



Cultural Negotiation and Identity Formation within the Diasporic Experience

Dr. Sumithra Devi S

Asst. Professor in English, T.K.M. College of Arts and Science, Kollam

Email: sumithra003@gmail.com

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.3.167](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.3.167)



Dr. Sumithra Devi S

Article info

Article Received: 23/06/2025

Article Accepted: 26/07/2025

Published online: 01/08/2025

Abstract

Immigrant authorship frequently delineates the multicultural ethos, which often revolves around intricate interrogations of belonging, racial dynamics, gender constructs, sexual identities, cultural divergences, and the complexities of multifarious subjectivities. This discourse necessitates an acknowledgement of “difference”, “otherness”, “femaleness”, “colour”, and “ethnicity”, thereby encompassing pluralism in its entirety. These literary contributions underscore the heterogeneous nature of the Indian diaspora, eschewing a monolithic representation, given the diverse hermeneutic paradigms through which individual immigrant authors process their thematic raw materials. Consequently, the intricate nuances of cultural interaction emerge as a salient thematic nexus pervading their literary oeuvres. Furthermore, their narratives elucidate the profound experiences of dislocation encountered by immigrant women protagonists within their adopted geopolitical milieus. Indian immigrants, often oscillating between their heritage and host cultures, confront an identity crisis that, while inherently fraught with discomfiture, proves an inevitable facet of their diasporic condition. Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White* exemplifies this phenomenon, delineating the protagonists Nalini's and Maya's endeavours to forge a coherent and meaningful sense of self within their hybrid cultural landscapes.

Keywords: ethnicity, identity, colour, difference, otherness, dislocation

Preethi Nair, a distinguished British author of South Indian heritage and recipient of the 2001 Asian Woman of Achievement award, delineates critical issues of ethnicity, cultural identity, and the inherent crises faced by

diasporic subjects in her novel, *One Hundred Shades of White* (2003). The narrative centres on the two protagonists, Nalini and her daughter Maya, as they navigate the complexities and opportunities presented by multiculturalism

within an English context. Nalini's journey is particularly marked by the profound dislocative angst stemming from both geographical relocation and the marital infidelity perpetrated by her husband, Raul. Her subsequent empowerment is symbolically articulated through her culinary practice, specifically the preparation of traditional Indian delicacies, notably pickles. In this context, cooking and spices transcend their literal function to become potent metaphors for the preservation and assertion of native culture, an art form intergenerationally transmitted from her mother, Ammu, which imbues Nalini with the resilience necessary to confront and integrate into the foreign cultural milieu. Concurrently, Maya's trajectory illustrates an initial phase of assimilation, characterized by her adaptation to the new domestic environment, culinary norms, and linguistic and social conventions.

The narrative structure of *One Hundred Shades of White* employs an analeptic method, unfolding through alternating first-person accounts from Maya and Nalini, thereby intricately conjoining past and present temporalities. Nalini's narrative endeavours to reconstruct a sense of home by simultaneously honouring traditional cultural practices and establishing a distinct personal space within the host topos. Conversely, Maya's narrative charts an initial trajectory of assimilation into the adopted cultural environment, which gradually evolves into an explicit acknowledgment and embrace of her native cultural heritage. This dual narrative strategy effectively highlights the divergent yet interconnected processes of cultural negotiation and identity formation within the diasporic experience.

In England, Maya and Nalini encounter significant challenges stemming from their racial and cultural distinctiveness, frequently facing interrogations regarding their origins and complexion. As children, Maya and her brother, Satchin, experience overt racial discrimination from their school peers. Maya recounts instances where her classmates perceive her as

an anomaly due to the presence of moist sandalwood and vibrant red marks adorning her forehead. In an attempt to mitigate this pervasive sense of "otherness", the children implore their mother to forgo these traditional auspicious marks. Both Maya and Satchin exhibit a pronounced aversion to cultural artefacts that overtly signify their "otherness". Satchin, for instance, even disavows Maya as his sister, citing her greased hair as a peculiarly Indian characteristic. Maya, in turn, discerns that "greasing is not the best technique in England" and reflects that "There was a thing called shampooing but Amma didn't know that back then" (21). Her disdain for her "jet-black" (25) hair and her fervent desire for blonde hair underscore her aspiration to achieve complete visual conformity with her English peers. The profound angst and humiliation experienced by Maya fuel her desperate attempts to divest herself of her ethnicity, including her distinctive black hair, in pursuit of acceptance and equitable treatment among her social cohort.

The challenges faced by the younger generation extend significantly to dietary practices. Maya recollects the peculiar gazes directed at her by other children when she consumed food with her hands, necessitating instruction from Miss. Davies on the proper use of cutlery. Further exacerbating her discomfort, Maya experiences acute embarrassment when her English friends overtly express disdain for the aroma of traditional Kerala dishes such as "aviyal", "thoran" and "olan" (24). Consequently, she repudiates her indigenous cuisine, even compelling her mother to prepare "omelettes and bread" for her.

Conversely, the novel meticulously delineates the transformative impact of culinary engagement on Nalini. Cooking functions as a central metaphor, evoking stability and rootedness for Nalini within the urban landscape of London. Through this practice, she meticulously reconstructs a semblance of home in a foreign land. She endeavours to replicate the sensory experiences—the aromas, colours, and

symbolic meanings—associated with the spices from her native village of Collenauta (situated on the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border), thereby drawing profound sustenance in her new life. This culinary proficiency and the mystical understanding of spices were imparted by her mother, Ammu. Nalini recollects her mother's words, "My mother always said that when you work with what you love, you work with magic" (55). This intergenerational transmission of culinary knowledge becomes a pivotal mechanism for Nalini's cultural grounding and psychological resilience. For Nalini and her mother, Ammu, culinary practice transcends its utilitarian function as a mere means of sustenance; instead, it serves as a profound epistemological art form through which the truths and meanings of life are progressively revealed.

Nalini's life in Bombay, shared with Ammu and her children, is abruptly disrupted when she is relocated to London, a year after her husband, Raul, commences employment with the Indian Oil Export Company in Great Britain. Despite Raul's assurances of "a bigger and better life" (79), Nalini swiftly apprehends her inability to assimilate effectively into her new country. This adaptive struggle contrasts sharply with the children's seemingly effortless integration into their adopted homeland.

The experience of displacement is acutely poignant for Nalini, who painfully realizes her inability to integrate into English social circles, frequently becoming an object of ridicule. This perceived failure engenders a sense of being overwhelmed, prompting her to seek solace and stability in her native culture. Consequently, she gravitates towards cooking: "I cooked huge meals and placed them on the dining room table from morning to night, I would concoct dishes, remembering recipes and stories from my mother, cook and forget the place I was in" (82). Through this culinary practice, she effectively reconstitutes a miniature India within London, strategically incorporating spices into her children's Western dishes as a mnemonic device

to reinforce their ancestral roots, native culture, and familial lineage.

Nalini experiences a profound cultural shock and personal devastation upon Raul's abandonment, leaving her and the children financially destitute in the unforgiving urban landscape of London. Her discovery of a photograph depicting Raul intimately embracing a blonde woman, with a young child positioned between them, precipitates a severe emotional breakdown. In response to this profound distress, Nalini instinctively seeks solace and psychological reprieve through the act of cooking.

Driven by a profound sense of self-respect, she prioritizes the preservation of her children's self-worth, resolving to shield them from the treacherous history of their father. The culinary act, in this context, provides Nalini with a clear strategic framework for navigating the crisis precipitated by Raul's betrayal. She elects to inform her children of their father's demise, a decision motivated solely by the imperative to safeguard their dignity and honour. This fabricated narrative is thus constructed entirely for the children's well-being, intended to facilitate their development into virtuous individuals. Nalini reassures them of her unwavering presence and meticulously prepares an elaborate dinner, including "some chicken drumsticks coated with breadcrumbs on a sideplate" (30), to assuage their emotional distress. Jolly-Wadhwa elucidates the divergent commitments exhibited by immigrant men and women towards their families, stating:

Unlike many men who could not cope with the dislocation resulting from migration and the pressure of maintaining families, and ultimately deserted their wives and children, women rarely had this option. The emotional and altruistic nature inherent in most women and their social and cultural conditioning as nurturers and

caretakers of the family, bound them to their families. (58)

Diasporic literature frequently illuminates the complex adaptive processes undertaken by immigrants as they endeavour to integrate into novel cultural environments, concurrently striving to preserve their sense of identity, indigenous traditions, and core values. While economic security may be attained in the host nation, the challenge of retaining one's original identity often proves formidable. Furthermore, these individuals frequently inhabit a liminal space, navigating a world imbued with memory and nostalgia for their homeland.

The transformative power of culinary engagement empowers Nalini to confront her new life in the foreign land with renewed vigour. Her self-concept undergoes a significant strengthening, leading her to resolve, amidst unfamiliar social landscapes and pervasive insecurity, that "it was a fight for survival and . . . if you stop and contemplate you lose the battle and so I was grateful for the fact that there was no time" (90). While she progressively adopts Western attire, her profound nostalgia for her homeland persists. As Geoffrey Hartman, a Jewish immigrant to the United States, articulates in *The Fateful Question of Culture*, "homelessness is always a curse" (7). In Nalini's specific predicament, her stoic endurance of hardships is solely driven by the imperative to provide for herself and her two young children. This encounter with a world fundamentally distinct from "home" leaves her profoundly disoriented.

The transformative power of culinary artistry proves to be Nalini's salvation. Word of her exquisitely prepared, exotic pickles disseminates widely, generating such substantial demand that she eventually abandons her sewing work to fulfill these orders. The financial autonomy derived from her pickle-making enterprise enables her to secure a one-bedroom flat, fostering, for the first

time, a genuine sense of belonging. Throughout her diasporic journey, Nalini consistently draws upon the wisdom inherent in her native traditions and cultural heritage as a vital source of sustenance.

Maya's diasporic experiences diverge significantly from Nalini's, attributable to disparities in educational attainment, age, and point of cultural immersion. As an immigrant, she profoundly craves recognition and affirmation from the host topos. Having arrived in England at the nascent age of four, her familiarity with the values and norms of her native culture is tenuous, primarily confined to ephemeral recollections and linguistic fragments inherited from her grandmother. This transcultural migration engenders a palpable sense of bitterness, as her ethnicity precipitates experiences of discrimination and humiliation that she finds intolerable. Consequently, in an effort to circumvent marginalization, she actively repudiates her ethnic heritage and assimilates into alien cultural paradigms. Despite these adaptive efforts, she remains unable to achieve full integration within the foreign culture, a phase characterized by profound identity instability. This crisis is so acute that it erodes her trust in her own mother. However, her fragmented self ultimately finds much-needed anchorage during a pivotal visit to India. This experience profoundly stirs her innermost consciousness, awakening dormant faculties and facilitating a crucial process of self-discovery regarding her roots, thereby affording her, for the first time, a sense of coherent perception, insightful understanding, and psychological stability.

In her negotiation of temporalities, the author endeavours to synthesize Maya's inherited heritage with her adopted cultural milieu. Maya internalizes her grandmother's values of "forgiveness" and "gratitude", which become instrumental in the construction of her new identity within London. A profound moment of illumination experienced during her visit to India precipitates the resolution of her

identity crisis, enabling her forward progression. She consciously embraces her past, acknowledging its enduring presence in her contemporary existence, thereby facilitating a viable experience of relocation. This process culminates in a reconciliation with her dual cultural anchorages. Despite a complex, often ambivalent relationship with India, she ultimately asserts and claims her cultural inheritance. Enriched by this integration, she achieves a sense of belonging in London, articulated by her statement, "I was grateful for the place that I had come to" (288). Consequently, Maya, mirroring her mother's journey, constructs a "third space" for herself in London, thereby embodying a hybrid identity.

In the final analysis, the narrative compellingly demonstrates how the indigenous cultural heritage profoundly illuminates and enriches the lives of its protagonists, Nalini and Maya, as they endeavour to reconstruct their homeland within the diasporic context of London. This process of cultural re-inscription is not merely an act of nostalgic recreation but a dynamic negotiation of identity in a transnational space. The enduring vitality of their native traditions serves as a crucial epistemic and ontological anchor, providing both psychological resilience and a framework for meaning-making amidst the challenges of displacement. Ultimately, the text posits that the active engagement with and re-imagination of one's cultural origins are indispensable for achieving a sense of belonging and self-coherence in a hybridized environment.

Works Cited

- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Chaudhuri, M. (2004). *Feminism in India*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hartman, G. (1984). *The fateful question of culture*. Routledge.
- Jain, J. (2002). *Writing women across cultures*. Rawat Publications.
- Jolly-Wadhwa, K. S. (2000). *Gender: A cross-cultural perspective*. Gyan.
- Nair, P. (2003). *One hundred shades of white*. HarperCollins.
- Narula, D. K. (2005). *South Asian diaspora: Summer blooms in winter gardens*. Creative Books.
- Tharu, S., & Lalita, K. (Eds.). (1997). *Women writing in India: 600 B.C. to the early twentieth century*. Oxford University Press.
- Uberoi, P. (1996). *Social reform: Sexuality and the state*. Sage Publications.
- Walby, S. (1997). *Gender transformations*. Routledge.

Bio-note: Dr. Sumithra Devi S. is an Asst. Professor in English at T.K.M. College of Arts and Science, Kollam. She has to her credit more than 14 years of teaching experience. Her areas of interest include Diaspora Studies, Indian Literature in English and Literary Theory. She is passionate about poetry and brought out her debut anthology of poems titled, *Between Silence and Voice*, in 2020. She has presented her poems at the Soorya Festival of Dance and Music, Trivandrum, the world's longest cultural festival.