

SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities

Print ISSN: 2773-7829; e-ISSN: 2773-7837

eJournal Site: www.cdetu.edu.np/ejournal/

- Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal
- Indexed in NepJOL; Star-Ranked in JPPS
- Permanently Archived in Portico



Central Department of English
Tribhuvan University
Kirtipur, Nepal

URL: www.cdetu.edu.np

Research Article

Food as a Healing Space for a Diasporic Identity in Grace M. Cho's *Tastes Like War: A Memoir*

Purna Chandra Bhusal 

The University of Texas at El Paso, USA

Article History: Submitted 15 Nov. 2023; Reviewed 13 Dec. 2023; Revised 14 Jan. 2024

Corresponding Author: Purna Chandra Bhusal, Email: pbhusal@miners.utep.edu

Copyright 2024 © The Author(s). The publisher may reuse published articles with prior permission of the concerned author(s). The work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). www.cdetu.edu.np



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjah.v6i1.62723>

Abstract

This paper aims to explore a connection between diasporic identity and culinary choice revolving around the life of the principal character Koonja in Grace M. Cho's *Tastes Like War: A Memoir* (2021). It investigates how Koonja performs her culinary choices as a tool to heal and nurture her abjected diasporic identity. To do so, drawing upon the theoretical insights from diaspora and culinary identity, the paper employs the method of qualitative content analysis while analyzing and interpreting the memoir. The paper tracks Koonja's sense of being displaced and dislocated for various reasons: Japanese and American violence in South Korea, the trauma of losing her family members, rejection and stigma in South Korea as a Yankee whore, giving birth to a son whose father was a mystery, marrying an American man in South Korea and immigrating to the United States (US) and discriminations in the US, and all these turmoils finally causing schizophrenia. The analysis and interpretation of the memoir reveal a finding: amidst Koonja's sense of diasporic displacement and worthlessness, culinary kinship functions as a means of assimilation, and her culinary choices, which have been saturated by nostalgia for and memory of Korean food, reunite her with an emotional and a gustatory home. The finding implies a therapeutic connection between diaspora and culinary choices revealing food as a healing space in the life of Koonja. Hence, the paper not only offers a fresh perspective to look at the memoir but also creates avenues for critical dialogues in the discourse of diaspora and culinary identity.

Keywords: Diaspora, food, culinary identity, culinary kinship, culinary home

Introduction

Tastes Like War: A Memoir (2021) by Grace M. Cho navigates through the life experiences of author's mother, Koonja. The memoir, which has fifteen chapters in four sections, is episodic and anachronological, but the entire plot can be narrated in full

circle by focusing on two different geo-cultural locations: Koonja's life in Korea and her life in the United States. Koonja, a Korean born in Japan in 1941 during Japanese imperialism, moved back to Korea upon the end of World War II only to encounter another colonizing power, the United States. She lost her family members—father, brother, sister—and, due to food scarcity, lived upon “spiders and grasshoppers, sometimes little birds” (Cho 29). As she grew up in poverty, Koonja worked in an American army camp probably as a sex worker earning rejection and stigma as a ‘Yankee whore’ within South Korean patriarchal society. She had a son whose father was a mystery. Despite such social stigma, Koonja's life took an optimistic turn when she met and married Cho's father—a white man born in America in 1919—in Korea.

The plot takes a significant transition in 1972 when Koonja, along with her daughter Cho and her son, immigrated from Korea to the United States. It heralded a profound sense of hope and meaning in Koonja's life. She embarked on a journey to America in search of a fresh start, drawn by the belief that mixed-race relationships and children were more accepted there. Upon their arrival in Chehalis, Washington, a white community with a total population of 5,727, they found themselves as the only Koreans and were dubbed Chinese by the whites. Despite Koonja obtaining American citizenship, her excitement was gradually shrinking. She hunted Korean food in supermarkets and forests. She not only hosted dinners but also stored and sold mushrooms and blackberry which shifted her identity to 'Madame Mushroom' and 'Blackberry Lady' from 'Chinese Lady.' However, as time passed, she made suicide attempts, and divorced her husband, opting to live with her son and his wife. When Cho inquired about her mother's suicide attempts Koonja responded that she felt worthless. Gradually, she descended into paranoia and schizophrenia.

During Koonja's inactive and isolated schizophrenic life, Koonja made only Korean food choices. She repeatedly insisted on traditional Korean dishes like *Kimji*, *She-ma-ri*, *Sukat*, and *Kong-Guksu*, which she had not tasted for decades. Her culinary revival triggered her childhood memories, with the pungent smells and flavors of Korean cuisine filling the air, prompting to reveal past stories. Koonja held the recipes of Korean food close to her heart. Her recipes were like incantations against a history of being rendered rejected, dislocated, and displaced. The author's routine of feeding Koonja Korean dishes and listening to her memories continued until Koonja's passing in 2008. In essence, Koonja nurtured a deep and intimate connection with her culinary home by rekindling her life and memories through the nourishing and healing power of Korean cuisine, which had been absent from her life for four decades since her arrival in the US.

This paper concentrates on the intimate bond between Koonja's culinary performance and her diasporic identity. It endeavors to explore the ways Koonja's culinary identity performs as a healing and nurturing space despite her life experiences of being rejected and discriminated against.

Literature Review

Cho's memoir has drawn the attention of many reviewers. This literature review critically revisits seven available literatures: five reviews and two reflective texts which include a review and a podcast by the author. The array of analysis and interpretation of

the available texts on the memoir shows that the prominent themes foregrounded are the psycho-social realities in the life of the principal character Koonja: trauma, schizophrenia, diaspora, resilience, dream liberation, plurality of perspectives, shifting identities, and mental health.

Fore and foremost, the author Cho writes that the memoir was a form of her research on schizophrenia and mental health. She states that there is a historical connection between the U.S. Empire and her mother's schizophrenia: "When I learned from another family member that my mother had been a sex worker at a U.S. naval base in my birth city of Busan, Korea, that I began to question how her life experience under U.S. empire was at the center of her dis-ease" (para. 1). Cho means that her mother's work as a sex worker followed by offense and rejection in Korea and racism in the US are the causes of her schizophrenia. Therefore, Cho writes that the memoir does not navigate through "the things my mother said, but through the things she couldn't say" (para. 2). For the author, the memoir is a collection of suppressed narratives of "the Korean War, gendered state violence, xenophobia, and an American mental health care system rooted in social control" (para. 4). In this sense, for Cho, her memoir is not only a critique of racism and imperialism but also the result of her years of research about schizophrenia. In this article, Koonja's food choice becomes not only a critique of white supremacy but also a self-healing diasporic domain.

In this regard, Tammy E. Kim, while reviewing the memoir *Tastes Like War*, explores the theme of trauma and schizophrenia. For Kim, the memoir delves into the author Cho's "trans-Pacific trauma" which compels her to "search for the exact recipe of [mother's] schizophrenia" (55). The dominant theme of the memoir, in this logic, is the impact of historical events and personal experiences of Cho's mother "as a waitress and a sex worker" and "marriage to Cho's father" in Korea to her emigration to white-dominated small-town Washington (55). All these experiences are the causes of mental disorders and schizophrenia. However, all these stories, as Kim writes, have been occasions to be shared: "Cho uses food to pry open her mother's history" (56). Hence, Kim reviews that trauma and schizophrenia have been navigated through the lens of food in the memoir. In this article, food becomes a healing to diasporic trauma and schizophrenia.

Moreover, Kim's reading of Koonja's trauma and schizophrenia has been exposed as realities of immigrants' experience by some other reviews. The themes of immigrant experience and Korean diaspora have been poignantly foregrounded by a review published in *Kirkenes Review*. The short review takes the memoir as a "wrenching, powerful account of the long-term effects of the immigrant experience" and "a book about the Korean diaspora." Here, the memoir has been taken as a powerful account that explores the long-term effects of the immigrant experience and serves as a book about the Korean diaspora.

On the other hand, some reviewers reveal the causes of those social realities in the life of Cho's mother. Here, transformation and legacy are some other themes explored in the memoir. As highlighted by Terry Hong, Cho gives life to her mother through her memoir which is "an exquisite commemoration and a potent reclamation" in course of Cho's depiction of her mother's evolving identity, from a glamorous hostess to

a woman tormented by schizophrenia (16). What draws the attention of Hong is the three forms of the journey of Cho's mother: "a glamorous hostess" to "as-yet-undiagnosed schizophrenic" to a mother "who cautiously shared fragments from her past" (16). In this way, Hong's interpretation tracks the transformative journey of Koonja.

However, in contrast to the reviews highlighting painful experiences, some reviews of the memoir track a strong sense of resistance. In this context, Jonghyun Lee reviews the memoir by highlighting its themes of resilience, empathy, and an act of liberation. Cho's memoir is portrayed as a daughter's empathetic account of her mother's complex life journey, paying tribute to her mother's acts of resistance against oppressive power structures, particularly within the context of the Korean diaspora. According to Lee, the author reincarnates her mother, Koonja, as "a hero, a fearless and inexorable woman who traveled through colonialism, war, militarism, poverty, racism, and xenophobia" (2). It shows that all these trials and tribulations had made Koonja much more resilient and stronger enough to cope with a sense of alienation and void. Therefore, the memoir has been taken as "a daughter's empathetic account of her mother's complex life journey (Lee 1). During the empathetic portrayal of her mother in the memoir, as Lee writes, Cho "liberates Koonja from the shame, stigma, and ridicule" dramatizing her life as "forms of resistance against an oppressive power structure" (Lee 2). Hence, the memoir, for Lee, is fueled with liberating narratives.

Additionally, some reviewers argue that the two contrasting themes—schizophrenia and liberation—have left the readers with abundant stories. For instance, reviewer Sunhay You argues that Koonja's schizophrenia and Cho's duality of identity inform readers of Koonja's repressed stories and experiences. You writes, "Cho weaves together Korean recipes, psychological texts, history, personal anecdotes, and dreams to uncover the tacit knowledge that lies in the wake of her mother's schizophrenia" (144). It means schizophrenic narratives of Koonja are charged with diasporic knowledge and skills. To trigger them, Cho's narrative thread makes "temporal jumps" showing two "competing perspectives between Cho's childhood self and adulthood self" (You 145). You further claims that the "multi-vocal perspective of both schizophrenic and diasporic subjects" has been presented as "a source and method for alternative knowledge formations (145). Hence, the memoir exteriorizes the hidden treasure of Korean American identities within schizophrenia, resistance, and a dream of liberation.

On top of others, the author Cho herself the stories of motivation and mental health in a podcast episode in *Fresh Air* hosted by Davies. The stories from Cho provide an intimate look into the author's motivations and the impact of her mother's mental health. The episode centers around the profound impact of her mother's undiagnosed schizophrenia on their relationship and how it drove Cho to write her mother back into existence. Cho shares some compelling forces that made her write the memoir where her mother is the protagonist: "I do know is that she was born in Osaka in 1941"; "I noticed that she was sometimes talking to herself in a way that didn't seem typical"; "she never told me what she did in Korea." When we analyze these lines of the author, the listeners can assume that the memoir seeks to demystify the mystery of her mother by filling in the gaps by collecting information from her schizophrenic mother.

In this way, the spectrum of the available reviews shows that the memoir has been reviewed from different but interconnected perspectives. If Kim exposes problems—trauma and schizophrenia—Cho, the author, and the short review published in *Kirkens Review* ground these problems on imperial and diasporic realities. In tune with them, Hong reveals the traumatic journey of Cho's mother causing the shifts in her identity ending up with schizophrenia. Lee, in contrast to other reviewers, nevertheless, claims that a common denominator of all these turbulences is resistance, resilience, and liberation. If these reviewers focus on the theme, You pinpoints the narrative approach in the memoir which articulates the knowledge and skills of schizophrenic Koonja. Indeed, the authorial voice in the podcast adds meaning to the memoir filling in silent spots.

Overall, it is evident that the analysis of the existing reviews surrounding *Tastes Like War* by Cho shows some prominent themes: trauma, schizophrenia, diaspora, resilience, dream of liberation, plurality of perspectives, shifting identities, and mental health. However, the available literature does not delve into the culinary subjectivity of Koonja that she has performed as a healing substance in these diasporic complexities. At this juncture, the exploration of Koonja's culinary performance as a nurturing substance is a significant research gap. Thus, this paper seeks to plug in the very research gap to explore how Koonja's culinary performances function as nurturing and healing spaces amidst a sense of displacement, dislocation, and discrimination.

Theoretical Framework

The paper incorporates the theoretical perspectives of diaspora and culinary identity. Diasporic identity, in this article, has been taken as a sense of dislocation, and rootlessness caused by displacement and discrimination. Culinary identity relates to kinship, memory, nostalgia, and home.

A diasporic identity lacks belongingness and a home of its own. According to Stuart Hall, the diaspora exists “not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity,” which are “constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (235). That is, diasporic identity performs in various forms in search of its roots and routes. Salman Rushdie takes a diasporic identity concerning nostalgia and memory where one is “obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” (9). That is, it lives with a sense of loss and a persistent penchant to recover it. A diasporic identity aligns with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybrid identity which plays with “innovative sites of contestation and negotiation” (1-2). Hence, diasporic identity lives with a sense of displacement and dislocation, thereby constantly fabricating identity through various means, and culinary kinship is one of them.

In addition, culinary kinship is an act of creating a network of relationships through food, food talks, and feeding. It is one of the manifestations of diasporic culinary choices. According to Claude Fischler, food or culinary choice is “central to our sense of identity” (275) because the “biological, psychological, and social” kinship of human identity is intricately linked to food choices (280). It means food choices create human relationships and social networks. Abarca introduces the concept of *charlas culinarias* (culinary chats) as a tool for listening to the voice of food as well as the voice of people. She further highlights the transformative power of food talk, which conveys “stories of hospitality, social networks, healing practices”, all contributing to one's cultural, social, and spiritual self (12). In this respect, feeding and food talks connect people regardless of their differences. Therefore, culinary kinship holds a dual role in human existence, serving as both a survival necessity and a defining element of culture and identity that

connects people through their food choices (Joshua and Bruner 1). "As we keep searching for new cuisines, we also converse . . . [that] has brought us together" write Baral and Lamsal while highlighting how they were connected through sharing food and stories (13). Thus, culinary kinship is an anchor of creating or connecting our identity and belongingness with other people through food. In simple terms, diasporic identities can build social networks and community connections employing culinary kinship.

Moreover, the culinary identity of a diasporic identity is grounded in memory and nostalgia. As Sri Hariyatmi writes, what people eat in their childhood is "eternally engraved in their mind" and, therefore, erasing the "residual memory of that taste is never possible" (47). It means what people prefer as their food is largely influenced by our sense of getting connected with the residual memory. Reflecting on this very phenomenon of food choice Meredith E. Abarca writes: "food choices are never neutral, but governed by social, political, economic, and cultural ideologies that continuously re-shape their individual, familial, and cultural sense of self" (1). That is, our sense of self or identity gets articulated through our food choices, and those choices revive our memory of where we come from and where we grew up. Therefore, Urdapilleta and colleagues underscore food preferences and eating patterns as embedded in "everyday home lives and sociocultural circumstances" (56). In this way, culinary memory and nostalgia is one of the performative aspects of diaspora which gives opportunities to re-create the memory of home in different geopolitical locations. Thompson observes the significance of food talk as a primary language for political and cultural claims, transcending boundaries, and topics (59). He argues that "Eat local" serves as an anchor to fundamental identity structures, thereby enabling individuals to seek agency in a diasporic world (59).

Food identity or culinary subjectivity, in diasporic situations, is not only an act of building culinary kinship and being nostalgic but also is an act of building new homes or third spaces through food choices. According to Anita Mannur, the culinary third space relates to the diaspora. In culinary third spaces, "food, forms of eating, and commensality become sites from which to resist imperialist policies, homophobia, practices of racial profiling, and articulations of white supremacy" (6). In the case of Koonja, her kitchen is a third space. It is because when people (im)migrate, "they move along with their emotional luggage including flavors, aromas, smells, and their gastronomical experience that also travel with them" (Hariyatmi 42). It means they live or travel with their culinary homes in the form of memory wherein food becomes an invisible bridge connecting the past and present of a diasporic identity. This very bridging point is a way of healing the diaspora amid the "adversity from living under a new dominant culture" (42). Thus, the diaspora re-creates culinary homes "with identifiable smells and familiar tastes to retrieve their homeland memory" (45). The culinary home is built upon sensorial and emotional culinary building blocks that come through memory: "The sensuousness of food is central to understanding at least much of its power as a vehicle for memory" (Holtzman 364). Hence, home becomes a matter of food choices for a diasporic identity.

In sum, the theory of diasporic identity entails a feeling of being dislocated and displaced, whereas the theory of culinary kinship, nostalgia, and culinary home offers a healing and nurturing third space where a diasporic identity gets a sense of reaching home emotionally and sensorially. In this article, these theoretical insights work as lenses to track Koonja's diasporic identity vis-à-vis her choices.

Research Method: Qualitative Content Analysis

This paper employs qualitative content analysis (QCA) as the method of analysis and interpretation of *Tastes Like War: A Memoir* by Grace M. Cho. QCA is a research technique or a method of analyzing available texts by exploring recurring patterns, themes, and motifs for the purpose of responding to the research question or problem statement: "Content analysts infer answers to particular research questions from their texts" (Krippendorff 30). It is a part of an interpretation since researchers have "their own values and beliefs" which influence the way they collect, interpret, and analyze data" (Ryan 17). As an analytical and interpretative method, QCA offers "replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff 24) ranging from "preparation, organization, and reporting of results" (Elo et al. 1-2). One of the distinct features of qualitative content analysis is its data or text: which "are meant to be read, interpreted, and understood by people other than the analysts (Krippendorff 38). Therefore, the quality criterion of qualitative content analysis is trustworthiness: "The aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is to support the argument" (Elo et al. 2). This very trustworthiness adds meaning to the research making it more explicit, so that "the results of their analyses will be clear to their scientific peers and to the beneficiaries of the research results" (Krippendorff 42). This article relies on the qualitative content analysis of *Tastes Like War: A Memoir*.

In this paper, *Tastes Like War: A Memoir* is the primary text. The research problem was how Koonja, a diasporic identity, performs her culinary identity as a healing and nurturing space. With this purpose in mind, the text was thoroughly read, and then key patterns and themes relating to diaspora and culinary identity were coded. Then, those textual details were qualitatively analyzed and interpreted from two different but interrelated theoretical perspectives: diaspora and culinary identity. Extracting the essentials from the analysis and interpretation, four distinct findings were inductively generated: diasporic consciousness, culinary kinship, culinary nostalgia and memory, culinary home.

Results and Discussion

A qualitative content analysis of *Tastes Like War: A Memoir* from the theoretical perspective of diaspora and culinary identity or subjectivity offers a unique lens to track how Koonja enacts and expresses her sense of self through food, and how food serves as a conduit for her cultural and personal narratives. Tracking her culinary performances informs the readers with her journey from displacement to partial assimilation to culinary nostalgia to the symbolic return to the culinary home.

Diasporic Consciousness: Koonja's Lack of Belongingness

Tastes Like War: A Memoir by Cho unravels identity crisis, alienation, and finally paranoia and schizophrenia in Koonja's life. Diasporic identity entails a sense of displacement and is in constant longing for home through memory and nostalgia (Bhaba 1; Hall 235; Rushdie 9). In the memoir, Koonja underwent an identity crisis since her birth was in an in-between space because she was "a Korean born in imperial Japan under conditions of forced labor" (4). In addition, while being in Japan, her language was seized because "Korean subjects were ordered to speak only Japanese or risk having their tongues cut out" (23). Here, Koonja's learning of the oppressor's language, the Korean tongue, suppressed Koonja's true Korean voice and identity. After the end of Japanese colonization, she returned to the divided South Korea which was occupied by American forces: "The end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945 did not mean the end of occupied Korea, but rather, a change in occupier" (24). It made her displaced and dislocated in her

native land the second time. In South Korea, she grew up with the trauma of losing her family members: father, a brother, and a sister. During her teens, she journeyed from her hometown of Changnyeong to the port city of Busan in search of work. As Cho reveals, in then-Korea, there were basically two places of employment for young women: the factory or the US Army base. Cho reveals that her ambitious mother went for the second choice: "I imagine that my mother, being a person of great ambition, chose the latter" (36). During those days, girls working in the army base were stigmatized as "Western Princess" and "Yankee Whores" in South Korea; they were rejected not only by their families but also by the communities. Life would be suffocating if those girls got pregnant. Cho tells that Koonja was pregnant at the age of twenty-one with some hints that she was raped by someone Korean because of her dejected status as a 'Yankee Whore': "The only women Koreans despised more than single mothers were the women who "mixed flesh with foreigners," because they were whores, and traitors too" (39). As a result, Koonja lived a life of rejection in South Korea. Now, Koonja's only hope of liberation and freedom was her marriage with an American man whom she must have met while working at the US Army base.

After her marriage with an American man, Koonja, moved to the United States in 1972, only to encounter racism. After immigrating to America, Koonja was not recognized as Korean; she was perceived either as Chinese or Japanese. Since she was the wife of a US man working in South Korea, she was received as a "war bride" in a "mocking tone" in the US (38). Gradually, Koonja's dream of freedom and liberation was shattered: "She tried to be American, conforming to every new custom she learned . . . [but] they still couldn't see her, and so she became their flesh-and-bones straw woman" (44-45). In this regard, Koonja's life was full of displacements "disrupted by colonization and war, the end by schizophrenia and near homelessness" while moving from one place to another (20). Thus, Koonja's diasporic immigrant identity was not recognized. As an immigrant, she had to haunt the most difficult jobs, and she became nothing more than flesh and bone for white Americans. She was invisible: "To survive my father's hometown, we sometimes had to make ourselves invisible" (47). On some occasions, both mother and daughter experienced even sexual harassment. Therefore, Koonja gradually felt worthlessness and emptiness which pushed her to paranoia and schizophrenia.

Culinary Kinship: Koonja's Culinary Assimilation

The memoir showcases the culinary kinship of Koonja as a part of the invention of identity in the midst of white supremacy in her community. Culinary kinship is a part of food behaviors that produce sociocultural, psychological, emotional, and political networks and connections with the help of food and food talks (Abarca, 1; Fishler 275; Joshua and Bruner 1). In the memoir, Koonja invests her culinary identity to social networks and connections. Such acts of creating connection and unity through food and feeding out of ostensible differences was a part and parcel of her culinary kinship.

In the memoir, Koonja creates culinary kinship as a tool of self-identification to integrate herself in the predominantly white community in the US. Koonja fed white people as "a way of making a living and learning to live among people who saw her as always and only a foreigner" which was both "a gesture of nurturance and an act of resistance" multiplying "her own worth" (13). She hosted dinners and parties with full enthusiasm. Koonja performs her culinary kinship through "a generous supply of food and drink, served with a dash of flirtation" (87). Her culinary identity was rooted in her passion for food and feeding: "She experimented with new recipes, cooked comfort foods on weekends, made sumptuous feasts on holidays" (219). Koonja performed her

passion and skill through cooking: "It seemed to me that she performed a magical feat each time she picked up a knife . . . She liked to sing when she cooked" (66). Additionally, she was not only a good cook, but her food was also charged with some positive emotions such as love, care, support, and healing. She prepared dishes and served the food in the family with love and care where 'one time no love' her phrase of encouragement to her family members to eat more: "If I only give you one serving, I am not giving you enough love" (218). It indicates her love and care to everyone whom she fed.

Koonja's culinary kinship—an act of cooking and feeding—helped her to make connections with the American people. Her intention of cooking, as a Korean immigrant, was not merely her act of performing her identity. She, at the same time, has the willingness to "be able to melt into the homogeneity of my father's hometown, and to that end, she embarked on a project of assimilation through the mastery of American cooking" (171). Thus, it was her project of self-identification and assimilation where American cooking "became something she took on with messianic zeal" (171). Additionally, Koonja's act of collecting and selling blackberries and mushrooms plays a key role in her shift of identity: "Word spread and soon she became known as 'the Blackberry Lady' instead of 'the Chinese Lady.'" People all over town greeted me with 'Say, aren't you the Blackberry Lady's girl?' (100). At best, she became "The Blackberry Lady by summer, Madame Mushroom by fall" (104). Thus, we can argue that Koonja's culinary kinship was not neutral, it was her personal as well as socio-cultural and even political choice as Koonja learned "to cook their familiar foods and hosting all-American Thanksgiving dinners" and she served the leftover turkey with *doenjang* and *kimchi* to her family (84). Her purpose behind creating culinary kinship was guided by her intention of assimilation as her "magnanimity, her delicious food, her seductive charm, were all self-devised political tools" (87). In this regard, culinary performance was a significant influence by Koonja's diasporic identity.

Hence, Koonja performs her culinary identity to create harmony and connection despite the dissonant realities of differences in America. Koonja used her culinary kinship as a method of assimilation. Her preparation of American food and Thanksgiving dinners is an act that she could produce to create her identity despite the shame and rejection she got as a war bride in America.

Culinary Nostalgia: Koonja's Longing for Home

Koonja's act of culinary performance for feeding her American acquaintances could not satisfy her hunger for Korean food. A diasporic identity lives with an indelible culinary and sensuous memory of the food of their childhood or home (Hariyatmi 42; Holtzman 364). Koonja's life in the US, despite her success in building culinary kinships with American food, had been through memory and nostalgia for Korean food which, emotionally and sensorially, transported her back to her childhood life. The nostalgia and memory not only connected Koonja with her past but also were an antidote to the American food and way of life.

Koonja, a diasporic identity, is haunted by the memory of Korean food: "For a Korean person, rural America was a food desert" (84). Koonja's confession to Cho about her longing for Korean food can be understood by her narrative: "I think about it, I dream about it" (87). Here, the dream is no other than her memory of and nostalgia for her Korean food. Therefore, Cho observes that "food was always in the foreground of these memories" where the scene of eating could discover "not only things that broke her but also things that kept her alive" (16). On some occasions, they were served with an abundance of American food, but it would remind Koonja's the hunger for Korean food.

There used to be “a parade of creamy tuna casseroles, lime Jell-O mixed with canned fruit cocktail and cottage cheese, snickerdoodles and homemade lemonade” which could never be an “antidote to her homesickness”, and as a result every meal became “a painful reminder of having left home” (82). There was love, care, welcome with American taste of food, but it could not treat Koonja’s homesickness. Due to this very culinary homesickness, Koonja hunted for her food and “discovered an Asian supermarket only thirty miles from our house” and bought “two hundred pounds of rice, the trunk stuffed to the brim with dried soybeans, gochu-garu, fish sauce, oyster sauce, brine shrimp, and fresh bean sprouts, and enough baechu” (78). Here, we can see how compelling her culinary memory of Korean food was. Her search for Asian supermarket is her search for home, a search for her identity, a healing third space.

Observing and reflecting culinary memory and nostalgia, Cho comes to the reflection that “food everywhere is not just about eating and eating (at least among humans) is never simply a biological process” (71). It means there are multiple factors that influence culinary nostalgia of Koonja. The culinary memory and culinary nostalgia were performed through food sharing with some Korean families. “Let’s eat together” was her catchphrase when she hosted Korean food to her Korean acquaintances (102). Cho writes:

She offered kimchi as a balm for their dislocations because she understood that everyday acts of eating and cooking preserved a connection to the people and places that one left behind. By inserting herself into the scene of induction, my mother also gave presence to the Korean kinship ties that had been lost or erased . . . she ruptured the discourse that the American family/nation was our savior, to whom we owed everything. (102)

In these lines, we can see the power of culinary nostalgia and memory. In this excerpt, the very Korean food kimchi reminds the people and places that are unattainable physically. It is through food that they can be rekindled and revived in the form of memory.

Hence, Koonja’s culinary identity is characterized by nostalgia and memory for Korean food. In this context, food is not just a matter of survival and calories; it is a bridge between the past and the present, Korea and America, and what is lost and what is at hand at present. In a sense, food becomes an in-between third space, a home for a diasporic identity, that is Koonja.

Culinary Home: Koonja’s Return to the Healing Space

Koonja’s journey from displacement, assimilation through culinary kinship, and longing for a home ended with the symbolic return to her culinary home. A return to culinary home, for a diaspora, is a memorial and sensorial reconnection to the root by making food choices in different (dis)locations (Hariyatmi 42; and Mannur 6). Koonja has a deep sense of displacement and identity crisis both in South Korea and America. She was not accepted by mainstream South Korean society, and she has not been accommodated by white American society. As a result, she felt worthless; had suicide attempts and finally became paranoid and schizophrenic in the later part of her life in America. During this time of psychological turmoil, she insists on Korean food time and again with her daughter Cho: “She made regular requests for Korean dishes she hadn’t eaten for ages, like *jangjorim* (beef and spicy green peppers stewed in soy sauce) or *chapssal tteok* (a sweet red-bean rice cake)” (227). Such food had a type of healing and consoling power. Even though she was physically in America and was stigmatized as Yankee whores in South Korea, she starts creating a culinary home sensorially and emotionally. When Cho visited her mother there used to be the smell and aroma of

Korean food: "The pungent smells of garlic and fermentation would fill the air, bringing Korea into the room. The tastes and smells sometimes prompted her to tell me some tidbit about her youth that I hadn't heard before" (223). In this instance, the Korean smell in the room implies a culinary home created in America by Koonja. One of the striking aspects of this food is that it transported her back to her childhood and started sharing her stories. Cho writes: "And slowly, through eating these foods, she found a way home. Through cooking the foods of her childhood and getting a glimpse into her early life" (15). In the memoir, Koonja's culinary home is created out of her memory.

In addition, the interesting thing is even though Koonja is schizophrenic, she can remember all the ingredients of Korean food, which in turn takes her back to her mother's act of feeding Koonja. While giving instructions for preparing *kong-guksu*, Koonja chants, "First you make soymilk. Boil the soybeans in a pot—just for a few minutes. Then you put 'em in the blender and strain it. Put salt in it. Plenty of salt" (212). The same was true with preparing *Sogogi*, "a spicy beef and radish soup in a clear, aromatic broth, which she taught me to make by barking out the directions from five feet away" (199). Here, Koonja's recitation of the recipe exteriorizes her longing for Korean food. Moreover, the healing and recuperating power of food can be sensed when Koonja reconnects with her memory despite her fragmented psychology. Koonja repeatedly asks for Korean foods: "a steaming bowl of fluffy white rice with *saengtae jjigae*", *Kong-Pa*, *Gochu-garu*, soybeans, *misu-garu*, mackerel, some *kong-nameul*. Moreover, Cho's feeding of Korean foods to Koonja built an intimate relation with her mother: "Feeding her brought me closer to her schizophrenia and allowed me to break bread with her voice. I came to understand that the voices were not alien to her, but part of her, perhaps voices from a suppressed and violent family history that were searching for a witness" (16). Here, we can see the healing power of Korean food. Such settings are the healing spaces of culinary chats that vocalize the suppressed voices. In this context, Cho's reflection comes to be valid that Koonja, after she had schizophrenia, had a great deal of thought into her choices "to eat or not eat something" which is an act of "expression of agency, tiny acts of rebellion against enormous structures of power" (25). It is evident when Koonja rejects "powdered milk" as it reminds American bombing in South Korea; it tastes like a war for her (19). The story of Koonja's persistent longing for Korean food continued until she passed away in 2008.

In sum, Cho's *Tastes Like War: A Memoir* performs Koonja's culinary subjectivity to showcase how food acts as a powerful medium for identity construction, sensory engagement, healing, and an emotional and sensorial return to home amidst social stigma and displacement. The memoir dramatizes how one's relationship with food can be a rich source of personal and cultural meaning, deepening our understanding of Koonja's journey through the complexities of her diasporic identity and her family's history.

Conclusion

Cho's *Tastes Like War: A Memoir* dramatizes the performative potential of Koonja's culinary identity by showing a therapeutic connection between her diasporic identity and her culinary choices. Koonja's life was full of discrimination and dislocation both in Korea and the United States. Therefore, to cope with those adverse diasporic situations, she uses food and feeding as a tool of assimilation; she builds culinary kinship with white Americans. Her memory and nostalgia for Korean food start haunting her, and as a result, she hunts for Korean food in American supermarkets and forests. Occasionally, she cooks Korean food for her family as well as her Korean guests. When

Food as a Healing Space for a Diasporic Identity in Grace M. Cho's *Tastes Like War* 64

they eat together, she revives the memory of her lost people and places in Korea. Despite all this nostalgia and memory, her diasporic identity ends up with paranoia and schizophrenia. Even during the time of paranoid hallucination, Koonja's food choices are unequivocally Korean. She instructs her daughter Cho, the author, to prepare Korean food; the recipes and ingredients of her chosen Korean food are on the tip of her tongue. When she gets her Korean food, she feels complete; she feels like she is going back to her culinary home. Hence, throughout her life in the US, food becomes an in-between space, a third space, a healing and nurturing space, a sensorial and emotional home.

The paper has created some avenues for further research in the domain of diaspora and culinary identity. In the present age of global flows, people have been (im)migrating from one place to another for various purposes or due to various socio-political and economic obligations. In all diasporic situations, enacting Koonja's culinary kinship may help the diaspora to build harmony and symphony within differences. Similarly, Koonja's choice of Korean food to connect with her sensorial and emotional culinary home appeals to the diasporic identities to heal their emotional scars through food choices. Hence, the article paves the way for some empirical research investigating myriad forms of the therapeutic bonds between food and diasporic identities across the globe.

Acknowledgment

I would like to acknowledge and express my sincere thanks to the food scholar Prof. Dr. Meredith Abarca, The University of Texas at El Paso, USA, for introducing culinary insights—especially culinary kinship—and encouraging me to write an article while doing her course 'Literature and Culture' (ENGL-6322-001) designed for Fall 2023.

Works Cited

- "Tastes Like War: A Memoir." *Kirkus Reviews*, vol. LXXXIX, no. 6, Kirkus Media LLC, 2021.
- Abarca, Meredith E. "Charlas Culinarias (Culinary Chats): A Methodology and Pedagogy Expanding a Food Consciousness." *Food, Culture, & Society*, 2023, pp. 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2023.2260130>.
- Baral, R. K., and S. R. Lamsal. "Food Habits in the Indian Subcontinent: Making of Cultural Identities." *SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities*, vol. 3, no. 2, Aug. 2021, pp. 13-23, <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjah.v3i2.39416>
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Cho, Grace M. *Tastes Like War: A Memoir*. New York, The Feminist Press, 2021.
- Cho, Grace. "Tastes like War." *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, vol. 20, no. 15, 1 Aug. 2022, pp. 1–9, apjjf.org/2022/15/Cho.html
- Davies, Dave, host. "In 'Tastes like War' a Daughter Reckons with Her Mother's Schizophrenia." *Fresh Air*, 14 Dec. 2021. Accessed 27 Sept. 2023.
- Elo, Satu, et al. "Qualitative Content Analysis: A Focus on Trustworthiness." *SAGE Open*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2014, p. 215824401452263–, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014522633>.
- Fischler, Claude. "Food, Self and Identity." *Social Science Information*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1988, pp. 275–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901888027002005>.

Food as a Healing Space for a Diasporic Identity in Grace M. Cho's *Tastes Like War* 65

- Frye, Joshua and Michael Bruner. "Introduction". *The Rhetoric of Food: Discourse, Materiality, and Power*, edited by Joshua Frye, and Michael Bruner, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012, pp. 1-7.
- Hariyatmi, Sri. "Food: Invisible Bridge Connecting the Past and Present Day of Diasporic Identity." *Celtic (Online)*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2019, pp. 42–50, <https://doi.org/10.22219/celtic.v6i2.9934>.
- Holtzman, Jon D. "Food and Memory." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2006, pp. 361–78, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123220>.
- Hong, Terry. "Tastes Like War." *Booklist*, vol. 117, no. 15, American Library Association, 2021, p. 16.
- Kim, E. Tammy. "Apparitions: Grace M. Cho's memoir of food and empire". *The Nation*, vol. 313, no. 8, Knowledge Bylanes, 2021, pp. 55-57.
- Krippendorff, Klaus. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. 4th ed., SAGE Publications, Inc., 2019.
- Lee, Jonghyun. "Book Review: Tastes Like War: A Memoir by G. M. Cho." *Affilia*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08861099221079394>.
- Mannur, Anita. *Intimate Eating: Racialized Spaces and Radical Futures*. Duke UP, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478022442>.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991*. 1st American ed., Granta Books, 1991.
- Ryan, Gemma. "Introduction to Positivism, Interpretivism and Critical Theory." *Nurse Researcher*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2018, pp. 14–20, <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.2018.e1466>.
- Thompson, John R. "Food Talk: Bridging Power in the Globalized World". *The Rhetoric of Food: Discourse, Materiality, and Power*, edited by Joshua Frye and Michael Bruner, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012, pp. 58-70.
- Urdapilleta, Isabel, et al. "Culinary Choices: A Sociopsychological Perspective Based on the Concept of Distance to the Object." *Food Quality and Preference*, vol. 48, 2016, pp. 50–58, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2015.08.007>.
- You, Sunhay. "Tastes Like War by Grace M. Cho (review)." *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2022, pp. 143–45, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2022.0004>.

To cite this article [MLA style]:

Bhusal, Purna Chandra. "Food as a Healing Space for a Diasporic Identity in Grace M. Cho's *Tastes Like War: A Memoir*." *SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 1, February 2024, pp. 53-65. *NepJOL*, doi:10.3126/sjah.v56i21.62723.