

Unveiling Cultural Identities and Self Savouring in Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White* and Sarah Addison Allen's *The Girl Who Chased the Moon*

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Abstract

Literature often deals with the notion of self-discovery. Self-realisation is the pinnacle of the inner journey that characters undergo in literature. Different individuals experience it at various stages; some in their adolescence, some in middle life, while others in their later years. Savouring is the act of taking pleasure in and appreciating something, frequently food but also other pursuits like music, nature, and relationships. The ability to savour something correlates with enhanced happiness, health, and contentment in life. Savouring serves as a method of introspection. Discovering oneself, one's ideals, and what provides delight and purpose in life aid in cherishing unique and varied experiences. Thus, this paper attempts to provide a comparative study of two novels, *One Hundred Shades of White* by Preethi Nair and *The Girl Who Chased the Moon* by Sarah Addison Allen, in which the female protagonists try to savour their self-discovery through various means, namely food, culture, and identity.

Keywords: culture, food, gender, identity, introspection

1. Introduction

Writings deemed artistic or intellectual excellence, such as narratives, plays, poetry, and novels, which are collectively referred to as literature. It comprises fiction and non-fiction pieces that are regarded as having literary significance, often due to their deft linguistic usage and capacity to arouse emotions, articulate ideas, and capture the essence of the human experience. Literature is often cherished for its entertaining value and its pedagogical or cultural importance. As a result of authors deriving inspiration from their surroundings while writing, literature is often seen as a mirror of life. Through their literary compositions, writers delve into and contemplate diverse facets of the human condition, including but not limited to love, grief, excitement, sorrow, and the intricacies of relationships. Writers produce characters and circumstances that embody diverse aspects of society, culture, and history. The relationship between literature and society is intricate and interdependent. The production of literature is closely tied to the societal and chronological context in which it occurs and frequently serves as a reflection and critique of that particular community's cultural, social, and political concerns. Literature possesses the capacity to mould and impact society through the act of questioning or reinforcing societal conventions and values. Literature can potentially influence both the development of a sense of cultural identity and the acceleration of social change. The works of feminist authors like Virginia Woolf and Audre Lorde have been instrumental in challenging patriarchal norms and promoting gender equality. Literature's value comes from how it both reflects and shapes cultural norms and encourages people to engage with pressing social and cultural concerns. For a deeper understanding of the ideas, feelings, and values held by people from different cultural origins, literature offers readers an unusual glimpse into different times and locations. Understanding and reflecting on the human experience is only possible with literature.

Preethi Nair, a British novelist of South Indian lineage, received the Asian Woman of Achievement award in 2001. Even though she was born in Kerala, India, she spent much of her childhood in England. Incredibly, *Gypsy Masala* is the author's first literary work, an incredible success. The author's books are renowned for their detailed portrayals of Indian traditions and culture and their exploration of

themes like cultural identity, migration, love, and family (Devi, 2022). Sarah Addison Allen is a well-known American writer whose works fall under the category of magical realism. Although she was born in Asheville, North Carolina, in 1971, she spent most of her childhood in southern America. Allen's debut book, *Garden Spells*, was published in 2007 and quickly became a New York Times bestseller. Her writings are notable for their use of magical realism and focus on themes of family, love, and reflection. Allen's writings have been praised for their vivid imagery, appealing protagonists, and captivating narratives (Anugraha, 2017). A comparison between these two female authors reveals their shared characteristics and distinct traits. The writers usually explore issues of family, love, and self-discovery in their writings. They also incorporate cultural and traditional motifs into their writings. While Sarah Addison Allen's works are set in the southern United States and frequently explore the experiences of American women, Preethi Nair's works frequently centre on the experiences of South Asian women who live in the UK. Preethi Nair's literary works are characterised by a greater emphasis on social and political themes, including but not limited to migration and multiculturalism. Conversely, Sarah Addison Allen's literary works tend to centre more on the themes of growth as an individual and self-discovery. Preethi Nair's literary approach tends to be grounded in realism, whereas Sarah Addison Allen's writing style integrates elements of magical realism.

The novel *One Hundred Shades of White* explores themes related to ethnicity, culture, and the identity crisis faced by the two primary protagonists, Nalini and her daughter Maya, while living in England. Nalini confronts the tumultuous experience of displacement and the severe breach of trust in her marital relationship with Raul. However, she feels empowered because of her skill in the kitchen, particularly when making pickles, a delicacy from India. The act of cooking and using spices serve as symbolic representations of indigenous customs. Nalini engages in the process of self-discovery through culinary pursuits, while Maya endeavours to acclimatise to unfamiliar surroundings, cuisine, and cultural norms. The story's narrative structure employs the analeptic method and features two alternating perspectives, those of Maya and Nalini. The past events are interconnected with the current situation. Nalini's narrative endeavours to reconstruct a sense of home by upholding customary practices while establishing a distinct identity within the prevailing cultural context. In contrast, Maya's story shows a gradual recognition and appreciation of the indigenous culture after an initial assimilation into the adopted homeland (Devi, 2022).

The *Girl Who Chased the Moon* deals with two main female protagonists and their unique characterizations. Emily Benedict showed up in North Carolina intending to unravel certain mysteries about her mother's past. Upon Emily's arrival at her maternal ancestral home and her encounter with her previously unknown grandfather, a solitary and benevolent figure, she becomes conscious that mysteries are not resolved in Mullaby. Still, rather, they are an integral aspect of existence at this place. Notably, the home features chambers in which the wallpapers transform to correspond with one's emotional state. Unidentified bright lights traverse the premises during the nocturnal hours. Mullaby's residents hold Julia Winterson's cakes in high regard, and it appears that Julia has an insatiable desire to keep baking them. Julia, who is both proud and vulnerable, uses baking as a way of expressing her innermost emotions. The ingredients of flour, eggs, milk, and sugar serve as the medium through which she communicates her message (Anugraha, 2017).

The protagonists of Preethi Nair's novel *One Hundred Shades of White* and Sarah Addison Allen's novel *The Girl Who Chased the Moon* actively engaged in encouraging interactions and introspectively considered their values and desires, which demonstrate the idea of experiencing the process of self-discovery. This paper focuses on how female protagonists endeavour to establish their identities through the process of self-discovery in select novels. Employing the concept of self-savouring, the characters are capable of enhancing their recognition of their own identity and their place in the world and of establishing an effective and satisfying sense of self.

2. Literature Review

The article "The Journey of Self-Discovery in Arun Joshi's Novel *The Foreigner*" provides an analysis of the literary work and dives into various themes as estrangement, detachment, anxiety, and self-discovery in the context of the fundamental significance of human existence. The point of this paper is to show how the main character, Sindi Oberoi, gets past his initial state of nihilistic turmoil and finally understands the existential meaning of life by constantly reflecting on himself and how he interacts with the outside world (Raina, 2016). The article "Pilgrimage as Self-Discovery in an Ecological Community" provides how, in a synthesis of the personal and communal, pilgrims become responsive to self-discovery. It is more about how extended wilderness voyages and pilgrimages may result in spiritual experiences that go beyond the bounds of traditional religion. The wilderness environment upends expectations and creates fresh and unexpected possibilities to meet the sacred within oneself and in one's relationships with both human and non-human creatures, thus leading to self-discovery (Redick, 2023). The article "Postmodern Feminist Perspectives in *Eat Pray Love*" examines Elizabeth Gilbert's novel *Eat Pray Love* using an understanding of postmodern feminist philosophy. The research explores how the novel rejects stereotypical gender norms and investigates self-discovery. Elizabeth Gilbert, the main character, embarks on a voyage of self-discovery and refashions her identity (Basotia & Kothari, 2020).

The thesis "Self-discovery of women characters in select novels of Toni Morrison" examines how Toni Morrison questions conventional gender notions using post-structural feminism, especially the theories of Helene Cixous. She believes that female writers can expose and challenge patriarchal society, resulting in women's liberation and self-discovery. Morrison, according to the thesis (Williams & Davidson, 2016), is an example of this kind of writing that promotes positive representations of women and disproves conventional gender stereotypes. The thesis "On the Road to Self-Discovery: A Selective Study of Women Protagonists in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande" analyses Deshpande's female protagonists' experiences and feelings as they navigate the themes of individuality, freedom, and peace throughout her works. The research focuses on the difficulties and barriers these women, especially those of the educated Indian middle class, encounter in their families and society. The objective is to demonstrate that these women, in spite of the challenges they encounter,

have their own inner resilience, which aids them in keeping their sense of balance and the urge in them to seek their self-identity (Vara Prasad & Indira, 2018).

3. Methodology

This study examines the theme of self-discovery from the perspective of savouring, as represented in literary works featuring female protagonists. More precisely, the novels *One Hundred Shades of White* by Preethi Nair and *The Girl Who Chased the Moon* by Sarah Addison Allen are analysed to explore the revelations experienced by their female characters. Focusing on this thematic framework, a meticulous analysis is undertaken to scrutinise select literary works.

4. Discussion

4.1 Savouring of the Self

An individual may discover their genuine ability to achieve their life goals by engaging in an introspective examination. Identity further inspires individuals to strive for their life's mission. Purpose compels a person to undergo an extensive transition by forcing them to face reality, an unavoidable truth they must accept. This is the soul's transfiguration, which provides knowledge for decision-making and judgement.

The term "savouring" is used to describe when people take their time to properly appreciate something. It may also indicate taking pleasure in one's taste of something. While the term "savouring" is most commonly used to refer delicious meals, it can be applied more generally to any positive or meaningful experience. The term "savouring" refers to the act of completely experiencing and appreciating something in order to increase one's delight in or appreciation for it. For those who have enough to eat, a safe place to sleep, a loving partner, meaningful employment, and good health, having one's physical and emotional needs met does not indicate that they will have an optimistic perspective on life. Some individuals, despite having their necessities met, continue to worry about their lives because they believe that stress and calamity are always just around the corner. Not everyone learns to appreciate the good things in their lives just because they are resilient enough to survive the storms that cause them concern (Bryant & Veroff, 2007, p. 01). "We posit that people have the capacity to attend to, appreciate, and enhance the positive experiences in their lives. This is the basic conceptual definition of savoring.....We call those capacities, capacities to savor, and the processes underlying those capacities, savoring" (Bryant & Veroff, 2007, p.02).

The relationship between the act of savouring and the process of self-discovery lies in the notion that actively immersing oneself in positive experiences that can foster a more profound comprehension of one's own identity. When individuals engage in the act of savouring positive experiences, they are not only experiencing pleasure in the present moment but also engaging in introspection to discern the significance of the experience to them. The act of reflecting can potentially yield valuable insights regarding an individual's values, priorities, and personal aspirations. These insights can subsequently facilitate the process of self-discovery. The act of intentionally relishing positive experiences has the potential to serve as a potent mechanism for individuals who aspire to enhance their self-awareness and cultivate a more optimistic and satisfying sense of self. The narrative of female self-discovery, in which access to self-knowledge is seen as requiring an explicit refusal of the heterosexual romance plot, the framework that has traditionally defined the meaning and direction of women's lives, is perhaps the genre that is most clearly associated with contemporary feminist writing. The contemporary narrative of female growth is a prime instance of an appropriation and reworking of classic literary genres like the Bildungsroman, theorising gender as the primary issue for women trying to balance individual and societal needs. In turn, a closer look at the defining characteristics of the feminist work of self-discovery finds a number of interesting similarities between the format of contemporary fiction about female identity and the liberation stories that shaped feminist philosophy (Felski, 1989, pp. 122).

The history of women's narratives cannot be understood by referring to an abstract ideal of "feminine" consciousness, but can only be addressed by considering the complex interplay between the social and material conditions affecting women's lives and the relatively autonomous influence of dominant cultural representations of gender, which do not simply constitute "external" determinants but are embedded at the deepest level of psychosexual identity. It is in narrative that the governing ideological conceptions of male and female roles are fleshed out, the configurations of plot mapping out the potential contours of women's lives as they can be imagined at a given historical moment. As ideologies of female identity have undergone significant changes, so too has the nature of women's plots. Thus, the last twenty years have seen the emergence of a distinctive new narrative structure for women, tracing a process of separation as the essential precondition for any path to self-knowledge (Felski, 1989, pp.123-124).

The selected novels for research are produced for, by, and about women. Only female characters are given priority in each work; no male characters have ever received more attention. Nalini and Maya from *One Hundred Shades of White* and Emily and Julia from *The Girl Who Chased the Moon* are illustrations of female characters that engage in the act of self-discovery.

4.2 *One Hundred Shades of White*

One Hundred Shades of White alternates between the perspectives of Maya and her mother, Nalini. The setting emerges from the experiences of two women, one from the viewpoint of a first-generation immigrant (Nalini) and the other from the perspective of a second-generation immigrant who was raised in a foreign land (Maya). The story begins with Maya reminiscing about her life in India and concludes with her father's decease. Nalini made up this dying narrative because she did not want her children to find out about their

father's actual hues. Actually, he fled with another family after abandoning them. He deserted them in that strange country with no money. Then, Maggie, the sister of a young man who carried spices to Nalini in her earlier days, takes care of her children since they are homeless in London. Nalini makes an awful lot of effort to devise a way to ensure their survival. She grew passionate about cooking and became quite good at it. She chooses cooking as her sole method of surviving when she is adrift in her life. Nalini strives for her identity in such a challenging setting. She makes the decision to rely on no one. The text makes an effort to provide readers with a clear understanding of the underlying factors that lead a dependent woman to transform into an independent woman through emancipation and by discovering herself in this process.

My children, what would I tell them? In two hours they would be home. I made my way to the kitchen and began to cook frantically. The blood from my hand covered the marrow as I picked it up and began to chop. Blood and tears dripped into the pan and made the oil splatter. Blood seeped into the wooden spoon as I held the spoon tighter and tighter. Who was this man who called himself a husband and a father? What kind of a person could be that cruel? Why? Security, stability, certainty, kindness: he pretended to have all those things, to give all those things but he took them away so ruthlessly. I didn't know where he was, even who he was, or if he was ever coming back. As the spoon went round and round in circles, I made myself a promise. I swore that this would be the last time he would ever disrupt our lives. No matter what reasons he had, he could never come back, and I would do whatever it took to keep him away from my children. Nobody could come back from this with the pitiful excuse of being a father, he didn't deserve them. And so that was the day he died (Nair, 2003, pp. 85-86).

The narrative has profound significance since it depicts the genuine essence of people. In contrast to Nalini, who never loses faith in life and lives with a dream, Raul, who left his family behind in a distant country, is rude, harsh, and ungrateful. Some hearts are unfailingly brave, overcoming all challenges while continuing to forgive and live their own lives. The novel illustrates the journey and identity-seeking of the female protagonists. The significance of food and the ability to cook are emphasised throughout the narrative, as Nalini engages only in cooking when there is no other option left for her. Thus, Preethi Nair illustrates how women turn to cooking as a method of sustenance. By vividly painting a picture of her native Kerala and how celebrations of holidays like Onam take place, Nalini pays honour to the place. It gives the reader a comprehensive image of the traditions and practices of Nalini's own country. She relates distinctively to her mother's directions about how food should be served during Onam. This demonstrates her blending with her own country, discovering herself in the context of her origins, and placing herself in her culture.

The narrow part of the leaf must always be on the left, serving beings at the bottom left corner, and first you place a small banana, next to this comes the banana chips coated with jaggery, then popadom. From the top left hand of the leaf, manga pickle, injipuli, thoran, olan, kichidi, aviyal. Only after this is placed can the guest begin eating. Wait for them to begin and then at the bottom centre you serve rice, then pour the sambar on the top of the rice. When they have finished, serve the payasam and after dessert, pour the rasam into their cupped hands and then wait to see if they would like more (Nair, 65).

Maya travels to Mumbai, an Indian city, to purchase some apparel. After that, she makes a trip to Kerala to see her grandmother. Maya recognises the importance of freshly prepared, lovingly prepared meals. She also acknowledges her heritage and masters the art of forgiveness, like her mother and grandmother. Maya strives to have her own identity, and she searches for it throughout the course of the narrative. She had previously been quite insistent about sticking to her own traditions. Later, after travelling to her own nation, she discovers who she is and what is essential to her. Maya had previously considered her odorous and oily cuisine to be avoided. She rejected Indian cuisine in the same way that she rejected sandalwood paste on her head and oil on her hair. Her perspective, however, was completely altered when she discovered her roots and read the letter that her grandmother had written. Maya, who was solely reliant on Western practices, understands the significance of the influence of food. Her visit to her homeland serves as a metaphor for her continuous quest for an identity in which she has no faith. Food acts as the umbilical cord that binds women to their identities.

4.3 *The Girl Who Chased the Moon*

Sarah Addison Allen is an inhabitant of Carolina and effectively portrays this geographical location in her literary works. In *The Girl Who Chased the Moon*, the narrative takes place in a captivating southern locality, where two female individuals endeavour to determine their respective positions in society. The female protagonists, Emily Benedict and Julia Winterson, strive to achieve their own identities despite all of the other hardships they endure. Emily travels to her maternal house to live with her grandfather after her mother's decease. She experiences significant emotional distress as she must acclimatise to her new surroundings. The relocation itself symbolises her quest to learn the truth about her mother, which leads her discovering herself. In order to overcome the town's prejudice towards her family, she is aware that she must learn the truth about her mother's past.

Julia Winterson exhibits exceptional proficiency in the art of cake-making, resulting in widespread admiration and adoration of her culinary creations. The writer paints a bleak picture of Julia's childhood. She is a complete loner at school. Sawyer leads her to become pregnant, but he is unwilling to marry her. She bravely gave birth to her child when she was still an adolescent and arranged for the child to be adopted. Julia uses cooking as a means of defining herself. She still yearns to reunite with her abandoned daughter.

Julia rested her head against the doorjamb for a moment, then she walked into the hallway. She paused at the door to the stairs, then walked past it and into the kitchen. A hummingbird cake, she decided as she turned on the kitchen light. It was made with bananas and pineapples and pecans and had a cream cheese frosting. She would make it light enough to float away. She reached over to open the window, To float to her daughter (Allen, 2010, p. 142).

She believes that life can only be fully lived with loved ones. As a result, she decides to bake in the hopes that her daughter might somehow connect with her through the aroma of the cakes. "And then there was the smell, the smell of hope, the kind of smell that brought people home" (Allen, 2010, p. 40). The two women, Emily and Julia, are in pursuit of an elusive goal that remains consistently out of their grasp, and they persist in their efforts until they attain it. They are in search of answers and feelings of affection that may appear elusive on occasion. Julia's self-identity is portrayed through her culinary skills and the BBQ she owns. Emily embarks on a journey of self-discovery through the exploration of her mother's flashback. The abrupt departure of Emily's mother, Dulcie, from Mullaby, North Carolina, had a profound effect on the town and Emily's search for understanding. Logan Coffey and Dulcie are married. The Coffey men are prohibited from venturing out at night because of a historical event that the family upholds, enforcing a stringent regulation that bars them from exiting the house once night falls. This limitation is connected to a familial confidential situation and a sorrowful incident from the past, namely the suicide of Logan Coffey several years ago. Dulcie, Emily's mother, was held responsible for the fatal incident, causing the Coffey family to have a rage and establish a rule that prohibits Coffey men from going out at night. The tragic and enigmatic circumstances of Logan Coffey's death and the ensuing accusation of Dulcie lend depth to the storyline of the novel. Win Coffey narrates the entire past to Emily. Dulcie was erroneously blamed for Logan's suicide, causing her to flee the place. Emily uncovers details concerning her mother's past from several sources, including Julia Winterson, a local baker who was familiar with the events surrounding Dulcie and Logan Coffey. Julia slowly reveals details of the story to Emily, aiding in her understanding of why her mother departed from the area. While delving into her mother's history, Emily discovers the intricacies of her mother's life, the profound impact of tragedy, and the significance of embracing one's legacy for shaping the future. The story weaves together themes of love, atonement, and the mystical aspects of daily life. Besides, it explores the complex dynamics of mother-daughter relationships and the strength needed to confront reality.

5. Conclusion

The process of self-discovery is widely regarded as a crucial aspect of personal development since it enables individuals to establish a distinct sense of self. The notion that literature serves as a reflection of life is a commonly held belief and frequently depicted in various forms of literary work. The act of self-discovery is portrayed in literature as a means of establishing one's identity in a society. Self-discovery is a multifaceted process that encompasses not only introspection and self-awareness but also cultural exploration and an understanding of familial relationships.

The journey to find oneself is the core of *One Hundred Shades of White*. Nalini is one of the protagonists, and her daughter Maya, born in the alien land, never felt accepted in any kind of culture. She plans a trip to India to learn more about her lineage and to discover herself. The novel delves into themes of finding oneself, including one's place in the world and the growth of oneself. Readers are also on a journey of self-discovery, which Nalini and Maya facilitate. The novel also delves into how food may lead to realisations. Through her journey, Maya learns to appreciate Indian food, which strengthens her ties to her heritage. The narrative emphasises the role of food in forging cultural identities and individual growth. *One Hundred Shades of White* is an engaging examination of self-discovery through the lenses of culture, food, and gender. The road to personal development and self-discovery is shown as being difficult and multifaceted.

Emily embarks on a voyage of self-discovery while trying to solve the mysteries surrounding her mother's background in *The Girl Who Chased the Moon*. She battles with emotions of loneliness and isolation and tries to make sense of her position in the world. However, as she starts to form relationships with the locals in Mullaby, especially with a boy named Win, who becomes her love interest, she begins to learn the truth about her past and accept herself. By realising who she really is, Emily discovers her life's meaning and purpose. The novel's primary concern is the journey of self-discovery, which emphasises how crucial it is to know oneself in order to achieve delight and fulfilment.

As a conclusion, the two chosen novels, one by Preethi Nair, an Indian author, and the other by Sarah Addison Allen, an American author, they have their own parallels in the narrative style. The themes of savouring self-discovery through food, culture, and identity are examined in both novels. These novels explore the intricacies of family histories. Magical realism is employed to investigate social norms. The female characters engage with their cultures through the fusion of magic with the mundane. Eventually, *One Hundred Shades of White* and *The Girl Who Chased the Moon* provide intricate narratives that delve into the main characters' cultural backgrounds and personal growth. Both works offer profound insights into self-discovery and the appreciation of one's unique cultural heritage by exploring family history, magical realism, and the impact of society. The novels employ food as a tool to delve into the themes of identity and culture. Magic and emotion are infused into food in *The Girl Who Chased the Moon*, which let characters connect and converse through it. Food has multiple meanings in *One Hundred Shades of White*, including Nalini's cultural identity, her emotional journey, and her assimilation to a new life. It provides happiness besides being a medium of expression and healing. These women view food not only as a necessity for daily household tasks but also as a way to make money by starting their own cooking-related businesses and finding satisfaction in their own introspection. In these novels, food serves as more than simply food; it is a symbol that enriches the plot and gives readers a better glimpse into the characters' cultures and inner lives. According to the novels, food can be an effective tool for narratives, bringing people together across cultural and geographical divides, and reliving past experiences. Self-discovery is considered more than just understanding oneself in solitude; it also involves connecting with one's culture and learning about the path that leads to one's nearest and dearest. The emotional bond that develops between Julia and her daughter in *The Girl Who Chased the Moon* and between Maya and Nalini in *One Hundred Shades of White* both serve as potent examples of this. Though the two novels are set in different places, the women authors handle themes like culture, food, and self-discovery in similar ways. Thus, emphasising the need to

cherish self-discovery is considered as a profound epiphany.

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Authors contributions

Priyadarshini S conceptualized and designed the study, contributed to literature review, developed the methodology and wrote the manuscript. Dr. M.R. Bindu provided critical insights and approved the final version of manuscript. Dr. Giriraj Kiradoo contributed to the editing and revision of manuscript. Dr. K. Nanthitha ensured overall coherence and the clarity of the manuscript. Dr. R Subhashini contributed in review and proofread. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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