Recipe for life:
Food as Metaphor, Identity, Memory and Diaspora in Preeti Nair's *A Hundred Shades of White*

Sreelekshmi
Research Scholar,
PSGR Krishnammal College for Women
Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.

Mrs. B. Mynavathi,
M.A.,B.Ed, MPhil
Head, Department of English
PSGR Krishnammal College for Women
Coimbatore.

Abstract

The food that one consumes is integrated in part and parcel of our life. Food habit varies from region to region. India is known for its multiple cultures and variety of cuisines. Food symbolizes identity and culture. It has cognitive significance as well. Food criticism is gaining importance in literary studies nowadays. Preeti Nair in her novel *One Hundred shades of White* combines the life of her characters with the process of cooking food. Various spices blend to add flavor to food similarly the inner peace of individuals when blended with certain virtues can transform lives. The novel focusses on mother daughter relationship and the ordeals they face with special emphasis on food metaphor. The paper tries to analyse the novel in the light of food criticism the philosophy or the values conveyed through the food metaphor and the memory which it evokes in the characters who are leading a diasporic life.

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Maruthena vendavam yakkaiku arundhiyatu

Attratu pottri unnin

Thiruvalluvar

The great sage Thiruvalluvar in his masterpiece *Thirukkural* says that the human body does not require medicine from outside if one is cautious about the food one intakes. Food has special role to play in one's life. It is not only vital for survival but also helps to stabilize emotions and balance psyche. Ben Jonson classified human beings based on humour as Sanguine, Choleric, Melancholy and Phlegmatic. Ayurveda classifies human bodies into Vata, Pitta and Kapha. There is a psychological relation of food to daily lives and relationships. Memories are associated with food as it opens the floodgates of memories through taste. Indian Writers like Jhumpha Lahiri and Salman Rushdie have incorporated food as a metaphor in *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Midnight's Children* respectively. This paper aims to analyse Food as a metaphor, Identity, Memory and Diaspora. Preeti Nair gives detailed description of the traditional cooking recipe of the Malabar region and its effects upon the characters. Preeti has thrown light on the medicinal value of food served along with deep morals on the characters.

Preeti Nair is a British author of Indian Heritage. Born in Kerala she was brought up in UK. Her novels are *Gypsy Masala* and *Colours of Love/ Beyond Indigo.*

In *Edible Ecriture* Terry Eagleton asserts "if there is one thing about food, it is that it is never just food. Like the Post Structuralist text, food is endlessly interpretable." Food criticism paves the way for readers to discover the possible hidden meanings in everyday life. In *Food and Culture: A Reader* (1997), Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esteric, two thinkers in food studies, write about the significance of food in academic researches and in everyday life.

> Food touches everything. Food is the foundation of every economy. It is the central pawn in political strategies of states and households. Food marks social differences, boundaries, bonds and contradictions. Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family and community relationships…Food is life and life can be studied and understood through food. Food is both a scholarly concern and a real life concern. (1)

Postmodern culture has been influenced by food images and usage of food as metaphor. The department of food studies has opened doors in literary studies to examine how the use of food imagery and metaphor represent complex ideas and deeper meanings in literature. Literary food studies analyses food symbolism to reflect on cultural identity which includes various position from social position to inner psyche. The writers use food and eating to symbolize cultural issues of acceptance, resistance and preservation of culture as well as symbols of memory, emotions, narrative history. In India, out of all the significant aspects of community life, food is the only part that binds while all others separate one community from the other. Food and Culinary items define Social Hierarchies and serve as a driving force behind people's actions. Food is the motivating factor that propels action on the part of individual or society. Food serves as an important part of their identity for emigrants and immigrants. When away from home the food from one's land brings pleasure. Food provides a link it induces a sense of belonging in an otherwise alien world. Food serves as a key to binding. In strange land familiar items are welcome as familiar faces.

One Hundred Shades of White is a novel of Mother Daughter relationship and the legacy of cooking. It is told in alternating narratives of Maya and Nalini. Cooking is described as the magical thing, if one understands its deep significance it becomes life changing

> The art of putting together food is a magical thing and if it is done right it has the power to soften the most hardened heart. My mother always said that when you work with what you love, you work with magic. However, if the ingredients are incorrectly administered, or if you work with bad intention, it can also bring the most disastrous results. (55)

Ammama, Nalini's mother and Maya's grandmother, is a wonderful cook. She is portrayed as the epitome of sacrifice and forbearance. She had struggled to bring up Nalini after her husband absconded from their life. She worked as a cook for wealthy people and cooked for the entire village during festivals. She became prosperous. When Nalini became of marriageable age an astrologer whom she revered predicted that Nalini should not fall for the first love. Which she did eventually, she eloped with Raul Kathi, son of an aristocrat to Bombay. There Satchin and Maya were born. Raul stayed with them for very short period for he worked in America. After some time he asked his family to shift to America. In America, they stayed in a cozy bungalow. Tom assisted Nalini in getting vegetables and other ingredients for she was extremely bored in America and wanted to return home. The children loved Burgers and other American food whereas Nalini craved for homely food. She found Maya distanced from her.

Raul deserted the family without any money, leaving them to fend for themselves. Devasted and depressed Nalini hides the truth that the father had left his children. She says instead that he died trying to save a child on the road. This was a lie which was white and Nalini hoped that the children would understand her someday. Satchin and Maya who were enjoying the luxury felt the pinch in the stomach. Tom arranged for their stay at his sister, Maggie's home. The children had to attend school with low fees and Nalini worked at Mr. Humphries Factory. Their life was like hell full of tortures and suffering, yet they tried to be happy with the circumstances. Later, Nalini started cooking pickles and Tom found customers for her. The business prospered and she was invited by Mr. Thakker to cook for his special guests. Mr. Ravi Thakkar came to America with an intention of finding his Fiance who had eloped with someone.

He waited his entire youth for that maiden. Then he came into contact with Nalini, he proposed to her but she feared if her children might refuse him. With consent of her children, Nalini married Mr.Ravi Thakker. Mr. Thakkar accepted both the children as his own. Satchin accepted him earlier in life but Maya realized her folly and his goodness only late in life, only after she had understood Ammama's philosophy. Tom was distanced by Nalini's closeness to Mr. Thakker. Also Tom realized a truth that Maggie was his mother and not sister. Maggie was the eldest girl of the family, she had twelve siblings. Maggie gave birth to Tom. She wanted to protect him and therefore escaped from Ireland. She did all sorts of job to fend for them. She even became a prostitute. Tom was ashamed of her profession yet he loved her. Tom got to know from one of the siblings about Maggie's relationship to him, he was thoroughly shattered. This was again a white lie but tom never forgave Maggie.

Ammu was born to Mrs Nalini and Mr Thakker. In one of the parties Raul Kathi showed up. He threatened Nalini that he would reveal himself infront of the children. Nalini sold her business empire and exchanged with Raul for keeping the secret. Satchin and Maya grow up. Maya falls in love with Satchin's friend Suri. In a car accident Satchin dies and Maya breaks off her relationship with Suri. After many years she is pursuing a course in Ukraine and gets engaged to Marcos. In the course of her part time work she happens to meet Raul kathi who tells her of what an imposter her mother is. This incident widens the gap between mother and daughter. Maya gets to visit her birthplace where her Ammama lived and died in anonymity. Ammama had left two letters for Nalini and Maya. She discovers that Raul Kathi had another family in London. She reunites with her mother and marries Suri.

Her Ammama teaches the philosophy "Sacrifice is important, Mol, Spirit will live on forever" (64). The lies told by Nalini and Maggie were white lies because they were being selfless. Nalini remembers Ammama's philosophy for life

> Just the right amount of cumin to stimulate appetite for life, a cinnamon quill to bring
> spice or action to stagnant phases of life, lemon juice to diffuse an argument, Chili to
> relieve pain and turmeric to heal the heart. 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 a sense of pride and stability. Golden Beans added to vegetable toran were for longevity and prosperity. (55)

When out of India, cooking grants Nalini her identity. It is deeply connected to the memories of her home, mother and happiness. Maya who was addicted to western food realizes the significance of sacrifice undergone by her mother and grandmother which is reflected through the food.

The novel is an example of all the seven forms of Imagery. They are: Gustatory imagery pertains to the sense of taste. Olfactory deals with the sense of smell. Visual describes the objects, places or things. Organic imagery explains the feelings of characters. Tactile imagery induces the sense of smell. Auditory imagery deals with sound. Kinesthetic imagery deals with the movement in the novel. The words which describe the movement of things through words. The following passage has all the seven forms of imagery.

> Give thanks for the root of ginger appears ugly. The cumin seed bitter and the smell of garlic can repulse, but in these things too there is beauty. And beauty comes in unexpected small quantities. These are things that are constant. Mangoes signify fertility, tender succulent orange flesh slithers gently off the knife. Then, in the centre, there is an unexpected stone, solid and furry as if to remind us that all that is sweet comes initially from hard. (264)

The words like bitter, sweet stand as example for gustatory imagery. The words like stone, slithers deals with auditory as it produces sound. Slithers is also an example for kinesthetic imagery. The words like Beauty, Ugly, Thanks all denote feeling and thus come under organic imagery. The objects like ginger, cumin seeds, garlic, mangoes, and knife are examples of visual imagery.

Food studies determine the multiple functions performed by food other than supplementing vitamins and minerals in the body. The diaspora community face identity crisis and nostalgia, the characters in the novel also face the same. Just like perfect blend of ingredients

bring out perfect taste, perfect blend of qualities like humanity, understanding, mutual co-operation, empathy, forbearance and forgiveness keeps the mind in stable position and brings out the best in every human being.

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