

Feasting on Culture and Identity: Food Functions in a Multicultural and Transcultural Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

*Malaysia is a food lover's paradise and Malaysians in general enjoy the diverse culinary heritage of its multicultural society. Although divided by belief, culture and creed, Malaysians are united in their love for the country's multicultural cuisine. Food is an integral factor in bringing Malaysians together and in allowing Malaysians to learn about each other's cultures and traditions but it can also be a source of contestation and ethnic tensions. This paper explores the multifaceted functions of food in two Malaysian literary works. The paper aims to identify the role of food in the Malaysian multicultural context at both the individual and communal level. Food references, imagery, metaphors and symbols are analysed through multicultural, transcultural lenses and the postcolonial theory of the Third Space. A novel by Adibah Amin, *This End of the Rainbow* set in pre-independence Malaysia, and a contemporary short story *Deep Fried Devils* by Shih-Li Kow, are examined to investigate the transformative roles of food in the Malaysian multicultural context. These texts demonstrate the integral role of food in eliciting nostalgia of happy childhood and family memories and in forging personal and communal friendships and inter-ethnic relationships. Both the novel and short story reveal the strong connection between food and cultural identity and show how food can bring about a sense of pride and possessiveness in individuals and cultural groups and at the same time evoke power struggles and identity conflicts in a multicultural and transcultural context.*

Keywords: food; identity; Malaysia, multiculturalism; transculturalism

INTRODUCTION

Beyond providing sustenance and nutrition, food and eating affect various aspects of our lives from our appearance, health, emotions, habits, interests, livelihood, social groups, relationships, culture and our identity. According to Barthes (2008), “food is a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour” (p. 21). Food, from Barthes’ (2008) perspective, is seen as a sign which has meanings and can be interpreted in many ways based on its use and context. Gunkel (2016) describes this “ability to have multiple and different meanings in various contexts” as “the polysemy of food” and defines food as “a system of communication, a type of language through which we express identities and relationships, including gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, festivity, and sacrality” (p. 246). Food is also seen to evoke feelings and create emotional attachments. Mannur (2010, p. 5), elaborates on the role of food in creating “nostalgia, performing cultural identity, and establishing alternative networks of intimacy not circumscribed by lines of blood and filiation”. Through food, a person can access his or her culture, past and nationality (Barthes, 2008). The way in which food is used, served and consumed can signify the identity and culture of an individual, community or nation.

At the individual level, food nourishes and is a source of energy to the human body. Food also plays a role in the mental, emotional, spiritual and social well-being of a person. It provides multisensorial pleasure that affects our moods and actions and is used as a source of comfort. It also triggers nostalgia and memories of people, places and events. According to Wong (2007), “the sensorial experience of food endures in one’s memory bank, long after the context in which it is consumed disappears or changes” (p. 121). Gunkel (2016) notes how

food has the “strange capacity to embody conceptual—even philosophical- frameworks, such as time, nature or home” (p. 247). In addition to this, food is also used as medium of expression to express feelings and affections and also creates emotional bonds. Fieldhouse (1995) notes how food is a vehicle for expressing friendship, for smoothing social intercourse, and for showing concern. Through the ages, food has been instrumental in creating the connection between people and their families, friends, home, culture, heritage and country.

At the communal level, food can be a marker of identity and be both a unifying and dividing agent. Food is used to define a sense of communal identity based on interest, ethnicity, religion, locality, and nationality. The love of a particular cuisine, dish or type of food can bring people together and be a factor in creating bonds and lifelong friendships and relationships. At the same time, food can also divide people based on their dietary preferences and religious restrictions. Food can therefore have a range of roles, meanings and functions according to the context and situation.

In recognition of the multifarious role of food, research on food is expanding beyond its biological, dietary and nutritional functions with scholars exploring how food and its production, cooking, eating, storage and discard behaviours are related to sociocultural norms and social diversity in a society and nation (Kong & Sinha 2016, Twiss 2012). A community’s foodways, the way in which a society perceives, prepares, uses and consumes food is believed to signify its values, mindsets and identity. As stated in Zahra, Ho-Abdullah and Tan (2014, p. 33) “investigating what and how a nation eats, as well as the choice of their food ingredients, qualities, production, and the process of ingestion can provide us with a valuable perspective into different aspects of their personal and cultural identities”. Housefield (1995) explains that the rules and customs that govern the distribution and sharing of food are reflective of the social relationships, social values and structures of a society. Research on food culture, therefore, promises to be revelatory in providing greater insights of culture and identity in society and nation.

The meaning and significance food has is multitudinous as well highly contextual in a multicultural and transcultural society like Malaysia. At both the personal and communal level, food is often the focus of various significant events and celebrations and is very much linked to cultural notions of hospitality, respect and even love for most communities in Malaysia. According to Housefield (1995, p. 78), “major transitional crises of life, the rites of passage, are marked in almost all societies by ritual or ceremonial distribution and consumption of food”. Individual, social, cultural and religious factors play a very important role in determining the roles and significance food has in the Malaysian context. Gunkel (2016) states that “food can only be understood by examining the symbolic function of food objects and practices; food is both an object of material culture and an object contextualized in ritual practice” (p. 246). As described by Housefield (1995), “a rich tapestry of social meaning is woven around every food event in complex strands... because food events may have more than one meaning depending on the actors and the circumstances of the play” (p.79). It is these different social meanings of food that is the focus of this study.

In the context of Malaysia, although there is great recognition of the interest and passion relating to food and eating, studies that investigate the different meanings and roles of Malaysian food and foodways are still emergent. Among such studies include those by Chiao, Khoo-Lattimore and Mun (2014), Choo (2004), Ishak et al. (2013), Lee (2017) and Wagner (2007) which provide a range of perspectives on food, culture and identity in Malaysia. The objective of this paper is to explore the multifaceted role of food in the Malaysian multicultural and transcultural context through the analysis of food related imagery, metaphors, symbols and references in a Malaysian novel and a short story. Kong and Sinha (2016, p. 6), note how current studies on food focus on “examining how food

fulfills a social role and brings communities closer together (or divides them)”. In line with this, this study aims to investigate the transformative role of food as an agent of both unity and division in multicultural and transcultural Malaysia through the analysis of the literary works using multicultural and transcultural concepts and the postcolonial theory of the Third Space. The exploration of the role and power of food as a social agent can enhance the understanding of behaviour related to inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia.

MULTICULTURALISM AND TRANSCULTURALISM

In this study, both the terms multicultural and transcultural are used to describe the sociocultural landscape of Malaysia. A multicultural society is one that is made of diverse ethnic, cultural, religious communities that co-exist as a unified community in a mostly functional way while retaining the unique individual heritage and identity of each community. However, interactions between different cultural communities and knowledge and understanding of other cultures can be superficial, limited and even non-existent. In contrast, a transcultural community is one that consists of greater interaction and mingling among ethnic and cultural communities, traditions and practices and interculturalisation which leads into the blurring of boundaries and identities; creating hybrid cultures and mixed identities that are more fluid, dynamic and open to change and growth (Hinnerová 2007). According to Epstein, (2009, p. 349), “multiculturalism paves the way from the dominance of one canon to the diversity of cultures and transculturalism moves further, from the diversity of cultures to the even greater diversity of individuals, transcending their rigid cultural identities”. In a transcultural society, there is a deeper and greater collective understanding, acceptance and respect for all cultures leading to a more dynamic, progressive society.

Both these terms can apply to Malaysia but they are not fixed to describe different times in history, geographical locations in the country or pockets of society based on age, class or social hierarchy. Malaysia can be both multicultural and transcultural at the same time depending on the context and domain. There are some domains in which communities resist transculturalism and prefer to preserve and uphold the purity and uniqueness of their cultural heritage such as language and rituals while in other areas such as food and fashion, there seems to be a greater acceptance of cultural hybridity and blending. Along the way, Malaysians seem to have found a way to be multicultural and transcultural, to hold on to their traditional cultural heritage and embrace other cultures as well as to fluidly adapt to and from other cultures that surround them. The following section will provide a brief background on multiculturalism in Malaysia and its effects on Malaysian Literature in English.

MULTICULTURALISM, TRANSCULTURALISM, LITERATURE & FOOD

Malaysia’s diverse and hybridized cultural heritage is largely a by-product of its colonial history. The artificial “creation” of an instant multicultural society naturally presented a lot of problems for all the cultural groups involved including the European colonizers. The local ethnic community, namely the Malays (failed) struggled to maintain their power and hold on to the land, governance and identity. On the other hand, the Chinese immigrant community and the indentured labour community, the Indians, tried to reconcile with the loss of their ancestral homeland and held on to every bit of their cultural heritage in fear of losing their identity in their new home. The colonial divide and rule policy ensured the plural sociocultural structure and contributed to plurality, polarity and ethnocentrism. Each community looked after its own and pursued its own agenda without much care to

inter-ethnic relations or integration. Even after achieving independence, the nation struggled to foster a sense of nationhood and community among the different ethnic groups. Sixty years after independence, ethnic and religious segregation and polarization continue to be an issue in Malaysia.

The national agenda to create a united and harmonious multicultural nation pre and post-independence was carried out by paying close attention to forging good and healthy integrations between the different ethnic groups. Literary works too, contributed to this agenda to inculcate a collective sense of community and nationhood by including themes that would unite rather than segregate people according to their ethnic groups. However, changes in sociopolitical situations and national policies in the late 1960s and early 1970s saw a rise of ethnic polarization and interethnic tensions that continue to persist till the present day. Raihanah (2009) notes how the division created by the policies on language, literature and culture contributed to the ethnocentrism that has become a defining feature of the Malaysian national psyche (p. 49).

Malaysia's diverse, multicultural and transcultural society is reflected in the writings produced by Malaysian writers of literature in English. Many of these literary works reflect the sociopolitical and sociocultural sentiments of the Malaysian people over time. Post World War II, literature was used to create a sense of national identity and as a means to unite the diverse ethnic communities in then Malaya (Vengadasamy 2011). This effort was initiated by the pioneering literary fraternity in University of Malaya during the 1950s. These writings contained postcolonial, multicultural, diasporic and identity related themes in accordance to the issues faced by the local community at that time. In contrast to colonial literary works, Malaysian literature in English used symbols, metaphors and imagery that reflected the local environment, cultures and people. According to Vengadasamy (2011, p. 100), early Malaysian writers were committed to creating literary works that projected "a uniquely Malayan consciousness, one that would give a 'common identity' to the diverse population of Malaya".

Although much has changed in Malaysia politically, socially and culturally since Independence, the one thing that has not changed in 60 years is the obsessive love Malaysians have for food (Soon & Lazarroo 2017). Over the years, more than any other element, food has played an important role in bringing all Malaysians together. The national fixation with food and eating has naturally spilled over into literary works of various genres. Food imagery, symbolism, metaphors and food related nostalgia are aplenty in works produced by Malaysian fiction writers both at home and abroad. Writers, both in the past and in current times use food to represent their longing for family, home and its comforts as well as memories of interethnic interaction and mingling. Often, in these writings, there is not just a nostalgic return to one's childhood home, memories and experiences through the memories of food but also of the communal consumption of it within a multicultural landscape. Prior to analysing the food references in the selected literary works, it is important to understand the culinary landscape of Malaysian cuisine.

CULINARY MULTICULTURALISM AND TRANSCULTURALISM

The diverse, unique and beautiful sociocultural landscape of Malaysia perhaps can be best represented, understood and experienced through its food. Malaysian food is a smorgasbord of cuisines originating from the various ethnic and cultural communities that have lived and live in Malaysia such as the Malay, Chinese, Indian, Sri Lankan, Peranakan, Portuguese, and Kadazan, Dusun, Iban and Indonesian communities. Although these cultural communities are proud of their traditional cuisines and continue to preserve their culinary heritage and traditions, the food, like everything else too, has evolved and adapted to the Malaysian

environment adding new, hybridized, delicious dishes to the existing traditional cuisines of the communities. Malaysian Chinese and Malaysian Indian cuisines for example, include flavours and dishes, which are unique to the community in Malaysia and are not found in China or parts of India from which the ethnic communities originated from. In addition to traditional and new dishes of diverse cultural communities, the different cuisines have over time organically influenced each other gastronomically and adapted to local ingredients and tastes through the process of interculturalisation, creating hybrid dishes that are truly transcultural and Malaysian.

A perfect example of a Malaysian dish is the *curry mee* also known as *curry laksa* which is a dish consisting of noodles in thick coconut milk based curry broth, flavoured with chilli, spices, lemongrass, galangal and served with meat, seafood, tofu and vegetables. The curry laksa is made of ingredients commonly found in traditional dishes of the three main ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia. The curry laksa is a hybrid dish made through the fusion of elements from different cuisines but the elements and flavours of each cuisine (Chinese noodles, Indian curry and Malay herbs) are still discernible in spite of being fused together in the dish. The curry laksa is an example of interculturalism and transculturalism at its best in Malaysia. It demonstrates how the multicultural interaction and intermingling in Malaysia has created hybridization while still preserving the unique identity of each cultural community (Hinnerová 2007).

One of the reasons food occupies such a central position in multicultural gatherings and engagements in Malaysia is that it allows the different communities to partake in a mutually pleasurable experience through tasting and eating different cuisines. According to Hook (1992), the practice of consuming the food of other ethnic groups, known as “Eating the Other”, is said to be a source of pleasure. The variety of foods and cuisine readily available in the country means that over time, Malaysians have come to appreciate the cuisine of other cultural communities and even incorporate elements of these cuisines into their own. “The Malaysian palate is, after all, built on variety, for the best part of being a multicultural society is enjoying different cuisines” (Soon & Lazaroo 2017). As a result of centuries and decades of cooking and “eating the other”, Malaysians in general, have developed a rather sophisticated palate (Hook 1992). Therefore, through these culinary cultural exchanges, the typical meal in a Malaysian household of any ethnicity has become hybrid and multi-cuisine in nature and as such embodies a form of cultural appropriation and “everyday multiculturalism” common in Malaysia (Flowers & Swan 2012).

The materiality of transculturalism and cultural hybridity is of course not only limited to food in Malaysia but also evident in the language, attire, art, cultural rituals and traditions. However, while inter-cultural influences can be frowned upon, discouraged, resisted or at times even rejected in these other domains, when it comes to food there seems to be more tolerance and acceptance. In the case of the former, the ‘purity and authenticity’ of languages, attires and cultural traditions and rituals tend to be guarded more closely from the influence of other cultures than food for some reason. Lee (2017, p. 141) proposes how culinary fusion “leads to an integrated sense of taste and a collective sense of identity” suggesting that food acts as a common denominator to bring people of diverse background together. Malaysian food, a hybrid multi-cuisine, becomes the element that brings people together in Malaysia. It is essentially the “Third Space” in and through which Malaysians feel the most comfortable mingling inter-ethnically (Bhabha 2006). This notion of the Third Space proposed by Homi Bhabha is a postcolonial sociolinguistics theory of identity and community (Faizah 2008). The concept of the Third Space is used in this study to examine the role of food in the Malaysian multicultural and transcultural context.

FOOD AS THE HYBRID THIRD SPACE

According to Bhabha (2006), all cultural statements and systems are constructed within a Third Space which is a hybrid space that brings people together. The Third Space can be both a location and a process that provides a place for the negotiation of identity constructions, structures and cultural systems of meaning such as race, gender and class (Brunsmas & Delgado 2008). In and through this Third Space, individuals and communities have the potential to develop a new understanding and appreciation of hybridised and fluid constructs of identity within multicultural and transcultural contexts. Third spaces are playgrounds for multicultural communities to engage with, learn about, experience, develop and recreate the unique cultural landscape in which they live in. The third space, “is a space of transgression, of potential social change, of dialogue, and of creativity, where constructions and myths are challenged and new subjectivities and collectivities are allowed to emerge” (Brunsmas & Delgado 2008, p. 339).

Third Spaces allow multicultural communities to evolve, develop, mix, merge and embrace change and growth. The Third Space is of hybridity in and between cultural differences (Bhabha 2006). In this study, food, a dominant cultural and ethnic identity symbol, is viewed as the hybrid Third Space in Malaysia where ethnic communities meet, interact, understand and influence each other by “eating the other” (Cook 1992, Dundar 2016). Food is viewed as being the potential Third Space as “food and foodways precipitate the emergence of hybrid identities” (Dundar 2016, p. 140). Dundar (2016) discusses how the Middle Eastern sweet, *baklava*, creates a permeable space where Arab immigrants are able to embrace their hybrid identities.

In Malaysia, food is truly the ideal and preferred style for ethnic and cultural fusion and hybridity and it is where multiculturalism and transculturalism thrives and is celebrated the most. Faizah (2015)’s study on Malaysian identity and the Third Space revealed that 81% of the respondents felt Malaysian food was the best “platform for the construction of a shared Malaysian identity” and that “food made different people come together; and eat in the same place regardless of religious and cultural background” (p. 32). Although Faizah (2015)’s study did not focus on food and its role in Malaysia, it does reveal that food can be viewed as the Third Space which provides the most comfortable inter-ethnic interaction for Malaysians. However, as mentioned, food is not free from sociopolitical contestations and struggles to preserve ethnic and cultural identity. This unique space that food occupies as a site of celebration and struggle in multicultural and transcultural Malaysia will be illustrated through the analysis of the two literary texts in this study.

METHODOLOGY

Two Malaysian Literature in English texts are used in this study. One is a novel, *This End of the Rainbow*, by Adibah Amin and the other is a short story, *Deep Fried Devils*, by Shih-Li Kow. The novel, published in 2006, is set in early 1950s Malaya and the short story, published in 2008 is set in contemporary times, 50 years after Independence. Although the texts are published only two years apart from each other, the settings represent divergent times and spaces in Malaysian history in terms of setting and political and sociocultural landscapes. The authors, both women, represent two different eras in the Malaysian literary scene. Adibah Amin, aged 81, belonged to the first wave of English educated Malaysians from University Malaya, Singapore who championed Malaysian literature and has written in both the Malay and English language. In her 40s, Shih-Li Kow, on the other hand, represents the more contemporary, cosmopolitan generation of Malaysian writers. The novel and the

short story were selected for this study due to their focus on food within the Malaysian context and their representation of different era and times in Malaysian history. Also, the authors represented different generations of the Malaysian Literature in English writers' fraternity. The selection was made with the intention that the abovementioned differences in the texts will yield a rich, diverse and more comprehensive finding of the role of food in the Malaysian sociocultural context.

The analysis will involve close examination of food references in both texts, including imagery, symbols and metaphors. The food references will be analysed according to the functions they fulfill at the personal level for an individual character in the texts and at the communal level, for ethnic groups represented in the stories. The analysis of food at the personal level will examine the emotions food evokes in individuals and its role in interpersonal relationships. At the communal level, the role of food as a cultural marker and agent of unity or division in Malaysia as represented in the stories will be scrutinized. The theoretical perspective of the Third Space will be used in the analysis to discuss how food promotes or problematizes intercultural mingling and acceptance of cultural diversity and hybridity. The discussion will include how food reinforces the multicultural and transcultural identity of individuals and communities in Malaysia.

ANALYSIS

THIS END OF THE RAINBOW BY ADIBAH AMIN

The novel, *This End of the Rainbow* by Adibah Amin, is the writer's first English novel and is set in Malaya, in the early 1950s. It presents life through the eyes of Ayu, taking the reader through her journey from childhood to adulthood in a multicultural community during the Second World War and colonial period in Malaya. The book provides insights into multicultural living, racial prejudice, colonialism and pursuit of independence and also reflects themes of identity, coming of age, family and friendship. The book is very descriptive and rich in imagery of the sight, sounds and tastes of Malaya. The vivid and detailed description of meals and dishes is especially noteworthy.

PERSONAL LEVEL: FOOD IN CREATING NOSTALGIA & INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The analysis of food references, imagery and symbols in *This End of the Rainbow* reveals that food plays a constant and significant role in the different phases in the Ayu's life. Meals and dining are elaborately described in Ayu's nostalgic recollections of her past memories of her home, family, childhood and adolescent memories. Food seems to play a central role and has a strong association to the people Ayu loves such as her mother, Husna, her best friends, Nimmi and Surmeet and their families.

Ayu's association between food and feelings of comfort and love begins, naturally with her experiences with her mother, Husna.

Husna always sensed the coming of a loved one. She was cooking Ayu's favourite dishes: asam pedas, the Johor style chilli-and-tamarind-gravy fish; the leafy vegetable, kangkong, stir-fried with onions and pounded anchovies; to be served with steaming, fluffy rice.
(*This End of the Rainbow* 2006, p. 11)

As always, Husna had sensed Ayu was coming and cooked her favourite dishes. That day there was also extra rice and sure enough, Nimmi and Surmeet arrived....As they sat around the big kitchen table and enjoyed the simple lunch, Ayu felt the tension of the past weeks, ease and melt into serenity.

Husna seemed to use food to express her maternal love and devotion to her children and loved ones. Through Husna's cooking, Ayu experienced the love her mother felt for her. As a result, Ayu associated maternal love and affections with food and a mother's cooking and feeding of her children. As a result, when her friends' mothers cooked and served her food, Ayu felt like she was their daughter and a part of the family. This is evident in Ayu's descriptions of her time with Nimmi and Surmeet's family. At Nimmi's home, Nimmi's mother and sister's hospitality through the serving of their traditional Malayali food made Ayu feel welcomed and at home.

Ayu was welcomed with warm smiles and delicious Malayali food. Nimmi's mother and younger sister Sheri kept heaping fresh helpings of fragrant steaming rice, fish curry, vegetables, yoghurt and crackers on Ayu's plate. Ayu's first taste of tairu, the yoghurt and of aviel, the vegetable dish, captivated her for life. She felt totally at home. Never before had Ayu been so instantly enveloped in the bosom of a friend's family. ...Ayu called her 'Amma' from the start.

When they heard the cry after several weeks' absence, Nimmi and Sheri and their mother rushed out. 'Ayu! You're back from Singapore!' 'Here's a tall glass of cool, cool, water!' 'You're thinner, moale, dear child! Come in, we'll feed you up.

(This End of the Rainbow 2006, p. 18)

The food plays such an important role in establishing the relationship between Ayu and Nimmi's family. *Amma* had made Ayu feel like a daughter by cooking and serving her the food as if she was her own daughter. Since Ayu's own experience of maternal love and care has a strong association with cooking and serving of food, she interpreted Nimmi's and Surmeet's mothers' actions the same way.

Papa and Mummy, Surmeet's parents who treated Ayu like one of their daughters...Mummy, comely and affectionate, hugged Ayu and gave her laddu, milk sweets, from a wedding...

(This End of the Rainbow 2006, p. 21)

Of nine girls born into the family, two were married, leaving seven at home, with Ayu making the number eight. The way Ayu attacked the milk-and-nut rich cream dessert, it was lucky that Mummy felt too pleased and tickled...

(This End of the Rainbow 2006, p. 25)

PERSONAL LEVEL: PRESERVING CULTURAL IDENTITY AND HERITAGE THROUGH FOOD

In addition to representing maternal and familial love and being a space for inter-cultural exchange and interaction, through food, Ayu learned about her own cultural heritage. Ayu describes her experience of learning to cook rendang by having to “*accompany her mother and Mak Ngah as they watched over the chicken pieces in coconut milk, dried chilies, garlic, ginger, galangal, lemon grass and salt cooking slowly over a wood fire*”. It was important to the family that Ayu had knowledge of traditional Malay food preparation and she was taught “*to weave the cases for the ketupat from coconut fronds and half –fill them with rice, to be boiled into dumpling with just the right balance of firmness and softness*”. To encourage her to further develop her culinary skills, Ayu was praised for her oddly shaped *ketupats*.

Many ethnic communities place a lot of importance in preserving their culinary heritage. Food is seen as identity and cultural capital, one of the most important aspects of ethnic identity that people hold on to even when other aspects of their cultural heritage such as language, attire, art and literature are lost or is no longer a part of their daily life. The eating and cooking of traditional food is among the easiest and most practical ways of incorporating one's culture in daily living even if one has not had prior knowledge or exposure to it. Traditional recipes and cooking techniques of a cultural community can be

easily learnt and transferred between generations provided there's enough awareness and effort to preserve the culinary legacy by the community. In many communities, women are the gatekeepers of a community's culinary legacy and mothers pass on their knowledge to their children to ensure the legacy survives and becomes a link that tie these generations together. This is evident in the story where Ayu's mother and aunt teach her how to cook and also in Surmeet's family where her mother is adamant that Surmeet masters Punjabi cooking.

COMMUNAL LEVEL: INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCE & HYBRIDIZATION

In addition to learning about her own cultural heritage through food, Ayu also learns about the culture of her friends through Chinese snacks her family shares with Lin, the traditional Malayali and Punjabi food she eats at Nimmi's and Surmeet's house and the meals she shares later with Po Po. She discovers new tastes and flavours that enhance, develop, sophisticate and irreversibly change her palate into a multi-cuisine one.

Ayu knew there would be delicious dessert with the simple dinner of chapattis, dhal, vegetables and the yoghurt called dahi. Surmeet had explained to her that the rice pudding, kheer, needed very slow cooking.

(This End of the Rainbow 2006, p. 25)

The dining table and the food shared between Ayu, Nimmi and Surmeet at their respective homes functioned as the Third Space, the hybrid playground where the friends engage with, learn about, experience, develop and recreate the unique cultural landscape in which they live in. Through sharing of food, Ayu, Nimmi and Surmeet have shared their cultural heritage with each other. Ayu expresses how the different tastes and flavours to which she was introduced to at Nimmi's and Surmeet's homes, changed her for life. Her palate changed and became hybridized as surely did Nimmi's and Surmeet's as a result of the culinary cultural exchanges they experienced as friends.

This effect of her exposure to different cuisines in her childhood and adolescence is evident in the different types of meals Ayu's has in her daily life in adulthood, representing everyday lived transculturalism. Ayu's experience mirrors that of most Malaysians who have developed a taste and desire for the cuisine of their own and other ethnic groups in the country. The interculturalization through food has paved the way for Malaysians to move towards becoming a more transcultural community that has greater inter-cultural mingling.

COMMUNAL LEVEL: FOOD SLURS & SEGREGATION

Thus far, the discussion of food references in the novel has focused on the positive associations and effects; however, food is also used in less positive ways. As noted by Kong & Sinha (2016:7), "just as food can be used for inclusion, it can be used to exclude." The first reference to food in the novel demonstrates how eating and dietary preferences differentiated one ethnic community from the other. It appears in an exchange between the young Ayu and a group of seven year old boys heading to a Chinese school who went past Ayu's house every morning. Completely in awe of their big boy status, Ayu had hoped, unsuccessfully, to get their attention and make friends by greeting them "good morning" in Hokkien (which she had learnt to impress them).

"In desperation, she called out one morning, 'Cina makan babi! (Chinese eat pork!)'. 'They turned, grinned and retorted, 'Melayu makan belacan!' ('Malays eat shrimp paste!)

(This End of the Rainbow 2006, p. 4)

This particular memory of Ayu with the Chinese boys shows the children at that time innocently use food as the primary element in insulting another ethnic group. The glaring dietary preferences and restrictions between the two ethnicities especially in the consumption of pork by the Chinese deemed as *haram* by the Muslims serves as a divisive element between the two communities, creating rifts and distances. The Malays, as Muslims, completely reject the consumption of pork while the Chinese, traditionally, do not use shrimp paste (*belacan*) which is found in many Malay dishes in their own cuisine. Thus, these dietary and culinary differences are used as identity markers, especially in racial insults and slurs as seen in the story. As children, other than skin colour, food is the easiest and most obvious element of ethnic classification. Globally, there are many other examples of how culture and peoples are mostly derogatively labelled through their ethnic food and dishes. Common examples of ethnic slurs and labels that use food, also known as food slurs would include the terms “curry” to refer to people of South Asian origin, “beaner” to refer to Mexicans or people of Central American descent, “cabbage-eater” for Germans or Russians and “kimchi” for Koreans.

In the novel, the young Ayu was only trying to get the attention of the boys in order to be friends with them, and in desperation she yelled out an insult as a last resort to get their attention and it worked. The boys in return yelled out another insult to Ayu. Being older, Ayu’s insult didn’t offend the boys but theirs made Ayu cry. The incident however, aided by the maturity and good-naturedness of the boys and Ayu’s father did not wreck the relationship between Ayu and the boys or between the Malay and Chinese communities. Ironically, as seen in the story, it helped forge a relationship between them.

The next morning saw the beginning of a beautiful though brief relationship between Ayu and the schoolboys. Each side developed an arsenal of colourful childish insults to be fired every morning-until the neighbours put a stop to the skirmishes.

(This End of the Rainbow 2006, p. 5)

A few years later, Ayu meets these boys again at her friend Lin’s house during Chinese New Year and exchanged friendly and polite greetings with them. “As their eyes met hers, they grinned mischievously but greeted her with decorum. Ayu replied courteously, giving them a demure smile”

(This End of the Rainbow 2006, p. 34)

The story shows how food and eating habits can be negatively associated with a specific ethnicity or culture and can be an agent of ethnic classification and division instead of the hybrid Third Space that celebrates diversity. In today’s heightened ethnocentric and religiously sensitive environment, such exchanges as described in the novel can escalate into full blown altercations and politicised to create tensions between the ethnic communities in Malaysia. Recent examples of such events include the segregation of food utensils in one school for Muslim and non-Muslim students and the restrictions by one school on eating in public spaces during Ramadhan. Increasing Islamisation in the public sphere has contributed to an increasing lack of tolerance reflected especially in food and eating spaces. This has led to “the disappearance of commensality between Malay and Chinese, due to the Muslim taboo of eating nonpermissible/haram food like pork” (Duruz & Gaik 2015, p. 8). As a result, the hybridised Third Space in which Malaysians came together to share and eat each other’s food and cuisines is slowly disappearing. It is becoming less common for Muslims and non-Muslims to eat at each other’s homes or at a common table unless the food or the restaurant is certified as halal. The food that brought multicultural Malaysians together in the past is increasingly being used by groups with ethnocentric and fundamental views to segregate Malaysians on religious and ethnic grounds.

COMMUNAL LEVEL: INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING & GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS
THROUGH SHARING OF FOOD AND SPACES

As seen in the story, although such taboos existed in the past, it did not affect personal and social interethnic relations as much as it does in the present time. This is due to “a heightened religious sensitivity and as sense of a Malay panopticon of laws and restrictions that did not register so strongly in the past” (Duruz & Gaik 2015, p. 8). Such conservative and puritanical views and practices were not the norm in early times in Malaysia as described in Adibah Amin’s novel where food and eating spaces functioned as the shared Third Space which created cultural exchanges with mutual respect and acceptance from all groups. This is evident in Ayu’s descriptions of Hari Raya and Chinese New Year celebrations where Malay and Chinese families came together to share food and learn about each other’s cultures.

On the first day of Aidilfitri, Lin and her parents came over bringing fruits and the two families enjoyed getting really acquainted over chicken rendang and ketupat.... Two days before Lin’s New Year, the Lim’s brought oranges for Ayu’s family, saying they would be going to their hometown, Ipoh for the traditional reunion dinner on the eve of the first day but would be back in a week...

(This End of the Rainbow 2006, p. 33)

In addition to fostering and forging friendships and bonds, through the feasting and celebrations, the people and the communities learned more about each other’s cultures and believe. The sharing of food demonstrated a spirit of generosity and created camaraderie and good neighbourliness.

Ayu and her parents thanked them for the oranges which, Ayu was charmed to learn, had a name that sounded like the word for gold and were thus believed to bring prosperity. Amri and Husna offered to keep an eye on the Lim’s house while they were away, wished them a happy and prosperous new year, and promised to visit them when they returned. The day after the Lim’s returned, Ayu and her parents visited them, bringing ‘gold’ oranges. The families had another cordial chat in three languages, this time over ‘love letters’, peanuts and dried melon seeds.

(This End of the Rainbow 2006, p. 32)

While they were there, a group of Mr Lim’s pupils came with little gifts, two of each kind. Ayu was glad her family had brought two packet of oranges when Mrs Lim explained to her that even numbers were for good luck.

(This End of the Rainbow 2006, p. 34)

Through their interaction with Lin and her family, Ayu and her family learned about the meaning of the mandarin oranges exchanged by the Chinese during their New Year celebrations and wholeheartedly partook in the tradition, demonstrating a truly multicultural spirit rarely seen in current times. The exchange of food as gifts and tokens of appreciation forged strong neighbourliness in the community with Ayu’s family offering to look after Lin’s house when they were away. We can also see in the story how the two families ate together Chinese New Year delicacies without a sense of suspicious or need to verify its halal status. Such experience of interethnic and intercultural mingling in the Third Space through food and celebrations helped Ayu become a truly transcultural person who understood and appreciated the cultures around her as well as her own culture.

*‘How come the three of us never felt race prejudice?’ Nimmi wondered.
‘We’re lucky, said Surmeet. ‘Partly it’s our parents’ attitude. The way they brought up’.
Yet in some ways, said Ayu, I’m very Malay, Nimmi’s very Malayali and Surmeet’s very Punjabi. Maybe the point is we accept our differences.
Not just accept, Nimmi stressed. ‘We love those differences.’
‘It’s also knowing one another so well’ Surmeet said.*

(This End of the Rainbow 2006, p. 126)

The novel shows how understanding and acceptance of ethnic and cultural differences stem from the way parents and families in multicultural communities raise their children and the role that food has as the Third Space in promoting inter-ethnic relations. Inculcating and encouraging children and people to learn about and experience the culture of other communities especially through intercultural mingling and interaction without prejudice and biasness as seen in the story helps create liberal, progressive, multicultural and transcultural individuals and communities.

DEEP FRIED DEVILS BY SHIH-LI KOW

The short story *Deep Fried Devils* is published in an anthology featuring 25 short stories written by Shih-Li Kow titled *Ripples and other stories*. *Deep Fried Devils* chronicles a Malaysian street food war between a Chinese and Malay hawker selling the traditional Chinese twin crullers known as *Yow Cha Kwai* (Cantonese) *You Tiao* (Mandarin) or *Chakoi* (Malay). The short story takes its name from the English translation of *Yow Cha Kwai* which simply means, deep fried devils or oil fried ghost. Set in contemporary, urban Malaysia, the story features the business/ ethnic rivalry over crullers. Ethnic identity and ownership of ethnic cuisine is on the forefront as the Chinese and Malay hawkers fight over the right and freedom of cooking and profiting from sales of food originating from another ethnic community. Issues of identity and power relating to ethnic delicacies are highlighted in the story.

PERSONAL LEVEL: FOOD AS ETHNIC MARKER & IDENTITY CAPITAL

The short story shows how food becomes a space for contestations between individuals. The contentions over the ownership of traditional ethnic dishes is evident right from the beginning when the owner of the Chinese *yow cha kwai* stall Lan Jie, complains to another Chinese hawker, Ah Wai, about the inability to control other ethnic groups from profiting from what she considers the property of the Chinese ethnic community, expressing her fear of the threat that poses to her business.

Lan Jie: I have said this and I will say it again, how can business be good when we have no control? See that stall opposite? What I sell, they sell too.

Ah Wai: Are you talking about that Malay man?

Lan Jie: Yes. How can Malay people sell our traditional Chinese snacks? They will tamper with our recipes until everything has sugar and coconut milk like some Malay kuih. Their yow cha kwai is for sure not as good as mine.

Ah Wai: Of course not.

(Deep Fried Devils 2008, p. 50)

In addition to protecting the potential monetary benefits cultural and food knowledge affords a community, the possessiveness protectiveness in preserving the authenticity (both in name, identity and flavour) is evident in both the Chinese and Malay characters in the story. Attempts by other communities to re-adapt the cultural heritage of another is rejected and considered inauthentic, unoriginal or stealing and tampering. Lan Jie is indignant about the addition of sugar and coconut milk to modify Chinese snacks and the corruption of *yow char kwai* to *chakoi* by the Malay community while Din and Rahimah are incensed by Chinese versions of *nasi lemak*, turmeric rice and the *satay*. The irony in this situation is that while Lan Jie questions the authenticity and quality of the *yow cha kwai* made by Malays, the crullers in her own stall are prepared by her Indonesian helper. Her anger towards the situation is once again expressed to a rich, Chinese Customer, Datin.

Lan Jie: See, that stall over there? They are selling exactly what I am selling. How can the government allow it?...Maybe the government will allow it. My question is how can our Chinese Traders Association allow it? What else will be forced to give up? Already Malays are selling soy bean milk, tau foo fah, yong tau foo, char kuey teow, even longan herbal drink. What next? Before long, we'll have no leg to stand on.

Datin: We still have our roast pork and bird's nest soup.

Lan Jie: Yes, they've stolen our chicken rice. Everybody sells chicken rice now.

(Deep Fried Devils 2008, pp. 50-51)

What Lan Jie seems to be outraged about is not that Chinese food is eaten and cooked by non-Chinese people but that the non-Chinese have begun to profit from cooking Chinese food which serves as an identity capital (Brunsma & Delgado, 2008). Lan Jie believes that only the Chinese have the right to use the knowledge of Chinese food and cooking as identity capital to reap the financial and commercial benefits it offers. Lan Jie's perceives Din's *chakoi* business as theft and a threat to the socioeconomic opportunities food as an identity capital brings to the Chinese community. However, the Malay hawkers Din and Rahimah, have a different view on the matter.

Din: They don't like us. They think that we are stealing their traditional business. But it's an open market isn't it?

Customer: Yes, open market. Of course.

Rahimah: After all, they don't own the recipes. See what they have done to ours. Stolen our nasi lemak. That coffee shop there sells nasi lemak panas just like they make curry, satay, turmeric rice, even pork satay. All that is ours. What about sambal belacan and kerabu, isn't that our mother's inheritance?

(Deep Fried Devils 2008, p. 53)

On one hand, Din and Rahimah feel that they have the right to sell *chakoi* because it's an even playing field as far as business is concerned. On the other hand, Din and Rahimah express possessive sentiments over traditional Malay food, claiming it as theirs and accusing the Chinese as thieves that have stolen and altered Malay food to suit their own tastes and needs. The 'us vs. them' dichotomy is expressed over food. Lan Jie and Rahimah's ethnocentric attitudes demonstrate a rejection of the blurring of cultural boundaries in transcultural contexts. In this context, the Third Space in which the cultures come in contact with each other and the hybridity it results in creates hostility and resentment instead of acceptance and harmony.

COMMUNAL LEVEL: FOOD AS AGENT OF DIVISION

The short story shows food as an important marker of ethnicity and highlights issues of power and control over cultural identity in multicultural and transcultural contexts. The emotional connection to their ethnic food creates a rift between the hawkers. Usual business rivalry is amplified by ethnic contestation and sentiments over deep fried crullers, a dish that exists in different forms in many cultural communities around the world. As noted by Raihanah (2009:64), "one's ethnicity becomes a mechanism to deal with consequences of power struggle between different cultural groups in a country". Although the differences between Lan Jie and Din are based on business rivalry, ethnicity becomes an issue and the rivalry turns into communal ethnic tension. The feeling of being usurped and overtaken in an area that she feels is rightfully hers leads Lan Jie to vocally express her displeasure.

Lan Jie shouted across the road: Looking, looking, what are you looking at? Apa tengok, tengok? Copy cat. Can't think of an idea to do your own business, you have to copy ours. Why don't you sell your kampung food instead of copying our Chinese cooking?

(Deep Fried Devils 2008, p. 54)

Feeling insulted, Din and Rahimah too, like Lan Jie, resort to stereotypical racist jibes and insults.

Din: Why don't you go back to your kampong in China if your Chinese cooking is so good? You come to stay in people's country and don't appreciate it. You dare talk like that. Go back to become a Communist.

Further insulted, Lan Jie, defends the land of her ancestors: What's wrong with Communist? Didn't you see the Olympics opening? So impressive, even America cannot do a show like that.

Rahimah: That one is real China Chinese. Not Malaysian Chinese like you selling chakoi.

Lan Jie: You don't even know how to say it properly. Chakoi, chakoi. It's yow cha kwai.

(Deep Fried Devils 2008, p. 54)

The heated exchange between the Lan Jie and Din and Rahimah show how quickly individual differences and misunderstandings over their business practice can escalate into communal and racial disputes bringing to fore existing racial prejudices and biasness in the Malaysian context. Similarly, in recent times in Malaysia, various individual practices and behaviours which have racist and discriminatory undertones were taken out of context to inaccurately represent an entire culture or community, further heightening inter-ethnic tensions in Malaysia.

While each culture in a multicultural contexts is proud of its heritage and is willing to share the tastes, flavours and gastronomical pleasures that its cuisine has to offer, *The Deep Fried Devils* situation indicate the reluctance of one ethnic community to allow another to use its traditional culinary heritage as cultural capital. Thus, food as a Third Space as seen in this story only applies to the consumption but not in the preparation or use especially as a commodity. Based on the attitudes portrayed by the characters in the short story, it is perceived that food can only be used as cultural capital by the ethnicity that to which the cuisine “belongs” to. Such rows over food and its ownership indicate the importance of food in establishing and expressing identity of a community.

In the first part of *Deep Fried Devils*, we see how a dispute over ethnic ownership of traditional food creates rifts, rivalry and bitter feelings between the characters in the story. Food does not function as the Third Space, the multicultural playground that brings the diverse cultures together in appreciation of the hybridity and acculturation resulting from a multicultural and transcultural existence. Instead, food becomes a problematic Third Space, a boxing ring where the materiality of transcultural adaptations and hybridity are contested and rejected, creating further divisions between communities.

COMMUNAL LEVEL: FOOD AS AGENT OF UNITY & NATIONAL IDENTITY MARKER

In the second part of the story however, the Chinese and Malay hawkers put aside their differences and unite when posed with the threat of further business rivalry from the foreign, migrant Indonesia and Bangladeshi community. This unity is manifested also through food, in the sharing of recipes of each other's cultural foods. In this context, the Chinese and Malay characters, unite as “we” the Malaysians vs. “those” foreigners.

Rahimah: Aunty, maybe I will stop making chakoi and just sell nasi lemak and Malay kuih instead. Then we can sell a truly Malaysian breakfast on this road.

Lan Jie: OK. No need to fight. You serious or not? I can give you a recipe for nyonya kuih. Very nice, my mother's recipe. My mother is second generation Nyonya. Guarantee hit.

Rahimah: Yes, we are truly Malaysian. Not like those illegal immigrants there. Truly Malaysian like Malaysian Airlines.

(Deep Fried Devils 2008, p. 57)

Although the food traditions and legacies were fiercely guarded in the earlier part of the story, the characters are prepared to unite through the sharing of these food legacies and traditions as Malaysians and not Chinese and Malays. The sharing of the food is symbolic in uniting these two communities as Malaysians (we) while the resistance to share the same food divided them along ethnic lines as Malay and Chinese (us and them). Food therefore creates the Third Space and can function to both divide and unite ethnic communities. The characters declare that with the presence of multicultural cuisines, the business becomes, “truly Malaysian”. The story also illustrates the potential of food as the Third Space in creating transcultural mindsets and identities in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that food and eating creates hybrid Third Spaces in and through which Malaysians experience everyday lived multiculturalism and transculturalism. Food occupies a paradoxical space in Malaysia as seen in the analysis of the novel and short story. It is both a space of bonding and acceptance as well as a site of hostility and division. The novel demonstrates the gastronomical pleasures and socio-cultural benefits of cross-cultural food consumption and reveals the material agency of food in promoting inter-ethnic integration in a pre-Independence Malaya. Post-Independence, as Malaysians become more transcultural through interculturalisation, issues of power and control over the commodification of ethnic cuisine arise, creating inter-ethnic tensions as seen in the short story.

This study has shown how food is shown to fulfill various roles at both the individual and communal level in both texts. At the individual level, food expresses love and affection, creates bonds and triggers positive nostalgia of home, family and friendships. Food is also used as tokens of appreciation, acknowledgment and is a central part of celebrations. Through food, family and cultural legacies and heritage are preserved. Food is used to express generosity and reconciliation. At the communal level, food functions as identity and cultural capital and as an agent of interculturalisation. Food creates multicultural communities and provides a national identity as the hybrid Third Space that allows different ethnicities to congregate together and celebrate their differences. However, food is also used as an ethnic slur to derogate and becomes a tool in power struggles and betrayals between ethnic groups. Food instills love as well as creates resentment and thus both unites and divides.

Food has and continues to have power and agency within the Malaysian multicultural and transcultural context at both the individual and communal level. The analyses in this study show how food references in Adibah Amin’s *This End of the Rainbow* and Shih-Li Kow’s *Deep Fried Devils* express a multicultural and transcultural rather than an ethnocultural identity of the Malaysian community. According to Gunkel (2016, p. 247), “we articulate ourselves and are ourselves articulated through foodways”. Malaysian foodways truly reflect the identity of Malaysia as a uniquely diverse, hybrid and dynamic nation rooted in culture and tradition.

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