

FOOD PRACTICES AND THE CONSTRUCTION, PERFORMANCE AND
POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

Master's Thesis

Literary Studies

specialization English Literature and Culture

Leiden University

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February 28, 2015

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Johanna Kardux, for her patience and her valuable suggestions for further improvement of my thesis. I would also like to thank Dr Evert Jan van Leeuwen for his willingness to be second reader. Both Dr Kardux and Dr van Leeuwen are inspiring and knowledgeable lecturers and I enjoyed every minute of the literature courses I took with them in the past years. Thank you both.

I dedicate this thesis to my mother Anneke van der Winden-Zuidema (1939-2009) who always believed in my ability and took personal pride in my achievements. Her memory will be with me always.

Introduction

Food practices as a field of research were largely neglected by academia for a long time. Sociologist Deborah Lupton attributes this neglect to a rejection of the strong physical dimension of food and eating, a rejection which originates in ancient philosophy. According to Plato, for instance, “the ‘follies’ of the body ‘contaminate’ the pure search for truth and knowledge” (Plato, qtd. in Lupton, *Food 2*). Still, food and eating have always been a topic of interest in anthropology and have become a focus of attention in other disciplines as well since the 1980s, for instance in history, sociology, philosophy, literary criticism and literary theory (Counihan and Van Esterik 1-2). In the reader *Food and Culture*, editors Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik aptly summarise the significance of this scholarly interest: “Food is life, and life can be studied and understood through food” (1). In *Towards a Psychology of Contemporary Food Consumption* Roland Barthes contends that food is a “system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour” (Barthes 21), which makes it strongly resemble language. It is “human interaction” that provides food with powerful “symbolic functions” (Piatti-Farnell 17) and makes it such a fruitful tool for communication. Similarly, the British anthropologist Mary Douglas regards food as a code that can be deciphered and which is used to send out social messages. She argues that the encoded messages can be found “in the pattern of social relations being expressed”, messages which are about the “different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries” (Douglas 61). Douglas, then, indicates that the consumption and preparation of food is the symbolic carrier of a variety of factors connected to social interaction. These social messages lie hidden in the different kinds of food people eat, as well as the way they eat it and with whom (Chang 12). Given that food consumption marks boundaries between the eater(s) and others, it has a primary

role in the development and maintenance of identity. Or, as food studies pioneer Warren Belasco puts it, “Food indicates who we are, where we came from, and what we want to be” (Belasco, *Food Matters 2*).

Since food is closely connected to language and identity it often plays a significant role in literature. The use of food in novels and other works of literature opens up the possibility to interpret and explore its function as a signifier of identity. References to food and eating function as a central theme throughout Kiran Desai’s postcolonial novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), which will be the main focus of this thesis. These conspicuous references elicit a closer look into the significance of food habits, as well as its effects in the novel.

In the first chapter of my thesis I will outline the theoretical framework of my analysis of *The Inheritance of Loss*. Deborah Lupton’s *Food, the Body and the Self* and Claude Fischler’s crucial article “Food, Self and Identity” are the major sources I employ to theorize the connection between food, body and identity from a sociological viewpoint. I then focus on food practice as a means of communication by discussing the work of Roland Barthes and anthropologists Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas. In order to further explore the concept of identity in the postcolonial world I will discuss the views of Stuart Hall and sociologist Andrew Weigert, but my main sources here are Joane Nagel’s article “Constructing Identity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture”, Claude Fischler’s “Food, Self and Identity” and Judith Butler’s work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. To make a connection between identity and crucial post-colonial concepts that link up with the central theme of food in *The Inheritance of Loss*, I draw from *The Location of Culture* by Homi Bhabha and *Modernity at Large* by Arjun Appadurai.

The second chapter deals with Desai's deployment of food practice to explore postcolonial themes of identity and displacement *The Inheritance of Loss*. In this novel Desai relates the story of an Indian judge who grew up in colonial times and spends old age in 1980s India. Food imagery is used by Desai to illustrate the judge's inability to adjust to change and construct a new identity. Furthermore, Desai also employs food practice to provide insight into the notion of national identity and shifting borders as she deals with the Gurkha revolt in the Northern provinces of 1980s India. Parallel to this storyline set in India, there is the Indian boy Biju who migrates to the United States where he experiences an American nightmare of exploitation as an illegal immigrant in the New York restaurant business. Biju's anxiety about keeping his Indian identity intact is set against the permeability of boundaries between identities as a result of mutual influence and change in the context of migration and globalization. Again, it is culinary practice that provides insight into the multicultural nature of American society, which is exposed as a society of social hierarchies and unequal power relations. The desire of the Indian judge to fully assimilate into the culture of the (former) coloniser and Biju's desire to hold on to his Indian identity express identity change and striving for a stable identity, respectively. All other characters in the novel take up different positions between these two extremes. Biju's and the judge's essentialist views of identity are undercut in the novel, and the interaction between identities and a possible emergence of hybrid identities is prominent. I will explore the postcolonial concept of hybridity, as well as ethnic identity, national identity, and variables of identity, such as class, race and power relations.

Since, as anthropologists and cultural critics have argued, food and food practices constitute a system of communication that conveys social meaning, food as a cultural and social practice and as a literary trope provides insight into society and culture and the identities they

produce. If we are what we eat, food is an important means to define and, more specifically, perform our identities. In a globalizing world, in which both people and products constantly travel, food follows migratory flows. When placed in a political, economic, and cultural context food functions as a boundary marker as well as a boundary crosser. This makes food a useful trope in postcolonial and other migrant literature in particular, as these novels explore the effects of migration and cultural encounters on the formation, negotiation, and performance of identities. Placing my reading of Desai's postcolonial novel *The Inheritance of Loss* in the theoretical framework of food theories, I will argue that Desai uses food as a metaphorical instrument not only to deconstruct colonial identities, such as that of the Anglophile judge and his friends, and fixed ethnic identities, such as Biju's, but also to imagine more fluid, multiple, migrant identities, such as Saeed Saeed's, and to focus attention on unequal power relations and the fluidity of nationhood and national identity.

Chapter 1: Theory

In this chapter I start by discussing the biological and non-biological, symbolic, effects of food on both body and self. By means of the sociological theories of Deborah Lupton and Claude Fischler I make the connection between the ingestion of food, its edibility, and the cultural community the eater belongs to. Focusing on the symbolic aspects of food and food habits I then discuss the structuralists theories of Roland Barthes and anthropologists Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas who approach food practice as a structured system of communication that resembles language and has the ability to shed light on broader social structures. Food codes can contribute to defining the self and the other which is a binary that constitutes the basic element of identity. Drawing on the theories of Joane Nagel, Claude Fischler and Judith Butler I discuss the construction and performance of identity in more depth and subsequently I will further explore the concept of identity in relation to the effects of globalisation and migration as part of the postcolonial theories of Homi Bhabha and Arjun Appadurai.

1.1. Food, Body and Identity

Food and the body are closely interconnected since we have the ability to experience food by means of our bodily senses. We can smell and taste food, see and touch it and at times hear it, in the process of preparation (Lupton, *Food* 13). The intake of foodstuffs means that food goes from the outside world to the inside of the body in order for that body to survive. Lupton argues that food is a “liminal substance” as it bridges the opposition between the “natural” and the “human” (Lupton 16) or what Fischler calls the “world and the self” or “outside” and “inside” the body (Fischler 279). Food incorporated into the human body results in the foodstuff becoming part of the self, part of who we are (Lupton, *Food* 17-18). The principle of

incorporation, as theorized by Claude Fischler, involves the incorporation of the properties of food, which makes the hackneyed phrase “you are what you eat” highly appropriate. Fischler argues that this phrase is consistent with biology, since food provides energy the body needs, but is also the source that maintains “the very substance of the body, inasmuch as it helps to maintain the biochemical composition of the organism”. Yet, the phrase “you are what you eat” also applies in a non-biological, symbolic sense. According to “popular wisdom”, the incorporation of food can “transfer certain characteristics of the food analogically to the eater”, such as “red meat” or “blood”, which supposedly give the eater “strength” (Fischler 279-80). All types of food, then, have both a biological and a symbolical effect on the eater’s body and self.

In the physical as well as the symbolic sense, food has the ability to arouse emotions in human beings, preparing the body for “either pleasure or revulsion”, which are emotional reactions that exemplify the intricate bond between body and self (Lupton, *Food* 32). After incorporation, food becomes part of the body, which constitutes the foundation as well as the “model” of the self, or, to quote sociologist Pasi Falk, “the psycho-somatic entity called the self” (Falk 10). “The body is something we are, we have and we do in daily life”, writes sociologist Anthony Elliott, paraphrasing the views of fellow sociologist Bryan S. Turner, who rejected the notion of the self as a disembodied concept within sociology. Turner regards the body as indispensable for an individual subject’s sense of self and points to the notion that the body also plays a crucial part in the way the “self” interacts with others (Elliott 2001, 97). Food consumption as well as the emotional condition of the consuming individual both function as reminders of embodiment and pose a threat to the Western ideal of “self-containment” and to the disembodied mind, which in Western societies is generally deemed superior to the body. Emotions, as a general rule linked to “disorder”, are often opposed to rationality (Lupton, *Food*

31). Unsatisfied hunger, for instance, can stir up emotions of “anxiety, irritability or anger” and exemplifies the bond between a partly corporal phenomenon and the emotional condition of the eater. Conversely, loss of appetite, an “emotionally flavoured hunger”, can be the result of emotions of love or stress (Lupton, *Food* 33). Not only a lack of food, but also food itself has the ability to evoke emotions. Both the social meanings and physical experiences of food have the ability to call up conscious and unconscious emotional reactions (Lupton, *Food* 31) which are imbued with “embodied sensations” and “strong feelings” (Lupton, *Food* 36). However, although the body is intricately connected to the self, the notion that we can have control over emotions suggests that bodies are also perceived as “separate from ourselves” (Lupton, *Emotional* 85), in accordance with the phrase “me and my body” (Falk 2).

In line with the notion that the body is partly detached from the self, the self is not in control of the body after food has passed the mouth to enter into the body. This points to the irreversible nature of ingestion of foodstuffs, which forms the basis for emotional responses with regard to certain types of food and the decision to incorporate food or not. Food gone bad or inedible substances can endanger the health and even the life of the eater, which points to the significance of identifying and analysing foodstuffs by using all the five senses before the act of swallowing (Fischler 282). In her seminal essay on the concept of “abjection”, entitled “Powers of Horror”, Julia Kristeva claims that “Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (Kristeva 2). All foods have the power to pollute the “clean and proper body” as food represents “the other”, “the natural” and the “non-human”, which is seen as being opposed to the “the social condition of man” (Kristeva 75) or “the cultured body” (Lupton, *Food* 113). Claude Fischler asserts that especially unknown foodstuffs can bring about

“primitive” bodily responses, as well as a deeply rooted psychological response of “disgust” (Fischler 283-84). Fischler calls the fear of unknown foodstuffs “neophobia” (Fischler 278).

A cultural frame of reference contributes to safeguarding the self-integrity and autonomy of the eater, since the eater generally chooses only to incorporate the foodstuffs that are “culturally deemed appropriate” (Lupton, *Food* 16). Within different cuisines (newly introduced) raw food is processed according to the culinary rules and customs of a particular culture, which takes away the fear of incorporating new foodstuffs and results in food that can be identified by the members of that culture (Fischler 287). Fischler argues that religious and cultural systems have the ability to alleviate the fear of contamination. These systems function as a safety net, since they have the ability to evoke “physiological manifestations of disgust” in the eater with regard to certain types of forbidden food and, concurrently, provide a frame of reference that places certain foods within the safe boundaries of familiar “culinary classifications, rules and norms” (Fischler 288). Food that bears the hallmark of inedibility, for example pork in Islamic culture, can be perfectly fit for human consumption; in other words, the sense of impurity can be completely symbolic. Nevertheless, feelings of disgust can be evoked by the mere thought of these foodstuffs (Lupton, *Food* 112). Therefore, cuisine places food within a cultural system and thereby gives it meaning (Fischler 286). As a consequence, the incorporation of food by the eater simultaneously incorporates him or her into a “culinary system” as well as the community that is linked to this system (Fischler 281).

The “culturally learned reference grid” (Fischler 284) on which the decision whether a foodstuff is classified as edible or inedible is based includes a culinary system of rules and norms. Food classifications as part of a more general taxonomy form the basis of sociological and anthropological theories on the symbolic properties of food practice and its meaning in a

socio-cultural context. Through all stages of human life “a thick layer of meaning” builds up around food and culinary practice, as food has a symbolic quality which is interwoven with its “physiological dimension” (Lupton, *Food* 8). Cooking not only changes foodstuffs in a material manner, but also “operates in the register of the imagination”, which Fischler defines as the conversion of “nutritional raw materials”, representing the realm of nature, into the realm of culture. Furthermore, Fischler considers the essence of a cuisine to be a set of “classifications and rules ordering the world and giving it meaning”, where significant classifications include the binary oppositions between food and non-food, healthy and unhealthy food as well as taboo and non-taboo food. Rules determine which foodstuffs may or may not be combined in a given culture and establish norms of “propriety and context”, for “no food is appropriate for everyone, at all times, in all circumstances, in any quantity”. These rules are determined by for instance the “age, sex, rank, status and social role” of the eater. On a broader level, rules also govern customs with respect to the “production, gathering, preparation, attribution and consumption of food” (Fischler 284-86).

1.2. Structuralist Theories on Food as Language

Classifications and rules are at the centre stage of theories on food as devised by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas and Roland Barthes. All three are part of, or at least influenced by, the structuralist tradition and focus on the symbolic aspect of food and eating by regarding food practice as a structured system of communication that resembles language. As part of culture as a whole, Claude Lévi-Strauss considers eating customs and the preparation of food to be a collection of signs which derive their meaning from the functioning within a system of signs they are part of and form binary oppositions with other signs in particular. Although the relationship

between a sign and what it refers to in the real world is often arbitrary, Lévi-Strauss looked upon some binary oppositions, such as edibility and non-edibility, as “natural” and rooted in the “real world”. This is in accordance with his theory that the “structure of primitive thinking is binary”. As point of departure Lévi-Strauss conceives a universal culinary system which is based on the dichotomy between culture and nature. This system functions as a language and should have the ability to uncover the underlying structure of cuisine: “A society’s cookery is a language into which it translates its structure” (qtd. in Fischler 286). Lévi-Strauss applied linguistics to food and cooking by transposing the phonological systems of the “vowel triangle” and the “consonant triangle”, representing different positions of, for instance, tongue and lips in the articulation of vowels and consonants, to cooking. He considered cooking to be a “truly universal form of human activity”, just like language. His so-called “culinary triangle” consists of the categories of “the raw, the cooked and the rotted”, which are founded on the underlying culture and nature discrepancy (Lévi-Strauss 28-9). Lévi-Strauss considered raw food that is cooked to represent the delimitation of nature through culture and regarded the different ways of achieving this transformation of food to be distinguishing for different cultures (Lupton, *Food* 9). He imagines a more complete diagram as a “grille” which can be “superposed on other contrasts of a sociological, economic, aesthetic or religious nature”, such as “men and women; family and society” (Lévi-Strauss 35). In short, in this theoretical context food practices reflect what Lévi-Strauss deems to be binary oppositions and he expresses the hope to find a broader structure: “Thus we can hope to discover for each specific case how the cooking of a society is a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure—or else resigns itself, still unconsciously, to revealing its contradictions” (Lévi-Strauss 35).

Anthropologist Mary Douglas also treats food as a code that can be deciphered, yet she focuses on “social relations,” which she regards as the foundation of food “codification” and simultaneously as the structuring factor of social events. In “Deciphering a Meal”, Mary Douglas emphasises that “syntagmatic relations” between binary oppositions are crucial in giving each element of an opposition part of “its meaning” (Douglas 62). Although Douglas contends that the structure of meals is determined by linguistic phenomena such as grammar and syntax (Lupton, *Food* 9), she expresses doubt about the possibility to find the “precoded, panhuman message in the language of food” that Lévi-Strauss attempts to uncover. Analysing British meals, Douglas argues that “between breakfast and the last nightcap, the food of the day comes in an ordered pattern” (Douglas 62). The structure of meals, which Douglas considers to be predictable, creates “order out of potential disorder” (Lupton, *Food* 9) and can be extended to other social structures: “the ordered system which is a meal represents all the ordered systems associated with it” (qtd. in Lupton, *Food* 9). Therefore, Douglas indicates that the consumption and preparation of food are the symbolic carriers of a variety of factors connected to social messages. Douglas argues that within this framework of food habits individuals “identify themselves by their tastes and distastes” (Fischler 286). According to Douglas, the social messages the food code conveys are related to and provide information about social relations: “If food is treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries” (61).

Roland Barthes, too, regards food and eating as a collection of signs that together constitute a structure that is affected by society and therefore provides insight into society. In his article “Towards a Psychology of Contemporary Food Consumption” (1961), Roland Barthes,

like Lévi-Strauss, contends that food, as it is inevitably imbued with meaning, strongly resembles the distinguishing features of language: “For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behavior” (Barthes 21). Barthes considers buying, consuming and serving food items to be “a real sign” and conceivably a “functional unit of a system of communication”. Since “communication always implies a system of signification” he argues that “an entire ‘world’ (social environment) is present in and signified by food”. However, sociology must first structure cultural “objects”, such as food, because only then an attempt can be made to determine in what ways society affects these objects, as it is society that structures these objects with the aim to “make use of them”. Barthes claims that the units of the system of communication consist of a variety of food “substances, techniques of preparation” and “habits” which are all part of a “system of differences in signification”. He argues that the units of this system can be determined by making an “inventory of all we know of the food in a given society” and he then uses the linguistic process of “transformational analysis” in order to discern if “the passage from one fact to another produces a difference in signification”. Barthes provides an example of regular bread, signifying everyday life, and luxury bread “*pain de mie*”, which signifies a “party”, showing that different types of bread can be “units of signification”. The system of food not only consists of different food varieties, but also of diverse “flavors” and “substances” or a combination of those, as well as qualities that transcend the “physical nature of the product” and refer more to the perception of the foodstuff, such as the notion “crisp”. All these different units of signification constitute a system of food that, according to Barthes, is governed by a “veritable grammar of foods”; a

grammar, with a syntax (“menus”) and styles (“diets”), which provides the possibility of comparing the different units (Barthes 21-23).

1.3. Postcolonial Theories of Identity

As postcolonial anthropologist Arjun Appadurai points out, structuralist theories have often been attacked on account of its “ahistorical, formal, binary, mentalist and textualist associations”. Nevertheless, Appadurai argues that the “Saussurean linguistics” on which the structuralists base their theories in their discussion of the concepts of culture and identity are “context-sensitive” and “contrast-centred”(Appadurai 12). Instead of regarding culture as an “object, thing, or substance”, he prefers to build on the adjective form, the “*cultural*”, as this perception of culture focuses on “differences, contrasts, and comparisons”. Appadurai proposes to regard culture not merely “as a property of individuals and groups”, but primarily as “a dimension of phenomena” that can be employed in order to “express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities”. In other words, Appadurai does not equate culture with social groups, but stresses the applicability of culture with regard to exploring “difference” that ultimately generates “diverse concepts of identity”. Appadurai argues that the key concept of “difference” provides insight into “points of similarity and contrast” between, for instance, “classes, genders, roles, groups and nations” (Appadurai 12-13). Food as a system of communication uncovers the notion of difference and therefore the concept of identity, because the system of food codes can contribute to defining the self and the other which are the fundamental elements of the concept of identity (Weigert et al, 31). The formation of identity is the result of the process of identification, which commonly refers to the individual finding a connection with another person, group or ideal based on a “common origin” or “shared characteristics” and resulting in a sense of loyalty and

solidarity. However, as opposed to this ostensibly finite process, postcolonial theorist Stuart Hall also mentions a “discursive approach” which regards identification as a “construction”, as part of a continuous process which “operates across difference”, through the “relation to the Other”. The process of identification depends on “what is left outside” and focuses the attention on “symbolic boundaries” (Hall 2-5). The distinction between self and other can be related to the binary opposition between edible and inedible, which is a distinction that is determined by cultural understanding and norms. This cultural code prescribes what can be eaten at what time and in which order and combination, thereby creating a system of boundaries between what is allowed and what is not (Lupton, *Food* 29).

In keeping with the structuralist theories as discussed above, Appadurai emphasises the life-structuring qualities of consumption, including food consumption, which he considers to be the result of “habituation through repetition”. By employing music as a metaphor for repetitive consumption patterns, Appadurai illustrates his view that small-scale daily (food) consumption patterns interconnect with broader patterns of food consumption:

In any socially regulated set of consumption practices, those that center around the body, and especially around the feeding of the body, take on the function of structuring temporal rhythm, of setting the minimum temporal measure (by analogy to musical activity) on which much more complex and chaotic patterns can be built. Pushing the analogy a step further, the small habits of consumption, typically daily food habits, can perform a percussive role in organizing large-scale consumption patterns, which may be made up of more complex orders of repetition and improvisation (68).

Appadurai regards the body as “an ideal site for the inscription of social disciplines”, such as eating. He describes food consumption as one of the types of consumption that is “closest to the

body” and tends to “acquire uniformity through habituation”. Habituation is the effect of repetitive bodily actions that Marcel Mauss calls the “techniques of the body” (Mauss, qtd. in Appadurai). According to Appadurai, avoiding habituation by pursuing an “anarchic consumption regime”, which means deviating from common (food) consumption patterns, is very difficult. He attributes this to the idea that techniques of the body are inclined to becoming “social disciplines” and parts of what Pierre Bourdieu has called a “habitus” that binds people into groups (Appadurai 67). Bourdieu argues that members of the same social group have the same “taste” in a wide variety of “cultural or symbolic goods and practices”. In the introduction to Bourdieu’s seminal work *Distinction*, Tony Bennett defines habitus as consisting “in a set of unifying principles which underlie such tastes and give them a particular social logic which derives from, while also organizing and articulating, the position which a particular group occupies in social space”. This “social logic” correlates with class and education (Bennett xix). With the concept of “habitus” Bourdieu intends to harmonize “individual agency” with the influence of the “social structure” around us (Maton 49):

...habitus focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being. It captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others. This is an ongoing and active process – we are engaged in a continuous process of making history, but not under conditions entirely of our own making (Maton 51).

The idea that we make choices that are influenced by the “social structure” around us also applies to food choices. Bourdieu argues that “cultural or symbolic goods and practices” not only comprise “taste for the most refined objects” but also the “elementary taste for the flavours of

food”. Indeed, he even expressly connects these two categories in his argument about taste and its connection with class and education (Bennett xix).

As the concept of habitus indicates, culture, including foodways, is of vital importance in community construction. Culture has the ability to determine the “boundaries of collective identity, establish membership criteria, generate a shared symbolic vocabulary, and define a common purpose” (Nagel 163). The consumption of food, the way these foodstuffs are consumed and the social context in which this takes place contribute to understanding the individual, as well as the bonds between the individual and other individuals. “Members of a society speak the same cultural language (foodways) and therefore should be able to receive and interpret one another’s message correctly, regardless of whether it is expressed through a linguistic sign or a food code” (Chang 13). As part of a cultural language, food habits and culinary traditions are passed down from generation to generation and are closely connected with “group membership” and “kinship”, since foodways revolve around “family and sub-cultures” (Lupton, *Food* 25). Food and cuisine contribute to a “sense of collective belonging” (Fischler 280), a sense of belonging to a group of individuals who share the same food habits and methods of food preparation. The sense of “collective belonging” can be very strong, which shows, for instance, in migrants or “minority cultures” who hold on to their culturally specific food habits for a long time, even when their native language has already passed into oblivion (Calvo, in Fischler 280). Focusing on displaced people, such as migrants, Homi Bhabha contends that culture in general leads up to “a symbolic textuality” which has the ability to “give the alienating everyday an aura of selfhood, a promise of pleasure” (Bhabha 246-7). Preparing food makes foodstuffs part of a culture and assimilates the eater of that food into that culture (Lupton, *Food* 25). Claude Fischler contends that shared culinary practice confirms the “diversity, hierarchy and

organization” of a community and its unity as well as its “otherness” (Fischler 275). The members of such a community indicate their collective identity by eating, for instance, specific dishes, which emphasises their distinctiveness from the “other” who practices different foodways. In order to underline this distinctiveness, a cultural community often designates a community with different foodways as “...-eaters” (Fischler 280). Therefore, identities functioning as “points of identification and attachment” go together with the ability to exclude the “other”, or as Hall puts it, the “abjected” (Hall 5). These boundaries, although not impermeable, are usually respected by the members of a cultural group. Yet, crossing these boundaries can invoke strong emotions of disapproval (Lupton, *Food* 29). Evidently, food practices, and other aspects of culture, not only bring about a sense of solidarity within a group, but simultaneously function as a boundary marker that distinguishes and separates sections of society based on shared characteristics such as “culture, region, race/ethnicity, religion, gender, age, class, sexuality” (Xu 4).

Ethnicity is a firm basis for collective group formation and functions as an overarching concept that is itself composed of, and determined by, elements such as “language, religion, culture, appearance, ancestry, or regionality” (Nagel 152-3). Political and cultural sociologist Joane Nagel argues that both “individuals and groups create and recreate their personal and collective histories, the membership boundaries of their group, and the content and meaning of their ethnicity” (Nagel 154). Although biological traits, such as skin colour, seem to be clear-cut markers of ethnic boundaries that fix the available “identity options” (Nagel 162), ethnic and racial identity is in fact a “social construction” (Nagel 168). Building ethnic boundaries, just like the construction of its cultural contents, is the result of the “actions of individuals and groups and their interactions with the larger society” (Nagel 162). Similarly, Anthony Elliott argues in

Concepts of the Self that “expressions of personal agency” do not occur “through our actions alone”, because it is also society that “disciplines and regulates the self”, which means that “beliefs about our identities are shaped to their roots by broader social forces and cultural sensibilities” (Elliott 2001, 2). External socio-cultural processes and political institutions play a vital role in the construction, definition and interpretation of ethnic boundaries and in the establishment of the available ethnic identities. In fact, Nagel contends that these forces, such as political institutions with their ethnic and immigration policies, are the most decisive factor in determining ethnic identities. Nevertheless, she concedes that individual “agency” also plays a role. In addition to external “agents and organizations” (Nagel 155-57), both the individual and social interaction with other people, such as fellow members of ethnic groups and their “antagonists” also partly determine ethnic identity (Nagel 152). Following the anthropologist Fredrik Barth, Nagel argues that ethnic identity is in part determined by the “individual's self-identification”, as well as by the “outsiders' ethnic designations”, that is, the ethnic identity these outsiders attribute to an individual. Therefore, individuals can carry “a portfolio of ethnic identities” which makes ethnicity changeable and depending on a variety of situations as well as on the interaction with other people. The changeable ethnic boundaries determine the composition, division and accessibility of a variety of “ethnic categories” that are “available for individual identification” (Nagel 154). All the divergent factors that influence the drawing of ethnic boundaries make these boundaries dynamic and unstable and show that ethnic identities in societies are “created, emphasized, chosen, or discarded” (Nagel 161). Ethnicity is best understood as a dynamic, constantly evolving property of both individual identity and group organization (Nagel 152).

Placing food in the context of Judith Butler's theory on performance and gender identity, food consumption can be regarded as a set of repeating "performances" that contribute to the establishment and construction of identity. The "identity categories" people are part of are "fashioned through our involvement with, and subjection to, cultural and linguistic codes" (Elliott 2014, 126). Food consumption as a system of cultural codes is crucial in the act of performing identity, as "we all perform 'selves' in the rituals of daily life" (Elliott 2014, 15). Looking at identity as the result of active performance, Judith Butler rejects the idea that identity has a fixed "internal core or substance" (Butler 136). Instead of considering an authentic "essence or identity" as the source of performance, Butler turns this around by arguing that (gender) identity is itself the result of acts of performance that match that identity:

Acts, gestures, and desires produce the effect of an internal core or substance ... Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality ... The original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. (Butler 136–38)

With regard to gender identity performance Butler points to the idea that "the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*". She considers repetition to be "a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established", as well as a "mundane and ritualized form" to legitimize this "set of meanings" (Butler 140). When applied to food practice, a wide variety of rituals and habits function as repeated acts that contribute to identity construction and provide identity with a sense of stability, as in Butler's view identity lacks an

“ontological” foundation. However, the idea that identity is determined by a diversity of performative acts and not by a stable “internal core” simultaneously makes identity potentially fluid and subject to change.

Human agency signifies “self-shaping and self-cultivation”, the capacity of “acting on the world and on others through our very need to give form and content to our identities, our sense of self” (Elliott 2001, 3). Likewise, Joane Nagel argues that culture, as one of the building blocks of ethnicity, is in fact the result of an active construction process within ethnic groups (Nagel 152-3). Culture contributes to community formation in that it “animates and authenticates ethnic boundaries by providing a history, ideology, symbolic universe, and system of meaning” that together constitute the “content and meaning of ethnicity” (Nagel 162). In order to clarify her point with regard to culture as a process of construction, Nagel transforms Fredrik Barth’s “vessel” metaphor into the “shopping cart” metaphor. In her view the shopping cart itself represents the concept of ethnic identity which contains the various components of a particular “ethnic culture”, such as “music, dress, religion, norms, beliefs, symbols, myths, customs”. It is self-evident that the components “customs”, “symbols”, “religion” and “norms” also comprise the multifaceted concept foodways. The shopping cart metaphor implies that ethnic culture does not come to us as a ready-made “historical legacy”, since the shopper in a supermarket puts in the products one by one. Moreover, not only new items are put in the cart; some items are already in it and some are discarded (Nagel 162). This metaphor depicts ethnic culture not only as malleable and changeable, but also suggests that food products, and the customs of preparing and consuming them, play a central role in shaping and defining ethnic, national, and cultural identities.

One obvious aspect of ethnicity is that it is often defined on the basis of physical characteristics that determine who belongs to which ethnic category or, as Chang phrases it, that determine “the space that we occupy in society” (Chang 7). However, the ethnic classification of a person based on outward appearance is also determined by society and its institutions. One evident manifestation of outward appearance is skin colour, which is often reduced to the explicit binary opposition of black, or coloured, versus white. Political theorist Ernesto Laclau argues that the construction of identity, in this case racial identity, is founded on exclusion and “establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles” (Laclau, qtd. in Hall 5). Analogous to the poststructuralist view that all binary oppositions are based on a hierarchy “between centre and margin (or periphery)” (Bertens 100), “white” functions as the prevailing standard in colonial discourse and “black” is the deviant colour, representing “inferiority or degeneracy” (Bhabha 114). Yet, this also shows that black and white are not isolated concepts, since one cannot exist without the other because they are interdependent and originate from difference (Bertens 102). Furthermore, skin colour forms part of the construction of racial stereotypes. The racial stereotype is a central mechanism in the construction of the individual subject in colonial discourse. Bhabha argues that colonial discourse and the exertion of colonial power are founded on a “discursive form of racial and cultural opposition”, embedded in stereotypes (Bhabha 112) that are typified by the notion of “fixity”. However, Bhabha argues that the “fixity” of (racial) stereotypes is a fallacy and that these stereotypes can only persist and support a colonial system in a changing world when they are constantly repeated (Bhabha 94-5).

In between “stasis” and “change” the (post)colonial concept of “mimicry” represents a manifestation of human agency that contributes to self-shaping identity through mimicking a hegemonic colonial power (Bhabha 122-23). Copying, for instance, cultural aspects of the

colonial ruling class involves the (partial) suppression of somebody's original cultural identity. Instead of the colonizer's demand that the colonized "turn white or disappear", as Frantz Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Bhabha presents mimicry, or "black skin, white masks", as a third option (Bhabha 172). As copying the colonizer does not result in colonized individuals that are carbon copies of their colonial masters, the colonized are only capable of "producing a partial vision of the colonizer's presence" (Bhabha 127). Mimicry implies ambivalence since it results in a colonized subject that is "almost the same" as the colonizer, "but not quite". This disparity is crucial, according to Bhabha, as he argues that mimicry can only be effective if it produces "slippage", "excess" and "difference" (Bhabha 122). Analogously, in *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon contends that "the colonized can only imitate never identify" (Fanon xxi). Therefore, mimicry involves striving for similarity but concurrently implies the notion of continual "difference". Mimicry changes colonial discourse and results in a colonial subject that is in an ambivalent state and has constructed a new hybrid identity (Bhabha 162).

However, hybridity is not restricted to a colonial context but also applies to the post-colonial world. This is in line with Bhabha's view that colonial discourse and practices foreshadowed many concepts in contemporary postcolonial theory, such as "ambivalence" and "indeterminacy". Focusing on manifestations of cultural displacement, for example as a result of migration, he draws attention to hybridity as an effect of interaction and cultural exchange (Bhabha 247-8). Interaction between cultures and the subsequent development of a cultural identity that is characterized by hybridity show that boundaries between identities are blurring and a fluid sense of identity emerges. Cultural interaction as a result of advancing globalization and the attendant "forced and 'free' migration" had a disruptive effect on "populations and cultures" that were "relatively 'settled'" in the past (Hall 4). In relation to cultural interaction

Bhabha contends that this process of change includes the “rearticulation, or translation, of elements”, resulting in a form of hybridity that is “*neither the One... nor the Other... but something else besides*” (Bhabha 41). Hybridity is central to the “cultures of survival” of the displaced. He argues that these cultures of survival do not fully correspond to the supposedly self-contained and authentic “national cultures”, but, instead, tap into “culture as an uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value” (Bhabha 246-7), which in turn mirrors Nagel’s shopping cart metaphor. Stuart Hall similarly defines identity as “multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions”, thereby emphasizing the fragmentation of identity in late modernity and denying its fixity (Hall 4). Rejecting the multiculturalist ideal of “cultural diversity” which implies a belief in “pre-given cultural contents and customs”, Bhabha proposes the notion of “cultural difference” where cultural hybridity is the result of interaction with and negotiation between cultural differences (Bhabha 50-51).

Bhabha argues that the “shifting margins of cultural displacement” disrupt the conception of a “national’ culture” and suggests that we reason from the premise that the postcolonial world is a cultural and historical hybrid (Bhabha 31). In terms of food culture, which as we have seen is closely related to (national) identity, boundaries between various (national) cultures with regard to food habits and cuisine are becoming increasingly indistinct (Lupton, *Food* 26). Migration clearly shows how divergent cultural ingredients result in hybrid (collective) identities. The heterogeneity of a nation’s people is characterized by the “discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference” (Bhabha 212). Moreover, Bhabha argues that the idea of assimilation of different minorities into “holistic and organic notions of cultural value” is obsolete (Bhabha

251). The people of a nation are affected by the pressure to be part of a “homogenous, consensual community”, but are simultaneously characterized by “unequal interests and identities” (Bhabha 209). This undermines the conception of a “historical identity of culture” representing a “homogenizing, unifying force” that is underpinned and legitimized by a supposedly “originary Past” that continues to exist in an imagined “national tradition of the People” (Bhabha 54). In line with this, Appadurai argues that modern nation-states are bordered territories populated by “communities of citizens” yet bound together by a “collective imagination” more than by factors such as “language, blood, soil and race”. Although the notion of “tribe” suggests that “language, blood, soil and race” have a sense of innateness, Appadurai argues that “modern nationalisms” are about communities of people united in a nation-state and connected by a constructed sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is sustained by a variety of information sources, for example as Benedict Anderson has argued, “print capitalism” (qtd. in Appadurai 161). National culture, which includes food habits, is based on a view of culture as an epistemological process which has a strong focus on describing “cultural elements as they tend towards a totality” (Bhabha 255). By contrast, culture conceived as an “enunciative practice” is a “dialogic process” which tries to uncover “displacements and realignments” that result from the versatility and ambivalence of culture (Bhabha 255).

Without detracting from Bhabha’s idea that culture is a “dialogic process” that reconsiders the “political claim to cultural priority and hierarchy” (Bhabha 255), Appadurai argues that various “culturalist movements” consciously and strategically employ “identity, culture and heritage” in order to revolt against, or receive more recognition from, nation-states, “transnational bodies” or other culturalist groups. In the context of unequal interests and identities of people within a nation-state, Appadurai defines the concept of “culturalism” as a

“conscious mobilization of cultural differences” as part of a (trans)national political aim (Appadurai 15). While culturalist groups draw on, for instance, “blood, soil, or language”, as supposedly stable primordial factors that unite people into ethnic groups, Appadurai regards agency as the key concept in ethnic identity construction (Appadurai 141). Moreover, cultural primordia themselves are the result of constructability, as Appadurai notes that they are “invented traditions or retrospective affiliations” (Appadurai 41). Cultural theorist Stuart Hall also calls a fixed historical origin of identity into question, as he emphasizes that it is not about “‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’”, but more about “what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves”. In other words, “resources of history, language and culture” function as ingredients in a “process of becoming, rather than being” (Hall 4). This view links up with Appadurai’s “instrumental conception of ethnicity” which conceives ethnicity as a concept that puts the conscious construction and mobilization of difference at centre stage with regard to the formation of group identity (Appadurai 13-14).

Contrary to the objective of culturalist groups, such as nationalist movements, to “dominate in the name of cultural supremacy” (Bhabha 51), Bhabha sees a possible emergence of an “*international culture*”. This “*international culture*” does not take “multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures” as a starting point, but focuses on cultural hybridity and the wiping out of the “politics of polarity” (Bhabha 56). Taking the modern Western metropolis as a starting point, Bhabha argues that migration changed the metropolis into a space where the Third World and the First World come together and a “postcolonial space” emerges (Bhabha 241). This postcolonial space throws doubt upon the idea of “social cohesion” and a stable social totality of “gender, class or race” (Bhabha 204). This induced Bhabha to express the necessity to reconsider the

concepts of “community, citizenship, nationality, and the ethics of social affiliation” and to look for alternative ways to express deviant “historicities of race, gender, class, nation within a growing transnational culture” (Bhabha 249-50). In line with Bhabha’s idea of a transnational culture, Appadurai considers the nation-state to be in decline. He advances the notion of the “postnational”, which refers to the idea that due to globalization the nation-state “has become obsolete” and is replaced by “other formations for allegiance and identity” (Appadurai 168-69). Appadurai argues that even if nation-states remain, their ability to “monopolize loyalty” of citizens will continue to be undermined and deterritorialized “national forms” will come into existence (Appadurai 169). Although due to global population flows a longing for a “homeland”, connected to a territory, is very strong, migration leads to diminishment of loyalty to the nation-state, and the lack of a homogeneous population. Therefore, Appadurai imagines “transnations” to become the “social sites” where “crises of patriotism are played out” (Appadurai 176-77).

Chapter 2: Identity and Food Practices in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

In an interview with Harriet Gilbert for BBC World Service in 2009, Kiran Desai responds to a question about her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*:

...people do get obsessed with, uh, their digestion and food... Talking about food habits, it's a way to really talk about different places, you know, being in between different places. Your habits of the table, your bathroom habits, all the rest of it, is a way to really...bring the story into a very personal sphere. Yeah, I think it is a way to expose a lot of things, the personal things are the most horrible to witness maybe, but they tell the story best often. (Gilbert)

In response to questions sent in by listeners Gilbert asks about the problems judge Patel has “when it comes to the lavatory”. In her answer Desai immediately connects bowel movements to food as the two are naturally connected. Yet, references to food and eating are not only related to (in)digestion; Desai indicates that everyday cultural practices, such as the “habits of the table”, can “expose a lot of things”. Food has the capacity to communicate social messages or, as Desai explains in the BBC interview, daily personal practice, such as food habits, can “tell the story best”. Like the theorists I discussed in the previous chapter, Desai recognizes food as a signifying system, which makes it strongly resemble language. In her novel, too, the significance of food consumption clearly transcends the level of merely satisfying one's appetite. In *The Inheritance of Loss* the everyday domestic activity of cooking and eating is a symbolic carrier that provides insight into shifting and conflicting identities, both individual and collective, as well as the permeability of the boundaries between these identities in the context of a globalising postcolonial world.

2.1. Colonial Identity Construction and Performance

As I made clear in chapter one, food consumption has a physical as well as a symbolic, non-biological side. As Fischler puts it, “any given human individual is constructed, biologically, psychologically and socially by the food he/she chooses to incorporate” (Fischler 275). In *The Inheritance of Loss* the judge’s cook writes his son Biju in the United States to ask if he is “growing fat” (233), because he believes that “health is wealth” (18). Food provides the strength that can lead to success, which is exemplified by Gyan’s great-grandfather “who had grown so strong on the milk of their buffalo” that he beat someone in a wrestling match and was recruited as a Gurkha in the Imperial Army for his physical strength (141). The popular belief that red meat or blood gives the eater strength (Fischler 279-80), which I mentioned in chapter one, is expressed by Lola when she discusses “rumors of increasing vegetarianism” in the Indian army (195): “To kill you must be carnivorous or otherwise you’re the hunted. Just look at nature—the deer, the cow. We are animals after all and to triumph you must taste blood” (195). In *The Inheritance of Loss* Kiran Desai provides the reader with another telling example of the incorporation of food as a way to construct the “self” when she relates how the judge’s mother makes her son drink his milk: “Fed he was, to surfeit. Each day, he was given a tumbler of fresh milk sequined with golden fat. His mother held the tumbler to his lips, lowering it only when empty, so he reemerged like a whale from the sea, heaving for breath. Stomach full of cream.” (58). In *Mythologies* (1957) Barthes points out that milk, which is associated with the “innocence of the child”, signifies purity. He sees this sense of purity also as an emblem of strength, a strength that is “calm”, “white” and “lucid” (Barthes 68). Yet, in the (post)colonial context of Desai’s novel it has racial connotations, serving as a metaphor for the supposed superior “white” English education Jemubhai’s parents had planned for him. He is essentially force-fed with

“whiteness” by his mother and his metaphorical transformation into a whale from the sea foreshadows his transformation into an Indian-Englishman. Jemubhai’s native body is metaphorically colonised by the dominant culture of the English (Piatti-Farnell 113) as internalised by his parents. Jemubhai’s transformation draws attention to the role food plays in the construction of identity; as Fischler puts it, “Food makes the eater” (282).

By feeding him milk, Jemubhai’s mother initiates the social construction of Jemubhai’s identity, whitening it. On the boat trip to the United Kingdom Jemubhai takes control over his own destiny, but the new identity he constructs for himself is a more radical continuation of the one his parents had planned for him. Jemubhai metaphorically throws his Indian identity overboard with the Indian food in his care package:

The cabinmate’s nose twitched at Jemu’s lump of pickle wrapped in a bundle of *puris*; onions, green chillies, and salt in a twist of newspaper; a banana that in the course of the journey had been slain by heat.... Jemu picked up the package, fled to the deck and threw it overboard.... The smell of dying bananas retreated, oh, but now that just left the stink of fear and loneliness perfectly exposed. (37-8)

For Jemubhai—as to Biju in America years later—the time in Cambridge was lonely indeed, since for “entire days nobody spoke to him at all” and his solitude “crushed him into a shadow” (39). This loneliness is expressed by the solitary English meals Jemubhai has in his room. Not sharing his meals with English people indicates Jemubhai’s exclusion from English society, for, as Deborah Lupton points out, it is “sharing the act of eating” that “brings people into the same community” (Lupton, *Food* 25). Although Jemubhai eats the same food as the English, which is supposed to incorporate him “into a culinary system” and consequently “into the group which practices it” (Fischler 280-81), he is not accepted by them as their equal. He is ironically

excluded by virtue of the old food habits he is determined to cast off: “Phew, he stinks of curry!” (39). Even though Jemubhai had not eaten curry since he left India, these words by a few English girls show how the English emphasise their own group identity by designating him as the “other” for the “different foodways” he is expected to practice (Fischler 280). Jemubhai’s experiences in England germinate a crisis of identity: “Thus Jemubhai’s mind had begun to warp; he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, found his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar” (40). Suppressing his Indian identity and desperately trying—to no avail—to assume an English cultural identity causes psychological conflict.

Food marks his identity confusion, which persists when Jemubhai returns to India and is appointed judge. He remains determined to assimilate into English culture by keeping rigidly to his adopted English food habits. His fetishizing of English (colonial) culture can be understood as a format of mimicry (Bhabha 130), which, as I have discussed in chapter one, involves one’s copying of cultural aspects of the colonial ruling class and the (partial) suppression of one’s original cultural identity (Bhabha 122-23). However, the judge does not really seem to enjoy his English meals: “The judge speared a bit of meat with his fork, dunked it in the gravy, piled on a bit of potato and mashed on a few peas, put the whole thing into his mouth with the fork held in his left hand” (109). This way of eating reflects the “passion of hatred” with which Jemubhai “worked at being English” (119), the same hatred with which he maltreats and rejects his Indian wife as she reminds him of his former Indian identity. Jemubhai obviously sticks to his table manners—holding his fork in his left hand—but the flavour of his meal does not seem to be of any interest to him. According to food scholar Paul Fieldhouse, culture is the decisive element that prescribes which types of food we eat: “the flavour of the food is [often] irrelevant [...] [:] culture tells us what is fit to eat and ethnocentricity ensures that we obey” (qtd. in Piatti-Farnell

109). The judge consumes food not for its taste or nutrition but for its cultural signification; because he wants to be part of English culture, “loathed Indians” (119) and shuts out those who display non-English foodways. Although identity construction involves the “marking of differences and exclusion” (Hall 4), Jemubhai’s food habits do not change him into an Englishman, but instead alienate him from his native culture. As a form of mimicry the judge attempts to be the same as the English coloniser, but never succeeds in becoming a carbon copy of them. The judge is trapped between two worlds, as his identity is neither Indian nor English and he realises “he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both” (119).

While Jemubhai consolidates and perpetuates the foundations of colonialism by internalising white/Western supremacy, so does his cook by internalising the sociocultural inequality that is part of the colonial system. Like the judge the cook thinks English food, as representative of English culture, is superior; he “was sure that since his son was cooking English food, he had a higher position than if he were cooking Indian” (17) and considers working for Jemubhai to be lower in status than working for “white men only”, as his father had done (63). The colonial system is built on the notion of the superior “colonial ‘self’”, the ‘us’, who exist merely by the grace of the “construction of the ‘non-self’”, the ‘them’ or subservient natives (Piatti-Farnell 111). When the judge’s friend Bose tells about the instructions he gave to his new cook, it appears that English cuisine perfectly reflects this foundation of colonialism by expressing that white goes with white and brown should go with brown: “‘Look,’ I told him, ‘keep it basic, nothing fancy. Just learn a brown sauce and a white sauce—shove the bloody white sauce on the fish and shove the bloody brown sauce on the mutton’” (208). This food metaphor corresponds to the view of ethnic identities as propagated by H. Hardless’s *The Indian Gentleman’s Guide to Etiquette* (1919) which Desai quotes from in her novel: “Although you

may have required the habits and manners of the European, have the courage to show that you are not ashamed of being an Indian, and in all such cases, identify yourself with the race to which you belong” (199). Recording and promoting difference, or, more precisely, racial segregation, this etiquette guidebook supports Bhabha’s theory that it is necessary to repeat racial stereotypes in order to uphold these stereotypes and hence the colonial system (Bhabha 153). Desai clearly draws attention to the idea that racial differences are politically and socially constructed.

As the concept of “mimicry” and the repetition of racial stereotypes indicate, the colonial system requires a “reformed”, yet “recognizable Other” (Bhabha 122). The notion that mimicry implies “difference” (Bhabha 122) is expressed by Desai through disrupted food rituals. In “Deciphering a Meal” Mary Douglas points out that a meal is a repeated “structured social event” (Douglas 69), the main function of which is to create order. Fischler similarly argues that rules determine the foodstuffs that may or may not be combined in a given culture and that refer to norms of “propriety and context” (Fischler 285-86). For the judge too, eating is a ritual performance, a ceremony that has a fixed set of rules to comply with in order to maintain control. The tea ceremony Sai and the judge take part in is a telling example of an upset ritual, reflecting disorder:

He, looked, then, at the sugar pot: dirty, mica-like glinting granules. The biscuits looked like cardboard and there were dark finger marks on the white of the saucers. Never ever was the tea served the way it should be, but he demanded at least a cake or scones, macaroons or cheese straws. Something sweet and something salty. This was a travesty and it undid the very concept of teatime. (3)

The contamination of whiteness is one of the factors that disturbs the tea ritual here. The sugar is not purely white, but has the colour of mica and “dark finger marks” soil the “white of the

saucers” (3). Indirectly referring to skin colour here as the visible “key signifier of cultural and racial difference” (Bhabha 112), Desai metaphorically expresses the impossibility for the judge to become fully part of “white” colonial culture. This also becomes evident in the judge’s frantic, yet futile, efforts to gloss over his brown skin using pink-white face-powder.

The judge’s attempt to gloss over his skin colour also reflects the (post)colonial concept of mimicry, since Jemubhai literally puts on a white mask to cover his dark skin and thereby evidently tries to copy the (former) English colonizers. Mimicking the English is part of the judge’s endeavour to (self-)shape his identity and turn white, because both the coloniser and the judge see his dark skin as, in Bhabha’s words, a “cultural/political *sign* of inferiority” (114). While the judge takes his whitening very seriously, his granddaughter Sai and the cook find it hilarious when they are both accidentally covered with white flour: “Looking at each other covered with white, they began to laugh”: “*Angrez ke tarah, Like the English*” (105). This way Desai mocks the judge’s attempt to hide his dark skin and together with the metaphorical contamination of whiteness in the tea ceremony, she suggests that mimicry is never fully successful. The essence of mimicry is its deficiency, as the result of mimicry is a person that is “almost the same” as the colonizer, “but not quite” (Bhabha 122). The tea ceremony as a whole emphasises the deficiency of mimicry: “Never ever was the tea served the way it should be...” (3). This sentence conveys the judge’s failure to create order through food practice and, ensuing from this, his failure to fully assimilate into English culture.

Order is further disturbed by the absence of an equal amount of “something sweet and something salty” (3) to go with the tea, symbolising a lack of balance between the multiple identities of the judge that cause so much unhappiness: his English and Indian cultural identities. The judge is aware that the “English” identity he has constructed for himself is precarious, but he

desperately holds on to it: “he had tolerated certain artificial constructs to uphold his existence. When you build on lies, you build strong and solid. It was the truth that undid you. He couldn’t knock down the lies or else the past would crumble and therefore the present...” (210). When the wife of a drunkard who was assaulted by Gurkha insurgents asks the judge for help, the judge gives her advice that actually reflects the way he managed to get by in life himself: “in this life [...] you must stop your thoughts if you wished to remain intact, or guilt and pity would take everything from you, even yourself from yourself” (264). Yet, eventually the judge is losing this battle in the last stage of his life: “The judge felt old, very old, and as the house crumbled about him, his mind, too, seemed to giving way, doors he had kept firmly closed between one thought and the next, dissolving” (110).

The judge’s identity is closely “tied to his sense of place” (Ferguson 44), as represented by his house Cho Oyu where he lives a secluded life as a “foreigner in his own country” (29). Similarly, the identity of Lola and Noni is also strongly connected with their property, called Mon Ami, and their corresponding lifestyle. The two sisters have transformed their home into an ostensible safe haven where the consumption of European food adds to the performance of their socio-cultural identity. Exemplary for their Anglophilia is their belief they are growing the “only broccoli grown from seeds procured in England” in their vegetable garden (44). They prefer imported foodstuffs from England, such as “Marmite, Oxo bouillon cubes, Knorr soup packets, After Eights” (46), as part of a “daily fight to keep up civilization in this place of towering, flickering green” that is Kalimpong (247).

Although Desai employs the word “place” here to indicate Kalimpong, the word “space” would better fit in with Jesse Ferguson’s argument that within “undifferentiated space” a sense of “place-ness” can be created (Ferguson 36). “Place-ness” is a concept that goes beyond “the

physical locale of home and home-region”, as it also includes “a person’s emotional, legal, aesthetic and existential investment in a given physical location” (36). Analogous to this, the English (colonial) food habits and rituals that dominate the secluded world of the judge are performances that contribute to his “carefully nurtured sense of being” that imbues his property Cho Oyu and provides it with a sense of “place-ness” (Ashcroft, qtd. in Ferguson 36). Prior to his retirement the judge travelled the country in order to administer justice and tried to create a sense of “place-ness” everywhere he set up camp, again significantly by means of food ritual. The cook, although presumably exaggerating, draws a picture of the dinner ceremony in such a camp: “The tents were very grand, Kashmiri carpets, silver dishes, and your grandfather dressed for dinner even in the jungle, in black dinner jacket and bow tie” (60). The power Jemubhai exercises as a magistrate of the law is connected with the physical location of the traveling court. The same applies to other physical locations; as Bill Ashcroft argues in *Post-Colonial Transformation*, “to inhabit place is, in a variety of ways, to inhabit power” (Ashcroft, qtd. in Ferguson 46). Eventually Cho Oyu is the last remaining place where the judge can exercise his power and authority, which shows in the grand, yet grotesque, evening meal the cook prepares in order to welcome the judge’s granddaughter, Sai Mistry, to the house in Kalimpong: “To welcome her, the cook had modeled the mashed potatoes into a motorcar, recollecting a long-forgotten skill from another age...” (32). The motorcar with its “tomato slice wheels” was on the table “along with paddle-shaped mutton cutlets, water-logged green beans, and a head of cauliflower under cheese sauce that looked like a shrouded brain” (32). In a theatrical way the judge and his dog Mutt emerge from the steam produced by the hot food, which simultaneously emphasises and ridicules their central position in Cho Oyu. However, just like the tea ceremony, this food ceremony is an upset ritual too, as the cook forgets to serve the soup first: “The judge

brought down his fist. The soup after the main course? The routine had been upset” (33). The disruption of the ritual marks the collapse of the grand colonial lifestyle of the judge, which is also reflected in the bottles of “Grand Marnier, amontillado sherry and Talisker” that have either “evaporated completely” or “turned to vinegar” (7). The latter also reflects the current temper and disposition of the judge.

The tea ceremony and Sai’s welcome dinner at Cho Oyu are examples of how eating habits and table manners are performative rituals that aim to mark the boundaries between sociocultural identities. Because the particular structure of meals is familiar to the members of each social group, it sets boundaries and excludes others (Douglas 69). As a westernized Indian, Sai is partly estranged from Indian society, since she was brought up by English nuns who taught her “cake was better than laddoos, fork spoon knife better than hands, sipping the blood of Christ and consuming a wafer of his body was more civilized than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds” (30). Sai’s western upbringing continues when she lives at Cho Oyu with her equally westernized grandfather. Indeed, the journey the judge “had started so long ago had continued in his descendants”, as he passed his westernized cultural identity on to his granddaughter Sai, who is also “an estranged Indian living in India” and shares the same “accent and manners” (210). Sai’s estrangement from her Indian identity shows in her unfamiliarity with Indian foodstuffs, as she “never chewed a *paan* and had not tried most sweets in the *mithaishop*, for they made her retch” (176). Instead Sai has a strong preference for what is regarded as English food, for instance “snap peas, French beans, spring onions”, and she “feared” Indian vegetables, such as “*loki, tinda, kathal, kaddu, patrel*, and the local *saag* in the market” (Desai 176). This psychological response of fear with regard to certain types of food and the strong bodily response to the sweets in the *mithaishop*, are both “manifestations of disgust” (Fischler 288) as

these foodstuffs are not part of Sai's "culturally learned reference grid" (Fischler 284). Correspondingly, Lupton argues that the biological phenomena "hunger, taste, and food preferences" are at the same time "products of the sociocultural environment" we are part of, since from the moment we are born our "responses to food" are formed by interaction with others and with "cultural artefacts" (Lupton, *Food* 1). When Sai and her Nepali tutor Gyan have a quarrel over Sai's celebration of Christmas, Gurkha nationalist Gyan takes the view that these westernized cultural preferences are obviously a form of what Bhabha calls mimicry: "It's clear all you want to do is copy. Can't think for yourself. *Copycat, copycat*. Don't you know, these people you copy like a copycat, THEY DON'T WANT YOU!!!!" (Desai 164). In the latter exclamation resounds the profound sense of otherness that mimicry entails (Bhabha 122).

Lola and Noni have an equally deeply rooted focus on western culture as Sai has and adopt a Western perspective on the world they live in, as they view it through "old travel books" from the western world (247). A topic such as the "exploration of the far Himalayan kingdoms" expresses this western viewpoint as these kingdoms are not at all far from where Lola and Noni dwell: "but far from what? Exotic to whom? It was the center for the sisters, but they had never treated it as such" (247). Their rejection of their Indian identity and their Anglophilia also have to do with class distinction. There is a large gap between the lives of the sisters and the "parallel lives" of Indians that are less prosperous (247): "These people could name them, recognize them—the few rich—but Lola and Noni could barely distinguish between the individuals making up the crowd of poor" (241). Like Lola, Noni and Jemubhai, Sai also finds herself in-between western and Indian cultural identities. The great sociocultural divide between Sai and the people outside her "tiny social stratum" (176) becomes evident when she and Gyan eat in each other's presence and notice each other's table manners:

Eating together they had always felt embarrassed—he, unsettled by her finickiness and her curbed enjoyment, and she, revolted by his energy and his fingers working the dal, his slurps and smacks. The judge ate even his chapatis, his puris and parathas, with knife and fork. Insisted that Sai, in his presence, do the same. (176)

However, Sai also tries to bridge the gap between the classes, as she likes to keep Jemubhai's cook company in the kitchen, which is a place Jemubhai himself had never set foot until the GNLFF activists rob his house. That Sai does not wish "to elevate herself above others" (Spielman 78) shows when, at the end of the novel, she looks after the cook after he has been beaten by the judge: "Sai went inside the kitchen. 'I'll make you tea,' she told the cook, who was covered in slipper marks" (324).

Although the judge apparently eats Indian food at times, his rigid determination to hold on strictly to English table manners and etiquette shuts out his fellow Indians who are unfamiliar with these rules. Only westernised Indians, such as Sai, Bose or Noni and Lola, can take part. Gyan, as a less westernised and poorer Indian, is unfamiliar with the judge's table manners and food habits, which makes him a social alien vulnerable to the judge's attack. Because he reminds the judge of his younger self, Gyan triggers the judge's traumatic memories of Cambridge, which arouses an uncontrollable urge in the judge to take it out on the boy as expressed by the cutting of (Gyan's) meat:

He detected an obvious lack of familiarity, a hesitance with the cutlery and the food, yet he sensed Gyan was someone with plans. He carried an unmistakable whiff of journey, of ambition—and an old emotion came back to the judge, a recognition of weakness that was not merely a feeling, but also a taste, like fever. He could tell Gyan had never eaten such food in such a manner. Bitterness flooded the judge's mouth. "So", he said, slicing

the meat expertly off the bone, “so, what poets are you reading these days, young man?”

He felt a sinister urge to catch the boy off guard. (109)

The distance the judge tries to create between himself and Gyan simultaneously functions as the distance he wishes to keep between himself and his traumatic Cambridge past, as Gyan unintentionally brings this past to the surface (Spielman 76). The judge’s food habits clearly provide him with a tool to use his authority over Gyan; however, the authority of the judge is waning, which is significantly reflected in the disruption of food rituals and the shortage of the necessary ingredients to make a “genuine” English dish. Because of political turbulence in Northern India due to the Gurkha nationalist activism, food is often scarce. Still, the judge desperately endeavours to uphold his socio-cultural position by holding on to English food practices.

The way the judge clings to English food habits mirrors the way immigrants often cling to the food traditions of their country of origin as a means of creating a “bond” with their home country and a “buffer” against the new country (Piatti-Farnell 127). The judge is like a foreigner in his country of birth. He had always strived to identify with a home country that was never his in the first place while at the same time trying to keep the people and traditions of the country he lives in at arm’s length. The dinner at the Gymkhana dining hall symbolises the process of excluding and being excluded, since the judge and his former colleague Bose are eventually dining alone, ordering food that is not served anymore:

“Roast mutton with mint sauce. Is the mutton tender?” asked the judge imperiously.

The waiter remained unintimidated: “Who can get tender mutton?” he said scornfully.

“Tomato soup?”

... Bose broke the spell by asking, “*Rissoles?*” That might salvage the evening.

“Oh no,” the waiter said, shaking his head and smiling insolently.

“No, *that* you *cannot* get.”

“Well what do you have then?”

“Muttoncurrymuttonpulaovegetablecurryvegetablepulao...” (207)

The waiter’s obvious disrespect for the judge indicates the judge’s waning authority. Desai’s use of satire further underlines the latter’s loss of “clout” (292). The judge’s ambition to identify with the English made him into a social outcast and eating alone symbolises his loneliness. At home his dog Mutt, “more human than dog” (32), is sometimes his only companion at the dinner table. The judge even treats his dog better than he treats the people around him. This shows, for instance, in the meat stews the cook prepares for Mutt, while the cook himself “never had the luxury of eating meat in the first place” (288). As meat becomes increasingly scarce, even the judge and Sai have to do without eating meat so that Mutt can have some and when all the meat is finished Mutt eventually gets to eat “soy Nutrinuggets with pumpkin and a Maggi soup cube” (288). Food shortages also force the judge and the rest of his household to start eating locally grown Indian foods, which marks a further destabilisation of the judge’s constructed cultural identity:

For the first time, they in Cho Oyu were eating the real food of the hillside. *Dalda Saag*, pink flowered, flat-leafed; *bhutiya dhaniya* growing copiously around the cook’s quarter; the new tendrils of squash or pumpkin vine; curled *ningro* fiddleheads, *churbi* cheese and bamboo shoots sold by women who appeared from behind bushes on forest paths. (281-82)

2.2. Postcolonial Identity Politics

The disintegration of the judge's lifestyle and authority are connected with the disintegration of "place-ness", which literally shows in the decay of his house. The "place-ness" and the related sense of identity of its occupants collapse when members of the Gurkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) cross the "spatial and social boundaries" of the "exclusionary place" that is the home (Ferguson 46). As opposed to Sai who, if somewhat reluctantly, is welcomed at Cho Oyu as a family member, the Gurkha insurgents invade the privacy of the judge and force him to offer hospitality: "We will join you for tea."; "Tea and snacks. Is this how you treat your guests?" (5). The socio-cultural gap between the Gurkhas and the residents of Cho Oyu is reflected in the tea Sai makes for them, which they find "too weak" (7), as Sai only knows the English way of tea making and not the Indian way. Although Cho Oyu does not change physically as a result of the trespassing Gurkhas, "the emotional and ideological weight" of it is "overturned" (Ferguson 44), as symbolized by Sai's "overturn[ing] the tea tray" (5) when she offers to get the judge's guns from the house. Just as the sense of place-ness of Cho Oyu has been degraded by members of the GNLF (Ferguson 44), so has that of Mon Ami, the house of the sisters Lola and Noni. Members of the GNLF enter the house and demand "money, food and shelter" (Ferguson 45) and eventually start building huts in their garden. By entering Mon Ami, the GNLF activists, who are of a different ethnic group than the sisters and have a lower social status in Kalimpong, also cross the "lines" that Noni believes are drawn "between classes" (67). Whereas the judge desperately holds on to his fractured identities, despite his awareness that these are "artificial constructs to uphold his existence" (210), Lola is deeply affected by the disintegration of place-ness by the Gurkhas and repents. The disruption of her sociocultural identity makes Lola realize

that holding on to her cultural identity and her privileged position has made her isolated and vulnerable:

It did matter, buying a tinned ham roll in a rice and dal country; it did matter to live in a big house and sit behind a heater in the evening, even one that sparked and shocked; it did matter to fly to London and return with chocolates filled with kirsch; it did matter that others could not. They had pretended it didn't, or had nothing to do with them, and suddenly it had everything to do with them. The wealth that seemed to protect them like a blanket was the very thing that left them exposed. (242)

Crossing social borders and invading private property are part of the GNLF's strategy to establish their own state in part of the Indian nation-state. What the Nepali aim to achieve by crossing the borders of private properties is to break down the sense of place and the socio-cultural identity and authority of its inhabitants at a "private/domestic level" (Ferguson 47). The ultimate goal of the GNLF is to "break down district-wide Kalimpong place-ness" (Ferguson 47), as well as social inequality in order to clear the way for Nepali to build their own "place" and "social order" (Ferguson 42). Breaking loose from the Indian nation-state, or at least reaching independence to some degree, is the political aim of the GNLF. Although a political movement, the GNLF strongly resembles a "culturalist" movement as they mobilize "identity politics" in order to pursue aims of "larger national or transnational politics". These aims generally entail a "struggle for stronger recognition" from an existing nation-state (Appadurai 15) or more "autonomy and dignity" (Appadurai 147). The identity politics of the GNLF implies a conscious employment of cultural difference, in this case Nepali ethnicity, in order to drive back the homogenising influence of the Indian nation-state, for instance by boycotting all "national celebrations" (*Inheritance* 192) and defending the use of the Nepali language. While

the modern nation is more the “product of the collective imagination” than of primordial factors such as “language, blood, soil and race” (Appadurai 161), the GNLF expressly employs these primordial factors to justify their nationalist political goals. Moreover, while contesting the “homogenizing, unifying force” (Bhabha 54) of the Indian nation-state, the GNLF itself is ironically fighting for a homogeneous state that represents only one “ethnos” (Appadurai 156): “Gorkhaland for Gorkhas” (7). GNLF supporters even “write a poster demanding Gorkha-land, in blood” (159). Lola acknowledges that the presence of Nepali in India is the result “of a porous border” (129) and that Nepali in India and Nepal are the same people. Through the discussions of Lola, Noni and Mrs Sen about the drawing of borders Desai calls attention to one of the factors that actually legitimize a nation-state: a “meaningful presence in a continuous body of bounded territory” (Appadurai 189). Lola puts things in perspective by mentioning the fact that the Indian borders were only drawn in colonial times: “When did Darjeeling and Kalimpong belong to Nepal? Darjeeling, in fact, was annexed from Sikkim and Kalimpong from Bhutan” (129). The disrupting activities of the GNLF eventually make Lola wonder about the meaning of borders and nations: “What was a country but the idea of it? She thought of India as a concept, a hope or a desire. How often could you attack it before it crumbled?” (236). Through Lola Desai clearly refers to the idea that the people of nation-states are united by a constructed sense of belonging (Appadurai 161).

The crossing of spatial and social boundaries, both personal and communal, as well as the notion of fluid national borders are central themes in *The Inheritance of Loss*. This situation correlates with the individual and collective identities of the characters in the book. The attempt of the Nepali to build their own “place” and “social order” involves a pursuit of primacy and a redrawing of borders, which results in the exclusion of others that inhabit the land and who do

not share the Nepali ethnic identity. This becomes clear when Sai and Gyan have a flaming row as they argue about Father Booty who is thrown out of the country by the GNLF, because of his Swiss nationality, although he had lived in India for forty-five years (221):

“In fact, good thing they kicked him out,” he said, “who needs Swiss people here?

For how many thousands of years have we produced our own milk?”

“Why don’t you then? Why don’t you make cheese?”

“We live in India, thank you very much. We don’t want any cheese and the last thing we need is chocolate cigars.” (258)

Gyan agrees to the GNLF’s policy of exclusion of non-Indian residents and appeals to history as a factor that justifies this exclusion, as well as the Nepali’s own exclusive right to live in and around Kalimpong. Gyan’s aversion to cheese making, which is an idea he finds on the virtual lack of this craft in Indian tradition, also reflects his essentialist view of identity, which implies a belief in a “pure” identity that is free of outside influences.

Gyan’s support for the GNLF and, related to this, his wish for clear boundaries between ethnic identities and the need “to understand himself” are motivated by his “conflicting identities” (Spielman 83). The main components of these identities are Gyan’s Nepali and Indian identities, which make up an interesting combination since the Nepali supported the British colonizer, who oppressed Bengali Indians, who in turn oppressed Nepali in 1980s India. By joining the GNLF Gyan simplifies his complicated “postcolonial identity” (Spielman 83), as this choice for a “masculine atmosphere” (161) brings to the fore his Gurkha warrior identity which is reminiscent of his great-grandfather. Although Gyan’s identity is historically complex, his support for the banishment of Father Booty shows he appeals to history in order to justify his preference for a stable and unchanging cultural identity. An appeal to history can be found in

Bhabha's concept of the "pedagogical" as part of his theory on narrating the nation. With regard to the population of a nation, the "pedagogical" model considers the people of a nation to be "historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy", thereby providing the discourse with "an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin in the past" (Bhabha 208-9). Corresponding to the historical focus of the pedagogical model the GNLF sees the foundation of their own nation-state "Ghoraka-land" (159) as their birthright and looks for justification of their revolt in "historical injustices" that have been done to Gurkhas (Ferguson 47). On the other hand, Ferguson argues, the GNLF appeals to Bhabha's theory of the "performative" model of national citizenship as they consider the notion of "historical origin" (Bhabha 208) not to be a justification for the social inequality within the Kalimpong area (Ferguson 42-3). The performative model regards the people of a nation as "the subjects of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people" and therefore focuses on people as acting and performing in the present and "through which national is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process" (Bhabha 208-9). Ferguson contends that the GNLF members justify their actions by relying on the "liminal position between the performative and pedagogical models of social identity discourse" as they claim not to be "bound by history" and simultaneously want to "right historical wrongs" (Ferguson 43).

As his conflicting and historically complex identities already indicate, Gyan's wish for a stable and univocal collective identity is unattainable. Moreover, Gyan's desire for a collective identity that is not affected by outside influences is not consistent with his actual behaviour and thoughts. The awakening love between him and Sai proves that borders that separate the Nepali and non-Nepali ethnic identities, as well as class differences, can be crossed. Significantly, Desai again uses food imagery to express the crossing of identity boundaries: "Gyan and Sai would

have melted into each other like pats of butter—how difficult it was to cool and compose themselves back into their individual beings” (129). Gyan and Sai call each other “*momo*”, which is “mutton in dough”, in other words “one thing plump and cozy within the other” connoting “protection” and “affection” (140). Sai confronts Gyan with his ambiguous conduct when Gyan brushes aside Sai’s Western view that Swiss products contribute to “civilization” by setting “a standard” (258):

“If this is what you’ve been thinking, why didn’t you boycott the cheese instead of gobbling it down? Now you attack it? *Hypocrite!* But it was very nice to eat the cheese when you got a chance, no? All that cheese toast? Hundreds of pieces of cheese toast you must have eaten. Let alone the chocolate cigars.... So greedy, eating them like a fat pig. And tuna fish on toast and peanut butter biscuits!” (259)

Gyan’s wish to join Sai for tea and snacks contradicts his desire to assume a “Ghorka warrior identity” (Spielman 84), a contradiction which in fact mirrors Sai’s own mode of living: “Any sense that Sai was taught had fallen between the contradictions, and the contradictions themselves had been absorbed” (30). In fact, Sai and Gyan both “want English and Indian things, authentic and inauthentic identity performance, family and total independence” (Spielman 86): “Every single contradiction history or opportunity might make available to them, every contradiction they were heir to, they desired. But only as much, of course, as they desired purity and a lack of contradiction” (259). Although they both exemplify the notion of cultural hybridity, Sai manages to balance out her identities better than Gyan, who unavailingly tries to adhere to a clear-cut one-dimensional identity, despite his actions and thoughts that deviate from this aim. Sai consciously looks further than the boundaries of her own “tiny social stratum” (176), as she

acknowledges that there is more than “one narrative” and that she cannot “create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it” (323), as Lola and Noni previously tried to do.

Gyan’s pursuit of “purity” mirrors the wish of the GNLF to exclude non-Indian residents and India’s propertied classes, such as Lola, Noni and the judge. Although Gyan subscribes to the viewpoint of the GNLF that history justifies this aim, he lacks the necessary patriotism to get totally absorbed by GNLF’s objectives and he even dreams aloud about moving to Australia with Sai, in order to be “free from history” (157). Gyan is not only struggling with his own conflicting desires, but he also doubts the commitment of the GNLF members themselves. He suspects that Gurkha leaders only take advantage of the general discontent of Nepali adolescents and merely pursue “the same power as government officials held now” (157). Moreover, Desai points to cultural globalisation through Gyan who is pondering over the authenticity of the motives of GNLF members: “these unleashed Bruce Lee fans in their American T-shirts made-in-China coming-in-via-Kathmandu?” (Desai 157). Referring to commodities and cultural products crossing borders shows Gyan’s awareness that his definition of the collective identity of GNLF activists is by no means pure and unaffected by outside influences in a globalised world. The Gurkha uprising is clearly not an isolated local conflict in a remote part of the Indian nation-state, especially if we consider that the seed of the Gurkha discontentment was sown in the days of the British global empire.

History shows that outside influences are not a new phenomenon in India, since cultures interact and mutually affect cultural identities. For instance, when the judge reads about the foreign powers that had set foot on Indian soil in previous centuries, he learned “with amazement” of “scurvied sailors arriving, the British, the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese. In their care the tomato traveled to India, and also the cashew nut” (110). Interestingly enough,

tomatoes and cashew nuts became an integral part of Indian cuisine, which underpins the view that “cultural authority” is ambivalent as it is itself the result of “differentiation” due to interacting cultures (Bhabha 50-51). As Bhabha points out, interaction and cultural exchange lead to hybridity (Bhabha 247-8). More than for instance the judge, Lola and her sister acknowledge that cultural identities, including ethnic identities, are hybrid constructs. Lola points to contemporary British society where people from many different cultures live in one country: “Also the new England, Noni. A completely cosmopolitan society” (46). In this context Lola also mentions the phenomenon that food crossing national borders in the wake of migrants can assimilate into another culture: “chicken tikka masala has replaced fish and chips as the number one take-out in Britain. It was just reported in the *Indian Express*” (46). Although the two sisters separate themselves from the lower classes of Indian society, which shows in their preference for expensive imported foodstuffs from the West, the food habits of Lola and Noni also mirror a sense of cosmopolitanism as they don’t limit themselves to western food. They are receptive to other cuisines, as they taught their maid Kesang how to make “Indonesian *saté* with peanut butter and soy sauce” (67) and on their trip to Darjeeling—together with Sai, Father Booty and Uncle Potty—they choose to eat at a restaurant that serves Indian, European and Chinese food:

They knew the menu by heart from years of special meals at Glenary’s. Indian, Continental, or Chinese; sizzlers, chicken and sweet corn soup, ice cream with hot chocolate sauce...As always they pondered their options and picked Chinese. ‘It’s not like real Chinese food, of course,’ Lola reminded everyone that Joydeep, her now dead husband, had once visited China and reported that Chinese food in China was quite another matter. A much worse matter, in fact. (213-14)

Apparently, the Chinese food served in India was adapted to the new environment, which again mirrors the notion that culture and cultural identity are not stable and are in fact subject to change and hybridisation (Bhabha 55).

2.3. Interacting Identities in a Hybrid Postcolonial Social Space

While the judge adopted a new cultural identity and in vain tries to stick with it living like a foreigner in his home country, the cook's son Biju wishes to keep his original identity intact as an immigrant in a new country. In the United States Biju fails to create a sense of place-ness, as he finds himself "in a space that should have included family, friends", but where he is "the only one displacing the air" (268). This sense of loneliness and rootlessness in the "unknown, the uncertain, and the threatening" space that is New York (Ferguson 36) resembles the judge's lonely Cambridge years during which he worked hard at transforming his identity. Yet, unlike the judge, Biju does not believe in adopting a new identity, as he aims to abandon what he conceives of as the "overrated control over his own destiny" (268), which is an attitude to life Biju experiences to be generally accepted in the United States. Biju wants to hold on to a one-dimensional and immutable Indian identity, because it safeguards him from "contradictions" (Spielman 79). As a result of his way of thinking, Biju is overwhelmed and confused by the many different (immigrant) ethnic identities he is confronted with in New York. All these ethnic identities are represented by the wide variety of restaurants Biju works at or desires to work at. Even more confusing for Biju is the fact that all the supposedly authentic ethnic dishes these restaurants serve are mostly cooked by a varied group of people from many different third-world countries:

Biju at the Baby Bistro.

Above, the restaurant was French, but below in the kitchen it was Mexican and Indian. And when a Paki was hired, it was Mexican, Indian, Pakistani.

Biju at Le Colonial for the authentic colonial experience.

On top, rich colonial, and down below, poor native, Colombian, Tunisian, Ecuadoran, Gambian.

On to the Stars and Stripes Diner. All American flag on top, all Guatemalan flag below.

Plus one Indian flag when Biju arrived. (21)

The New York restaurants are a reflection of the multi-ethnic society of the United States as a whole and strongly resemble the “contact zones” that Mary Louise Pratt describes: “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in context of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt 6).

In the New York restaurant business these asymmetrical power relations can be found in a distinct division between First and Third world. Because of relatively low food prices in the United States, compared to India, Biju believes that “poor people eat like kings!” in America (49), but the restaurants in New York clearly reflect a “hierarchical layering of people” (Masterson 422). European-oriented cuisine is literally on top and the non-western ethnic

workers who prepare the European dishes can be found below in the kitchen. The dividing line between the dominant position of European cuisine, as a metonymy for European culture, and the workers from third-world countries reflects the exclusionary practices and power relations in (post)colonial times. In connection with this, Desai also draws attention to the economic disparity between postcolonial India and the United States, using the consumption of basmati rice as a telling example:

In India almost nobody would be able to afford this rice, and you had to travel around the world to be able to eat such things where they were cheap enough that you could gobble them down without being rich; and when you got home to the place where they grew, you couldn't afford them anymore. (191)

Reflecting the colonial system of the past, basmati rice is grown in the Third World using its resources and cheap labour and then exported to the First World where it is made available to a wider group of consumers at low prices. Desai again draws attention to this First and Third World inequality, when she describes Heathrow airport where Biju has a stop-over on his way back to India:

All the third-world flights docked here, families waiting for their connections squatting on the floor in big bacterial clumps, and it was a long trek to where the European-North-American travelers came and went, making those brisk no-nonsense flights with extra leg room and private TV, whizzing over for a single meeting in such a manner that it was truly hard to imagine they were shitting-peeing, bleeding-weeping humans at all. Silk and cashmere, bleached teeth, Prozac, laptops, and a sandwich for their lunch named The Milano. (285)

First World and Third World are clearly separated at the airport as well as in the airplane, the sandwich being one of the boundary markers, despite the fact that, as Desai points out, “basic bodily functions unite us all” (Masterson 421).

Yet, in the French restaurant the dividing line between Third and First World is permeable, which shows when the noise of a fight between Biju and his Pakistani co-worker in the basement kitchen can be heard in the restaurant upstairs:

The sound of their fight had travelled up the flight of steps and struck a clunky note, and they might upset the balance, perfectly first world on top, perfectly third-world twenty-two steps below. Mix it up in a heap and then who would patronize his restaurant, *hm?* With its coquilles Saint-Jacques...and a duck that made an overture to the colonies, sitting like a pasha on a cushion of its own fat, exuding the scent of saffron. (23)

Just as the tumult in the kitchen travels upstairs, ignoring boundaries, so has the root of the conflict between Biju and his Pakistani co-worker traveled outside “national borders” (Masterson 423). Desai links the conflict in the New York kitchen with the broader conflict between India and Pakistan. Biju has apparently internalised Indian animosity and distrust towards Pakistani. He finds this prejudice towards his Pakistani colleague reassuring, because it is devoid of “contradiction” (Spielman 79) and therefore is something to hold on to in a world he finds confusing. Biju expresses his aversion to his co-worker by referring to Muslims’ abhorrence of pigs and pork meat, shouting, “Pigs, pigs, sons of pigs, *soar ka baccha*,” as he and his colleague “threw cannonball cabbages at each other” (23).

Despite the hierarchical layering of people, multi-ethnic food practice in New York represents the coexistence of cultural differences and—if applied to the sense of identity—casts doubt on the existence of a “fully assimilated and homogeneous American identity”. A mono-

cultural population as an effect of the workings of what was universally known as “melting pot” was contested by “multiculturalism” in the 1980s. The idea of multiculturalism recognizes the possibility of “cultural difference”, which becomes clear in the metaphor of the “salad bowl” where “separate cultures mix but remain distinct”. The “salad bowl” model implies that ethnic identities remain separate, but this metaphor ignores the fact that ethnic identities do take on qualities from other cultures, just as culinary traditions influence each other and for instance borrow each other’s ingredients (Piatti-Varnell 2-3). This corresponds with Bhabha’s notion of “cultural difference” and hybridity, as this is about interaction and crossing the boundaries of cultural identities (Bhabha 50). For example, Biju encounters a variety of dishes from world cuisines, but also the mixing of culinary traditions, resulting in “the goat cheese and basil *samosa*” and “the mango margarita” (145). These hybrid dishes express the negotiation of difference.

Biju is not only confused about the wide variety of ethnic identities he encounters in New York, he is even more unsettled by the multiple ethnic identities he perceives within one person. In line with multiculturalists’ conception of “cultural diversity”, Biju believes that cultures and the related cultural identities exist independently and unchanging alongside each other (Bhabha 50). For this reason Biju resists what he felt the New York restaurant owner Harish-Harry had done: “manufacture a fake version of himself and using what he had created as clues, understand himself backward” (268). As his hyphenated name already suggests, Harish-Harry combines two worlds. On the one hand, he is dedicated to serving “the real thing” (145) at his Indian restaurant, for instance by banishing beef: “Beef? Are you crazy? We are an all-Hindu establishment. No Pakistanis, no Bangladeshis, those people don’t know how to cook...” (139). Apparently Harish-Harry holds on to his dislike of India’s neighbouring countries and excludes them and their

eating habits from his restaurant. On the other hand, he embraces America's ways of doing business, such as the all-you-can-eat concept, and he makes his way in the world of capitalist consumerism, although he chauvinistically contends that capitalism and "all civilization comes from India" (145). Biju, on the other hand, is looking for "clarity of principle" (147) and in his view Harish-Harry is trying "to be loyal to so many things that he himself couldn't tell which one of his selves was the authentic way, if any" (148).

The prime example of hybridity as a result of interaction and cultural exchange is Biju's colleague Saeed Saeed. Corresponding with Joane Nagel's view that identity is the result of an individual's actions as well as his or her "interactions with the larger society" (Nagel 162), Saeed Saeed performs multiple identities that originate both from cultural heritage and conscious choices. It is Saeed Saeed's opinion about eating pork that makes him express the hierarchy of his loyalties to all these identities: "They dirty, man, they messy. *First* I am Muslim, then I am Zanzibari, *then* I will *BE* American" (136). Not eating pork illustrates how Saeed Saeed's Muslim identity is part of a "culturally learned reference grid" that does not allow the consumption of this type of meat (Fischler 284). In addition to a sense of comfort, which is an effect that cultural manifestations from the country of origin tend to have on the displaced (Bhabha 246-7), the food habits that represent Saeed Saeed's Zanzibarian identity simultaneously express the notion of hybridity: "Saeed Saeed cooked cow peas and kingfish from the Price Chopper to cheer himself up, and plantains in sugar and coconut milk. This goo mixture smelling of hope so ripe he slathered on French bread and offered to others" (96). This shows that Saeed Saeed shops at an American supermarket in order to buy ingredients for a Zanzibarian dish which he puts on French bread. The interaction between cultural identities also shows in the fact that Saeed Saeed shares his Zanzibarian food with non-Zanzibari others. By

means of sharing food Saeed Saeed builds social relationships as is the custom in his home country. However, sharing food goes against American food habits, as Saeed Saeed discovers: “everyone go shopping separately, separately they cook their dinner, together they eat their separate food” (98). Though Saeed Saeed expresses a Zanzibarian preference for sharing food, it at the same time appears to be one of the reasons for leaving Zanzibar: “But then everyone have nothing man! That is why I leave Zanzibar” (98). In spite of such contradictions Saeed Saeed navigates through American multicultural society and successfully adapts to the cultures and subcultures he is confronted with. This resembles Joane Nagel’s “shopping cart” metaphor in which culture, as one of the building blocks of ethnic identity, is malleable and actively constructed by “picking and choosing items from the shelves of the past and the present” (Nagel 162). For instance, as an American in the making Saeed Saeed likes to eat “BigBoyBurgers” (122), despite the fact that he married into an American hippie family that reject this type of food. Consequently, Saeed Saeed shares this food preference with the family dog, which is reminiscent of Jemubhai’s solitary dinners with his dog Mutt. Moreover, American identity is apparently not uniform as the Caucasian Vermont hippies eat “brown”, “unprocessed” food, while Saeed Saeed prefers the American “white rice, white bread, and white sugar” (122). In his article “Food and the Counterculture” Warren Belasco takes the industrially processed Wonder Bread as a prime example of a food product from which all “colored ingredients” have been removed, which he regards as a symbol of racial “segregation” (221). Saeed Saeed’s in-laws represent the “counterculture” of the 1960s whose followers show a strong preference for “natural and organic foods”, in other words, a “countercuisine” (Belasco 217). Warren Belasco argues that this preference for brown coloured foodstuffs “externalised white radicals’ alienation from sanitised”, white, “suburban life” and expresses a “neo-primitive fascination with cultures

and struggles of brown people throughout the world” (Belasco 222). Interestingly enough, Saeed Saeed, as a representative of “brown people”, prefers white processed foodstuffs. Instead of becoming part of a minority counterculture he negotiates between mainstream white American culture and his Muslim and Zanzibari identities. Apart from highlighting Saeed Saeed’s American identity, the white and brown opposition of processed and unprocessed food, respectively, also underlines Saeed Saeed’s breaching of colour boundaries by entering into a multiracial marriage.

Saeed Saeed shows that flexibility and adaptation can bring success and happiness, while Biju comes off worse as he strives for an impossible pure Indian identity, free from outside influences. Saeed Saeed’s success as an immigrant makes Biju admire him: “Biju was overcome by the desire to be his friend, because Saeed Saeed wasn’t drowning, he was bobbing in the tides” (76). Biju’s admiration for Saeed Saeed confounds him as Saeed Saeed is a black Muslim and Biju has always been taught to have a profound distrust of both blacks and Muslims. Consequently, Biju is forced to reconsider his prejudices and finds himself facing a series of dilemmas by which he tries to explain the friendship he feels for Saeed Saeed (76-7). While Saeed Saeed’s “generosity buoyed him and dangled him above such dilemmas” (77), Biju eventually sticks to his prejudices and keeps on looking in vain for an authentic one-dimensional identity (Spielman 78-9). Biju’s internal identity conflict can be exemplified by the words that constantly go through his head when he is serving beef to Indian bankers: “holy cow unholy cow” (135). Beef does not fall within the safe boundaries of “culinary classifications, rules and norms” (Fischler 288) of Hinduism and therefore the mere thought of eating beef can call up feelings of disgust in Hindus. Biju’s colleague Achootan shows that it is not only the fact that eating beef is forbidden that makes it revolting to him, but also the method of preparation, as he

has an aversion to the way the partly raw and still bloody steak is served: “You know we may be poor in India, but there only a dog would eat meat cooked like this” (136). Eventually Biju decides to live “within a narrow purity” (137) and quits his job at the steakhouse, thereby aiming to restore the boundary between his Indian identity and other (hybridized) identities he encounters in America.

Although religion has the ability to make its followers stick to certain food habits, Desai gives prominence to the notion that all culinary traditions, and hence ethnic identities, intermingle. Not only do outside influences affect Indian cuisine, Indian migrants for their part brought their dishes to Saeed Saeed’s home country Zanzibar: “In Stone Town they eat samosas and *chapatis*, *jalebis*, pilau rice” (53). In her article “The Empire Bites Back”, Njeri Githire challenges “static notions of identity”, comparing “linguistic borrowings” to “culinary borrowings” which are both a result of constant intercultural exchange in a globalizing world. Githire contends that all national cuisines incorporate food habits from other cultures which eventually become inextricably part of that particular cuisine, therefore calling into question the validity of the notion of “authenticity” (Githire 857-58). For instance, in the United States the hot dog is considered to be an American food item par excellence and part of a homogenous national identity. Lola ridicules this national identity when she enters into a discussion with Mrs Sen: “And the kind of patriotism they go in for...just give them a hot dog on a stick, they begin to wave it at the flag...” (131). However, the hot dog too was originally an ethnic food as it has a history outside the United States (Smith 303). Questioning the authenticity of a national dish as part of a national cuisine draws attention to the idea that “cultural statements and systems are constructed”, either intentionally or accidentally, and are part of an imagined “national tradition of the People” (Bhabha 54-55). An imagined national cuisine can “provide added concreteness to

the idea of national or ethnic identity”. Throwing doubt upon the authenticity of national cuisines in with questioning the legitimacy of “nationhood” and national identity (Mintz and Du Bois 109). As Biju says when working in a hot dog restaurant even the all-American hot dog is subject to the process of hybridization as it is still evolving due to cross-cultural contacts: “You like Indian hot dog? You like American hot dog?” (16). Desai appears to refer to hyphenated identities in a multicultural society here.

Desai advances the crucial concept of balance as an alternative to Biju’s pursuit of the illusory ideal of authenticity. For instance, the “English-speaking upper-educated” Indian women Biju encounters in New York when delivering meals for Freddy’s Wok, both “went out to mimosa brunches” and “ate their Dadi’s roti with adept fingers” (50). When Americanized Indians order hot vindaloo at Harish-Harry’s Indian restaurant to show they are ‘real’ Indians, Biju and the rest of the staff are keen on showing them they are not: “The evildoers bit into the vindaloo—And that vindaloo—it bit them back” (148). The hot dish made the students ask for yoghurt: “That is what we do in India, we always eat yoghurt for the balance...” (148). Desai further emphasises the notion of balance by mentioning Ayurveda, a philosophy which considers balance as life’s natural state (Singh 33): “Hot cool, sweet sour, bitter pungent, the ancient wisdom of the Ayurveda that can grant a person complete poise...” (Desai 148). According to Ayurvedic wisdom, “mental inputs to experience” as well as “material inputs” to the body—such as food—can get a person out of balance causing afflictions. In addition to material input there is also material output in the form of excreta (Singh 33). The judge’s irregular bowel movement is symptomatic of his imbalance (Singh 33). The lack of balance causes an identity conflict within the judge, as well as within Biju, turning them both into isolated, dispirited and disillusioned individuals. However, just as the neutralising effects of yoghurt show, the imbalance of material

inputs can be corrected. Finding the right balance is like finding the right proportions of the ingredients in a recipe in order to produce the best results.

Conclusion

Food's function as a boundary marker makes it a suitable tool for the construction and performance of identity. However, food also crosses boundaries since foodstuffs travel the world and blend into different national cuisines, thereby calling attention to the idea that authentic cuisines are a fallacy. Food dishes travel the world together with migrants and exist next to each other, but are also subjected to cross-cultural exchange as boundaries between cuisines are increasingly porous as in fusion cooking. In *The Inheritance of Loss* Desai effectively employs the versatility of food and food practices as a recurrent motif that links narratives which take place on three different continents and in different time frames. Using food as a trope Desai sheds light on complex identity issues in the context of a globalising postcolonial world. Food tells the story about Jemubhai, the Anglophile judge, who is torn between identities and is losing his authority while falling back into solitude. Desai employs food imagery to shed light on the origin of the judge's lack of balance: a fetishizing and copying of the English colonial ruling class, a painful construction of a new identity through active identity performance and the subsequent process of attempting to assimilate into English culture while simultaneously suppressing his Indian identity and excluding his fellow-countrymen. Disrupted food rituals indicate that mimicry reproduces difference and that the judge's attempt to turn into a white man is impossible. In the parallel storyline about the migration experience of the cook's son Biju in New York, Desai focuses attention on the opposite of assimilation. Biju encounters a wide variety of ethnic identities in the New York restaurant business, as well as people that carry multiple ethnic identities. However, Biju resists the permeability of boundaries between identities and decides to strive for 'authenticity' and an unchanging identity, which is an unattainable goal as Desai illustrates by using the metaphor of food practice. While the judge is

unable to see his true self, as “he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him” (40), Biju hopes his return to India may result in “not noticing himself”, not standing out as ‘other’, which he regards as the “greatest luxury” (268). Although the judge eventually sees the error of his ways, both the judge and Biju represent two extremes, the wish to fully assimilate and the wish to keep one’s ethnic identity intact respectively. All other characters in *The Inheritance of Loss* navigate between these two extremes. What Desai appears to imply is that porous borders between identities resulting in hybrid identities may lead to a state of balance. Saeed Saeed is the prime example of this as he performs multiple identities and manages to balance these out. Although Sai’s eating habits and table manners make her share the sociocultural identity of the judge, she exceeds the boundaries of this identity, mainly by falling in love with her socially less privileged Nepali tutor Gyan. Both Sai and Saeed Saeed allow multiple identities to determine their course of life and they share a sense of self-consciousness about their identities. The latter is a quality also shared by Gyan, Lola and Noni. Yet, Gyan is more torn between a commitment to a desired stable Nepali identity and the reality of more fluid identities, while Lola and Noni, although locked up in their social class, are increasingly aware of and receptive to outside influences and change.

Desai also applies the notion of influence and change to the broader level of the nation-state, calling attention to fluid and shifting borders between countries, as well as between national and ethnic identities. Through Biju’s experiences in the New York restaurant business Desai illustrates that an unchanging, homogeneous American identity is a fallacy. The New York restaurants are exemplary for the multi-ethnic nature of American society where identities are subject to mutual influence, change and hybridisation. Despite the interplay of identities, Desai simultaneously draws attention, by means of food imagery, to an invisible border between the

First and Third World in Western society which mirrors the unequal power relations of the (post)colonial world. As exemplified by the judge, British colonial rule in India resulted in both cultural interaction as well as a division between the British and the subordinate Indian peoples. The modern Indian nation-state consists of a variety of ethnic identities and here too inequality is a factor of importance. In postcolonial Indian society there is not only a distinct boundary between the lower classes and the privileged class to which Lola, Noni and the judge belong, but ethnic groups are also treated unequally by Indian authorities and, in the case of the Nepali citizens, discriminated against. The Nepali united in the GNLF both resist inequality in India as well as the symbols of unity of the Indian nation-state. In order to justify their nationalist political goals the GNLF focuses on what it deems to be primordial factors, such as blood, soil, language and race. Gyan's pursuit of a 'pure' identity mirrors the notion of primordia and the wish of the GNLF to exclude all non-Nepali. However, Desai casts doubt on primordia, for instance by showing that Gurkhas too are affected by globalisation. Part of the strategy of exclusion the GNLF employs is to break down the socio-cultural identity and authority of the privileged residents of Kalimpong by crossing sociocultural borders and simultaneously creating new borders to reflect the desired hegemony of the Nepali collective identity. Desai criticises the GNLF for resisting the homogenising influence of the Indian nation-state while aiming to establish their own homogenous nation-state. Moreover, through Lola and Noni's contemplations and discussions, Desai undercuts the very idea of a nation-state and focuses attention to their artificiality as well as the fluidity of borders between nations and identities. As opposed to the GNLF's essentialist views of nationhood and national identity, Saeed Saeed and Sai represent the shifting, hybrid, and plural nature of identity and a possible emergence of a transnational culture.

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