

# Food as function and food as figure: Cultural translation and cultural hybridity in *A change of skies*, *Love and vertigo* and *Nina's heavenly delights*

ANETTE SVENSSON  
Jönköping University

## Abstract

Food is a major concern in popular culture and in literary studies at present and there are numerous novels, movies, and TV-shows that focus on food and its various functions – literary, cultural, and social. Food, which is a highly politicised subject, is one way in which cultural translation takes place as it is used to create an understanding of cultural transfer processes and their implications.

This paper aims to explore how representations of food accentuate the theme of migration and serve as sites for cultural translation in *A change of skies* by Yasmine Gooneratne (1991), *Love and vertigo* by Hsu-Ming Teo (2000), and *Nina's heavenly delights* by Pratibha Parmar (2006). In addition to representing the source and target cultures, food illustrates the immigrant's position in-between cultures, thus emphasising cultural hybridity, in particular through the fusion of food from the source and the target cultures.

**Key words:** cultural hybridity, cultural translation, translation studies, food studies, migration literature, popular culture

## 1 Introduction

Food is a major feature in popular culture and literature, and there are numerous novels, movies, TV-shows etc. that focus on food and its various representations. Food as a construct carries cultural and social meanings: “What, for example, might a passing Martian make of a cake topped with burning candles?” Sarah Sceats asks (2000: 125). The concept of food covers not only the dishes themselves, but numerous aspects connected to food such as growing crops, shopping for groceries, ingredients, eating, cooking, serving, the effect food has on the body, distribution, politics, sustainability, poverty, and survival. A basic and obvious declaration by Warren Belasco, which, however, is worth considering, is: “Food is important. There is in fact nothing more basic. Food is the first of the essentials of life, our biggest industry, our greatest export, and our most frequently indulged pleasure” (2002: 2). As he continues to assert: “Food indicates who we are, where we came from, and what we want to be” (2002: 2), Belasco further alludes to the greater implication of food, namely its function as a cultural and social signifier.

Abundant in nuances and connotations, food is a literary metaphor frequently used as cultural representation. Although, “[f]ood itself is not bound within any single discourse,” it becomes “impregnated with meaning from the many and various frameworks within which it figures – and this is a major reason why it is so rich a resource for writers” (Sceats 2000: 126). The function of food as a cultural and social signifier in literary productions is the main topic of this article which

explores food as literary figure in analyses of on-going processes of cultural transfers and the ensuing effect of cultural hybridity in *A change of skies* by Yasmine Gooneratne (1991), *Love and vertigo* by Hsu-Ming Teo (2000), and *Nina's heavenly delights* by Pratibha Parmar (2006).

This article explores how representations of food accentuate the theme of migration and serve as sites for cultural translation. In addition to representing the source and target cultures, food illustrates the immigrant's position *in-between* these cultures. In particular, stereotypes connected to food function as markers of cultural and/or national identity, thus emphasising the image of culture as homogenous. For migrants, who move from one cultural setting (*source culture*) to another (*target culture*), food functions as a representative of the migrant's source and target cultures, a representation that is emphasised through a polarisation between food cultures, as well as through resistance or acceptance of food from the source culture, which is a way to resist or accept a belonging to the same. The pressure the immigrant child experiences to live up to the expectations of the source culture, the parent's ideal, represents the immigrant's double cultural identity. Hybrid cultural identity is a focal point of this article and as hybrid meals are either praised or criticized by the characters, cultural hybridity is described as either accepted or rejected. Thus, reactions to food, which may vary depending on character and/or time, are indicative of how hybridity is negotiated in the texts. Additionally, the migration process as well as the translation process are illustrated through the immigrant's affiliation(s) with the source and/or the target food cultures. While the wish to cook traditional dishes from the source culture denotes non-adaptation and a resistance to translation, the desire for the target food culture illustrates a wish to be “translated beings” in Salman Rushdie's sense of the word (1983: 29).

Although the concept cultural translation has been used with various meanings in academic disciplines for the last thirty years, in this article it is seen primarily as a practice and as the result of that practice (Bhabha 2004, Polezzi 2006, Steiner 2009). Borrowing and adjusting one of Roman Jakobson's (2004) three categories of translation, “[i]nterlingual translation or *translation proper* [which] is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language” (Jakobson 2004: 139, original italics), the term cultural translation refers to *intercultural translation*, that is, translation between cultures, in this article. Hence, translation as practice and product is in focus as the simplified and basic translation model of a source text, text A, that is translated (activity) to a target text, text B (product), aimed at a target audience and used as the basis of the concept, but instead of texts, the primary focus is on cultures and/or cultural environments. However, the trajectory from A to B does not mean that either the translation process or the migration process is simple in the structure and the term intercultural needs to be problematised. One way to problematise this term is through a comparison with travelling, which “implies movement between fixed positions, a site of departure, a point of arrival.” Iain Chambers argues that migrancy “involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain” (1994: 5). In

addition, the ensuing integration process is “conceptualized as a multidimensional, complex and not necessarily linear process” (Faist, Fauser & Reisenauer 2013: 1921), and “assimilation is an interactive, bumpy journey along multiple non-linear pathways” (Levitt 2003: 178). Hence, the simple view of the migration process (a trajectory from A to B) and the complex view of the migration process (a non-linear trajectory and illusive A and B) exist simultaneously. However, the simple view of the migration process illuminates and reinforces the idea of cultural homogeneity while the complex view allows for a dynamic view of the migration process and disrupts the idea of culture as static and homogeneous. Hence, the term intercultural translation, which refers to translation between cultures, renegotiates the idea of binaries.

This article responds to ongoing discussions in literary criticism (e.g. Steiner 2009), that consider the use of cultural translation; in food studies (e.g. Montanari 2006), that discuss how food is used as cultural representation; in cultural studies (e.g. White 1995), when discussing migration processes; in postcolonialism (e.g. Bhabha 2004), in terms of cultural hybridity; and in gender studies (e.g. hooks 1998), particularly relating to how food practices maintain power hierarchies, at the same time as it aims to expand the fields of literary criticism and food studies further by relating them to translation studies, the academic research field where translation theory is combined with comparative literature (see Svensson 2010).<sup>1</sup> As this article will show, food, which is a highly politicized subject on a global as well as a local level, is one way in which cultural projection takes place as it is used to create an understanding of different cultures – an understanding that can be seen as a form of cultural translation.

Food has a strong presence in popular culture, such as novels, blogs, films and TV-shows, which can be seen in the fact that in Sweden, with nine million inhabitants, viewers are offered seventy-four various cooking or food shows on TV per week (Ljungqvist:n.pag.). Because food is such a popular topic, it is particularly significant to analyse how it is described and what power hierarchies are at work through food in fictional works that are consumed by numerous people. Many people realise that food is culturally specific when they travel (Quan & Wang 2004: 297). Visits to other countries and other cultures often result in people becoming more acquainted with various local cuisines which are then exoticised as authentic by the travelling subject. Whereas the food itself – its consistency, form, shape, smell, taste, ingredients, preparation as well as ways, places and times of serving – varies from one cultural environment to another, so do the histories, traditions, and meanings frequently associated with food. Sidney W. Mintz claims:

---

<sup>1</sup> This topic and analyses of among others *A change of skies* by Yasmine Gooneratne (1991) and *Love and vertigo* by Hsu-Ming Teo (2000) has previously been brought up with a focus on Australian literature in the dissertation *A Translation of Worlds: Cultural Translation and Migration Literature* (2010).

The foods eaten have histories associated with the pasts of those who eat them; the techniques employed to find, process, prepare, serve, and consume the foods are all culturally variable, with histories of their own. Nor is the food ever simply eaten: its consumption is always conditioned by meaning. These meanings are symbolic, and communicated symbolically; they also have histories. (1996: 7)

The symbolic meanings (and their origins) attached to food may be unconscious in people's daily lives, especially as “the symbolic investment of meaning in food has little to do with the food itself,” as Mintz (1996: 8) further argues. Yet, these histories and symbolic meanings are present in most cultural environments. In the three examples of popular migration literature discussed in this article, the symbolic meanings of food are linked to the topic of cultural diversity, seen in the authors' use of food as cultural representation as well as a means of emphasising cultural hybridity.

As a theoretical concept, hybridity is useful when analysing migration literature in terms of double identity construction and the effects of cultural representations of food in this case. Hybridity is, as Robert J. C. Young points out, “a cross between two species” (1995: 8). Hence, hybridity is at the same time the act of merging and the ensuing result. The access to double or multiple cultures that hybridity represents can be seen as both advantageous and disadvantageous. On the one hand, hybridity has, as Peter Burke states, “been criticized for offering ‘a harmonious image of what is obviously disjointed and confrontational’ and for ignoring cultural and social discrimination” (2009: 7). On the other hand, postcolonial hybridity is a constantly changing concept that represents strength and can be seen as an advantageous condition that illustrates change, development, and progress. The complexity of hybridity is explained by Young who claims that “[h]ybridity thus makes difference into sameness, and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the different no longer simply different” (1995: 26). The dual function of hybridity, the act of fusion and its result, is particularly useful when analysing descriptions of food and food practices in the analysed fictional texts where it can be applied to the characters' migration processes.

The fact that food functions as a mediator between different cultures suggests that it also functions as a means of translation. Tobias Döring, Markus Heidel and Susanne Mühleisen claim that the “discourse of multicultural meals and consumerist variety becomes a means of erasing difference: the other is consumed” (2003: 7). When the other is consumed, the unfamiliar becomes familiar; eating is thus regarded as a familiarisation process that in many ways mirrors the translation process. The idea that eating the other erases difference can, at the same time, be questioned as the eating process could function as a way to alter the consumer.

In order to better understand how figures of food serve as sites of cultural translation in *A change of skies*, *Love and vertigo*, and *Nina's heavenly delights*, it is useful to consider two translation strategies theorised by Friedrich Schleiermacher (2004: 49) and further developed by Lawrence Venuti (1995: 20) because they illuminate the power positions involved in the act of translation. As opposed to a foreignizing method, which advocates foreign elements, a

domesticating method aims at making the text as familiar as possible to the reader. Most translations contain both domesticating and foreignizing strategies, but there is often a tendency to foreground one or the other. These methods could be seen as problematic, and how they are applied can be seen as strategies to demonstrate power hierarchies. In this article, the domesticating translation method is primarily present on the intratextual level in the characters' fusion of food cultures, while the foreignizing method, which occurs on the extratextual level, is most noticeable in the use of foreign terms for dishes from the source culture. However, because the use of foreign terms is not exclusive, there is also an element of domestication when the authors and director use translated terms to describe food from the source culture. The domesticating translation method thus functions as a familiarisation process while the foreignizing method creates an interest in foreign elements and emphasises the theme of exoticism.

## **2 Cultural polarisation: Contrasting the source and target cultures**

In *Love and vertigo*, a story about the Tay family's migration from Singapore to Australia during the 1970s, food is a central theme, and food practices are portrayed as culturally specific, which is emphasized by the contrasts between the Singaporean source and the Australian target food cultures.<sup>2</sup> One example where the contrasts between the source and target cultures are highlighted is the picnic that takes place soon after the Tay family have immigrated to Australia. The Tay family's way of picnicking is described as very different from the Australian picnic, a difference that causes the main character Grace to realize her own and her family's foreignness in the Australian setting. During the picnic, Grace describes the Singaporean food culture from an insider's perspective, while the Australian food culture is viewed from the outside. The term picnic generates the following associations for Grace: “When I think of family picnics, I hear the hiss of sizzling oil and the clang of the metal wok in the kitchen as Mum cooked rice vermicelli with pork, egg and vegetables” (Teo 2000: 147). Because the setting is Australia and Grace's picnic memory contains typically Singaporean dishes, the memory emphasizes the differences between the Singaporean and Australian food cultures even before Grace has encountered an Australian picnic. When the time for the picnic arrives, the differences in food practices continue as Grace notices how and what other, presumably Australian, families eat at picnics:

From the car I looked at other families picnicking in the park. The smell of barbecuing meat and the hiss of fat sizzling on hot coals provoked stomach rumblings and mouth-watering cravings for meals as yet unknown and untasted. People were lying in the sun, munching on sandwiches, drinking Coke or beer or cups of wine from Coolabah casks. (Teo 2000: 149)

---

<sup>2</sup> These contrasts are set in an era when, in the non-fictional Australia, the policy of multiculturalism had just begun to replace the cultural assumptions of assimilation to the ‘Australian way of life’ for migrants.

In the novel, barbecuing is a way of preparing meals associated with the Australian cuisine and the act of preparing the meal, either at home in advance or during the picnic, is presented as one of the many differences between the two food cultures (Teo 2000: 149). In addition, the particular dishes and beverages the Australians consume appear foreign to Grace. In this situation, the Australian food culture is described as strange but appealing to the immigrant, while the Singaporean food culture is familiar and dull. The stereotypical Australian picnic is polarized with the Tay family's equally stereotypical picnic tradition, where almost every detail illustrates difference in a way that portrays the Singaporean food culture in a negative light and the Australian food culture in a positive light. The Tay family is the only family sitting on a groundsheet in the shadow, while others lie in the sun (Teo 2000: 149). While the immigrants are depicted as eating their prepared food hurriedly and gravely with chopsticks, the Australians are waiting for the barbecued meat in a relaxed manner (Teo 2000: 149). Furthermore, while the Tay family are “solemnly shovelling” and “sucking and slurping” the food (Teo 2000: 149), the Australians are munching on sandwiches.<sup>3</sup> When the two food cultures are polarized, apparent differences are not only accentuated, but also carried to the extreme, which further emphasizes the positive and negative characteristics of the two food cultures and enhances the gap between them. In addition, the polarisation of food cultures functions as a projection of Grace's internal struggle with migration and an ensuing double cultural belonging. Thus, in *Love and vertigo*, food is a literary figure with which Teo represents two disparate cultures and the migrant's complicated relationship to both.

In *A change of skies*, descriptions of food function as symbols of regional and cultural identities. The two main characters, Barry and Jean, are both Sri Lankan, but their cultural identities differ because Barry is Sinhalese and Jean is Tamil. The couple's cultural differences are reflected in their eating habits, as Jean explains: “Being so westernized, for instance, my husband is only semi-vegetarian. Unlike me. And so, naturally, many of his ideas too are only, so to speak, semi-Asian. Unlike mine” (Gooneratne 1991: 119). Gooneratne emphasizes the differences in ideas that exist between Sinhalese and Tamil (in the novel) by contrasting Jean's and Barry's food practices. There is a value distinction between Sinhalese and Tamil which can be seen in how the word semi, preceded by the restrictive word only, is used twice to describe Barry's cultural characteristics. His half-identity is emphasized and also contrasted with Jean's complete and pure identity: “I am a Tamil [...] and a Hindu. Pure veg” (Gooneratne 1991: 128). Pure vegetarianism becomes a sign of Jean's cultural identity; genuineness refers not only to her conservative and uncontaminated ideas and foodways, but also serves as a means to resist western influences.

---

<sup>3</sup> The picnic scene is described from Grace's point of view and she focuses on the differences between her family's (food) culture and the (food) culture she observes during the picnic. Therefore, the novel simplifies the situation into an ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy where ‘the others’ are perceived of as Australians.

Food is also a means to represent cultural and national stereotypes and prejudices in the novel. One example is the “pork-eating Ching-Chong,” which illustrates a disapproving attitude towards the Chinese food culture as well as Chinese people who are given a negative epithet as they are connected to a non-vegetarian food practice (Gooneratne 1991: 128). Australians are also described in negative terms as they are “polluting the air with meat fumes from [...] smelly Barbie[s]” (Gooneratne 1991: 128). From Jean’s vegetarian point of view, both the Chinese and the Australians have food and cooking traditions that she perceives as negative. Although all food cultures described in the novel are to some extent generalised representations, stereotypes are not only a way to emphasise cultural food habits in positive or negative terms, but also a way to illuminate cultural differences and structure national and regional identities hierarchically, where Jean’s Tamil identity is presented as superior to all other nationalities and ‘regionalities.’

In *Love and vertigo* and *A change of skies*, the polarisations of the main characters’ source and target cultures highlight cultural differences and illustrate how Grace, on the one hand, experiences her source culture as negative or restrictive while she perceives the target culture as tempting or representing freedom. Jean, on the other hand, regards her source culture as far superior to that of the target culture. Hence, these polarisations emphasize the immigrant characters’ relationships to their respective source and target cultures. In addition, they function as ways to exaggerate the homogeneity of cultures as they illustrate the immigrant’s resistance to deal with an increasing double cultural belonging.

### **3 Resistance to and acceptance of the source food**

In *Love and vertigo*, food from the source culture serves as a means to preserve the characters’ connections with home. A rejection or an acceptance of these food traditions are ways through which the characters are portrayed as connecting with or distancing themselves from either the source or the target cultures. Grace’s resistance to the food and the membership in the source culture offered by her mother Pandora is particularly emphasized during a visit to her relatives in Singapore. Grace, who is fourteen years old at the time, is “*forced* to come to Singapore with [her] Mum” (Teo 2000: 2, emphasis added). Grace is thus resisting the source culture even before arriving in Singapore. At a hawker centre, they eat “satay, Hainanese chicken rice, Singaporean Hokkien noodles, *tah mee, laksa, gado gado, rojak*” (Teo 2000: 2, original italics). The various dishes are not further commented upon, which suggests that they are familiar to Grace. Pandora’s attempt at introducing her daughter to the local Singaporean culture fails as Grace is disgusted by the local eating customs and by the smell of the dishes served at the hawker centre: “I complained about the noise, the smells, the disgusting charnel-house of the table where the previous diners had spat out pork ribs and spewed chewed chicken bones all over the surface” (Teo 2000: 2). Her repulsion with the Singaporean eating practices emphasizes Grace’s wish not to belong to this particular culture. At this time in her life, Grace can neither share her mother’s comfort food nor her comfort zone.

In *Nina's heavenly delights*, food illustrates Nina's distance to the Indian culture which her parents represent. In the movie, it is revealed that Nina ran away from her family and husband-to-be on her wedding day. Pressured into marrying an Indian man, Sanjay, her departure demonstrates a resistance not only to marriage, but also to her parents and the cultural traditions they represent which can be seen in the fact that she has neither been back visiting her parents nor called more than twice a year (Parmar, 2007). The resistance to her parents and their source culture is particularly illustrated through the art of cooking. As she left her family, Nina also left her work as a chef, a work that she shared with her father, behind. The connection to family, and especially father, is so closely connected to cooking that it seems impossible to separate them. Consequently, in order to leave her family, she must also leave her cooking career behind.

Nina and Sanjay are considered the perfect couple, since both of them are Indian and great chefs who love to cook. However, their differences are represented in their approaches to cooking. While Sanjay is a technical cook who follows the recipe exactly, Nina uses her heart when she creates new dishes (Parmar, 2007). Thus, their different cooking qualities illustrate their incompatibility. The reasons why Nina cannot marry Sanjay are because she does not love him and because she is gay. Instead of revealing her sexual identity to her parents, she leaves everyone and runs away to London (Parmar, 2007). The resistance to a particular cultural identity is also a resistance to conform and to enter into a heterosexual relationship. Nina is not able to combine her sexual identity and her cultural heritage, and the resistance to her parents' source culture is illustrated through her resistance to stay in Glasgow and cook 'their' food. Both Grace and Nina resist their source cultures and this resistance is clearly expressed through their resistance to eat (Grace) and cook (Nina) their source food.

Food is used to illustrate rejection but also acceptance of a cultural belonging in *Love and vertigo*. Although the young Grace, at the age of fourteen, is described as a girl who resists her mother's source food and culture, the adult Grace admits that she has been "culturally lazy" and that she "had depended on [her] Mum whenever [they] went somewhere Chinese" (Teo 2000: 274). After this realisation and following her mother's suicide, Grace's attitude towards the source culture changes. Her reconnection with Singapore and with the Singaporean food culture illustrates how she relates to her dead mother: "I turn into the hawker centre and wander from stall to stall, debating between a bowl of fish porridge, *nasi lemak* or a couple of spicy, smelly, vermilion-coloured *otak otak* wrapped and roasted in banana leaves" (Teo 2000: 272, original italics). The revisit to the hawker centre many years later describes how Grace's resistance towards Singaporean dishes has turned into acceptance. After Pandora's suicide, Grace needs a connection to her mother's food and culture. Reflecting back on the time she resisted her mother's culture she remembers how her mother "used to crave such things [Singaporean dishes] for breakfast" (Teo 2000: 272) and how she herself retorted with a traditional Australian breakfast: "Spooning soggy Weetbix into my mouth or scraping Vegemite onto my toast, I exaggerated my incredulity that anyone could eat

anything so pungent and spicy that early in the morning" (Teo 2000: 272). The young Grace expresses repulsion for her mother's food traditions, whereas the adult Grace asks herself: "How is it that my dead mother's tastebuds now coat my tongue and nudge my cravings?" (Teo 2000: 272). Instead of emphasising her Australianness, the adult Grace acknowledges her Singaporean roots. At the same time as she accepts her mother's food, she accepts her own double cultural identity.

Although there are many differences between the novel and the movie, one thing that is similar is the death of a parent. Just as Grace is reconnecting with her mother through food in *Love and vertigo*, Nina reconnects with her dead father through the art of cooking in *Nina's heavenly delights*. Food is also the means through which she reconnects with her cultural identity and reveals her sexual identity (Parmar, 2007). Resistance and acceptance of food practices from the source culture illustrate the inability to escape one's double cultural belonging and, at the same time, the inability to maintain cultural homogeneity or escape cultural heterogeneity. In the novel and the movie, the death of a parent leads to an acceptance of the child characters' source cultures and hybrid cultural identities.

#### **4 Pressure to live up to the expectations of the source culture**

In *Love and vertigo*, food is used to illustrate culturally specific characteristics and the immigrant child's inability to live up to the expectations of the parents' source culture. In particular, the dish hot chillies is announced to have specific cultural meaning. During the Tay family's re-visit to their relatives in Singapore, Grace's brother Sonny is informed of the significance of eating chillies:

'What's the matter with you, Sonny?' Uncle Winston demanded. 'How come you don't take chilli? You're not a real man unless you can eat the hottest chillies, you know. My father used to pick up those tiny chilli *puddies* – the hottest chillies you can find on this earth – and he ate them like sweet cakes. Here, have some.' He spooned a generous amount of chilli into Sonny's bowl of noodles. (Teo 2000: 145-46, original italics)

Winston, who assumes that something is wrong when Sonny does not eat chillies, quickly informs Sonny that eating the hottest chillies is a sign of masculinity. The impressed, almost bragging, voice with which the anecdote about Winston's father is told indicates that being masculine is highly regarded in that specific cultural context. Thus, hot chillies is used as a cultural figure to illustrate the importance of being masculine in the Singaporean setting.

Sonny is unable to live up to the cultural standards of the source culture. Knowing that eating chillies is a sign of masculinity, it is still impossible for him to eat them: "His eyes oozed tears and his nose dribbled. His larynx and tongue were on fire. Desperately, he sucked up coconut juice through a straw, then fished out the ice cubes to roll them around his burning mouth" (Teo 2000: 146). This failed attempt at eating chillies causes laughter and ridicule among his relatives: "Uncle Winston and the rest of the cousins reared with laughter while auntie Shufen sat there, staring unblinkingly at Sonny and gnawing off pieces of satay with her teeth. 'What a sissy! Can't eat chillies'" (Teo 2000: 146). Besides being laughed at, Sonny is also called

a sissy – a term with negative connotations meaning an effeminate boy – by his relatives. Unable to eat hot chillies, Sonny is thus unable to meet the expectations of the source culture.

Sonny's inability to live up to the Singaporean image of masculinity is described as a very agonising problem in *Love and vertigo*. When the story about hot chillies continues, though in an Australian instead of a Singaporean context, it reveals Sonny's fear of not being able to prove his masculinity and therefore letting his father down: “he dreaded the moment when he would have to confess that he could not bear the taste of chillies” (Teo 2000: 147). What he fears the most is “the moment when his masculinity would be shamed before his father” (Teo 2000: 148). The fear of not meeting his father's expectations illustrates Sonny's eager wish to be culturally accepted, to be a good son with Singaporean measures. The dish hot chillies can be seen as a significant symbolic figure in the novel as it is a means to express the cultural pressure the immigrant child experiences in *Love and vertigo*.

In *Nina's heavenly delights*, Nina's brother, Kary, is pressured by his parents to behave according to the norms of the Indian source culture. Kary has secretly married an English girl while he pretends to be dating another girl, Lisa (Parmar, 2007). The fact that Lisa also is English shows that Kary believes that his parents accept that he dates English girls, but that they expect him to marry an Indian girl. Besides marriage, Kary is also pressured by his parents to become a doctor. As is revealed in the movie, he has dropped out of medical school and is instead working for Sanjay and his father selling groceries (Parmar, 2007). The cultural pressure Kary feels is implicit. Even though his mother does not forbid him to marry an English girl, he clearly experiences her unspoken expectations. The fact that these characters struggle to live up to the standards of the source culture illustrates a desire to belong to that particular cultural environment and to accept their double cultural access.

### **5 Cultural hybridity: Fusing the source and target cultures**

In the meeting with the new target country and culture, food often changes so that a hybrid version appears which has a new function both ritually and socially. The creation of this hybrid version functions as a familiarisation process where food becomes the means through which a particular source culture is translated to a target consumer, at the same time as the reverse process occurs. In *A change of skies*, a combination of the Sri Lankan source and Australian target food cultures emerges when Jean, in her transformed role as a successful cook and cookbook writer, creates new dishes where she “*combine[s] Oriental and Western ingredients and methods of preparation*” (Gooneratne 1991: 208, original italics). This fusion between the oriental (source) food and western (target) food familiarizes the Australian consumer with the Sri Lankan culture because the cookbooks are aimed at an Australian audience and because the two restaurants owned by Jean and Barry are located in Brisbane and target an Australian consumer population.

The fusion of the two food cultures represents the immigrant's hybrid cultural identity and the migrant situation on an individual and a collective level. The

individual level communicates the immigrant’s movement from one cultural environment to another and the subsequent efforts to combine these two cultural environments. Jean further illustrates the collective migrant experience when she purposefully mixes two or more food traditions in her creation of new recipes. In an interview following the publication of her cookbook, these combinations are in focus:

*Every recipe in her book reflects [...] the many-layered, transforming immigrant experience that is now an integral part of Australian life. Exotic ingredients drawn from many parts of the world blend with the best of wholesome, healthy Aussie tucker to create unforgettable dishes that tickle the taste buds.* (Gooneratne 1991: 293, original italics)

The term blend emphasises the significance of the mixing of food cultures, not restrictively Sri Lankan but exotic ingredients with Australian elements in the novel. On the collective level, the migrant situation expresses the circumstances in Australia where immigrants have brought cultural elements and culinary experiences, a combination that is the Australia Jean and Barry encounter. Through the act of fusion, food stereotypes are resisted and the Australian food culture is enriched by the inclusion of exotic ingredients. Thus, food fusion is represented as a process that leads to improvement where the Australian food culture is refined through the blend with exotic ingredients. In *A change of skies*, hybrid identities and hybrid cultures, which constitute, and are a result of, the migrant’s in-betweenness, are paralleled by the fusion of food cultures, which functions as one of the governing metaphors in the novel.

The combination and blending of food cultures is a way to introduce foreign elements to the target consumer by mixing them with familiar elements. Consequently, the fusion of two food cultures that occurs in the novel can be seen as a domesticating translation method. Similarly, as opposed to employing a foreignizing translation method, which advocates foreign elements, Jean can be seen as a translator who uses a domesticating method, which aims at making the text as familiar as possible to the reader. She is “*part of the new wave of migrants who are bringing to Australia the unique skills and cultural riches of Asia*” (Gooneratne 1991: 293, original italics). On the intratextual level of *A change of skies*, Jean brings Asian cultural riches to Australia, in a similar way to how a translator moves the text closer to the reader, by adapting her source food to better suit the target consumer. The creation of hybrid dishes through which Jean translates the Sri Lankan and Asian cultures and food cultures to an Australian target consumer thus functions as a powerful business strategy based on ‘refining’ existing cultures and food cultures, and also functions as a site from which it is possible to manipulate or alter the consumer.

Hybridity is a major theme in *Love and vertigo* where Teo presents a household with hybrid food traditions as the Tay family alternatively eat Australian and Singaporean food. On Grace’s birthday, their lunch is Singaporean: “Mum cooked rice porridge for lunch and I helped her to make the meatballs, rolling together a gooey paste of minced pork, garlic, ginger, shallots and chopped bits of Shiitake

mushrooms" (Teo 2000: 202). The detailed description of the content of the meatballs, which reads almost as a recipe, is contrasted against the Australian dinner that same day: "Mum had made roast chicken with potatoes, pumpkin and green beans because it was my favourite meal then" (Teo 2000: 203). Although these two meals are not explicitly traditional Singaporean and Australian, they are portrayed as such in the novel, which can be seen in Madam Tay's (Grace's grandmother) different reactions to the two dishes. While she accepts the lunch unquestioningly, she "stared incredulously" at the dinner and commented: "No good" (Teo 2000: 203). Both the acceptance and the refusal are illustrations of Madam Tay's familiarity with one dish and unfamiliarity with the other. As she accepts only Singaporean food, she rejects not only Australian food, but also the Tay family's hybrid food traditions. Consequently, she refuses adaptation, alteration, and translation.

The construction of hybrid meals is a positive feature in *A change of skies*, but the one meal in *Love and vertigo* that is a fusion of the source and target food cultures is described as a negative and unwanted experience. When Pandora is unwell and, therefore, unable to cook dinner, Grace and her brother Sonny, in spite of their inability to cook, use the ingredients available together with their familiarity with both food cultures and create a meal for their father Jonah, who reacts with disapproval:

He looked at the rice Sonny had steamed and the tinned frankfurters and baked beans I'd heated up for dinner that night. [...] Bad-temperedly, he swiped his arm across the table and sent the cheap china dishes with rice, baked beans and frankfurters smashing onto the tiled kitchen floor. (Teo 2000: 187)

All through the novel, Teo portrays Jonah as a man who strongly disapproves of wasting food and drinks. Therefore, throwing food on the floor instead of consuming it is a sign of his displeasure. The meal that is a fusion of the source (rice) and target (baked beans and frankfurters) food cultures is composed out of necessity and possibly with an unawareness of the ingredients' different cultural associations. However, hybrid food practices, and hybridity as such, are in the novel mainly considered positive, but the mix of the source and target food cultures into one meal is a negative practice, one that results in an unwanted and contaminated meal. Hybridity is considered both a strength and a threat due to the in-between characteristics that provide an access to the two entities that are merged. However, Jonah's view of fusion as contamination alludes to the negative view of hybridity as an impure result of the mixing of two 'pure' entities such as food traditions. One example of negative criticism towards hybridity is the loss of traditions and roots (Burke 2009:7). The migrant's position in-between cultures allows access to two food cultures, but while the mixing of these cultures is regarded as a positive feature in *A change of skies*, it is considered a negative feature in *Love and vertigo*. Jonah is predominantly viewed from Grace's perspective, and his negative attitude towards the hybrid meal suggests that he is upset over his wife's inability to cook,

but also that he does not approve of the mixed meal and wants to keep the source culture and the target culture separated.

How various dishes are combined is culturally specific, which is why food often lends itself to metaphors of hybridity and bi/multiculturalism. Food fusion is seen as an often used or even over-used metaphor by Tamara S. Wagner, who claims that “the metaphoric mixing of food has become standard fare when it comes to the literary representation of multiculturalism” (2007:32). In *A change of skies* and *Love and vertigo*, food fusion is not just an easy way to represent hybridity, it also functions as a way to emphasise power relations between cultures and people. The mixing of food and/or food traditions is a well-known metaphor of hybridity, but it does not operate on its own in these novels, rather it is strengthened by the characters’ need for acculturation processes, a need that also advocate hybridity. Hence, the fusion of food cultures is one of several ways in which the hybrid state of the immigrant character and his/her position as a translated being, a being who has access to two cultures and who has the means to translate back and forth between them, is represented.

In addition to creating recipes that contain ingredients from both the source and the target cultures (which can be seen as a domesticating translation method), the fusion of two food cultures is a way to promote exoticism in *A change of skies*. Gooneratne takes the fusion of food cultures to another level as her character can be seen as performing “[f]ood pornography,” which is “making a living by exploiting the ‘exotic’ aspects of one’s ethnic foodways” (Wong 1993:55). The successful reception of Jean’s hybrid recipes and meals can be seen as food pornography in terms of exploitation and manipulation, but not in terms of “a confirmation of the superiority of the white majority, only willing to accept outsiders when they provide ‘spicy’ and ‘exotic’ food” (Pang 2003:55). Although the exotic food fusion is a way for Jean to be accepted by the target culture, she is not described as a victim and the target culture is not portrayed as superior. Rather, she uses her exotic position to her advantage, and regards her own Tamil Sri Lankan culture as superior to all other cultures (Teo 2000:119). Although initially resisting translation, she gradually starts to see the benefits of having access to both the source and the target cultures (Teo 2000:120).

From her advantageous in-between position, translation through food fusion is a way of marketing her own superior culture and of refining the (in her view) inferior Australian (food) culture. The mixing of cultural ingredients is a way for Jean to perform what Döring, Heidel and Mühleisen refer to as “marketing exotic foods as delicate delights” (2003: 7). Jean’s hybrid dishes are valued higher than traditional dishes in Australia and they function as a way to improve the local cuisine. Ethnicity is thus portrayed as an asset in the novel. Through her cooking, “ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture,” as bell hooks states in connection with her critique of the (ab)use of ethnicity as attraction in literature (1998: 181). hooks’ food metaphor is applicable to *A change of skies*, where ethnicity is used to spice up the Australian food culture, hence reproducing exoticism. However, rather than being taken advantage of, Jean is

described as a character who uses her exotic culture to improve the poor quality of the target (food culture). At the same time as Jean’s food fusion devalues the Australian food culture, it exploits the Sri Lankan ethnicity. The creation of hybrid dishes functions as a means to reach the target population and to manipulate the target (food) culture. This manipulation functions as a market strategy which brings Jean and Barry financial success. While hybrid meals are described as negative in *Love and vertigo*, the blending of food cultures results in success and the hybrid dish is considered more valuable than its parts when hybridity is exploited in *A change of skies*. Regardless of whether the reason for creating hybrid dishes is a necessity or a market strategy, or the result of these creations is failure or success, the fusion of food from the source and target cultures illustrates the impossibility of cultural homogeneity, and the necessity of cultural heterogeneity.

## **6 Food as a means of cultural translation**

Besides functioning as a way to represent and identify oneself and others, food often serves as a first contact with an unfamiliar culture and is a way through which cultural translation is possible. “[T]he *palate* functions as a kind of *contact zone*” (2003: 156, original italics) Rüdiger Kunow argues. Food, like language (another central identity facet), communicates cultural practices and customs. Massimo Montanari claims that “[e]ating the food of the ‘other’ is easier, it would seem, than decoding the other’s language. Far more than spoken language itself, food can serve as a mediator between different cultures” (2006: 133). The sharing of food rituals (consciously and/or unconsciously) creates a sense of belonging at the same time as it intensifies an exchange of cultural information. The fact that food functions as a mediator between different cultures suggests that it also functions as a means of translation. When the other is consumed, the unfamiliar becomes familiar; eating is thus a familiarisation process that in many ways mirrors the translation process.

Resistance to the source culture demonstrates a desire to be altered – to be translated. Both Grace and Nina are described as expressing a wish to belong and fit in, to be part of the target cultures, illustrated through their resistance to food and food practices from the source culture. The eventual acceptance of the source food, on the other hand, demonstrates a desire to be translated back to the source culture. The double translation processes open up for a hybrid cultural identity where neither the target (Australian and Scottish) nor the source (Singaporean and Indian) food cultures and cultures are rejected; instead, both are needed to make Grace’s and Nina’s cultural identities accepted.

In the three analysed works, the young male immigrants are described as experiencing pressure from their families and relatives to behave according to the norms of the source culture. Their inability to live up to these cultural expectations is a sign of their cultural translation. They have become what Salman Rushdie refers to as translated men (1983: 29). However, their struggle to live up to these cultural expectations illustrates their desire to connect with the source culture, to be translated back. Hence, the male characters’ double cultural identities are

emphasized as they illustrate the hybrid positions that immigrant children hold in the target country.

One way in which food functions as a means of cultural translation is through the process of fusing food from the source culture with food from the target culture and thus creating hybrid dishes. As Jean in *A change of skies* uses Australian ingredients in combination with Sri Lankan dishes, she can be seen as a cultural translator who translates the Sri Lankan culture to the Australian target consumer in a way that shares similarities with a domesticating translation strategy, that is, by making the foreign familiar by using familiar elements. In this way, the translation process mirrors the migration process where hybrid dishes illustrate the immigrant characters' hybrid cultural identities. Hence, food fusion is one way in which these migration stories manifest the elision of the idea of cultural homogeneity.

### References

- Belasco, Warren (2002), “Food matters: Perspectives on an emerging field”, in Belasco, Warren & Philip Scranton (eds.), *Food nations: Selling taste in consumer societies*. New York: Routledge, 2-23.
- Bhabha Homi K. (2004), *The location of culture*. 1994. London: Routledge Classics.
- Burke, Peter (2009), *Cultural hybridity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Chambers, Iain (1994), *Migrancy, culture, identity*. London: Routledge.
- Döring, Tobias, Markus Heide & Susanne Mühleisen (2003), “Writing/Eating culture”, in Döring, Tobias, Markus Heide & Susanne Mühleisen (eds.), *Eating culture: The poetics and politics of food*. Heidelberg: Winter Universitätsverlag, 1-16.
- Faist, Thomas, Margit Fauser & Eveline Reisenauer (2013), *Transnational migration*. Cambridge Polity Press.
- Gooneratne, Yasmine (1991), *A change of skies*. London: Penguin.
- Hooks, bell (1998), “Eating the other: Desire and resistance”, in Scapp, Ron & Brian Seitz (eds.), *Eating culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 181- 200.
- Jakobson, Roman (2004), “On linguistic aspects of translation”, in Venuti, Lawrence (ed.), *The translation studies reader*. New York: Routledge, 138-43.
- Kunow, Rüdiger (2003), “Eating Indian(s): Food, Representation, and the Indian diaspora in the United States”, in Döring, Tobias, Markus Heide & Susanne Mühleisen (eds.), *Eating culture: The poetics and politics of food*. Heidelberg: Winter Universitätsverlag, 151-75.
- Levitt, Peggy. (2003), “Keeping feet in both worlds: Transnational practices and immigrant incorporation”, in Joppke, Christian. & Ewa Morawska (eds.), *Integrating immigrants in liberal nation-states: From post-nationals to transnational*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 177-194.

- Ljungqvist, Rickard (2010), ”74 matprogram på bara en vecka”, <https://www.expressen.se/noje/74-matprogram-pa-bara-en-vecka/>. Accessed 9 July 2018.
- Mintz, Sidney W. (1996), *Tasting food, tasting freedom: Excursions into eating, culture, and the past*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Montanari, Massimo (2006), *Food is culture*. Trans. Albert Sonnenfeld. 2004. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pang, Chin Lin (2003), ”Beyond ‘authenticity’: Reinterpreting Chinese immigrant food in Belgium”, in Döring, Tobias, Markus Heide & Susanne Mühleisen (eds.), *Eating culture: The poetics and politics of food*. Heidelberg: Winter Universitätsverlag, 53-70.
- Parmar, Pratibha (2007), *Nina’s heavenly delights*, London: Verve Pictures Limited.
- Polezzi, Loredana (2006), ”Translation, travel, migration”, in Polezzi, Loredana (ed.), *Translation, travel, migration. The Translator Studies in Intercultural Communication*, 12(2):169-88.
- Quan, Shuai & Ning Wang (2004), ”Towards a structural model of the tourist experience: An illustration from food experiences in tourism”, *Tourism Management*, 25(3):297-305.
- Rushdie, Salman (1983), *Shame*. London: Jonathan Cap Ltd.
- Sceats, Sarah (2000), *Food, consumption and the body in contemporary women’s fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich (2004), ”On the different methods of translating”, in Venuti, Lawrence (ed.), *The translation studies reader*. Trans. Susan Bernofsky. New York: Routledge, 43-63.
- Steiner, Tina (2009), *Translated people, translated texts: Language and migration in contemporary African literature*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- Svensson, Anette (2010), *A translation of worlds: Aspects of cultural translation and Australian migration literature*, Doctoral thesis, Umeå: Print & Media.
- Teo, Hsu-Ming (2000), *Love and vertigo*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.
- Venuti, Lawrence (1995), *The translator’s invisibility: A history of translation*. New York: Routledge.
- Wagner, Tamara S. (2007), ”Boutique multiculturalism and the consumption of repulsion: Re-disseminating food fictions in Malaysian and Singaporean diasporic novels”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*: 31-46.
- White, Paul (1995), ”Geography, literature and migration”, in King, Russell, Johan Connell & Paul White (eds.), *Writing across worlds: Literature and migration*. London: Routledge, 1-19.
- Wong, Sau-Ling C. (1993), *Reading Asian American literature: From necessity to extravagance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Young, Robert J. C. (1995), *Colonial desire: Hybridity in theory, culture and race*. London: Routledge.