

## Food, Identity, Power and Multicultural Solidarity in Preeta Samarasan's *Tale of a Dreamer's Son*

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### ABSTRACT

The role of food from a sociocultural perspective is one that has been increasingly explored in cultural narratives and academic inquiry in the past few decades. In literature, food is used as a tool to evoke the senses and convey meaning about identity, culture, relationships and emotions. Food can be instrumental in shaping personal and cultural identities, community dynamics and embedding ideologies, particularly in culturally diverse societies. This article explores the intersections of food and identity in multicultural Malaysia as depicted in Preeta Samarasan's novel *Tale of the Dreamer's Son*. Through critical literary analysis of the novel, the article examines how food shapes identities and functions as a tool for manifesting belief systems, cultural practices and power as well as how it fosters the Malaysian concept of *Muhibbah* (the spirit of multicultural solidarity and mutual respect) within the multicultural landscape of Malaysia. Anderson's (2006) theory of Imagined Communities and the concept of *muhibbah* as framed by Haslina Ibrahim (2013) is applied to understand how identity, power and solidarity are at work through food consumption practices, as well as the restrictions and regulations surrounding food, within the context of multicultural Malaysia, as depicted in the novel. The analysis reveals that food is used as a marker of personal and communal identity and relationship dynamics in the novel. Food also serves as an ideological tool to impart and manifest values and belief systems as well as power in a diverse society. This study contributes to the broader discourse on food, identity, and

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gastronativism in literature and highlights the unique interplay between culinary practices and sociocultural dynamics in multicultural contexts.

**Keywords:** Food; identity; gastronativism; multicultural; Muhibbah; Malaysian literature

## INTRODUCTION

Food is integral to cultural and religious identity, often symbolizing inclusion and exclusion. Beyond sustenance, food carries cultural, religious, and social meanings (Atkinson, 2021; Bourdieu, 1984; Douglas, 1966), reflecting personal histories, beliefs, and social hierarchies. Food is a potent symbol of identity and a site where both individual and collective identities are formulated, expressed, contested, negotiated and reformulated (Parasecoli, 2022; Vijayaraghavan and Chattaraj, 2024). Food studies scholar Parasecoli (2022) argues that food does not merely reflect cultural traditions but actively shapes political and social boundaries. Parasecoli (2022), coined the term gastronativism to refer to the ideological use of food to determine who belongs and who doesn't in a community and highlighted that food choices can become a tool for asserting identity, enforcing exclusion, and reinforcing social hierarchies. This study examines the role of food in shaping personal and communal identities and relationship dynamics. It also explores how food is used as a tool for manifesting belief systems, cultural practices and power as well as how it fosters Muhibbah (the spirit of solidarity and mutual respect) within the multicultural landscape of Malaysia as represented in the novel, *A Tale of A Dreamer's Son* (2022) by Preeta Samarasan.

In Malaysia, the dynamics of gastronativism are evident in how dietary restrictions function as a mechanism of identity policing and cultural distinction. In contemporary Malaysia, debates surrounding halal regulations, labelling controversies, and the etiquette of serving certain dishes in public functions illustrate how food can become a lightning rod for identity and ideological concerns, revealing the delicate balancing act between religious observance, cultural affiliation, and political power. This was evident in a recent controversy that occurred in January 2025 over an allegedly fake halal label of a ham sandwich at a convenience store in Kuala Lumpur which illustrated how food controversies can become flashpoints for broader cultural, religious, and political debates. The controversy over the labelling of this food item quickly escalated from a legal issue to a religious one when a politician from a major political party in Malaysia accused the convenience store of belittling a religious community (Hadi Azmi, 2025). Hadi Azmi (2025) wrote that “debates over dietary standards often intertwine with sensitive issues of race, faith and culture.” In Malaysia, where halal standards are closely linked to faith and social cohesion, this scandal not only exposes regulatory relapses but also deepens tensions around what it means to be authentically Muslim.

Food practices increasingly intersect with wider identity politics and power relations in multicultural societies, particularly in the Malaysian context, where religious boundaries, socio-economic disparities, and ethnic tensions frequently surface around questions of consumption and prohibition. Such issues are often portrayed in various cultural narratives including literary works and popular cultural texts. The sentiments surrounding food including food nostalgia, culinary traditions, the identity politics surrounding food and the above-mentioned concept of gastronativism are issues that have been represented in various Malaysian cultural narratives, namely literary works. Studies on Malaysian literary works have shown how writers link food practices to cultural, personal and communal identities. In *This End of the Rainbow* by Adibah

Amin, Perry (2017) notes how food is used as ethnic slurs, albeit playfully in Ayu's interactions with the Chinese boys in her neighbourhood. Perry (2017) highlights how different culinary traditions and dietary practices can be a unifying as well as a divisive element in a multicultural society. Such literary accounts echo how everyday food practices intertwine with sensitive issues of race, faith, and culture, further fueling identity politics.

The social functions of food in Malaysian society have also been highlighted in other literary works by Malaysian authors and have been the subject of various studies (Perry 2017; Wan Putri Nurlisa et al., 2022; Wagner 2007). In Shih Li Kow's novel *The Sum of Our Follies* (2017), the communal cooking activities and feasts by the villagers are depicted as an essential aspect that contributes to the intercultural harmony and unity of the multicultural community (Wan Putri Nurlisa et al., 2022). In the short story *Deep Fried Devils* (2008) also by Shih Li Kow, the competition between ethnic Chinese and Malay hawkers selling *you tiao* or *cakoi* (fried crullers) is highlighted, showcasing how food can increase ethnic and economic tensions in Malaysia (Perry 2017). In Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), the quiet ritual of sharing the traditional Malaysian breakfast of kaya toast and strong coffee in a local *kopitiam* (coffee shop) captures the everyday interplay of cultural traditions and modern identity in Malaysia. In *Eat First, Talk Later* (2015), Beth Yahp explores the themes of belonging, exclusion, and the complex dynamics of cultural and religious identity.

Despite the increasing scholarly attention to food within cultural and literary studies, there remains limited understanding of how food narratives specifically shape and reflect social and political identities in Malaysian literary texts. Studies by Wan Putri Nurlisa et al. (2022), Perry (2017) and Wagner (2009) have explored food's role in cultural expression and social bonding, emphasizing its symbolic functions in fostering shared identity and community cohesion. While these works highlight how food can serve as a marker of cultural heritage and belonging, there is a need to expand studies into the sociocultural role of food pertaining to identity, power and value systems in the Malaysian context especially from a literary studies perspective. There is a need to examine food from a gastronativism perspective on how it is used as an ideological tool in navigating ethnic tensions in Malaysian literature and this study aims to fill that need.

This article seeks to examine the role of food as a marker of identity and an ideological tool for the dissemination of belief systems and power in the diasporic fiction set in Malaysia by Preeta Samarasan's *Tale of the Dreamer's Son* (2022). The novel is set in early post-independence Malaysia and follows the daily lives of those connected to the Muhibbah Centre for World Peace, a community space designed to bring together diverse religious and ethnic groups. Central to the narrative is Cyril Dragon, the Centre's founder, whose vision attracts a varied group of characters including Reza, his mother Salmah, Yusuf, Leo, and others. As these individuals engage in communal cooking and shared meals, the novel documents their routine interactions and personal journeys within a multicultural setting, providing a snapshot of a society in transition.

Food occupies what Perry (2017, p. 198) describes as a "paradoxical space" in literary works because it can simultaneously divide communities rather than unite them, but it is also used to symbolize the nation's diverse and multicultural landscape. Through a detailed examination of food and consumption in *Tale of the Dreamer's Son*, this study will explore how Samarasan uses food to construct a narrative that is rich in cultural and religious symbolism. By focusing on specific examples from the text, such as the communal feasts at the Muhibbah Centre or the personal food rituals of individual characters, the analysis will reveal the intricate ways in which food functions as a vehicle for exploring themes of identity and ideology within the Muhibbah Centre's community.

This study addresses these issues by analyzing Preeta Samarasan's *Tale of the Dreamer's Son*, a novel that offers a vivid portrayal of food's role in a multicultural and multi-religious setting. Drawing on the concept of *muhibbah*, which encompasses values such as *Musyawah* (Dialogue), *Ukhuwah* (Kinship), *Harmoni* (Harmony), *Ikhlas* (Sincerity), *Bersangka Baik* (Mutual Trust), *Amanah* (Integrity), and *Hormat* (Respect) (Haslina Ibrahim, 2013), this research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on food, identity, and literature, highlighting the interplay between culinary practices and social dynamics in a diverse society struggling to become truly integrated. This study aims to build on current scholarly works by examining how food operates as a mark of cultural boundaries that also play out in real-life power struggles, especially in a multicultural setting like Malaysia where *muhibbah* carries both utopian promise and practical challenges.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### FOOD AND IDENTITY

Food serves as a powerful signifier of both cultural self-definition and cultural difference. It functions as a marker of identity, symbolizing one's cultural and religious customs (Ruark, 1999). In literature, food is often used to depict cultural and ethnic identities, acting as a bridge or barrier between different groups. Phillips (2013) and Roy (2010) both discuss the role of food in identity formation, but while Phillips highlights its potential to exclude individuals from certain groups, Roy argues that shared meals primarily function as an inclusive force.

Recent studies highlight how food is not merely a symbol of identity but a fluid site where identities are constantly negotiated and redefined (Vijayaraghavan & Chattaraj, 2024). The imagination of national identity through food, particularly in the construction of cuisines, reveals the tensions between inclusion and exclusion in multicultural societies. In Malaysian literature, these tensions manifest in how food practices reflect ethnic, religious, and class-based divisions, making food a key narrative tool in examining identity and ideology. While scholars such as Perry (2017) and Wagner (2007) acknowledge the ways in which food can foster both integration and division, there is a broader need to investigate how these practices may reinforce or challenge political hierarchies and power relations. Perry (2017) highlights food's role in bridging cultures but overlooks its political dimension as a site of contestation and negotiation. Similarly, Wan Putri Nurlisa et al. (2022) discuss food's communal aspects in Malaysian literature but do not explore its use in resistance or dominance among ethnic groups. Pillai (2012) examines memory and identity in *Evening is the Whole Day* within a postcolonial and transnational framework, but does not consider food as a medium for power, inclusion, or exclusion. These studies leave a gap in understanding how food rituals reinforce or challenge socio-political structures and shape identity in Malaysia's postcolonial, multi-religious context.

Edwards (2018) emphasises the need to distinguish between religious belief and religious identity, arguing that the socio-cultural aspects of religion often overshadow individual beliefs. He asserts that food practices are deeply embedded in cultural and religious identities, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and others. This perspective is crucial in understanding how food can serve as both a unifying force and a marker of cultural boundaries. For instance, dietary laws in various religions are not only about food consumption but also about maintaining a distinct religious identity (Edwards, 2018). Nevertheless, scholars such as Markowitz and Avieli (2022) note that these dietary laws can also perpetuate social stratification, especially where certain

groups wield their dietary restrictions to assert cultural dominance or to resist assimilation by mainstream society. Yet, current discussions on religious identity do not adequately explore how food becomes a site of political negotiation, used to assert cultural dominance or resist assimilation, particularly in societies with diverse religious communities.

Xiong (2023) further explored food as a marker of cultural identity and discusses how food consumption serves as a way to express religious beliefs, where the practice of dividing food into sacred and secular categories reflects the deep connection between food and religious identity. Thus, dietary restrictions become an expression of faith and communal belonging. This emphasis on the boundary-making properties of food calls attention to power dynamics by delineating what is “permitted” versus “forbidden,” communities can uphold distinctions that have far-reaching effects on social hierarchy and political influence (Xiong, 2023). Consequently, this gap invites further analysis of the intersection between food, religion, and political power in shaping identity.

Food is also deeply intertwined with religious practices, often reflecting and reinforcing religious beliefs and values. Counihan (2000) identifies food's role in religion, noting how dietary practices are used to maintain religious identity and community cohesion. Counihan (2000) identifies how dietary practices are used to maintain religious identity and community cohesion. For instance, the practice of breaking fast during Ramadan, consuming kosher food in Judaism, or following vegetarian diets in certain Hindu and Buddhist communities illustrates how food is integral to religious observance and identity (Douglas, 1984). The breaking of fast during Ramadan is a significant religious and social event for Muslims in Malaysia. Iftar, the meal eaten after sunset to break the fast, is often a communal affair that brings together family, friends, and even strangers; fostering a sense of unity and shared religious observance. These practices not only reinforce religious teachings but also foster a sense of unity and belonging among adherents. Markowitz and Avieli (2022) explore how food and religious practices intersect in contemporary societies. Their study reveals that food practices serve both to unify diverse groups and to demarcate religious boundaries, emphasizing the importance of dietary laws in maintaining religious cohesion (Markowitz & Avieli, 2022). Nonetheless, these studies sometimes overlook how marginalized or minority groups employ alternative food practices as forms of cultural preservation or political resistance, thereby challenging dominant narratives. At the same time, tensions over halal certification, the serving of pork in mixed spaces, and debates over sensitivity in communal feasting indicate that food norms can also highlight socio-political divisions. These elements show how food in Malaysia simultaneously embodies inclusivity and potential flashpoints for conflict, setting the stage for literary explorations of identity.

### GASTRONATIVISM

Gastronativism, as defined by Parasecoli (2022), refers to the ideological use of food as a powerful political tool to advance ideas about who belongs to a community and who does not. Parasecoli (2022) views gastronativism as a global phenomenon that views food as a potent symbol of identity (memories and personal, family and communal identity) through which communities can proudly embrace their cultural heritage and celebrate their culinary traditions. Food is also a medium that enables displaced, marginalized and oppressed groups to be uplifted and have a sense of belonging (ibid).

Nations as well as ethnic and religious communities and even social elite groups project and distinguish their identities and assert their existence and power through food, especially in times of conflict and crisis (Parasecoli, 2002). However, even the subject of what constitutes a country's national cuisine can be debatable and a site of congestion and power struggle. Food wars



between countries claiming a particular dish as its own are not unheard of. For example, the friendly rivalry over dishes like chicken rice, *char kuey teow*, *rendang* and *satay* amongst Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia is an example of how food can be a contested medium in asserting national identity and pride.

Gastronativism builds upon DeSoucey's (2010) notion of gastronationalism, which examines how food traditions are employed to assert national identity and authenticity within political and economic frameworks. DeSoucey (2010) highlights that debates over food labelling, regulation, and heritage serve to reinforce power structures, thereby shaping public perceptions of culinary authenticity. Similarly, Ichijo and Ranta (2016) argue that food acts as a battleground for national identity, where cultural values and historical narratives intersect with contemporary political concerns. The ongoing battle over food between Malaysians and Singaporeans illustrates this point about how food can be a symbol of national pride. In Malaysia, where food laws and dietary restrictions are deeply intertwined with ethnic and religious identities, gastronativism plays a critical role in shaping inclusion and exclusion. The debates over halal certification and national cuisine, for instance, not only reflect religious observance but also signal broader struggles over cultural legitimacy and political power (Yakin, Christians, & Dupret, 2021).

In literary studies, gastronativism examines how food serves as a marker of identity and ideological contestation. While specific applications of gastronativism in literature are limited, scholars have explored related concepts. For example, Leer (2018) discusses how European food shows employ narratives that can be seen as forms of gastronationalism, promoting either monocultural or multicultural national identities. In Malaysian fiction, food is often depicted as both a unifying force and a source of tension, reflecting the real-world complexities of cultural coexistence (Perry, 2017). Perry (2017) and Wagner (2007) note how food narratives negotiate social belonging, exclusion, and resistance, making them a crucial lens for understanding identity politics in postcolonial literature. By integrating gastronativism with literary analysis, this study highlights how food narratives serve as ideological tools, shaping cultural hierarchies and identities, particularly communal, religious, and ethnic.

#### FOOD IN MALAYSIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

In Malaysian literature in English, food often signifies cultural self-definition and difference, bridging the gap between the individual and the collective experience. Authors like Tash Aw, Preeta Samarasan, and Tan Twan Eng use food to create a sense of place and cultural authenticity. In Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005) and *Five Star Billionaire* (2013), food scenes set in bustling markets or intimate family gatherings highlight the communal bonding and shared heritage intrinsic to Malaysian society. Aw's vivid descriptions of dishes like nasi lemak, roti canai, and laksa capture the sensory richness of Malaysian cuisine while exploring the socio-political complexities of the nation.

In Preeta Samarasan's *Evening Is the Whole Day* (2008), food depicts social hierarchies and familial dynamics within a wealthy Indian-Malaysian family. Elaborate feasts and culinary rituals in her novel symbolize status, tradition, and cultural pride, inviting readers to immerse themselves in the sensory experiences of Malaysian life. As Wan Putri Nurlisa et al. (2022) posit, such depictions of food may simultaneously accentuate differences in social standing and reflect deeper tensions around ethnicity, religion, and economic disparities.

Tan Twan Eng's novels, such as *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012) and *The Gift of Rain* (2022), employ food as a metaphor for memory and reconciliation. Tan's descriptions of traditional

dishes reflect the characters' struggles with identity, loss, and the traumas of war, finding solace and healing through cooking and sharing meals. In these narratives, food becomes a site of remembrance and postcolonial reflection (Wong, 2007), embodying both personal and national histories.

Food is also used to evoke powerful memories and a sense of nostalgia. Shih-Li Kow's *The Sum of Our Follies* (2017) and short stories like *Deep Fried Devils* (2008) and *Hungry in Guangzhou* (2008) dribble food into their narratives, using culinary experiences to evoke nostalgia and trigger vivid recollections for characters and readers alike. This nostalgic turn, as Koh (2017) notes in her discussion of food porn and visual narratives, can also be a form of identity construction that forges emotional ties between individuals and their ancestral or communal roots. Other novels that depict how specific dishes and culinary traditions serve as conduits for relieving cherished moments, creating a sensory experience that resonates deeply on a personal level are *Eat First, Talk Later* (2015), by Beth Yahp, Chua Kok Yee's *Sambal Without Anchovies* (2010) and Renie Leng's *Penang Kitchens: A Zuihitsu* (2019).

In Zen Cho's *Spirits Abroad* (2021) and *Sorcerer to the Crown* (2016), food becomes a symbol of cultural hybridity and adaptation. Cho's integration of Malaysian culinary elements reflects the fluidity of cultural identity in contemporary Malaysia, showing how food serves as a conduit for cultural exchange and negotiation in diasporic communities. Nonetheless, while such depictions highlight the hybrid nature of culinary practices, they do not always address how these same practices can be leveraged in broader social or political struggles.

Food in literature often delineates boundaries of belonging and exclusion, acting as a marker of social and cultural identity. Adibah Amin's *This End of the Rainbow* (2006) and *Gedung Kuning: Memories of a Malay Childhood* (2010) vividly depict Malay food customs, illustrating how culinary practices shape individual and societal narratives whereby inherited recipes act as archives of culture and memory, emphasizing the role of food in constructing and preserving identity. Yet, to date, fewer studies systematically investigate how these narratives engage with identity and ideology, particularly the interplay of power, religious ideals, and socio-economic hierarchies, within the context of Malaysia's multiethnic environment.

Hence, while Malaysian literature offers rich culinary representations, there is a pressing need to move beyond purely symbolic readings of food to interrogate its role in negotiating ethnic tensions, religious boundaries, and power imbalances. The present study aims to fill this gap by examining how Samarasan's *Tale of the Dreamer's Son* employs food as a politically charged device, illuminating not just personal or communal identities but also the tensions that arise within a purportedly inclusive *muhibbah* community.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### IMAGINED COMMUNITY

The analysis of food references in *Tale of the Dreamer's Son* employs an expanded theoretical framework based on Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities (2006), repositioning it to focus on an imagined multicultural/multi-religious community within a Malaysian context. Anderson posits that a nation is an imagined political community where bonds among members are forged through shared ideologies, symbols, and practices. According to Anderson, individuals are able to "identify with others outside their immediate surroundings to create imagined communities", possess an image of being in communion with each other and even feel pride or

shame in the action of others” in spite of never having met each other (Xidias, 2017 pp.11-12).

Although Anderson’s framework is historically anchored in the rise of print capitalism and national identity, it remains valuable and relevant for understanding how communities coalesce around shared beliefs and communal rituals in postcolonial contexts. Mandaville’s (2001) examination of Transnational Muslim Politics used Anderson’s concept of imagined communities to the global ummah, illustrating how religious identity is maintained through shared texts, rituals, and collective memory. Likewise, Roy (2004) demonstrates in *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* how new media enables Muslims worldwide to imagine themselves as part of a single faith community, despite vast geographical and cultural differences, further reflecting Anderson’s emphasis on symbolic and discursive bonds. In the Malaysian setting, these rituals frequently revolve around cultural and religious practices, including food consumption. Van der Veer (1994) likewise explores how Hindus and Muslims in India construct parallel “imagined” religious communities that shape national identity. These works show that while Benedict Anderson’s initial focus was on national imaginings, scholars have productively applied his insights to religious contexts, especially where community formation depends on shared symbolic systems and collective participation. In the Malaysian setting, as mentioned, these rituals frequently revolve around cultural and religious practices, including food consumption.

Extending Anderson’s concept to religious spaces, scholars like Talal Asad (1986) emphasise the role of religious practices and symbols in forming collective identities, highlighting how shared rituals contribute to imagining a cohesive religious community. Parasecoli’s (2022) gastronativism complements Anderson’s imagined communities by illustrating how food consumption and regulation serve as a means of maintaining communal boundaries. While Anderson argues that national identities are constructed through shared symbols, Parasecoli (2022) extends this idea to food, showing how dietary rules function as a form of culinary nationalism, reinforcing who belongs and who does not. This is evident in how the Muhibbah Centre’s food restrictions dictate cultural participation, creating a hierarchy of inclusion based on adherence to prescribed dietary norms. Mahmood (2005) further illustrates the interplay between individual agency and communal religious identity, demonstrating how personal piety and religious practices shape collective consciousness.

This study draws on Anderson’s theory to interpret the Muhibbah Centre as a microcosm of a broader imagined Malaysian community. By examining how characters navigate communal meals or adhere to specific dietary rules, the present study demonstrates that food functions as a unifying emblem while simultaneously creating fault lines that cause tension. This approach not only enhances our understanding of the novel’s critique of idealistic community visions but also speaks to a larger discourse on identity and ideology, where communal expectations may clash with individual beliefs or socio-political hierarchies in a diverse cultural milieu.

#### MUHIBBAH

*Muhibbah*, derived from the Arabic word *habba*, meaning love and compassion, embodies the values of goodwill, empathy, and mutual respect crucial for harmonious coexistence in a multicultural society (Ibrahim, 2016). In the context of Malaysia, the concept of *muhibbah* is linked to “social harmony and its values transcend all cultures, religions and traditions” (Marina Munira et al, 2019, p. 54). It has often been idealized as an antidote to ethnic and religious tensions, reflecting a hope that diverse communities can coexist in a spirit of unity and acceptance (Mohd Nazmi et al., 2021).



Haslina Ibrahim (2013), stresses that “the word *muhibah* has been accepted as a positive value that inculcates integration spirit among people of different races and religions in Malaysia and its values are: M = *Musyawah* (Dialogue) U = *Ukhuwah* (Kinship) H = *Harmoni* (Harmony) I = *Ikhlas* (Sincerity) B = *Bersangka Baik* (Mutual Trust) A = *Amanah* (Integrity) and H = *Hormat* (Respect)” (p. 4). These definitions form a basis for understanding the *muhibbah* element in this study to analyse the role of food and the behaviour and interactions surrounding it.

In this study, *muhibbah* is defined as the spirit of mutual solidarity, harmony, and mutual respect that goes beyond mere tolerance in a culturally diverse community. It is important to highlight the fact that *muhibbah* is more than just tolerance. It pertains to both people’s emotions and the bonds that those feelings imply, suggesting a deep attachment and authentic love among the people (Kamar Oniah, 2013). Yet, *muhibbah* is never free from social or political critiques (Wan Norhasniah, 2016). In practice, political forces, societal stratifications, and institutional limitations may undermine its ideals. The distance between the ideal and the actual state of *muhibbah* is visible in many facets of Malaysian life, including food culture, where inclusivity and unity still face challenges such as class divisions, ethnic biases, and conflicting dietary laws.

By foregrounding *muhibbah*’s seven values (*Musyawah*, *Ukhuwah*, *Harmoni*, *Ikhlas*, *Bersangka Baik*, *Amanah*, and *Hormat*), this framework sheds light on how communal eating at the *Muhibbah Centre* can simultaneously inspire unity and unmask underlying political and cultural tensions. Food becomes not only a symbol of fellowship but also a site where identity and belief systems play out through acceptance, exclusion, or covert resistance.

This study thus combines Anderson’s Imagined Communities with *muhibbah* to analyse how food practices at the *Muhibbah Centre* shape and challenge communal identity. While communal meals aim for harmony, underlying cultural and religious tensions expose the fragile balance between collective ideals and personal autonomy. By focusing on these aspects, Anderson’s framework (2006) and Haslina Ibrahim’s *muhibbah*’s concept (2013) highlight the importance of food as both a unifying and divisive force in debates over culture, faith, identity and ideology within a multicultural space, ultimately illuminating the complexities of forging genuine *muhibbah* amid diversity and at times competing communal allegiances.

## METHODOLOGY

A literary textual analysis is employed via a close reading of the novel focusing specifically on how the novel’s setting and characterization are shaped by aspects and issues related to food. The *Tale of the Dreamer’s Son* by Preeta Samarasan is set in the early post-independence and modern Malaysia portraying a multicultural and fragmented society while highlighting uncalm cultural and religious hatred. The plot is centred on the activities of *Muhibbah Centre for World Peace* which is intended as a sanctuary that transcends religions or races so as to promote unity and understanding. The characters comprise a marginalised, culturally diverse, multigenerational group.

The analysis will focus primarily on the settings and characters in the novel and how these elements interact with and are shaped by aspects and issues related to food. The primary setting is the *Muhibbah Centre for World Peace*. The *Muhibbah Centre* is the space where communal cooking and eating in *Tale of the Dreamer’s Son* take place. It serves as a multicultural space promoting unity and harmony among different religious and ethnic groups. The Centre was established by Cyril Dragon who blends together a number of religious practices including

vegetarianism and other restrictions such as no pork or beef. The daily life at the Muhibbah Centre revolves around communal activities and shared meals, reflecting the centre's emphasis on unity and collective living.

The character analysis will focus mainly on the characters of Cyril Dragon, Reza, Salmah, Yusuf and Leo and examine how food affects their emotions, behaviour and personality as well as their value systems, decision making and ultimately, their self-perception and identity. These characters are closely associated with food and they seem to navigate their familial and religious identities through their interactions with food. The novel revolves around Cyril Dragon, portrayed as a charismatic leader who embodies the ideals of equality and tolerance, often compared to iconic religious figures like Jesus, Krishna, and Muhammad. He is the founder and guiding force of the Muhibbah Centre. Despite his idealism, Cyril faces personal and societal challenges that add depth to his character. Reza, is a boy of mixed heritage who arrives at the centre with his mother Salmah, disrupting its harmony and exposing cultural tensions. His friendship with Leo, marked by their rebellion against the centre's vegetarian diet, underscores themes of camaraderie and defiance. Salmah, Cyril's partner, is a complex figure, balancing love for her son with her own identity struggles. Yusuf, known as Kannu, born and raised at the centre, explores his own sense of belonging amid its eventual dissolution.

The analysis is framed within Benedict Anderson's theory of Imagined Communities and the Malaysian concept of Muhibbah as outlined by Haslina Ibrahim (2013). Anderson's theory is used to examine how food functions as a symbol of shared experiences and collective identity within the novel, influencing characters' sense of belonging and participation in an imagined community. Through food, the characters navigate cultural boundaries, social hierarchies, and interpersonal relationships that contribute to the formation of a collective identity. The concept of *muhibbah*—which highlights the spirit of multicultural solidarity and mutual respect amongst Malaysia's multi-ethnic communities—is applied to analyze the role of food in relationship dynamics, identity markers and ideological tools. The analysis specifically examines how the seven elements of *Muhibbah*—*Musyawaharah* (Dialogue), *Ukhuwah* (Kinship), *Harmoni* (Harmony), *Ikhlas* (Sincerity), *Bersangka Baik* (Mutual Trust), *Amanah* (Integrity), and *Hormat* (Respect)—are enacted or challenged through food-related practices, revealing how communal dining, dietary restrictions, and personal food choices serve as sites of both solidarity and conflict within the imagined multicultural community depicted in the novel. This combined framework highlights the importance of food as both a unifying and divisive force in debates over culture, faith, and identity within a multicultural space. Additionally, this study examines how food-related scenes contribute to the representation of the multicultural environment, reflecting both the tensions and the potential for integration within the Malaysian context.

## THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Textual analysis was used to identify emerging themes and recurring patterns in the novel, focusing on the characters' interactions surrounding food, moments of conflict or solidarity, and the symbolic weight of dietary practices. This resulted in the identification of key themes such as relationship and power dynamics, power and ideological conflicts, and religious identity which demonstrates how food functions as both a marker of cultural belonging and a tool for navigating personal and communal struggles. For instance, instances of food being regulated, rejected, or ritualized within different relationships were examined to reveal how characters assert or resist identity through food-related choices and restrictions. The analysis is therefore organised

according to the identified key themes of family dynamics, power and ideology, and religious identity.

## ANALYSIS

In the novel, food emerges as a nexus of family bonds, religious identity, and community-building. While the Muhibbah Centre aspires to embody the utopian ideals of a harmonious and inclusive society mirroring Thomas More's (1965) notion of a perfect commonwealth, the novel exposes the practical and emotional complexities of forging collective solidarity around dietary norms. The analysis reveals how food-related practices create, sustain, or disrupt communal and personal identities through the regulation of dietary norms, shared meals as acts of solidarity, and resistance to imposed food restrictions. These processes highlight the tensions between communal ideals and individual agency, revealing food's role in both fostering unity and exposing divisions.

### FOOD, FAMILY, AND COMMUNAL BELONGING

Under the utopian vision of the Muhibbah Centre, a space reminiscent of Thomas More's (1965) ideal society, but shaped by local religious and cultural norms, families are expected to align with vegetarianism to uphold unity and spiritual purity. The analysis shows how food serves as a significant medium for inclusion and exclusion within the microcosm of family dynamics, highlighting how communal bonds are forged or broken.

### UKHUWAH, SINCERITY, AND RESPECT

Reza's relationship with his mother, Salmah, is characterized by a sense of responsibility and sacrifice, illustrated through his actions surrounding food. Reza's act of counting out coins to settle bills and allocating money for a late supper, ensuring that his mother receives more food than he does, highlights his role as a caretaker within the family despite his young age. This dynamic resonates with the *muhibbah* values of *Ukhuwah* (Kinship), *Ikhlas* (sincerity), and *Hormat* (respect) for his mother, where caring through food becomes a symbol of love and communal bonding.

He has counted out coins for the bills and when there has been money left over to buy a late supper from the curry mee man he has put only two fishballs in his own bowl so that she might have three.  
(Samarasan, 2022, p. 98)

This intimate act reinforces their familial bond, showing how personal food practices contribute to communal identity. In Andersonian terms, even micro-level acts of care can unify individuals by generating shared emotional attachments. Here, mother and son forge a miniature imagined community anchored in reciprocity and devotion.

However, tension arises when communal ideals clash with personal desires. For instance, Salmah's pragmatic acceptance of meat stands in contrast to the Centre's vegetarian norms, reflecting *Bersangka Baik* (mutual trust) overshadowed by Salmah's real-life struggles. This contrast between Salmah's quiet adaptation and Reza's more rebellious stances pinpoints how *muhibbah*'s ideal of unity often buckles under personal circumstances.

#### FOOD, POWER AND IDEOLOGY

Cyril envisions the Centre as a utopian haven where physical possessions like lavish birthday feasts matter less than spiritual or emotional well-being. He asserts his utopian ideological beliefs and insists that “happiness was not about things” (Samarasan, 2022, p. 98), echoing Thomas More’s (1965) premise that communal ideals should transcend materialism. However, Reza’s disappointment with his austere birthday highlights the flaw in this utopian ideal: abstract principles often fail to meet individual emotional needs.

Cyril’s attempt to maintain a collective identity that transcends material concerns aligns with his vision of *muhibbah*, but it also dismisses Reza’s personal longing for the traditional birthday he wanted. This juxtaposition illustrates how attempts to enforce (or in other words, control) communal harmony can conflict with individual needs, revealing the complexities of sustaining *muhibbah* within a diverse social unit.

Reza’s resistance to the vegetarian diet imposed by the Muhibbah Centre symbolizes a sort of power struggle and his broader rejection of Cyril’s authority. His culinary rebellion can be understood through Parasecoli’s (2022) concept of gastronativism, where food choices become acts of political defiance. The Muhibbah Centre’s strict diet, framed as a unifying practice, actually serves to enforce ideological control. By secretly eating meat, Reza is not just rejecting a dietary rule but resisting the Centre’s imposed identity and Cyril’s attempt to exert power through his rules. Reza’s actions mirror real-world challenges to gastronativist policies that regulate food as a means of asserting power. Reza’s secret indulgence in meat-becomes an act of rebellion against the Centre’s rules, destabilizing the ideal of *muhibbah*. As Yusuf reveals:

They eat meat. All kinds of meat. Fish, fowl, pig, cow. They eat outside when they go into the lorry but... but the worst part is they bring it back here also. They bring meat into the house. They’ve been doing it for a long time... Everybody knows about it. They do it openly. Everybody knows except you, Papa... Sometimes they even keep it in the fridge in the kitchen and Neela helps them hide it. Cow meat, pig meat, next to your clean food in the fridge, can you believe it, Papa, can you believe it?

(Samarasan, 2022, p. 450)

Such transgressions indicate the fragility of *muhibbah*. While communal ideals exist, hidden dissent shows the reality that individual desires do not always align with collective norms. Cyril’s nonchalant reaction, “Boys will be boys,” further suggests unequal enforcement of rules and a paternalistic double standard, complicating the family’s sense of unity.

He finds out about the fishballs and the chicken and the satay he will find a way to spin some forgiving fantasy for himself... 'Boys will be boys,' he will say, 'They are only having a bit of fun. Testing the limits.

(Samarasan, 2022, p. 446)

As such, food emerges as both an ideological tool of control (on Cyril’s part) and a tool of defiance (on Reza’s part), revealing how family ties can fracture under the weight of communal expectations. The act of consuming meat becomes a form of defiance not only against dietary restrictions but also against Cyril’s paternalistic authority. By resisting the Centre’s vegetarian diet, Reza demonstrates a break from the *Amanah* (integrity) and *Hormat* (respect) that Cyril expects. In essence, food becomes a battleground between Cyril’s imagined communal values and Reza’s assertion of personal autonomy. Cyril’s actions are not solely driven by a commitment to maintaining order but are also influenced by personal ideology, emotions and connections.

#### SUB-COMMUNITIES AND FAILURE OF *HARMONI*

Although Reza and Leo are half-siblings, a fact unknown to them, their relationship with food becomes a defining aspect of their bond. They share indulging in forbidden foods. Their secret consumption of pork, “the unholy of unholies,” affirms an underground sub-community that rejects the Centre’s utopian premise. This clandestine camaraderie, founded on shared rebellion, contrasts sharply with the *Harmoni* the Centre espouses:

In the shade of the back porch two boys crouch to unwrap their loot. A bundle of jumbo fishballs. A bundle of chicken wings. A bundle of char kuay teow with prawns and cockles. And a bundle of lap cheong. 'Pork some more!' Reza crows. And Leo knows he has done it. He has scored. Because it is not just the non-veg he has produced but pork: the unholy of unholies. The flesh most guaranteed to offend. Reza looks at him with the wonder and respect which an apprentice might have met the eyes of Da Vinci.

(Samarasan, 2022, p. 171)

While Leo envisions a future of opening a *nasi kandar* restaurant with a variety of meat and seafood dishes, Reza imagines a restaurant dedicated solely to meat, devoid of vegetables, rice, or noodles (Samarasan, 2022, p. 183). Their aspirations of opening their own meat-heavy restaurants further underscore food as a means to “imagine” a different community, one upholding their personal freedoms above Cyril’s ideal.

Yusuf, on the other hand, internalizes the Centre’s vegetarian mandate as a moral imperative. By reporting Reza and Leo’s infractions, he aligns himself with Cyril’s brand of *Amanah* (integrity) and *Hormat* (respect for authority) but isolates himself from the sibling bond he longs for. This highlights the conflict between abiding by the communal utopia engineered by Cyril and the human need for connection beyond institutional rules. Yusuf’s isolation illustrates how *muhibbah*, in practice, can foster division when its values are imposed in a rigid, paternalistic manner.

I know you said Neela has so little and we all have so much but... but they eat satay in the kitchen even. Beef satay. I think...I think she herself makes it for them, Papa. With our knives and our cutting boards and our pots and pans. They eat it on our plates...

(Samarasan, 2022, p. 451).

While the Centre’s vision of *muhibbah* ideally includes *Musyawah* (encouraging dialogue and mutual understanding), Reza and Leo’s secretive actions, as well as Cyril’s tattletale to his father, indicate that genuine conversation is lacking, leading them to create their own parallel or sub-community instead of engaging in open dialogue with their peers within the larger community which they are a part of.

#### FOOD AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

In *Tale of the Dreamer's Son*, food marks religious identity, shaping characters' self-perception and community relationships. The *Muhibbah* Centre, founded by Cyril Dragon, promotes vegetarianism to foster unity, embodying its vision of *muhibbah*, particularly *Harmoni* (Harmony) and *Ukhuwah* (Kinship) across cultural and religious divides. Cyril Dragon epitomizes the connection between personal values and food choices. His unwavering commitment to vegetarianism from a young age, as highlighted by his refusal to eat the coronation chicken offered by Aunt Dolly, illustrates the deep-seated influence of personal beliefs on dietary habits



(Samarasan, 2022, p. 79). Cyril's decision to adhere strictly to a vegetarian lifestyle, even when faced with social pressure, underscores the alignment of individual ideologies with food practices, reflecting *Ikhlās* (Sincerity) in his adherence to the Centre's communal vision. Cyril's imposition of a vegetarian diet seeks to shape a shared identity—an "imagined community"—centred on moral purity and unity.

Yusuf's rejection of meat extends to a broader critique of societal norms. His disdain for others who consume meat, including his own brother Reza, highlights his perceived moral superiority. This sentiment is echoed by other characters in the Centre, such as Mrs. Arasu, who expresses concern about the spiritual purity of those who eat meat. "Either way you must put a stop to it. Your own son! Surely you don't want his soul stained with meat" (Samarasan, 2022, p. 175). Here, Yusuf's stance reveals *Amanah* (Integrity) toward the Centre's doctrine, viewing meat as a contaminant that jeopardizes communal harmony. In contrast to Yusuf's devout adherence, Reza is more sceptical and rebellious. He frequently defies the Centre's dietary rules, sneaking out to eat various meats, including pork. This defiance is not just a rejection of Cyril's authority but it also challenges the *Bersangka Baik* (Mutual Trust) that the Centre relies upon to sustain its ideals of solidarity. This tension between devout practice (Yusuf) and open defiance (Reza) shows how dietary norms become a locus for asserting individual identity within an imagined community that aspires to *muhibbah* but often struggles to accommodate personal autonomy.

Neela, a cook at the Muhibbah Centre, embodies the intersection of food, labour, and cultural recognition. Despite her significant role in preparing meals, her efforts often go unappreciated. Neela's pragmatic approach to food, as seen in her defence of her son's dietary choices, challenges the idealized notions of purity and harmony within the Centre (Samarasan, 2022, p. 177). Neela's perspective exposes the gap between the ideals of *muhibbah* and the lived realities of individuals who bear the brunt of cooking and cleaning:

But first I will tell you one thing: the temple priest's no-onion no-garlic pure vegetarian food and the poor man's koddal curry feast, it all turns to shit in the end. And whether it is the priest's shit or the poor man's sit, it smells like shit. Shit is shit. I am the one who cooks and I am the one who scrubs the toilet so who knows this better than I do?

(Samarasan, 2022, p. 177)

By equating all diets, vegetarian or otherwise, to the same biological outcome, Neela undercuts hierarchies of sanctity, hinting that true *Ikhlās* and *Hormat* for others might require acknowledging the common ground all humans share. Her blunt view underlines that the *muhibbah* ideal of respecting diverse practices often collides with a more rigid enforcement of purity within the Centre.

Salmah, Reza and Yusuf's mother adds another layer of complexity. Raised with Islamic principles, she navigates her own complex relationship with religion and dietary practices. While she conforms to societal norms, her private flexibility suggests a pragmatic approach, sometimes drinking alcohol or showing leniency on halal restrictions, contrasting with Yusuf's rigidity and Reza's rebellion. "Praying five times a day, eating meat, fasting during the fasting month, all this is part of my childhood. You cannot escape your childhood forever" (Samarasan, 2022, p. 287).

Salmah's decisions, including her insistence on hiring a Muslim maid to avoid pork in the house, reflect her attempts to uphold *Hormat* (Respect) for community expectations after leaving the Center but also conflicts with the value of *Bersangka Baik* (Mutual Trust). "Told them she needed a strong young girl – orang Islam please we cannot be having anyone who will curi-curitapau pork into the house" (Samarasan, 2022, p. 70).

Beyond the Centre, the novel delves into the broader religious tensions within Malaysia, illustrating how a larger “imagined community” shaped by ethnic and religious norms faces similar struggles. Following the dissolution of the Muhibbah Centre, conversations around non-halal food at a fair reveal deep-seated cultural divides:

What would Mr Ho get out of ordering non-halal chicken? ... 'What he gains,' Azmi says, 'is the pleasure of watching all of us Muslim boys eat haram food. The sheer fun of it. You don't know. These kafirs live for that kind of thing

(Samarasan, 2022, p. 238)

This suspicion arises from the lack of *Bersangka Baik* (Mutual Trust) and *Harmoni* that *muhibbah* ideally aspires to instil, exemplifying how real or perceived slights in dietary laws can fracture communal ties. The public debates around non-halal food also is a missed opportunity for *Musyawah*. Rather than engaging in meaningful dialogue to reconcile differences, the participants resort to stereotyping and suspicion, highlighting how the absence of genuine conversation undermines the very foundation of *muhibbah*.

Yusuf's refusal to eat chicken, despite societal pressures, similarly reinforces *Amanah* (Integrity) to his personal beliefs: "I don't like chicken. ... Everybody likes chicken! ... I'm a human being. That's what I am. Why do you care what I eat?" (Samarasan, 2022, p. 244).

Latifah's attempts to persuade Yusuf to eat meat by appealing to religious doctrine reflect *Musyawah* (Dialogue) in a narrow sense, albeit tinted with social pressure:

Day after day I help myself to only the kuih and day after day she tells me: 'You know, isn't it, Yusuf, Allah created the fish and the birds and the animals for us to eat? Allah Himself told us which one is clean, which one is unclean. Those that are clean we should thank Allah and eat, Isn't it? Uncle is spending a lot of money to buy all this good food for you boys. If you don't eat he will think, 'What lah this boy, so ungrateful!

(Samarasan, 2022, p. 209)

Yusuf's internal conflict and eventual resignation to eating meat highlight the pressures to conform to communal norms, even when they conflict with personal beliefs.

I wish I could tell you that I vomited then and there in the dust. Or better still, that blinded by a bright light I fainted and had to be carried home by some brawny-armed fellow in a kain pelikat only to open my eyes hours later to a new and invincible faith in the Lord God of all creatures great and small. But in fact I managed to hold myself together perfectly well. Even fed myself from the twenty-five or so chafing dishes in the buffet

(Samarasan, 2022, p. 321)

Partaking in the buffet, despite his reservations, lays bare the pressures to conform within a religiously diverse milieu. It highlights the struggle to maintain one's personal convictions (upholding *Amanah* to his beliefs) while managing the communal desire for uniformity. Such moments demonstrate that practising *muhibbah* in a pluralistic environment often demands compromises, including silences or internal resignations, that do not neatly align with the concept's highest aspirations.

In sum, food in *Tale of the Dreamer's Son* not only serves as a marker of religious identity, it also reveals the negotiations and tensions involved in sustaining a communal ethos. While *muhibbah* in its fullest sense aims for spiritual solidarity (*Ukhuwah*), mutual respect (*Hormat*), and sincerity (*Ikhlās*), the novel illustrates how individual ideologies, convictions, social pressures, and latent prejudices often complicate these values. Anderson's notion of imagined communities

helps illuminate why a shared vegetarian ideal may unify people symbolically, but fracture under divergent personal beliefs. Far from a simple story of harmony, Samarasan's narrative shows that *muhibbah*, when confronted with deeply held religious sensibilities and political realities, remains an aspirational goal that is both powerful in theory and challenging in practice.

## DISCUSSION

### IMAGINED VS REALITY OF THE MUHIBBAH COMMUNITY

The Muhibbah Centre in *Tale of the Dreamer's Son* symbolizes idealistic, utopian *muhibbah*, aiming for unity beyond cultural and religious lines. Cyril Dragon's vision of harmony uses food to bridge divides and cultivate community bonds, encapsulating *muhibbah*'s emphasis on *Harmoni* (Harmony) and *Ukhuwah* (Kinship). This setting becomes a reflection for examining how food functions as a unifying force as well as a source of conflict. The Centre's dietary practices, including its strict vegetarian diet, serve as a representation of this ideal, positioning food not merely as sustenance but as a testament to the community's shared values.

The Muhibbah Centre attempts to construct a communal identity where members, despite diverse backgrounds, perceive themselves as part of a cohesive group united by shared ideals and practices. The Centre's strict vegetarianism is a deliberate effort to eliminate distinctions that arise from cultural and religious dietary differences, thereby fostering a sense of collective belonging. By partaking in the same meals, members are meant to internalize a common identity, reinforcing the imagined unity that Cyril envisions.

Nevertheless, the reality of life within and beyond the Centre starkly contrasts with this vision. The clandestine behaviours of characters such as Reza and Leo, who indulge in forbidden meats like pork, underscore the gap between the Centre's utopian ideal and the lived experiences of its members. Parasecoli (2022) highlights that gastronativist policies often fail because they assume that food unity can override deep-seated cultural differences. The Muhibbah Centre's attempt to create a single culinary identity ignores the personal, religious, and ethnic nuances of its members, ultimately leading to hidden resistance and fragmentation. Food cannot be a neutral bridge when it is used to enforce ideological conformity. Reza's and Leo's secret consumption of meat, contrary to the trust (*Bersangka Baik*) and sincerity (*Ikhlas*), exposes how personal desires and cultural backgrounds clash with communal norms. Likewise, Neela's discreet support for their rebellion shows how *Hormat* (Respect) toward the Centre's rules cannot fully override individual allegiances or survival strategies. These acts of defiance highlight the difficulty in realizing a true *muhibbah*, where individual beliefs and preferences often run counter to collective ideals.

Yusuf's struggle highlights the complex negotiation between personal identity and social acceptance, a central theme in the novel that underscores the difficulties of achieving true *muhibbah* in a multicultural society. His unwavering commitment to vegetarianism may symbolize his dedication to *Amanah* (Integrity), but it also highlights how rigid devotion can lead to isolation and tension within a larger imagined community. Despite yearning for kinship (*Ukhuwah*), especially with Reza, Yusuf's moral rigidity of viewing meat as a spiritual pollutant ultimately alienates him. His eventual capitulation reflects the fragility of personal convictions when confronted with social expectations, indicating that true *muhibbah* demands more *Musyawahah* (Dialogue) and mutual understanding than the Centre truly fosters.

In comparing the imagined goals of the Muhibbah Centre with the real hardships of its members, the novel critiques the feasibility of achieving complete harmony in a diverse environment. Despite efforts to create homogeneity through shared dietary restrictions, defining identity and belonging within a multicultural society remains challenging. The novel suggests that the *muhibbah* ideal, while noble, may be unattainable without acknowledging and respecting individual differences. The challenges faced by the characters illustrate the inherent contradictions in enforcing a collective identity that overlooks personal and cultural nuances. Cyril's vegetarian mandate that presumes a one-size-fits-all approach clashes with the emotional significance of specific dishes. The Centre's failure to achieve its vision highlights the limitations of an imagined community that does not leave room for dialogue around difference. As a result, *muhibbah* in *Tale of the Dreamer's Son* is revealed to be a lofty aspiration that cannot simply be legislated through a single dietary code.

These fictional tensions mirror real debates in multicultural Malaysia, where disagreements over halal certifications, pork prohibitions, or vegetarian vs. non-vegetarian preferences frequently arise. Critics of *muhibbah* note that while it highlights values like *Hormat* and *Bersangka Baik*, social realities such as class disparities, entrenched ethnic politics, and religious sensitivities can impede genuine *Musyawah* (Dialogue). Hence, Samarasan's portrayal resonates with broader Malaysian challenges. The Centre's strict rules echo how well-intentioned national programs for unity sometimes falter when confronted with personal autonomy and cultural or religious diversity.

From the centre's perspective, unity and harmony hinge on eliminating the discomfort of conflicting diets. Yet real *Ukhuwah* might demand *Musyawah*: frank conversations about personal convictions, religious taboos, and cultural attachments. The novel thus suggests that while communal meals attempt to symbolize togetherness, genuine *Hormat* and *Bersangka Baik* must also extend to those who deviate. Food in this novel therefore becomes a symbol of both unity and division—used to bring people together but also serving as a contested and highly symbolic medium through which individuals assert their identities and resist homogenization.

The results reveal the challenges of reconciling idealistic visions with the multifaceted nature of human experiences and societal realities. It highlights that *muhibbah*, as an aspirational concept, requires more than shared practices; it necessitates genuine understanding, acceptance, and respect for individual identities. The novel thus calls into question the feasibility of constructing an imagined community without addressing the underlying cultural and religious differences that define its members.

## CONCLUSION

Preeta Samarasan employs the food motif in *Tale of the Dreamer's Son* to investigate a complex correlation between food, identity, and communal belonging within Malaysia, a multi-ethnic society. This can be clearly relayed through careful scrutiny of how food serves as more than just a backdrop but an active agent in personal and social identification. The diverse culinary traditions and eating habits within such societies exemplify broad themes of unity, conflict, and resistance. In addition to serving as an emblem of non-violence and inclusivity, particularly when a vegetarian diet is adopted, food also becomes an issue of discordance and rebellion. It is used as a powerful tool to resist hegemonic control and express individual identity and ideologies.

The exploration of food in the context of identity and communal belonging highlights broader aspirations for unity, encapsulated in the notion of *muhibbah*—an ideal that seeks harmony and mutual respect among diverse cultural and religious groups. However, the disparity between idealistic visions of communal harmony and the lived experiences of individuals underscores the complexities of achieving true inclusivity. This discord illustrates the challenges of navigating identity and belonging in a diverse and evolving landscape, echoing concepts such as Anderson's Imagined Communities, where constructed communal identities may not fully encompass the nuances of individual identities.

Samarasan's narrative asserts the nonexistence of a perfect system or ideal community. The inherent weaknesses and contradictions embedded in the social fabric reflect the patterns of reality faced in multicultural societies, where the ideals of inclusivity and harmony confront challenges related to social class, patriarchal values, and systemic flaws. This suggests that while aspirations for *muhibbah* are noble, the complexities of human nature and societal structures often lead to conflicts and challenges.

Ultimately, this exploration of food as a critical element in shaping and reflecting identity, faith, and social relationships underscores its significance in negotiating cultural and religious identities. By presenting food as a central theme, there is an emphasis on the broader social commentary regarding the difficulties of achieving true harmony in diverse societies. Future research could delve into the role of food in other multicultural contexts, examining how culinary practices manifest gastronativism, negotiate identity, and foster understanding or conflict. Such studies could offer a deeper appreciation of the ongoing quest for inclusion and understanding in varied cultural landscapes, illuminating the complexities and contradictions of striving for a harmonious society, where the principles of *muhibbah* can be fully realized only by embracing diversity and fostering authentic connections among individuals.

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