

Food and Body as Markers of Identity in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*

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Abstract

Timothy Mo's Sour Sweet is a novel about an immigrant Cantonese family who run a food counter in England. Their food and body become the markers of their immigrant identity that moves away from the national identity that they are expected to represent. The food they serve in their food counter becomes not only a means of financial well-being but also a means of cultural communication, translation and transformation. The gentle traditional body of a Chinese lady functions as the centre of sexual attention because of its form outside her own cultural constructs. Therefore, food and body in Sour Sweet are equally represented as the subjects that determine the cultural identity of immigrants. Culture identity is a constructed phenomenon by the transformed ingredients of food and untraditional body of the female protagonist of the story in Sour Sweet. Thus, this paper attempts to analyse Sour Sweet in terms of its uses of the concepts of food and body as the notions that construct cultural identity of the immigrants. It will also question whether or not the cultural identity turns into a commodity in a globalized setting.

Key words: *food, body, transformation, translation, globalization*

Timothy Mo is a British author of Cantonese origin. His novels are about the definitions and redefinitions of hybrid identities in multicultural London. His first two novels *The Monkey King* and *Sour Sweet* have been acclaimed as the most prominent of his novels about the identity problems of the post-colonial Chinese community in Britain. His second novel *Sour Sweet*, published in 1982, is a novel about the immigrant experience in Britain, questioning the modified power relationships of a migrant Chinese couple in London in the 1960s. The novel underlines the dilemmatic situation of Lily and Chen, caused by their constantly changing gender roles after migration. Having to make a choice between their old and new cultural values, they are obliged to break with cultural expectations and, to some extent, exchange gender roles. While, in a broader sense, the novel underlines the general hardships and culturally contradicting situations faced by the migrants in daily life, it specifically attempts to focus on familial relations and tensions of the Chens in order to highlight how migration affects gender roles and power relationships within a family. Mo represents the Chen family's rejection of English values and resistance to cultural assimilation in their isolated life among all the symbolic Englishness, without ignoring the fact that the family cannot avoid approaching those rejected values inch by inch every day.

This paper attempts to analyse *Sour Sweet* in terms of its uses of the concepts of food and body as the notions that construct cultural identity of the immigrants. It will also question whether or not the cultural identity turns into a commodity in a globalized setting. As Paul

White suggests, we live in the age of migration today and migration “changes people and mentalities” [5, 1]. While the mentality, personality and gender roles of migrants change, the way they represent their identity also undergoes modification. According to White, as there are multiple influences on the migrant’s culture and identity, “new experiences result from the coming together” of these multiple influences, such as the new ways of cultural representations, new styles of music and poetry and new political ideologies all of which lead to “altered or evolving representations of experience and of self-identity” [5, 1].

Sour Sweet recounts the story of the Chen family in London during the 1960s and relates their story to the Chinese community in London. Consisting of thirty-six chapters, the novel contains two overlapping plots: one is the simple life struggle of the Chen family; the other is the violent story of the Chinese triads. The two stories eclipse each other and they are narrated in alternate chapters, making the reader meander between a peaceful family story and fierce gangster violence.

Lily and Chen get to know each other and marry during a short summer break and go to England as a newly wed couple. After getting married, Chen moves to London with his bride. The novel centres on their marriage life in the isolated Chinese community in London and begins in the fourth year of their stay in the UK. The author depicts Chinese migrants as the central characters and the English as the peripheral throughout the novel in order to emphasise the isolation of the migrants. As Lars Ole Sauerberg suggests, Mo deploys the English people only as “extras” in *Sour Sweet* [3, 130]. When their son Man Kee is born, Lily’s sister Mui comes from the homeland to live with them and help Lily with the housework. However, Mui is in a cultural shock, and refuses to go out of the flat and watches TV all the time. She even turns her back to the window and the courtyard below, in order to reject her new environment. She wants to occupy herself with the created Chinese interior of their household, rather than being distracted by the exterior Englishness. Nevertheless, she eventually gets over her shock and even starts to go out after saving her nephew when he falls off the window sill.

In *Sour Sweet*, Timothy Mo uses food as the marker of change in the cultural codes of an immigrant family in Britain where they use their traditional food as a tool of survival in a food counter that they start running as a family. However, food, which functions as the intensifier of immigrants’ cultural representation, not only turns into a means of survival but also gets commoditized. Their food functions as the marker of their immigrant identity that moves away from the national identity that they are expected to represent. The food they serve in their food counter becomes not only a means of financial well-being but also a means of cultural communication, translation and transformation. Although Chen works in a restaurant, his wife Lily prepares an evening meal for her husband, because she intends to continue her cultural tradition. She likes to do “things in the ‘Chinese’ way” and migration “only serves to intensify this given identity” [1, 54]:

Lily Chen always prepared an ‘evening’ snack for her husband to consume on his return at 1.15 a.m. This was not strictly necessary since Chen enjoyed at the unusually late hour of 11.45 p.m. what the boss boasted was the best employee’s dinner in any restaurant [3, 2].

In this ritual, food becomes a cultural metaphor that reminds them of home. Yet, this cultural symbolism is also stripped off its original spirit because of the unusual time and place. Another important point is that Chen finds it difficult to eat the Chinese food that Lily prepares for him in the middle of the night. The first reason is the unusually late hour of the night to carry out a traditional food ritual. The second reason is that Chen finds the soup too hot for him, because he gradually gets accustomed to eating the food they serve for the English customers at the restaurant. Due to the softened ingredients for the taste of the English, Chen loses his appetite for the food prepared according to the authentic Chinese recipes.

She believes that she would fail to be a proper wife otherwise, so Chen has to have a strong, spicy and hot soup cooked according to authentic Chinese recipes. Lily acts as a “model

of the wife's servitude to the husband, rigid but unimpeachable" because she is attached to "her inherited gender role" [1, 56]. As food functions as a "cultural currency" for their communication [1, 55], the soup ritual continues every night. She is not yet aware of what the UK, her new homeland, might offer her in terms of gender equality in public space. In the meantime, she continues her role as a dutiful housewife in her limited domestic life, which is ornamented by Chinese understanding and traditions. Lily's situation exemplifies a typical depiction of the wives of immigrants. They are brought to a new country by their husbands who confine them into households which are usually surrounded by an alien host culture. Moreover, they are generally required to resume their traditional duties while being alienated. Gradually, their habits change in compliance with their new home, and they begin to celebrate Christmas. The smell of their kitchen is alienated for Chen. He thinks they are becoming English, an inevitable fact that annoys him. This assimilation begins to be felt through the smell of their kitchen:

The smells, wafting through the wide-flung windows, were so evocative of the locale, so English, so indescribably alien, they set his nerves tingling, quickened his pulse: aroma of compounded of creosote, wood-smoke, pipe tobacco, grass and mud. [3, 135]

Although they speak English while serving the customers, their voice, used to the intonations of their mother tongue, is shrill and lifeless in English [3, 135]. Similarly, like their language use, the food they serve is also hybridised, and on a busy schedule, what is served as Chinese food is far away from its authenticity [3, 138]. Like the characters who cook it, the food also suffers from a shift in its identity.

In accordance with their Chinese cultural origins, food also has medical functions. Being a Chinese woman who enjoys good health, she devotes herself to the nursing of her husband when he gets the flu. However on his bedside, she has to improvise certain formulas:

As a supplement to this physical commitment to her husband's bedside, Lily concocted slimy herbals draughts for Chen, as vile-tasting as they were evil-smelling, which enveloped the whole flat in vapours that made the eyes smart and water. The formulas were improvised. Her father had given her the recipes. The trouble was the ingredients were not available in the UK, cornucopia of good things though the island was in respect of homelier merchandise. [3, 8]

The lack of ingredients in the making of herbal mixture for medical purposes also occurs for the food they wish to cook. When their traditional dishes lack the necessary ingredients, they lose their Chinese customers, while the English, who like to drink unsuitable wines, do not care about it:

The waiters preferred to see Chinese customers, which gave them a good chance for chat about shortcomings in particular items on the special Chinese-language menu. He preferred to see a preponderance of Westerners who consumed expensive and unsuitable wines as well as beer with their meal and did not share the irritating obsessions of the Chinese customers with their totally unreasonable insistence on a meal made up of fresh materials, authentically cooked. [3, 29]

While the impossibility of finding fresh ingredients and of authentic cooking keeps the Chinese customers away, the English customers' indifference to the authenticity of Chinese food makes their job easier, since they no more have to worry about caring for authenticity. On the other hand, as they move from the original sense of their food, their own appetite for their traditional food changes too:

The food they sold, certainly wholesome, nutritious, colourful, even tasty in its way, had been researched by Chen. It bore no resemblance at all to Chinese cuisine. They served from a stereotyped menu, similar to those outside countless establishments in the UK. [3, 105]

Mo also playfully alludes to the notion of cultural hybridity in their restaurant's name. There is a pun about the native word DAH LING, the name of their village, by which they call their restaurant. The word inevitably recalls the English word "darling" [3, 95]. This is a situation of hybridity and a cultural clash. However, they do not realise that they fall into amusing situations when they answer the phone by saying the name of their shop.

The gentle traditional body of a Chinese lady functions as the centre of sexual attention because of its form outside her own cultural constructs. Lily's body is unusually strong for a Chinese woman. She has bony, large hands, big feet, and is as tall as her husband. These characteristics give her the strength to overcome the difficulties in England. However, Chen nostalgically misses a gentle, soft body of a traditional Chinese woman:

She had a long, thin, rather horsy face and a mouth that was too big for the rest of her features. She was also rather busty and her hands and feet were a fraction too big to be wholly pleasing to her husband. [3, 16]

However, English men, who find an oriental sexuality in Lily's appearance, turn to look at her:

Westerners found her attractive, though. Lily was unaware of this but Chen had noticed it with great surprise. [3, 17]

As a result, Mo constructs a parallelism between food and body. As both of them are distanced from home, they are taken away from their original sense. Nevertheless, English people find these alienated food and body attractive, whereas the immigrants nostalgically miss the original sense:

Chen wasn't disturbed. He knew what he liked and Lily didn't conform to the specifications. This he knew with a certainty as absolute as his knowledge that the food he served from the 'tourist' menu was rubbish, total *lupsup*, fit only for foreign devils. If they liked *that*, then in all likelihood they could equally be deluded about Lily. [3, 17]

Therefore, food and body in *Sour Sweet* are equally represented as the subjects that determine the cultural identity of immigrants. Cultural identity is a constructed phenomenon by the transformed ingredients of food and untraditional body of the female protagonist of the story in *Sour Sweet*. It is, as a result, not only the traditional food that is hybridized, but also the body of the immigrant. While migration changes identities and mentalities, it also forces the traditional food, gender roles and the body of the migrant to change. On the other hand, even if the shape of the immigrant's body remains the same, the perception of body representation moves away from its cultural boundaries. Food, as the means nutrition, also moves away from its nutritional value to satisfy biological hunger and it gets commoditized by the opening of the restaurants that serve traditional dishes to satisfy the biological hunger of the host culture. By doing so, it becomes the means of financial survival in globalized setting. During this transformation, the modified ingredients of the traditional food turn it into an alien food for the migrants, while it becomes the representative of traditional Chinese food for the English.

To conclude, this paradoxical situation of the migrants concerning the perception of traditional food and body as the markers of their cultural identity functions to deconstruct the authenticity and it turns this authenticity into a temporary attraction for the members of the host society who seek for exotic pleasures.

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Gastronomia și corporalitatea ca mărci identitare în romanul lui Timothy Mo *Sour Sweet*

Rezumat

Romanul lui Timothy Mo, Sour Sweet, prezintă povestea unei familii de imigranți din Canton. Coordonatele principale ale romanului și, în mod implicit, ale identității emigrantului sunt reprezentate de gastronomia tradițională și de raportul acestuia cu corporalitatea. Având ca puncte de plecare aceste două aspecte, romanul pare a ilustra modul în care, sub influența globalizării, identitatea culturală tinde să fie transformată într-un bun economic și social.