

## **Food and Identity in Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White***

**Anukriti, Research Scholar, M.A. (English), UGC (NET-JRF)**  
DCRUST, Murthal  
[anukriti.ginni@gmail.com](mailto:anukriti.ginni@gmail.com)

**Prof. Sujata Rana**  
Dept. of Humanities  
Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram Univ. of Sci. & Tech.  
Murthal

### **Abstract**

Food has been widely recognised in areas such as anthropology, sociology, food science, semiotics as well as in literary, film and cultural studies. Food and eating mirror the making of a self and reflects a detailed and comprehensive image of our identities. As self-understanding and authentic existence are the chief objectives of any kind of philosophical inquiry, especially in postmodern times, food becomes a valuable key to that. The paper proposes to study Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White* as chronicle of such a journey spanning three generations of women through the metaphor of cooking. Food is one of the most popular tools in the hands of diasporic women writers to express their longing for as well as rejection and finally acceptance of their home culture. The novel is an unforgettable rendering of a mother and daughter's search for identity and 'wholeness' in an alien land and coming to terms with the 'duality' of their existence.

**Keywords:** Preethi Nair, *One Hundred Shades of White*, British Asian Literature, Diasporic literature, Women's literature

Food, which is ensured by stuffing down, is indispensable for the survival of our life. The unique quality of integration of food makes it important and is open to symbolism. As Peter Scholliers says: "Food crosses the border between the outside and the inside and the principle of incorporation touches upon the very nature of a person" (8). It is then quite obvious that food is a part of us and it is linked to our oneness. Food is considered with wide social and cultural point of view irrespective of the common need for nutrition. "Food is a cultural practice through which people participate in attitudes and rituals of a group and these participations can be socially controlled as well as more automatic" (Scholliers 7).

A great importance is attached with respect to linkage between food and identity to both the study of food and literature. That particularly is pivotal and of essence to every human being is an established fact as different social theorists opine because it gives sense to existence and establishes relationships between oneself and the other thereby creating values. The oneness of the people affects their view-point and formation of their society. It formulates the process and

procedure they act, react, eat, think, work etc. "People do all this with reference to economic, social, cultural and political conditions, events and expectations, and by doing so, they influence the economic, the social, the cultural and the political" (Scholliers 5). Nowadays, the idea of homogenous identity is untenable—identities are multiple and they are a combination of various facets. The important question is how food is related to identities and processes of identification.

In any society, and even more so in diasporic societies, women are the carriers and preservers of culture and identity of the community. The paper proposes to study Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White* as chronicle of an immigrant's journey away from the centre of their homeland to the pluralism of a multicultural society. The journey spans over three generations of women and their search for identity and 'wholeness' through their inherited culinary talent. Food and the art of cooking is portrayed to be diffused with mystical powers that has healing properties and that ensures communal wellbeing. The novel set primarily in India and Britain is also a record of celebration of the bond between mothers and daughters.

The books, films, plays and other gazettes put together and paved the way for emerging the literature of 'British Asians' in the 1990's. It is because of this that the South-Asian immigrants and their descendants find their respectable place in mainstream of contemporary British literature. Overbearing traditional parents, cultural and racial conflicts, arranged marriages, grand weddings, feasts, funerals and Indian fabrics provide almost a set backdrop that reflect the reality of the ghetto Indian community in the UK. If a writer is true to his personal experience, then the novel becomes another 'me too' pity memoir. If on the other hand the writer aims for the objective eye of the outsider, they are promptly accused of siding with the 'West' and betraying their community. Against this backdrop of contemporary British Asian literature Preethi Nair's, *One hundred Shades of White* stands out for its empathetic storytelling of an immigrant's journey from a mono-cultural consciousness towards a consciousness of multiculturalism and pluralism.

The novel alternates between the narratives of Nalini and her daughter Maya but is, in fact, a story of three women belonging to three generations - Ammu the grandmother who never leaves India, Nalini the mother who comes to Britain with her young children at the age of 24, and Maya the daughter who comes to the UK at age four and grows up there. Ammu occupies very little space in the whole narration but remains ever present in the minds of her daughter and granddaughter till the very end of the novel. Her gift for cooking, the mystical and healing properties she attributes to the spices and her inherent wisdom are inextricably linked to her rootedness in her home culture. She is always at peace because she is in harmony with nature and she can hear the 'pace'. Her stories are the common thread, binding the three generations together. Nalini inherits her mother's gift of cooking. Working as her mother's assistant in a small village of Kerala where the mother-daughter duo lived in harmony with the world and earned their living as cooks Nalini had soaked in all of her mother's culinary wisdom regarding the healing properties of spices and food. The village astrologer had warned her: 'You will be a very, very prosperous woman, unimaginably so, but never lose sight of your gift. If you do, you lose your centre and all else falls away.' (p. 58)

Decades later Nalini's husband Raul deserts her and she finds herself alone in a foreign country with no money to even return to India and two young children totally dependent on her. Forced to take up employment in a sewing factory cooking saves her sanity: 'It was 1978 and I was alone in a strange country at the age of twenty-six. This first place of employment, Humphries & Co, Bow, was a badly-lit factory, where I sat making shabby dreams for two small children... The monotony of the noise would take me far away, with my children and mother, back to India, to a beautiful home with a veranda surrounded by mango trees ...The noise would bore through the memories, but I would stitch them together with a fabric of sunshine and laughter... I cooked. Cooked whatever they (the children) needed for the next day, cooked just to forget. Forget that somewhere I was losing them...' (91)

True to the predictions of the astrologer, her talent for cooking brings her freedom from poverty and her monotonous job at the sewing factory and restores laughter, prosperity and love in her life. Her intuitive and wise use of spices, her deep sense of gratitude and love infused her pickles with mystical restorative properties and she soon makes her a prosperous woman with her own brand of pickle, 'The Abundance of Spice'. While working to establish her pickle brand and change her life for better, she has the untiring support and love of Maggie and Tom. Maggie became almost a mother-figure to Maya and Nalini's main source of female affinity so important for women to flourish. Maggie and Tom provide Nalini with the know-how to survive in an alien land. Together with their support and the remembered words of her mother's wisdom Nalini's life is rebuilt again: 'My mother used to say that it was forgiveness that worked on the soul and made miracles possible. According to her, forgiveness from a broken heart combusted energy that made insurmountable obstacles just dissolve.' (101)

Nalini also meets Ravi Thakker, her future husband through a cooking assignment for a dinner party he was throwing. Years later when she thought she had left her past firmly behind and has had another daughter Ammu, her first husband Raul re-surfaces as a family friend from America and threatens to undo the fabric of the new life she had built for her children. Blackmailed by Raul to maintain silence Nalini is forced to sell her shop and raise money. Already divorced from her gift, Nalini loses Satchin, her first-born to a freak car accident and her life unrolls again. The grief is all engulfing: 'Nothing pulls you out of it, not even seeing another suffer in the same way; the sobs that I heard from the other side of the wall were Maya's, who stored her tears for night time. We grieve alone. Months went by and it didn't get any easier.' (265)

Nalini loses Maya too first to a grief that isolates both of them in their own cocoons. Raul comes to meet Maya at her school after Satchin's death and poisons Maya further against Nalini. Maya goes away to University and then to Spain and makes a new life for herself, mastering the language, getting engaged to an upcoming Spanish lawyer and finding employment. Repeated calls from Nalini couldn't bridge the gap between them: 'Then one day as I (Nalini) was in the garden planting some coriander seeds, I decided it was time to let her go. Never once did I stop loving her and it was then that I understood what my mother did for me and what she meant by letting go. I went back into the kitchen.' (268)

Taking a loan Nalini started afresh and leased a small shop. Ammu, her youngest daughter had always taken a keen interest in her mother's cooking unlike Maya. She brought Nalini's life back to a full circle with her eagerness to learn from her mother the mystical art of cooking like Nalini learnt from her mother. The trajectory of Maya, the third-generation female character, in terms of metaphor of food, culinary practices and eating habits, comes a full circle with her first rejection and repulsion of traditional Indian food cooked by her mother and then her final acceptance and recognition of the magical and curative powers of the same. Maya, Nalini's daughter arrived in Britain at the age of four and promptly fell in love with the local food, rejecting her mother's food. Despite Nalini's best efforts Maya showed no interest in the traditional home food: 'Her food would often go to waste as Satchin and I discovered that we liked burgers and fish fingers with ketchup a whole lot better. We would gang up against her and make her place these items on the grill instead or tell her how to make English things.' (24)

On her maiden trip to India to buy some fabrics for her employer Maya visits Mumbai to find out the house she was born in and then travels all the way to her grandmother's village in Kerala. The journey becomes a metaphor for her search for identity as it revives a side of her that she had never believed to exist. On her return she fails to sum up her experience of India to her Spanish fiancé Marcos: 'That India had revived a part of me that was lying dormant? That colours, aromas, contradictions, emotions from the place that we are from are born with us, and at some point, we are asked to rediscover them?' (253)

Her journey to India has two main outcomes. The first is understanding the mystical power of freshly cooked home food prepared with love: 'I spent days on end sitting in the kitchen area with his mother and their servant girl. I watched spices being ground with stone, leaves being soaked and dried in the sun, fruit being preserved into pickles, dishes prepared from scratch with love and attention. Each person was working through their own thoughts and kneading dough or grinding lentils was a temporary respite. The end results were amazing: brightly coloured and full of freshness, not packaged for convenience and thrown together in disposable haste; answers so clear that it was impossible not to see them.' (251-52)

The second outcome is to accept her roots and learn to forgive. Maya goes back to her grandmother's village and finds the small hut in which her grandmother had lived till she died. She meets her father's relatives too and discovers the bitter family history behind her parents' marriage. The old village priest-cum-astrologer hands Maya two letters from her grandmother, one addressed to her mother and the other to herself. The letter filled with Ammu's innate wisdom and love encourages Maya to finally embrace her roots, her genes and learn to forgive: 'When you are ready, the truth will come and find you. I know you are brave enough, for invisible things too are passed through the genes. Your journey, you know, begins here in the place where you are from. When you find the truth ... forgive and let go. Do what you love...listen to the magical conversation that is always taking place through the food that you savour, the words that are spoken to you, the music that you hear, the people that you meet, and you will never feel alone.' (248-49)

Her trip to India is soon followed by another work-related trip to America and Maya is determined to find out the truth about Raul, her father and childhood hero. Forced to

acknowledge the depth of betrayal by Raul evidenced by the presence of his family in America, Maya contrasts him with Ravi, the only true father-figure and rock in her life. The layers of lies pulled away from her eyes, she is finally ready to go back to her family and hope for forgiveness and a new beginning.

Thus, from the analytical study of the role played by food in the life of women of three generations, one can admit unhesitatingly that food plays a key role in the life of a person, especially an immigrant. Food of the home country is often the only tangible 'home' in the life of an immigrant. For Nalini who grew up in India, cooking home food becomes a way of holding on to familiarity and makes her feel close to her mother who she misses terribly. For Maya, however, her smelly and messy Indian food is a source of much ridicule and bullying in school. She rejects Indian food as she rejects the sandalwood paste dot on her forehead and her greased-with-oil hair. She wants to make friends, fit in and be happy in her adopted country. Only when she is ready can she search for her roots and embrace the duality of her identity.

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