Sanghamitra Dalal, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

From Fermentation to Preservation: The Making of Memory, Kimchi, and Belonging in Michelle Zauner's Crying in H-Mart

Abstract

The article will read the biracial Korean American Michelle Zauner's grief memoir, Crying in H-Mart (2021), which is suffused with raw articulations of agony and despair as it documents Zauner's cancer-stricken mother's last days. However, I will focus on how Zauner devotedly undertakes learning to cook and consume her mother's dishes following her mother's demise. As the gustatory sensation is induced in its entirety, she not only starts memorializing her mother but also starts learning how to embrace her biracial identity, which has often been a bone of contention between her and her mother. Therefore, evoking David Sutton's concept of gustemology, which identifies food as a cultural site capable of reimagining the worlds displaced in space and time, I will examine how synesthesia, radiating through the process of creation and recreation of food and memory, could suggestively resuscitate the irrevocable loss, often suffered by migration and displacement, death, and bereavement.

Keywords: gustemology, synesthesia, kimchi, memory, Michelle Zauner

1. Introduction

Food and memory are integrally connected, and memories of food are particularly significant as they are not merely memories of a dish or a memorable feast but are capable of sparking complex feelings and emotions in human minds. In The Omnivorous Mind (2012), John Allen explains how the taste, smell, and texture of food can be extremely evocative, conjuring up the place, the setting,

and all other associative details attached to the experience of eating a particular dish. Allen asserts:

> *Beyond memories of taste and place, food is effective as a trigger of even deeper memories of feelings and emotions, internal states of the mind and body. These kinds of memories can sneak up on you: they have the power to derail a current train of thought and replace it with one both unexpected and unexpectedly potent. (150)*

This unique capability of food memory, evoking powerful analogies, has been interpreted by Abarca and Colbi as a sense that "provides a polytemporal consciousness, that (re)defines home and longing for home, the root of one's identity, as an embodied experience, and that finds expression through various narrative forms: oral, written, digital, and performative" (4). Hence, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in their exploration of autobiographical narratives, observe that "food-laced memories feed readers' desire to redefine themselves by both imagining pleasures and cooking them up, as a way of enacting the life chronicled" (149). Therefore, food memories and food memoirs can be perceived as emblematic re-inscriptions of not only the subject's felt experiences but also a way toward attaining an efficacious understanding of one's own identity and belonging, which are often adrift and disoriented, fractured and fissured, particularly in the contemporary times of mass migration and displacement.

Given this context, in this article, I will read Crying in H-Mart (2021), a memoir penned by Michelle Zauner, best known as a singer and a musician. She is the lead vocalist and songwriter of the indie rock band Japanese Breakfast, which was nominated for Best Alternative Music Album and Best New Artist at the 64th annual Grammy Awards 2022 for its third and latest album 'Jubilee' (2021). Crying in H-Mart debuted at #2 on The New York Times' Hardcover Nonfiction Best Sellers List. MGM's Orion Pictures has already acquired the rights to adapt the memoir into a film. Zauner is writing the script and her band, Japanese Breakfast, will provide the soundtrack. Born in Seoul to a Korean mother, Chongmi, and an American father, Joel, Zauner immigrated to Oregon when she was only one year old, and her biracial identity has often emerged as a source of potential conflict, particularly during her teenage years. When she bitterly complains to her mother: "You don't know what it's like to be the only Korean girl at school," her mother calmly replies: "But you're not

Korean. You're American" (Zauner ch. 8). However, the complex mother-daughter relationship, fraught with the stereotypical anxieties of immigrants and the confusions suffered by the biracial immigrant descendants, ended abruptly when Chongmi passed away of cancer in 2014, aged fifty-six, while Zauner was only twenty-five. Therefore, the greater part of the memoir categorically documents the anguish and trauma during her mother's last days, as she continues to suffer from excruciating pain, and Zauner, who has assumed the role of a primary caregiver, fails to alleviate any of it. It also exposes the raw articulations of Zauner's unwavering grief at the loss of her mother. Yet, Zauner's memoir, even though intensely suffused with sharp sensations of pain, trauma, grief, and loss, her reminiscences of the time spent with her mother, eventually transcends and transforms her despair and heartbreak into a journey towards self-actualization.

Zauner's course of life following her mother's demise is specifically carved out of and marked by memories, tastes, and smells of the traditional Korean dishes her mother used to cook for her fastidiously. As Zauner devotedly undertakes learning to cook and consume her mother's dishes, evoking the gustatory sensations in its entirety, she not only starts memorializing her mother but also learning how to heal her grieving heart following the deepest loss. The process eventually unearths her deep-rooted Korean self, which is often covertly hidden within her complex identity as a Korean American in both Korea and America. She describes her memoir as "a story about mothers and daughters. It's a story about grief. It's about learning to cook Korean food in the wake of loss as a way to preserve my mother's memory and our shared culture" (Ruiz).

My reading of Zauner's memoir, Crying in H-Mart, will primarily explore how practices of recreating the tastes of food memory could be translated into a harmonious reconstitution of fractured and fragmented identities, often suffered by the biracial descendants of immigrants. I will refer to David Sutton's concept of gustemology to examine how memory and synesthesia, evoked by certain foods, ingredients, and preparation techniques, could effectively chart an emblematic course along the routes of finding self and belonging. Finally, I will focus on the symbolism of the widely known and hugely popular Korean dish kimchi and the making of kimchi, as elucidated and practiced by Zauner following her mother's death. I will attempt to argue that since the technique of fermentation is capable of transmutation, the personal and individual practices of memorialization through

cooking and consumption of ethnic foods could transform the angst of grief and loss into a joyous celebration.

2. Food, Memory, and the Senses: A Gustemological Approach

The intricate relationship between food, memory, and the associated emotions and feelings, evokes a particular kind of sensory and social experience identified by David Sutton as synesthesia. Synesthesia, according to Sutton, is a complex union of different senses where "sensory experiences cannot be compartmentalized, but seem, rather, to feed off each other" ("Food and the Senses" 305). Sutton considers food a cultural site, which not only symbolizes social wholeness but is specifically capable of evoking the worlds displaced in space and time. The synesthetic recall of familiar yet lost taste and smell of food and home transforms into "an embodied aspect of creating the experience of the whole" (Sutton 315). While participating in the process of creating and recreating food and memory, synesthesia could suggestively resuscitate the irrevocable loss, often caused by migration and displacement, death, and bereavement.

Expounding further on the idea of "food as a sensory phenomenon" and "memory itself as a sensory capacity" (Korsmeyer & Sutton 469), Korsmeyer and Sutton propose the concept of gustemology to provide a unique avenue for food-related research. Korsmeyer and Sutton's perception of the idea of gustemology does not simply associate the sensory experience of food consumption with the stereotypical sense of taste. His idea of tasting food includes not just smell, texture, and temperature but sight and sound as well. Similarly, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in her discussion of food as a performance medium, proposes: "As a sensory experience, taste operates in multiple modalities – not only by the way of mouth and nose, but also the eye, ear and skin" (2). However, according to Korsmeyer and Sutton, taste, in an extended sense through a gustemological approach, can be "tied to multiple domains of social life" and "can take on much broader and potentially more metaphoric applications," unearthing the fluidity and affinity between life's more extensive experiences of "knowing, living and interacting" (469), which are inherently synesthetic. In this context, Korsmeyer and Sutton highlight the role of memory in sense-making through a gustemological approach toward comprehending life's synesthetic experiences.

Korsmeyer and Sutton further propose that memory itself can also be perceived as a sense where sense is distinguished as capable of forging communicative and creative avenues between self and the world. Therefore, they intend to conceptualize both memory and senses "as active, creative, even transformational cultural processes, not simple receivers of empirical information" (471). Consequently, the sensory properties of food are not shaped by taste and smell only but, more significantly, by one's memories and expectations. Korsmeyer and Sutton refer to Marcel Proust's seminal madeleine moment, where sensations of certain tastes invoke involuntary memories of the past in the present. The tea-soaked petite madeleines remain one of the most powerful metaphors for memory and the senses, as Proust recollects:

> *But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. (50-51)*

In addition to drawing from the Proustian moment of induced involuntary memory, Korsmeyer and Sutton also allude to the notion of collective memory as professed by Maurice Halbwachs (1950). As Halbwachs argues that memory can only function in a collective context, Korsmeyer and Sutton point out that memory is stimulated and shaped "by the social milieus and the people, objects and institutions," which emphasizes his proposition that "memory is indeed a communicative channel, through which we shape our interactions with others and with our environments" (471). Therefore, memories invoked by synesthetic perceptions conjured up by certain dishes are at once singular and collective. It is an act of individual reimagining of the past as well as creating and recreating both the dish and the memory in the present. Such transformative capabilities of synesthetic food memories thus transcend from simply symbolizing social bonds and cultural or ethnic identities to engendering a fluid, emancipated vision for the future of the self. Korsmeyer and Sutton assert that: "The present is filled out with significance as people seek moments from the past that are felt to illuminate and enrich a particular present impression appropriately. Beyond that, memories from the past combine with present impressions to spur future actions" (472). Hence, memory,

perceived as a sense, can turn the present into a polytemporal plane, which, according to Korsmeyer and Sutton, operates on different levels of awareness. They, therefore, contend:

> *[A] gustemological approach, one that takes the sensory aspects of eating, not just in the moment of now, but in the deeply evocative ways that food can tie together multiple strands of the past that infuse any present social situation, offers new ways of thinking both about selfhood and subjectivity and about group identity and collective memory. (473-74)*

As mentioned in the earlier section, Michelle Zauner's memoir, Crying in H-Mart, documents how the practice of creating and recreating food memories induces synesthesia. In the following section, I will examine how Zauner's synesthetic experience of food and memory, while mourning for her deceased mother, not only memorializes her mother but also transforms her way of perceiving self and belonging in a positive light, primed for the future.

3. In Search of Belonging as a Biracial Korean American

Crying in H Mart commences with Zauner's desperate cry: "Ever since my mom died, I cry in H Mart … Am I even Korean anymore if there's no one left to call and ask which brand of seaweed we used to buy?" (ch. 1), setting the tone of the memoir straightaway. H Mart is the largest US-based grocery chain that specializes in Asian food, groceries, and everyday essential needs, as well as upscale products. Particularly catering to the needs of Asian Americans, H Mart is operated by Hanahreum Group, where H stands for Han Ah Reum, a Korean phrase that translates as "one arm full of groceries." As Zauner recalls how her mother expressed her love through hours of shopping, cooking, and serving labor-intensive dishes for the family, she confesses: "[Y]ou'll likely find me crying by the banchan refrigerators, remembering the taste of my mom's soy-sauce eggs and cold radish soup. Or in the freezer section, holding a stack of dumpling skins, thinking of all the hours that Mom and I spent at the kitchen table folding minced pork and chives into the thin dough" (ch. 1). Growing up in America, Zauner can hardly read or speak Korean; however, she seems to be fluent in H Mart and her mother's kitchen.

Yet growing up as a biracial in America, as a Korean American, with a distinctive Korean appetite, does not provide Zauner with a clear sense of identity during her younger years. While she is

considered an Asian in America, she is perceived as a Caucasian in Korea. Failing to label her under any familiar ethnic Asian categories, such as Chinese or Japanese, Zauner's American classmates frequently harass her with dismissive curiosity: "Well, what are you, then?" (ch. 8). In desperation to establish her Americanness and to assimilate with her American friends and peers, Zauner tries to efface her half-Korean identity in as many ways as possible. She stops bringing lunches to school which her mother carefully prepares every morning. In the school cafeteria, she repeatedly orders whatever the girl in front of her in the queue is having, even though she finds the plain bagel with cream cheese and semisweet hot chocolate "blandness incarnate" (Zauner ch. 8). She even drops her middle name, which is her mother's name, Chongmi. Her justification is that with a simplified name like Michelle Zauner, without a strange Chongmi in between, she is at least "neutral on paper," which protects her from the embarrassment when people accidentally pronounce Chongmi as "chow mein" (Zauner ch. 8).

Therefore, throughout her adolescence, Zauner experiences a troubled relationship with her mother and her biracial self, where both struggle to understand each other. She does not even develop an intimate bond with her father, who often remains away, detached from the family, starting a new life soon after his wife passes away. Zauner perceives this discordance as standing on opposite sides of a fault line, marked by generational, cultural, and linguistic differences, which she expresses as: "[W]e wandered lost without a reference point, each of us unintelligible to the other's expectations" (ch. 14).

However, she repeatedly asserts in her memoir that food has always remained the common language between her and her mother, and food is the only way her mother expresses her love. Zauner's mother remembers exactly which stews Zauner likes with extra broth or which banchan dish she empties first so that it would be served next time "with a heaping double portion" (Zauner ch. 2). Zauner recalls how her mother starts preparing food two days before her returning home from college during vacations – marinading short ribs, filling the fridge with her favorite side dishes, and leaving the radish kimchi on the counter the day before so that it gets extra tart by the time she reaches home. Her memory further evokes the past sensation of homecoming in conjuring up how blissfully Zauner lays her palm flat, blankets it with a piece of lettuce, tops it off with a glistening short rib soused in sesame oil, sweet syrup, and soda, and caramelized in the pan, filling the

kitchen with a rich, smoky scent, a spoonful of warm rice, a dredge of ssamjang (Korean spicy dipping sauce), and a thin slice of raw garlic. As she folds it into a perfect little satchel and pops it into her mouth, her eyes slowly close in its delectable wholesomeness she identifies as “a miraculous reunion … fainting in dramatic appreciation” (Zauner ch. 6).

However, when her mother is diagnosed with a rare form of stage IV squamous-cell carcinoma, and Zauner quits all her part-time jobs to return home to care for her mother, hoping to recreate the dishes her mother loves to help her gain strength and lift her spirits, she encounters a different sense of unbelonging – not only because of Zauner’s incapability of cooking ethnic Korean dishes but also because her mother, who has become so weak, frail, and nauseous due to the chemotherapy sessions, is no longer capable of tasting and swallowing the food she used to enjoy eating and preparing for the family when she was healthy. However, Zauner notices that her mother’s old Korean friend, Kye, who arrives to help take care of Zauner’s mother, successfully prepares some simple and hitherto unknown Korean dishes, such as kongguksu (cold soymilk noodle soup) or jatjuk (pine nut porridge) that her mother manages to eat and digest. When Zauner pleads with Kye to help her learn how to make these dishes for her mother, as she is aching to resuscitate her emotional connection with her terminally ill mother through their common language of food, Kye politely refuses and asks her to help with preparing food for herself and her father. Zauner is devastated to realize that her fragmented identity fails to empower her to uphold her complex selfhood and belonging and that she can never entirely belong to both worlds without reservation. Kye’s discreet refusal to help her learn to make dishes her mother can savor during what was her most challenging physical condition uncovers the inevitable exclusion that Zauner painfully grasps:

I 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 seemed to say. And you will never really understand what it is she needs, no matter how perfect you try to be.” (ch. 8)

Zauner's life after her mother's death is, at first, ravaged by unforgiving memories and traumatic nightmares. She constantly visualizes and dreams of her mother's last days, devoid of any dignity, suffering in excruciating pain and agony. Her unsuccessful attempts to reconnect with her father and her fruitless visits to a professional therapist increasingly throw her deep into the mire of despair and hopelessness. However, in the following section, I will examine how Zauner discovers the power of invoking gustemological synesthesia through creating and recreating food and memory across time and space, which not only helps her in memorializing her mother with all her positive attributes but also paves a way toward reconciling and reclaiming her own sense of identity and belonging.

4. From Fermentation to Preservation: The Making of Food and Memory

Zauner's search for herself and her memories finds a way to H Mart as she observes: "In the H Mart food court, I find myself again, searching for the first chapter of the story I want to tell about my mother" (ch. 1). Denied the opportunity of learning to cook the dishes her mother could eat amid pain and nausea, Zauner undertakes to learn to cook them after her mother's death, starting with jatjuk, the pine nut porridge, which Kye most often prepared for her mother. Her guide is the well-known YouTuber and author Kim Kwang-sook, commonly known as Maangchi, a specialist in Korean cuisine. Zauner considers Maangchi her digital guardian since her ways of speaking and cooking remind her of her mother.

Jatjuk is a simple dish made of rice, pine nuts, salt, and water, which Koreans usually prepare for people who are sick since the protein and good fat of the pine nuts help them recover faster. However, jatjuk is soupy and has a delicate taste, and Maangchi recommends slowly spooning it instead of drinking it. She writes: "I want you to enjoy the aftertaste. 1 spoon after, pause! And close your eyes just as I did in the video, to savor the taste. Oh yummy oh yummy. Do you taste a bit of the pine tree aroma there? Then start another spoon!" (Maangchi). As Zauner starts following the steps instructed in the YouTube video anxiously, wondering whether she has put enough water or whether she will get the required consistency, she eventually realizes it is "the first dish that

made me full" (Zauner ch. 16). However, it seems significant to note that Zauner's feeling of being perfectly satiated is not triggered by the delicate and clean taste of jatjuk. Mastering Korean culinary arts gives Zauner the crucial insight into how to reclaim her birthright. As she enjoys spoon after spoon of jatjuk, she starts embodying herself and her mother synesthetically, which she visualizes in the following way: "I closed my eyes and spooned the last of the soup into my mouth, picturing the soft mixture coating my mother's blistered tongue, the warm liquid traveling slowly into my stomach as I tried to savor the aftertaste" (ch. 16).

Zauner's journey toward the reclamation of her relationship with her mother and her identity as a Korean American is gradually shaped by remembering and recreating particular gustatory senses and the associated memories. She resolves that she is the only one responsible for reviving and sustaining her Korean self, which she has denied accepting for a long time. She pronounces: "Within five years, I lost both my aunt and my mother to cancer. So, when I go to H Mart, I'm not just on the hunt for cuttlefish and three bunches of scallions for a buck; I'm searching for memories. I'm collecting the evidence that the Korean half of my identity didn't die when they did" (ch. 1). Letting Maanchi's videos play in the background, as Zauner meticulously practices mastering one dish after another, carefully measuring, pausing, rewinding to get it exactly right, she exhumes distinct memories, which are marked not only by smell and taste but also invoke the sensory and social experiences of knowing, living, and interacting. Knife-cut noodles in chicken broth take her back to the afternoon of shopping and waiting for lunch at Myeongdong Gyoja with the queue extending out on the street, the rich stock, and the starchy noodles of the kalguksu dish appearing to be gelatinous, her mother ordering more and more refills of famous garlic-heavy kimchi, and her aunt scolding her for blowing her nose in public.

Reconstructing memories is not solely confined to recollecting, revisiting, or simply recreating what had happened in the past. Zauner's endeavors to preserve her mother's life and her memories drive her to go on a pilgrimage to certain places in Seoul, Busan, and Jeju Island in Korea. These are the places her mother wanted for them to experience together one last time; however, the entire plan had to be canceled since her mother had become critically ill during the long flight to Korea and had to be confined to a hospital. Zauner eventually forges a loving bond with Nami, her only remaining aunt in Korea after her mother's death. Despite their language barriers they

reminisce their mother and sister together with a flourish of rapture and joyfulness. Zauner emphasizes the importance of sharing food with her aunt and hearing stories from her. She explains this is how she strives to reconnect with her, mother through recreating her mother's memories and stories for her own survival, eventually carving a route to comprehend her Korean roots, which Kye has summarily dismissed.

As she makes her way through Gwangjang Market and its bubbling pots for kalguksu, overbrimming bowls for bibimbap, metal containers full of jeotgal, salt-fermented seafood banchan, crimson sacks of pollack roe smothered in gochugaru, to Jagalchi Fish Market in pouring rain, with its stir-fried octopus and spicy fish stew, moving on to the thick strips of samgyupsal or Korean barbeque sizzled over hot coals, clinging stubbornly to the wire grill, reminding her of her mother and her butane burner, her mother wearing a blue summer dress with straps over her shoulders, Zauner is successful in constructing her fond memories of experiences that never occurred before. Memory, itself a sensory capacity, can create the sensations of what Zauner expresses as "the tastes she wanted me to remember. The feelings she wanted me to never forget" (ch. 17).

However, the culmination of Zauner's synesthetic recreation of food and memory to preserve and celebrate her mother's life eventually finds the right course of action through making the most popular Korean dish – kimchi. Made of salted and fermented vegetables, mostly napa cabbage and Korean radish, and seasoned with a variety of spices and ingredients, kimchi has evolved into a symbol of Korean identity. Following Maanchi's instructions, Zauner attempts to prepare two types of kimchi, chonggak or radish kimchi, and tongbaechu or napa cabbage kimchi. Zauner's detailed description of her kimchi-making episodes exudes her multi-sensory encounters that affect her understanding of the intricate relationship between food and life. The embodied experiences of cutting, cooking, cleaning, and washing, along with the texture and feeling, taste and smell can transform a mundane dish to be imbued with a deep and intimate symbolic awareness of life's many inevitabilities.

Zauner proceeds with memorializing the sensations of the charming squeak of the knife cutting the cabbage in half, the pulling of the leaves, gently and politely like sheets of crumpled tissue paper, the painting of the bright red and fragrant paste of fish sauce, salted shrimp, red paper flakes, chopped green onion, and sweet rice flour porridge, between the leaves, inhaling deeply to absorb

the experience. As her kitchen is radiated with the smell of vegetables fermenting and fills up with different sizes of mason jars, each staffed full of different types of kimchi in various stages of fermentation, Zauner solemnly observes:

> *I had thought fermentation was controlled death. 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. (ch. 19)*

She eventually perceives that synesthetic recreation of food and memory can transform the traumatic memories of "chemo head and skeletal bodies and logging milligrams of hydrocodone" (Zauner ch. 1) that persistently haunt her never-ending nightmares. Therefore, she resolves not to let the memories she has constructed after her mother's death be festered again. They have to be nurtured and preserved because she realizes "[t]hey 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" (ch. 19). Zauner's attempt to reconstruct memories of her mother eventually transmutes her own understanding of herself and helps her locate her identity and belonging. As she symbolically embodies her deceased mother – "If I could not be with my mother, I would be her" (Zauner ch. 19) – I contend that a gustemological approach toward comprehending life's synesthetic experiences can orchestrate a sense of belonging.

5. Conclusion

Michelle Zauner's memoir Crying in H-Mart manifests how an embodied practice of synesthetic recreation of food and memories can reconstruct a sustained sense of home and belonging, an idea that often appears to be particularly challenging to biracial diasporic individuals. Drawing from David Sutton's concept of gustemology, as revealed in Zauner's memoir, food can effectively be perceived as a cultural site, while memory can be regarded as an organic sense capable of evolution and transformation. The idea of food should not be narrowly confined to the senses of

tasting and smelling; rather, food memories and the associated processes of making a dish can evoke multiple sensations and myriad forms of remembrance, the potent symbols of creation and recreation.

Zauner's detailed description of her mother's painfully deteriorating physical condition, her raw articulations of unwavering grief following her mother's death, and her eventual reviving of the effervescent spirit of her mother through reconstructions and recreations of memories in a symbolic manner, particularly through her kimchi-making episodes, articulate how the inevitabilities of life's decomposition or disintegration do not solely signify an indelible finality. Eventually, Zauner realizes that fermentation is not just perishment but a ceaseless journey through various forms of transitions toward transformation. Identity and belonging, in a world of migration and displacement, are not to be merely found within certain preconceived categories but should be perceived as an evolving process of regeneration and rejuvenation.

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