

Power and pleasure around the stove: The construction of gendered identity in middle-class south Indian Hindu households in urban Malaysia

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Available online 10 May 2005

Synopsis

In the literature on household gendered work, women are conceptualized as 'producers' while men are conceptualized as 'consumers' of women's services. Rather than contest this argument, this paper shows that food may be used for a myriad of purposes, whether to resist, maneuver, change, express, and even reinforce the sexual division of labour. Specifically, conversations with 20 middle-class South Indian women residing in Klang Valley show that they derive personal gains from food production as it facilitates in the construction of gender and class identities. Although women's attitudes and practices generally reproduce the dominant gender ideology, they do not perceive foodmaking as a form of gender subjugation since this role is coloured by how the 'self' is constructed. Furthermore, women view this role to be a significant cultural value, which may be continuously adapted, reproduced, modified, revised, recreated, and elaborated in whichever way they feel befits the situation. © 2005 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Introduction

Women are the direct providers of the meal. . . you can see that even in the epic stories. . . I remember the story of Ramayana. . . you can see that when the King and Queen were banished from the kingdom, the Queen who reigned for so long all of a sudden takes to cooking and prepares the meals. . . where does she get these skills? . . . I don't know. . . The author expects the woman to be able to do it. . . and even in the Mahabharata. . . Draupadi ends up cooking for all the five brothers. . . so does the mother Kunti when she is in the forest. . . she cooks for all of them. . . but she was

a princess all the way. . . you must have heard of the container that one of the *rishis* gave to Draupadi. . . it provides a meal. . . it never goes empty no matter how many people she wants to feed. . . the food that she cooks in it will go on multiplying until she has eaten from it. . . so she eats last. . . and then it goes empty.¹ (Indian Hindu female, lecturer, aged 43)

Gender features prominently in food. Cosmological expressions of women and food as portrayed in the major Indian epics take concrete form in the everyday world. Cooking is nearly universally coded as feminine² because of the strong relationship of

women with food preparation (see [Counihan, 1989](#)). The symbolic relationship between women and food stems from their nurturing role in presenting food to give and sustain life. Some theorists claim that cooking is service work women perform not for themselves, but only to meet the needs of others, notably men (see [Charles, 1995](#); [Charles & Kerr, 1986, 1988](#); [Dare, 1986](#); [DeVault, 1991, 1997](#); [Ekstrom, 1991](#); [Murcott, 1995](#)). In the corpus of literature on gender work in the household, women are conceptualized as 'producers' while men are conceptualized as 'consumers' of women's services (see also [Gershuny, 1983](#)).³ It is not my aim here to contest this frequently stated argument but rather to add that in culturally specific circumstances, women can be seen to use food for a myriad of purposes, whether to resist, maneuver, change, express, and even reinforce the dominant gender ideology. Here, I address the plausibility of women deriving personal gains from cooking to achieve their own ends. In such a case, women who cook and serve meals are not necessarily mere 'producers' in the production process of goods, implying that their role in cooking is carried out as service work for others. For many, food is a tool they themselves creatively 'consume' – in a symbolic sense – as it can be manipulated according to the wishes of these women, and cooking is conceived as a means for creating their identity as women of a specific class rather than as a chore that is dutifully fulfilled. Thus in cooking, it may be said that 'producing' is a way of 'consuming.' In other words, through giving of themselves in cooking, women are securing gains for themselves.

In this paper based on fieldwork conducted in urban Malaysia,⁴ I am concerned with middle-class Indian Hindu women exercising power and achieving pleasure in the everyday practice of cooking, while creating a gendered identity specific to their class status. In Malaysia, women do not share a unified identity. Rather class, religion, and so forth color their identity as women. As such, for the Indian Hindu women, there is no 'essence' of gender laid down by 'tradition,' as it were, but only that which is repeatedly (re)created at every moment, implying a more fluid and subjective conception of their identities as women. For this reason, I use the term 'gendered' identities throughout this paper. I find this phrase to be more accurate as it implies a "plurality

and difference without abandoning the notion that gender does play a part in constituting the subject" ([Marshall, 1994](#), p. 112).

The sample of Indian Hindu women for this research consisted of twenty housewives and working women; the latter group of women come from professional, business, and civil service backgrounds. The women with whom I worked do not perceive their role as providers of food as oppressive but rather have made active choices within the parameters of their culture. Their perception may stem from the ways in which the 'self' is constructed, that is, fluid and unbounded and, thus, decisions for others are synonymous to decisions made for themselves. In Western scholarship there is a particular perception of the 'self' as a discrete entity (see [Dumont, 1970](#); [Roland, 1988](#)). The idea that Western women are oppressed in domestic matters of food provision may derive from a dualistic understanding of how the person is constructed. Looking at South Indian Hindu women and their perceptions of their role in feeding others challenges the notion of the discrete 'self' as a universal concept. In sociocentric societies such as India and its diasporas, the "collective man" ([Dumont, 1970](#), p. 9) or "dividual" ([Marriot, 1976](#), p. 111) predominates. As such, the 'self' is constantly incorporating the 'other'; and in the arena of food provision and preparation by women, the motivational impetus directing consumption is a collective rather than an individual concern.

My analysis moves away from consumption as a function of the larger economic process as it appears in the work of economists; the approach I have adopted is concerned with the motivational dimension to consumption in relation to the wider social environment, and the ways in which meanings are constructed. In this regard, I am interested in the way meanings are attributed to commodities and the ways in which consumption of these commodities have come to be linked with group identity (see [Friedman, 1994](#)). In multi-ethnic Malaysia where the Indian population is fragmented according to class, caste, language, and religion, a woman articulates her identity and her family's through consumption practices which simultaneously become crucial in shaping mutual perceptions of people from different ethnic, class, and caste groups. Food is one of many arenas in which Malaysian Indian Hindu women produce these

respective identities. For this paper, I will concentrate on some specific ways in which a woman's food provider role becomes a site through which she 'performs' her gendered identity in deference to the discursive gender practices linked to her (Atkinson & Errington, 1990; Butler, 1990, 1993; Moore, 1988; Strathern, 1988), and in so doing affirms her family's socio-economic class status. For my present purposes, I use the term 'class' in a socio-economic sense as it is indicated by different lifestyles, values, and political commitments, with income as a contributory factor of class differentiation. An obvious manifestation of class status is consumption patterns (see Wazir-Jahan Karim, 1989–1990).

The social context

In Malaysia, decisions relating to food consumption indicate the complexities of a sociopolitical context favoring the Malay majority while marginalizing minority groups such as the Indians.⁵ According to government definitions of ethnicity, Malays are accorded *bumiputera* status, which in literal terms means 'prince of the soil,'⁶ and in political terms demarcates specific ethnic groups who have privileged access to the economic resources of the country. Primarily of South Indian descent, the majority of Indians in Malaysia were recruited into rubber plantations as indentured laborers under the *kangany* system (Selvaratnam, 1985; Selvakumaran, 1994).⁷ Educated Indians arrived in smaller numbers, taking up civil service positions in the British administration (see Arasaratnam, 1979). Being Indian and, thus, non-*bumiputera*, carries with it negative implications. The political definition homogenizes Indians⁸ which, in turn, fosters the perception that Indians are poor⁹ while dismissing the minority of middle-class Indians.¹⁰

In the Indian food system, food has always been a marker of differentiation of caste status (see Dumont, 1970; see also Ferro-Luzzi, 1981). The people with whom one dines and the kinds of foods dined upon indicate caste standing. In a modern context such as urban Malaysia, food choices are bound up more with differentiations marked by class distinctions. To revoke the stereotype that Indians are poor and represent the lower classes, middle-class Indian Hindu

women actively have to affirm their class status. One way in which this is done is through food consumption. This process can be explained through French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) notion of cultural capital. According to his thesis, people who control cultural capital and define aesthetic ideals and positions of legitimacy are also the possessors of economic capital. By applying this analysis to food, I found that there is a clear pitting of the accumulation of economic capital against the accumulation of cultural capital among Malaysian consumers. The foods one chooses to buy, prepare and consume classify the consumer, to paraphrase Bourdieu. When a 'convenience' food is incorporated into everyday diets, it "classifies" its consumers in a specific *habitus*, which facilitates the marking of group distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 6). Thus, middle-class Indian Hindu women who consume convenience foods are in an active process of differentiating themselves from the lower classes and affirming their membership in the growing urban middle classes. Consciously manipulating symbolic markers of class status and boundaries in food consumption, they play a crucial role in expressing and reinforcing the class status of their families.

In the last two decades, Malaysia's economy has expanded and, consequently, the middle classes have grown (see Kahn, 1996), although improvement has been slower for the Indians.¹¹ In this race to modernise, food has become important to the definition of class differentiation (cf. Goody, 1982). Here, the purchasing of pricey commodities has come to serve as indication of social standing in the socio-economic class hierarchy (cf. Rokiah Talib, 2000, p. 37; Wazir-Jahan Karim, 1989–1990). Dining at plush restaurants, buying food at supermarkets and upscale food distribution outlets, and purchasing highly-priced convenience foods are ways for a consumer to claim affluent social standing (see also Jackson, 1976, 1979; McGee, MacLeod, Salih, & Pilkington, 1988), and to mark social boundaries between class strata. This trend started with the birth of supermarkets in Malaysia in the late 1960s. Geographer James Jackson (1979) found that in Kuala Lumpur in the late 1970s, those with higher incomes consumed foods generally unaffordable to the less wealthy, for example, Western foods obtainable only in supermarkets, in addition to food sold at traditional food

outlets such as the 'wet' market.¹² In another study on consumption patterns, Southeast Asian scholar Ho (1980, p. 56) echoes the same idea when she remarks that there is a "modernization of shopping habits" among urban consumers. With access to a larger disposable income, these people tend to purchase food products, many of which are convenience foods,¹³ from the newer food outlets such as supermarkets. This is an attempt to segregate themselves from the lower classes that are restricted to shopping at the 'wet' market. Additionally, McGee et al.'s¹⁴ 1980s study states that there is a strong link between urbanization and the internationalization of the food system in Malaysia, which veers towards what they have called 'the industrial palate.'

Common convenience foods used in middle-class Indian Hindu homes include imported canned fruit, canned soups, both imported and local cookies, cereals, frozen french fries, instant mixes for the various Indian sweetmeats and breads, jams, juices, salad dressings, and spaghetti sauces. In the meat-eating Indian Hindu homes, frozen chicken nuggets and canned tuna are fairly popular, although mainly children consume the former. Many of the above foods are more expensive than 'fresh' foods (see Khalid & Abdul Aziz, 1984) and, thus, are considered 'extra' or extrinsic to their basic diet. As such, their consumption activates images of a specific class status and, in this case, the middle classes who have money to spend on these foods and who become the trend-setters for the rest of the local populace (see McGee et al., 1988). Thus, there exists a link between status goods such as convenience foods and class when people are slotted at particular levels of society depending on the kinds of foods they eat (McGee et al., 1988). Since many of these foods evoke images of the West and modernity,¹⁵ their consumption has become a fashionable statement to affirm membership in a specific class.

Consumption of food, in this case, is a productive activity. When deciding for and preparing certain foods, the Malaysian woman creates meanings indicative of identity, both her own and that of her family. When, where, and what she buys and cooks for the household are opportunities to create a class identity specific to consumption patterns through the purchase and use of these highly-priced convenience food products. A Malaysian Indian woman affirms

her family's class identity and her own as a 'good' woman, wife or mother for when buying and consuming these foods, she actively announces that she is a modern, elite woman—one who provides for her family by appropriating 'modern' foods that are available only to privileged segments of society. For the Indian Hindu woman, the activities of managing food and cooking reflect cultural values which she perpetuates in terms of cultural expectations specific to her gender on the one hand, while on the other, it allows the woman to play a crucial role in reaching beyond the family unit when she aims to make claims and reinforces the affluent social standing of her family. In postcolonial Malaysia, the ways in which food consumption habits are constructed are also bound up with 'the counter-hegemonic cultural revivals' existing within ethnic groups. In this sense, the Indian Hindu woman becomes a key player in defining her community's habits – whether food-related or otherwise – which become significant to defining boundaries of the Indian ethnic group's "imagined community" (Wong, 2001, p. 75). It is for this reason that the Indian Hindu woman is an active negotiator of the cultural values around her; but she cannot be seen to be an agent in her own right, creating her own meanings around food provision. Rather she defines her family's socioeconomic status mediated by a modality of modernity shared by others of the same class position in accordance with meanings presented to her by various forces. Producers, advertisers and the media are constantly attaching meanings to food products which a woman, in turn, it could be said 'imbibes' and 'regurgitates' and, at the same time, recreating these meanings in her own way (see also Baudrillard, 1973), a point to which I will return later. Women's magazines are sprinkled with colorful and glossy advertisements of highly-priced convenience foods that are marketed as having the magical quality of cutting back on cooking time. The newspapers are another venue through which producers reach out to the middle-class female consumer. Supermarkets capitalize on the daily printed media to advertise food sales, invariably consisting mostly of convenience food items. The modern working woman who has fewer hours in the day resorts to the supermarket or hypermarket for her daily food shopping and, in turn, reaffirms her middle-class identity by purchas-

ing foods at these venues, which tend to be relatively more expensive than shopping at the traditional food outlets. Cooking programmes on television also impart meanings linked with social class when certain food products are used as ingredients in recipes. That the middle-class Indian Hindu woman is not constructing her identity and her family's only in response to meanings with which she is confronted, also brings an interesting insight on an earlier point as to how in the process of producing food, this tool is also consumed by a woman. Thus, the everyday activity of domestic food production is a creative site through which a middle-class Indian Hindu woman makes choices, although not necessarily independent of meanings thrust upon her by society, which in turn defines the kind of producer and consumer she eventually turns out to be.

Contemporary definitions of gendered identity

The dominant gender ideology for the Indian Hindu stems from a religious doctrine that specifically marks a woman's place in the household and in society at large. Ideal notions of what it means to be a 'good' woman emphasize selfless devotion, obedience, and loyalty to one's husband (see [Wadley, 1988](#)). A woman's self-sacrificing tendencies are also highlighted in matters of everyday practice concerning food. Cultural expectations of women linked to ideal¹⁶ notions of womanhood persist despite large numbers of Indian women entering the workforce.¹⁷ Women continue to take charge of certain activities within the household that are most connected to a woman's gendered identity. As a woman in her early 50s remarked:

Of course women should be the ones to cook. . .if she plans the cooking, she should cook. . .why not a man, you may ask? . . .Indians always expect women to do the cooking.

The task of managing food has become part of the commonsense framework of some women who connect cooking with their identity as women. A housewife in her late 30s said:

If a woman is wife and mother. . .something has got to appear on the table. . .and so, it is she who cooks.

A successful businesswoman in her mid-40s said this:

Women are attached to cooking. . .it is the identity of being a woman. . .even if men can cook, it is more women's work.

Accordingly, the provision of meals on a day-to-day basis – the buying and storage of food, preparing it for cooking, the physical act of cooking itself (that is, combining and heating the ingredients),¹⁸ setting the table, serving food, and washing up after a meal – is often described as 'women's work.' This attitude was no different for working women. Although they feel the combined pressures of coping with career demands and household management, caring for the family and taking charge of the home is still their primary concern. The majority of Indian Hindu women I interviewed continue to cook, feeling that it was their responsibility and not their husbands' to do so. A dentist in her early 40s who depends heavily on her maid when it comes to cooking said:

It may not be important for a woman to do the cooking as such but yes to manage the cooking. . .so it is very important for her to know how to cook. . .because in our society. . . I wouldn't know what Westerners do. . .as an Indian wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. . .it is very, very important because it is expected of me. . .but more than that because it is expected of me, I think it is very important because my husband does not cook. . .but I also feel very good, looking at my children eat what I have prepared for them. . .and the comments that they give me. . ."oh *amma!* this is very nice. . ." spurs me on to cook.

The kinds of foods that appear at the dining table are an indication of the choices a woman makes, and a woman's experiences with cooking vary. There are those who find that cooking can be physically draining and time-consuming, especially for working women, as an everyday meal in a typical South Indian home can consist of one or two vegetable dishes (normally three or four in a vegetarian home), a meat or fish dish (in non-vegetarian homes), with rice as the basic starch. The middle-class Malaysian woman differs from her sisters in the lower classes.¹⁹ Besides being educated, these women have wider interests due to their urban experience and class status.

In addition to their work, many women talked about spending time reading a book, attending courses, as well as becoming involved in social work. They also mentioned embarking on a degree by taking evening classes, going to the gym, meeting up with friends, or chauffeuring their children to piano, dance, or tuition classes (extra remedial classes conducted in the home and taught by tutors specifically hired for this task). As the time a woman spends in the kitchen is shortened because of competing interests and demands, choices for the kinds of foods to be used, and whether the family 'eats out' or brings food home, highlights continuities in a woman's identity and her relationship with the people around her. Even if they are tired or do not have sufficient time especially among women who have neither the help of a maid nor an older relative (for example, a mother or mother-in-law), convenience foods are an attractive option for a 'quick meal.' It is clear that this trend is becoming increasingly common from the fact that proprietors of food industries are targeting convenience foods at working wives as faster and more convenient than home cooking.²⁰ By using convenience foods in the home, the working woman creates meanings related to her new identity as a worker whose time spent at home is diminished considerably.

Although Indian Hindu men may contribute to the process of meal production by buying food,²¹ this is almost always done under the instruction of their wives. When it comes to cooking, however, husbands are never expected to cook. A housewife in her early 50s had this to say:

I'll never leave the cooking to my husband even if he can cook...and I know men who cook...as a mother, it is I who knows what my husband and children like, and how they like it prepared...my husband does not know these things perhaps because as a husband and father, he does not see these things as his responsibility, leaving them instead to me as I am mother and wife.

In the households where the women were working, however, I found that a good number of husbands, especially the younger ones, may help in the initial preparation (if not the actual 'cooking') of some foods, like the cutting up of meats such as mutton or a whole chicken²² if not in washing the dishes. This does not mean that Indian men never cook in the

home.²³ Men do cook, particularly when they are unmarried and live alone. If married, however, men cook only when their skills are called upon for the occasional treat such as weekend meals or when their wife is taken ill.²⁴ A woman in her mid-30s whose husband attempts at cooking about once a month when she does not feel up to it said:

I prefer to cook...if I don't feel like doing so, my husband may take over...it is part of my role as mother and wife...I was brought up that way...a woman need not be a very good cook but she does need to know how to cook...I think both boys and girls should know how to cook...and my boy is interested...nowadays it is both the husband's and wife's responsibility to take care of the home, and his wife may want him to cook once in a while...and what if he goes oversees to study...they may not have maids cooking for them...he may need to cook...feel that way for my son...but I feel that it is the woman's prerogative to take care of the cooking...but we will not know what will be in the future...I'm just preparing him.

Although women welcome their husbands' occasional help in the kitchen and around the house, most women saw cooking as their task. A woman in her early 50s who enjoys cooking and does not mind the responsibility that comes with it laments over the apathy of her retired husband and his lack of interest in maintaining the household. She made this remark:

There are some Indian men who are nice men...they want to do things for their wives...But most Indian men are spoiled by their mothers...In Indian homes, the mothers work for their sons but the daughters do everything for themselves and they're so used to it...[for their sons] when they're married...their wives will do everything for them...This is tradition...so it is a common trend today...It's important that women change men's attitudes...they should expect that their sons learn to cook one or two dishes especially for emergencies...not for their wives...and they should also do some housework...my husband won't even pick up the newspaper!

Responses and attitudes varied depending on the age of the women. The older the women, the more conservative their attitude towards their provisionary

role in food matters. A woman in her late 40s who has a university education added:

It is very important that women cook and not men...if you say men eat, and therefore, they should cook...no! you lose that motherly role...what's the feminine role?...she has the time, or makes time...if a man is a bachelor like in the olden days when they worked on the railway lines, they do not eat to have an enjoyable meal but to just fill their stomachs...it's the woman who takes interest in making that special meal...and only a woman can do it.

Here, a woman's nurturing and caring aspects are considered feminine traits that distinguish her from a man. By demarcating their daily activities and responsibilities in this way, both women and men actively create their distinct gendered identities in the domestic sphere. How a woman comes to manipulate food in producing her identity as a woman has to be understood within the general definition of femininity in society. In Tamil, the word feminine or '*pennamei*,' assumes different meanings depending on the context. For a middle-class woman, to be feminine is synonymous with being the lady of the house, a nurturing and loving mother, and a selfless woman. It does not carry with it the negative connotations of being docile, submissive, and obedient. In fact, for the Indian Hindu woman, femininity is generally seen as something to be enjoyed and cherished since it draws out positive aspects of being a woman.

However, there are social pressures on Indian women to provide meals for their families inside the home despite working outside the home. One of these social pressures is that it is difficult to buy from restaurants or food vendors²⁵ food comparable to home-cooked food. Nevertheless, making a foray into a restaurant has become a relatively frequent occurrence for middle-class families in Malaysia.²⁶ However, in contrast to the Malaysian Chinese, who are commonly associated with 'eating out'²⁷, food among Indians is intimately linked to the home, and there is a marked preference for 'home-cooked' food. Dining at home may be reinforced to some degree by the idea that food is invested with a sacred quality and must be treated with ritual purity (see Dumont, 1970)²⁸ that is ensured only when it is cooked by those known to the consumer.²⁹

Malaysian Indian Hindu women do not provide for their families simply in deference to cultural norms or social circumstances that establish their role as wife and mother. Although middle-class women in the urban context tended overwhelmingly to reproduce the dominant gender ideology, they are relatively freer to use activities such as cooking to reinterpret cultural expectations, creating personalized notions of what it means to be a woman. By virtue of their class status, these women have greater leeway in creating an identity for themselves in whichever way they want. If a woman finds herself in a situation where she does not feel like cooking, convenience foods are a great help. Yet there are others who serve foods that are modern, such as convenience foods, not only to provide for their families, but more importantly, to create their version of a woman's identity that is 'modern' and 'progressive.' Being modern and progressive means that a woman is busy working and has less time devoted to food preparation and, hence, convenience foods are an option for her. Convenience versions of local foods are increasingly available in both traditional food outlets as well as supermarkets. A clerk in her late 40s uses the convenience version of string hoppers,³⁰ although they may be a little expensive than preparing them fresh ingredients:

These [string hoppers] are now available from supermarkets...you just need to soak them and steam them...it really cuts down on a lot of time...if I were to make it from scratch, it is a long process for which I do not have energy or time because I am working...you first have to prepare the *ragi* (finger millet)³¹...wash and then have it dried in the sun...then it needs to be sent to the mill...only then can the dough be made...there is not much difference in taste if I were to make it at home...so I just buy the pre-packaged one.

A lecturer in her late 30s shies away from preparing local-style breakfasts for lack of time but instead buys imported cereals even though they may be more expensive:

The foods we buy are mainly imported although the prices are stiff...I buy cereal for the boys...they like Kellogg's cornflakes and not Nestlé because Kellogg's comes from Australia...it may be more expensive but there is a vast difference in taste.

For her, purchasing convenience breakfast foods not only does away with preparation time which is an advantage to the working woman, but because imported cereals tend to be fairly expensive to the middle-class consumer, the very act of consuming such foods reaffirms the family's class status. As mentioned earlier, most convenience foods are bought from supermarkets that conjure images of the West and modernity. As such, the consumption of these foods has come to be linked with a modern lifestyle and the creation of a modern identity.

The interpretation of cultural expectations around the food provider role is also revealed in the intent and motivation of Malaysian Indian Hindu women. There is the woman whose household employs a maid. In this context, maids do many of the mundane 'chores' around cooking, leaving the more creative aspects to her female employer. Then there is also the woman who simply enjoys cooking, seeing it as an art form that she enjoys engaging in at times. I also met women who did not necessarily find joy in cooking anymore. These women were usually older and whose children were more independent and did not eat at home as frequently. These women probably continue to take charge of cooking in deference to social and cultural demands, but may choose to execute their duty by employing a maid, buying food home, catering meals, or 'eating out.' Most women do not fall exclusively into any one of these experiences. From my conversations, I learned that women's experiences with food are multifaceted and activated differently depending on the varying contexts. In other words, it is more likely that a particular woman may find herself having each of these experiences at varying points of time. In the rest of the paper, I show that women, while reproducing the dominant gender ideology, can and do derive power and achieve pleasure from food provision. Within these positive experiences, women reinforce their gendered identity and their families' socio-economic class status.

Cooking and power

When women cook, they wield certain powers of decision-making. In many homes, meals are planned ahead of time. If a woman decides to prepare a chicken curry dish, the meat has to be taken out of the freezer to

be thawed ahead of time. When it comes to vegetables, it is common that leafy vegetables are cooked earlier, leaving the rest to be cooked later in the week, or a day or two before the next food shopping trip.

Decision-making in food provision includes, on the one hand, what foods are to be cooked for that day and on the other, the style in which the food is prepared. Women stated that there were times when they sought the preferences of their husbands or children. Other studies focusing on meal preparation in the home stress the inequalities felt by women who cooked only for those around them, never preparing meals for themselves (see Charles, 1995; Charles & Kerr, 1986, 1988; Dare, 1986; DeVault, 1991, 1997; Ekstrom, 1991; Murcott, 1995). In my research, I found that women did not just cook for others; neither did they cook just for themselves. Some women spoke of varying the dishes every time they cooked so that everyone, including themselves, would get a chance to eat foods that each person relished. Others remarked that when they sought the opinion of other family members, it was either when they had run out of ideas of what to prepare or simply because they valued the requests of the others at that moment. In these instances, women do not relinquish their decision-making power.

I would like to add that in no way am I asserting Lewin's concept of women as "gatekeepers" (see McIntosh & Zey, 1989, p. 319), but instead I see women as a pivotal force in managing food in their homes where matters of food are a collective affair. Looking out for the other does not necessarily mean that the woman is disadvantaged and ultimately exploited by those around her. In the Indian Hindu context, the "familial self" (Roland, 1988, p. 7) predominates, defined by social relationships within the family structure. Psychoanalyst Alan Roland (1988, pp. 7–8) describes the 'familial self' to encompass:

symbiosis-reciprocity that involves intensely emotional intimacy relationships, with their emotional connectedness and interdependence. . . [here] there is a constant affective exchange through permeable outer ego boundaries. . . where high levels of empathy and receptivity to others are cultivated, and where the experiential sense of self is of a 'we-self' that is felt to be highly relational in different social contexts.

As such, for Malaysian Indian Hindu women, personal experiences related to decisions around food consumption involve seeking the choices of other household members. As the whole act of eating at home is a familial ritual, husbands and children are consulted when cooking a meal and, thus, decisions for food choices made by the woman are not an individual activity but a collective one. For her, cooking and feeding the family are activities that encapsulate emotions, expressions, and statements of feelings that capture the continuity between 'herself' and the 'others' in her family; as such, she works to incorporate the others around her in such a way that decisions in food matters are synonymous to decisions made for herself. Here, 'feeding others' is perceived as a way of 'feeding self.' This idea was echoed by a working woman in her late 40s who said this of her lunches:

I prefer to have something simple...I don't like to spend too much, and have a very good meal...I'm not happy when I'm the only one who enjoys food...I feel selfish when my husband and son are not with me and I'm enjoying the food alone.

A teacher in her early 40s who finds joy in cooking only for others said:

I only cook when the children are around...if not I don't see the point in cooking...if my children are not at home, my husband and I just prefer to go out and eat...cooking must be an effort that is worthwhile...when there is no one to eat...it is not worth my effort.

Women are not the only ones thinking about the 'other' in the familial context but men, too, are found to 'sacrifice' for their children. A woman in her early 40s who did not think her husband was important in influencing her decisions in matters of food said:

My son gets it [the food]...that's the Indian psyche...the children are all important...if there's a little curry left, neither of us will take it but we will give it to him...we'd say "never mind, we'll eat whatever there is...like bread or something"...we'll say "here, you have it"...it's in the Indian upbringing that children are important...probably that's been passed down.

Decisions as to whether the 'fresh' or convenience version of a food is going to be used are

typically made by women. Today there are convenience versions of many 'fresh' foods. If a woman finds herself in a context in which she wants to create and heighten her feminine identity, she may want to prepare a dish from scratch; yet in another context she may want to announce her identity as a busy, 'modern' woman when she uses a convenience food. Many women also have the power to decide if a convenience food is 'unhealthy' (although I have also heard men voice concerns over this matter) and, thus, eliminate it from her family's diet. Women also decide the frequency in which a convenience food should be consumed because they were uncertain as to the kinds and amounts of preservatives that went into such foods. It is also common that women take on the responsibility of making decisions whether to use convenience foods in their everyday diet, for example, serving packaged breakfast cereals instead of preparing a breakfast food like *uppama* (Tamil; semolina cereal (cream of wheat) which is spiced, and loaded with tiny pieces of different vegetables). Other women decide to use convenience foods only as 'emergency' foods when they are too pressured for time to prepare dishes from natural ingredients.

That cooking is a domain controlled by women and, thus, an area of power and potential conflict were explained to me by a woman in her early 40s who lives in an extended-family situation:

My husband was telling me the other day...you women are funny...when there are two women in the house, you are always bickering...in the house you fight like this...what's with you women? Why do you need to fight so much?...I replied and said to him...“you are so judgmental”...women have only found their feet say about 10 or 20 years ago...and you know, I always tell him...compare yourself with some other man in the office...aren't you all fighting power?...that's what's been happening for thousands of years...you men never got on so well as you have...put two men in a territory controlled by men, and you men really fight dirty and bad...so why do you expect two women in a household who can cook not to fight...they both are territorial...would they welcome the other in?...it's the same thing unless...it works out like this...I am working...so I can say “okay, you have your territory, and I have mine”...it

becomes a territorial war because you take it away from them. . .you're taking away the power that they had before.

Many South Indian homes in Malaysia are organized around the extended family concept (see [DaVanzo, 1993](#)). In many of these homes, it is not uncommon that the older relative, usually the mother or mother-in-law, oversees or does the cooking. She is the matriarch of food provision while the younger woman plays a supportive role by assisting. In some cases, misunderstandings can and do arise. The woman quoted above lives in an arrangement where her mother-in-law dictates the food habits of the family. Their differences are heightened particularly in matters of food as she represents the younger generation of women who enjoys experimenting with new foods while her mother-in-law insists on ethnic foods every day. This woman is of the opinion that whoever provides and controls matters concerning food (which includes how foods are to be cooked) is linked to the power a woman wields. Another career woman in her mid-40s also spoke of power when it comes to cooking in the home. She explained it this way:

Managing food in the home is one way a woman asserts her power. . .but I think like a man, a woman also likes having more territories. . .it's the same with both men and women. . .they want more and more and more. . .they're never satisfied. . .this is power over other people. . .and it is human nature that shows up also in the domain of food management in the home.

In these cases, a woman derives satisfaction from the fact that she is the primary decision-maker or provider of the meal. The same woman in her early 40s attempted to give an explanation of the attitudes of middle-class Indian Hindu women toward their food providing role:

Now women take control of matters of food as they see it as the last defense they have against any change they have in their position [in this fast changing world]. . .you have your maid. . .she can do the cooking. . .but still the decision-making is mine you see. . .it doesn't matter if the maid is there or the Kenwood³² is there. . .I can decide. . .I decide what gets onto your plates and into your stomachs!

A woman is dominant in the home irrespective of whether she participates in the wage economy. Attaining an education and establishing a career for oneself is common among many middle-class Malaysian women. However, women do not seek to establish themselves in the public sphere at the expense of losing their dominance in the home. In fact, many Malaysian Indian Hindu women remarked that they were concerned about having professional careers. Pursuing a career while also maintaining their status in the family is perceived as the ideal. A woman in her early 40s and a full-time lecturer who recognizes the importance of her role in cooking as wife and mother mentioned:

If there were visitors, and if the wife is not working. . .I notice that she is expected to do a lot of entertaining. . .but if she is working. . .the husband will take the visitor out for meals, and not expect the wife to prepare a meal all over again just to entertain their guests. . .it's like my family, and I think it happens with other families as well. . .in a way, she's trapped in some way. . .I think it is good for a woman to have both a home and career. . .it's good for her confidence. . .it keeps her happy. . .and thereby, she's more cheerful.

A young woman in her late 20s with a university education said:

I actually enjoy cooking. . .that's why my husband does not go into the kitchen very much. . .I don't know why but in my family. . .we got that complex in us. . .I think it runs in the family. . .all my brothers-in-law can cook but the women do not let them into the kitchen. . .I remember when my mother was here once and my husband said that he would volunteer to cook. . .in response, my mother gave me a glare and said that if my great-grandmother was alive, she would turn in her grave. . .we never let the man come into the kitchen. . .my grandmother always told me this. . .no matter how much you study, you must always know how to cook. . .she did not directly say that a woman's place is in the kitchen. . .but women must know how to cook as managing food and the home is a woman's responsibility.

In this case, it is acceptable for a woman to pursue higher education and be career-minded. However,

equally important is that she does not place education and career above social expectations that stress her role as provider and nurturer in the family.

Cooking and pleasure

A woman can also find herself in a situation where she wants to express her creative spirit through cooking and, thus, need not necessarily produce a meal for the satisfaction of others around her or in accordance with the ideology of food as 'gift.' There are many women who enjoy cooking, seeing it as truly a work of creativity and the end-product an art form. Each meal is a unique artistic creation; the combinations of the meal can be varied depending on her moods and emotions at that moment. Although a meal can be repeated, the exact taste and flavor of each dish can never be entirely replicated over time. Many women with whom I spoke described the joy they received from expressing their creativity through foodmaking. A young woman in her early 30s expressed her enjoyment of the aesthetic process of cooking in this way:

There's a Tamil proverb that says "if you're not pretty, use turmeric, if you're not a good cook, use tamarind³³". . .cooking is like mathematics. . .it is also an intellectual hobby. . .it is a way of expressing yourself. . .your likes, dislikes.

Here, cooking need not be only a practical exercise but one that invokes the intellectual capacities of the cook. As posited by feminist philosopher Lisa Heldke (1992, p. 203), foodmaking can be a "thoughtful practice" indeed given the careful choice of cooking method to be employed, the judicious use of ingredients that go into a dish, the skillful control of heat, and the moment at which the food is taken away from the heat, and how the food is to be displayed depending on the status of the diners.

With every dish or meal, a woman makes numerous culinary choices—aesthetic, technical, and social. When women make foods from fresh ingredients, it is not difficult to see cooking as a creative process. Here, foodmaking is likened to art; the foods are raw materials like clay, which she then sculpts with her hands. In this context, a woman cooks, deriving pleasure from the activity of cooking. A

lecturer and administrator in her early 40s who enjoys cooking had this to say:

[I think] presenting the food is. . .I'm particular when we have guests. . .for everyday meals, it's not so important. . .what I find creative is the actual cooking itself or the preparation. . .this is what I feel to be my most creative best.

Creative cooking frequently occurs during the weekends when women have more time to cook an elaborate meal. In a number of homes where the women are working, the weekend meal is the 'special' meal when something different than the usual everyday dishes are prepared. Weekend meals in many homes may constitute a 'change' from the daily diet, consisting of foods set apart from the regular plain rice, and two or three meat and vegetable dishes. 'Special' foods in Malaysian homes today are pizza and spaghetti. In Indian homes, a 'special' food could also be a Malaysian dish like *rendang* (a spicy dish made with either chicken or beef) or *nasi lemak* (rice flavored with coconut milk, eaten with fried chicken, egg omelet, fresh cucumbers, and fried peanuts).³⁴ It is during the weekends that a working woman is not pressed for time, and it is a chance for her to develop her creative skills. Many women spoke of cooking something 'special' depending on their mood, or if they were inspired to experiment with new or expensive foods. It is on such occasions that women opened recipe books, or attempted a recipe given to them by a friend or their mothers. This was also the time when women paid more notice to the requests of their husbands or children or entertained guests with a home-cooked meal. Thus, these women derived satisfaction within the parameters of their social and cultural circumstances, that is, from their role as cook.

That a woman treats cooking as an art and derives pleasure from cooking may still be the case when she uses convenience foods. Malaysian Indian Hindu women enjoy modifying convenience foods further, a creative practice of working out how it can be cooked (especially with bottled and canned foods), or what other foods can be served with the meal even if the convenience food item may be consumed in its original form. There are many convenience foods that are prepared in combination with fresh foods and, in this process, the store-bought convenience food is transformed into a home-made food. In families that

prepare spaghetti, which has become quite popular with the emergence of Western restaurants in the urban areas and among families who have traveled abroad, women told me that they enjoyed preparing this dish often at the request of their children. Rather than making the sauce from scratch, many women bought the bottled spaghetti sauces, although they were considered fairly expensive. However, these sauces were never used directly from the bottle. Women would add first and foremost a dash of chili powder to spice up the dish, and flavor it further by adding finely diced onions.

In the spirit of creativity, the mass-produced commodity takes on a new meaning when it appears at the dining table. Through “consumption” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xiii), used in a broad sense to encompass the ways a product is appropriated and transformed, a woman makes the product her own – modifying it in her own way and by using it for her own purposes – both of which may not have been envisioned by designers of the original commodity (see also Baudrillard, 1973). The place of marketers cannot be denied here as it is their intent to have her purchase the convenience food product and yet have her place her own stamp on it so that she derives personal gains from using the product. That marketers have long sort this strategy was outlined in the 1963 classic *The Feminine Mystique* by the famed Betty Friedan. Quoting a report, Friedan explains that convenience cake mixes appeared to be manufactured in such a way, demanding some effort on the part of the woman so that “by using X Mix the woman can prove herself as a wife and mother, not only by baking, but by spending more time with her family. . . . Of course, it must also be made clear that home-baked foods are in every way preferable to bakery-shop foods. . .” (Friedan, 1963, p. 186). Essentially, the trick for marketers was that they had to produce a food product that a woman would buy with the intention of eliminating the drudgery of cooking, while at the same time it had to be enticing enough that she would still purchase it because it was of added-value to her. It is the pre-packaged convenience foods that had this charm of cutting down on preparation time while still being attractive for use when a woman wanted to cook a meal and claim it as her own. As such, it is never treated as a commercially-produced food item as the woman has

turned it into a special dish with her culinary skills. Furthermore, the food product, having passed through her hands, is transformed from a capitalistic context devoid of real emotional meaning into an object invested with emotional meanings. Here, the end-product is a metaphor for her love, which she offers to her family.³⁵ The fact that she has prepared the dish with love and care further transforms the mass-produced object into a personal ‘gift’ (see also Lupton, 1996).³⁶ Following French Sociologist Marcel Mauss’s (1967) thesis of the gift, the convenience food now encapsulates something of the identity of the donor and, in this case, the woman. However, it is the context and ways in which gifts are presented with appropriate sentiments that strips the gift of its commodity identity, enabling it to convey instead the giver’s identity.

However, this gift is not a gift in a true sense in that it entails a counter-gift in the spirit of reciprocity. The very act of cooking a meal for one’s husband and children is an expression of “selfless display” (Lupton, 1996, p. 47), and the gift here, in the form of food, is a powerful sign of love that encompasses allegiance, benevolence, commitment, delight, sacrifice, satisfaction, and unity. Although this gift is never presented with the intention of it being reciprocated in any way, there are non-material and intangible returns in the form of affection and gratitude conveyed to the giver. A strong emotional dimension emerges when a woman is unhappy or upset if the food is refused, or when there is great delight in her food. Through this process, a woman becomes the centrifugal force in directing emotions and bonds of love at the familial level.

Anthropologist R.S. Khare’s (1976, p. 253) comments (although referring to Tamils of South India) are applicable to the Malaysian Indian Hindu woman when he describes the product of the skill of a woman in the kitchen as “a ‘taste’ that comes from the hands of those who are socially and emotionally near. . . .” In the case of a convenience food, the mass-produced food product can be converted into an emotionally-charged object when it passes through the hands of the woman. Having incorporated part of herself into the end-product (see Lupton, 1996) that embodies her emotions, she not only derives pleasure from preparing the dish but from seeing her husband, children, and relatives content with what she has produced. A

woman in her mid-30s with whom I worked put it this way:

I enjoy praise when I've cooked a good meal. . . I think it is important. . . it motivates me as a woman. . . it deeply satisfies me.

Another Indian woman in her mid-40s said:

As a wife and mother. . . I feel happy when I watch them enjoying the food I have cooked. . . when my children have a favorite food whatever it may be, I keep it specially for them. . . it is a joy to see them eat what they like.

A working woman in her late 40s said that she always puts her best into cooking for:

Food is unlike power or achieving status. . . in power and status, it's always something you can say that you can never get enough. . . but with food, you can say "enough" as you cannot keep eating and eating as there is a limit as to how much your stomach can take in. . . so when I cook, I make sure that what I have produced is always the best in terms of taste and quality, and only then am I happy. . . so that when my family members have eaten, they can say that they have "had enough," in that, they are satisfied.

Food in this context is bound up with relationships and kin attachments unlike 'eating out' where food is a commodity to be sold and bought. From the above, we can see that the woman is central to the 'consumption' as much as the 'production' process. There is a sense of joy that a woman feels when she cooks a dish that is liked by the members of her family for her efforts have brought on a positive effect.

Thus, food is a tool women creatively 'consume,' in the sense that they manipulate it and cooking is conceived as a means for creating their identity as women of a specific class rather than simply a chore to be dutifully fulfilled. For these women, it may be said that 'producing' is a way of 'consuming.' This is particularly true for women from the economically privileged middle classes as they have the choice of experimenting with a greater variety of foods and ingredients. Even if they were cautious about becoming too experimental in how they cooked for fear that the meal might not be successful, many women generally enjoyed cooking and saw it as a creative activity.

"Meddling" maids and mechanical aids

In addition to using convenience foods, an Indian woman may also employ a maid to assist in meal production, without compromising her identity as a woman, wife, and mother. I observed that in many middle-class Indian Hindu families, women never left the cooking entirely to their maids.³⁷ One of the women I interviewed who is in her late 40s explained it like this:

You cannot depend on a maid or someone else. . . when I cook for my family, I feel satisfied. . . I would have cooked food according to my own style and what I want to do. . . I think the family is more excited when it is the wife or mother who does the cooking of the meal rather than someone else.

An exception I encountered in my research experience was a dentist in her early 40s who manages her own practice. Although her elderly mother-in-law lives with her, she relies on her maid to carry out the daily cooking, except during weekends when she cooks for recreation. However, on a daily basis, she always leaves clear instructions for her maid as to what needs to be cooked. Having a maid does not contest a woman's gendered identity. Instead a woman harnesses certain benefits that come with having a maid while fulfilling her objectives as nurturer and provider.

Although in most households maids only assist in the preparation of food, for example, the cutting of vegetables or washing the pots and pans, they rarely participate in the actual cooking of the main dishes for a meal. One woman in her early 40s explained:

But I'm quite happy to let someone else do the cutting, chopping, washing, and all those things because I find that a chore. . . that kind of power. . . I'm quite happy to give up. . . but not cooking.

When a maid does do some cooking, she is left with the mundane tasks, for example, frying *pappadum* (Tamil; *appallam*)³⁸ or cooking the rice that is almost always done in an electric rice cooker. It is a common occurrence that women who have maids to help them with the initial preparation of ingredients are happy to execute the actual cooking of the dishes and adding the 'final touches' to the meal. In this case, they gain pleasure from cooking because they have

handed over the drudgery aspects of cooking, which entails the uncreative tasks, such as cutting, chopping, and the washing up, to maids (see also [Chin, 1996](#)). Hence, the pleasures derived from cooking are an employer-centric perspective whereas maids probably view cooking through different eyes.

I have also heard women say that the cooking should never be left entirely to the maid as the latter cannot be 'trusted,' pointing to the inabilities of the maid to prepare a successful meal. A working woman in her late 40s who rises early every morning just to get some of her cooking done for the day had this to say about her maid:

I never leave any of the cooking to her...if it's vegetables, I find that she overcooks them...even when it comes to frying, she doesn't seem to do it right...I rather do it myself...I think I'm just particular about how any of the cooking is done...so I'd rather do it myself.

The dentist with whom I spoke elaborated on this theme:

If the mother in the family could tell whoever is cooking (if she is not the one cooking)...if she could give instructions as to what the family wants to eat like vegetables...like normally, I would tell the maid "cook *ladies' fingers*³⁹ today for my children and then make *tauhu* (Hokkien/Malay; soya beancurd) with rice for the children"...I always tell her because I don't know if she knows what to feed them...she likes to feed peanuts which she fries in flour...you know these cakes...I say "No! No! you must have greens...and protein as well"...or I call her (from my clinic) and ask her...and if it is not proper, I will tell her.

Live-in maids from the Philippines and Indonesia are not only relatively affordable to middle-class urban families (see [Heyzer & Wee, 1992](#)), but are symbolically bound up with middle-class identity and consumption patterns, as asserted by [Chin \(1998, pp. 166–167\)](#):

From the perspective of the middle classes, not only are foreign servants substitute homemakers, but they also are symbols that construct and maintain social status. In short, the in-migration and employment of Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers have

become a major part of the state elite and the middle classes' pursuit of a shared vision of modernity that defines and displays goods—including that of commodified Filipina and Indonesian female servants...put simply, the middle classes' consumption of Filipina and Indonesian women's domestic labor is...a key way to construct and maintain social status in an age of rapid social change.

Many working middle-class women agree that maids are a modern-day convenience, and without them household tasks could not be achieved as quickly. The urgent need for the middle-class working woman to employ a domestic worker to help her execute household tasks must be understood in light of the Malaysian state's policies about women's place in the family. Clearly the intended outcomes of the 70 million target National Population Policy (NPP) promulgated in 1984 is to encourage women to have more children to meet the labor needs of the country, while assuming that they will continue to be productive workers in the labor force ([Chin, 1998, pp. 167–168](#)). After 5 years, the National Policy on Women (NPW)⁴⁰ or the *Dasar Wanita Negara* was announced with one of its goals clearly directed at "integrat[ing] women in all sectors of development in accordance with their capabilities and needs in order to enhance the quality of life, eradicate poverty, ignorance and illiteracy, and ensure a peaceful and prosperous nation" (cited in [Sha'ban Muftah Isma'il, 1997, p. 40](#); [Fatimah, 1998, p. 127](#)). The place of women in the family was not ignored as may be seen from the family policy that emerged soon after. The Family Development section of the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991, p. 424, as cited in [Puthuchery, 1991, pp. 11–12](#)) principally emphasized women's role in providing a "conducive and harmonious family environment," while simultaneously actively engaged in the country's wage economy, although the latter was defined as an additional dimension to a woman's familial responsibilities. Hence, the rhetoric of the 'ideal woman' was also underscored when it became extended to women who are able to balance successfully the worker and mother/wife roles ([Puthuchery, 1991, p. 12](#)). A similar message was echoed in Vision 2020—Malaysia's modernity project which called for the active contribution of women from the middle- and upper-income echelons into wage employment,

while stressing that they continue to retain their roles as mothers in the home. It is in this context that constant messages stressing women's productive role in society has led many, particularly those of the middle and upper classes, to opt for a live-in foreign domestic worker who can substitute for their long absences from the home. These women are best qualified to employ foreign domestic workers by the very fact they uphold the capitalist-patriarchal construction of women—which means that they come from stable families where both husband and wife are working and the husband is the principal breadwinner (Chin, 1998, pp. 170, 174–175).⁴¹ In defining the citizenry who may employ a foreign domestic worker in effect demonstrates the state's strategy in characterizing the content and lifestyles of the middle and upper classes and, in turn, delineating them from the lower classes (Chin, 1998, p. 185). In spite of allowing the employment of these women, the state insists on the heavy surveillance of these workers, claiming that they pose a potential threat to the local population if not checked (Chin, 1998, p. 202).

Yet Indian Hindu women from the growing middle classes continue to rely on foreign help to carry out domestic chores as many wish to pursue careers of their own and maintain a lifestyle befitting the urban middle classes. For these women, in the same way housework is transferred to the domestic worker, so are stages in the preparation and presentation of everyday food. A career woman recalls how her mother who was a housewife used to spend hours in the kitchen, carrying out domestic chores and keeping up the house. She says that today's woman is different; a maid is thus beneficial. Yet women are careful not to let their maids take over their role as nurturers. There are women who cringe when their maids take credit for a well-cooked meal. A woman in her early 40s whose mother helps in the daily cooking had this to say:

But it makes a difference that my mother provides. . . I don't think I would feel so threatened if she does so compared to if a maid was cooking. . . probably if my husband said that the food was good. . . I'll be happy to relate it to my mom. . . but I may not feel so happy that the maid is taking the credit. . . I know other Indian women who claim that their maids are terrible cooks but it may not be true. . . they want them to remain where they are [that is, as maids in the household].

Another woman in her early 40s remarked:

I know women who say that if their maid cooks the way she does, it is because we have taught her. . . if someone says very honestly. . . if a guest comes to the house and compliments the maid. . . the lady of the house is probably going to say. . . "oh! I taught her this". . . we wouldn't say "what a clever girl she is!"

In a fast-paced world, most middle-class Malaysian women have found ingenious ways of speeding up the cooking process with the use of electrical appliances such as the blender or special cookware such as the pressure cooker, without having to see their role in cooking as a chore. My argument stands in contradiction to feminist statements that domestic technology serves to further bind women to household chores as it is accompanied with the rising expectations of the domestic role of women (see Wajcman, 1995). In Malaysia, where Volvo cars are proudly driven by their owners because they are powerful status symbols, and the areas in which one takes up residence bears on the person's social standing, the many objects found in the home also facilitate a similar objective when it "promote[s] the wished for '[wo]man about town image'" (Robinson, 1982 as cited in McGee, 1985, p. 210; see also Rokiah Talib, 2000, pp. 37–46). Such objects like kitchen appliances and special cookware are usually stored away in the indoor kitchen⁴² which closely resembles kitchens in the West—normally tastefully decorated and furnished with the most up-to-date kitchen cabinets and electrical appliances that make the room an elite status showpiece. Some of these objects in themselves do not produce status (for example, the blender) as they can be also found in the kitchens of urban lower class and rural homes. However, it is the meanings constructed around these objects and their perceived value that produces status. A middle-class woman does not treat these objects as luxury goods but understands them to be necessities with only utilitarian benefits (cf. Wazir-Jahan Karim, 1989–1990). If an object breaks, she may discard and most likely replace it without much thought, while a woman from a lower class may feel a greater loss. In using such objects, a middle-class woman differentiates herself from a woman of the lower class or rural background⁴³ who finds such objects expensive, and if purchased considered a luxury good. The value placed

on such objects and the sheer numbers of electrical appliances found in an urban middle-class kitchen differentiate the experiences of women from the different classes.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that large numbers of Malaysian Indian Hindu women are working, they continue to cook for their families. That women continue to perpetuate this pattern dovetails with the dominant gender ideology that ascribes certain tasks to women such as housekeeping, cooking, and taking care of the children while men take care of other responsibilities connected to the home. Although their attitudes and practices reproduce the dominant gender ideology, generally Indian Hindu women do not perceive food provision as a form of female subjugation by men since their role in food provision encompasses cultural values that are not perceived as oppressive. From the perspective of a critical outsider, these women can be seen as (unconsciously) trapped by false notions that their ideal place is in the home, and to manage activities like the cooking. But taking their statements seriously renders a different perspective.

My purpose in discussing women and food provision in the home is not to counter hegemonic constructions of them but to point out that there are positive elements that come out of such everyday practices from which women derive personal gain. The sites in which Indian Hindu women find themselves need not always be understood in light of how they construct gender relations within the home and direct peoples' perceptions outside the home. In a time of rapid social and economic change, a woman may assert her shifting gendered identity by either reinforcing the current gender paradigm or by modifying it. For example, when she uses convenience foods or utilizes the services of foreign domestic help, this may be seen as valid avenues through which she gains freedom to spend more time in other activities inside and outside the home. Hence, although it may be the case that these women are forced to reproduce cultural values without having any recourse, they have found ways of continuously adapting, reproducing, modifying, revising, recreating, and elaborating these values in whichever way

they feel befits the specific situation in which they find themselves as well as according to their perceived interests. As such, women may also resist the dominant gender ideology should they opt not to cook, but this occurs only in a limited way without their necessarily transforming social expectations entirely (cf. Healey, 1999, p. 60). It is in this way that women exercise control over their lives and cultural locations as they have capacity to direct and create a changing form of gendered identity linked to their everyday experiences, while staying ideologically consistent with established cultural norms.

Endnotes

¹ Note that the quotes throughout this paper have been edited for grammatical purposes by the author in order to ensure clarity. In so doing, the author has maintained the integrity of the quotes by preserving the original meaning of the statements.

² Exceptions to this include professional chefs, special holiday cooking in which men play a greater role in food preparation, and barbecues in the outdoor.

³ In this paper, I am not concerned about the unbalanced nature of domestic work that has been the interest of some anthropologists and sociologists, that is, that much of the household work is still carried out by women and not men (see Ramu, 1989–1990). Instead I focus on how women skillfully manipulate activities associated with them, such as cooking, in their interests.

⁴ This paper is based on dissertation research conducted from May 1996 to April 1997, and in April 1998. Additional fieldwork trips were made in November 2001 and April 2002. During the months spent in the Klang Valley (which includes the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, and the three other adjacent satellite cities namely Petaling Jaya, Subang Jaya, and Shah Alam) of the State of Selangor, I gathered information from extensive research with two Indian families, in-depth interviews with twenty Indian women, and conversations with numerous other women, and men.

⁵ Not long after the departure of the British in 1965, racial riots erupted between the Malays and Chinese in 1969 (see Nash, 1989). In response to the racial riots, the government established the New Economic Policy (NEP) to restructure society and eradicate poverty in the rural areas (see Milne & Mauzy, 1986). This policy was targeted especially at the Malay community that has since vastly improved in economic terms. In line with the NEP, defining ethnicity for the allocation of resources became crucial especially among the Malays who were accorded *bumiputera* status. Soon to replace the NEP was the National Development Policy (NDP), advocating "a Singapore-style Second Industrial Revolution, with a shift from the model of the low-wage factory to the high-tech, highly skilled economy" (Stivens, 2000, p. 17).

⁶ The term *bumiputera* is used to include those who are indigenous or who claim indigeneity to the Malayan Peninsula. The Malays constitute the largest group in this category, while the

other groups include the *orang asli* and other indigenous people groups of Sabah and Sarawak. It must be noted that while *putera* means 'prince' in the Indic origin, while *puteri* means princess, the concept *bumiputeri* does not exist because ownership of the soil (*bumi*) descended through men. Hence, the term *bumiputera* is intrinsically gender discriminatory, although it applies equally to women in everyday parlance.

⁷ The *kangany* was the chief labor-recruiting officer who was also supervisor of the laborers on the plantation (see also Jain, 1970).

⁸ In Malaysia, the majority of Indians are Hindus, with the rest being Christian or Muslim. In recent years, Indian Hindus have become more aware of their ethnic identity. I was told that social organizations like the Hindu Sangam have become concerned with the conversion of Hindus to various Christian denominations. Ethnic awareness is also evident in that a greater number of younger Indians are attending temple *puja* (worship) on Fridays.

⁹ This stereotype arises from the fact that the majority of Tamil Indians in the Peninsula served as laborers in rubber plantations. However, it ignores the diverse characteristics existing in this group that in reality represents Indians of different backgrounds in terms of class, caste, language, and religion.

¹⁰ Among the growing middle classes are migrant Tamils from the rubber estates who have succeeded in becoming prominent politicians in the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). However, through personal experiences, I became aware that Tamils who trace their background to the rubber plantations, and later become a part of the growing urban middle classes do not normally reveal their roots. From this, there seems to be a clear stigma attached to having come from the rubber plantations. Furthermore, it may be well worth noting that those who come from this background are of the lower castes. In this case, it is very common to find in everyday interaction established middle-class Indians who are from the higher castes (for details on how the caste system functions among the Tamils of Malaysia, see Rajakrishnan, 1984), like the Chettiars, Brahmins, Vellalars, and even the Ceylon Tamils, to differentiate themselves from those from the plantations (see Arasaratnam, 1979). I also discovered that these groups of South Indians do not get involved in the activities of MIC that has become dominated by Tamils from the rubber plantations. The former group instead is heavily involved in cultural and social organizations and institutions that promote Indian dance, music, and other such cultural activities.

¹¹ In the past, Indians have faced problems in integrating into the wider Malaysian society (see Kaul, 1980). MIC officials have in the past been concerned over the plight and overall advancement of the Indian community (see *New Straits Times*, 29 June, 1996; *New Straits Times*, 8 July, 1996).

¹² The term 'wet' market is used more commonly than open-air market in Malaysia (and Singapore). It is called such as the ground is constantly wet with water, dripping from the ice on counters used to keep the fish fresh. At the end of the day, the ground is usually washed with water, and many a time, it does not become dry for the following day when business resumes.

¹³ Malaysians use the term 'processed' foods when referring to convenience foods. For the purpose of this paper, I am using the term convenience foods in order to differentiate foods that have been commercially produced to reduce the length of time required

for preparation from other foods such as wheat flour, for example, that has undergone some method of food processing.

¹⁴ See McGee et al. (1988, p. 3).

¹⁵ Alatas (1972) makes the point that modernization in Malaysia is very much linked to the West, and a Western style of living. Jomo K. Sundaram elaborates on this point by saying that Western cultural products are encouraged because it is the "lowest common denominator" in a highly controversial multiethnic milieu (as cited in Chin, 1998, p. 191). While this path to modernization entails western liberal capitalism, it was only achieved with the strong hand of the state (Stivens, 2000, p. 18; Stivens, 2002, p. 459). However, it must be noted that the form of modernity evolved in Malaysia is highly Islamized and, in turn, contextualized. Among the many features that signifies Malaysia's modality of modernity is the state-supported Islamic banking system and the setting up of a Malaysian Institute for Islamic Understanding (IKIM) (see also Stivens, 2002, p. 460).

¹⁶ I find the term 'traditional' to be problematic as it implies that culture is static, as well as discounting the fact that cultural traits can, and do, change over time.

¹⁷ Currently, there is a labor shortage filled by unskilled workers. In light of this, the Malaysian government has been recruiting women (particularly Malay) into the workforce. From my conversations with officials at MIC, I gathered that the majority of Indian women with at least a high school education are more likely to work to supplement the household income.

¹⁸ In the everyday practice of cooking, the cutting and chopping up of food ingredients, and cleaning up are seen as separate tasks from the actual 'cooking' which involves the combining and heating of ingredients.

¹⁹ For an analysis of gender roles in working class Indian households in urban Malaysia, see Oorjitham (1984).

²⁰ See *Malaysian Business Times*, March 12 (1994, p. 4).

²¹ Shopping for food is an activity that may be carried out by either the woman or her husband, or it may demand the combined efforts of both a woman and her husband. When food shopping is carried out either by her husband only or by both a woman and her husband, I have found that it is often that a woman has the final say as to what needs to be bought as she handles the cooking.

²² I sensed that such work was considered more difficult as it required the use of a chopper.

²³ In fact, it is the Indian man who always cooks in the public context, for example, in the temple. Food offered to the gods is always cooked by the temple priest (cf. Ferro-Luzzi, 1981) for fear that any food brought by the devotees may be contaminated, for instance, by using pots used for cooking meat or food cooked by a menstruating woman. It is customary that devotees only bring fruit (protected from pollution because of their skins) or cartons of milk as offering.

²⁴ I observed that many men, especially of the older group, were not able to even prepare for themselves a hot beverage like tea, coffee, or milo (a chocolate drink produced by Nestlé to which hot water, milk, and sugar are added); for this they depended on their wives.

²⁵ In Malaysia, unlike in the U.S., there is a much wider range of public eating places, catering to a variety of food budgets. Among Indians (and Malays), I have found that it is not uncommon to buy

home food, and consume it at home rather than eating openly in public spaces.

²⁶ When Indians do 'eat out,' it is usually during weekends. This is especially true for non-vegetarian Hindus who consume a wider choice of foods.

²⁷ In fact, the idea of 'eating out' used to be commonly associated by the Malays and Indians with the Chinese. Although Indians do not make it a frequent practice to 'eat out,' I have met many Malays who increasingly depend on buying food. This occurs specifically among working women who have difficulties pursuing a career and managing home.

²⁸ When cooking, great care is taken to avoid ritual pollution. In non-vegetarian homes, special pots and cutlery are set aside for periods of fasting. Menstruating women are forbidden from approaching an altar to pray or offer food. When a woman is menstruating, an older relative like her mother or mother-in-law takes over the ritual duties of serving her husband or son during fasting periods.

²⁹ I found that maids helped in the cooking even in high caste Indian families like the Brahmins. Here, an Indonesian or Filipina maid's involvement in food preparation may not be seen as polluting as she falls outside the matrix of the caste system (cf. Rajakrishnan, 1984). We can assume here that Indians in permitting their maids to cook are responding to a "context-sensitive kind of rule" (Ramanujan, 1989, p. 47). In other words, if maids of low caste backgrounds were to have been employed, it is more likely that she will not assist in food preparation.

³⁰ Also called *idiappam*, these South Indian noodles are made from rice. For *idiappam*, the rice is first washed, dried and then ground into a flour-like consistency. To this rice flour is then added water and salt for taste. The water helps the flour form a dough that is forced through a press that looks like a large cookie press. By pushing down the piston of the *sevai* or *idiappam* press, the rice dough is squeezed through the holes in the removable disc attached to the base of the press. The noodles turn out to be thin only because the disc is punctured with small holes. When pushing down the piston of the press, the dough is made to fall gently onto a greased platter which is then placed into a steamer. *Idiappam* is usually eaten with grated coconut or chutney, although among the Tamils of Sri Lanka, it is enjoyed with a thick fish broth made from coconut milk. These noodles may be dried and kept for up to 3 weeks, and taken out and fried or steamed at a later time.

³¹ *Ragi* is an annual plant (*Eleusine coracana*) in the grass family. It is native to the Old World tropics, and is an important cereal in India and Africa.

³² This brand of cake-mixers is expensive as they are imported. Many people use the brand name Kenwood when referring to this appliance perhaps because the name carries prestige.

³³ The word tamarind comes from the Arabic "*tamar-i-hind*" meaning the "dates of India" (Jaffrey, 1981, p. 434). Tamarind (Tamil; *puli*) is a common souring agent needed in many South Asian and Southeast Asian dishes. These sour brown pods come in slabs packaged in plastic bags, and sold in markets, provision shops, and supermarkets in Malaysia. The pods are first soaked in water to release its pulp, and its juice is added to the dish.

³⁴ Vegetarian homes may substitute the meat and egg with 'meal-maker' or textured protein prepared in curry-style. Jaffrey (1981)

has noted that versions of this rice dish appear throughout coastal and South India, Sri Lanka, and eastward through Southeast Asia up to the Philippines.

³⁵ I thank Caroline Tauxe for pointing this out to me.

³⁶ The difference between a mass-produced commodity and a gift used to cement social ties has been explained by Carrier (1993) and Gregory (1982). The contrast lies in the fact that the former is impersonal while the latter connotes a context characteristic of close social relationships.

³⁷ I found that the Chinese women who had maids, compared to the Malays or Indians, were most likely to leave entirely to their maids even the decision-making as to the kinds of foods and dishes prepared for the day. In this instance, returning home to a meal is a surprise for them as well as for their families.

³⁸ This is a crispy, savory fried cracker that is eaten at meals. Commercially-produced *pappadam* can be bought in the sundry shops in residential areas with larger communities of Indians, for example, Bangsar and Brickfields.

³⁹ The term ladies' fingers is more commonly used when referring to okra.

⁴⁰ For details of the NPW, see Fatimah Hamid Don (1998, p. 126–131).

⁴¹ Furthermore, it must be noted that the marking of class boundaries were further made possible through the practice of discriminatory rules against allowing single women to employ foreign domestic workers (see Chin, 1998, p. 170).

⁴² An outdoor kitchen as opposed to an indoor kitchen is an area beyond the indoor kitchen, usually partially or fully sheltered. In some homes, the outdoor kitchen is where most of the cooking for everyday purposes is carried out. Usually women prefer to use the outdoor kitchen because they do not want their indoor kitchens to become dirty.

⁴³ It should not be assumed that people from the rural areas are poor. Some rural families possess lifestyles similar to their urban counterparts, especially those living in or near towns, and those from middle-class backgrounds.

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