

Book Review

Chang, Irenna Ya-Hui. *How What You Eat Defines Who You Are: The Food Theme in Four American Women Writers*. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008. 186p. (\$109.00)

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One of the most distinctive characteristics of Irenna Ya-Hui Chang's book is that it reflects the fluidity and multifaceted implications of food provision, preparation and consumption. This dynamic aspect of food comes to the forefront through the very structure of the analysis. The four novels in Chang's study include Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1993). The book focuses on three different ethnic groups, Asian American, African American and Native American, and on novels that range in settings, cultural and historical contents. Chang's analysis illustrates food's symbolic and metaphoric qualities to anchor social complexities and create spaces to address commonalities amongst differences. Structurally, such similarities are further illustrated by the thematic organization of the chapters and the combination of novels analyzed within them.

The most remarkable aspect of Chang's study is its interdisciplinary theoretical approach. From the standpoint of food studies, every food reference weaved into the analysis of characters' individual and collective sense of self is contextualized from a literary, psychological, sociological, anthropological, economic, historical and ecological food perspective. Chang's work moves way from the tendency of food based literary analysis of simply consuming food as a symbol, image, or metaphor. Food is a real entity, which produces real effects. People are not simply symbolically oppressed and metaphorically liberated. Food changes our body; our body changes our mind; our mind changes our soul—all together these changes affect the dynamics of our social and cultural milieu, which Chang illustrates in her work. This triangular effect that uses food reference as the lens for literary criticism is clearly evident in each chapter of Chang's work.

The study includes four chapters. Chapter 1, "Food Consumption and the Troubled Self..." addresses all four novels. It establishes food as a theoretical and ideological discourse, for food consumption goes beyond the need to sustain the body. Roland Barthes's analysis of food as "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usage, situations, and behavior" frames the central concerns examined here: the tension between an individual's emerging personal taste which differs from her/his ethnic community's desire to maintain a distinctive culinary flavor, as a form of resisting assimilation.

Chapter 2, "Communing the Beloved and Being Transformed: Love Triangles in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," examines how food's meaning—literal, symbolic and metaphoric—carries a paradoxical implication. It can simultaneously function to maintain oppressive gender, class, and racial attitudes and actions, but it can also reinvent them by transforming power dynamics. While food's power to transform a persons' sense of self is often illustrated in terms of how women

experience such change, Chang makes a strong argument on how food transforms the men within the love triangle found in each of these novels. In *Love Medicine*, Nector is able to reconnect with his cultural heritage; in *The Color Purple*, Mister learns to appreciate and befriend Ceci. What makes this shift significant is that it breaks the focus often made with food transformative power only in women's lives.

When using food as the central literary trope, the notion of taste cannot be absented. Chang addresses it in chapter 3, "Taste and Collective Identity in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*." The examinations of taste range from its physiological dimension to its purely social-economic and aesthetic implications. The two most significant theoretical paradigms of taste offer here are taste as "moral category" and the shift between taste of necessity to taste of extravagance. By examining the process by which the narrator and central female characters in these two works reject the cultural boundaries defining their gender roles and reinventing new paths, these aspects of taste are underscored.

The final chapter examines domestic space and gender identity as displayed in the cinematography renditions of Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* and Wayne Wagn's *The Joy Luck Club*. Theoretically, perhaps this is the least compelling chapter of all mainly due to its long narrative plot descriptions. However, what is of value in this final chapter is Chang's close reading analysis of the creative liberties the directors take in changing or adding scenes revolving around food or kitchens. Through these changes, they illustrate how the claim of ownership of a physical space, here the kitchen, emotionally and psychologically increases the female protagonists confidence self-worth.

While not necessarily a weakness, however, by setting the analysis of these four novels within the politics of "minor" literature, Chang might have limited the creative forces that food itself can offer to transcend, or at least challenge, the premise set by Deleuze and Guattari's canonical article, "What is a Minor Literature?" Their thesis on "minor" literature essentially argues that everything within this body of literature (understood as ethnic minority) is political and that everything carries a collective value. These perimeters constraint the creative freedom of the authors who feel the pressure from within their own ethnic group to represent the community in a particular prescribed cultural pattern. Each chapter addresses different aspects of the tension between the individual voice of creativity and the pressure of the collective sense of community. But how much is our own palate for literary analysis constrained by closely consuming the set menu of critics that came before us? In Chang's case, to what degree did the set menu created by Deleuze and Guattari deluded the bitter taste produced when people's cultural, social, and socio-economic dynamic lives are reduced to a single ethnic flavor?

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