



FOOD AND DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN PREETHI NAIR'S *ONE HUNDRED SHADES OF WHITE*

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ABSTRACT

Diasporic writings have emerged into a distinct literary genre today. The word 'diaspora', derived from the Greek word *diaspeiro*, means scattering of people from their land of origin. One of the central features of diasporic writing is a mapping out a journey. This is a journey from the centre of the immigrant's home culture to the periphery of the alien culture and again from the periphery of the alien culture to a different centre representing multi-culture, that is, a consciousness of at least two cultures or more. The paper proposes to study Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White* as representative 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, rejection and finally acceptance of their home culture. Against the backdrop of contemporary British Asian literature Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White* stands out for her deep insight into the lives of the immigrants and her empathy with the characters. 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: British Asian Literature, diasporic literature, women's literature, Preethi Nair.

Diasporic writing has emerged into a distinct literary genre today. The word 'diaspora', derived from the Greek word *diaspeiro*, means scattering of people. Though initially limited to the dispersal of Jews from their homeland, in this increasing era of globalization, it is applied to the numerous ethnic and racial groups living in an alien land. The immigrants who left their home countries for various reasons, voluntary and non-voluntary, had to construct afresh a sense of community, culture and nationality in a country where they were a minority. Thus, their writings deal with their own experiences of geographical dislocation, displacement, cultural ambivalence, social and political alienation and absence of centrality. On the one hand they express a longing for their home land

through memories, oral testimonies, remembered histories and stories, on the other hand they give voice to their reaction to the alien land where they have come as immigrants. One of the central features of diasporic writing is a mapping out the journey that all immigrants must undertake. The journey starts with a movement away from one's homeland to an alien land. This is followed by a phase of loss and rejection in a hostile and unfamiliar society. Then gradually the immediacy of the sense of loss begins to fade away and there follows an intense struggle of creating a space for themselves in the adopted country. Finally after all these phases, the immigrant moves towards a process of reconciliation, assimilation and affirmation of a new culture. This process can be

summed up as a moving away from the centre of the immigrant's home culture to the periphery of the alien culture and again moving from the periphery of the alien culture to a different centre representing multi-culture, that is, a consciousness of at least two cultures or more. In the words of Malathi Ramanathan:

'Individuals and families who live at the juncture between two cultures can lay claim to belonging to both cultures, yet for reasons of being born into one culture and living in the second, they are marginal people, very different to the norm set by majority. Marginality leads to the psychological conflicts of a divided self. The story of the diaspora is the different stages in the resolution of this conflict in the lives of individuals, families, and generations. With the loss of sense of security of a known historical past and a shared geographical space, the need "to belong" becomes constitutive of the Indian diaspora.' (p. 187)

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 representative of an immigrant's journey away from the centre of their homeland to pluralism and multi-culture. The journey spans three generations of women and their search for identity and 'wholeness' through their inherited culinary talent. Food and the art of cooking is given mystical powers that can create healing and communal wellbeing. The novel set primarily in India and Britain is a celebration of the bond between mothers and daughters.

The literature of 'British Asian' label in its present avatar started emerging in the 1990s with the success of books, films, plays, music albums and TV shows by and about the British Asians. Since then it has been an exciting journey to witness South Asian immigrants and their descendants find a tentative foothold in mainstream contemporary British literature. For the first writers of the British-Asian label it was a liberating and life-changing experience to find out that their own lives of duality

was not only acceptable but also marketable and 'cool'. However, after a couple of decades the 'newness' has given away to problems for British Asian diasporic writers that need answers. Every time a new book or film appears with the British Asian label, the narrative brings with it a strong sense of *dejavue*. 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. Diasporic consciousness has become a double-edged sword for these writers. If a writer is true to their 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 multi-culture and pluralism.

The novel alternates between the narratives of Nalini and her daughter Maya but is in effect 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 innate 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 inherited 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 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 dresses 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...' (p. 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, affluence 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 made 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 had the unflinching support and love of Maggie and Tom. Maggie became almost a mother-figure to Maya and Nalini's main source of female camaraderie 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.' (p.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 unspools 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.' (p. 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.' (p. 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. Maya, Nalini's daughter arrived in Britain at

the age of four and promptly fell in love with the local food and reject 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 fishfingers 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.' (p. 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?' (p. 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.' (p. 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.' (p. 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 given the evidence 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.

The metaphor for cooking has increasingly become a tool in the hands of diasporic women writers for expressing the duality of their existence. Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai are just to name a few authors to have tried to navigate an immigrant's journey through detailed food imagery. Food plays a key role in the life of 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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