

## IDENTITIES AT THE DINNER TABLE: COMMENSALITY, SELF-PERCEPTION, AND RELATIONSHIPS IN ANNE CHERIAN'S *A GOOD INDIAN WIFE*

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**Abstract:** *Food studies is rapidly gaining ground as a multidisciplinary area of research. Within it, literary food studies brings an interdisciplinary perspective as works of literature are viewed through the lens of food that is informed by frameworks and concepts that are rooted in a variety of fields including cultural anthropology, sociology, and more. One such concept that is in focus here is that of commensality that is associated with food and food practices. Commensality, drawing from notions of conviviality, refers to the practice of sharing a table and consuming food together. Deeper meanings of communal identities come to the fore in this social practice, leading it to shape how identities are understood and projected. Commensality can be a complex site of belonging and alienation depending on the context, and this paper seeks to explore the representation of the same in Anne Cherian's *A Good Indian Wife* (2008). Leila, the titular Indian wife in the novel, moves to the US from India after her marriage to Neel and grapples with finding her place in the foreign land. With this displacement comes the endeavor to reaffirm her new identity, which now includes the role of being a wife and the aspect of being an immigrant. Neel also deals with complicated feelings towards the projection of his identity. With food playing a crucial role in the everyday experiences of their lives, commensality becomes a point of enquiry into how they see themselves and how their relationships with each other and themselves evolve through the course of the narrative.*

**Keywords:** *commensality, food, food culture, identity, migration*

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## Introduction

Food is often an integral part of traditions and practices where some are passed down through generations – taking on a collective flavor – while others are made individually. These food practices influence both cultural and individual identities and also shape food relations. Food relations here are the relations that one has with food and include the relations formed with others through food. This brings in the addition of commensality in the creation of the space marked by food practices, which is also influenced by foodways – a term referring to the cultural, social, historical, and economic intersections related to the production, preparation, and consumption of food (Miller & Deutsch, 2009, p. 3).

Food is not something that is merely consumed, but is eaten in a social setting, even when one eats alone (Fischler, 2011, p. 530). Food is “relational” (Goldstein, 2018, p. 40), drawing from the idea that “an entire ‘world’ (social environment) is present in and signified by food” (Barthes, 1961/2013, p. 26), as it circulates through ecological transformations and is further influenced by processes associated with the relationships among people. The term “commensality” – derived from the Latin word *commensalis*, which refers to the practice of eating together at the same table – is used to refer to the social aspects, interactions, and relations with food (Goldstein, 2018, p. 40). Commensality is a fundamental part of our identity as social beings delineating the social circles and communities we belong to and also the ones we are excluded from (Douglas, 1985, p. 36; Fischler, 2011, p. 533; Jones, 2007, p. 8; Jönsson, Michaud & Neuman, 2021, p. 1; Kerner, Chou & Warmind, 2015, p. 27). Commensality also includes the exchange of memories and experiences in the presence of the food that sparks remembrance (Seremetakis, 1993, p. 14). Social connections integral to the formation of identity are formed through the interplay of commensality and memory (Goldstein, 2018, p. 50). The act of eating reflects a person’s place in relation to their community/communities, relating to the aspects of cultural identity (Vlitos, 2018, p. 45; George & Vijayaraghavan, 2022, pp. 5-8; Upstone, 2009, p. 126), making meals carriers of communal values and group identity (Forrest & St. Maurice, 2022, p. 3; George, 2022, p. 622; Sreelakshmi, 2023, p. 144; Vlitos, 2018, p. 65). When identities undergo crises (Mercer, 1990, p. 43), communal eating become a site of “disagreement, tension, [and] incomprehension” (Vlitos, 2018, p. 45).

The narrative in the spotlight here centers on characters who experience different kinds of food relations due to their individual journeys of migration. This encourages a reading of this text with the intersections of food and identity as the focus to get a better picture of their everyday experiences. Anne Cherian’s novel *A Good Indian Wife*, published in 2008, features Leila as the titular Indian wife in the novel. She moves to the US from India after her marriage to Neel and struggles with finding her place in a foreign land and assimilating with the culture there (Aguiar, 2013, p. 182). With this displacement comes the endeavor

to reaffirm her new identity, which now includes the role of being a wife and an immigrant. Neel also deals with complicated feelings towards the projection of his identity and conflicting experiences of assimilation and rejection of affiliations. With food playing a crucial role in the everyday experiences of their lives, commensality becomes a point of enquiry into how they see themselves and how their relationships with each other and themselves evolve through the course of the narrative.

### **Commensal Links to Cultural Identity**

Suneel, or Neel as he goes by in the US – a new name to mark his “new life” (Cherian, 2008, Ch. 4), finds that his movement between the US and India had left him feeling that he did not fit in and find himself belonging in either of these countries. He calls this “the classic immigrant dilemma” (2008, Ch. 3), marinating in the dissatisfaction that this liminal existence grants. Aware of the role of food as a marker of ethnic identity (Mannur, 2010, p. 7; Vallianatos & Raine, 2008, p. 365), one of the ways in which Neel resists his association with being an Indian is by rejecting the food that he grew up eating, and by extension, rejecting the food memories and food relations that are linked to these foodways. He disapproves of the “oily snacks” of his hometown – *murku* and *vada*. When he was a child, he found the food and drinks served to him by his American friend’s mother to be much tastier than the ones in his mother’s repertoire, reveling in “the faraway land [of America] made closer by powders and cans bursting with flavor” (2008, Ch. 3). He associates food in America with enjoyment, where his fridge is stocked “with steaks and burgers” and food in India to be more restrictive where “there would be no meat” as per his family’s eating practices (2008, Ch. 1). His adoption of eating non-vegetarian food dismisses the rules of consumption that his family follows in India, thereby dismissing his affiliation with them and his extended community, a practice that he consciously adopts for this reason (Brown & Mussell, 1984, p. 5). Sights and memories that would evoke nostalgia in most create aversion and distaste in him. Instead of focusing on “*samosas, aloo chops, and vadas,*” he pays attention to the “smell of stale oil and flour” (Cherian, 2008, Ch. 3) and only sees the food in a distasteful light. He tries to forget the milky sweet coffee, reminiscent of the “taste of his childhood” (2008, Ch. 5), by drinking his coffee black and sugarless in the US. “The sight of turmeric-stained fingernails and the odor of curry powder that clung to one’s hand hours after the meal” makes him cringe in distaste (2008, Ch. 14).

Neel is distinctly aware of his identity and the privilege that comes with it in the novel. As an Iyengar – “the best of all South Indian Hindus,” as he is told – his status as doctor with an American citizenship propels him further up the caste and class hierarchy. His family insists on getting him married to a suitable

bride equipped with the skills to maintain the family's "good name" and a list of hand-picked women chosen by his family is lined up for him. The women he meets are "raised for marriage": trained in the fine art of cooking intricate recipes and qualified with a college degree with the sole purpose "to secure a marriage, not a job" (2008, Ch. 1). Neel is deeply disapproving of these women, for he sees them continuing what he believed to be the endless drudgery of life in India. He shows his disgruntlement towards his homeland by resisting the cultural identity that is offered by his affiliation with the country. He repeatedly assures himself that he is not "a traditional Indian man" (2008, Ch. 1; Ch. 5) in want of a wife who would "spatter kitchen walls with the oil from dosas and sambar" (2008, Ch. 1). He is staunch in his yearning for "a whole other way of being" (2008, Ch. 1), guided by his fascination for the "wonders of the Western world" (2008, Ch. 3) and his desire to get away from the influence and control of his family. However, his attempts to run away from India and his Indian identity is all for naught as "India inevitably assert[s] itself" (2008, Ch. 3) and he is tricked into marrying a woman of his family's choice.

His relationship with Caroline in America from before he was married is one that he deems to be "Indian-inappropriate" (2008, Ch. 1), acknowledging the class and caste difference between them – aware that she is not of his "own kind" (2008, Ch. 3). However, he looks beyond status, occupation, and education levels to satisfy his "white fetish" (2008, Ch. 14) realized in his intimate interactions with Caroline – seen in the perverse way he refers to the "white perfection" (2008, Ch. 8) of her body that distinctly focuses on the color of her skin. His desire is sparked by his fascination with his American friend's mother, prompting him to pursue an unsuccessful relationship with another white woman, Savannah, before finally leading him into Caroline's arms. Snubbed by Savannah's racist notions that see his "brownness" as a "limitation," overlooking his status granted by his education at Stanford and his job as a doctor, he is determined to become as "American as possible" by finding "a white wife" (2008, Ch. 3) – one who would be able to "fill in the gaps" of his cultural assimilation in the US (2008, Ch. 1). Neel and Caroline's clandestine dates involve food that is in no way associated with India – they eat Chinese food to celebrate their anniversary together and Caroline makes French-inspired meals for them in her apartment on other occasions. Their relationship is associated with alimentary metaphors, where the early days of their relationship are referred to as "their salad days" – a Shakespearean idiom linked to carefree innocence, idealism, and pleasure (2008, Ch.1). Their relationship progresses from the first course of the salad to wondering how soon Neel could leave after their meals together, hinting at his increasing disinterest in Caroline over time. There are other hints of his growing exhaustion from resisting his identity, such as when the aroma of his and Caroline's usual Chinese food order gets too unpleasant for him in the closed space of his car. He staunchly keeps their relationship a secret – owing to

their different statuses at first, and later, due to his marriage to Leila – and stops meeting her outside her apartment, with restaurant dates deemed as “risk[s]” to be avoided. As he begins to avoid her later on in the narrative, he stops eating with her. He decides to break off his relationship with her after they meet her brother who refuses his presence at their table – a racist action that rejects him for his cultural and ethnic identity.

Neel’s marriage to Leila brings in further complications. During their first dinner together – a setting that should ideally spark interest in and curiosity towards each other in the backdrop of their shared meal – Leila and Neel feel uncomfortable and awkward together. Leila scans the menu for something familiar, noting that the dishes included were: “the foods Mills & Boon heroines ordered when sitting with their lovers. Spaghetti in Bolognese sauce, veal cacciatore, pasta primavera” and more. She finally finds the mention of the safe vegetarian option of “*chana batura*” at the very bottom of the menu, an order that she is implicitly snubbed for by the waiter, leading her to ruminate at how some “Indians scorned those Indians who were not cognizant of Western ways” (2008, Ch. 8). The meal also sets Leila reeling at the reveal of Neel’s shocking non-vegetarian food habits when he orders “the Beef Stroganoff with a salad, oil and vinegar dressing, light on the oil” (2008, Ch. 8). The differences in their respective food orders on their shared table parallel the same in them as people. While Leila settles for her order after finding nothing else appropriate and does not confront the server for his subtle insult, Neel has no qualms about taking up space and being noticed in the modifications that he asks for in his order. When they are joined by an American couple at the restaurant, Neel feels invigorated and feels more at ease with them than he does with Leila. She, on the other hand, feels put on the spot and judged as they indulge in commensality with conversations that are eased by shared experiences while they eat with their forks and knives (Counihan, 2022, p. 157). The use of cutlery for eating is only limited to certain foods in her experience and she now fumbles with eating familiar food with unfamiliar implements. When asked about how they had met, Neel is embarrassed at having to reveal the truth of him being in an arranged marriage as it goes against all the Western ideals of choice and living for himself that he wholeheartedly wishes to integrate with, and he makes up a tale of seeing her “pour tea, looking very serene and domestic” and falling in love with her “before the first cuppa was cold” (Cherian, 2008, Ch. 8).

Neel’s friend Sanjay, in contrast, is someone who is comfortable and accepting of his migrant identity, wholeheartedly embracing his “Indian accent” (2008, Ch. 1) and his American wife Oona’s desire to merge their cultures together – primarily in the kitchen (Upstone, 2009, p. 126). Even though he was concerned about the differences between them, wanting the backdrop of shared experiences to build their relationship – a notion that Neel could not fathom as he would be willing to abandon all his ties to India at the prospect of gaining a white

spouse – Oona “correct[s] that loss” (Cherian, 2008, Ch. 13) by bridging their cultural gap through the food that they make and eat together and bonding through commensality (Fischler, 2011, p. 533). She does not look at the food that they make as a way of experiencing “gastro adventure” – referring to the consumption of exotic cuisines – but as a way of indulging in “gastro nostalgia” – the phenomenon of holding on to one’s ethnic associations through the consumption of food (Srinivas, 2007, p. 88). Sanjay’s comfort in his Indian-ness, coupled with his friendly nature, greatly soothes Leila. Their first interaction over the phone wherein he speaks of her presence ensuring that Neel’s fridge will never be empty, assures Leila of her role as a dutiful wife – a role that, although limiting, is what she has been preparing for all her life – a reminder that assuages her growing disappointment with Neel. Leila is born and bred in the same milieu wherein she is socially conditioned to believe that her existence is only meaningful in the roles of an obliging wife and dutiful mother. Sanjay’s invitation to dine at his place makes her feel accepted within Neel’s circle of friends and less lonely in the foreign land.

After he accepts Sanjay’s invite for dinner under duress, Neel has Leila dress in a pantsuit to appear to be the kind of woman that he wants in front of his friends. However, he notices that she wears it “like it [is] someone else’s clothes” (Cherian, 2008, Ch. 13). Although she welcomes the change in clothes and the additions to her wardrobe – a sign of her fluid perception of herself – she draws the line at his shortening of her name without her permission and emphasizes that she is proud of her name and, by extension, her identity

The commensal meal with Leila and Neel at Sanjay’s house introduces her to Neel’s close friends in the capacity of being his wife. Leila appreciates the kitchen cupboard that shows how “the dividing strands of their braided lives,” cultures, and identities work for Sanjay and Oona – with “Western spices” coexisting harmoniously with spicy Indian-style pickles (2008, Ch. 14). This joint meal is the first that Leila eats with Neel among his friends and she is charmed by his jovial persona as he toasts with champagne in celebration with them, his “foreignness” – his ease with Western culinary culture – making him “exciting” in her eyes (2008, Ch. 14). Neel is disappointed to see the omission of meat in the meal – for the biryani and vegetable dishes were made by Oona with Leila in mind – and this adds another reason for Neel’s frustration with Leila and he rebukes her condescendingly for her food habits. This evidently shows an undercurrent of tension within the friendly commensality. This decidedly “un-Indian gathering” leaves Leila feeling disheartened and confused as she struggles with transitioning into the role of a wife while also dealing with the cultural differences that have come about because of her migration (2008, Ch. 14). She decides to try eating meat after being provoked by Neel. She eats a morsel but declares that she will not be having it again, having been transported to the past through that bite of food. She remembers how she had gotten close



to Janni – who belonged to a “family of Muslims who ate goat meat” (2008, Ch. 8), a linkage through food that reflected boundaries drawn by exclusion based on religious cultural identity and allied food practices (Douglas, 1985, p. 36) – while in college. Their union was disapproved by her parents due to the difference of religions and she was held captive in her home. She landed in the hospital after she unsuccessfully attempted to take her life, and her parents used the excuse of her having gotten food poisoning from eating meat. The incident scarred and subdued her, leaving her a puppet to be strung along to her parents’ notions of propriety, forever linking the idea of eating meat with all the misfortunes that had transpired.

Regretful of her past, she sets about improving her present by endeavoring to transform into a “more American wife” for Neel (Cherian, 2008, Ch. 14). One step to becoming more American that Leila adopts is through food. She begins to watch cooking programs and look up recipes of food from Western cuisines. When Neel surprisingly stays home to dine with her, she offers to make him pasta primavera. Although he is impressed at her knowing how to make it, he says that he would “prefer some Indian food” and she makes a meal fit for a “vegetarian king” (2008, Ch. 16), opting to make food that she could also eat even though she had slowly started making chicken for him – changing herself for him. She also avoids nuts – a luxury that she was looking forward to having – after she gets to know of his allergy, a sacrifice that goes unnoticed by him. As she cooks in the kitchen in America, she remembers scenes from the kitchen in her home in India, where the loneliness she feels now is juxtaposed with the joy in togetherness she used to experience while cooking back home. Neel steadfastly ignores her during the meal, the commensality certainly not being convivial as they eat mechanically, lonely even as they eat together:

Cooking had been an occasion for laughter and conversation, tasting and the stealing of tidbits. She wished Neel would keep her company....The vegetables sizzled in the cast-iron pan, absorbing the coriander, cumin, chili, and turmeric....In an hour the kitchen only looked American. Spices suffused the air...the musky aroma of basmati rice. Neel ate quickly, fork moving regularly from plate to mouth. Leila felt...invisible... (2008, Ch. 16)

While Neel seems to despise the food from his homeland, his relationship with the collection of cuisines is not as straightforward as there are times when he “miss[es] the flavors of spicy chicken curry, cool *raita* sprinkled with roasted cumin seed powder, green cabbage speckled with chilies and coconut” (2008, Ch. 12), reiterating that “culturally significant foods harness emotions” (Steckley, 2022, p. 176). He would never consider taking Caroline to an Indian establishment, for he wants his relationship with her to be hidden in “the anonymity of Western restaurants” (Cherian, 2008, Ch. 12). Caroline is aware

of Neel's apparent aversion to India and all its associations, especially the food and its people. She is confident that his wife is a temporary accessory that will be removed from her path soon so that she can step up in life with the identity of being an upscale doctor's wife. Her French inclinations, including insisting on pronouncing her name the French way and always placing herself among French foodways, are all part of a pretentious act to appeal to Neel's attraction to her whiteness. His decision to take his wife to meet his friends irks Caroline, as she was never allowed to indulge in commensality with him in public, and definitely not with his friends and colleagues.

As Neel and Leila get to know each other, a validation of their relationship comes in the form of his agreement to go to an Indian restaurant at her insistence. He still shows an aversion to the experience, but much more subtle than it used to be, showing that his interactions with Leila are making him less resistant to embracing his identity publicly.

### **Food Relations in Food Practices**

Food relations and food practices – both individual and communal – are ways in which people interact with food, adding nuance to the way they view themselves and the people around them. “What, how, and with whom we eat” influences the formation of identity (Probyn, 2000, pp. 9-10), with food practices also facilitating the expression of “alternative visions of kinship” (Mannur, 2010, p. 55).

Neel is keenly aware that food and eating together carries social meaning (Brown & Mussell, 1984, p. 5) in the observation that the elaborate meals that his mother prepared for him was “how she showed him love” (Cherian, 2008, Ch. 1). He is also implicitly aware of the dynamics of commensality, noticing that the fancy crockery usually brought out “on important occasions” (2008, Ch. 1) is used to serve coffee at a family meeting. The importance of the conversation therein – which he later realizes is about his marriage plans – is marked by the ritualistic use of the special cups. The news of Neel and Leila's wedding is met with a host of lunch and dinner invitations from their extended family “wanting to congratulate and feed” them (2008, Ch. 5) showing commensality as a bonding practice that is an integral part of celebrations and maintaining relationships (Klitzing, 2019, p. 27), although Neel sees these visits as “a blur of faces and food” (Cherian 2008, Ch. 5). In a later occasion, he “takes some control over his life” (2008, Ch. 5) by rebelling against commensality by firmly refusing a cup of coffee and steadfastly meeting the host's offended gaze. This seemingly small act is a big projection of his frustration at being ruled by his family's will and his anger at being forced into his discarded identity of being Suneel from India.



The ritual of the arranged marriage's first meeting between Leila and Neel is a "multisensory or synesthetic food experience" that creates "a lasting memory expression" (Sutton, 2010, p. 73, p. 159). The meeting is marked by the presence of Leila's mother's infamous homemade *samosas* and a description of the ritualistic serving of a beverage by the bride to the potential groom that titillates all the senses:

Leila served coffee to his parents. She concentrated on the milky brew. As she poured the hot liquid, she smelled the faraway, sweet aroma of America, and heard the 'r' sounds in his accented words. (Cherian, 2008, Ch. 4)

While Leila remembers the meeting fondly, Neel has another perspective on the situation, for he recollects his teeth aching from the sweetness of the condensed milk added to the coffee, the overt sweetness doing nothing to quell the bitterness rising in him towards his family for their trickery and deceit. The *samosas* served at the meeting also carry an unpleasant taste in his mouth as his begrudging acceptance of the comestibles served to him and partaking in the commensality of the culinary space there had inadvertently signed him up for his marriage with Leila.

Commensality is integral to the food practices that are part of larger rituals and settings, as seen in the case of the wedding arrangements where the presence of food is crucial in the daily – and the special – happenings of life that reflect integral changes in identity:

[t]he Krishnan house was inundated with relatives come to witness the miracle wedding. Cousins bearing all types of food. Bags of new rice, strings of coconuts, tins of *chuklis*; the kitchen began to look like a storeroom. Families slept in every possible space...and people ate meals in shifts. No one used plates, they just a spread a banana leaf on the floor and ate whatever had been prepared. (2008, Ch. 6)

Even in the preparation for the impending migration after the wedding, food is a primary concern. Leila's mother is worried about the change in food habits and so she ensures that her daughter can make the dishes that she is used to eating by packing a "*dosa tava*" and "*idli maker*" in her luggage (2008, Ch. 6). These everyday things carry her mother's affection, care, and concern. Leila and her mother's precarious relationship is salvaged in the culinary space, as this act carries the same sentiment as from her childhood when her mother would wake her up early on the days of her exam and make her a cup of coffee to keep her awake while she studied. This childhood ritual is one that she recollects on her wedding day when she notices the absence of the brew to keep her awake at the early hour she was woken up.

The presence of food is felt in the myriad wedding rituals that they participate in, such as the rice that is showered upon the couple by the invitees as a symbol

of their blessings, and the sweets that are served to them right after their nuptials to initiate the metaphorical sweetness in their new life together. While Leila mindfully eats the sweet and hopes for the best, Neel ends up choking on the mouthful, perhaps foreshadowing the difficulties that will arrive in their marriage.

Leila looks forward to her new relationship with Neel, imagining themselves eating at “candlelit restaurants” (2008, Ch. 6) spending time together sharing affection and meals inspired by the couples in the American films that she looks toward to guide her in her life after marriage in the new country that she now calls home. However, the reality is far from her fantasies as his standoffish behavior makes her feel as though the “marvelous life she had dreamed of was dismantling even before it started” (2008, Ch. 9). Leila first day in the US is filled with disappointment – in her life, her shattered dreams, and her husband – and hunger for food and affection making the absence of both starkly visible in the house with its empty fridge and pantry.

She soon eases into her life in the US and she begins to “experience the myriad flavors of America” (2008, Ch.12). The letters that she sends to her family back in India try to capture all the details of the everyday experiences of food – the “taste of the nectarine juice, the Brobdingnagian eggs” and the variety of the packaged food –that leaves her fascinated (2008, Ch. 12). She revels in her newfound freedom as she takes to the streets of San Francisco to explore. While dressed in a *salwar kameez* that makes her feel self-conscious at the stares that she garners, her confidence returns when she is complimented by someone for her appearance. Emboldened with the knowledge that she need not change too much to be accepted, Leila sets about acquainting herself with Neel’s friends and making friends of her own. She connects with Oona over tea and *pakorās* in the kitchen – a space that feels more like her own in comparison to the living room that carries Neel’s touch – marveling at the tea kettle that Oona gets for her as a gift as they exchange memories and experiences centered on food. Their commensality also prompts them to talk about their difficulties with cultural differences through food, leading to a closer bond based on shared experiences. She meets Rekha and invites her for a cup of tea, sharing with her new friend her new commensal experience of being in a café for the first time. As Rekha talks about her life as an American of Indian descent and her relationship troubles, Leila is glad to find a kindred soul. She meets Rekha at other instances in the culinary spaces of restaurants and café where they bond by exchanging food memories and relations. Refreshing her memories with Rekha within the space of the café and stimulated by other sensory elements makes her fondly remember her family back in India:

The herb tea smelled deliciously familiar, the cardamom evoking Amma’s Sunday-only *biryani*. Indy used to call it the culinary obstacle course

because of the cardamom, cloves, and round, fat peppercorns in the biryani. The rest of the family would have finished eating, and there was Indy, slowly, painstakingly picking through the rice because she didn't want to bite into one of the spices. (2008, Ch. 18)

Although her social conditioning dictated that she be happy in her position as a doctor's wife taking care of their household, she soon realizes that she finds fulfilment in carving an identity that includes being Neel's wife as a part and not the whole of her perception of her own identity. She ponders the aftereffects of changing from "being Indian" to becoming more American from what she hears around her – "some had American accents, others claimed they couldn't eat spicy food anymore" (2008, Ch. 19). She dreads losing herself and turning into someone whom she does not know. A friend assures her that she would change, perhaps unknowingly and not wanting to, but the change would happen over time. To this, Leila realizes that she has already started changing by becoming a "stronger person" (2008, Ch. 19); a person who is becoming less reliant on Neel in the way that she perceives and projects herself.

This change goes unnoticed by Neel as he tries to avoid commensality with Leila. He ensures that food is markedly absent in their initial interactions. "He didn't want her to cook for him" (2008, Ch. 12). The cold draft in the apartment seeps through as she is left alone to warm herself through "endless cups of hot tea" and solitary meals (2008, Ch. 12).

After she gets to know of Neel's extramarital affair with Caroline, the commensality with his friends that she was looking forward to earlier becomes stifling, "the smell of the food nauseating and the conversation interminable" (2008, Ch. 21). Thoughts of confronting him are squashed as she thinks of how this would affect their families back in India.

She decides to not let him adversely affect her and instead turns up at the colleagues and family barbecue party at Neel's workplace and charms Neel amidst the resultant commensality with the way she fits in with everyone else, comfortable in her difference from the dominant culture. They get invited to a colleague's wedding and Leila insists on "being herself" as she dresses up in a saree (2008, Ch. 24). She asserts her identity and all the markers of it, even in the face of Neel's rebukes. As Leila finds company and garners attention for her saree in the culinary space of the banquet hall at the wedding, highlighted by the presence of the feast and the celebratory commensality, Neel witnesses her "ability to be comfortable just being herself" and wishes he could imbibe the same (2008, Ch. 24). He offers to get her a plate of food as an apology for his remarks about her clothes and partakes in commensality with her and their friends by way of a toast with champagne, one that Leila accepts as he gets to know him a little more.

Leila is determined to stop being the subservient wife to a cheating husband, subtly letting him know of her feelings through food. She begins cooking for herself, the earlier kingly feasts made in his honor transformed to easy meals that spark fond food memories linked to her family. While Leila deigns to share the meals with Neel, she does not initiate any other interaction that accompanies a commensal meal. This prompts Neel to generate the conversation over the dinner table, becoming pleasantly surprised as he learns more about her, learning that he had misjudged her all this time. Astonishingly, Neel had “copied her and used his fingers to eat the meal,” leaving his fork untouched, uncaring of the usual disgust that comes along with his eating with his hands (2008, Ch. 25). As they talk more, he reveals that “many Indians feel intimidated, inferior to whites,” to which she replies that she had never felt so. Witnessing Neel’s vulnerability makes Leila feel closer to him. Neel finally chooses Leila over Caroline and consummates his marriage with his wife.

The consummation makes Leila feel that her aspiration to be “an American wife” has been achieved (2008, Ch. 26). Anita Mannur (2010) argues that the culinary space is an experimental yet safe space that allows for the negotiation and exploration of the identity aspects of gender and sexuality, and Leila ascribes to this notion by making the kitchen into a space where she feels safe to think about her lustful thoughts without the fear of judgement. Her cooking takes on an “erotic” touch – with food and sex “metaphorically overlapping” (Counihan, 1999, p. 9) as they are multisensorial experiences that excite similar responses within the body, and wherein “eating functions as a metalanguage for genital pleasure and sexual desire” (5) – as she cooks while thinking of Neel, “wondering if he, too, would get the moist suggestiveness of eggplant, the obvious sex appeal of zucchini....Everything reminded her of sex” (Cherian, 2008, Ch. 26). Leila and Neel validate their relationship in the public eye as they go out to eat – another win over Caroline for Leila.

The kitchen continues to be capable of functioning as a liberal place where boundaries are blurred and privacy is accorded. Leila’s mother talks to Leila about the upcoming nuptials and the “wifely duties” (2008, Ch. 6) that are expected of her – hinting at the physical consummation of her marriage. While the talk of sex is awkward and jilted and done as her mother strictly keeps her eyes on the boiling milk as a distraction, it does not take away from the fact that this is as open as her mother would have been with her.

Leila is cognizant of the various food practices and rituals that lead to the multiple food relations that she is a part of. Commensality also becomes a site of uncomfortable silences that signify tensions between friends and family (Vlitos, 2018, p. 40), such as the instance where Leila and her mother’s tiff serves to make their whole family feel awkward at the dinner table. Neel often feels frustrated in commensal situations with Leila, especially when she reveals

her unexpected pregnancy and makes him feel uncomfortable consuming the meal of egg curry and rice – assuming the symbolism that accompanies the dish.

Commensality is also seen as a way of seeking and providing comfort – in the way Leila gives Neel a cup of warm milk and keeps him company at the dining table, letting him talk about the memories of his childhood, as he waits for updates about his grandfather’s failing health from the hospital in India.

Leila feels Neel’s absence while he is away in India. “She had counted his absence in terms of meals eaten alone” (Cherian, 2008, Ch. 36), and his “absent presence” – the presence of his absence (Hetherington, 2004, p. 163) – keeps her company at the dinner table. She prepares a special meal for him by “experimenting with American recipes” to welcome him from India (Cherian, 2008, Ch. 36). This also shows Leila’s growing ease and confidence as she approaches a hybrid identity and its markers. He praises her for the meal and also requests to see Indian meals on the table occasionally, signaling that he is closer to coming to terms with his identity. As they visit an Indian grocery store in the US, Neel is reminded of a visceral food memory from when he was in college where “a hot mango pickle sandwich was a popular midnight snack,” prompting him to get a bottle of pickle to “taste his memory” (2008, Ch. 36).

When Leila suspects that Neel is going to visit Caroline even after assuring her that the affair is over, the almond tea that had gained her such praise from her friend ends up being poured into a thermos flask for Neel. Blinded by her fury, Leila tries to seek revenge and uses food as a carrier for her vendetta. She nearly kills Neel by triggering his life-threatening nut allergy, until she snatches the flask back from him at the very end. This action gives Neel another chance – both in life and with his marriage to Leila.

## **Conclusion**

Food relations and food practices – both individual and communal – are ways in which people interact with food, adding nuance to the way they view themselves and the people around them. Prompted by their varying experiences with the different kinds of mobility, the characters operate in the culinary space delineated by food practices and commensality to explore and understand their dynamic identities. Neel’s fears about facing prejudice – and his past experiences that have burnt him – prompt him to shun his cultural identity of being an Indian. This causes him to develop an aversion to the food that he grew up eating, a disgust that makes him look down upon his compatriots and their food practices. Even after he gains confidence in his identity, the aversion towards the specific kind of food still partly remains as he catches himself thinking judgmental thoughts. Leila settles in America after a tumultuous journey that includes a cheating husband, but her various experiences – especially the ones

through food – assure her that her migration will continue to have a positive influence on the development of her identity as she assimilates into the new land and gains confidence in herself and what she can become.

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