



THE ART OF HEALING: CULINARY TRADITIONS, DIASPORA, AND FOOD ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN PREETHI NAIR'S 100 SHADES OF WHITE

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ABSTRACT

Gastronomic creation can be a powerful tool in recuperating self-efficacy and reinforcing optimism. Witnessing the mechanism of scratch food transforming into a final product provides a sense of achievement which contributes to mind nourishment. The present paper is about the study of the novel *100 shades of white by Preethi Nair* exploring the curative abilities of culinary artistry, self- discovery and food entrepreneurship. Through protagonist Nalini's character the paper explores how food acts as a conduit for memories of home country during the process of acclimatizing and also her exploration of self-sufficiency in an uncharted territory after the white lie she told to her children about their father's demise as he abandons them stemming from conjugal infidelity.

Preserving culinary traditions and consumption of native dishes can provide a connection between the ancestral and current land to the diasporic groups. This paper scrutinizes about the wellness benefits of spices which enables the sustaining of cultural heritage and also how commensality can be served as a therapeutic outlet and the role of food in empowering individuals to reclaim autonomy over their circumstances.

KEYWORDS – Culinary, gastronomy, diaspora, commensality, therapeutic

INTRODUCTION

In *100 shades of white*, the term “white” ostensibly symbolizes a “white lie” - a seemingly innocuous falsehood articulated by the protagonist in an attempt to shield her children from a devastating truth capable of causing major upheaval. However, this symbolic association sanctions deeper scrutiny. While the “white lie” is often construed as an act of compassion or protection, it simultaneously raises critical ethical questions: can deception ever be fully justified, even when motivated by love? Does the act of withholding the truth, however well-intentioned, compromise the agency and autonomy of those it seeks to protect? Persistent tension existed between Nalini and her daughter, Maya. Maya was never able to establish a deep emotional connection with her mother, largely due to her profound affection for her father and the immense difficulty she faced in coming to terms with his sudden news of false demise. This underscores the notion that, although

one may resort to deception to shield loved ones from psychological distress, such actions often give rise to internal conflict and gradually erode the strength of relationships. Thus, the novel complicates the moral landscape by suggesting that even lies borne out of affection are plagued by imprecision, positioning “white” not merely as a symbol of innocence and protection, but also as a marker of ethical tension and erosion of integrity.

While often perceived as a simple domestic act, cooking emerges as a complex and enduring cultural ritual, embodying social solidarity, traditions, and power dynamics that profoundly shape human experience. When culinary preparations are meticulously composed, kitchen functions as a chemical laboratory, wherein the fundamental elements of air, fire, water, and earth harmoniously employed. A recipe, in and of itself, is devoid of soul; it is the responsibility of the cook to infuse it with essence and vitality. While the need for healing is a universal human experience, the path to recovery is neither uniform nor straightforward. When individuals are confronted with emotional or psychological wounds, the questions of where to seek refuge becomes deeply personal and often uncertain. Some individuals find expression in dance, others in song, and yet others in the culinary arts; the crux lies in discerning the avenue that most profoundly enhances your equilibrium of health. The protagonist of our novel, Nalini, was compelled to emigrate to England with two young children, where she was confronted with the painful revelation of her husband Raul’s conjugal infidelity. This betrayal engendered deep psychological anguish and emotional turmoil. In pursuit of healing, Nalini turned to the inherited culinary gift of cooking as a source of solace and emotional grounding, drawing strength from the familiar rhythms and sensory comforts of her cultural traditions. Over time, what began as a deeply personal act of healing evolved into a transformative medium through which she reclaimed agency, fostered resilience, and redefined her sense of self. By harnessing her inner turmoil into the creative and restorative process of food preparation, Nalini not only found personal restoration but also forged a path toward empowerment and renewed purpose.

Analogous to the pursuits of painting or writing, cooking is a creative oeuvre where flavours, textures and colours blend to create something unique. The endeavour to create something truly original is invariably accompanied by a multitude of intricacies, as it requires the navigation of uncharted intellectual and creative terrain. This pursuit demands not only a high degree of imagination and innovation but also the capacity to transcend established conventions and resist the pull of imitation. Originality, in its most authentic form, often emerges through a process marked by uncertainty, experimentation, and risk, wherein the creator must grapple with both internal doubts and external expectations. As such, the act of producing original work becomes a deeply complex undertaking, one that calls for resilience, vision, and a willingness to challenge both personal limitations and broader cultural norms. In an era marked by the proliferation of creative output, the very notion of uniqueness is constantly challenged. To craft a singular work demands not only imaginative insight but also a deliberate negotiation of existing conventions and cultural frameworks. Authentic originality, therefore, emerges not merely from inspiration, but from the creator’s ability to synthesize personal vision with broader artistic or social dialogues.

Culinary practice serves as a conduit for individual expression, enabling practitioners to embed aspects of their identity, creativity, personal aesthetics into the composition and presentation of each dish. Unlike numerous pursuits that demand extended periods of effort and patience before any discernible progress becomes evident, cooking stands out as a uniquely gratifying activity that yields immediate and tangible results. The process of preparing a dish allows for a direct and visible transformation of raw ingredients into a finished product, offering the practitioner a swift sense of achievement. This immediacy not only provides emotional satisfaction but also reinforces a sense of purpose and control, making cooking both a practical necessity and a deeply rewarding creative outlet. The satisfaction of plating a beautiful meal and tasting your creation is a direct reward for your effort which provides you an effective response indicative of goal fulfilment and task completion. In one of the cooking sessions when Nalini says “The sound of dancing oil popping in the heated cheenchatti whilst chillies were frying was like music to me, and the smell of warm cinnamon and clove made its way to all the rooms in the house” (p. 75). This suggests that the integration of

multiple sensory modalities may contribute meaningfully to therapeutic efficacy, particularly when tailored to the specific needs and contexts of individuals. Cooking uses a natural aromatic compound released from herbs and spices. This may be conceptualized as a form of contemplative practice, with the potential to substantially contribute to the enhancement of emotional well-being.

Nalini belonged to Kerala, a southern Indian state. Back in her village, she and her mother were village cooks. After moving to England, cooking traditional dishes preserved the methodical safeguarding, perpetuation, and institutional recognition of the tangible and intangible cultural assets, aimed at maintaining the continuity of historically significant traditions, values, and practices within evolving sociocultural and temporal frameworks. Festivals and special occasions are often predicated upon the culinary domain. While celebrating festivals like Onam, indicated by the subsequent statement “Do you remember Mol, Onam? It’s all for Onam,” Amma said, pointing at the vegetables. The prickly bitter gourd looked almost offensive sitting next to a sedate cucumber, the black-eyed beans looked evil next to the green garden peas, and the hairy yam looked as if it was going to eat up the potato. ‘For aviyal, olan, thoran.’ She reeled off a list of dishes just like she used to do when she trapped me in the kitchen in India.” (p. 24) it helped her to keep the tradition alive and underwent processes of emotional, psychological, and communal healing facilitated by meaningful participation in culturally embedded practices and traditions. While it is often asserted that engagement with cultural practices facilitates healing and the preservation of traditions, this claim warrants further scrutiny. The notion that cultural experiences inherently lead to emotional or psychological healing may oversimplify the complexities involved in individual healing processes. Writers stir emotion beautifully using food metaphors to create a sensory experience.

Using food as a metaphor in a text means employing food imagery and concepts to represent or construct a richer meaning or understanding. The text is a delightful spread of symbolic flavours where each food metaphor adds a layer of meaning and richness. “Freshly picked coriander leaves tempered bad humour and gave a sense of clarity, fiery peppered rasam warmed the soul, and grated coconut added to many dishes soothed and comforted. Pounded lentils left to soak for days made the batter for soft pancakes filled with shallow fried masala potatoes for sense of pride and stability. Golden beans added to vegetable thoran were for longevity and prosperity” (p. 55). This sentence serves as a compelling illustration of the author’s sophisticated literary technique, wherein food is employed not merely as a narrative element but as a powerful symbolic device through which deeper thematic meanings and cultural nuances are thoughtfully conveyed.

ANALYSIS

The term diaspora has multiple interpretations depending on the context. In ethnic and cultural context, it is a community of people living outside their ancestral homeland while ensuring the continued preservation of culinary embedded associations and deeply internalized emotional bonds pertaining to it. The term Diaspora is ambiguous because it has evolved over time and is utilized in various interpretive and operational contexts. Roger Brubaker is one of the most apt when it comes to defining a diasporic community. He defines diaspora most notably in his work *“The ‘Diaspora’ Diaspora” (2005)*, published in the journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. According to him you need to have three criteria matched if you wish to designate a community as a diasporic community. The first criteria is a geographical dispersion of these communities from their native country to a foreign land. The concept of diaspora can involve multiple communities across various geographical regions. Dispersion of people could be voluntary or involuntary. In Nalini’s case, she first eloped with Raul and got settled in Mumbai voluntarily but her movement to England was involuntary as she did not like leaving her mother in India, but nevertheless, she persists in holding on to the hope of eventually receiving emotional warmth and affection from her husband, while simultaneously aspiring to cultivate deeper, more resilient familial bonds that reflects unity, mutual understanding, and lasting emotional connection and the hope of returning back to India within a year as promised by her husband, she made the decision to go to England. Second, when these communities move to a different country, what do they think about their homeland? They need to think that it is essential that individuals must be encouraged to perceive

their homeland as a primary locus of identity formation, cultural continuity, ethical values, and traditional practices. It is an elucidation of their nature and the circumstances that have led to their present form. Finally, once they are moved to a different country, they need to develop the socio - cultural boundary between their culture and the host culture that is the culture of the foreign land. One of the most consequential approaches Nalini preserved her culture is through Indian cooking but she also shared the Indian stories and myths with her children using it to teach them essential life doctrines and make a conscious effort to preserve and uphold the rich cultural traditions, values, and heritage of India, even as they adapt to and navigate life within a new and often contrasting socio-cultural environment.

Individuals belonging to diasporic communities frequently confront a myriad of intricate challenges as they endeavour to assimilate into life within a foreign socio-cultural landscape while simultaneously striving to preserve their distinct cultural identities. A primary concern is that of cultural displacement, wherein individuals often grapple with profound feelings of alienation and identity dissonance as they attempt to reconcile the values and traditions of their native heritage with often contrasting norms and expectations of the host society. These complexities are further exacerbated by linguistic barriers, which impede effective communication and hinder access to essential public services, equitable employment opportunities, and broader social integration. The ensuing statement by Nalini compellingly encapsulates the intricate ways in which diasporic struggles can deeply influence an individual's emotional psychological, and existential experience. "I tried to go out, but hated the constant reminders that I was in a foreign place. Being in the house was difficult as it was without being introduced to further strangeness. The constant drone of traffic also annoyed me, it was so monotonous compared to the chaos of street-life back home: there was not the jumbled-up sound of people trying to make their way across the road, attempting to dodge the rickshaws and the cows, no pungent smells coming from street corners nor the busy noise of bartering, no street sellers vainly shielding their wares from being polluted by the big, heavy buses passing through town, no vibrant dancing colours." (p. 80)

Nalini's marriage with Raul (her first husband) was a fiasco as he abandons her and the children stemming from conjugal infidelity. In their indigent condition, Tom (the spice supplier) and his sister Maggie became a benefactor to them. After toiling for a period of time in a sewing factory, Tom assembled a requested supply of homemade pickles and asked Nalini if she could make it. It constituted a critical juncture that significantly reoriented the trajectory of her life, though the full extent and nature of its impact warrant further examination. Nalini's second marriage to Ravi was not merely a union of individuals but a profound bond cultivated through the shared experience of meals. In the beginning, Nalini served as Ravi's cook, preparing dishes that resonated deeply with his palate. Over time, the act of preparing and sharing these meals became a ritual that transcended mere sustenance, fostering a deeper emotional connection between them. This relationship exemplifies the concept of Commensality. It is the practice of eating together which sociologists and anthropologists recognize as a fundamental social activity that fosters relationships and community. As noted by scholars, commensality is central to understanding how shared meals can create and cement relationships, acting as a ritual that strengthens bonds and signifies belonging. Subsequent to Ravi's invitation for Nalini to partake in a shared meal, a practice that began as an occasional occurrence, it gradually evolved into a regular ritual. This routine not only facilitated the exchange of culinary experiences but also provided a platform for profound conversations, thereby fostering mutual understanding and trust. The act of sharing meals, or commensality, transcended mere nourishment; it became a conduit for emotional connection and relational strengthening.

Communal meals report higher levels of happiness, increased life satisfaction, and a greater sense of trust and support within their communities. The shared experience of dining together often leads to enhanced interpersonal relationships, characterized by deeper emotional connections and a sense of belonging. In this context, Ravi and Nalini's shared meals exemplify how commensality can serve as a foundational practice in building and solidifying relationships, transforming their connection into a robust and enduring partnership.

Food aid in many avenues, being assistive economically is a tremendous asset. It is not merely a humanitarian response but a strategic economic tool that, when implemented effectively, can stimulate local economies, promote sustainable development, and contribute to long-term economic stability. Culinary experience is a boon in venturing food services companies. Food entrepreneurship in the diaspora is a vibrant and growing sector, driven by a desire to connect with heritage, share cultural experiences, and cater to the increasing demand for diverse cuisines. They create jobs and contribute to local economies. Their businesses can revitalize neighbourhoods and create opportunities for economic growth. It also plays a vital role in preserving and promoting traditional recipes and culinary practices.

Individual's food intolerance is pivotal in modern times which presents prospects to the culinary industries as they abide by society's dietary restrictions and preferences. The growing awareness has considerable implications for the culinary and food service industries, which are now compelled to accommodate a diverse range of dietary restrictions and preferences, including gluten intolerance, lactose sensitivity, nut allergies, and plant-based diets. Such developments not only necessitate greater sensitivity to health-related needs but also open new avenues for innovation and market expansion. By aligning their offerings with the evolving dietary demands of consumers, culinary enterprises can enhance inclusivity, foster customer loyalty, and remain competitive in a health-conscious marketplace. Ultimately, the intersection of individual dietary needs and culinary responsiveness represents a crucial dynamic in the evolution of modern food culture. Nalini's smart use of spices and her inherited culinary talent brings back joy, prosperity and love to her life and made her become a wealthy woman with her own brand of pickle, "The Abundance of Spice." "The right amount of cumin to stimulate appetite for life, a cinnamon quill to bring spice or action into stagnant phases of life, lemon juice to diffuse an argument, chilli to relieve pain and turmeric to heal the heart" (p. 55). This sentence eloquently reveals Nalini's ingenious and deliberate use of spices in her pickles, a testament to her deep-rooted understanding of traditional culinary wisdom and its intersection with holistic well-being. Each spice is not merely an ingredient but a carefully chosen element, infused with purpose and intention, aimed at maximizing the health-giving properties of the final creation. In doing so, she transforms a simple condiment into a vessel of nourishment, seamlessly blending flavour with function, and tradition with thoughtful innovation. Her craft becomes a quiet yet powerful narrative of care, knowledge, and cultural continuity.

Spices occupy a fundamental and integral position in the culinary arts, serving to refine flavours and impart depth, complexity, and character to the art of cooking. When spices are incorporated into culinary practices for their therapeutic properties, it constitutes a profound augmentation, enriching both the nutritional value and the overall well-being derived from the meal. Nalini's entrepreneurial venture is centered around the production of pickles enriched with tangible health benefits, exemplifies a remarkable synthesis of traditional wellness practices and contemporary business acumen. Her initiative not only draws from indigenous culinary wisdom but also reimagines it through a modern entrepreneurial lens, thereby creating a product that serves both nutritional and cultural purposes. This commendable fusion of health-conscious innovation and economic enterprise underscores the potential of culturally rooted, sustainable business models to address contemporary consumer needs while preserving heritage. This dual outcome, enhancing public health while concurrently securing her economic stability illustrates a profound and nuanced achievement. The manner in which Nair intricately weaves the themes of health awareness and entrepreneurial initiative into her narrative reflects a profound and sophisticated understanding of the dynamic interplay between personal conviction and social responsibility. Her work serves not merely as a story of individual ambition, but as a powerful testament to enduring resilience, innovation, and the unwavering pursuit of meaningful success. By seamlessly blending cultural knowledge with business acumen, Nair offers a compelling model of how deeply rooted traditions can be transformed into pathways for empowerment, well-being, and sustainable enterprise

CONCLUSION

Nalini's transition from a modest village upbringing to forging a life in a globalized and complex society like England underscores a deeply layered and, at times, turbulent journey shaped by displacement, cultural negotiation, and personal reinvention. Her path was not merely one of geographic relocation but a profound redefinition of identity amidst competing expectations and unfamiliar terrains. Nair critically examines this trajectory with nuance and sensitivity, illuminating the emotional and socio-cultural costs embedded in such a transformation. The narrative emerges as a rich and thought-provoking intersection of culinary tradition, diasporic struggle, and entrepreneurial resilience- offering readers more than inspiration, but also a meditation on the complexities of migration and selfhood.

For Nalini, cooking transcended the realm of a mere domestic chore; it constituted a deeply embodied inheritance from her mother, cultivated from early childhood. It functioned not only as a means of sustenance but as an essential conduit for emotional expression, cultural continuity, and the fortifications for interpersonal relationships. Food emerged as her most powerful inheritance- a medium through which she could assert agency and forge belonging in unfamiliar spaces. Roland Barthes, in his exploration of the semiotics and semantics of food and culture writes in *mythologies* (1957), "It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour" (167).

In the context of migration, dislocation, and irrevocable separation from her mother, culinary practice emerged as a powerful site of agency and remembrance. Though Nalini was never afforded the opportunity to reunite with her mother following her reallocation to England, the culinary wisdom imparted to her symbolically preserve her mother's presence and sustain a sense of rootedness amid the unfamiliar.

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