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Malaysian Food Culture as a Communal Identity Marker in Shih-Li Kow's *The Sum of Our Follies*

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ABSTRACT

Food is deeply rooted in cultural traditions and has been a ubiquitous and prominent element in cultural productions and narratives of cultures around the world. In literature, food is often employed literally and metaphorically to evoke the senses or communicate meaning about the identity, culture, or emotions of people. This article examines the connection between food and cultural identity in multicultural Malaysia as represented in the novel, *The Sum of Our Follies* by Malaysian author, Shih-Li Kow. It aims to identify how food is utilized in the novel to define a communal cultural identity for the characters in a fictional, small town of Lubok Sayong, Malaysia. Textual analysis of food references in the novel is employed to interpret the connection between food and cultural identity and draw parallels between the author-defined social reality in the novel and the Malaysian context. Anderson's (2006) theory of the Imagined Community is applied to understanding communal identity as constructed through food and food spaces. The analysis revealed that food and food spaces are used as an indicator of a community's geographical and physical environment, peer network, ethnicity, nationality and social class. Shih-Li Kow's construction of social reality in this novel shed lights on the significant role of food culture as an identity maker for communities in Malaysia. The novel also captures the complexity of the Malaysian urban and small town sociocultural and socioeconomic divide through the lens of food culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Food provides more than just nourishment and sustenance to the human body. It can also 'feed' the mind and soul, and be a source of comfort, pride, and expression of one's identity. Food scholars view food as a token of power which could also be used as an artistic way to show off and communicate society's customs, as well as to express one's beliefs or identity (Ruark, 1999). Food is also imperceptibly intertwined with the nation and one's history and identity (Mannur, 2009; Roy, 2010). This connection between food, culture, and identity is often portrayed in various cultural narratives including literary works, especially those featuring specific ethnicities, cultures, or communities. While the interdisciplinary study of food, identity and literature has only been gaining attention around the globe within recent years, the study of food as a culture and its roles in identity shaping had attracted scholars and pioneers like Pierre Bourdieu, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Mary Douglas since the 1900s. Boyce and Fitzpatrick (2017) wrote an extensive book about food in literature in Western history. They state that the conception of food changes with time, and literature tends to reflect the ideologies and concerns surrounding food. In a way, an author's social reality presented in a fictional world is interconnected with actualities of the real world.

Food fulfills various narrative, symbolic and ideological functions in literary works but its significance and value have not been sufficiently scrutinized and critically analyzed. According to Mannur (2009), although "food has been garnering interest as a subject for cultural and literary inquiry" ambivalence towards researching food in literary and cultural studies could stem from perceptions that "food studies is concerned with the material realm of food culture, and more suited for anthropological or sociological modes of inquiry, rather than literary studies" (p. 10). In this study, food culture is viewed as a community's practices, behavior, attitudes, traditions and philosophy surrounding food, and refers to the cuisine, types of food, methods of preparation and serving food, eating and table etiquette, ingredients, produce as well as tools and equipment used in food preparation and consumption (Long, 2021; Ng & Karim, 2016; Raji et al., 2017). However, food can be viewed in literary studies from various perspectives and roles, including as a "discursive space that is able to critically interrogate the nostalgic and affective rendering of food in relation to racial and ethnic identity" (Mannur, 2009, p. 12). Works by diasporic writers tend to feature various food references as a homage to their cultural heritage and identity. Food can occupy a more central position in the psyche of some communities than others and this is often achieved through nostalgia and reminiscence of childhood tastes. Even if a Malaysian were to live overseas, their connection to the country is still maintained through memories of the tastes of Malaysian food which in itself is a medley of hybrid, multicultural dishes and ingredients as "meanings of food support communities in ways that challenge the imaginaries of communities confined to national boundaries" (Duruz & Khoo, 2014, p. 5). In multicultural contexts, food is seen as cultural heritage and capital as well as a site for cultural immersion and intercultural engagement (Perry, 2017).

Malaysia is a prime example of a multicultural nation where food occupies a central position in the psyche of most Malaysians and this is manifested in everyday conversations, cultural traditions and rituals, art and cultural production, and literary narratives (Perry, 2017). The preoccupation with food and eating in Malaysia has naturally spilled over into literary works by Malaysian and Malaysian-born writers. Food imagery, symbolism, metaphors, and food-related nostalgia are aplenty in literary works produced by Malaysian and Malaysian-born fiction writers

both at home and abroad. Writers have used food to represent their longing for the comfort of family and home. Food is used in literary works to represent the diverse and multicultural landscape of the nation and its people but it also occupies a "paradoxical space" where instead of uniting communities, it divides them (Perry, 2017, p. 198).

The social and cultural functions of food in Malaysian narratives are multifaceted. The role food plays in cultural narratives and the sociocultural landscape requires more scrutiny and research (Perry, 2017). As research in food and culture grows, there have been several studies exploring the correlation between food and identity in the context of Malaysia such as those by Duruz and Khoo (2014), Olmedo (2015), and Olmedo and Shamsul Amri (2017). However, research on food narratives in Malaysia, particularly in the genre of literature is limited. In past and present writings by Malaysian writers, food has occupied a significant role in the narratives and imagery. Writers such as Adibah Amin, Beth Yahp, Chan Ling Yap, Tan Twan Eng, M. Shanmugalingam, and Shih Li-Kow have used food to convey various meanings about the setting, characters, plot, and themes of their literary narratives. Often, in these writings, there is not just a nostalgic return to one's childhood home, memories, and experiences through the remembering of food but also of the commensality or communal consumption of it (Siti Nuraishah Ahmad & Wan Nur Madiha Ramlan, 2019). The memories and descriptions of food and its consumption are often presented in a positive and nostalgic tone. Some works do express feelings of longing, alienation, and even prejudice through food imagery and symbols (ibid, 2019). Communal cultural identity in this article references a categorization of identity that cannot be disassociated with an individual's participation in a communal activity, rituals, and rites, and is a unifying construction in which a group of people or community is actively conscious of their participation and roles within the sodality. The use of food in Malaysian literature in English requires further scrutiny to uncover how it functions and makes meaning within the sociocultural context of Malaysia.

In recognition of this, this article aims to explore the correlation between food and communal identity as represented by a Malaysian author in a novel depicting a multicultural Malaysian community. This article examines how food is used to express communal cultural identity in Shih-Li Kow's *The Sum of Our Follies*. The exploration of the social and cultural significance of food and eating in Malaysia is an endeavor that promises to be both intriguing and revelatory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

FOOD, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY

Food has often served as a powerful signifier of both cultural self-definition and cultural difference (Thompson, 2011). According to Phillips (2013, p. 73), "acceptance or rejection of food shows others one's similarities to and differences from them and provides an instantly comprehensible basis for connection or distance … food serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart". However, food has also played a role in bridging differences as the partaking of a mutually pleasurable gastronomical experience help forge better understanding and relationships between different groups and peoples. As noted by Roy (2010, p. 14) "communities are perhaps as frequently built on principles of distaste, distance, and avoidance as on taste and consumption" and food plays an important role in forging relationships between people and communities.

Counihan (2000), in *The Social and Cultural Uses of Food*, identified six main roles of food which include: food and power; food and community; food and family; food as meaning, symbol, and language; food in folklore and literature; as well as food in gender, sex and sexuality.

She accentuates the complexities of food culture and foregrounds the role that food has played in the formation of racial identities, gendered bodies, national tastes, cultural memory, and social capital. Ruark (1999) is keen to note that food scholars view food as a marker of power and is also representative of a community's customs or an individual's identity or ideology. In addition, it holds an artistic function. Food fulfills all these functions and more in the Malaysian context.

SOCIAL IDENTITY

Food is indispensable from cultural and social identity as "food and food practices are important in the creation and maintenance of social identities in multicultural contexts" (Reddy & van Dam, 2020, p. 1). Herrigel (1993) explained the concept of social identity as the "desire for group distinction, dignity, and place within historically specific discourses about the character, structure, and boundaries of the polity and the economy" (p. 371). This paper finds that the concept of imagined community (Anderson, 2006) is very much related to the theory of social identity developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979) in a way that people identify themselves as belonging to part of a group by self-categorizing, based on knowledge of their membership in the social identity that has value and emotional significance. Hogg (2006) explains that one of the motivating factors for an individual to identify himself or herself in a particular social group through religion, gender, and race is because of his or her wish for positive self-esteem. Previous studies that use the social identity theory to study food preferences and food and culture in a multicultural context include Bartels and Onwezen (2014) and Reddy and van Dam (2020).

MALAYSIAN FOOD CULTURE

Although Malaysia is a multicultural society with various ethnic groups often mingling and interacting with each other, Malaysia lacks the portrayal of multicultural eating as food choice is often made along the lines of ethnic, cultural, and religious considerations (Lee, 2017). In Malaysia, the social and cultural conventions of food consumption are as significant as the food and type of dishes being consumed. The eating and coming together such as Iftar (breaking fast) during Ramadan and the reunion dinner at Chinese New Year are as important as the food that brings people together. Lee (2017) contends that multiculturalism in Malaysia works in a way that we are eating apart together rather than eating together. Nevertheless, eating the foods of others, be it in the *mamak* (Indian Muslim) restaurants, *kopitiams* (Hainanese coffeeshops), food courts, *kenduris* (Malay festive banquet) or open houses during festive seasons, provide a construal of multiculturalism without giving up cultural identity.

Both Malay *kenduris* and "open house" practiced by Malaysians of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds are settings of communal feasting and celebration and these "connections between food traditions and community offer insightful perspectives for exploring food within the framework of nationalism" (Long, 2021). The "open house" refers to the opening of one's home to "welcome friends, family and neighbours or guests from everywhere and all walks of life to help one celebrate a traditional celebration" (Kasim et al., 2014, p. 157). It plays an important role in communal engagement by providing the community with a platform to engage in ethnic traditions, customs, practices, norms, and culture (Kasim et al., 2014). According to Kasim et al. (2014, pp. 157-158), *kenduris* and open house play "an important role in transferring and sustaining tradition, culture, custom, and civilization from one generation to another" and help enhance "the level of social interaction between community spheres and the hosting families". At these traditional communal feasts, family members, relatives, friends and neighbours gather in

homes or community spaces to prepare and serve traditional food and delicacies. In villages and small towns, the whole community "will assist, collaborate and contribute whatever items are needed for preparing food and drink to the host of open house in order to ensure the success of the event" (Kasim et al. 2014, pp. 160-161).

However, the characteristics of these communal celebrations have changed over the years due to urbanization and changes in the pace of life and values (ibid, 2014). The expanding fast-food franchise in big cities and suburban areas is a sign of the increasing eating-out culture in recent years (Amrul Asraf Mohd-Any et al., 2014; Noraziah Ali & Mohd Azlan Abdullah, 2012). Amrul Asraf Mohd-Any et al. (2014) quote "Malaysians today are fond of eating out, be it at hawker stalls, fast food outlets, or even fine dining restaurants. It is a norm to see families of all races, especially among the urbanites, gathering at restaurants and enjoying quality time while having their meals" (p. 1892). *Mamak* restaurants and hipster cafes are favorite eateries for city dwellers, and these have become spaces to gather, mingle, or be seen to project a form of preferred identity (Duruz & Khoo, 2014; Kartini et al., 2021). Even during festive celebrations, instead of holding open houses, many urbanites choose to go out to eat (Noraziah Ali & Mohd Azlan Abdullah, 2012) or host their friends in food courts, restaurants, hotels, or cafes as cooking and hosting at home consume a lot of time, energy, and money. Those who do choose to celebrate at home hire professional caterers to prepare the intricate traditional dishes and cuisines. However, the practice of traditional *kenduris* and open houses are still very much alive, especially in villages and small towns as they are valued for being "a platform for social communication and integration between members of a community that strengthen the social bond or relationship" (Kasim et al., 2014, p. 167).

FOOD AND LITERATURE

Literature and food studies is a growing cross-disciplinary field that probes into literary engagements with food, foodways, and consumption practices and traditions. In this field, the relationship between literary practices and food practices is viewed as recursive and literary texts are seen to be not merely transmitting or depicting food cultures and practices, but also structuring them (Tigner & Carruth, 2017). In recognition of the potential in examining the relationship between food and literature, more and more scholars have looked at the meanings and roles of food in various literary genres and contexts. In their chapter titled *Gustatory narrative. Meals, memory and modernist fiction*, Tigner and Carruth (2017) analyze the consumption, preparation, and mnemonic meaning of food in literary works such as Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginal Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and find that the description of food and eating in these novels function as literary devices that "propel narratives of the past"; they also "function as signposts that guide the reader through alternative narrative structures" (p. 109). Food imagery, metaphor, and symbolism are also used in literature to communicate meaning, represent complex ideas, and reflect on cultural identities such as ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, and social class.

Whitt's (2011) analysis of food imagery and metaphors in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* found that food, used as a literary device, helped to drive the plot, represent the characters, and reflect the setting and cultural context of the novel. According to Whitt (2011), food and consumption were used in the novels to symbolize memories, feelings, heritage stories, relationships, power, consumption, and cultural issues of acceptance, resistance, and culture preservation. Olaosun (2020) examined food symbolism in the poems of Nigerian poet Olaklere Oladitan and found that

food contributed to the construction of the aesthetic, affective qualities, motifs, and themes of the poems; it was also a medium for representing individual and communal African cultural values. In the poems, food was also used to represent social psyche and memory and was found to be an important element for personal spiritual and psychosocial growth (Olaosun, 2020).

FOOD NARRATIVES ON MALAYSIA

Food truly occupies the consciousness, conversations, and everyday realities of Malaysians in a very prominent and significant way, and this can be seen in the literary works by Malaysian and Malaysian-born authors. In their writings in English, the multicultural cuisine of Malaysia has been celebrated and showcased through poems, short stories, novels, graphic novels, memoirs, and travel writings set in various towns and cities in Malaysia. For example, the food culture of Ipoh, a town in the state of Perak, famous for street food such as chicken rice, bean sprouts, and *hor fun* (flat rice noodles) among others, has been celebrated through *Hungry in Ipoh* (2015), an anthology of short stories featuring food. The short story, *Sambal Without Anchovies* by Chua Kok Yee (2010), is a story of love and loss and how food represents love, memory, and nostalgia for loved ones and special moments in life. Food and nostalgia is also a theme in Beth Yahp's *Eat First, Talk Later* (2015), Chan Ling Yap's *Sweet Offerings* (2009), and Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012). The role of food in identity and family relationships and traditions is also seen in M. Shanmughalingam's *Marriage and Mutton Curry* (2018) and Tash Aw's *We the Survivors* (2019).

In addition to representing emotions and memories, food is also used to showcase the cultural traditions and identities of different ethnic and cultural communities in Malaysia. Selina Siak Chin Yoke's novel, *The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds,* celebrates the unique, hybrid Peranakan culture and Nyonya cuisine through rich imagery of Nyonya laksa, curries, and *kuehs* (cakes). According to Siak, in Malaysia, food is everywhere and permeates culture and consciousness in ways that she has not seen in any other country, and it "serves as balm and salve, feeding not only our bodies but also our minds, and possibly even our souls" (Siak, 2018, para. 2). There are many other literary works written about Malaysia that showcase food as fulfilling various emotional, social, and cultural purposes at both individual and communal levels.

In their analysis of Beth Yahp's *Eat First, Talk Later* (2015), Siti Nuraishah and Wan Nur Madiha (2019), found food instrumental in the writers' efforts to search, remember, reconstruct, and define "home" and belonging, especially for diasporic and transnational individuals and communities. Malaysian literary works in English also present the social and cultural realities of the nation through food imagery and metaphors. Perry (2017) analyzed Adibah Amin's novel, *This End of the Rainbow* (2006), which was set in pre-Independent Malaya, and Shih-Li Kow's short story, *Deep Fried Devils* (2008), which was set in contemporary Malaysia, to identify the functions food play in multicultural Malaysia. According to Perry (2017), the analysis of food in these stories revealed food as a third space of bonding and acceptance as well as a site of hostility and division for the multicultural communities in Malaysia. In the same spectrum as these past researchers, this paper attempts to bridge the gap between the consumption of food and cultural Malaysian identity in Shih-Li Kow's work through our understanding of her characters and the setting of a small fictional town set in the state of Perak in Peninsular Malaysia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

IMAGINED COMMUNITY

In this article, the analysis of food references in *The Sum of Our Follies* utilizes Benedict Anderson's theory of Imagined Communities (2006) to identify how food is used to express community and cultural identity in a Malaysian community. Anderson (2006) proposes that the nation is an imagined political community, and the ties and fraternity that people in this nation or community have with members whom they do not know and have never met, are based on a shared ideology, symbolic system, or sets of behaviors and practices. Language, culture, traditions, artefacts, narratives, and cuisine are among the elements that allow communities to possess a mindset of perceived unity.

Nugent (2010) applied the understanding of Anderson's (2006) imagined communities to shared practices surrounding food culture. According to Nugent (2010), shared consumption routines of people within a country are significant as "consumption is not incidental to national identity" but is "partly constitutive of it" (p. 11). In Malaysia, the relationship between food and national identity has been explored by scholars including Duruz and Khoo (2014) and Olmedo and Shamsul Amri (2017) who studied food spaces such as *mamak* restaurants and *kopitiams* as third places and spaces for culinary and cultural exchange in Malaysia. In multicultural contexts, third spaces are hybrid, neutral grounds that allow the negotiation of cultural differences, identity constructions, structures, and cultural systems of meaning such as race, gender, and class (Bhabha, 2006; Brunsma & Delgado 2008). According to Olmedo and Shamsul Amri (2017), *mamak* eateries are instrumental in fostering a sense "of living togetherness" among Malaysians and are places where they see themselves as their "Malaysian selves" instead of "ethnic-group' selves" (p. 202). Expanding from Duruz and Khoo (2014) and Olmedo and Shamul Amri's (2014)'s works, this study views both the *mamak* restaurants and *kopitiams* as a multicultural, third space for gathering and communal dining. These eateries offer Malaysians of all ages and all walks of life affordable local food (*kopi*, *teh tarik* (milk tea), *Milo*, *roti canai*, *roti bakar*, *mee goreng*, etc.) and entertainment (televised games, sports, drama, etc.), and function as a neutral space to discuss studies, work, politics, business, etc. or just tohang out with friends. This shared communal experience at the *mamak* eateries and *kopitiams* creates a perceived sense of commensality and unity amongst Malaysians.

AUTHOR-DEFINED SOCIAL REALITY

This article seeks to explore how the author, Shih-Li Kow, utilizes food references to stipulate identity construct from a communal perspective through the characters in her novel. In the context of this study, it is important to note that the community that the author has constructed is purely fictional, but the issues presented are based on Malaysian social realities and grounded on the author's own experiences, hopes, and desires. The concept of social realities in institutions has been researched and discussed by various academics such as Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Shamsul Amri (1998). Using Malaysia as a case study, Shamsul Amri describes that identity is formed within two social realities which are the authority-defined social reality and the everyday-defined social reality. The authority-defined social reality is defined and observed by people who are part of the "dominant power structure" while the everyday-defined social reality is one that is experienced by the people in their daily lives (Shamsul Amri, 1996, p. 477). Raihanah M. M. (2009) draws from Shamsul Amri's (1998) theory on social realities and applies them to the

realities constructed by authors in literary works. The social realities constructed by authors are known as "author-defined social reality" through which authors "represent their social and political ideological standpoints, whether centred in the person, ethnicity or nation" (p. 56).

Anderson's (2006) theory of Imagined Community and Raihanah M. M.'s (2009) concept of author-defined social reality are therefore adopted in this article to examine a Malaysian imagined community at localized food stalls or during any consumption or process of commensality based on the understanding of how the author has defined her social reality. This study will also examine the social dynamic and communal identity of the characters in her novel. Since Shih-Li Kow's primary setting of the novel is fictional, it is fitting that an imagined community contrived through food consumption is used to define the characters' cultural identity. All the findings of the research are therefore subjected to the parameters of Shih-Li Kow's author-defined social reality and how she projects the idea of community and cultural identity through her food narratives.

SHIH-LI KOW'S *THE SUM OF OUR FOLLIES*

This article analyzes food references in the novel *The Sum of Our Follies* (2017) by Shih-Li Kow, an award-winning Malaysian author. Shih-Li Kow is known as the local colorist and almost all her works conjure the sights, smells and sounds of Malaysia (Leon, 2009). Her writings include vivid descriptions and references to food that represent Malaysia's rich multicultural food heritage. *The Sum of Our Follies* (henceforth referred to as *TSOF*) revolves around the struggles of a small town and its people to survive the modernization and globalization of Malaysia (Leon, 2014).

The novel is mainly set in the fictional town of Lubok Sayong which is said to be near Perak, a state in the north of western Peninsular Malaysia. The town is made up of a tight-knit community that is not very accepting of outsiders but influenced by modernization and must adapt. The descriptions of Lubok Sayong's landscape, the characters and their dynamic inter- and intra-ethnic interactions with each other, as well as mouth-watering depictions of the food and feasts, conjure a truly authentic image and provide an insight into various aspects of Malaysian culture and way of life.

The key characters in *TSOF* are Au Yong and Mary Anne, Lubok Sayong residents who moved there from the city. Other characters include longtime Lubok Sayong residents such as Mami Beevi (owner of Big House homestay), Miss Boonsidik (a half-Thai, half-Malay transvestite from Bukit Kayu Hitam who works as a kitchen assistant at the local school), and Wong Kam (a *coffeeshop/ kopitiam* owner). Au Yong is a friendly middle-aged Chinese man who, prior to managing the town's lychee canning factory, was a manager at a hypermarket located in Kuala Lumpur. Mary Anne is a young orphan girl who was living at an orphanage near the city. At the age of 11, Mary Anne was adopted by Assunta (former resident of Lubok Sayong and stepsister of Mami Beevi). However, Assunta and her husband were killed in a car accident on the day she adopted Mary Anne. Mary Anne survives the car accident but is injured. Au Yong becomes a frequent visitor while she is in the hospital and forges a bond with the girl. After she recovers, Mary Anne moves in with Mami Beevi who becomes her guardian thereafter. Mary Beth is Mary Anne's closest friend from the orphanage who visits Mary Anne in the hospital and later comes to stay with her regularly at the Big House before eventually moving to Kuala Lumpur for work. The narrative of the novel switches from the point of view of Au Yong and Mary Anne as they present their experiences of the city and life in the small town they have come to call home.

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METHODOLOGY

This article employs the literary textual analysis method to examine the author's use of food in the novel to represent communal cultural identity in the context of Malaysia. As noted by Galda et al. (2000), literary analysis focuses on examining an author's use of the literary elements such as character, narrative patterns, symbolism, and stylistic devices in his or her work. This article focuses on the elements of settings and characters in relation to food references in the novel. The analysis involves a close examination of food references including the mention and description of the food, its consumption, preparation, and ingredients that correspond to the theme of social identities. The food references are identified according to the geographical and physical settings in which they appear in the novel. The characters or people from the novel that surround or are engaged in food preparation and consumption in a physical and social setting, and the social and cultural events that involve food are also identified and analyzed in relation to the communal identities they project through their engagement with the food.

Settings of communal cooking and eating in Lubok Sayong are mostly found to occur at Mami Beevi's Big House, Hemmingway's Bar, and Wong Kam's coffeeshop (*kopitiam).* In the city, reference to food and consumption is found to be at Mary Beth's house and a coffee shop in Kuala Lumpur. The characters that are closely related to food in the novel are mainly Mami Beevi, Au Yong, Wong Kam, and Mary Anne, but there are some food-related references connected to other people who visit Lubok Sayong such as foreigners, city folk, tourists, volunteers and relatives. These characters are scrutinized to investigate the formation of an Imagined Community (Anderson, 2006) and how the characters categorize themselves into a particular social identity through food culture, which inherently involves the idea of social fluidity setting the boundaries of inclusion into the inner community circle or exclusion from.

The food references are scrutinized to identify emerging themes and determine their significance from a personal or communal perspective in the novel. Food in references to communal spaces and social gatherings where the community of groups gather around food in social settings such as Wong Kam's coffeeshop, Hemmingway's Bar, or in a domestic setting such as Mami Beevi's house, were extracted from the text for further analysis. To keep to the aim of this study, food in reference to personal significance were omitted. The function of food as a cultural and identity marker such as locality (urban or small town), nationality, class, etc. is studied to derive a distinct connection between the concept of food and communal or cultural identity. Through evidence from the text, recurring types of social identities throughout the novel will be presented in the analysis. The specific markers that contribute to the formation of a communal identity such as geographic location including urban versus small town, as well as food spaces and social identity will be discussed, including nationality, ethnicity, and social class. This paper seeks to bridge the gap in the current literature and define how food reflects the identity of a community through writer Shih-Li Kow's perspective.

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ANALYSIS

FOOD AND GEOGRAPHICAL/PHYSICAL SETTING

URBAN SPACES AND COMMUNITY

The urban setting of Kuala Lumpur and its city dwellers were defined in this novel through the eateries that occupied urban spaces and type of food that city people consumed in contrast with their small-town counterparts. The number and variety of food and restaurants in the bustling capital city of Kuala Lumpur with the ubiquitous franchise cafes like Starbucks, and fast-food joints like McDonalds contrasted greatly with the quiet coffeeshops/*kopitiams* in a sleepy small town like Lubok Sayong. There are also *mamak* restaurants, pubs, bakeries and cake shops, bubble-tea kiosks, and even fish-and-chips and kebabs that Mary Beth wanted to try in London, which was available at Bob's restaurant downstairs from where Mary Anne lives.

The food that the urban community ate and had access to differentiated them from the small-town community. While the people of Lubok Sayong have their own specialty dishes that were diverse in cuisine and flavors, it was also clear that the small-town community adhered to a sort of local eating standard and culture, and there were certain types of food and drinks that were considered foreign to them. For example, city folks were tagged as 'Starbucks slurper' in an excerpt that read, "They wrote survival kits for newspapers that were not delivered here, but were read by city readers in their dry armchairs at Starbucks, sipping frappes." (Kow, 2017, p. 23). The urban and small town as well as local and foreign divide were decided based on their choice of drink, whether the coffee was obtained from Starbucks or local *kopitiam*. The American couple's preference for Diet Coca-Cola at Wong Kam's *kopitiam* was also keenly noted by Au Yong as a distinctively foreign drink of choice, setting them apart from the locals who were usually described drinking coffee or *teh tarik* at a *kopitiam* and never a soda (p. 92). In fact, the only other time that Coca-Cola was mentioned in the novel was in the city when Mary Beth and her boyfriend were drinking it in front of the television (p. 155). It was also during Mary Anne's visit to the city that Fu offered her a mug of red wine topped up with Sprite (p. 167). Shih-Li Kow seems to assign and reserve certain beverages based on which community and setting the narrative takes place. Local and more affordable drinks like *teh tarik* and coffee at Wong Kam's *kopitiam* and even beer at Hemmingway's are referenced in connection to the insider community, i.e. people and places in Lubok Sayong, while imported, more expensive beverages such as Starbucks coffee, Sprite, Coca-Cola and wine are references in connection to outsiders of the community, i.e. the city dwellers and/or foreigners.

Food was also an important part of the way in which hospitality was accorded to urban (outsiders) in comparison to locals (insiders) in Lubok Sayong. The locals were hospitable and generous when relatives and friends from Lubok Sayong, who were now living in the city, came to visit as they were considered as part of the imagined community who shared the same culture and values. However, the community was less welcoming of other city folk and drew a line with foreigners or outsiders from the city like flood volunteers, who were unwelcomed despite bringing necessities such as food as their "rice bowls lay elsewhere" (Kow, p. 16). This is evident in the way the people of Lubok Sayong treated their tourists with lesser generosity by serving them small portions of *nasi lemak* (coconut-milk rice) and greasy noodles for breakfast. The feeling of neighborliness seems to extend only to members of the community who shared a common culture and are part of the imagined small-town community.

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SMALL TOWN SPACES AND COMMUNITY

In Lubok Sayong, there are many small stalls, coffeeshops/ *kopitiams*, a few restaurants and bars, and one Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) outlet as choices for the locals to dine out. People also ate in each other's homes as home-cooked meals were greatly valued by the community. According to Anderson's (2007) theory of imagined community, people feel a sense of being part of the same group through shared experiences and values, and these can come from gatherings at communal dining spaces either in public or domestic settings. The people of Lubok Sayong are a close-knit small-town community where every celebration is held together, and there is evidence of commensality occurring very often in their town.

When Mary Anne visited, Au Yong and his family showed their hospitality by hosting a gathering in their home where they would serve many traditional Chinese dishes for her to taste.

> Every time we visited, Auyong called one of Assunta's sisters a day ahead. The women would gather in one of their homes and turn it into a cooking event. Auyong enjoyed these gatherings, having them cook for him and the opportunity to talk in Chinese. We would eat and eat, or rather Auyong would eat and I would try.
>
> (Kow, 2017, p. 206)

Shih-Li Kow also describes how the Lubok Sayong community gathered to cook for *kenduris* such as weddings and use the town's communal wok for wedding feasts and making *dodol* (glutinous rice cakes). Shih-Li Kow describes of "… a wok the size of a crater used for communal cooking during weddings, or for making *dodol*…" (p. 23). As noted previously, events where members gather in the communal kitchen or cooking space to prepare food for the whole community is an occurrence more common in small towns and villages rather than in cities in Malaysia. Shih-Li Kow provides a glimpse into the small-town social and communal spirit through the descriptions of these communal cooking events in Lubok Sayong. Such communal activities are central to creating bonds between the members of the community, giving them a sense of belonging (imagined or otherwise) and an emotional link to the place and its people. The generous hospitality and warmth of communal cooking seem to be only extended to people who are considered-local residents or those accepted by residents as insiders of the community like Mary Anne (a frequent visitor and close friend to Mary Beth). As found in the novel, the infamous Lubok Sayong's *nasi lemak*, which is sold at a stall to everyone, is meagre in portion, but food that is cooked and shared by the community at a *kenduri* was very abundant. This demonstrates how food is used to show one's acceptance and treatment in a community. Counihan (2000) states that food sharing and communal feasts are a sign of confirmation in the social community.

Wong Kam's *kopitiam* in Lubok Sayong is a neutral third space for people of the community to gather and have drinks together regardless of their background. The community would watch the World Cup and the Beijing Olympics on a big screen, and have free hot drinks served with biscuits on these special occasions. These communal gatherings over sports and food forge a sense of communal spirit and identity for the community.

In Lubok Sayong, *curry laksa* at the local stall is also known as *laksa sakit perut* (stomachache laksa) as it often causes food poisoning due to the conditions of the river water. Despite this, it is a favorite as locals continue to patronize the stall. Outsiders, however, find the *curry laksa* a repellant. A taxi driver, a non-resident of Lubok Sayong, complains to Mary Anne, "Oh, I know. That's where they sell the *laksa sakit perut*. I got ill once. How to bring tourists?". The willingness of locals to risk food poisoning through *curry laksa* distinguishes them from

outsiders. Such shared communal experience and attitudes are what forms the 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006).

In small towns like Lubok Sayong, *kopitiams* like Wong Kam's coffeeshop, tend to be fuss-free, casual dining places that are willing to accommodate their customer's individual tastes and desires. These add to the charm and pull of these third spaces where the locals feel at home and are acknowledged as insiders of the community. In contrast to large impersonal city eateries, small-town eateries not only offer food and drinks but also friendship, companionship, and a sense of belonging to their patrons.

> …the hypermarket customers were all nameless and faceless. Here, the coffee shop owner and I exchanged soft porn DVDs, the discipline teacher at the school was my fishing buddy, the bartender at Hemingway's didn't mind if I sometimes ordered Chinese tea at the bar and beer at the coffee shop. In the last quarter of my time on earth, pardon the melodrama, there was much comfort in being addressed by name by familiar faces. The occasional stranger in town was a novelty, a curiosity to enjoy, instead of another face to forget.
>
> (Kow, 2017, p. 91)

Au Yong, therefore, is more comfortable at the eateries in Lubok Sayong compared to the ones in the city because the owners of Hemmingway's and Wong Kam coffeeshop know him by name and are willing to serve him food off the menu. The warm and personalized service provided to local patrons in small-town eateries gives them a sense of belonging to the community and place they call home. Such service is rare in bustling cities where even a regular customer is seldom recognized or acknowledged.

FOOD AND NATIONAL CULTURE

The love of food and sitting together to *makan* (eat) is something all Malaysians share regardless of ethnicity, religion or locality. Food is a ubiquitous part of Malaysian living and all events, be it personal, business, social, cultural or religious, include food and eating in some form or another. Whether in cities or small towns, many Malaysians gather as a community at *mamak* restaurants and *kopitiams* while sipping their iced Milo drinks and *teh tarik* to watch various sporting events like football, badminton, and the Olympics on big screens. In *TSOF*, Shih-Li Kow showcases the coming together of Malaysians to watch a badminton game at Wong Kam's *kopitiam*.

At Lubok Sayong, locals gather at Wong Kam's *kopitiam* to witness national shuttler, Lee Chong Wei, play in the Olympics final. When the game ended in defeat for Malaysia, Wong Kam served free *kopi-o* (black coffee without milk and sugar) and passed around a big tin of cream crackers to lift the spirits of the people there, "but the thick black coffee and dunking biscuits failed to raise [their] spirits" (Kow, 2017, p. 183). The small-town hospitality and community spirit are evident in Wong Kam's generosity in handing out free coffee and cream crackers to his patrons/friends. Here, Shih-Li Kow provides an insight into how food is shared generously among insider communities and used as a source of comfort to lift the spirits of those who are down. Another aspect worth noting here is the author's description of a very Malaysian manner of eating cream crackers with hot beverages. She notes the quirky Malaysian habit of dunking cream crackers into their coffee, tea or Milo. The dunking of specifically the cream cracker in coffee, tea or Milo is a quintessential Malaysian experience shared by Malaysians across generations, ethnicity, localities and classes.

FOOD AND ETHNICITY

The analysis of the novel reveals that the author has used food in a subtle manner to highlight ethnic tensions and inequalities that exist in Malaysia. This is done through a metaphor of a three-layered tea, a drink advertised on the sticker of the table at the *mamak* stall where Au Yong and his barber friend, Winner D@ Kathirvellu Doraisamy went for tea while Au Yong was in KL. Winner, an Indian man, expressed his exasperation over this glass of tea, claiming that the tea was a form of racism as it is black at the bottom from the palm sugar, yellow in the middle from the condensed milk, and brown at the top. Winner viewed the black color of the tea as representative of the Indian community and became offended that they were always at the lowest strata of society. He states:

> "Always the black at the bottom; we Indians at the bottom, the brown Malays on top and you, yellow Chinese in the middle making the best of both worlds. The worst thing is, these stupid mamak fellas are so proud selling it. They don't look at themselves in the mirror."
>
> (Kow, 2017, p. 173)

The ethnic tensions in Malaysia are presented in this context via the metaphor of the three-layered tea from the perspective of an Indian barber voicing his frustrations to his Chinese friend whilst dining at a *mamak* restaurant. The *mamak* is seen here as fulfilling its role as that neutral space where Malaysians of all backgrounds can gather to meet each other, eat and voice their views about various issues including politics which is a popular subject amongst older men who gather at *mamaks* and *kopitiams* (Olmedo & Shamsul Amri, 2017). The author here, through the character of Winner, can be seen as presenting the views of some sections of society in Malaysia who are unhappy with the realities of living in a multicultural society and the challenges of interethnic relations. Winner expresses:

> "You stir it up and pretend everyone's living in harmony. This is no John Lennon song, friend. Look at it, now it's all brown. Where's the black and the yellow? That's not harmony, that's hostile takeover, and I'm saying it nicely."
>
> (Kow, 2017, p. 173)

Although the author does not present explicit ethnic-related tensions between the multi-ethnic characters in the novel, the tensions that do exist in larger contexts are subtly presented in this conversation between Winner and Au Yong. Winner uses the different elements and colors in the three-layered tea to refer to the three major ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia. The politics of color displayed through food in literature is an intriguing aspect of the contemporary story as it is reminiscent of the nineteenth and twentieth-century Western books that depict a certain color as being more desirable or superior to other colors, and is used to indicate social standings (Almerico, 2014; Boyce & Fitzpatrick, 2017). In Western narratives, the color of bread was used to indicate social standings and status as white bread is mostly consumed by the upper class while brown bread is parallel to the standing of being poor (Almerico, 2014; Boyce & Fitzpatrick, 2017).

In one part of the book, communal preparation and consumption is specific to the Chinese ethnic group and cultural traditions. Shih-Li Kow references the Chinese community at Lubok Sayong where food prepared at these gatherings was more in-line with traditional Chinese cuisines, with dish names being unfamiliar to non-Chinese.

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> Someone was always putting food on my plate: braised phoenix claws; broccoli with sea slugs and glossy black mushrooms; steamed catfish with leathery skin, slit in the belly and splayed open in soy sauce; bitter herbal soups and pickled vegetables; porridge with black eggs and pig trotters in vinegar.
>
> (Kow, 2017, p. 206)

The ingredients for meals referenced in the gatherings, namely pig trotters, black mushrooms, and bitter herbal soups are distinctive markers of the ethnic Chinese identity of the people as these are not ingredients found in the cuisine of other ethnic groups such as Malays and Indians in Peninsular Malaysia.

FOOD AND SOCIAL CLASS/STATUS

Food in the novel was also used as an indication of socioeconomic class and social status. The majority of the people in the novel belonged to the middle- and working-class strata. One exception was the character of Datin Sabine Bernelli. As indicated through her title of *Datin* (the wife of a *Dato* - a title bestowed by Malay state rulers as a contribution to the state), Sabine Bernelli belongs to the upper-class community in Malaysia who tend to be wealthy and privileged. Her husband is an Italian chef who owns and works at the Monsoon Island Resort and Spa and the couple's differing taste and lifestyle is reflected in their food preferences and choices. This is evident when Datin Sabine Bernelli casually refers to western gourmet meals and ingredient as if they were accessible to and could be afforded by the average Malaysian.

> "Today, we have Gian Carlo's famous canapés and cocktails. You must try his Australian lamb meatballs with mint sauce served with biscotti picks. We plant the mint ourselves. It's so important to us to be local."
>
> (Kow, 2017, p. 133)

Neither lamb, mint nor biscotti are local traditional staples. The fact that Datin Sabine expressed how important it was to be local by giving mint plants as examples indicates how out of touch she was with the food of the middle or working classes.

DISCUSSION

Shih-Li Kow utilizes the idea of food as being spatially unique to one's environment. The preparation, type of food, and progression of commensality are advertently described as being on two separate ends of the same pole with the *mamak*/*kopitiam* culture of Lubok Sayong on one end and yuppie culture of the young urban, westernized city folks on the other. From hot drinks served at small stalls to cold soda beverages at Starbucks, dining culture distinguishes the urban versus small towns in Malaysia. In Lubok Sayong, there is an essence of the more 'Malaysian' traditional small-town feel where the community often prepares food and eats together thus forming a bond within their community culture, which is very different from the individualism of urban life where fast-food chains and takeaways are common in everyday life as described by the author. However, Shih-Li Kow's also shows how some food cultural practices can transcend geographical boundaries and be part of a shared national culture like the consumption of the drinking and dunking of biscuits in Milo, *kopi-o and teh tarik* at *mamaks* and *kopitiams* whilst enjoying sports on large-screen televisions at *mamak*s or *kopitiams as a community.* Although food, in many ways,

can be seen as way of dividing people and communities, it can also be an agent for bonding and inclusion to create shared identities and values.

The findings of the novel also revealed an unexpected notion where in a multicultural society, ethnic tension is expected to be the center focus of conflict, but in fact the urban and small-town divide is more pronounced in the case of Lubok Sayong. In *TSOF*, ethnic marker does not come out strongly with food as compared to *Shih-Li Kow's* other work, *Deep Fried Devils* (2008), in which division and tension were caused by an ethnic group's possessiveness of its cultural food and traditional methods of preparation. Rather, in this novel, food shows a level of ethnic cohesion where there is a process of negotiation and compromise in the community where there are many inter-ethnic interactions. The author-defined social reality of Shih-Li Kow, one might argue, diverges from the Malaysian real-world reality where ethnic tension is prevalent and there is a division of ethnicity in a multicultural nation due to differences in values and policies. Different ethnic groups may also have different religious practices that may translate into various consumption practices and food items that may or may not be appropriate for consumption. The cultural makeup of Malaysia is complex and the reality of different ethnicities getting along together without inter-ethnic disputes, while tempting, is hard to believe. But the key finding, through the analysis of *TSOF*, shows the author-defined social reality of the role of food plays in a small-town community as opposed to in an urban city. In developing a communal identity through food, commensality is an act that must be consciously participated in by individuals to consolidate their roles and contribute to the group. Thus, there is a lack of commensality in the urban setting and although fast-food eateries are depicted as being more popular, there is a lack of integration within the group which makes it harder to establish a communal identity.

CONCLUSION

This article shows the correlation between food, its preparation and consumption, and the sociocultural identity in multicultural Malaysia as depicted in the novel *TSOF* by Shih-Li Kow. The author has managed to utilize food as a literary device to give a sense of realism to a fictional town and characters that face real and complex everyday issues and challenges in a way that mirrors the reality of actual Malaysian communities. The novel captures the authenticity of Malaysian lifestyle through descriptions of communal sharing spaces centering around food and eating together, where people from different generations, cultures, and religions congregate and mingle, thus forging ties and building a community. The novel displays the multicultural makeup of Malaysian society with diverse and individual cultures who do have shared values that help them become a community and a nation.

The analysis of *TSOF* has revealed how food and food spaces can be a communal identity marker. Food was used to depict the culture of the people inside and outside of Lubok Sayong, and their shared communal identities; it was also used to mark the geographical or physical environment, ethnicity, nationality as well as social class. Food was an element used to identify commonalities and differences between people and cultures. It showed that diverse cultures can communally partake and share meals together, subsequently fostering a connection that strengthens the whole community. The reality that the author defines in the novel can be viewed as a reality that does exist in many parts of Malaysia where people mindfully come together despite their dietary, cultural, and religious differences to share in a communal gathering and meal while learning, understanding and enjoying each other's cultures and traditions. Throughout the novel, the opposing narratives on small-town versus urban food practices make the divide between the

less urban and urban community a prevalent theme in *TSOF*, which is an integral social reality that Shih-Li Kow intends to convey.

The article affirms the strong connection between food narratives and culture and identities as represented in a literary text. Through the lens of Anderson's (2006) theory of Imagined Community, food can be viewed as a cultural phenomenon that involves a large subset group of people as identities are oftentimes shared communally. *TSOF* is a novel that reflects literary realism in Shih-Li Kow's authentic embodiment of the realism of contemporary Malaysian small-town living. The readers are given a glimpse and understanding of the social realities and cultural identities of Malaysia through the vivid imagery of the fictional Lubok Sayong. The detailed descriptions of the novel's complex characters and issues, and most importantly the depictions of the rich Malaysian food culture and heritage celebrate the unique and diverse identities of the Malaysian people as individuals, communities, and a nation.

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