived reality of Chinese immigrants, portraying their struggles with both tragic intensity and a sense of hope, evoking the complexities of immigrant life with both sorrow and promise.

In contemporary literature, food transcends mere sustenance, symbolizing cultural identity, existential struggles, and the complexities of migration. In *Bone*, Fae Myenne Ng uses food to explore the experiences of immigrant families, highlighting themes of displacement, memory, and identity. Through food imagery, Ng reflects on the challenges of marginalized communities, touching on issues of gender, class, and race. Food rituals in the novel preserve cultural traditions while revealing the emotional and social difficulties of navigating between a homeland and a foreign society. Ng portrays how food practices—whether through Mah's nurturing role in the kitchen or the symbolic "bones" representing cultural loss which connect deeply to both personal and collective histories. Ultimately, food in Ng's *Bone* becomes a metaphor for cultural survival and resistance, symbolizing the characters' struggle to maintain their Chinese heritage amidst alienation and societal pressure, and underscoring the resilience of immigrant communities in the face of adversity.

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