



RECREATING HOME: AN ANALYSIS OF PREETHI NAIR'S ONE HUNDRED SHADES OF WHITE

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ABSTRACT

Immigrant writers depict the multi-cultural ethos, which gyrate around questions of belonging, race, gender, sexuality, cultural differences and multiple identities. This involves the recognition of 'difference', 'otherness', 'femaleness', 'colour', 'ethnicity', in short, pluralism as such. The writers reveal the Indian diaspora as heterogeneous and not as something monolithic, for the paradigms from within which each immigrant writer works out her raw materials vary. The nuances of cultural interaction become the striking thematic link evident in their works. They incorporate the experiences of dislocation experienced by immigrant women protagonists in their respective foreign spaces. The Indian immigrants, who vacillate between the two cultures, confront identity crisis which is painful, yet inevitable. Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White* depicts the attempts made by the protagonists Nalini and Maya to find a meaningful place for themselves in the foreign culture to which they have migrated.

KEYWORDS : homeland, otherness, discrimination, roots, identity crisis

Preethi Nair, recipient of Asian Woman of Achievement award 2001, is a British author of South Indian heritage. Her novel *One Hundred Shades of White* is involved with issues like ethnicity, culture and identity crisis faced by the two protagonists, Nalini and her daughter Maya, in England. Both the mother and the daughter are caught in the quandaries and possibilities of multiculturalism. Nalini faces the chaos of dislocation, along with the brutal betrayal of their marriage by her husband Raul, but gets empowered, which is exhibited by her cooking of Indian delicacies especially pickles. Cooking and spices become a metaphor of native culture and it is this art, which she has learnt from her mother, Ammu that gives her the courage to face the foreign culture. While Nalini comes to terms with her self through cooking, Maya tries to adapt to her new home, new food and the language and manners.

The story develops through the analeptic method and is told in two narratives, that of Maya and of Nalini, which alternate. The past conjoins with the present. While Nalini's narrative attempts to recreate a home by honouring tradition, but carving a niche of her own in the host topos, Maya's narrative shows the initial acceptance of the adopted home but eventually acknowledging the native culture.

Maya and Nalini face serious problems in England, as they are very often asked to answer questions about their origin and colour.

Maya and her brother, Satchin, as children, face racial discrimination from other students at school. Maya tells how her classmates consider her a strange being since her forehead is adorned with moist sandalwood and bright red stains. To escape from the feeling of being the "other", the children want their mother to avoid the auspicious mark on their forehead. Maya and Satchin hate all cultural artifacts which proclaim their "otherness". Satchin even refuses to acknowledge Maya as his sister since her hair is greased, which is peculiarly an Indian feature. Maya realises that "greasing is not the best technique in England" and that "There was a thing called shampooing but Amma didn't know that back then" (21). She hates her "jet-black" (25) hair and craves for blonde hair as she wants to look exactly like her English friends. The angst and humiliation experienced by Maya is what makes her desperate. At any cost, she wants to discard her ethnicity, even her black hair which proclaims her otherness for acceptance and equal treatment among her friends.

Another challenge that the young ones face is with respect to food. Maya remembers how all the other children look at her

strangely, when she eats with her hands, and it is Miss. Davies who teaches her how to use a knife and fork. To aggravate the situation, Maya gets embarrassed, when her English friends behave as though they cannot stand the smell of the Kerala dishes, "aviyal", "thoran" and "olan" (24). She discards her native food and even impels her mother to make "omelettes and bread" for her.

The novel delineates the impact of a particular experience, that of cooking on Nalini. It is the metaphor of cooking which evokes stability and rootedness for Nalini in London. She recreates a home away from home through cooking. She recreates all the smells, colours and meanings of spices from her native village of Collenauta (on the Kerala Tamil Nadu border) to draw sustenance in her new life in London. It is her mother who imparted to her the power of cooking and the mystical quality of spices, "My mother always said that when you work with what you love, you work with magic" (55).

Cooking, for Nalini and her mother Ammu, is more than a means of livelihood. Rather, it is rather through this art that life unravels its truths and meanings before them.

Nalini is whisked off to London a year after her husband Raul joins the Indian Oil Export Company in Great Britain, which disrupts the settled life of Nalini, Ammu and the children in Bombay. Though he assures "a bigger and better life" (79), Nalini realises that she can never make it in her new country. While Nalini finds it difficult to adapt herself to England, the children are seen accepting their new country easily.

The experience of displacement is poignant in Nalini. She realises painfully that she can never fit into the English social circle which makes her an object of ridicule and she is being laughed at by others. Nalini in a way feels threatened that she is losing the battle. She longs for something from her native culture to hold on to and she resorts to 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). She almost recreates a miniature India for herself in London through cooking and adds spices to her children's western dishes to remind them of their roots, their native culture and their grandmother.

The worst culture shock occurs to her when Raul abandons them without a penny in the face of the cold London city. She comes across a photograph of Raul with his arms around a blonde-woman and placed between them, a young child. Nalini breaks down like a mad woman and turns to cooking for

some relief.

As a woman of self-respect, she decides that her children's self-worth should be protected and that they should not know the treacherous history of their father. The act of cooking gives her a clear vision of how to resolve the crisis of Raul's betrayal. She decides to tell her children that their father has died. This is for preserving their dignity and honour as her only concern is her children. The lie itself is invented for the sake of her children, to let them evolve into good people. Nalini assures them that she will be there with them always, and cooks an elaborate dinner with "some chicken drumsticks coated with breadcrumbs on a sideplate" (30) to make them happy. Jolly-Wadhwa explains the differences in the commitment that men and women show towards their families as immigrants:

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 writers reveal how immigrants strive to adapt to the new cultural environment in which they struggle to maintain their sense of identity, native traditions and values. The immigrant finds economic security, but it is difficult to retain his/ her identity. Moreover they move around in a world of memory and nostalgia.

It is the spirit of cooking that enables Nalini to face life anew in the foreign land. Her self emerges powerful and she decides, in the middle of unfamiliar faces and a heavy insecure feeling 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). Slowly she switches over to western clothing. But she continues to remain deeply nostalgic about her home. As Geoffrey Hartman, a Jewish immigrant to the United States, says in his book *The Fateful Question of Culture*, "homelessness is always a curse" (7). In Nalini's case it is only the need to fend for herself and her two little children that she stoically suffers the hardships. The encounter with a world which is not 'home' leaves her nonplussed.

The magic of cooking is what rescues Nalini. Word spreads about the exotic pickles that she makes, which brings in orders from many people to such an extent that she leaves sewing to fulfil them. The financial stability that she acquires from pickle making enables her to rent a one bed-roomed flat and for the first time she feels at home. At every step of her immigrant life, Nalini derives wisdom from her tradition and native culture for sustenance.

Maya confronts experiences which are different from those of Nalini as the levels of education, age and point of entry are different. She, as an immigrant, craves for recognition and acknowledgment from the host topos. She, who reaches England at the age of four, hardly knows the values and norms of her native culture except for the fading images and words of her grandmother. The move from one culture to another leaves her embittered as her ethnicity causes discrimination and humiliation that seem unbearable to her. To save herself from the humiliation of being the marginalised, she shuns her ethnicity and switches over to alien cultural norms. Despite the efforts, she is not able to come to terms with the foreign culture. During this phase, instability is what defines her immigrant self. The identity crisis is so intense that she loses faith in her own mother. Her fractured self gets the much awaited anchorage from a visit to India. It stirs the innermost recesses of her mind and awakens the dormant faculties. She discovers her roots and this gives her perception, insight and stability for the first time.

In her negotiation of past and present, the writer has attempted to link Maya's heritage with that of the alien. She imbibes her grandmother's values of "forgiveness" and "gratitude" to forge a new identity in London. The powerful moment of illumination that she gets in India resolves her identity crisis, and enables her to move on. She accepts the past and acknowledges its existence in the present making the experience of relocation possible. She attains reconciliation to her dual anchorages. Though it is a love-hate relationship that she shares with India, she eventually demands and asserts her inheritance, her cultural heritage. Thus enriched, she feels at home in London, when she says "I was grateful for the place that I had come to" (288). Thus, Maya creates a "third space" for herself in London like her mother and assumes a hybrid identity.

The story, in the final analysis, shows how the native culture brightens and irradiates the lives of its protagonists, Nalini and Maya, in their attempts to recreate their homeland in London.

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