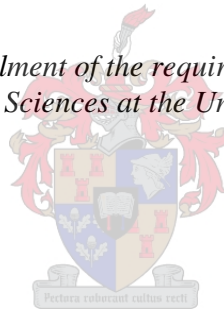


# **Spicing South Africa: Representations of Food and Culinary Traditions in South African Contemporary Art and Literature**

by  
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*Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Stellenbosch*



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March 2012

### **Declaration**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis echoes a multitude of voices. Most of them are referenced in my bibliography, but there are some integral ones which need to be acknowledged, thanked and referenced individually here.

For making this project possible I thank the National Research Foundation of South Africa for bursary support linked to Meg Samuelson's research project "South African Subjectivities: Roots and Routes in Literary and Cultural Studies".

Thank you to my supervisor Prof. Meg Samuelson, for being the guiding voice for this thesis. Your boundless knowledge and tireless encouragement has significantly shaped and influenced this thesis, but also me as an individual. I could not have asked for a more competent, supportive or inspirational supervisor.

Thank you to Riaan Oppelt for generously sharing his work-in-progress with me. Also, I am extremely grateful to Gabeba Baderoon for providing me with an extensive reading list for this thesis.

I am indebted to my brother and sister and my immediate family for their continuous support both directly and indirectly throughout these two years.

Johann, thank you for your unwavering love, patience and attention.

For granting me this opportunity and for believing in my potential I have to conclude by thanking my parents. To my mother, your strength is astounding and truly inspiring. Your generosity and support throughout this time could not be repaid in a lifetime. To my father, thank you for teaching me to take time to laugh, play and savour life's soul food.

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## ABSTRACT

Francoise Vergés comments in her essay *Let's Cook!* that “one could write the history of a people, of a country, of a continent by writing the history of its culinary habits” (250 ). Vergés here refers to the extent to which food can be seen to document and record certain events or subjectivities. Exploring a wide range of texts spanning the late 1800s up to the post-apartheid present, this thesis focuses in particular on the ways in which “spice” as commodity, ingredient or symbol is employed to articulate and/or embed creole and diasporic identities within the South African national context.

The first chapter maps the depiction of the “Malay” figure within cookery books, focussing on the extent to which it is caught up in the trappings of the picturesque. This visibility is often mediated by the figure’s proximity to food. These depictions are then placed in conversation with the conceptual artist Berni Searle’s photographic and video installations. Searle visually interrogates the stagnant modes of representation that accrue around the figure of the “Malay” and moves toward understandings of how food and food narratives structure cultural identity as complex and mutable.

Chapter two shifts focus from the Cape to the ways in which “Indian Cuisine” became significant within the South African context. Here the Indian housewife plays a role in perpetuating a distinctive cultural identity. The three primary texts discussed in this chapter are the popular *Indian Delights* cookery book authored by the Women’s Cultural Group, Shamim Sarif’s *The World Unseen* and Imraan Coovadia’s *The Wedding. Indian Delights*. All illustrate the extent to which the realm of the kitchen, traditionally a female domain, becomes a space from which alternative subjectivities can be made. The kitchen as a place for cultural retention is explored further and to differing degrees in both *The Wedding* and *The World Unseen*.

Ultimately, indentifying cultural heritage through food enables tracing alternative and intersecting cultural identities that elsewhere, are often left out for neat and new ethnic, cultural or national identities. The thesis will in particular explore the extent to which spices used within creole and/or diasporic culinary practices encode complex affiliations and connections. Tracing the intimacies and the disjunctures becomes productive within the post-apartheid present where the vestiges of apartheid’s taxonomical impetus alongside a new multicultural model threaten to erase further the complexities and nuances of everyday life.

## OPSOMMING

In haar artikel *Let's Cook!* wys Francoise Vergés daarop dat die geskiedenis van 'n mens, 'n land of selfs 'n kontinent saamgestel sou kon word deur te skryf oor die geskiedenis van hulle kos en eetgewoontes (250). Vergés skep hier 'n besef van individuele en sosiale identiteit wat deur kos geleenthede vasgevang kan word. Deur bronne vanaf die laat 1800's tot die post-apartheid periode te bestudeer, fokus hierdie navorsing spesifiek op die wyse waarop speserye as kommoditeit, inhoud of simbool gebruik word om die kreoolse en diasporiese identiteite in Suid Afrika te bevestig of te bevraagteken.

Die eerste hoofstuk lewer 'n uiteensetting en beskrywing, soos verkry uit kookboeke, van die stereotypes wat vorm om die Maleise figuur. Daar word konsekwent gefokus op die mate waarin die sigbaarheid van die Maleise identiteit verstrengel word in 'n bestaande raamwerk van diskoerse. Die Maleise figure word dikwels meer sigbaar in die konteks van kos en eetgewoontes. Berni Searl se fotografiese en video installasies word gebruik om hierdie stereotiepiese visuele kodes te bevraagteken. Searle ontgin die passiewe wyse waarop die Maleise persoon visueel verbeeld word en beklemtoon dan hoe kos en gesprekke oor kos die kulturele identiteit kompleks en dinamies maak.

Hoofstuk twee verskuif die klem vanaf die Kaap na die wyse waarop die Indiese kookkuns identiteit kry in die Suid Afrikaanse konteks. Die fokus val hier op die rol van die Indiese huisvrou en haar kombuis in die bevestiging en uitbou van 'n onderskeibare kulturele identiteit. Die drie kern tekste wat in hierdie hoofstuk bespreek word is die wel bekende en populere *Indian Delights* kookboek wat saamgestel is deur die Women's Cultural Group, Shamim Sarif se *The World Unseen* en Imraan Coovadia se *The Wedding*. *Indian Delights* toon verder die mate waarin die kombuis as primere domein van die vrou, 'n ruimte bied vir die formulering van alternatiewe subjek posisies. Die kombuis bied ook geleentheid vir inherente subversie wat verder en op alternatiewe wyse ontgin word in die bronne *The Wedding* en *The World Unseen*.

Deur kos te gebruik om kulturele identiteit te verstaan bied ook die geleentheid om kulturele oorvleueling te verstaan al mag sommige groepe beskou word as onafhanklik in hul oorsprong en identiteit. Hierdie navorsing gee spesifiek aandag aan die mate waarin speserye en die gebruik daarvan in kreoolse en diasporiese kookkuns die kompleksiteite, soortgelykhede, verskille en misverstande reflekteer. Dit is veral waardevol om te let op soortgelykhede en verskille gegee dat die apartheidstaksonomie van die verlede en die

huidige multikulturele model die rykheid en subtiele nuanseerings van die daaglikse bestaan verder kan erodeer.



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Spice is a complex and contradictory marker: of figure and ground, sign and referent, species and genus. Of love and death, epithalamium and epitaph, sacred and profane, medicine and poison, Orient and Occident; and of the traffic between these terms (Morton 9).

The spice trade significantly shaped the modern capitalist world. The growing taste for spice fuelled a trade that linked continents and significantly increased contact between the East and West. As Morton suggests, more than just a commodity, spice is a symbol, and becomes significant as an object of study in different contexts as it encodes stories, connections and meanings.

The pungent smell of turmeric, jeera or gharam masala must be followed to its destination, which is the home, particularly the kitchen. There it is stuffed into the crevices of a ripe mango, or sprinkled over meat laid out to dry, or mixed with onions, lentils and chickpeas in order to make dhal. Here usually female hands measure and mix spice, adding it to dishes that are then tasted to ensure the individual spice becomes masked or strengthened, before being ultimately consumed. Thus spices encode multiple journeys and a plethora of different stories. They carry the imprint of the site of their production, but are simultaneously “webbed out into the wider world” (Michael 261) as objects of consumption. Significantly, then, spices elide fixity, particularly once pulverised and blended in the process of food production.

The use of spices in the process of cooking extends the subject of this thesis to food more generally. Food, similar to spices, offers a semiotic slipperiness which makes this a rich and complex area of inquiry. As Cheryl-Ann Michael notes “food and food memories offer simultaneously a means of connection to particular places and people and a refusal to limit these meanings to these particularities”(261). She proceeds to emphasise that food needs to be slippery to be “assimilated [...] as part of ourselves. Its symbolic slipperiness both allows and disavows fixity – any claim to a single referent, or to ownership” (261).

Within the South African context, food narratives are mobilised to different degrees and with differing outcomes. For instance, the distinctive koeksister monument in Oranje is erected in homage to Afrikaner nationalism and women’s assigned role within this “imagined community” (Anderson 45). The confection commemorates the refusal of Afrikaner women to succumb ideologically to British rule in the sense that it became a cultural icon and a symbol of a distinct Afrikaner identity. However, the koeksister is also part of the Cape

Malay cooking tradition bearing the same name but as such is served with less syrup, shaped into a small ball form and mixed with spices. Although there is no clear evidence of the one version preceding the other; the curved figure of the Afrikaner version also becomes symbolic of an interconnectedness of cultures rather than being unique and distinctive. Food and food narratives like this are mobilised to different ideological ends but are continuously shown to be part of other converging narratives, slipping from their intended meanings into other unintentional ones.

This thesis explores the multiple ways in which spices and their use within food convert and challenge meanings in various cultural texts like cookery books, conceptual art and literature which focus on the Creole Cape and the Indian Kitchen. This introductory section puts the circulation and production of spices in context against the historical background which brought spice to South Africa and which, in turn, drew the region into a network of trade in the Indian Ocean area. In addition to the historical context, this section outlines the extent to which cultural identity is linked to food and cuisine. However, the challenge is that these meanings are sometimes elusive and often result in unexpected conclusions.

### **1.1 Historical Context**

The spice trade in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and onward changed the way food around the world was seasoned: spice contributed to new ways of preserving food and was valued for its unique medicinal properties. Much of the expansionist pursuits that produced the growth of the imperial world were undertaken with the main impetus of acquiring spices. However, during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, spices were not widely attainable in Europe, despite the considerable trade in these commodities. As Pearson notes “the elite used the ‘fine’ spices (nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon and mace especially) as we do today, to produce more flavoursome meals...this use of spices is clearly an optional and luxury one, designed for display as much as for necessity” (2) . The use of spice as a sign of status was, however, not limited to European societies: “...the demand for these fine spices among the elite of the great Mughal empire in India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries knew no bounds...” (Pearson 2). Spices were also a prized possession both in and around their places of origin (Moluccas, Indonesia, Ceylon etc.) as well as in far-flung destinations such as imperial England.

In the European imagination, both the origin of these spices and the spices themselves had a certain “mystique” created around them partly because “the spice islands had swum into

western Europeans' ken before they were accessible" (Morton 9). Consequently, the spices and their origin became sources of myth and fantasy: "for the people of the Middle Ages, spices were emissaries from a fabled world. Pepper, they imagined, grew, rather like a bamboo forest, on a plain near paradise. Ginger and cinnamon were hauled in by Egyptian fishermen casting nets into the floodwaters of the Nile, which in turn had carried them straight from Paradise. The aroma of spices was believed to be a breath wafted from Paradise over the human world" (Schivelbusch 6). Pearson concurs, noting that "spices came from remote and, to Europeans, unknown parts of the world. They added a touch of the cosmopolitan to everyday life in medieval Europe" (2). Thus, spices and their various uses became imbued with surplus meaning, becoming the ultimate sign and embodiment of the exotic or foreign.

The Cape became a crucial geographical node in the spice trade being a halfway mark between the spice-rich East and Europe in the North. Martin Versfeld speculates wryly that he owes his existence in the Cape to a humble bowl of soup "as the settlement at the Cape...was prompted by the need for a victualling and refreshment on the long a scurvy voyage to the Spice Islands" (10). Once established under the Dutch East India Company [VOC] as a victualling station to supply passing ships with fresh supplies (cf Ward)<sup>1</sup>, the Cape population was to change alongside an emerging cuisine and culture.

Even though the British claimed sovereignty over the Cape in 1620, the Dutch were the first to start a settlement on this strategically crucial port in their trade network. Its main focus was to provide garden produce and fresh meat (secured from trade with the local Khoikhoi pastoralists) to trading ships bound to and from the spice-rich East Indies. The functioning of this refreshment station soon became heavily reliant on slave labour which was largely imported from the Indian Ocean world. The spice trade is thus intimately linked to both the establishment of the Cape settlement and to the introduction of slaves to the Cape.

Statistics show that "between 1652 and 1808, when the slave trade stopped, approximately 63 000 slaves were imported. In all, 26,4% of the colony's slaves were from Africa, 25,1% from Madagascar, and 25.9% were brought from India and 22.7% from Indonesia" (Gilliomme and Mbenga 53). The introduction of slaves not only influenced the demographic of the Cape but also the interiors of its colonial homes; as Worden notes "[h]ousehold

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<sup>1</sup> See footnote on the replacement of the overland spice route replaced by the sea route – effectively unseating Venice as main distributor and trader of spice.

inventories displayed considerable Sian influence, with Bengal cottons and Indonesian cloths” (152). Islam, with its dietary laws, was also brought to the Cape and became a prominent religion among the slaves. Slaves in particular refigured the kitchen as many of them were employed as cooks and housemaids. They brought with them their own culinary traditions and recipes and many households started incorporating these influences into their daily diet.

In the late 1700s, weakened by “revolution and war in Europe and increased challenges in the colonies” (Ward 297) the Cape was eventually annexed by the British. The VOC control over the previous century and a half, however, had far reaching effects on the colony and its polity. The VOC effectively turned the Cape, initially a refreshment station, into a flourishing settler colony with free burghers, company servants and slaves, the latter soon outnumbering the settlers. Despite the Cape developing a substantive free burgher, and later English settler population it still maintained its ties to the “mother country”, the first being the Netherlands and the second being Britain. Therefore, while the VOC period significantly formed the Cape as a settler colony, the period of British rule ensured that the colony was exposed to other influences.

With increasing contact between the East and the West, efforts were made to secure a sense of national identity. In the case of a British identity in the motherland and its colonies, efforts were made to domesticate foreign influence. Middle class British women of the Victorian period, for example, came to terms with the nation’s connection with India through the appropriation of the mostly eastern dish: curry. Susan Zlotnick convincingly argues that there was a need to establish a fixed notion of Englishness “precisely at a time that it appeared most vulnerable...when the English beg[an] to abandon their firesides for colonial destinations” (54). This was done through the domestication of the Eastern dish in an effort to “erase its foreign origins and represent it as purely English” (Zlotnic 54). In other words, through this appropriation the foreign is defused into something familiar and digestible. The Other became less threatening through this process of incorporating it into the Self. As Zlotnick notes, “‘imperialism is a form of cannibalism’ and always lurking behind the desire for incorporating is the fear of being incorporated, which can rightly be read as a response to the culture’s own desire to assimilate and possess what is external to the self” (56). Domesticating the foreign and de-activating its potential threats through the “highly

politicised” act of cooking served as a way of keeping the category of Englishness stable and unaffected.<sup>2</sup>

If spice played a crucial role in weaving together a new global economy in which the Cape took up a central role, sugar drew the first port of Natal (then Port Natal, now Durban) into direct contact with British India. The growing taste for sugar made plantations all over the Indian Ocean a profitable but precarious endeavour. Colonial Natal’s climate and environment proved to be suited for sugar cultivation, although on a much smaller scale than the sugar plantations of Haiti, Cuba and Jamaica. Following the abolition of slavery, in 1833, alternative sources of cheap labour were devised. Indentured labour was introduced to Natal after its successful implementation in Mauritius where labourers were mainly imported from the south of India. The first ship bearing indentured labourers to Natal, the SS *Truro*, “left Madras in October 1860 with 342 individuals on board and dropped anchor in November 16. The *Belvedere*, with 310 passengers from Calcutta, arrived shortly thereafter. During the subsequent five years up to 1866, a total of some 5,400 indentured Indians arrived in Natal” (Metcalf 141). The system was temporarily halted, because of the complaints of maltreatment, but recommenced in 1874 under new, more stringent regulations. The recruitment of labourers typically followed the principle of divide and rule and plantation owners found it expedient to “have a mixture of Indians, viz., Bengalees and Madrases” (Metcalf 144).

During the voyage itself, the ships upon which these labourers travelled became sites where “caste purities were largely lost (after all, the crossing of the dark ocean, the *kala pani*, signified, at one level, the loss of caste)” and where “a new form of socialization that went by the name of *jahaji-bhai* (ship brotherhood)” was created (Mishra 74). A telling example of the evolution of such affiliations can be seen in the diary entries of H. Hitchcock, “surgeon-superintendent of the *Umvoti*” (Desai and Vahed 25). These journal entries give a detailed account of the journey from Madras on 26 October, 1882, which reached the Natal coast on 1 December, 1882. The diary records the beginnings of a rebellion caused by insufficient food:

Govindan would not keep quiet and asked again in the most impertinent and insolent manner to serve out the rice. The compounder took no notice of him, and then the boatman began to make use of very indecent language. The compounder turned around, said that he will not serve out the rice first but would serve them

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<sup>2</sup> In addition one might think of the evolution of green houses, the development of zoos as other means through which imperialism both exploited other lands, made these elements stand as synecdoches for these lands and as a means through which to domesticate that which is other, threatening or outside of the colonial culture

last. All the boatmen then in body refused to wait...this was not the first occasion that they have kept giving trouble...three of the ringleaders were brought before the captain and they were asked the cause of their behaviour. They stated that they felt hungry, and in consequence of their rice the day previous being with gravel and sand, they had to throw it overboard and eat nothing (Vahed and Desai 26)

This extract reveals how new affiliations forming between labourers under extremely harsh conditions, were spurred on by a communal definition of what was seen as edible.

Systematically, there occurred a development of new affiliations through the breaking of castes and also an evolution and definition of new ways of eating influenced by their rations. Thus a new communal identity began to evolve through a collective definition of a cuisine. Brotherhood, in this instance, was crucial since there existed a definite gendered division of labour as the women were forced to clean the rice (outside, in harsh conditions), so perpetuating the gendered division of labour.<sup>3</sup>

On the ship, their diet consisted of mutton, potatoes, rice and dry rations, and their rations upon arrival in South Africa would consist of rice, dhol (dhal), salt fish, ghee or oil and salt along with fresh fruit and vegetables and a piece of land to cultivate (Vahed and Desai 38). Under the constrained conditions of the voyage and the harsh conditions of the plantation economy in which indentured labourers worked, more evidence emerges of new affiliations between people and adaptations of their eating habits. New cooking customs and culinary traditions arose in the context of limited resources and from remembered recipes and habits brought over from the sites of departure - effectively translating the familiar into the new setting.

On arrival they were lumped into the racial categories of 'Coolie', 'Asiatic', or 'Indian' and descriptions of them (by imperial agents) veered between such oriental depictions and outright prejudice focussing on their sanitary habits, smell and countenance as marks of otherness, as is evident in the following description;

Idoltary, Cholera, and other epidemic and contagious evils were at our door. Skilled thieves, Dacoits and Indian mutineers more or less sanguinary, were certain to infect our native population, and things generally would be bad with us...their reception by our natives were at once antagonistic. The latter professed to look upon the strangers with a kind of righteous horror, expressing a most intense contempt for their meagre physical development...the flavour of cocoanut oil and other essences obliging them to spit. (Russel 490-491)

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<sup>3</sup> In addition, according to these cultural norms, women were initially not provided with rations on the sugar cane fields.

Other descriptions envisioned the ‘coolie’ as being superior to the ‘native’ population, claiming that it would be expedient to have this population replace the other as servants within the domestic sphere:

I foresee a time when our housewives would be relieved from the menial labour of the kitchen, shirtless and indecent kaffirs superseded by clothed and decent coolies...I see gardens kept in order...[h]orses well groomed...these are minor advantages certainly, but they are conveniences which tend very materially to our enjoyment of life ( Vahed and Desai 64).

Clearly, the racial stratification of this society is evident in the promise these labourers held in replacing the “indecent kaffirs”. This supersession is also imagined as taking place in the kitchen, which might imply superior cooking abilities or a greater “decency” and cleanliness as a result of Muslim and Hindu laws (in similar ways to the stereotyping of the Malay community in the Cape). At the same time, the domestication of the Indian immigrants might have been seen as a strategy to contain and curtail the imminent threat of the ‘Asiatic menace’.

Within this array of influences and differing affiliations, an Indian community was established from early indentured labour populations and later passenger immigrants to become one of the largest diasporic communities in the world. And it is in this particular colonial context that they imprinted their influence on numerous areas of South African life and particularly in the South African cuisine. A prime example of the impact on the culinary landscape of South Africa would be Durban’s specifically local Indian-influenced dish; the Bunny chow. Purportedly, Bunny chow developed out of necessity as the indentured labourers toiling on the cane fields did not have containers or plates to take with them to work, thus a hollowed out loaf of bread was used to carry the contents, which usually was some form of curry. There is, however, scant evidence of the origins of this dish, so distinctly associated with Durban. Other sources trace its evolution to the apartheid system where the hollowed out bread-container was employed as a means of serving curry to patrons who were not allowed in Indian establishments. Thus it evolved as a rudimentary “take-away” system.

By tracing these food traditions arising from the spice trade and the individual culinary contributions it becomes evident that the two geographical sites on which these histories centre - Durban and Cape Town - played, and still play a significant role in situating South Africa within a network that extends beyond its borders. When viewed from the ever moving oceans that flank the south African coast, new possibilities emerge for imagining South

Africa as less insular and hermetically sealed and rather a link in an interconnected chain. As Isabel Hofmeyr notes of the conceptual lens produced within Indian Ocean studies:

This model, with its emphasis on circulation, presents a set of analytical openings that allow us to think about the movement of people, ideas and commodities in and around the Indian Ocean in a manner that moves beyond the national or area studies narrative (8).

Creolisation, and diaspora become key terms to consider when working within the Indian Ocean paradigm. The terms are closely related to Indian Ocean studies which recognise the centuries of trade and exchange facilitated by trade winds and monsoons that have made this area particularly susceptible to creolisation and cultural circulation, and which under the VOC, then British colonialism saw the introduction of slavery and indentured labour that subsequently enabled the formation of diasporic groups.

Unquestionably, the spice and sugar trade significantly shaped the history of South Africa. The trade in these two commodities drew South Africa into a network of trade and ensured that the Cape and Natal became nodal points connecting far flung corners of the globe. The trade in these commodities not only impacted the economic systems but also influenced the demographic, culture, religion and cuisine of these regions.

## **1.2 Theoretical perspective**

Food and the process of eating is a universal phenomenon that can be found in all societies as sustenance is crucial for human life and, as Brad Kessler, notes “food is the great leveller. We all need it equally as much as the other” (165). Thus representations of food and culinary traditions abound across cultures, with varying degrees of symbolic significance.

Representations of food are also crucially “freighted with meaning...[and] open doors to double and triple meaning” (Kessler 156) and are often infused with the dominant ideologies of the time. Food has become so invested with a multitude of meanings in different contexts and epochs – a fact which leads Francoise Vergés to note that “...one could write the history of a people, of a country, of a continent by writing the history of its culinary habits” (250). If cuisine and culinary habits are almost an archive which reveal elements of a society and its people, it comes as no surprise that there have been a multitude of writers, anthropologists, linguists, historians and cultural theorists engaging with food and cuisine as an area of study. This section will underscore the main theoretical concepts of this thesis and elucidate on the link between cultural identity and food in South Africa, specifically relating to the Cape



Malay<sup>4</sup> community, whose origins lie in Cape slavery, and the Indian population who began to arrive in colonial Durban after 1860.

Creole cuisine is described by Françoise Vergés as

[a] cuisine [that] embodies trans-ethnic, trans-cultural processes and practices. Creole cuisine forsakes purity. It is the cuisine of a society built on destruction and erasure...it has borrowed from every cuisine. It is not a fusion food...but a highly elaborated and sophisticated practice in which recipes from China, India, Europe, Africa and Madagascar are reworked and translated into a Creole way of cooking...Creole cuisine is a practice of creolisation: imitation, appropriation, translation. (245-5).

Vergés is writing of Reunion, but similar arguments can be extended about the Cape. Creolisation attempts to retrace the historical connections and networks between people and places often sacrificed in favour of discourses of purity and unity (as exemplified in apartheid ideologies). However, Nuttall and Michael, elaborating in the South African context, distinguish multiculturalism and hybridity from creolisation, since germane to the former two terms is the concept of containment, which is opposite to the concept of creolisation. The version of creolisation espoused by Nuttall and Michaels, “which entails a move away from thinking in terms of frontiers and into the realm of the intimate” has come under critical scrutiny by Kozain who notes: “with ‘intimacy’ too, one still has to be cognisant of separation, of how segregation in fact structures ‘intimacy’” (201). In other words, he urges scholars to keep focus on the ways in which, within the context of the Cape as a slaveholding society, creolisation did occur, but was significantly structured by the unequal intimacy (Gqola 24) of the slaveholding home.

Diaspora is a contingent term which has its origins in the dispersal of Jews beyond Israel, but it has been appropriated to describe a myriad of other dispersals (both wilful and forced). The definition that this paper aligns itself with is outlined in Avtāh Brah’s *Cartographies of Diaspora*:

the concept of diaspora should be seen to refer to historically contingent ‘geneologies’, in the Foucauldian sense of the word. That is to say that the terms should be seen as a conceptual mapping, which defies the search for originary absolutes, or genuine and authentic manifestations of a stable, pre-given, unchanging identity: for pristine pure customs and traditions or unsullied glorious past...As a description of distinct historical experiences diaspora represents a heterogenous category differentiated along the lines of class and gender (196).

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<sup>4</sup> See section 1.3 on terminology used for a discussion on how this thesis employs the term “Malay”

This definition echoes Veejay Mishra's insistence that diasporas have an "irreducible complexity" and that they exhibit both a "progressivist as well as a reactionary streak" (Mishra 2). Both these authors caution against distilling the concept of diaspora into a romantic/essentialist idea which erases all the contextual varieties within these social formations. When these nuances are registered, the study of diasporic formation might allow one to "rethink the rubrics of nation and nationalism, while refiguring the relations of citizens and nations" (Braziel and Mannur 7).

This term 'diaspora' is also crucially linked to the notion of 'home'. Home in diaspora becomes a complex term; being simultaneously the physical as well as the psychic lived space or even the fictitious home. The latter refers to the memory that acquires new meaning or attributes as something in the imagination which becomes "an absence that acquires surplus meaning" (Mishra 92) or a "mythic place of desire" (Brah 192). In some instances this connection with an imagined homeland is cultivated by the eating and preparing of familial, remembered or traditional dishes. Darryll Accone, the author of *All Under Heaven*, reflects on this relationship between food, notions of belonging and cultural identity when he notes that his grandfather's traditional cooking was both a way of showing affection and "...his subtle way of reminding [me] that [I] was Chinese" (2). For Accone's grandfather, the ritual preparing and eating distinctly Chinese food was used to emphasise a distinct cultural identity within the hostile environment of apartheid South Africa. Food becomes an important marker to divide "us" from "them", while simultaneously stratifying intra-social relations. As such, the imagined homeland becomes intimately recalled through the symbolic process of cooking and eating a specific dish and ultimately serves as a way to mediate the feelings of isolation and alienation in a diasporic context. .

Food links with identity in crucial ways: not only does it demarcate the borders of one's individual identity but also, in a broader sense, the borders of one's community and culture. Then there is the notion that food and the etiquette surrounding its preparation and consumption provide one with a prescribed set of rules on how to define oneself and subsequently the other. Methods of preparing and consuming food enables a certain "culinary citizenship" (Mannur 4). Such consumption methods being a visible marker of difference is captured in the travel report by a British Imperial agent:

...the local natives have everything in common with the dumb cattle, barring their human nature...their food consists of herbs, cattle, wild animals and fish. The animals are eaten together with their internal organs. Having been shaken

out a little, the intestines are not washed, but as soon as the animal has been slaughtered or discovered, these are eaten raw, skin and all (cited Coetzee 12)

Menus drawn on by different groups, along with the etiquette surrounding food preparation and consumption, form a crucial part of the process of stratification between societies. The way in which food is prepared and how it is eaten differentiates societies but also within the societies one might say that “certain quantities, qualities and types of food are often taken as indicators of the moral and cultural worth of social groups’ lifestyles” (Ashley et al. 62). Jack Goody comments on this aspect of, specifically, British cooking and etiquette when he notes that:

What we see is a hierarchical differentiation of manners, including table manners, which make some of the most profound discriminations of stratified styles of life. Etiquette of this kind (not putting half-eaten meat back in the bowl, wiping one’s nose on one’s sleeve) is not superficial, a matter for the surface rather than the depths; refined ways of acting are so internalised as to make alternative behaviour truly ‘disgusting’ [and] ‘revolting’...turning them into some of the most highly charged and deeply felt of intra-social differences (140)

Thus, patterns and rituals become imbued with hierarchical structures, which serve to distinguish higher from lower classes as well as the foreigner from the native. Goody continues to track the parallels between class and consumption patterns in different geographical locales such as India, China and parts of the Middle East and finds this as a collective characteristic in some form in all of these spaces, the distinction usually drawn with the

...puritanical approach to food characteristic of the low church, of the petit bourgeoisie and of revolutionary groups of the one hand, and the haute cuisine...of the aristocratic, mercantile, political, religious or academic establishment on the other. (Goody 149).

Food, in other words, becomes a powerful tool to demarcate the borders between the self and the other. These distinctions are, however, not stagnant and remain contingent upon numerous factors, while eating patterns have, in certain parts of the world such as Scotland, remained unchanged.

Such an attempt to fix food and traditions to a singular meaning is problematic, since both Indian and Malay cuisine have origins and influences beyond the borders of the Cape or South Africa. Food cannot be tied to one stagnant symbolic meaning, food simulates a rhizomic horizontal root structure which allows it to have multiple meanings simultaneously. Michaels elaborates on this multiplicity by noting that:

... in this slipperiness of food as cultural referent lies its value...the word 'slipperiness' itself is fitting, offering a slippage between the literal and symbolic meanings. We need food to be slippery before we may comfortably digest and assimilate it as part of ourselves. Its symbolic slipperiness both allows and disavows fixity – any claim to a single referent, or to ownership (261).

Thus, it can be said that food defies the attachment of one single meaning or value. Instead, food's symbolic value seems to spill over into any given conceptual category placed on it.

Cooking and the evolution of specific cuisines seems to have the potential for recording marginal and alternative individual experiences, as the popular adage "you are what you eat" suggests. Beyond its most obvious meaning, this adage also implies that individual experience can be imprinted in cuisines. As Metha notes with regard to Indian cuisine "the various spices used in Indian cuisine become cultural signifiers or hieroglyphs whose successful decoding unravels a woman's story" (155). But at the same time, vigilance is needed not to slip into essentialist renderings of these past experiences and memories and make a double erasure. While contrasting food memories with culinary grand narratives may serve as a way of recording and retrieving neglected or forgotten parts of history, food and its links with cultural identity and permanence also indicate identity to be something that undergoes constant "transformation" that "far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (Hall 394).

This study, therefore, reads representations of food as symbols or metaphors signifying many meanings. Often they are mobilised to symbolise national or regional unity, blurring differences in an effort to promote sameness. Food as symbol thus becomes implicated in creating boundaries between the self and the other or the foreigner and the native. Therefore, the metaphor of eating becomes a significant trope during the colonial period and continues up to the present day. The documentation of these food traditions and recipes subsequently become imbued with social, political as well as historical realities. They come to stand as domestic documents that registered the dynamics of society played out in the microcosm of the kitchen. But, reading them as rhizomes rather than deeply embedded roots enables one to see cuisine in states of flux and motion mingling under forms of creolisation and diaspora.

The creolisation of cuisine happens in the everyday contact between individuals often within the confines of the kitchen. Thus the focus on spices and its uses within food also inevitably leads one into the realm of the everyday as distinct from the "exceptional moment: the battle, the catastrophe, the extraordinary deed" (Felski 17). The human need to feed and nourish the

body is testament to the fact that “we are all anchored in the mundane” (Felski 16), as cooking and eating punctuate daily routine. It is therefore a realm of experience often left out of the annals of history or national representations that tend to favour the spectacular. This is a point made by Njabulo Ndebele in his response to apartheid-era protest writing:

South African society, as we have seen, is a very public society. It is public precisely in the sense that its greatest aberrations are fully exhibited...Consequently, we have a society of posturing and sloganeering; one that frowns upon subtlety of thought and feeling, and never permits the sobering power of contemplation, of close analysis, and the mature acceptance of failure, weakness and limitations. It is totally heroic.(17).

It is the “habit of looking at the spectacle [that] has forced us to gloss over the nooks and crannies” (Ndebele 156) which impoverishes the imagination, Ndebele calls for a “rediscovery of the ordinary”, noting that for him “the ordinary is defined as the opposite of the spectacular” (Ndebele 152). As a consequence, the everyday and the mundane is too often rejected as insignificant and irrelevant and, as Ndebele notes, this manifested in the writing of the time, to the detriment of the South African literary canon. Therefore, by turning to food, a product firmly embedded in the everyday, this thesis moves to read the everyday as a productive site for investigation and exploration.

### **1.3 A note on terminology used**

The vestiges of apartheid’s racial classification system are still visible in South Africa today. Although, I believe it is necessary to move beyond a national discourse that equates self-worth, class and intellect with race the concept in all its varied inflections needs to be interrogated and debunked in order to show the instability of these neatly drawn distinctions. The extent to which such distinctions are not linked to any essential core self should be exposed to move beyond the racial discourse pervading the political, social and personal landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. However, I agree with Gqola that a sustained engagement with these categories is important “given the continued ways in which race continues to matter in South Africa in social, political and economic ways”, which suggests that completely abandoning these categories is premature (16). Therefore it is necessary to clarify my use of racial classification throughout the thesis. I use “Cape Malay” as this is one of the best known and comprehensive terms through which to describe this community which concerns this thesis although I am aware that this by no means is a static or essential term but one produced by colonial and apartheid classifications and by a pervasive discourse of ethnos.

The signifier 'Malay' in the context of South Africa has a complex and entangled history. According to Jeppie, it refers to the Muslim community who "for a long time in dominant discourse –such as the press and the government reports - was referred to as Malays, then as slamse (a corrupted form of Islam and a wholly negative term), and also as coloured Moslems" (80). Due to their marginal status as slaves and the descendents of slaves, there is no record as to what these people called themselves, or if they saw themselves as part of a collective group, beyond occupying the lowest rungs of Cape society. From its inception as a settler colony, the slaves at the Cape were a "motley crew" (Barnard 6) of individuals from Madagascar, Mozambique, Batavia, the Indian subcontinent and Ceylon. The fact that there was significant trade and migration in this area before the introduction of imperialism further reveals the impossibility of neatly defining and categorising the individuals. The signifier "Malay" became increasingly used during the course of the twentieth century and being Muslim meant that you were marked as part of the Malay ethnic group, which was seen as "separate and distinct from the larger community of people termed coloured" (Jeppie 80). The significance of this ethnic marker grew, and in 1925 the Cape Malay Association was established with the aim of gaining full rights of citizenship "for they were neither 'natives' nor 'Asiatics'" (Jeppie 84).

Notably, Jeppie cites folklorist I.D du Plessis as instrumental in constructing and preserving a distinctive Cape Malay identity (Jeppie argues that this is done partly in service of establishing and delineating the precarious position of the white settler community). Du Plessis

...attempted to represent the Malays and make them conform to an imaginary model of the 'original' Malays...in this project all the evidence of creolization, ethnic interaction, cultural exchange between the slaves, and newly formed identities in the setting of the slave society of urban Cape Town was rejected (Jeppie 84) .

Jeppie shows that in the creation of a unitary group of Malay conformed to certain stereotypes which Jeppie notes "...du Plessis was essentially recapitulating [from] earlier writers on the Malays in South Africa and Indonesia. These writers portrayed the Malay as generally passive and feminine but someone who could easily lose control and run amok under certain circumstances." (88).

The apartheid state had difficulty in organizing the term "Malay" in its systematised and politicised racial stratification and the word was usually grouped as a subheading under the name "Coloured". In this way the previous distinction between "Malay" and "Coloured" as

ethnic markers became blurred. This is evident when in 1959 the category of coloured was subdivided into “Cape Coloured, Cape Malay, Griqua, Indian, Chinese, “other Asiatic” and “Other Coloured” (Reddy 75). It is also clear that the apartheid system established the racial hierarchy (more definitively than in the colonial era) and the term “Coloured” was used interchangeably to describe the Malay community. This was also influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement that identified any so-called “non-white” person as “black” in an attempt to foster alliances and create a united front against the apartheid state.

One marker of the Cape Malay group’s distinctiveness is their food. Their cuisine is often presented as unique and distinctive to cast this group as homogenous and simultaneously foreign. The manipulation, creation and re-articulation of what the term “Malay” signifies shows the extent to which the category itself is unstable, and conversely how other similar race/ethnic markers are shown to be fictitious.

The Indian indentured labourers brought to Natal posed similar challenges to the taxonomical impetus of the colonial and apartheid governments. They were collectively distinguished as “Indians”, “Asiatics” or colloquially “Coolies” despite coming from different regions, castes and religions. Concurrently within this community there is a complex negotiation of claiming national belonging. Mesthrie notes that within the Indian community there is also some dissent on self-naming as a way of locating national affiliation;

The way in which Indians see themselves has had a long process of development during which there has not always been unanimity. Indians have been categorised as a group in South Africa’s long history of racist legislation and they have been labelled in various ways by other groups...as the twenty-first century arrived, many have come to see themselves simply and primarily as South African with a proud Indian heritage. But concerns about being Indian surface in complex ways in the South African political formation, particularly in the working class areas of KwaZulu-Natal (10)

The claims of belonging to a certain place is complicated by South Africa’s history of exclusion, and the complexities within the group. Thus the complex negotiation of belonging often involves a mobilisation of Indian decent/ancestry to varying degrees and to differing ends.

#### **1.4 Chapter organisation and choice of primary texts**

By reading a range of texts both from different genres and across a historical span which reaches from the colonial past to the post-apartheid present this thesis explores the ways in

which representations of food and culinary traditions articulate and/or trouble cultural identity. Each chapter is roughly arranged around a specific historical period and geographical locale. The Cape is the point of departure for this thesis and I open by mapping the historical significance of this geographical site and the different culinary traditions that emerged here as a consequence of the slave and spice trade. It will trace the main voices that recorded these new culinary dishes and the tensions and faultlines involved in this process.

Culinary traditions do not merely exist to give sustenance. Food practices are highly stratified and culturally encoded. What we eat, how we eat, when we eat and with what we eat profoundly influences and even determines our claim to a specific “culinary citizenship” (Mannur 4). The evolution of the cookery book hints at a standardisation of these practices. Cookbooks therefore become an important archive to explore in order to gain insight into often neglected and overlooked elements of culture. Arjun Appadurai, in his important contribution to this field of study, notes that cookbooks:

combine the sturdy pragmatic virtues of all manuals with the vicarious pleasures of the literature of the senses. They reflect the shifts in the boundaries of edibility, the proprieties of the culinary household budget, the vagaries of the market, and the structure of domestic ideologies. The existence of cookbooks presupposes not only some degree of literacy, but often an effort on the part of some variety of specialists to standardize the regime of the kitchen, to transmit culinary lore, and to publicize particular traditions guiding the journey of food from marketplace to kitchen to table. (3)

Cookbooks are often erroneously overlooked as benign manuals charged with the sole purpose of guiding the reader in their culinary endeavours. Yet, they do much more. They not only register the accepted customs around eating practices at a specific time and locale, but can also serve as a means of recording and stabilising dominant ideologies while often domesticating any foreign influence. They perpetuate and/or resist, either openly or more clandestinely, various popular discourses and stereotypes. Within the South African oeuvre of culinary literature, Malay cuisine enjoys a precarious visibility. Cookbooks by authors such as Hilda Gerber, Renata Coetzee, C.S Leiboldt and Cass Abrahams, and the post-apartheid novel *The Slave Book* by Rayda Jacobs, will be analysed as part of this exploration of food and culinary traditions and their systematisation at the Cape.

The cookbooks discussed in this section are approached chronologically, with the first collection dating from the late 1800s. Not surprisingly, they share some interesting similarities but also diverge in fundamental ways. The collection discussed are by no means exhaustive of the range of cookbooks printed in South Africa, and there are some periods that



are noticeably unrepresented in this study such as the era before British rule as well as that between the 1940s and the 1960s. The texts chosen for discussion in this section cluster around the early 1900s and the latter part of the 1970s up to 2004.

I turn next to selected photographic and video installations by Berni Searle. Searle's post-apartheid work creates interesting conversations with the cookbook as an historical document while simultaneously addressing current contemporary issues. Her creative use of spices gives this exploration of food representations a unique perspective since much of her work juxtaposes food and gives discussions around food a specific inflection of gender and race. The *Colour Me* series as well as her more recent work such as *Half Light* and *Snow White* serve to render a post-apartheid refiguring of the narratives and representations around food.

Chapter two is heavily indebted to Gabeba Baderoon's PhD thesis titled "Oblique Figures: Representation of Islam in South African Media and Culture". In this study she conducts an extensive survey on the Malay figure in popular media, art and cookery books. She identifies certain tropes and scopic regimes that influence this figure's visibility within the public realm. She develops the concept of "ambiguous visibility" as a means of understanding and describing the kind of presence this figure holds within the public sphere. The range of texts she uses within her thesis created a useful outline for the texts chosen to be examined within this thesis. This thesis aims to bring Searle's photographic work in a more direct conversation with the chosen cookery books, while in using Baderoon's work as platform it also extends to Natal and the Indian kitchen.

The focus will then move from Cape Town to Durban, as I consider the impact of the indentured labourers on the landscape, culture and, most importantly, the kitchens of this geographically significant port city of the Indian Ocean world. *Indian Delights*, a very popular cookery book authored by the Women's Cultural Group in Durban and edited by Zuleikha Mayat will be the primary text discussed in this section. Although this cookery book reappears in numerous editions and imprints, I will focus on the first edition published in 1954. The context in which these women worked in their role as authors of the cookery books is crucial in examining the impact they had on the Indian kitchen and the broader South African cuisine. The recently published *Gender and Modernity and Indian Delights: The Women's Cultural Group of Durban, 1954-2010* by Vahed and Waetjen will serve as a crucial source of contextual information about the group. Their contributions in the field of

cuisine and culture will, in some instances, be discussed in relation to Ramola Parbhoo's *Traditional Indian Cookery in South Africa* (2008).

Shamim Sharif's debut novel *The World Unseen*, along with Imraan Coovadia's novel *The Wedding* will be the focal texts of the last chapter. Retelling the narratives of migration, told to them by their grandparents lends both of these narratives a unique and intimate perspective on the Indian kitchen. Both authors committed those oral narratives to the written word previously not recorded in print prior to 1994. Concurrently it is interesting that both Sharif and Coovadia wrote these texts while living outside South Africa. Following the emigration to South Africa of her grandparents, Sharif's parents migrated to England, where she was born and raised. Similarly Coovadia wrote *The Wedding* during an extensive sojourn in the United States, although he has subsequently returned to live and work in South Africa.

Sharif's novel won the Betty Trask and Pendelton May "First Novel Award" and the story was subsequently adapted to film. The narrative explores the vexed relationship between food and constructions of gender within a diasporic community living in and around Pretoria in the 1950s. Sharif focuses on the domestic sphere as a site of oppression and abuse, but simultaneously brings to the surface the subversive qualities inherent in this space. Ultimately Sharif reveals the potential of cooking as a means of rebelling against the stifling gender categories. Similarly, Coovadia traverses the uneasy ground around food and the making of home within the diasporic Indian community living in Durban. He traces the journey that brought his grandparents to South Africa and offers a comical look at the ways in which they attempt to make South Africa their home within the tumultuous context of segregationist South Africa. Coovadia threads the theme of food and spice as a subject through his text, lending the narrative a sensory richness and depth. Both of these novels grapple with the notion that cooking traditional meals is an essential way of preserving cultural identity, and both challenge the gender roles encoded in such constructions.

## CHAPTER TWO: CREOLISING THE CAPE

Since its 16<sup>th</sup> century incarnation as a victualling station, Cape Town and its hinterland has been intimately linked with food; its establishment as a Dutch East India Company settlement had the sole purpose of supplying scurvy ridden ships with fresh produce. Kerry Ward suggestively describes it as “the Cape cauldron” referencing “the nautical perspective of the turbulent meeting of the southeast Atlantic and the southwest Indian Ocean waters” as well as referring “metaphorically to the unsettling and destabilizing effects the forced migration of convicts, exiles, and slaves had on the settler society” (127). A cauldron is also more literally a cooking appliance, a pot used for cooking over an open fire, which entrenches the Cape’s vital role of producing and supplying food at the Cape. This metaphor concurrently suggests a wide array of people mixed together as the ingredients to this cauldron.

Although the supply of fresh produce was the main impetus for the Cape settlement (and later the colony), this did not translate into a standardised practice, epitomized by any cookbook, until much later. According to Leipoldt “among the books in the largest private collection at the time when the Cape was still in possession of the Dutch, there is not a single copy of a printed cookery book” (16). It appears that the first documents on cookery produced at the Cape were “manuscript collections of domestic recipes” which Leipoldt suggests were “undoubtedly brought into the country as family treasures, carefully preserved and judiciously expanded by their owners” (14). Despite such a stunted inception of the cookery book at the Cape there subsequently developed, especially during the British colonial occupation, a substantive body of work which began to elaborate a specific Cape cuisine. In this oeuvre, the figure of the Malay looms large.

In a comprehensive survey of cookery books Baderoon identifies some of the ideologies and discourses that accrue around the Malay figure at the Cape in 19<sup>th</sup> century landscape art. In particular, she finds that the figure of the Malay is rendered visible through the picturesque. The formulaic nature of the picturesque affords the Malay figure an “ambiguous visibility” due to their proximity to food. Baderoon goes on to note that the

“‘ambiguous visibility’ applied to a narrow spectrum of Cape Malay/ Capetonian Muslims which became shorthand for proper knowledge. Thus there is both a hypervisibility of Cape Malay “culture” with the simultaneous erasure of complex Capetonian Muslim histories beyond the visual and linguistic idioms.

‘Ambiguous visibility’ functions in the aid of stereotype, where the discursive implications of the visibility and its parameters remain unexamined” (Baderoon qtd Gqola 172).

Much of these parameters are dictated by the picturesque mode of perception.

The picturesque, both in art and in literature, served as a means of domesticating and translating a landscape often seen as alien, impenetrable and foreign. The picturesque in art approaches landscape in a particularly structured and formulaic way that can broadly be described as follows:

composed by the viewer, in receding planes according to the Claudian scheme: a dark coulisse on one side shadowing the foreground; a middle plane with a large central feature such as a clump of trees; a plane of luminous distance. (J. M. Coetzee 39).

This composition served as a means to understand the sense perceptions elicited by the Cape as well as the unrelenting arid landscape to the north. It lent a tranquil gloss and calmness to an environment that seemed impenetrable. J.M Coetzee emphasises that:

... the cult of the picturesque made the contemplation of widespread cultural recreation. A generation learned not only to view terrain as a structure of natural elements with analyzable relations one to another, but be[came] aware of the associations natural and acquired, borne by these elements. Picturesque landscape is, in effect, landscape reconstituted in the eye of the imagination according to the acquired principles of composition (40)

Therefore, the visual arrangement dictated by the picturesque mode influences how the landscape is viewed; that is, the landscape is mediated through its conventions rather than perceived in its own right. The colonial European viewer necessarily has to manipulate and contort what is perceived in order to make his/her aesthetic principles fit to a foreign landscape. Dubow confirms this by noting that

we may understand the colonial picturesque not as something which, in the four sides of the pictorial frame represents a real space, but as something practically productive of ‘place’. Or, more acutely, this is an agency with which the picturesque is wilfully invested so as to counter the unvisualizable space of colony, so as to prompt its silence into relations of speech (Dubow 98).

The picturesque aesthetic, it seems, played a central role in imagining the Cape as a colony – a space which accommodated the settler presence and gave them a sense of belonging.

These picturesque descriptions of the Malay figure often verge on the exotic – a term which helped to cast the Malay as simultaneously domesticated and foreign. Huggan notes:

...the exotic is not, as is often supposed, an inherent quality to be found 'in' certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places; exoticism describes, rather a particular mode of aesthetic perception – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to the immanent mystery (13).

The term “exotic” both produces the other and domesticates it by interpolating it as such.

Crucially exoticism describes

...a political as much as an aesthetic practice. But the politics is often concealed, hidden beneath layers of mystification...the exoticist rhetoric of fetishised otherness and sympathetic identification masks the inequality of the power relations without which the discourse could not function (Huggan 14).

The politics of exoticism appears to mask the unequal power relations (particularly the history of slavery at the Cape) to produce the Malay category while simultaneously employing this figure to construct a distinctive Cape cuisine and character.

The chapter will then place these cookery books in conversation with a selection of Berni Searle's photographic and video installations. Searle is a Cape Town based artist, internationally renowned for her work that engages with and challenges the picturesque mode of representation – with a specific focus on food and its subversive potential. By using everyday substances such as food, spices and olive oil within her art she opens up areas for thinking about food and the domestic sphere in ways that trouble and complicate the neat nomenclature of art and the everyday, the public and the private and the oppressive and the subversive.

The genre in which Searle works can be broadly defined as conceptual art. She situates her work within a paradigm that moves away from the object focus of realist art and opens up previously narrowly defined modes of artistic representation which focus on the notion of self-reflexivity. This promotes the idea that art should, in the process of being art, critique its 'artness'. Salah and Oguibe define this by noting that:

the roots of conceptual art lie somewhat in these efforts to make art that questions its own nature and stature, rejects the cult of the artist's hand and uniqueness of the art object as fetishised in the West, as well as problematising the desire for coherence and narrative consistency (10)

Searle uses both video installations and photography as representational mediums. This reflects her move away from the often challenging stagnant forms of representation and allows a self-reflexive critique thereof. She gestures towards open-endedness rather than finality, and flux rather than fixity (van der Watt 12). The installation form provides her with

“an appropriate vehicle, because it exists for a particular time, and in most cases, has the ability to change in the process of being installed, exhibited and viewed” (Lewis qtd. Murinik 108).

Searle explores the interlaced<sup>5</sup> and slippery nature of cultural identity by using food and spice as a primary media. Spice surfaces as a continuous thread through much of her earlier work and alludes to the complex history of slavery and trans-oceanic trade that intersected at the Cape. Coupled with her use of photography and her own naked body, Searle asks poignant and powerful questions about colonial attempts to render the other knowable and domesticated by making them visible within a specific frame. This taxonomical impetus eventually bled into the apartheid system obsessed with fixing and tabulating the other according to visual signs, such as skin colour. By inserting her own body into the frame she further expands the complexity of her work and enhances her engagement with issues of race, gender and domesticity. In this way Searle seems to promote an understanding of food and cultural identity that is creole and complex which evolved out of a crucible of differing influences.

The conceptual mode within which Searle works becomes a useful way in which to interrogate and undo the stagnant circumscribed means through which Malay and Coloured identity is allowed visibility within the public realm. Food is used both as a means to impede and structure this visibility as well as a means to resist these impositions and it becomes a fruitful enquiry. I turn now to the set of cookery books which illustrate the circumscribed and “ambiguous visibility” given to the Malay figure through his/her proximity food and the imminent subversion of these narratives.

## **2.1 Cape cookery books and the figure of the “Cape Malay” (1890 -2004)**

The cookery books discussed in this section are arranged chronologically and date from the late 1800s to 2004, the end of the first decade of the post-apartheid era. Because they span such an extensive period of time they differ in theme and structure in significant ways. However, their casting of Malay cuisine and identity seems to correlate in the formulaic fashion. The earliest document on cookery that this thesis explores does not specifically address Malay cuisine, but it is included as it poignantly shows how cookery books participate in constructing and domesticating imperial, cultural or national ideologies.

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<sup>5</sup> This is also the title of Searle’s November 2010 exhibition.

### **2.1.1 A.G Hewitt's *Cape Cookery: Simple Yet Distinctive (1890)***

As one of the very first recipe books to focus on Cape cuisine, A. G Hewitt's *Cape cookery: Simple Yet Distinctive* is described by Leipoldt as "the first account of many local recipes...although it could not claim that it was an exhaustive collection of Cape recipes" (19-20). The recipe collection does, however, articulate the extent to which cookery books helped create a distinct culture and society at the Cape. The recipes are of an uncomplicated nature and purport to hail solely from the Cape and in keeping with the subtitle of the collection the unassuming first edition is not embellished with descriptions or excessive illustrations.

What Hewitt does is to distinguish Cape cookery from other types of cuisine by emphasising its humble character as opposed to French cookery, which was deemed ostentatious, as is evident in the foreword:

In the palmy days, when Indians visited the colony, Cape cookery enjoyed a reputation which it has now almost entirely lost through the competition of more pretentious French dishes. But it is believed that there are still many households which would gladly welcome a handy collection of really good old-fashioned recipes, such as were almost traditional among the better classes of Cape society (Hewitt 19)

In an effort to shore up a sense of distinctive Cape identity, Hewitt casts French cuisine in opposition, but includes seemingly contradictory recipes such as "French Bean Bredie" and "Home made Pate de Foie Gras". By including these dishes Hewitt at once casts French cuisine as other to Cape cookery but simultaneously domesticates it by using the term "bredie" which is an Afrikaans word with Malay origins. Describing the Foie Gras as "home made" entrenches the extent to which Hewitt appropriates and domesticates French cuisine into her version of distinctly Cape recipes.

The foreword thus illustrates inter-social stratification in cuisine while registering its intra-social distinctions by emphasising that Cape cuisine was enjoyed by "the better classes" In this way Hewitt suggests a definite social stratification delineated by meals.

The style of cookery is lent credibility by emphasising its long-standing tradition from times when Indians visited the colony. Her nostalgic descriptions of a halcyon age in Cape history, recall a time when Indians (who could be read as synecdoche for foreignness) were temporary sojourners and did not make the Cape their home. It is perhaps significant that this was published nine years prior to the South African War (1899- 1902) and 23 years after the

first diamond was found near Kimberly in the Northern Cape (1867) – events which brought an upsurge in immigrants moving to the interior. The diamond rush of the 1870s followed by the gold rush (late 1880s and 1890s) lead to rapid industrialisation of the Cape and its hinterland and it is within these tumultuous times that Hewitt’s foreword takes a nostalgic view of the pre-industrial Cape.

As one of the first manuals on Cape cookery this collection provides a unique insight into the society and culture developing at the Cape during this time as it emphasises the patterns of eating meals in a stratified way while defining a distinctly Cape cuisine.

### **2.1.2 Hildagonda Duckitt’s *Where is it? Of recipes (1891) & Diary of a Cape Housekeeper (1902)***

Hildagonda Duckitt was a prolific cook and member of a prominent Cape family. She wrote two cookery books, the first titled *Hilda’s “Where Is It”? Of Recipes* and the second being *Hilda’s Diary of a Cape Housekeeper*. These two collections offer useful and rich insights into everyday domestic life at the Cape from a female colonial perspective. Duckitt goes to great lengths to record minute details of the recipes included in her collections and also the experiences of life at the Cape for a middle/upper class white woman.

Duckitt, says that both these collections owe their inception to requests by friends (usually from England) who “had spent a few years at the Cape, and who have ever since shown a kindly interest in South Africa” (Duckitt 1). One might read this as participating in an emerging concept of “virtual travel” which, according to Bickham, is nowhere more prevalent than in the cooking and consumption of food: “Like museums and botanical gardens, meals – whether eaten inside or outside the home – could act as occasions for shared explorations of other worlds” (96). From the 18<sup>th</sup> century, cookery books, especially from distant parts of the empire, became accessible to a wider British middle-class audience; and “flooded into the British homes in their hundreds of thousands from the 1730s onward” (Bickham 97). Food, from all corners of the empire, became a preoccupation fuelled by the impetus to domesticate the new imperial space through culinary processes. Ultimately what was eaten at the dinner table was an important mark of wealth and status in both the colonies and in the mother country.

Duckitt’s first collection of recipes, unlike Hewitt’s, gives the origins of each of the recipes recorded. These sources range widely - some from specific families and acquaintances, while



others are identified as Dutch or more obliquely Colonial. Still others are simply traced to an area or homestead within the Cape such as Constantia and a select few are identified as simply being from the Cape while some recipes, such as those for *Bobotee* and *Blatjang*, are said to be Malay or Indian in origin. With this emphasis, Duckitt draws on the amalgamation of culinary influences at the Cape by tracing each dish to its origin.

What is also different is that these are then neatly cordoned off in separate sections: the cuisine as a whole is said to develop out of a host of influences but each individual dish is kept separate, systematically ordered (the exception is *Koeksister* which is said to have both Malay and Dutch origins). Duckitt's multicultural model of cuisine with different cultures' contributions - which remain distinctly separate – has a few exceptions. These are the inclusion and recognition of some dishes which have Cape origins which implies a development of a creole cuisine at the Cape. This bears testament to the fact that a uniquely local cuisine was starting to evolve within Cape Town.

In her second book titled *Hilda's Diary of a Cape Housekeeper* published some 11 years later, she stipulates that it was written for “many who, like myself, were born in South Africa, as well as those who intend to make their home at the Cape, or whose official duties bring them out for several years” (Duckitt 2). The threefold audience of this collection are all somehow allied to the British Empire, as this was published in London and South Africa simultaneously. In the dedication Duckitt states that this collection is an “expression of loyalty and devotion” (Duckitt 3) to the Princess of Wales, further strengthening the British allegiances of the author. This may not be unusual, considering the year of publication coincides with the conclusion of the devastating South African War which had “...unexpectedly high human and material costs...[it]...sapped the will of the imperial power and scared away British immigration” (Gilliomee and Mbenga 185). Duckitt's book might be seen as an attempt to encourage migration from Britain to South Africa to strengthen ties between the former two colonies (Natal and Cape) and the previous Boer Republics- then about to merge as the future Union of South Africa.

*Hilda's Diary* includes recipes alongside practical descriptions and tips on how to run a household in the Cape. She states in her description of servants that “the women as a rule, make very good cooks, but few stay with a mistress longer than twelve months” (Duckitt 32). Following this she describes a scene at the marketplace which, as Baderoon notes, “entrenches the connection between food and Malays” (114); Duckitt declares:

Melons of all kinds are sold in the markets, where the great heaps of them side by side with scarlet chillies, red and yellow tomatoes, and other bright coloured fruit and vegetables, make masses which would delight an artist, and the subject is still better for sketching when the stall is presided over by Malays in their bright coloured dresses. How many subjects an artist would find to paint in our markets! You will see an old Malay with one of the broad hats like a little thatched roof on his head, and wearing the Malay pattens instead of boots, with perhaps a turkey under each arm, or with a bamboo under each shoulder, from which hangs a basket at each end, one filled with geese and the other with apricots, and so on, a never ending series of pictures; the Malay gala dresses are always of beautiful colours. (65)

Her evocation of the scene as a painting through which to describe the marketplace foregrounds how the picturesque mode already informs the way the scene is viewed. The description reveals the figure has to be framed by food to depict him as domesticated and servile<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, the food is described in the same terms as the figure of the Malay, and emphasis is placed on their colourfully visible appearance.

What makes this figure noticeable is the emphasis placed on the different cultural markers of this character through the “toering”, “pattens” and colourful dresses. The visibility of this character is depicted as exotic, colourful and foreign. At the same time this exoticism is tempered by making it palatable either through the proximity to food, or the use of food imagery to describe them.

To conclude, Duckitt participates in the picturesque rendering of the Malay figure by literally framing him/her with food and in an effort to construct a sense of coherent settler identity the figure is also domesticated through their proximity to food. However, Duckitt more than Hewitt, emphasises that this identity is firmly associated with Britain.

### 2.1.3 Hilda Gerber's *Traditional Cookery of the Cape Malays (1954)*<sup>7</sup>

Between 1954 and 1968 Hilda Gerber produced numerous cookery books with titles such as *Fish Fare for South Africans* (1945), *Little Betty's Cookery Book* (1948), *Cape Cookery Old and New* (1950) and *With Love and Ladle* (1953). Her last book and the focus of this section, titled *Traditional Cookery of the Cape Malays* breaks with the previous discussed cookery books as it includes discussion and extensive descriptions of specific food traditions,

<sup>6</sup> Baderoon cites a contemporary online cookery book in her Ph.D. study which uses a strikingly similar lexicon with which to describe the Malay: “with their soft caramel, skins and wide smiles, the Cape Malay people are a prized and proud element of the South African culture...I cannot think of a dried apricot without the image of a caramel coloured woman, grinning widely, a wooden spoon in her hand, gently stirring a pot of simmering curry and fruit. Splendid! (Grebe qtd Baderoon 22). There is no clear sign that the discourse framing the figure of the “Malay” dissipates with time. There is a definite continuity from the 1900s up to the present.

<sup>7</sup> This collection was published posthumously in 1954 from a manuscript completed in 1949..

religious festivals and family celebrations. The title also reveals a shift from a focus on regional cuisine towards one on ethnic cuisine. This can be ascribed to the fact that the South African context for this cookery book was in a time when racial politics had sedimented into the rigid doctrines of apartheid. There is thus much emphasis placed on the distinctiveness of this group – the Cape Malay – in an effort to stress difference (as separate development was at the heart of apartheid's ideology).

Consequently, much of the content continues to fix the Malay within the strictures of the picturesque. The foreword, written by I.D du Plessis, paints the Malay figure as both exotic and docile and he notes that “the literal recording of the recipes gives a distinctive local colour to this work. Many of the dishes are exotic, but not expensive, and care has been taken to include ingredients which are obtainable” (qtd Gerber 1). While the cuisine is cast as distinctive and striking it also emphasises the ingredients are local and domestically obtainable.

Yet, as much as the book tries to record the culinary habits of the Malay group the tone and style of the collection sits uneasily with its intention. Du Plessis declares in his introduction that this book is “...a comprehensive survey of a subject which has long called for treatment by an expert.” (du Plessis 1). In this way the relationship between observer and observed is established; as Gerber is seen as the expert on the subject of Malay eating habits. The anthropological distance created between Gerber and the community she studies aligns itself with the colonial obsession of recording and classifying the other (exotic) to show the “discursive dimensions of ethnography” (Klopper 38). This implies a necessarily hierarchical relationship between the observer and the observed rather than a reciprocal one and Gerber sees her task to be one that records a heritage about to be lost as she notes:

[W]omen of all ages remember that their elders used to make certain dishes which they recollect eating in their youth. But they themselves either no longer know how to make them or do not bother to do so. For this reason it is the more desirable to make a record of Malay cookery before that which is still typical of the old custom disappears for ever (Gerber 34)

In the face of imminent loss either through ignorance or the forces of modernisation and industrialisation Gerber wants to preserve what it is that makes the Malay group distinctive and exotic. She chooses to render the figure of the Malay visible and knowable. Presenting it as an area of study which is in need of preservation, through the focus on food. It is with the looming spectre of the homogenising tendency of modernity, evident in Gerber's mention of the use of can openers, that she attempts to preserve that which made them distinctive,

different and exotic. The threatening tendency of modernity to make that which was seen as other, the same informs her need to cast and distinguish the Malay as different and distinct. Therefore revealing the anxiety around maintaining difference, that which we can define ourselves against, in order to keep the self intact. Ironically she participates in the very process of contamination that she decries (Klopper 42).

Similar, to Duckitt's *Hilda Where Is It? Of Recipes*, Hilda Gerber's *Cookery Book of the Cape Malays* provides the origin of each recipe included in the collection. The recording of the names and the areas in which the contributors lived has, according to Baderon, "allowed descendants of these women to trace their contributions" (20). This attests to the possibility cookbooks harbour as an alternative archive for the communities and individuals left outside of the official annals of history. The indirect contributors of these recipes can thus subvert the tendency present in most of these cookery books discussed that presents the Malay community as homogenous. This reclaiming of authorship reiterates the subversive possibilities harboured within the domestic sphere. By giving the names of the individual contributors, by including the individual creator of the dish, Gerber also includes different versions of the same recipes in an attempt to record the nuances and complexities present within the group. She also keeps the original naming of the dishes, which allows English, Afrikaans, Indian and Malay titles to appear (Gerber 34)

#### **2.1.4 C Louis Leipoldt's Cape Cookery (1976)**

C. Louis Leipoldt was born in 1880 in the Western Cape and became a journalist, physician, writer, poet and lecturer of note. He also published numerous books and columns on cookery that continue to be re-published posthumously, the latest of these cookery tomes lining bookshelves in 2011. *Cape Cookery*, published in 1976, is true to Leipoldt's style of culinary writing, as it is verbose, interspersed with anecdotes and devoid of any exact measurements or formulaic recordings of recipes.

Much of his culinary work deals with the Malay cuisine documented in this section, and many of his descriptions and anecdotes revolve around his childhood *Ayah* or nanny. He begins *Cape Cookery* by accounting for his interest in cooking:

My interest in cookery dates from the time when, as a little boy in the late eighties of the last century, I assisted, in a very minor and suppressed capacity, at

the culinary operations of a very expert Coloured woman cook who bore the reputation of being one of the best in the Cape colony...she presided over a kitchen whose cleanliness could have served as a model for the operating theatre of a modern hospital (Leipoldt 11)

In this description, the ability to cook is equated with the work of a surgeon. This implies the cook as head surgeon within a kitchen where she is in complete control. Cooking becomes a means of asserting dominion over a space within the domestic sphere. Here the ability to cook seems to grant the possibility of assertively occupying a space and articulating a presence through the fastidious preparation of certain dishes.

Baderoon similarly sites Leipoldt's description of Malay cookery as a form of art and as an example of Muslim food being encoded with resistant meanings (Baderoon 22). Leipoldt believes Malay cooking is an art which involves "the free, almost heroic, use of spices and aromatic flavouring..." (Leipoldt 11). Baderoon suggests that one might read this "free use of spices by cooks who were 'masters' at the skill of combining flavours as a significant claim of control-mastery and freedom that fell beneath the surveillance of slave-owners" (Baderoon 15). The kitchen becomes a site where individual expressions of agency might be located as the free use of spices is an individual imprint upon the dish - something which asserts individual identity. Food and specifically spices, therefore, become the primary means of this articulation.

In the introduction to his cookery book *Leipoldt's Cape Cookery* is described as "a Master of the Cape table" but at the same time the author is "greater than his kitchen" (7). Cooking, described as only a part of Leipoldt's diverse interests, meant he is better defined by his ability to appreciate and master the art of Cape cookery whilst being able to transcend it. As such, he allows the *Ayah* in the kitchen to feature regularly in his descriptions and books and attributes much of his culinary knowledge to her. Yet, although granted authority in the domestic sphere she is still, as Oppelt notes, the Malay figure and is not imagined beyond the confines of the kitchen. In other words, she occupies a privileged position in his book because of her cooking skills but she is not allowed an identity beyond this role. As Oppelt notes:

Inasmuch as Leipoldt's 'Cape Malays' are given voice through the quotes of *Ayah* Hannah and other servants Leipoldt was familiar (perhaps familial) with in his youth, they are still 'chained' to the kitchen in his descriptions of them...in his reveries for 'Cape Malay' cooks, Leipoldt does not make a case for them as being agents of resistance

Therefore, while the depictions which saturate Leipoldt's work give a voice to the Malay woman in the kitchen they do so in circumscribed terms: she is still imagined in stagnant ways with limited repertoire of positions available to her.

In the 1970s there was a discernible shift in focus on servitude within the kitchen. One might understand the emphasis in the context of apartheid of the time which introduced "Bantu" education in an effort to secure and perpetuate a class of servants and labourers. This shift at this time can be explained by a preoccupation with securing a workforce.

### **2.1.5 Laurens van der Post's *First Catch Your Eland: A Taste of Africa* (1977)**

The subject of Malay cooking also features in the work of Laurens van der Post, a well-known and influential writer, explorer, conservationist and soldier for the British army. Much of his work could be defined as travel writing with titles such as *Venture to the Interior* (1951), *The Dark Eye in Africa* (1955) and *The Lost World of the Kalahari* (1958). However, it is his survey of food traditions in Africa titled *Catch your Eland: A Taste of Africa* with a subsection entitled "Malays at The Cape" which is discussed here.

Van der Post's narrative recounts the historical trajectory that brought the Malay people to the Cape, and then continues to describe the unique quality of their cooking, the care taken in its preparation (emphasising their fastidious cleanliness) and, often anecdotally, he refers to his experience of witnessing religious feasts and gatherings such as one meal prepared after the Ramadaan fast:

I have always been amazed at this sudden uprush of energy, the noise, the movement, the sounds of pestels ringing out in iron mortars as they stamp out the cinnamon bark, dried chillies and a dozen or more other herbs and spices for the evening meal; the heightened voices rising to an almost hysterical pitch as they issue orders and instructions to one another; and above all the scent of cooking, both pungent and subtle and evoking all the scents of Arabia (130).

It is noticeable that the sense perceptions recorded in this description overwhelm and obscure the figures that wield the pestles. There is almost no mention made of individuals other than being disembodied appendages of utensils used to prepare the meal, - again emphasising the theme of how food and cooking affords this figure only an ambiguous visibility.

Further erasure of the subjects - the cooks - occurs through the Arabian reference. In Orientalist stereotype they are lumped together as an Arabian homogenous group while their vague connection to exotic spices automatically signals they are foreign.

Thus, in contrast with Duckitt, who includes the name of the individual contributors, van der Post's narrative effectively erases their expertise. The group is rendered disembodied and homogenous and only visible through the sense impressions of the scene.

### **2.1.6 Renata Coetzee's *The South African Culinary Tradition* (1979)**

The extent to which the Malay influence was rendered as exotic is striking in Renata Coetzee's *The South African Culinary Tradition: The origin of South Africa's culinary arts during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and 167 authentic recipes of this period*. Her collection of recipes suggests a rise in exotic perceptions although the title of the collection might indicate a departure from the previously discussed cookery books. With a more professional academic approach food and South African culinary habits are presented as an area of study and recipes are interspersed with historical information, illustrations and also the culture around it in the South African context.

Renata Coetzee structures the text around different chapters with headings such as "Food from the Cape table: the development of the art of cape cookery", and "Cape cookery in the 18<sup>th</sup> century" amongst others. The latter subtitle is noteworthy as it lists the different influences of South African cuisine, among which are the following influences: "The Dutch element/The German contribution/ A French flair/An Eastern aroma/Edible wild plants (veldkos) and their influence/Cape edible wild plants (veldkos)/A traditional table" (Coetzee 1). The perception of South African cuisine evolving out of others such as Dutch and French however, omits influences stemming from the Khoisan or other African contractors. Moreover, the hierarchical ordering of these influences puts the Eastern influence below the French but above local edible plants but what is unique is she situates these local influences as separate. Indeed, her promotion of a distinctly multicultural model of cuisine by neatly cordoning of each group's contribution to the cuisine as a whole is noteworthy.

What is unchanged is found in the "Eastern Aroma" subsection which describes the Cape Malays in familiar terms as "lively and colourful by nature" with "much to contribute to the romance and individuality of the Cape" (Coetzee 46). These descriptions illustrate the same caricature of the Malay figure of the colonial period has passed on into the apartheid era, as the adjectives "lively" and "colourful" are meant to illustrate their visibility. It is apparent that a set of stereotypes framing the figure of the Malay are merged with the other distinctive influences which makes Cape Town unique, and as such they are represented as local version of the exotic.

She includes the telling caption “Piquant, aromatic, exotic – in food and in character the Cape Malay has had much to contribute to the spice of life” (Coetzee 25). In this Renata Coetzee merges the adjectives used to describe the food with those describing the Malay. This reveals the extent to which the figure of the Malay is embedded in a discourse of consumption and domestication while at the same time being presented as exotic and foreign. Therefore, they are represented as consumable exotic objects that are domesticated through ingestion. Their exotic nature is emphasised only to the extent that it contributes to the status of the Cape and its cuisine. This participates in the idiom that shaped the way in which the figure of the Malay was perceived and represented, by emphasising their colourful nature and their contribution to the allure of the Cape.

Renata Coetzee continues to explain that:

the men were skilled carpenters, tailors, musicians, coachmen and fishermen, while the women were expert cooks who introduced not only exotic oriental dishes to Cape tables but brought with them the precious spices of the East (Coetzee 45)

The emphasis on labour with the reference to their culinary contributions is suggestive of political influences since the fear of depicting skilled labour, other than white labour, is subdued by highlighting the hands as foreign. Simultaneously, the act of doing labour domesticates this figure and allays its possible threats to the status quo. Coetzee, like Leipolt, emphasises servitude in her descriptions which foregrounds the 1970s apartheid discourse on the importance of securing a labour force through the implementation of Bantu education (among other strategies).

### **2.1.7 The insider view: Cass Abrahams and Faldiela Williams**

The characteristics shared by all the cookery books discussed above revolve around the author’s position regarding the Malay figure - they are merely observers who are not part of the community they write for. To revert to the taxonomy of race, they all form part of the dominant white population. As such, the books provide a specific vantage point to observe the culinary traditions of the Malay community. The limited range of cookery books published by Malay authors reveals the limited, racially defined access to means of representation - a characteristic of the colonial and apartheid governments. However, Muslim women have begun, since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to systematically fill this gap. Baderoon elaborates on the differences between these two types of authors by noting that



the recipes [collected by authors such as Gerber, Coetzee and Duckitt] were gathered through research among cooks, or in the case of Leipoldt and van der Post, from the experience of having ‘Malay’ servants as cooks. As a result, a trope common to both Leipoldt’s and van der Post’s is that of the preternaturally gifted woman in the kitchen: the recurring theme of the skilled but silent woman in the kitchen was radically revised by the arrival of cookbooks written by Muslim women. (105)

Authors such as Cass Abrahams form part of this revised way of writing about Malay food traditions and will subsequently be discussed in detail. It is, however, imperative to note that these authors do not necessarily escape the stereotypes that accrue around the Malay figure.

### **Faldela Williams’ *The Cape Malay Cookbook* (1993)**

Faldela Williams’ popular cookbook was reprinted 13 times. Williams was raised in a household where cooking formed a central part of the daily activities as her grandmother was a *koeksister* vendor. This gives her a privileged vantage point that none of the other authors could claim. The previous collections were all anthropological in that their authors were observers documenting Malay cooking, customs and traditions. Williams is not only an observer but also an eager apprentice, an epicure and ultimately a collector and curator of these recipes. Bangstad confirms the importance of this shift in authorial position by noting that this is a very popular book within the Muslim community because it “is seen as closer to their own cooking, and less commercial” (3)

Williams, in her introduction, makes an effort to trace the history of the Malay community and with this she demystifies the often misunderstood term “Malay” by noting that:

Cape Malay is perhaps something of a misnomer as it refers to followers of the Islamic faith, whose forefathers were brought to the Cape as slaves from the Indonesian islands of Java, over 300 years ago. They were not associated with Malaysia in any way, except that they spoke Malay, a kind of universal language in that part of the world. (Williams 7)

Her attempt to commemorate the slave past, while keeping an eye on the fact that they cannot be unilaterally linked to Malaysia, but rather to multiple localities effectively opens up the debate and allows for some fluidity while contradicting previous attempts to fix and frame this figure.

However, in the foreword to this collection, Williams mentions Leipoldt and van der Post, who, according to her, have extolled the virtues of Cape Malay cookery. The mention of these authors situates her within the knowledge circuit of these previously discussed cookery

books and seems to straddle the line between the picturesque/exotic and a more encompassing and nuanced definition.

She reveals their influence by reverting to a kind of orientalist rhetoric, noting that the Malay cook “used the exotic spices of the land of their birth to create such well-known dishes as bobotie, sosaties and pickled fish...” (Williams 7). Arguably, to the Malay community these spices would not seem exotic as they form part of the everyday dishes of their lives.

Describing the spices as exotic here hints at an audience other than that of the Malay community. Baderoon confirms this in an interview with the publishers of these texts where they mention that “20 percent of the ‘Cape Malay’ books are purchased by tourists” (107). Thus the use of the term exotic does seem to hail a reader outside the immediate ‘Malay’ community, which alerts one to the commodification of the Malay community – no longer as slaves but now as a tourist attraction.

### ***Cass Abrahams cooks Cape Malay: Food from Africa (2008)***

Cass Abrahams’s narrative, by contrast, departs from the previous cooking narratives and away from the history of the Cape Malay in order to explore neglected material. The first chapter is aptly titled “Food and tradition” with sub-headings ranging from “Food in the home” and “Keeping it in the family” to “Halaal and Haraam”(Abrahams 8-9). This introduction is followed by extensive explanations accompanied by images of the spices and herbs used in her dishes. The recipes, other than those of Williams and Duckitt, do not incorporate the origin or creator of the dishes but are interspersed by images of the food and photographs of the Bo-Kaap district (the historical Malay quarter of Cape Town) taken by the internationally renowned photographer George Hallett.<sup>8</sup>

The foreword, written by author Cassiem D’Arcy, jars somewhat in tone and style present with the rest of the cookery book. He describes, for example, that “from birth till death the Cape Malays celebrate each and every occasion with groaning tables bedecked with the bounteous fruits of the earth and the labour of a thousand kitchen fingers, each dish suffused with wondrous spices from the far off ancestral lands” (6). This description of the “groaning tables” and disembodied hands preparing food recalls the van der Post text. Moreover, the use of the third person, similar to Faldiela Williams, immediately creates a sense of distance between author and subject. Baderoon remarks on use of the third person as anthropological

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<sup>8</sup> Both Abrahams and Hallett are involved in a form of documenting, through food and photography respectively., which is why the collaboration is so fitting.

in nature, which also renders the community of Cape Malays homogenous and designates them as an area of study.

Her framing material and recipes also diverge in a fundamental way from the previous cookery books as she asserts that Cape Malay food is uniquely South African, which is why she subtitles this collection “Food from Africa”. Her stance that it is by no means a homogenous cuisine presents a significant departure from the previously discussed authors, who stressed the exotic nature of the food. To Abrahams, dishes have multiple interpretations and adaptations and she hypothesises that these variations are a testament to the complex demography of the Cape of earlier years. She explains that:

Most of the Cape Malays who lived in Cape Town and the Bo-Kaap were free burghers. Because of the distance between Constantia and Claremont, and Cape Town where the spices were obtained, cooks in the Claremont and Constantia area adapted their recipes to the availability of the ingredients. (Abrahams 5)

Abrahams concludes by noting that consequently “the flavour of the food and the combination of the spices often tells from which area the cook comes” (9). Thus she emphasises the complexities and nuances of Malay cuisine, which previous authors in this study seem to neglect or gloss over in favour of emphasising the cuisines’ foreign and exotic nature. In an interview she goes even further to include (as none of the other authors have done) the influence of the Khoisan culture on cuisine from southern Africa:

The spice and fusion of Khoi-san and Dutch food gave rise to what is known as Cape Malay cuisine today. So you can think of meat loaf coming from Holland and the spices added to that to make a bobotie. So there you have its fusion, it’s a very good example, and it’s incidentally the national dish of South Africa as well. So you have this very good example of fusion there. Or a khoisan-slave fusion is waterblommetjie bredie, spices like allspice, peppercorns, cloves, garlic then the wild flowers, that is Khoisan added the waterblommetjie, plus the meat stewed in a particular Dutch way. So the method was Dutch, the spices were the slaves and the ingredients, 50% of them were Khoisan (Abrahams qtd Baderoon 101)

Abrahams’ interpretation of Malay cuisine originating from the Cape and bearing traces of Dutch, Eastern and local techniques and ingredients posits the cuisine as creole in nature, rather than being a distinctive cuisine presented as a by-product of a multicultural nation.

**Rayda Jacobs' *The Slave Book* (1998)**

Rayda Jacobs' novel *The Slave Book*, explores the ways in which food fixes the Malay figure within a specific frame, while simultaneously showing the possibilities for subversion in food preparation in the master's home in the Cape Colony. This novel tracks the lives of a disparate band of slaves forced to live together on the wine farm Zoetewater in the Cape district. It also sheds light on the intimate but often dangerous connections forged within the kitchen - the contact zone between master and slave. One of the main characters, Somiela, in the process of being sold, was separated from her mother and is put to work under the guidance and protection of Rachel, an older slave woman, in the kitchen. Rachel tellingly warns Somiela of the precarious position they inhabit within the kitchen: "the benefit of being in the kitchen is that you'll have food to eat and clothes to wear, and you'll sleep warm next to the fireplace. But you'll also be constantly under the feet of the family. The master's kind if you do as he says. The women come upon you like the wind, fast and unexpected..." (Jacobs 30).

Within the kitchen Somiela and Rachel are responsible for all the cooking, and it is because of Somiela's unique style of cooking and her striking appearance that she immediately draws the attention of the family and her fellow slaves. When the new "voorman", Harman, is invited to dinner he remarks: "'This is good food,' [...] his eyes watering slightly. 'Is it a dish particular to the Cape? We have very plain food in the Karoo'" (Jacobs 76). Marieta subsequently informs him that it is "Maleier food" and adds that it has "too many chillies in it". He is urged by Andries to take a second helping along with the remark "the young one cooked it" which immediately draws a reaction from both Harman and his brother Marthinus. Somiela thus immediately becomes visible through circumscribed terms, which is what leads to violent clashes between her and Marieta.

Thus their position in the kitchen allows the women certain luxuries that the slave men outside do not have, but this close proximity to the family also enables closer surveillance. This novel foregrounds the fact that Malay cuisine developed as a consequence of slavery in Cape Town as Baderoon notes "despite its appealing surface, in the Cape making food was incontrovertibly linked to slavery" (89) However, their position within the kitchen often aids in their subversion of the farmers rule. Medicine, prepared in the kitchen, is often sent to the slave men living outside in the "jongenshuis". Whenever extra food can be spared it is plated

and shared among the slaves. Rachel becomes a source of information as she overhears news shared in the house and is able to impart it to her fellow slaves.

### **2.1.9 Conclusion**

This survey of an array of cookery books has shown how they exhibit striking similarities yet sourced from numerous eras in South African history, they also differ in theme and impetus. There is consistency in the way in which they render the Malay figure visible but in some instances these representations are depicted as domestic and less threateningly foreign. Much of this Malay visibility revolves around food which ultimately renders them as consumables in the colonial economy. Such limited visibility serves to highlight their shadowy positions within other arenas where they are only an inutterable presence.

These food narratives encode such alternative meanings. The descriptions by Leipoldt and the discussion of *The Slave Book* reveal the asserting presence of cookery. The ritualistic and skilful preparation of meals is a means of articulating presence within an often hostile and dangerous environment.

Abrahams and Williams use their position within the kitchen to articulate and broker new kinds of cultural identity. Therefore, rather than being gatekeepers for a traditional pure distinctive cuisine they reveal the entanglements characteristic of most cuisines (and by extension of cultural identity).

I turn now to Berni Searle who further reveals the mutability and complexity of cultural identity through her creative use of food and spices as expressive medium.

## 2.2 The mobilisation of Creole identities in Berni Searle's contemporary art

Berni Searle, the Cape Town based conceptual artist, offers intricate and thought provoking insights into the complex arena of identity politics through unique uses of and references to food. Classified as “Coloured” during apartheid, Searle offers a sustained engagement with the implications of this imposed categorisation. Titles such as *Colour Me* and *Discoloured* flag this specific engagement with racial taxonomies but this theme by no means overstates her intent. The insertion of her naked body, the creative use of spices and the engagement with invisibility grants her work a nuanced depth and semiotic richness. The use of spices synchronises with the colonial history of South Africa, while the insertion of her physical form allows her to engage with the effect of grand narratives on the personal body. Working within the field of conceptual art, Searle questions the means of representation and its historical implications while unsettling stagnant identity markers.

This section will focus on the visual representation of food, spices and culinary traditions through the exploration of her series *Colour Me* (1999) which include the photographic installations: *Traces*, *Looking Back*, *Girl*. All of these photographic prints foreground the artist's body either covered or traced by spice. Along with the photographic installations two video installations, *Snow White* and *Vapour*, will be discussed as they incorporate broader themes relating to the act of cooking and by extension, of eating. All of these pieces reference food and spices in differing ways and/or the traditions attached to them.

Although originally a trained sculptor, Searle works with/through the contemporary medium of photography and videography. She states that she shifted to photography because of

[w]ant[ing] to work in a more immediate and less time consuming way...photography offered a wide range of options that could be generated in relatively short space of time. The digital process also presented a number of options in terms of the range of media that the images could be printed on and how they could be displayed in installations (qtd Bester 7).

The transition to a less fixed and time-consuming medium gives Searle's art a transitory and malleable nature. The importance of having options when having to exhibit her work seems to address a significant theme in her work as she notes:

I am very aware of not wanting to represent myself in a way that is static. I think that the work itself exists as a result of a creative process as well. And often my processes attempt to convey something about the intangibility or flexibility and a state of flux which is central to my view of occupying multiple identities which are constantly changing (qtd Murinik 20).

Photography allows her work to be exhibited on multiple platforms, rendering gallery walls porous and her art accessible to a wider audience.<sup>9</sup> This mimics her insistence that the subject is not to be seen as fixed and immovable.

Searle does, however, insist that although her pieces are performative in that they evoke “movement and indeterminacy” they are not to be regarded as performance art. She chooses the lens as a means of mediating the performance aspect of her work in order to not be “directly consumed or exoticised” (Bester 1). This phrasing is most suggestive in the context of this study as it registers the possibility of ocular consumption. She draws attention to the eye’s function as another orifice which holds the potential for consuming that which is seen as outside or other. Searle is aware of the duplicitous nature of representation and the dangers involved in making the body visible. As Phelan notes “While there is a deeply ethical appeal in the desire for a more inclusive representational landscape and certainly under-represented communities can be empowered by and enhanced visibility, the terms of this visibility often enervate the putative power of these identities” (6-7). Searle, echoing Phelan, is cautioning against the uncritical assumption that conflates the visible with the known which historically appeased the colonial appetite for control over the other. This is the same mechanism (discussed in the previous chapter) which aimed to domesticate the figure of the Malay by inserting him/her within a regime of visibility that rendered him/her known. Crucially these formulaic representations rendered the subject static and fixed in order to secure settler identity. Thus the camera, although giving immediacy and movement to her work, mediates the experience so that she cannot be directly consumed.

The title *Colour Me* implicitly references apartheid’s racial nomenclature by evoking the Coloured racial category. Searle reveals her unease around the pseudo scientific racial classification when she notes:

I use the term with reservation, as a way of indicating a resistance to the imposed hierarchical racial classifications under apartheid. Interestingly enough, there are tendencies by various groupings in post-apartheid politics, particularly in the Western Cape, to claim the term coloured in reference to an ethnic minority which I find problematic. Apart from many concerns, one of the problems within this ‘ethnic minority’ framework, is that identity is often viewed in static terms which reinforce stereotypes about who we are (qtd Coombes 250)

This reluctance to be identified in static terms is a theme that manifests in many of her works. She seems to favour articulating a multitude of overlapping identities. This multiple

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<sup>9</sup> Her video installations can be found on her website as well as on You tube, which emphasises the denigration of the object in art and rather focuses on the concepts that they grapple with and evoke.

positioning is important since the colonial and apartheid systems both used categories such as “Coloured” and “Native”. These terms, according to Zimitri Erasmus, are but signifiers that relate arbitrarily to an erroneously perceived homogenous entity/group/skin colour. She notes that “...once subaltern subjects were categorised according to the Population Registration Act under certain signifiers, the state treated its own signifiers as real – i.e unproblematically linked to an ‘essence’...Soon enough the apartheid social formation made it difficult to separate world from text” (73). Searle attempts to rework these stagnant categories from a post-apartheid context by opting to see the subject as entangled in a multitude of subject positions.

The address in the title *Colour Me* could be read as Searle enticing someone other than herself to define and classify her, which makes her passive in this process. This passivity of the subject in naming/colouring someone emphasises the constructed nature of such categories, and alerts one to the fact that this category is not something inherent and essential but rather imposed. The intention behind the use of this category was to fix the subject as visible, marked and therefore known. Thus she draws attention to the imposition of meaning onto one’s skin colour in an effort to pacify and render the other known/marked.

Simultaneously, spice as a slippery signifier surfaces other antecedent meanings. The spices suggest multiple trajectories that converge on her body. Paprika, made of dried and pulverised chillies, has its origins in South America. Kiple suggests that

the dissemination of chilli peppers and other new world foods in Africa was closely related to a slave trade linking that continent with Portugal’s American colony of Brazil. From there American plants flowed Eastward to Africa to feed West bound slave cargoes (114).

Chilli powder subsequently became a crucial ingredient in Indian cuisine. Turmeric, viewed as the poor man’s saffron, was harvested mainly in South Asia, along with ground cloves, which has its origins in Indonesia. Cloves were also cultivated in Zanzibar under the Omani Sultanate, where they proved to be a lucrative crop. Pea flower purportedly originated in the Mediterranean basin and subsequently spread to other parts of Asia. Searle’s body becomes the nodal point where these various narratives of movement and exchange converge. Covering her body with these spices suggest allegiances and connections that exceed the imposed national narrative as they trace familiar slave routes and attest to diverse places being connected through historic oceanic passages. These trajectories reveal entanglements that were to jar with apartheid ideologies aiming to separate and fix identities within



distinctive categories. Instead, spices encode links, relations and movements and attest to the “necessarily messy and complicated mixing which have produced all contemporary societies” (Coombes qtd Schmahmann 45)

The evocative images included in the series *Colour Me* on one level become meditations on the literal and figurative processes of consumption through slavery. Francois Vergés points to this in the following anecdote:

a European travelling in Mozambique asked a group of slaves waiting to be taken aboard a slave ship what they thought awaited them. The slave said: ‘they bought us and they are taking us to the ship so they can eat us.’ The European asked them why they thought the whites would eat them and they answered: ‘Why would they hide us below the deck? This is where they cook us...Being a slave was to be eaten as a human being below the deck and to be rejected as a thing on the shore of the colony (251)

A similar gastronomic metaphor used to explain slavery seems to manifest in Searle’s work through the spicing of the body. The immediate proximity of the commodity, in the form of spice, and the body becomes suggestive of the slave body which was historically seen as something which could be bartered with: its value fixed by someone other than the self.

If the spices in *Colour Me* register history on a large scale, they also reference Searle’s personal ancestry:

[My] great grandfather from Mauritius was a cook and I have indirectly experienced his expertise through the food that my mother cooks, pointing to food as cultural signifier. Apart from my physical features very little connects me to this heritage, one of the tentative aspects being food (qtd Gqola 128)

Searle manages to map both broader historical narratives intermingled with her personal history and ancestry on her body. The personal and the public seem to seep into each other. The body becomes the site upon which these narratives play themselves out.

In conjunction with tracing various historical trajectories, the spices also encourage meditation on the scopic regime to which the black female body is subjected. The colourful spices make of her a visual hyperbole of sorts. Her visibility is exaggerated and emphasised and even, to a certain degree, obscured through spices. Thus this visibility becomes ambiguous and mediated, much in the same way as the picturesque<sup>10</sup> dictated the visibility of the Malay figure. Baderoon astutely notes that “Repeating the trope of abundant spices famously associated with Muslim cooking by Leipoldt, the silent object of the gaze

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insistently renders observable the mechanisms of visibility and its connection to the past” (Baderoon 101). Searle thus lays bare the way in which stereotypes around food and the use of spices have formed a visual lexicon around the figure of the Malay. Rather poetically, the spices simultaneously register the outline of her body and erase parts of it. The cracks and crevices of her skin, personal pigmentation, scars and wrinkles are smoothed over and disguised by the invasive, powdery substance.<sup>11</sup>

In some of the images her mouth is completely covered by spice. The supine position she adopts coupled with the spice that cover not only her body, but also her face and her mouth might lead one to read the spices as suffocating and invasive. As Van der Watt argues, the “point of contact [alluded to by the spice] consumes her” (124). The spices covering her mouth suggests a silencing, she is made visible but is not granted a voice. The spice, at once picturesque and exotic seems to arrest her visibility and simultaneously renders her mute. Again, it can be said, the spices covering her body function as an example of the “ambiguous visibility” granted to the Malay figure (Baderoon 83). Their visibility is circumscribed to erase any individual subjective experience.

The installation *Girl* broadly follows the same composition as *Colour Me*, except that now the artist’s body has been spliced into different frames. As in *Colour Me*, the title of the installation partly references the oppressive apartheid system in that the caption *Girl* contradicts the images, which are clearly of an adult female. The term denotes the way, in the apartheid era, in which black men or women were often infantilised to emphasise their inferiority. As such, *Girl* once again evokes that era’s obsession with naming the other, while simultaneously erasing their identity. The representation of the body and the title do not seem to fit, drawing attention to the fact that while language, similar to visual representation “produces ruptures; it fails to reproduce the real exactly” (Phelan 2). This is why the frames do not split Searle’s body evenly; some parts spill into other frames haphazardly, while certain body parts are repeated in other frames. *Girl* thus addresses Searle’s continuous interrogation of imposed stagnant categories/ideologies/discourses which attempt to mediate/impede and control the representation and subsequent understanding of the self and the other.<sup>12</sup> Her body cannot be contained by the frames, she spills unevenly over the borders

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<sup>11</sup> This recalls van der Post’s description of the “Malay” family preparing dinner – where the sensory intensity of the scene obscures the figure preparing the food.

<sup>12</sup> Yvette Abrahams in her article *The Great Long National Insult: Science, sexuality and the Khoisan in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century* describes the “act of Naming [as] partake[ing] of the powers of the Divine.” She goes on

of the image. These excesses seem to signify the spilling over of identity and subjectivity over these conceptual categories. These uncontainable parts of the body become a suggestive visual metaphor leaning towards what Gqola describes as “the multiplicities of positioning” (126) and emphasises the fluid nature of Searle’s identity, which resists any sort of imposed categorisation. She rejects being over determined by her history or gender – and ultimately also seems to be resisting containment by apartheid’s ideologies.

*Girl*, along with the rest of her oeuvre, also shows the importance of her gendered body as a signifier. Searle emphasises the importance of not solely reducing her work to explorations of racial politics when she notes: “...When I use my body I am a particular, gendered individual, and in that sense there is a multiplicity of identities that’s being explored within the work” (quoted Lewis 30). Inserting her gendered body into the frame evinces the intersectional nature of identity that her work addresses.

Through her own nakedness and the adoption of certain postures she interrogates the history of the objectification and exploitation of the black female body. Desiree Lewis asserts that the artist’s naked body:

signals the extent to which the social category ‘black woman’ has automatically connoted corporeality, with stereotypes about this group’s sexuality or closeness to nature allowing dominant groups to define themselves in terms of everything that black women are not (Lewis 50)

Thus Searle’s body performs this historic “othering” of the black female body. As a group black women have been “the object of the gaze of colonial explorers, voyeurs at the metropolises...[and subsequently] black South African women have borne the burden of what Laura Mulvey terms ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Lewis 109). The imperial gaze, obsessed with classification, of ordering the world to make it visible, compartmentalised and understandable fixed the black female body as perpetual other.

Searle’s images, however, disrupt this power relationship because they seem to invite the gaze, rather than be a passive victim of it. In the series *Looking Back*<sup>13</sup> she overtly plays with this idea. Instead of turning her gaze away from the viewer, she returns the gaze by tilting her face toward the camera. In so doing, Searle artfully makes one aware of the observer’s gaze

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to explain that “To the enlightenment scientists, to name’ was not a matter of knowing the inner being of a plant, animal or mountain. Instead, it meant to define, to classify, to ‘know’ nature in the biblical sense” (38)

<sup>13</sup> This collection still forms part of the *Colour Me* series.

that is implicitly part of the “production of the exotic non-western” other (Schildkrout 328).

Searle explains:

...by courageously looking (they) defiantly declared: Not only will I stare, I want my look to change reality. Even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it opens up the possibility of agency (qtd Hassan 31).

This act of looking back gives the subject some sense of agency and her unwavering stare unsettles the viewer by showing the extent to which the viewer is implicated in this act of objectification.

The insertion of her own body in her work similarly disrupts the relationship between artist and object/subject. Searle becomes object, subject and creator all at once. Gqola proposes that this insertion of the artist's body into the work “challen[ges] the dynamics of power and highlight[s] her agency, corporeality, as well as the many ways she has been written on, coloured by processes which she evokes from the past” (Gqola 127). Thus not only does she become the subject of the gaze, she directs the gaze through the lens of the camera. Refusing to give up the right to self-representation, she occupies the area within the frame while simultaneously hovering outside it. In so doing she moves beyond the bounds of the frame, similar to her body spilling over the individual frames in the installation *Girl*, she refuses to be fully contained. This becomes a powerful reclamation of the means of representing the self and significantly plays with the politics of visibility.

The pitfalls and possibilities of representation resurface in her installation *Traces*. Here the partially invisible body is juxtaposed with the visible one. Three prints render her naked body, seen from an aerial shot, covered in spices, while another three present the outline that figure left in the spices. All of the prints have Searle's body, or the imprint thereof left in the spices hovering above a defective scale which contains spices. The visibility of her body in the first three panels is juxtaposed with the absence of her body in the last three. The visible body is marked by the spice and the absent bodies' outline is captured by the spice. These images are arranged in six, vertically installed photo-based digital prints. Even when filled with a larger quantity of spices because of the absent body, the scale registers the same weight as when it contains a smaller amount of spices. The scales visually represent the language of science designed to make the truth visible (Coombes 247) but in this instance the scale seems to obscure rather than reveal the truth. Searle is thus drawing attention to the “spurious ‘visibility’ and ‘transparency’ (objectivity) of scientific investigation” (Coombes 247).

The trace of her body in the spices does, by contrast, register her absence. These erased bodies, leaving faint imprints in the everyday domestic substance could then suggest that food and culinary traditions and specifically recipes could be explored as an alternative archive, which although faint do register a human imprint - something which the scales do not register. She might also be suggesting that the domestic sphere or more specifically the kitchen as a site where slaves left an imprint of their lives, specifically in the preparation of food. As Baderon notes “cooking and other domestic work was the most common reason for keeping slaves; in the 1820’s and 1830’s two thirds of the approximately six thousand slaves in the Cape performed domestic work” (Baderon 101). This meant there were precarious connections and forced intimacies within the kitchen that inevitably influenced the cuisine.

The play on visibility and invisibility, and also deliberate erasure, forms a definite leitmotif in Searle’s broader oeuvre, and plays a central role in *Traces* and becomes suggestive on different levels. Searle seems to harbour scepticism about the visible body, as visibility necessarily fixes the subject, as Phelan notes:

visibility is a trap...it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession. Yet it retains a certain political appeal...while there is a deeply ethical appeal in the desire for a more inclusive representational landscape and certainly underrepresented communities can be empowered by an enhanced visibility, the terms of this visibility often enervate the putative power of these identities. A much more nuanced relationship to the power of visibility needs to be pursued...  
(7)

Searle, echoing Phelan, registers the extent to which visibility is not directly proportionate to increased power within the public sphere. Hence the picturesque and exotic frame used to represent the Malay figure illustrates this in that such representation can serve to further erase that which it purports to make visible. Representation acts as a means of “stabilizing difference” (Phelan 4) which then creates stagnant concepts around identity and subjectivity/cultural identity. The use of the word ‘appetite’ further emphasises the way in which representation works to make the other domesticated and consumable. This ultimately leads Phelan to insist that “there is a real power in staying unmarked” (6). Searle therefore, continually plays visibility off against invisibility – which allows her to evade the multiple trappings and entanglements of visibility. This evasion moves toward representing a subject that is mutable, never fully fixed and always in the process of becoming rather than being (Hall)

Up to this point Searle's oeuvre references food and spices but does not engage with the process of preparing food. The video installation *Snow White* is her first attempt at incorporating the gestures, rituals and techniques of making food into art. In this piece we see Searle's naked kneeling body initially from a bird's eye view, which then shifts to an eye level shot. Her figure is isolated by a spotlight which renders the rest of the stage indistinguishable and ominous. Gradually a thin veil of a white powdery substance falls from the sky and systematically covers her body and immediate surrounds, giving the body a statuesque quality. She eventually gathers the excess substance into a heap in front of her and starts kneading it into a dough ball. She continues in this meditative state, systematically collecting flour in a semicircle around her body and kneading it until the film concludes.

At the centre of this installation is the repetitive action of making bread: a uniquely domestic activity. Searle asserts that she is in fact preparing a roti "a flat bread that is generally eaten with curry. This tradition has been passed down to me from my Mauritian great-grandfather who was a cook...food is a tentative connection to this heritage" (qtd Murinik 1). While referencing a specific culinary tradition she also stipulates that this process is similar to the process of making bread, thus should not be limited to a certain context/culture. The emphasis is rather on the ritual-like repetition enacted when kneading the dough and how this serves as a tentative connection to her Mauritian heritage. Rita Felski chooses to read repetition specifically in relation to everyday activities as "provid[ing] a connection to ancestry and tradition...situat[ing] the individual in an imagined community that spans historical time. It is thus not opposed to transcendence, but is the means of transcending one's historically limited existence" (20). This symbol of female domesticity (the woman kneading) can thus be read as means of constructing and reconstructing subjectivity through repetition. Felski reiterates "...repetition is not simply a sign of human subordination to external forces but also one of the ways in which individuals engage with and respond to their environment" (21). Kneading articulates the everyday actions, usually gendered, as having the potential to harbour alternative meanings. Kneading is not merely a submissive act: the falling flour is gathered, mixed with water and it is transformed and congealed into a solid substance which can ultimately give sustenance.

Concurrently, Searle evokes fantasy through the title of the piece, *Snow White*, which is mingled with the confronting reality of her naked body. The title references the brothers

Grimm fairytale that goes by the same name.<sup>14</sup> The primary character in this story, a domestic goddess, is nurturing and an adept cook (as she has to care for seven dwarfs). This European fairytale has come to represent an ideal image of white femininity. The insertion of Searle's naked body, however, brings the construction of white femininity in dialogue with colonial constructions of black femininity. The falling white flour on the black female body presents an implicit irony of black women historically performing the domestic labour which enabled an idealised white female identity to maintain the domestic standards of an ordered, nurturing kitchen and home.

The everyday act of making food, usually undertaken in the privacy of the home, is brought under the spotlight. Breadmaking, often seen as pedestrian and mundane, is staged as a work of art and gathering the flour which falls on her while kneading becomes a form of creative transformation. Instead of kneeling in a posture of work, or as some have read, subservience, the body is juxtaposed with a kneading action to transform flour etc. into something consumable.

The process of cooking is openly referenced in Searle's 2004 video installation *Vapour*. This installation references, if obliquely, a photo of a mass feeding scheme during the Eid festivities. Searle, in an interview with Michael Stevenson, notes:

I was drawn to the image on many levels, the most immediate of which was the visual impact of the huge pots and roaring fires, placed in what seemed to be endless rows. The sheer enormity of the event, the logistics of making food on such a huge scale and the intentions of the people involved sparked off so many possible associations and I thought these could be very worthwhile exploring.  
(interview with Stevenson)

Searle translates this image into an artwork by restaging this event in Athlone, Cape Town at dusk (roughly the same place and time at which the photograph published in the newspaper article was taken). This event involved placing numerous large cooking pots in rows over burning embers. The smoke of the fires and the initial close-up camera angle makes this scene almost apocalyptic. The smoke produced by the fires along with the low lighting conditions renders this scene much more ominous and sinister than her other pieces. Unlike

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<sup>14</sup> Eating forms a central motif in the Brothers Grimm fairytale. The moment Snow White takes a bite out of the apple, given to her by her step-mother, she falls into a deep slumber. Thus the act of eating pacifies her. She is rendered immobile through the act of consumption. An act of agency renders her passive- which then seems to carry the implicit warning that female subjectivity hinges on compliance. The status quo is however restored when a man kisses her (again foregrounding the use of the mouth) and she wakes from her slumber.

the reported event on which it is based, the pots, however, were not filled with food but rather with water. This, on one level, is where the title of the piece derives. The water in the pots transforms into vapour from the heat of the fire (a potentially dangerous element) to evoke a theme of transformation - found in almost every one of Searle's earlier works. The soundtrack accompanying this installation is soft whistling of the wind and the crackle of the fires and as the artist walks barefoot among the rows of pots and smouldering fires. Initially it is not clear who this person is as one at first only sees her feet, yet as the camera pans out to an aerial shot her body becomes visible. The body is, however, dwarfed by the cooking pots and distorted by the bellowing smoke and vapour produced by the pots of boiling water. Only in stills accompanying the video installation does it become evident that it is in fact Searle precariously treading amongst the fires. This signals a departure from her previous works where Searle's (usually naked body) often features as the focal point of the piece.

The absence of Searle's body as focal point does not, however, suggest a departure from the personal and intimate nature of her work. Searle comments on this, noting:

[P]ersonal recollections were evoked, not in terms of my childhood, but from a later stage in my life, when I first met my broader family, from whom my immediate family had been estranged. It was in my teens, when I was first invited for Eid by our extended family, that I saw men cooking in big pots in the backyard. It intrigued me, perhaps because of my realisation of what my childhood might have been, but also because I could not imagine how it was possible to cook in such huge quantities and still have such tasty food. That's a real art! (Stevenson interview)

Food as a mnemonic device is evoked in this description. Food and its preparation evokes both her ancestry and her extended family and is therefore a means through which she can connect to other facets of her personal history. She also foregrounds the communal traditions of cooking and the process of eating.

The description of the process of cooking with such large quantities shows cooking to be a means of expressing personal skill and agency. Cooking is not merely a mundane task, but rather an articulation of mastery and dexterity. Thus the act of cooking is recognised as art – a means of self expression that allows individuals to articulate a presence.

The silhouetted figure obscured and dwarfed by the pots, however, reveals the individual participating in this staged ritual. Quite literally, her outline is made visible through the light produced by the fires. She continuously moves in and out of the screen, and the viewer is never given a full view of her which serves to signal a continuous engagement with the



visibility of the Malay/Coloured community and their proximity to food. The newspaper article points towards a tendency to cast the Muslim community as knowable through their food and specifically in this case through their celebration of Eid. However, they are rendered invisible in most other spheres of public life<sup>15</sup>.

However, the meditative strolling in between the pots read alongside the title *Vapour*, again promotes the theme of transformation, central to the artwork. Yet any efforts to fix this transformative possibility is forestalled by using the slippery, fluid, amorphous element of vapour.

In conclusion, Searle attempts to find a new lexicon with which to represent the figure of the black female by moving away from stagnant stereotypes towards an emphasis on the mutability of subjectivity. By playing the marked off against the unmarked, the visible against the invisible, she emphasises her suspicion of representation and reifying identity. Ultimately, these themes are explored through everyday domestic items such as spices, flour and olive oil. As such everyday things allow her to exhibit and explore the layered and often challenging domestic sphere. In addition, these same domestic items are a means of subverting and destabilizing dominant narratives around race, gender and identity.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the survey of the cookery books shows the extent to which the figure of the Malay is caught up in a complex web of discourses and stereotypes that instead of dissipating with time, seems to have intensified due, in the main, to the apartheid era. This visibility is firmly connected to food. However, within the post-apartheid context, these depictions are challenged and unravelled in the public arena to allow suppressed subjectivities to surface. Here, Cass Abrahams and Faldiela Williams, reworking and rewriting the established knowledge circuits around Malay food, systematically begin to challenge these stereotypes and allow for alternative and complex subject positions to be articulated.

Berni Searle's photographic and video installations take their cue from the discussions started by Abrahams and Williams and develops them further. She interrogates the frame through which the Malay figure, is understood. She shows visibility is not directly proportionate to

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<sup>15</sup> This relates to the "One city, many cultures" project launched in Cape Town where certain facets of different cultural groups were represented as a means of creating better awareness of specific cultures. The Cape Muslim community was represented through the festival of Eid. This reiterates the idea that by representing this specific part of their culture they are cast as distinct and knowable, while effectively erasing the complexities, overlaps and mutability present in all cultures.

power within the public realm and that, in fact, visibility is often “a trap” that fixes identity and subjectivity to a single meaning.

Thus visibility and specifically the Malay figure’s visibility so hinged on food becomes a means of domesticating this figure within the colonial and apartheid period. However, due to the transformative potential of food, these figures are also seen to exploit and mobilise their presence and challenge stagnant identity markers. Therefore, food surfaces as a means to “allow and disavow fixity” (Michael 261)

### CHAPTER THREE: THE INDIAN KITCHEN

[The woman's] realm has not been that of war, art, philosophy, scientific endeavour, high office. What else is left to woman but everyday life, the realm of the insignificant, invisible, yet indispensable? (qtd in Felski 17).

The kitchen space is a locus upon which many debates about gender have converged. As a synecdoche for the domestic, the kitchen is associated with the body, the everyday, the mundane and, by extension, the female. In contrast to the male domain of the intellect, the mind and the rational public sphere, the kitchen becomes the quintessentially female space where the everyday, the necessary and the human converge. Women have “often been seen as the personification of home and even as its literal embodiment. Houses are often seen as quasi-uterine spaces; conversely, the female body, notes Freud, is the former home of all human beings” (Felski 23). This feminised space is placed in a hierarchical binary with the public sphere, with the private sphere seen as inferior to the masculinised public sphere of commerce, activity and trade.

Ideologies of gender are further rewritten or reinforced within the diaspora where women are often loaded with surplus responsibilities. Yuval-Davis explains:

women are often the ones chosen to be the intergenerational transmitters of cultural traditions, customs, songs, cuisine and, of course the mother tongue. This is especially true in minority situations in which the school and the public present different hegemonic cultural models to that of the home... [and women] are expected to remain the primary bearers of a distinctive 'home' culture (115).<sup>16</sup>

Within often hostile or racially stratified communities, women in the diaspora are tasked with being cultural disseminators to not only the immediate family, but also the community at large. It is often in the sharing of and partaking in traditional food that the home symbolically becomes a means of aligning the self/the interior/psyche with the 'mother country'.

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<sup>16</sup> Feminists have seen this as a regressive and sexist view and the role of the woman as housewife and caregiver as one that traps the female in prescribed (less important) roles. However theorists such as de Certeau and Luce Giard have worked to rewrite the way in which one sees the everyday activities such as the typically female occupation of cooking (among other things) as an activity with other possibilities – particularly subversive ones.

The diasporic Indian community introduced to South Africa via Natal is of specific interest to this section. The system of indenture brought human cargo destined for labour on the sugar cane fields from 1860 up to 1911. After the five-year term of indenture was over many stayed on in South Africa and made it their new home. However, the colonial government of Natal, followed by the Union government of South Africa from 1910, insisted on seeing these labourers as temporary sojourners, because at the time South Africa was imagined as a white nation. South Africans of Indian descent were only granted citizenship in 1961 – and this within the limitations imposed by the apartheid state. For this community, home and the negotiating thereof became particularly complex, as they were seen as alien or other to the national body.

Within this hostile environment food became a means to assert their presence and the kitchen became the space where their culture could be nurtured and kept cordoned off from the outside world. Food was a means to fortify the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’. A certain way of preparing a dish and the ingredients used aligns one with a community and immediately identifies the other to this community. Women, cast as cultural transmitters within the diaspora, were burdened with the task of keeping their culture and cuisine pure and unsullied. However, the texts explored within this section challenge the notion of a pure culture along with the role of the female as the barricade protecting cultural purity. The three main texts to be discussed in this chapter focus on different subject positions taken up by women in the diaspora and how they use food as a means of defining and/or redefining that subject position. The focus falls on the kitchen and the preparation of food within this space.

The three primary texts to be analysed in this chapter were produced in significant periods in South African history. The first section will focus on the popular cookery book *Indian Delights* first published in November 1968. The collection was released in the midst of the Verwoerd presidency with South Africa recently having become a republic without being allowed a seat in the Commonwealth (a decision backed by the Indian government at the time due to South Africa’s apartheid policies). The collection is edited by Zuleikha Mayat and compiled by the Women’s Cultural Group, and gives useful insight into the ways in which food and its preparation becomes a medium for perpetuating cultural and gendered identity within the diaspora. The extensive introduction and foreword, along with anecdotes that frame and flavour the recipes, give readers a rare glimpse into the ideologies embedded in preparing and serving food.

The second section will explore two novels, the first of which is *The Wedding* by Imraan Coovadia (2001), which is set in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and traces the fictional journey of first generation Indians from South Asia to Natal, told from the perspective of their grandson. One of the main protagonists, Khateja (the narrator's grandmother), refuses the expected relationship with food. She repudiates performing the idea of "Indianness" correctly and continuously defies what is expected of her as an Indian woman both at home and in the diaspora. Rather than accepting her role as nurturer and perpetuator of her culture through the preparation of traditional Indian home-cooked meals, she uses food as a weapon with which to fight these expectations.

*The World Unseen*, by Shamim Sarif (2001), is a novel set in and around Pretoria of the 1950s, and focuses on possible alternative subject positions within the Indian diaspora in South Africa. It hones in on the lives of two very different female characters and how they negotiate a place for themselves within this community. Amina, a homosexual woman who co-owns a café, and Miriam, a married mother of three, become entangled in a narrative where food and its preparation entrap women and become a means through which they negotiate alternative subject positions.

### 3.1 *Indian Delights* and the articulation and negotiation of diasporic identity

As long as one of us preserves your nourishing knowledge, as long as the recipes of your tender patience are transmitted from hand to hand and from generation to generation, a fragmentary yet tenacious memory of your life itself will live on.

(Giard 154)

Cookbooks, which usually belong to the humble literature of complex civilisations, tell unusual cultural tales. (Appadurai 3)

The above quote by Luce Giard seems a poignant impetus for writing the very popular *Indian Delights* cookbook. The Women's Cultural Group was prompted to commit to print the recipes and culinary methods preserved predominantly within families as an oral archive by anthropologist Hilda Kuper. Kuper announced at one of the group's meetings that "after a century in South Africa, Indian South Africans have failed to produce a literary work of note" (Vahed and Watjen 107). This remark was met with outrage but ultimately spurred the group to attempt to fill this void in the South African literary canon. Thus was the idea of a collection of recipes specific to the Indian South African community born. It is important to note here that they situate cookery books (specifically *Indian Delights*) as part of a literary canon.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, cookery books are shown to be not only instruction manuals of sorts but also a means of "[writing] oneself into history" (Ojwang 69). In a literary and political field that leaves female voices mute, cookery books "become vehicles for telling personal or communal experience and for the imagination of senses of selfhood" (Ojwang 76). The recipes are not only factual manuals describing measurements and processes; they also reflect, mould and participate in the construction of cultural identity, while the process of cooking is claimed as a creative means of self-expression.

Along with this impetus, the aim of the book was to remedy the lack of culinary apprenticeship within the Indian households as a growing number of women were entering the "working world" after increased educational opportunities were made available to girls<sup>18</sup>. In Mayat's view the book was spawned in response to the

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<sup>17</sup> Many authors have argued for the reading of cookery books as part of a literary canon and claim that it has not been granted this position because of a "patriarchal literary establishment" (Haber & Avakian 19). See for example Goldman (1992), Leonardi (1989)

<sup>18</sup> This recalls Gerber's expressed need to preserve and document the culinary practices of the "Malay" community spurred on by the homogenising threat posed by a country rapidly being modernised.

first generation of South African women who could no longer spare their time to teach the cooking to their daughters owing to such factors as the breaking up of the extended family system and mothers having to work outside the home to supplement family income (Vahed and Waetjen 108).

Thus the book functions as a tool for a minority group to impart to younger generations of women certain traditions and values that cluster around the preparing and serving of a meal.

*Indian Delights* in turn influenced the evolution of another book authored by Goolam Vahed and Thembisa Waetjen, entitled *Gender and Modernity and Indian Delights: The Woman's Cultural Group of Durban, 1954-2010*, which this section draws on extensively. This book aimed to supplement another lacuna within the literary arena some 53 years after the Women's Cultural Group first addressed the problem of scarce Indian voices within the literary arena in South Africa. This was pointed out by Mayat at the launch of the book *Language, Identity, Modernity: The Arabic Study Circle of Durban* (1997) authored by Shamil Jeppie when she commented that "women were left almost entirely out of the account". She went on to explain that:

[The Woman's Cultural Group] worked closely with the Circle in those programmes that interested us. We publicised their functions, participated in the events as far as was allowed, helping behind the scenes, mutually allowing lectures in our houses [however] we seem to have been airbrushed from the Circle's minutes and deleted from the memories of the officials that has been interviewed by the author (qtd. Vahed and Waetjen 8)

In an effort to work against this airbrushing tendency Vahed and Waetjen set about recording the history and contributions of the Woman's Cultural Group.<sup>19</sup> The study incorporates a discussion of the numerous *Indian Delights* editions, the context in which the women worked and personal interviews with many of the members. In addition Mayat revealed that, at the launch of Vahed and Waetjen's book in 2010 she gave as much information to the two authors in an attempt to make the account as balanced and accurate as possible. As a supplement to the reading and understanding of the Women's Cultural group the study is invaluable and gives important insights into the inner workings and social dynamics of the group.

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<sup>19</sup> The authors caution against reading this book as "companion piece" to *Language, Identity and Modernity* and nor is it written in an effort to "balance out" Jeppie's account of the Arabic Study Circle. They insist that "the Woman's Cultural Group suggests its own themes and categories for historical inquiry." (Vahed and Waetjen 8)

This section aims to explore the way in which the Women's Cultural Group authored and systematised the regime of the kitchen and explores how they constructed and regimented the tasks within the kitchen and the woman's role within this private space. By exploring the way in which they articulated the role of the woman within the diaspora through her dexterity with food this section will reveal the complex relationship between cultural and gendered identity and food. Somewhat paradoxically, the book as a source of income allowed them to transcend the narrowly defined borders of the kitchen (which I argue they themselves co-authored) while it remedied the paucity of female voices within the South African literary canon. Ultimately the collaborative, embodied and interactive way of writing themselves into the South African literary canon reveals new ways of moving away from logocentric forms of recording individual voices. Lastly, in order to fully gauge the extent of the contribution made by *Indian Delights* in South Africa and the construction of diasporic identity I read this cookery book alongside Ramola Parbhoo's *Traditional Indian Cooking in South Africa*.

As the Women's Cultural Group focus on the preparation of food, it is evident that the domestic sphere becomes important and is cast as a gendered space cordoned off from the outside world. The focus on preserving the "hearth of the home" amidst social changes is outlined in the foreword of *Indian Delights*:

A hundred years ago, the Indians came to South Africa and introduced to this country the experiences of a rich and varied culture. Few of their material traits, however were destined for survival in the changing pattern of a modern industrial economy, for being predominantly a rural people, they were attuned to expressions in an old world society of deep familial bonds, in which the complexity of daily life, intensified and concentrated itself around the home and the hearth. Like all people thus challenged with the irresistible tempo of a growing metropolis, they bowed themselves to change, admitting into their lives, traits, which, if not entirely new, were more suitable adaptations of their own cultural forms. An exception to this, however is found in their art of cooking... (Meer 3)

The public sphere is thus seen as a space where adaptation and change is constant; situated at the other end of this binary sits the domestic sphere, which is cast as insular and uncontaminated. The art of cooking is envisioned as the way in which this private sphere is routinely practiced and affirmed as distinct and unchanged.

Chatterjee explores this binary between the spiritual and the material - or more specifically the inner and the outer dichotomy - in late 19<sup>th</sup> century India with respect to the national resolution of the Women's Question. He considers the possible reasons for the prominence of the Women's Question during the period of nationalisation and the subsequent retrogression



in attempts to answer it. The role of women in Indian society and the debates that surrounded issues such as widow immolation, widow remarriage and age of consent in the early and mid-nineteenth century in Bengal broadly defines what the Woman's Question involved. He locates the origin of this retrogression in the opposing forces that exercised power on India: the pull towards modernisation and the simultaneous need for preserving traditions. On the one hand "to overcome [colonial] domination, the colonised people [had] to learn these superior techniques of organizing material life and incorporate them within their own culture" (237), but concurrently they could not completely compromise their cultural identity.

[As] Indian nationalists in the late nineteenth century argued, not only was it not desirable to imitate the West in anything other than the material aspects of life, it was not even necessary to do so, because in the spiritual domain the East was superior to the West. What was necessary was to cultivate the material techniques of modern western civilisation while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture (Chatterjee 237-238)

Ultimately, the material world became a space of amalgamation and modernisation while the spiritual realm was located in the inner sanctum – in the home – a space cordoned off from the colonially-contaminated outside. Chatterjee explains that "the material domain lies outside us – a mere external, which influences us, conditions us and to which we are forced to adjust. But ultimately it is unimportant. It is the spiritual which lies within which is our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential" (238). The role of preparing food, and by extension, guarding the inner realm against foreign influence, typically falls to women: "the home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation. And so we get an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into ghar [home] and bahir [the world]" (Chatterjee 239).

In addition, I argue that food traverses this final boundary between the outside and the inside which explains the central role that it plays in preserving cultural identity. Traversing the final distinction between what is perceived as inside and what is understood as being outside the body, acts as a most basic form of incorporation. Foreign influence in the form of food cannot be ingested and incorporated into the body as that is where the essential core of identity lies.

This distinction between the social roles of men and women is articulated throughout *Indian Delights*. It is an ideology that apparently posits the woman as subordinate and trapped within the confines of the kitchen. However, when one reads beyond these symptoms, produced by

the context in which these texts were written, alternative meanings seem to surface. The authors of *Indian Delights* seem to be re-appropriating this space of oppression and drudgery and turning it into one of creativity. They are, in other words, in the process of making the kitchen a space from where agency might be activated, as Metha notes: “the kitchen offers the necessary space to facilitate the women to perform every day magic as a means of controlling their circumstances” (156). Rather than being a space that traps and immobilises them, the kitchen allows for the articulation of individual agency and presence.

The first sentence of the foreword to *Indian Delights* states: “As a cook, the Indian housewife is second to none.” Mayat goes on to note that “from childhood the daughters in the family are taught not to be wasteful with foodstuffs and they are meticulously coached to appreciate food flavours” (Mayat 14). The relaying of this type of knowledge from one generation to the next, coupled with the initial learning and eventual mastering of certain dishes, presents cooking as a unique type of knowledge, learned within the kitchen, which eventually becomes a prized skill.<sup>20</sup> The kitchen and the apprenticeship system create a gendered knowledge circuit while simultaneously “providing a safe space of mutuality and sharing” (Metha 156)

Cooking and eating become more than just the act of sustaining the body’s energy levels, it becomes a means of creative self-expression:

[T]o the Indian woman, food is not just something that supplies the body with its daily requirements, but in the handling of foodstuffs she finds fulfilment for all the prowess a woman is capable of. In the preparation she tries out utmost economy for maximum returns ...Till comparatively late all Indian art was functional, and cooking remains one of the means by which the Indian women expresses her artistic leanings (Mayat 14)

Thus the preparation of food and the serving of food is lifted to the realm of art and this situates it as an important part of the culture where meals are given symbolic meaning. A woman finds purpose in the preparation of food, which becomes a means of creative self-expression.

Ultimately women are caught up in what Metha (and Ojwang following Metha) define as the “paradox of positionality”: they are trapped within the inner sanctum in order to protect it against contamination, as this space becomes the locus in which cultural identity is

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<sup>20</sup> Within the Malay community a preternaturally talented cook is called a “motjie kok”. She will be asked to prepare feasts for weddings and other occasions in exchange for other favours such as the painting or fixing of a house. Cooking becomes a prized skill within the community, functioning as a valuable skill with which to barter.

reproduced; but this is also a space where women display “complete autonomy” (Metha 153) through taking control of the preparation and serving of meals. Yet, acting as an autonomous agent within the kitchen affords women at most an ambiguous agency.

The ambiguity of this agency and its complex nature is comically articulated by Sukasha Singh in an article published in the *Mail & Guardian* in 2004. She introduces her article as follows:

I am looking for a support group. One at which I can introduce myself upon arrival with the words: 'Hi my name is Sukasha, I am an Indian woman and can't 'cook'. I'm looking for a support group in which I could recount the drama of how I betrayed my culture and how I am doing my best to make amends by learning to make perfect rotis'. (Singh)

Although written in a comedic tone the piece does hint at the limited means through which women can legitimately express themselves. Singh draws attention to the lack of support women might find if they fail to conform to the accepted cultural norms. In this case she draws specific attention to the limited subject positions available to women within the Indian community, and she highlights cooking ability is crucial for being accepted as part of the community. The making of a perfect roti seems to represent the passport with which to re-enter her community as a worthy citizen.

However, when considered in context, *Indian Delights* can be seen to have enabled a group of women to transcend the narrowly defined role that they themselves co-authored (similar to the way in which Searle's spices make visible but simultaneously erase). The book's content seems to promote the role of the submissive, frugal and obedient housewife but the revenue that it created for the group allowed them to eke out a place for themselves which ultimately became a platform from which they could mobilise support for charities and political causes. The women created a network of nodes situated within the domestic realm, often inside the kitchen, where connections and affiliations could be forged and from where recipes could be collected and transcribed. The collection therefore allowed a minority group to enter into an arena in which they enjoyed little or no representation.

Such an archive occupies a precarious position as it documents private records but dishes it up on a public platform. Thus, similar to the process of eating - something which is universal across perceived boundaries -, the cookery book transgresses the line between the public and the private as it opens up the private space for a larger audience. This space however does not remain stagnant, as evidenced by the numerous revised editions of the book.

Vahed and Waetjen evocatively explain that “tasting...was an ongoing part of transcription from oral to textual record and it involved the considered judgement and input of group members” (114). The metaphor of tasting as part of this process becomes very suggestive: it hints at food being savoured and experimented with in a gendered collective comprising different (in age and in region of origin) tastes. Alterations of the oral record become a means through which to construct an alternative archive by a community and a gender that was actively silenced in the context of apartheid. Hajira Omar, a member of the group articulates the cultural and archival value of the book by emphasising that:

...it's a way of preserving the culture. I mean we are all eating differently because of health reasons, we are starting to eat baked fish and grilled meat ...and this book in a way preserves [food history]. Even if you don't use the recipes, it's a good way to know how people did prepare food. So it's a preservation of culture. (qtd. Vahed and Waetjen 143)

*Indian Delights* although allowing for cultural transmission between generations did have its obstacles, as many of the orally transmitted recipes did not have specific measurements. The group struggled to quantify measurements remembered as a pinch of masoor, a dash of ghee or a sprinkle of jeera. The tasting of dishes was then employed as means of finding the right balance for each dish. As Waetjen notes “Working oral food knowledge into print-based recipes was not a passive or straightforward act of transcription. It involved active intervention and translation by the book's creators” (Vahed and Waetjen 583). Ultimately personal taste and memory played an influential role, as the gauge for taste of a certain dish is what will influence the evaluation of the end result, thus the final product is a strange amalgamation of memory, subjective sensory perception and democratic consensus. Incorporating multiple senses into the transcription hints at an archive that moves away from a strict logocentrism, to one which registers an embodied experience in the act of recording.

Over and above writing a representation of Indian culture for the public realm, the Women's Cultural Group, and Mayat in particular, were trying to promote, through the language of food, a creolised (if slightly conservative) understanding of food and a similar understanding of cultural identity. In her weekly column that ran in the *Indian Views* for six years under the heading 'Fahmida's World', Mayat recalled a dream, in this dream a “worried gentleman” gives her the following warning:

Do not go and reside in any of the areas set aside for your own group or you will rue the day as surely as I do, both economically and socially. God intended South Africa to be a stew pot of many races and cultures and in that way retains the tang and piquancy of the chow-chow pickle. Dividing it into unnatural barriers

makes it insipid...the gentleman was hunting at a fever pitch in the bottle, but it contained not the delicious little varieties usually associated with pickles. Instead there was an endless number of mangoes, ripe mangoes, small mangoes, big mangoes, mangoes, mangoes, mangoes... (Vahed & Waetjen 36-37)

In criticising the Group Areas Act through the domestic image of the “chow chow pickle jar”. Mayat evokes and extends the culinary metaphor to include the political. This is similar to Ward, who used the cauldron as a metaphor for the Cape, and Searle who referenced this object in her installation *Vapour*. The blend then becomes a unique mixture of different elements from different regions, all of which are adapted and translated within the context of Durban, but also the broader South Africa. In order to elucidate the different discourses at work in *Indian Delights*, I will read it alongside another cookery book titled *Traditional Indian Cooking in South Africa*, by Ramola Parbhoo, first published in 1985.

The title of Parbhoo’s collection interestingly employs the preposition “in” rather than “of”, suggesting that the cuisine she writes about is one which is homogenous and directly transplanted from India to South Africa. As such, it is presented as “authentically” Indian and unsullied by the diasporic location. The pictures accompanying the cuisine are exclusively of different places and scenes of everyday life in India balanced by pictures of the different dishes to be found in the collection. Reading the images alongside the captions, it becomes evident that Parbhoo posits her cuisine as distinct and authentically Indian.

These two collections present a different understanding of Indian cuisine and culture, however they converge in the way in which they imagine a “homeland” – read here as India. The identification with the homeland produced in *Indian Delights* is tinted with nostalgia and a degree of self-exoticisation. The cuisine and anecdotes retold in this collection veer close to orientalist depictions of the East, such as when Mayat describes the “colourful Indian dishes” as “veritable pictures” (15). Parbhoo describes her cooking in similar terms:

I cooked simple vegetables and lentils to exotic biryanis with spices and herbs, combining techniques with texture as and colours and exotic smells. I blissfully nurtured the art of authentic Indian cooking (Parbhoo 7)

She goes on to confirm her venture into teaching Indian cooking by saying that “I was to be a teacher of spices, oriental tastes and the revealer of the magic secrets of basic Northern Indian, essentially Gujerati, cooking” (Parbhoo 7). Words such as “exotic” and “magic secrets” casts India and its food in contrast with ordinary or pedestrian cuisine, instead it is presented as unique, shrouded in mystery and always visually striking. These descriptions recall the exotic vernacular used in the colonial cookery books to describe Malay cookery and

reveal the extent to which the stereotypical idea of the East forms part of the imagining of home. Brah explains “‘home’ is a mythic place of desire...in this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin” (192). The idea of home is mobilised to prove the legitimacy of the cooking traditions and is used to emphasise the superior quality. This also shows the extent to which food mediates and affirms nostalgia for a homeland.

In contrast to this type of isolationism, *Indian Delights* moves toward understanding the “Indian cuisine” as originating from South Africa. The collection includes recipes for “Dried Snoek”, a fish species found predominantly in the South African fishing waters, as well as “Afriki Akhni”<sup>21</sup> along with a recipe titled “City of Durban Atchar”. All these recipes, especially their names, speak of a specific adaptation and invention with “authentic Indian” cooking within the context of Durban. However, they do not lose sight of other culinary connections in the broader Indian Ocean world as they include the recipe for “Mauritius Methi Pickles” (91). Thus *Indian Delights* seem to posit Indian Cuisine as a type of creole cuisine, as it carries the influences of their origin but adapted within the South African context. As the cuisine borrows from different areas and contacts this view of an Indian cuisine opposes the diasporic notion of an unsullied and purely Indian culinary tradition...

The different editions of *Indian Delights* show the cuisine as mutable and complex. The first edition (which is the reference point for this study) was printed in 1957 and is titled *Indian Delights: A book of recipes by the Women’s cultural group*. This version was subsequently updated, revised and extended to 310 pages in 1970. In 1982, they published a third edition which came to be known as the *Red Edition*, which extended to 400 pages. *The Best Of Indian Delights* was published in 1988 and “even more than others responded to the changing pace of life in South Africa”. The latest edition was first printed in 1999 under the title, *A Treasury of South African Indian Delights* (Vahed and Waetjen 122-128).

The constant reworking and rearticulating of recipes allows this work to become an active form of writing and re-writing of the Indian woman’s role within the community. This is evident in the edition titled *Best of Indian Delights* (1988) which “even more than other editions, responded to the changing pace of life in South African Indian households. This was the book that promoted “shortcuts” and the use of “gadgets” as time-savers...[a]s Mayat

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<sup>21</sup> Alternative spelling for this dish is “Afriki Yakhni” – loosely translated as ‘African stew’.

pointed out at the book launch, the *Best* was not “simply a repeat edition but was updated and included 140 new recipes to reflect ‘changing culinary tastes’” (Vahed and Waetjen 127).

Far from being stagnant and formulaic, the collection and its subsequent editions attempted to keep the content relevant to readers located in a complex and ever changing community. In emphasising the unique, changing and mutable nature of the food the women are also in essence re-writing their role in the kitchen. As the cuisine is involved in a process of adaptation and change (not necessarily reciprocal) rather than being unsullied and pure it forces a rethink about cuisine as a marker of a distinctive culture. The inevitable creolisation of the cuisine becomes a sign of its adaptive composition, much more varied than the ethnic/national or multi-cultural models would allow. The role of women in the kitchen is also subtly rewritten, as Fatima Meer notes in her foreword to the first edition of *Indian Delights* “it is the young housewife in the middle and high economic sections of the community, who gives time, thought and originality to Indian cooking, synchronising it in many ways with the cooking of the West” (4).<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately the Women’s Cultural Group used the genre of the cookery book in an effort to carve out a voice for them both within the home and within the broader public sphere. They harnessed the potential of the kitchen and the preparation of food in an effort to mobilise interventions within the public sphere. Their imposed position within the kitchen paradoxically becomes the means through which they are able to make forays into the public sphere – which is regarded as a male domain (specifically so within the context of apartheid South Africa). From this position they are able to re-write, or at least tentatively challenge their role as bulwarks of purity by highlighting their role as brokers rather than bulwarks. They systematically re-imagine the inner sanctum and the production of cultural identity within it as a fluid one

In a letter from Ahmed Kathrada to Fatima Meer on the subject of cultural production and reproduction he notes:

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<sup>22</sup> The different competing ideas within the diaspora of what authentic Indian cuisine entails was highlighted when Kumkum Bashin, wife of the former consul general for India in New York arrived in Johannesburg. They were invited to partake in an Indian home-cooked meal as their hosts thought they might be “missing Indian food” (1). Bashin, upon sampling the food, declared that this food presented as Indian was “highly influenced with south African flavours”. She subsequently decided to write a cookery book titled *Simple & Easy Authentic Indian Cuisine* in an attempt to make authentic dishes that were easy to prepare accessible to the South African population.

[M]y own views are best expressed in a passage I read by Gandhi where he says:  
I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible.  
But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I think that more or less accords with  
your views. (qtd Vahed & Waetjen 12)

This is again evocative of the home as the seat of culture, but rather than being sealed off and closely guarded, it is open to the winds of cultural plurality without overcoming the space. Ultimately it is cultural pluralism and fluidity advocated in the cookery books which exposes the complex, mutable nature of culture. This also forms part of an active creolising of culture rather than a passive sense of “*belonging* to a community, *reflecting* its values and *enjoying* its traditions” (Vahed and Waetjen 11; orig. emphasis).



### 3.2 Duplicity domesticities: Imraan Coovadia's *The Wedding* (2001) and Shamim Sarif's *The World Unseen* (2004)

Imraan Coovadia's hilarious first novel *The Wedding* forms part of a post-apartheid retracing and surfacing of narratives - often left out of the dominant circuits of representation. He recasts the grand narratives of travel and migration through the lens of the personal and the intimate, by revealing that this novel is in part the story of his grandparents' move to South Africa: thus is described as a "novelised memoir" (Govinden 57). Despite recounting a personal narrative, *The Wedding* weaves into its plot broader issues around representation, migration, diasporic identity, gender and notions of belonging. Throughout the narrative, food and cooking are surfaced as forming an important part of the material reality of diasporic community. My analysis, which places this narrative in conversation with both *Indian Delights* and *The World Unseen* aims to show how the inner sanctum is rendered a complex space being both complicit in fixing the female within the house while simultaneously offering a platform from which new subject positions can be negotiated.

The exceptionally crafted, comical narrative centres on the inexorable Ismet's quest to marry and domesticate Khateja, whom he sees out of a train window when he is travelling across India. Unbeknown to Ismet, Khateja does not want to get married, nor does she wish to fulfil any other expected traditional feminine roles. Ismet is warned, after meeting Khateja for the first time, that she is "strong", "head stubborn" and most "obstinate" and that she has "gone against everybody and everyone in existence" (Coovadia 24). Later on, Khateja is evocatively described as "having a mouth like green chillies", which highlights both her fiery character and her linguistic prowess (which is in stark contrast with Ismet whom she names "the blushing-ur-ur-man" (Coovadia 34) because of his inability to express or defend himself against Khateja's numerous verbal onslaughts). Despite Khateja's refusal, and numerous warnings from community members, Khateja and Ismet are wed. However, Khateja aims to make Ismet's life as difficult as possible in order for him to divorce her as soon as possible. One of her chief strategies to do this is by withholding the consummation of the marriage. After a catastrophic honeymoon trip to Hyderabad, they move into Ismet's house in Bombay with his mother, Rashida.

Khateja's defiance grows as she finds herself entrapped within this new home in which both Rashida and Ismet expect her to conform to the traditional domestic ideal. She "mooned about the place. Slept late and kept the other occupants awake by moving furniture about in

her room. She also leaves food, more specifically, peach pips lying around like landmines to ignite Rashida's anger." (Coovadia 58). In her first outright rebellion she uses the paraphernalia of the domestic sphere to disavow and rebel against her role within it. The first of these rebellions comes in the form of setting fire to the kitchen. Her refusal to cook food or help Rashida with the preparation of meals results in a tussle where an oil lamp is accidentally thrown on the floor, setting alight the kitchen. Khateja shouts dramatically "Let me go!...My freedom! Now!" (Coovadia 96) before the lamp is smashed against the wall; this emphasises her desperation to be divorced and symbolically acts as a renunciation of her domestic and marital responsibilities. However, this act does not grant Khateja freedom because Ismet still refuses to annul the wedding and allow Khateja to return to her village. After this Rashida refuses to cook until Khateja is willing to prepare a meal for the family, but she characteristically resists, asserting: "I am certainly not going to be running around slaving in the kitchen" (Coovadia 99).

During the domestic strike that follows Khateja setting fire to the kitchen Ismet is forced to go hungry. His hunger becomes a sign of domestic unrest and is, by extension, a source of shame. He is forced to fend for himself, but is too ashamed to admit to the origins of the hunger evident in the following quote:

His stomach had actually gone numb from deprivation, and it hung in the middle of him like a giant iron ball. Why all he'd had today was a vegetable *samosa* from the shop near the office...and then the man at the next desk, smiling hungrily, choplicking, had unwrapped a *poori* the size of a newspaper, stuffed with slices of mutton and spread inside with mustard and bits of green and red mango pickle...Oh how he'd wanted some, just a bite, maybe a little-little more. He'd just worked up the courage to ask for some when this man, noticing his devouring glances, actually offered (108)

Faced with the prospect of admitting his hunger and, by association, to the domestic unrest he refuses the offer of food despite his gnawing hunger. Ismet rationalises that accepting it would be "the most obvious sign of his predicament...since what decent, self-respecting individual would come ravenous to work, bone chewing, taking in his desperation to lascivious glancing" (Coovadia 109-110).

It is out of a culmination of domestic strife, hunger and an idealistic vision of founding a new race that Ismet decides to emigrate to South Africa. He chooses South Africa because Tjepal, Ismet's friend, explains that his wife, like Khateja, was "kicking, screaming, raising up a big fuss and commotion, oh ho! Wouldn't lift a finger" (Coovadia 119), but assures Ismet that "a few years in South Africa has put end to that for her. You should see her now,

completely obedient, asking me every minute what I am wanting, what are my wishes, what she can do for me. Absolutely in love” (Coovadia 117). Hearing this, Ismet is immediately sold on the idea of emigration. Khateja at first is resistant and writes to her father pleading to come back to the village, upon which her father informs her that she is welcome but will be married to Ahmedu (the village idiot) on arrival. She, therefore, apparently acquiesces to Ismet, accompanying him to South Africa, though it is revealed that she in fact harbours “an appetite for travel” (Coovadia 141).

Ismet imagines South Africa as “a clean table of a continent” (Coovadia 119), participating, somewhat ironically, in the colonial construction of Africa as an empty space devoid of human presence and history. As Govinden notes “they see [Africa as] a *terra nullius*, and unchartered virgin land” (60). However, the use of the word “table” resonates also with a double meaning: presenting the diasporic site for Khateja’s domestication as the clean table points also toward Ismet’s vision that Khateja will comply with the domestic responsibilities that accrue around the table upon arrival in South Africa.

Ismet and Khateja quickly come to realise that far from being *terra nullius*, Durban is a complex, populated port city complete with “railways” “tall building[s]” and even “a minaret” (Coovadia 137). Entering into this space (even initially only as sojourners), which is already significantly stratified, there develops a need to reconstruct a sense of community. Ismet is given preferential treatment by his new landlord, Vikram, because according to him “we must be together as Indians. Must be” (Coovadia 145). His landlord also warns him not to emphasise differences within the Indian community when he advises Ismet “not [to] come with stories if you are a Bombay Indian, or that one Tamil, one what-what Gujarati-Indian...No my friend what is essential is we must stand together united as one, that is my point” (Coovadia 150). This advice is met by silent disdain; later Ismet irritably concludes “What India did this Vikram imagine was there?...the only India he had seen was a million squabbling fiefdoms and hostile tribes quarrelling over the land. Where [were] these ‘United as one man India’ going to come from?” (Coovadia 189). This need to imagine a unifying principle within the diaspora belies a hostile and divided racialised society of the homeland, but the Indian community participates in the false idea of a homogenous homeland because, as Coovadia reveals:

...thanks to its piebald, multistriped composition, the municipality of Durban inculcated in the mind of the expatriate Gandhi, who was currently residing there, the outrageous conviction that each disparate subcontinental belonged to the

same nationality – and so, in a sense, Durban created the nation-state of India.  
(Coovadia 143)

The idea of India as a unitary and homogenous entity is one created in the diaspora. This echoes Mishra's insistence that

diasporas construct homelands in ways that are very different from the way in which homeland peoples construct themselves. For an Indian in the diaspora, for instance, India is a very different kind of homeland than for the Indian national. The diaspora wants, in Suketa Metha's words, 'an urban, affluent, glossy India, the India they imagine they grew up in and wish they could live in' (Mishra 18).

Although Ishmet is initially suspect about the category of "Indian" Vikram evokes, he participates in its construction and preservation, and does so by separating the private from the public and designating the inner sanctum as incubator for Indianness. Crucially he posits the cooking of traditional Indian meals, by Khateja, as the primary way of aligning the self and the space they occupy with the imagined homeland.

Ishmet, significantly, sees the threat of acculturation personified in the creolised dish Bunny chow. Bunny chow is traditionally prepared by hollowing out half of a bread loaf and filling it with curry, the removed bread is served on top or as a side dish to the meal. Although the origins of this dish are not certain - either ascribed for indentured labourers to have a container for their food when toiling in the sugar cane fields or ascribed to the apartheid era where as a consequence of the Group Areas Act restaurants needed to implement the take-away system as patrons of different races were not allowed to dine together, the dish represents adaptation and borrowing from different elements present within Natal. Consequently, this uncovers the intimate mixing of cultural markers. In the Bunny chow, Ishmet sees the inevitable mixing and appropriating of cuisines and cultures that he feels are distinct and separate. Ishmet sees this contaminated form of Indian cuisine as threatening and ultimately a sign of degeneration through acculturation:

a man cannot live on bunny chow alone: ...India is a portable country, to some extent, which moves as people do, accommodating itself freely to new environments, but if they started off forsaking her, forgetting her in this and that detail, what would happen at the end of time. (Coovadia 156)

Ishmet is thus motivated to bring to their existence in South Africa some stability and routine and more crucially a sense of tradition and home (read here as "India").<sup>23</sup> This could be

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<sup>23</sup> Ironically, as Fainmann notes Ishmet's "focus on food is that India was in fact marked for him by the absence of food owing to the culinary impasse between Rashida and Khateja. Coovadia thus exposes the romanticisation of homeland that occurs through migration, which is often marked by the disjuncture between memory and past experience." (69)

recreated by “Sunday dinners, snacks on the weekend time, curries, Biryanis, bhajias, pathas and pooris...” (Coovadia 157-8). For Ismet, then, traditional Indian dishes function as “the bringers of a new order among things” (Coovadia 158).

Ismet expresses the need to turn the space they find themselves into a place, because following de Certeau “space is a practiced place” (117). Cooking becomes a ritual practicing place, where not only the activity and the repetitive acts constitute a conversion of space into place, but the smells and fragrances announce their presence and ephemerally mark it as theirs. For Ismet the active process of cooking (by nature a repetitive act) becomes a means through which to foster a sense of belonging. He again foregrounds the sign of the table as catalyst to this ideal when he notes “Philosophically, what was a family if it didn’t sit down together to table?” (Coovadia 158). It becomes evident that in the diaspora Ismet sees food and the act of eating as symbolically aligning himself with home, therefore the practice of preparing traditional Indian food transforms the space of diaspora into a place and the ingesting of a traditional Indian meal serves as an act of communion with an imagined community.

The practice of place then becomes a gendered one. Although Ismet is increasingly shown to be mapping and traversing the public realm (with his broom selling business) Khateja is not allowed the same amount of freedom and mobility. Ultimately, the role of the female within the diaspora becomes responsible for perpetuating a cultural identity nurtured within the inner sanctum and practiced through preparing traditional meals. Posanezi defines this tendency as the:

cult of domesticity which tends to fixate women to home as a timeless space whereas men tend to be associated with mobility and notions of progress. As far as the condition of migration and diaspora is concerned women are often called to preserve their nation through the restoration of a traditional “home” in the new country. This idea of home entails the preservation of traditions, heritage, continuity. ( qtd Govinden 66)

Khateja is encouraged to become the traditional housewife preparing the traditional Indian fare, and Ismet the husband who “had his tea at home in his armchair” (Coovadia 158).

Khateja, however, refuses to comply with the prescribed role of “traditional Indian-style home-country wife” (165) because she fears “wind[ing] up lifelong adding a pinch of this and a spoon of that, testing with a finger, down on her two bruised knees scrubbing, chattel-faced, whittled down in the kitchen, rubbing at her red-rimmed eyes at the close of the day only to

face the burning connubial bedsheet” (Coovadia 165). But instead of simply turning from the kitchen, she takes control of it and harnesses its resources. Bargaining for low prices at Charm Soolal’s store, she adroitly buys supplies for her planned dishes. The kitchen becomes a war zone where the “pot, ladle, wet meat, spice, a sheaf of paper napkins [and] a concertina of paper plates” are marshalled as Khateja’s “footsoldiers” (Coovadia 171). Khateja is the coordinator planning and executing an attack. Her brief exhibition of culinary proficiency emphasises autonomy and agency as she is able to manipulate and take command of Ismet’s physical body (through the control of his hunger and eating pattern) and his desire to foster family life around a table.<sup>24</sup>

Rather than simply refusing Ismet’s demands, she completely upsets this demand by systematically over-spicing his food. She starts out by making a supper laden with traditional Indian delicacies. This carries on for a few nights in order to lull Ismet into a sense of comfort and predictability until she pours “six bags red chillie powder, twelve grated green chillies, a big glass bottle of black pepper and...for good measure a fifth of a pint of tobacco sauce” (Coovadia 178) into his supper. Recalling her burning of the kitchen earlier in the novel, Ismet’s insides, mouth and throat are now burnt. His combined desire to incorporate traditional Indian food and control Khateja by insisting she fulfil her role within this community becomes indigestible. The fiery Khateja refuses to be incorporated or digested by this patriarchal system. Instead, she uses food – and particularly chillies – as her weapon of choice against her enforced position in the kitchen. Highlighted here is possibility of subversion inherent within the oppressive systems.

However, alongside the seditious use of food looms the inverse which is the objectification and consumption of Khateja (both literally and metaphorically). This is first hinted at when she first refuses to marry Ismet, stating “I will not be sold away as if I am a box of vegetables for you to give to any passing stranger who is on the street” (Coovadia 43). Once in South Africa she becomes increasingly frustrated because she is unable to move around as freely as she did in her village and describes her predicament as being much like “a chicken in a coop. *His* chicken in *his* coop...” (Coovadia 183).<sup>25</sup> This metaphor becomes imbued with surplus meaning when we recall that a chicken is sacrificed at her wedding and elaborates on

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<sup>24</sup> Ismet arrives home and Khateja, still busy with cooking, instructs him to leave her, he goes to his room and sits on his bed “and tried not to feel hungry and looked out the window. But his stomach growled. It raged and roared” (Coovadia 174).

<sup>25</sup> Her teacher in the village singles her out as being very bright and promising and lovingly refers to her as his chicken (Coovadia 214).

the ways in which the woman, burdened with the responsibility of food preparation, is threatened with being consumed by this demand. Therefore, Khateja becomes increasingly “disaffected” and “subdued” because of the burden placed upon her as an Indian female both by the diasporic community, and by the apartheid system that impinges on her freedom.

Ultimately Khateja is incorporated in a more insidious manner: through the act of consummation that is continuously corralled with the image of eating. As Kilgour notes a “bodily image for incorporation is that of sexual intercourse, which is often represented as a kind of eating. In French, to consume and to consummate is the same word...[l]ike eating, intercourse makes two bodies one, though in a union that is fortunately less absolute and permanent” (7). Consummation and consumption are kept in creative tension throughout the whole of the novel. Ismet’s hunger does not only draw attention to domestic instability, but also to his unfulfilled sexual desires. In an effort to consummate the marriage he starts to bring home fruit for Khateja’s enjoyment. Ismet grows increasingly desperate and starts to talk to the fruit, an apple, as though it is a female: “what an apple you are. You are an apple of the apples. For myself I can say honestly that I have never seen such an apple with my own two eyes. A crisp new thing” (Coovadia 251). Khateja hears this and admits that if she had not seen the spectacle herself “she would have been sure he was dilly-dallying with another woman on the side” (Coovadia 251). Ismet continues to entice Khateja by saying “Take a look inside my Khateja. Put one finger there, Take one little nibble nibble. How soft ne?...he clicked his fingers under her chin, a smile in both eyes...and he handed it over to her still in its skin” (Coovadia 252). This exchange is laden with sexual connotations, and foreshadows the eventual consummation of the marriage. Which suggests a taming of Khateja (Samuelson 12) and an incorporation into the role articulated for her by Ismet which involves the mothering of a “legion of children” (Coovadia 46). Thus the marriage is eventually consummated, but is soon followed by a second marriage.

The narrator reveals that “my grandfather Ismet Nassim married again. Yes, he found himself a new wife, Yasmin, a second wife...” (Coovadia 269). This wedding, in contrast to the first one is described as “proper” with “classical dancers and the *qawali* band with their red silk *kurtas* and sitars” (Coovadia 273). Ismet reveals that having the dancers perform is “the little [he] can contribute to keep [the] Indian culture alive...[o]ur Indian culture that’s all that counts at the end of the day” (Coovadia 273). Ismet mobilises an idea of India as something to be preserved treasured and perpetuated with “creativity and imagination” (Coovadia 273).

Khateja is visibly upset by the introduction of a second wife and attempts to sabotage the wedding. Again she employs food as her weapon as she spills sweet yellow rice over the new wife's dress. Upon seeing Ismet feed Yasmin sweetmeats, Khateja remarks "[a]t least, since woman is really the product of what she eats, one day we can be making, oh, an excellent curry with Yasmin...an excellent curry she would be making ...even Ismet would be enjoying it and asking for second helping" (Coovadia 273-4). Again Khateja uses the paraphernalia of the kitchen as a means of resisting her position within the community. However her remark also highlights the extent to which marriage can be consuming. Khateja herself is ultimately "subdued by her diasporic location, which reduces her horizons to the boundaries of the kitchen while fixing its gaze on the imagined homeland; her transoceanic mobility paradoxically becomes immobilising" (Samuelson 281).

In the last section of the novel titled "North" The narrative closes with Khateja and Ismet's grandson, the narrator, in New York. Khateja and Ismet's story is thus woven into another ocean crossing. Thus mobility and movement is played off against Khateja's increasing immobility which illustrates the extent to which women's movement within the diaspora is curtailed to separate the public and the private domain. One of the central ways in which women are kept within the confines of the inner sanctum is through acts of cooking, feeding and nourishment. However the kitchen, and the food and spices within it, are used by Khateja to temporarily subvert the demands made on her by Ismet.

Shamim Sarif's *The World Unseen* picks up the narrative where Coovadia concludes it, as she imagines an open Indian kitchen where alternative subject positions are fostered, and unconventional affiliations made. As her debut novel *The World Unseen*, peers into the world of the diasporic inner sanctum exploring closeted and closed off spaces left unseen or marginal to the dominant circuits of representation. Onion-like, the narrative peels back the layers of the inner sanctum to reveal the impact of apartheid's racial ideologies and the inherently heterogeneous diasporic community have on this space. The private kitchen and the public café are two central spaces around which much of the plot unfolds and both foreground the centrality of cooking in the narrative.

At the centre of the novel are the two female characters Amina and Miriam, both of Indian origin living in and around Pretoria. Their narratives are skilfully intertwined from the start of the novel which foreshadows their eventual romantic involvement. Within the diasporic Indian community they occupy very different positions: Amina Harjan is an unconventional



and subversive individual who emigrates from India to South Africa with her parents after her grandmother dies. Sharif reveals that it is the move to South Africa that gives Amina “a strength of purpose that nobody can contain” (17). She breaks various social and political taboos: she is a homosexual woman who illegally co-owns a restaurant with a coloured man, Robert. Her appearance is unconventional as she predominantly wears trousers, which makes her the subject of malicious gossip within the patriarchal and predominantly heterosexual diasporic community. Miriam, on the other hand, is brought to South Africa as the wife of Omar. Unlike the feisty Amina, she initially finds herself at the bottom of a strict hierarchy in her brother-in-law’s house. She is forced to do menial labour such as cook, clean, care for her own children and her husband’s disabled sister, Jehan. She very seldom is seen outside the domestic sphere and is continually in the process of cooking. Miriam, her husband and two children (she gives birth to a third child in Delhoff), eventually move out of the stifling household to Delhoff where they run a supply store. She is depicted as isolated and alienated within this oppressive environment; however, upon increased contact with Amina, she systematically starts to re-image her position within the household and challenges the strictures within this community. Amina awakes Miriam’s dormant critical faculties, symbolically revealed in her box full of books that is hauled out of the attic.

By exposing the multiple journeys, to and from India, Sharif like Coovadia, “dispels the dominant misconception that Indians solely moved to alleviate poverty” which ultimately “widen[s] the scope of history to reflect the diversity of migration narratives” (Fainman 145). Concurrently, by writing these narratives from a female perspective, Sharif works against the “silencing of the history and experience of women’s immigration and migration to South Africa” (Peberdy 17). Creatively re-telling the gendered stories of migration Sharif works to enrich the paucity of these narratives of movement and mobility by subverting the obsession that both the apartheid state and this diasporic community had with purity and the policing of borders.

The community at the centre of this novel is fraught with oppressive patriarchal and discriminatory structures. There is an internal policing of the boundaries of acceptability within the community, often with horrendous consequences, as in the case of Amina’s grandmother, Beggum. Beggum lived in South Africa under similar circumstances as Miriam during the 1800s but was subsequently expelled and forced to go back to India after she was raped by a black man working for her husband and became pregnant as a result. Amina

recounts her Grandmother's emotional state by noting that "there was nothing she could do, and no one she could tell. Even if they believe she had been raped, she would be worthless to her husband...a damaged thing" (Sharif 138). Upon giving birth to the child, it becomes apparent that she does not share the same father as her brother as she had curly hair "in a family of Indians, all who had thick, but irretrievably straight hair" (Sharif 136). Realising this the family repeatedly beats Amina's grandmother until she faints on the kitchen floor. After much conflict Beggum is sent back to India with both her children in an effort by the community to purge any foreign influence, but upon departure her son is grabbed from her by her husband while the train is moving and she is unable to get him back. She is thus left with her daughter to travel back to India

Miriam undertakes the journey taken by Beggum in reverse. Miriam is forced to leave India and her mother because she is married to Omar who already resides in South Africa. Upon hearing Miriam singing in the apartment above the one he occupies, he enquires from his Aunt "Are they our people?" his aunt confirms that she is, and Omar replies "then I want her" (Sharif 39). This comment by Omar emphasises the fact that he collects his wife from India so as not to allow anyone foreign into the family or community. Upon arrival in South Africa, Miriam and Omar temporarily move into her brother-in-law's home, here she finds herself at the bottom of a strict hierarchy. The kitchen is depicted as an oppressive space where she is constantly monitored and criticised, seldom allowed to sit or eat anything herself as she cares for her immediate and extended family. The family dinners consist of an established hierarchy, the men are given preference followed by Farah, her children and lastly Miriam who has to "[stand] at the pot and wipe the remaining sauce from the sides with a cold *rotli*" (Sharif 26). Miriam is laboured with the task of perpetuating "Indianness" in their new home, and she is henceforth confined to the private sphere where she is predominantly responsible for preparing meals and caring for her children whilst occasionally watching the shop.

Thus women are seen as vessels and reproducers of cultural identity, and this dissemination springs from the well of the domestic. The public domain can be compromised, but the private domain is fiercely guarded to prevent any foreign element entering. This is part of the reason why Miriam is continuously figured inside the home, initially, only ever moving outside when instructed to do so by her husband. She is consistently found within the kitchen

preparing meals for the family. She becomes the archetypal domestic housewife (Chatterjee 14)

Amina stands in opposition to these imposed gendered roles within the diasporic community. The major sign of her independence and difference is the café that she owns. One might read the café as a space which works on the same principle as the kitchen but ultimately rewrites this space as less oppressive and more enabling. Sharif describes the community's response to Amina and her café as follows:

despite her lack of conformity , she was still Indian , still a very young unmarried girl, and her seemingly unlimited freedom and lack of concern for propriety was of great concern to everyone in the Asiatic bazaar. Her way of dressing , the fact that she had just opened up her own business ('with a Coloured man'), even Beggum's photograph hanging proudly in the café – all these facts only fed the interest of those around her. They were appalled and horrified and shocked, but many began to patronise her café because they liked the food, they liked the atmosphere and they liked the prices. (Sharif 28)

Amina is thus able to negotiate a different subject position for herself within this community; however, as shown by the picture of Beggum hanging in the café, she continues to recognise that it is one marked by violence.

The first of these connections forged within the walls of the café is the one between Amina and Miriam. This relationship is often mediated by food as is evident in their first meeting where Amina gives Miriam a koeksister to eat. The koeksister symbolically stands for something unique to South African cuisine, departs from Miriam's families' diet of strictly traditional Indian food and represents a creole cuisine which is neither familiar nor foreign. Therefore this initial meeting is marked by Miriam consuming, for the first time, a cuisine representative of the entanglements that exist outside the confines of her domestic sphere. Similar to the threat that Bunny chow holds for Ismet in *The Wedding*, koeksisters become the sign of contamination, which threatens the community's sense of order and purity, but unlike Ismet, Miriam enjoys the sweet confection. After Amina is contracted to create a vegetable garden in Omar's backyard the relationship between Amina and Miriam is allowed to develop. Within the kitchen, to which the vegetables are bound, many of their conversations take place.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> This ingestion of new forms of food is also used as a metaphor for the awakening of Miriam's critical faculties. Sharif seems to be suggesting that food for the body and food for the mind, or food for thought, is

The café is presented as a subversive space which allows for numerous transgressions of apartheid laws but also societal and community values. The café becomes a nodal point in the narrative and it provides a platform from which many of the female characters are able to gain some sort of agency. Amina is able to supplement her mother's meagre allowance for food, she is also able to move out of her mother's home into the room behind the restaurant. Along with being able to own a car; the income generated from the café allows Amina a degree of mobility which is in stark contrast to the stasis and fixity characterised by the inner sanctum in which Miriam finds herself.

Rhemat (Miriam's sister-in-law), who lives as an exile in Paris because of her illegal marriage to a white man, comes to Amina for help in order to escape retribution. Amina opens up her closet containing provisions for the café and hides Rhemat behind the tinned food. Their ruse succeeds and Rhemat is able to stay in the room unperturbed until the morning. Similarly, Rhemat is seemingly hidden under a pile of food in Amina's car, which the police officer punches as he suspects someone hiding under it. He ends up hurting his hand, as Rehmat, unknown to Amina, is not in the car but down the road. Therefore food and the space of the café allow Rehmat to escape from South Africa. The café is ultimately a space where difference is tolerated and often encouraged - a space in which to re-imagine the community and identity.

The café exists precariously as a mediator between the public and the private realm as, in essence, it is an institution selling food to a larger paying community which works on the premise of the kitchen at home. The café significantly serves creole dishes ranging from koeksisters and boerewors to bredies and bobotie. Therefore this café in contrast with the traditional kitchen becomes a place where tradition and laws are challenged rather than accepted. The cuisine reveals the amalgamation of Amina's Indian background, Robert's "Coloured" heritage along with Afrikaner cooking culture (present in the boerewors) and contemporary global culture present in the continuous drinking of sodas (specifically Coke).

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equally important. Amina gives Miriam a book of poetry on their second meeting and the reading process is described as follows: "Miriam had seen nothing of his before and began reading slowly, pausing to savour each word, as though she were tentatively tasting a new kind of food, one that was unfamiliar but exquisite" (Sharif 129). Correlating eating and reading suggests the potential of both these activities to subvert and broaden the confines of the kitchen and the woman's role within it. Tellingly she reads this book of poetry inside the kitchen, thus subtly this space is rewritten as one which allows for change and difference.

The food and beverages served in this café allow for foreign influence to permeate the diet of this community.

After tasting Miriam's food, Amina decides to hire her to make "Indian cuisine" to be served on occasion at the café. When Amina tells Miriam of her plan, she insists that "Indian men love to eat their own food, and when they can't get home to lunch they can come to you" (Sharif 261). Miriam "felt an excitement at the idea of working at the café – a being away from the shop, at doing something new and useful – but she was immediately filled with the certainty that she would not be able to take the job" (Sharif 262). She is confirmed in her sentiment as Omar refuses to allow her to take the opportunity to earn her own money. This refusal culminates in a violent outburst by Omar, but Miriam does not desist, and after Omar leaves she pens a letter to Amina that:

was brief and business-like; just as the acceptance of a job should be, she thought. She toyed with adding a further paragraph of explanation at the end, but decided against it. The night was late already, and she wanted to be up early the next morning to catch the first mail to Pretoria (Sharif 344).

This hopeful closing passage suggests that Miriam, despite violent opposition, is rewriting her position within the domestic sphere and the larger family through the gendered and domestic task of preparing meals. Therefore the activity that barricades her inside the kitchen proves to be a means through which she can articulate an alternative subject position. She is able to break her husband's stranglehold, through her connection with Amina and her links to the café but also to open up her kitchen, formerly cordoned off. Cooking is then reclaimed as a way of asserting and negotiating alternative subject positions. However the picture of Beggum hanging inside the café serves as a reminder of the violence that marks this space, that creolisation is not an unhindered, reciprocal act of sharing and adapting but rather a process marked by strict policing and painful encounters.

The café, by including Indian cuisine as part of its menu alongside other creole dishes, promotes the idea that food that speaks of a broader narrative moving beyond the demarcated borders of the land, a food that speaks of connections within and without the lines that articulate a nation can be prepared in the same pan. As the spices used in bobotie and koeksisters as well as the coriander in the "boerewors" are the same used in the preparation of Miriam's dhal and potato curry. They form a "dialogue of spices" (Metha 165) emphasising the already entangled nature of the cuisine represented as distinctive. Spices in these dishes

are the mutual, “common ground” (Metha 165) between them, and slip across and challenge the imposed borders of culture, ethnicity and nation.

Despite the community’s efforts to shore up an Indian identity in the apartheid state’s separate development culture Sharif continuously emphasises the heterogeneity of the diasporic community and its inevitable entanglement with other communities, cast as different or other. Her descriptions of the diasporic community echoes Mishra’s insistence that “diasporas themselves are contaminated, they carry racial enclaves, with unassimilable minorities and other discrepant communities, and are not pure and, unified spaces in the first place” (Mishra 5). With this said, the inclusion of creole cuisine as a marker of the mutability of cuisine and by extension cultural identity warrants a rethinking of cultural identity as insular and stable. Sharif imagines, through the space of the café and the theme of food, a community that allows for the differences of Miriam’s Indian cuisine, but which also acknowledges the mutual connections and entanglements that disrupt the idea of an insular, cultural identity.

### 3.3 Conclusion

Within the diaspora the distinction between the public and the private depends on the idea that the public realm is a place of compromise while the inner sanctum is the space where cultural identity should be reproduced and perpetuated. As a women’s responsibility, this task often becomes even more pronounced within the diaspora as the kitchen becomes a site where cultural identity can be actively produced and nurtured through cooking traditional meals. Therefore women are often placed as bulwarks of cultural identity.

The kitchen, however, is shown to be a duplicitous space - both asserting the woman’s role as traditional cook while being strategically subverted beyond such a narrow limitation. The Woman’s Cultural Group make a voice for themselves through food by using cooking as a means of artistic and assertive expression and are able to write themselves into an archive beyond their role as cultural reproducers. Similarly, Khateja in *The Wedding*, uses the paraphernalia of the kitchen as a means of resisting her role as cook and housewife. *The World Unseen* develops these issues further as Sharif envisions the kitchen as a platform to foster female allegiances and support to move beyond the stifling confines of the domestic sphere.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

The binary between what is perceived as inside - as part of the self or the essential core of identity - and what is outside - often perceived as foreign, unknown and other – becomes pertinent when exploring the body's incorporation of food. Ingestion carries the concomitant threat of being consumed by what you consume as is evident in the oft quoted saying “you are what you eat”.

Ingesting food authentic to a specific cultural group places the inner being in symbiotic harmony with the imagined group (a striking example would be the taking of Christian communion where the ingestion of bread and wine becomes a symbolic pledge of allegiance to a larger unit described as a body-religious). The ingestion of food as a symbol of unity, serves as a means of aligning the body - the house of identity - with the larger community. It is through this association that communities strengthen what makes them unique but it is the process that inevitably excludes what is foreign. Ultimately the drinking of tea is a sign of ‘Britishness’, the French are described as ‘frogs’, because of their inclusion of frog's legs within their diet, similarly a stereotype that accrues around Pakaistanis is that the ‘stink of curry’.

The evolution of cookery books and gastronomic literature entrench the link between cultural identity and food even further, as they commit to print and systematise the “regime of the kitchen”. As such cookery books start to reflect, delineate and imagine a culture, community or nation. Hewitt in her collection of recipes, *Cape Cookery: Simple Yet Distinctive*, both imagines and defines an emerging community by delineating what is eaten by the better classes in Cape Town. She makes an inter-social distinction by contrasting it with a “pretentious” French cuisine and so delimits and defines a community through its cuisine.

It is this obsession with keeping cultural identities pure and the need to establish legitimate claims to belonging that informs much of the rhetoric around the Malay figure at the Cape. By imagining Cape Town as simple yet distinctive also involved negotiating the visibility of slavery and the presence of the Malay figure. In addition, exploring cookery book literature reveals the extent to which the figure of the Malay is made legible through her/his proximity to food. Through descriptions that veer between describing them as food, using the same vocabulary to describe the food and the figure, and literally framing them with food. These representations suggest a certain visual consumption: representing them as picturesque and

exotic so as to make them palatable for consumption and incorporation into the image of the community and the city

Huggan suggests this picturesque description of the Malay, perpetually cast as foreign and exotic through their connection to food and spice already implies a domesticated figure. Such a connection casts them as other while erasing the harsh realities of a slave-holding society and in this way certain uncomfortable truths are buried. This figure now becomes part of the landscape, described in reference to food. Subsequently, the Malay is caught up within a multicultural model which posits them as a distinctive and separate community.

It is this supreme suspicion of the codes of representation, and the prerequisites for visibility, that Searle continuously draws attention to in a post-apartheid context. The spices that make her visually striking, so excessively apparent simultaneously erase her and this draws one's attention to the traps of representation. Subtle nuances are erased and covered by the spices, and tellingly the spices completely cover her mouth. The visibility of her body is juxtaposed with that which is erased, covered and silenced. The creative play with the terms of visibility creates an interesting conversation with the cookery books and ultimately helps to elucidate the strictures that govern the visibility of the Malay figure.

Germane to this is the extent to which the female figure within the diaspora is burdened with the responsibility of perpetuating cultural identity through cooking traditional food.

Traditional food, as a crucial element of cultural identity in the diaspora, needs to be prepared and ingested within the home to keep it authentic in potentially contaminating contexts.

Bunny chow, for Ismet in *The Wedding*, becomes the sign of cultural demise, of amalgamation, contamination, adaptation and creolisation. It threatens the stability of his home and his sense of self. His defence against its threatening presence is to enclose the home, disallow the eating of the dish, and force Khateja to comply with her role of "traditional home style country wife" (Coovadia 67) Similarly, Miriam in *The World Unseen* is fetched from India and brought to South Africa in order to prepare distinctly "Indian" cuisine and in this manner perpetuate within the inner sanctum a distinctly "Indian" cultural identity. Food is used as a means to fix certain individuals within a frame, through their proximity to food they are cast as servile, compliant and domesticated.

However, all these narratives register, to differing degrees, the possibility of subverting the *status quo*. Judith Butler's insistence that one cannot refuse representational politics, because:



the juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence there is no position outside this field, but only a critical genealogy of its own legitimating practices...and the task is to formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and mobilize. (Butler 5)

According to Butler, legibility is the only way of critiquing the criteria of visibility and representational politics. Therefore radical critiques that move outside the boundaries of legibility only serve to enforce the status quo. She then posits that the alternative to radical critique is imminent resistance that functions within the boundaries of legibility, disrupting the structures from within.

Ultimately, these women move within the set confines of the community and more specifically the kitchen, and subvert these strictures from within. As food is a slippery signifier it easily slides from being implicit in their subjugation to a tool for imminent resistance. As such, Khateja uses spice strategically to counter Ishmet's demands on her. She uses the everyday substance spice as a means of effecting this rebellion by systematically over-spicing his food. Therefore rather than submit to the demands of being an Indian housewife in the diaspora placed on her, she uses this forced proximity to food as a weapon to resist it.

Parallels can be drawn between the subversive use of food within *The Wedding* and food as a weapon in both *The Slave Book* and in earlier representations of Malay cookery. In *The Slave Book* it is the taste of blood and the injustice that Somiela faces which she imagines fighting against by using the "language of the kitchen" (Baderoon 88):

Tasting the saltiness of her own blood, she promised herself that she would make this monstrous woman pay. The first opportunity she had she would pee in her coffee, poison her food ...(Jacobs 68-69)

Alongside this Baderoon also identifies similar narratives involving slaves at the Cape as she notes:

The image of the skilled and compliant servant shares space with her double – the slave woman who exercises the dangerous power of the kitchen to 'gool' or conjure by adding insidious, undetectable ingredients to food, to form magic potions or, worse, poison This fear, deriving from the proximity of slaves, and later, of their descendants, circulated in the Cape long after the end of slavery (Baderoon 89)

Therefore the underside to the compliant, domesticated housewife, slave or cook is the “gooling” witch-like character who uses food to gain agency and disrupt the gendered hierarchy.

The equation of cooking with art (art of the everyday), registers a degree of self expression (captured in Leipoldt’s description of the “free heroic use of spice”) and agency found within the circumscribed space of the home through cooking. Abrahams describes the use of spices as “essential to Cape Malay cuisine where it is combined masterfully in many different ways to create the most interesting variety of flavours and aromas” (11). With regards to the housewife’s role during Ramadaan she exclaims “what creativity she has to display to come up with something new and exciting everyday” as, according to custom, she has to prepare “sweetmeats or savoury titbits” that have to “vary from day to day” (Abrahams 45).

Williams, similarly, explains that “ever since their arrival at the Cape, over 300 years ago, Malay cooks have been masters of the art of seasoning” (8). Leipoldt insists that the “Ayah’s art was the result of many years of instruction and experience...” (11) Mayat, as quoted above, suggests that cooking remains a way in which “Indian women expresses her [sic] artistic leanings” (14)

The act of creating a dish, or being the master of its creation (and in some instances being known for being a master at a certain dish) could be read as a means through which an individual could claim authorship within a limited realm of self expression. Therefore beyond being part of an imposed heteronormative ideal for the woman to protect and perpetuate cultural identity through cooking, these accounts hint at a sense of ambiguous agency gained within the kitchen by cooking. Mimicking Butler’s insistence that resistance to the status quo must happen within the borders of legibility; claiming cooking as a form of art and self expression ensures that this imposed activity becomes a means of articulating subjectivity/resistance.

Ultimately, imminent resistance within the kitchen forms a thread that runs throughout most of the narratives discussed. Sharif, Coovadia, Searle and Abrahams seem, in different degrees, to be reworking and resisting the discourses that fix the female as a bulwark of culinary and - by extension - cultural identity. Abrahams does so by revealing the creole nature of Malay cuisine, by not positing it as a fusion between “Malay” and “European” cuisines, but as with the example of *waterblommetjie bredie* she reveals other contributors often left completely out of representation. She also emphasises that the cuisine is not foreign

or exotic but evolved locally within the crucible of daily life. The Women's Cultural Group, as argued in Chapter Two, systematically moved to include dishes that adapted to changing conditions and appropriated ideas/ingredients/techniques from other cuisines. Finally these cookery books included ingredients such as "Waterblommetjies", "Okra" and "Snoek".<sup>27</sup> Therefore they subtly move away from holding fast to the view of pure cuisine, and distinguish a cuisine that evolved and changed within the complex and harsh worlds of slavery and indentured labour. Significantly, these are women who promote the view of the cuisine as creole and evolving, and who not only subtly rewrite the dominant discourse around cuisine as a marker of a distinct culture, uncontaminated by outside elements, but also recast the woman traditionally seen as the guardian of these borders. She now becomes the broker, curator and compiler of these connections and adaptations, rather than being the perpetuator and symbol of purity.

The zenith of this creolised model of cuisine is Amina's Café in *The World Unseen*. The café is a space where different cuisines are prepared within the same kitchen and people of different races prepare and consume these cuisines together – from boerewors to koeksisters. The café becomes a platform for not only a creole cuisine, but also for different affiliations and connections among races (which in the apartheid system were strategically kept separate). Sharif, through the space of the café, shows how the diasporic community inevitably starts to bleed into other communities and cultures ultimately creolising the cuisine, but also the lines of cultural identity. Amina is able to eke out an alternative subject position for herself, from where she then starts to test and stretch the borders of the diasporic community.

The picture of Beggum hanging in the café marks this union between races and cuisines as dangerous and severely policed. Sharif emphasises that this space is marked by violence and intrusion by both the diasporic community and by the apartheid state. The fact that the police enter the café in the opening scene of the novel emphasises that this space is severely and often brutally policed, and that it occupies a precarious position in the community within the apartheid state. The fact that the police officer in the opening scene of the novel fires a shot that damages the frame of Beggum's portrait serves as an ominous warning about the community's obsession with purity becoming like that of the apartheid state.

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<sup>27</sup> Imam Abu Bakr Effendi attempted to declare 'snoek' and 'kreef' Haraam in the mid eighteenth century. This caused tremendous uproar amongst the Muslim community as these two ingredients had become such important staples in "Malay" cuisine. (Mountain 100)

Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge that “intimacy is not always a happy process”, these intimacies are often violent, forced or unequal (Nuttall 25), however, “even within the most violent of systems (and possibly because of it, where violence itself gives rise to the fractures and cracks that let the other in) cultural traffic occurs – mutual mimeries, mutabilities” (Nuttall 22). In the history of southern Africa it is within the crucible of everyday life that creolisation, adaptation and appropriation of cultural identities occurred. In the slaveholder’s house, where dangerous intimacies between slave and master were an everyday negotiation a creole culture evolved. Through adaptation and the use of tactics new menus and dishes evolved, such as Bunny chow and Bobotie. Therefore negotiation, adaptation and “making do” registers within “a terrain [which is] imposed” (De Certeau 37). By tracing these connections one might come to understand cultural identity as being, like its cuisine; adaptable and complex

Ultimately one comes to understand by reading cultural identity through food, culture like its cuisine, changes and transforms to its environment. Cultural identity is not stable or stagnant and it is caught up in a process of:

becoming as well as of being. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power (Hall 394).

Cultural identity is continually being made and re-made within the crucible of everyday life. The multiple forces at play involved in the process, could also relate to the slipperiness of this concept. It is never fully present, stable or fixed

at different places, times, in relation to different questions, the boundaries are recited. They become, not only what they have, at times, certainly been – mutually excluding categories, but also what they sometimes are – differential points along a sliding scale (Hall 396).

Concurrently the ingredients and contributions to certain dishes bear the imprint of connections between individuals that defy exclusionary nationalist or ethnic discourses. When unpacked, however, many dishes, often used to symbolise a distinctive culture or group, reveal an inevitable creolisation.

It is this awareness of creolisation that Coovadia and Sharif propose to revise specifically for the groups who have often been characterised (as is evident in Hewitt’s description) as temporary sojourners or marginal minorities. Through the course of history the Indian

minority have been labelled as “Coolies’, ‘Madrasee men’, ‘Calcutta men’, ‘girmityas’, ‘Arabs’, ‘Bombay merchants’, ‘British Indians’, ‘passenger Indians’ and ‘colonial borns’” (Govinden 10). These labels all indicate a belonging to an elsewhere, always cast as other. Similarly, the move to incorporate the “Cape Malay” community as part of the larger Malay diaspora indicates this community as apart from the national culture, belonging to an elsewhere which promotes the reading of the group as not being “local...nor creole” (Jeppie 81). This trend continues into post-apartheid South Africa, where some still claim a hyphenated identity such as “Indian-South African”, or “African of Indian decent” casting them, like the Malay community, as a homogenous group, distinctly foreign and not part of the South African citizenry. This exclusionary aspect has persisted in insidious forms as Nyamnjoh notes “intensified globalisation...a process marked by accelerated flows and dissolving boundaries is countered by the intensifying realities of borders, divisions and violent strategies of exclusion” (1).

Coovadia and Sharif both promote a broader more transnational view of citizenship, not dependent on native claims to land. Coovadia, through the narrator/grandson, and Sharif through Amina, Miriam and her sister-in-law critique such discourses. The setting of the last chapter of *The Wedding* is New York, where narrator/grandson watches a film regarding the expulsion of Indians from Uganda. He articulates a sense of being at home within the flux of the largely immigrant community in New York. Rather than articulating a fixed identity bound to a specific locale, both Sharif and Coovadia “privilege restless mobility over settled states” (Samuelson 283).

Ultimately, this thesis traced the different and complex ways in which food “allows and disavows fixity”. We have seen that during the colonial era a discourse of consumption and food aimed to fix the “Malay” community as both domestic and exotic - done by continuously placing them within food imagery. This formulaic means of representation, however, is still visible in the post-apartheid period which now establishes the Malay group as distinct so as to disavow their creole origins and “fit” into a multicultural model.

## CODA

### **I. *Drawing South Africa into the larger Indian Ocean world: The Chinese influence***

The texts studied in this thesis focussed mainly on slave and indentured labourers' journeys to South Africa. These texts are by no means exhaustive of the material on this subject. However, it is crucial to state that there are similar narratives that draw the larger Indian Ocean world into the canon of South African fiction (with recurring culinary themes). Most notable among these narratives are *All Under Heaven* by Darryll Accone and Emma Chien's *The Emperor Can Wait*. Both narratives, similar to the ones discussed in my thesis, weave food memories and recipes through their familial informed narratives. Accone recounts the movement of his grandfather and father's movement from China to South Africa. Throughout this journey, food comes to play different roles: it serves as a mnemonic device, as connective tissue, and as means of cultural exchange.

Similarly, Emma Chien's *The Emperor Can Wait: Memories and Recipes from Taiwan*, recounts her journey from Taiwan to South Africa while concluding each chapter with a recipe. The title is half of the saying "the Emperor can wait – while we eat" which for Chien "captures the importance of food" within the diasporic Chinese community in South Africa (4). These novels intermingle their personal stories through food to differing degrees, whilst simultaneously negotiating a sense of belonging, historically denied by the apartheid state. These novels hint at a broader project (beyond the reach of this thesis) of tracing food narratives that imagine South Africa as part of a much larger network of exchange, and motivate against truncating national/racial narratives.

Shubnum Khan's debut novel *Onion Tears* and Shaida Kazi Ali's *Not a Fairy Tale* were both published during the closing months of my research. As both are narratives infused with recipes, spices and cooking they warrant a cursory discussion here. Both call for being subjected to more careful and detailed analysis to expand this study, as they compliment and challenge some of my conclusions.

### **II. Shubnum Khan's *Onion Tears***

Khan explores the complex questions and negotiations of diasporic identity in South Africa by considering the impact of migration on three different generations. What makes this narrative unique is that it attempts to incorporate vexed social issues pertinent to the South African literary interest in crime and violence. The narrative foreshadows the persistent

awareness of danger in the opening chapters, which eventually culminates in a violent break-in towards the end of the novel. As the title suggests, food remains a lingering presence and important theme throughout the narrative.

There are three women around which the narrative unfolds namely Khadeeja, Summaya and Aneesa. The eldest, Khadeeja, owns her own business that sells home-made *atchar*. She is widowed with two children - one being Summaya. Khadeeja is represented as somewhat traditional in that she continually emphasises the importance of getting married to the right man (both in colour and in culture) and she sees cooking as a female occupation that keeps India alive within the diaspora. Summaya is a headstrong single mother working at a travel agency called “The Queen Jewel of the East Travel and Tours” (Khan 12) which specializes in trips to India and the Middle East. Lastly, Aneesa the daughter of Summaya, is the youngest voice within the narrative and is characterised as introverted and perceptive.

Khadeeja’s father, Abdur –Rahim Mizra immigrated to Bronkhortspruit, South Africa on a whim with his fifteen year-old wife because he wanted to see “the great Africa” (Khan 4). He opened a general store in order to support his growing family but “they knew poverty; they knew harshness, but (most importantly) they also knew how to cook. Their father, the shopkeeper, but also the cook, had ensured that” (Khan 71). The siblings all have exceptional cooking talents and the narrator recounts that they used to steal a large metal dish for their “witches brew” and would then “danc[e] around it in their madreesha cloaks and fill[...] it with water, lanky weeds and a bottle of their mother’s nutmeg powder” (Khan 69). The gooling theme again surfaces and given a modern inflection when Khadeeja wonders whether she is poisoning a customer, who has a history of heart problems, she imagines the oil from the *atchar* “drift into his arteries, and lay itself in layer upon fatty layer so that the blood struggled to bubble through” (Khan 3). Khan highlights, similar to the narratives in *The Wedding* and *The World Unseen*, the seditious qualities of food and foregrounds its subversive possibilities.

Alongside this, the medicinal qualities of food become apparent when Summaya’s husband divorces her. Summaya is plunged into a catatonic depressive state, and she refuses to eat or respond to any outside stimulus, which includes neglecting her daughter. This condition persists until Summaya passes the kitchen where her mother is peeling and cutting pineapples for *atchar* and puts a piece into her mouth. From this moment on Sumaya exclusively consumes pineapples in differing forms (*atchar*, covered in chilli, crystallised sugar

pineapples, or simply fresh) because “it was the only thing that put taste back in her mouth. With its pungent sour sweetness. It bit into her dead tongue.” (Khan 109). Systematically the pineapples nurse her back to a state where she is able to care for, and respond to her daughter. Food, specifically the pineapple, becomes a panacea for Summaya, the everyday act of eating this fruit becomes a meditative practice that resuscitates her physically as well as emotionally. The agency gained within the kitchen by Khadeeja is therefore entangled with the act of caring and being knowledgeable of the different uses of food. Food and feeding in *Onion Tears* is mobilised as means of communal caring.

Khadeeja is hastily married off to Haroon, because of her large family, but he later commits suicide. Before the wedding, Khadeeja’s mother warns her that “she should always ensure that her hair was combed and that her husband’s food was given to him in time” (Khan 4). Therefore the preparation of food again, forms part of the gendered economy of the household. Tellingly, the grandmother, after the death of her husband starts a catering business. The narrator explains that:

Khadeeja threw herself into her cooking...she put her heart and soul into her meals. People tasted her food and looked at the hunched old woman in front of them with new eyes. They felt they *knew* her through the taste in her food. ... in the fluffy white rice they felt her kindness; in the strong meaty stews they felt her fierce love and in her milky sweet *sar bath* they felt her sadness...she became a part of her food and in turn, through her food, others became a part of her (Khan 6).

The grandmother, Khadeeja, literally becomes part of the food that she prepares which again corrals the preparation of food with a means of creative expression. Food and the sharing of a meal is described as a form of communal sharing and site where filial connections can be forged. She is described as symbolically being part of the dishes she prepares. However this description, coupled with the warning from her mother, does hint at a subtle objectification of her figure. She becomes an ingredient in the dish as well as its creator (similar to Searle’s body being both object and creator of her art), which again emphasises the ambivalence of this agency found within the kitchen.

The ambivalence of this agency is further revealed with the articulation of her father’s warning “Never forget your beloved India. Never forget where your roots are...” (Khan 113). The narrator confirms that she actively remember India by “ma[king] curries” and by “w[earing] Punjabis. She watched Indian films. She had a framed photo of the Taj Mahal in her bedroom. Her house smelled like onions, curry leaves and garlic. She kept India Alive in



her own little Way” (Khan 113). These symbols represent objects gathered to represent and recreate a sense of belonging to an elsewhere. These symbols, however, represent an image of India created through media, through watching Indian films and indulging in Indian soap operas (which she admits to being her most loved act of keeping “India Alive”). Therefore, the imagined home is one mediated by media images - which ultimately inculcate a stereotypical idea of this imagined home she perpetuates within the diaspora.

The real and the imagined collide when Khadeeja’s brother, under dubious pretences, takes Summaya and Khadeeja on a holiday to India. This section is narrated through Summaya’s voice, with the result that one does not have direct access to how Khadeeja perceives this “home”. Some cursory remarks describe her mother as “relaxed”: she notes that

she always had a small serviette in her handbag to wipe the restaurant plates before she ate of them. But after that she was fine. She would dig into exotically scented rice, ask for more chillies, wipe more butter chicken into her roti and ask for *aloo parathas* with extra ghee (Khan 196).

Khadeeja’s comfort in this country is gauged through her dexterity with food and the eagerness with which she consumes it. She seems comfortable and “at home” and this becomes even more alarming to her daughter. Summaya feels awkward within this context, her descriptions of the people veer between repulsion and subtle disgust which then colours into shame for not feeling “some sort of kinship with these people, with this land with this culture” (Khan 195). She becomes increasingly alienated until, upon taking a boat ride through Kerala, she sees a “woman hunched at the edge of the river, scrubbing her washing. Her bright eyes and her weathered face seemed to say something to Summaya” (Khan 198). She describes the place this woman occupies as a complex space where “naked babies sucked on wet rags behind golf courses with coconut sipping ladies...hidden between cities and trees” (Khan 198). In this moment Summaya feels “some sort of affinity with India ...she finally felt *something* ... Something that was understanding. You could be two things at once. *You could be and not be*” (Khan 199).

The narrative comes to a dramatic conclusion when Aneesa and Khadeeja are attacked by robbers in their home. Khadeeja is stabbed, but it is not fatal and she eventually recovers. However, Khadeeja and Aneesa both are changed by the episode. Khadeeja’s home is now, contrary to its previous depictions as warm and welcoming, described as “the outside-is-inside house. The house that betrayed them. The One that changed them forever” (Khan 264). Mimicking the seeping of the outside in Khadeeja’s bottles of preserves are found broken on

the floor of her apartment: “ thrown haphazardly [on] the floor. Some of the buckets had been opened...rich gold oil leaked out and seeped into the carpet. Several of the buckets were fully opened to reveal cascading colours of sticky fruit and vegetables...they looked strangely beautiful there. Scattered pieces of icy flesh” (Khan 262). This mingling of the “outside” with the “inside” is initially seen as a consequence of violence, however Summaya seems to read a strange potential in this blurring of distinctions. Summaya notes after the violent episode and the reconciliation between her former husband and Aneesa that “yes, things did not disappear, but they could Change. Leak out of their prickling bottles and drip into glossy pools to take up new forms” (Khan 280). Therefore one might conclude that preservation, in its multiple forms, makes way for adaptation.

### **III. Shaida Kazi Ali's *Not a Fairy Tale***

In the witty, if slightly sardonic, debut novel of Shaida Kazi Ali she adroitly blends the stories of two sisters, Zuhra and Salena, whose lives are intimately entangled, but at times read as complete opposites. Zuhra is the youngest of three siblings, she is allowed to tell her own story in the first person which reveals her headstrong personality and her dexterity with language (as she manages to complete an Honours degree in English literature). Zuhra is described as being “dark”, “wild haired and resolute” (Ali 1). Salena is her senior by ten years and is “shy” and “silent”. Her story occupies the last section of the novel, however unlike Zuhra, she is not allowed to tell it herself, the reader is allowed access to her only through a third person narrator.

As foreshadowed by the title the novel knits existing fairy tale narratives through the novel but continuously subverts them (often in comical ways); the three little pigs find shelter at the wolf's , now a Muslim, restaurant. Red riding hood is sent a letter from the wolf, prompted by his therapist, in which he declares his undying love for her, and as a sign of this devotion has meticulously studied the Koran in order to impress her. Sleeping beauty decides to poison her prince. The narrative is interspersed with re-written fairy tales and alongside this recipes are added to the ending of some chapters. Therefore Ali seems to be combining the theme of food and domestic ideals present in the fairy tales while simultaneously commenting on the gendered and cultural economy of feeding and consuming.

From the beginning of the novel, Zuhra is critical of and resists accepting the gendered hierarchy in her home, made explicit around the dinner table where her father allows no conversation. Along with this there is an unspoken imposed hierarchy around the dinner table

as the young Zuhra explains: “Each night we sit at the kitchen table, Papa, Faruk-Paruk, Salena and me. Ma eats standing up at the kitchen sink so it’s easier for her to reach the pots on the stove and dish up second helpings for the men.” (Ali 16). The gendered hierarchy is made explicit by the sequence and frequency of consumption- the men are allowed second helpings which is in stark contrast with Salena who finishes “her tiny portion neatly and silently, the same way the cat Ginger washes her paws. She is so quiet sometimes I forget she is there.” (Ali 16). However, instead of submissively and dutifully consuming her food Zuhra, in contrast to Salena, “makes hills out of the mushy white rice and turn[s] dhal into small muddy rivers. The overcooked vegetables are [her] trees and the fatty meat [her] castle walls” (Ali 16). She seems to be exploiting the creative potential of food, rather than passively consuming it as she creates alternative food worlds (the castle signals the fairy tale genre). The slipperiness in mushy food and the building of a fairytale setting signals the domestic ideal (of a servile domestic princess). She concludes with a childish insistence that she would much rather “eat Rice Krispies and bananas” and the chapter ends with the recipe for this dish.

Zuhra and Salena both come to see marriage as an act of culling and consuming the female body. After Zuhra witnesses *Dhabiha*, she refuses to eat any type of meat and insists on living on a diet of Rice Krispies and cheese sandwiches. After this shocking experience she becomes aware of the routine slaughter of animals for consumption and she phones her sister to ask her to explain the how animals are killed in an abattoir. Salena (a young bride at this point in the novel) explains this process as follows:

A sheep (or a goat) is trained to lead the others to their deaths. Usually this is a young ram, and when he has lived in the abattoir long enough and is used to the smell of blood, he leads the other sheep up the ramp into the slaughterhouse. The sheep follow, he escapes through a side gate, and they die. Later, when he gets older, they get a new Judas goat and the old one follows him to his death....mother and other women like her are Judas goats. They let girls follow them into the marriage-abattoir. (Ali 24)

Marriage, is viscerally likened to the act of slaughter this is reconfirmed by Salena when she pages through her wedding album and happens upon a photograph “of herself surrounded by bridesmaids. Trapped in their photograph prison, they smile back at her like a giant bowl of colourful jellies. Salena, in the centre, is the whipped cream in this human trifle, offered up as human dessert, sold for a hundred rand” (Ali 121). This description is then somewhat sardonically followed by a recipe for a trifle. Marriage is represented by Salena as something that consumes her and renders her trapped and unable to escape. Not until she physically and

metaphorically cracks the mirror, with a piece lodging itself in her husband's neck, does she escape the stifling confines of her marriage.

Food and consumption, employed as a metaphor for Salena's marriage (unlike metaphors from Zuhra's marriage represented as equal and reciprocal) is used in more seditious and subversive ways. In *Not a Fairy Tale*, the gooning wife is present in multiple forms, as in all novels studied in this thesis. This theme like that in *Macbeth* and many fairy tales includes a witch-like character. The daughters' mother, in an attempt to stop a criminal from breaking into her car for a third time, makes a "potion" of snail poison and brooklax mixed into two one litre bottles of Coke and Fanta. Needless to say the culprit does not return. Zuhra is so frightened by this that she decides to stop drinking Coke in the house for fear of her mother poisoning her.

Elaborating on this theme, spells are presented as recipes of a slightly different kind, but are still intimately tied to the kitchen and to an articulation of resistance from a female subject. After numerous failed attempts at conceiving a child Zhura, whilst doing research for her Honours thesis, finds a "Spell for a Baby Girl". The ingredients are listed and the method of preparation follows the format for ordinary dishes as Ali combines the use of spells and potions with the preparation of meals, continuously blurring these two concepts. This is apparent when Zhura reveals that the Mung Dhal curry that her Aunt Anjum makes is "guaranteed to take the chill off your bones, and perhaps invite love into your heart." (Ali 64). Similarly, Zuhra always drinks "Soothing Masala Tea" when she has to walk home from school in the rain, but Salena also informs her that whenever "you're scared you should make masala tea and recite Surahs Falaq and Naas over your cup before you drink it, to protect you from harm, envy, black magic and, of course, the evils of Shaytan" (Ali 36).

Thus to conclude, although these texts await detailed analysis they suggest interesting and alternative avenues for thinking about food, cooking and cultural identity. The fact that these novels were recently published shows an increase, rather than a decrease, in focus/interest in the issues of the culinary as subject and theme within literature. Both *Not A Fairy Tale* and *Onion Tears* thus further expand on the themes and concerns raised within this thesis. *Onion Tears*, similar to Coovadia's *The Wedding*, explores the complex negotiation of belonging within the South Africa context for a diasporic community. Food plays a central role in the preservation and negotiation of cultural identity within the narrative. *Not A Fairy Tale* has unique tone and style and opens up unique points of connection and contention for this thesis.

Ultimately these novels hint at possible future research that can potentially widen and enrich the focus of this thesis. These new novels also confirm the relevance of research around food, gendered identity, cultural identity and gastronomy in general and the links between these fields of inquiry.

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