Chapter 4

Identity and Longing: Yearnings of the Diasporic Heart in the Novels of Preethi Nair

‘What to do?’ Siro says to Nandini. ‘She is determined to marry him, what to do?’

‘Good. Let her make a good marriage,’ Nandini says …

‘Good, good. These children will never go back,’ Gertie says. ‘Let them make marriages here.’

‘But with white fellows?’ her brother says.

‘Why not?’ Gertie asks sharply. ‘You think once you give them all this, you can take them back there, take it all away?’

‘Why not?’ Wesley asks. ‘They can get used to anything. They are not English. They are ours.’ …

Victor laughs, but he wants to cry. ‘We belong nowhere,’ he says. ‘But if we belong anywhere, it is here. I have chosen here.’ He stands. ‘We have chosen here. And that is it,’ he says, flicking his wrist up as if tossing an imaginary cricket ball into the air. ‘We are here.’ (Fernando, 18)

While considerations of place and displacement are common and overarching in diasporic literature, in the last two decades textual representations of British black and Asian experiences have been increasingly marked by a Du Boisen double consciousness. The second generation writers and the protagonists are more open about their insider and outsider status in British
society. They are British by birth or at least by education and acculturation, but they are not always seen as such or thought of as such even by themselves due to their connections to other places. Colour, the most visible marker of racial difference plays a big role too in their feeling of alienation. As defined by Homi Bhabha, the protagonists feel both ‘two-ness’ and ‘doubling’ and often create a ‘third space’ where their fragmented selves and ideas of sameness and otherness combine to create a multiethnic identity. The unique space created by British black and Asian writers affirms how Britishness is founded on the Asian, African and Caribbean difference or ‘otherness’ and how recognition of this relationship can be used to redefine Britishness in its modern, multicultural context.

Preethi Nair the second author to be examined in detail in this study was born in 1971 in Kerala, India and came to the UK when she was two years old. She was born in India but raised and educated in the UK like Nikita Lalwani. She worked as a Management Consultant until she was thirty. She left her secured job to pursue her dream of becoming a writer. When she couldn’t find a publisher for her first novel *Gypsy Masala*, she gave up her job without the knowledge of her parents or friends, used up her savings to self-publish her book and went a step further by inventing Pru Menon, her publicist, to promote her own book as she didn’t have the money to hire a PR firm. She not only won a prestigious three-book deal with Harper Collins but also won the Asian Woman of Achievement Award.

Her second novel, *The Colour of Love* is a fictionalized account of her own journey of following her dreams to become an author. Nair’s third novel *One Hundred Shades of White* has been adapted by the BBC for a television series. Apart from the novels, Nair has written many plays. *Dreaming Alice: Looking Glass*, her first play, was commissioned by the BBC Radio 4 and she immensely enjoyed writing it and then having it performed. The play that remains closest to her heart is *Sari: The Whole 5 Yards*. She has written, performed and produced the play where she plays the role of the sixty-two year old protagonist who decides
to reclaim her life and gives up a life of pretence after forty years of pretending to have had the most perfect life.

Like many second generation British Asian women writers she is versatile and has juggled many roles once she found the courage to let go of the boring job she held. She is one of the faculty at Financial Times/IE Business School. Nair is also the MD of Kiss the Frog, a company that takes storytelling into organizations. Some of her satisfied clients include LEGO, BBC, ITV Imagine, Channel 5, Whatif!, MTV, Citibank, British Chamber of Commerce, DEFRA, Terrapinn, Merrill Lynch, Morgan Stanley, Deutsche Bank, UBS investment bank, ICA, Southbank Centre, Saville Group, Ernst & Young, Yorkshire Forward, AstraZeneca, London Business School and Cranfield University, Henley Management School, Women in European Banking Conference, Annual Rotary conference and Vitalise Conference. She is a compelling storyteller and adventurer and fills her audience with courage to take their leaps of faith.

The back story of Nair’s first novel *Gypsy Masala* is almost as interesting as the novel and finds its way, though fictionalised, to her second novel, *The Colour of Love*. She had so much belief in the manuscript of her first novel that after she faced many rejections from publishers, she gave up her job and her savings to self-publish and self-promote her book. In an interview to Bryony Gordon for *The Telegraph* Nair denies that she is too ambitious, she says she just does what it needs to get a job done. It is this spirit of hers that encourages her corporate clients to think beyond the box. Nair’s first novel is also partly autobiographical and fictionalizes her own struggle to give up the security of well-paid job in the City for an uncertain career as an author. Listening to one’s heart as symbolized by hearing the beats of the African drummer in this novel is especially difficult for children of Indian immigrants.

Nair’s father is an importer of steel and her mother is a charity worker. For the first generation Indian immigrant parents careers in liberal arts such as writing, painting, music or acting with uncertain income are almost always dismissed as hobbies. Careers in law, medicine,
finance, software engineering with assured incomes were considered serious enough to be pursued as profession. Nair says in her interview to Gordon that like most Indian parents her parents too wanted she and her brother to have proper careers. It took her a lot of courage to follow her heart. *Gypsy Masala* is divided into three each sections, each narrated by different characters. The first section is narrated by Molu, the protagonist. The second and the third sections are narrated by her Aunt Sheila and Uncle Bali respectively, the adoptive parents who brought her up when Molu was orphaned as a baby.

The novel deals with themes of dreams and disappointments, loving and letting go, family and relationships, expectations, mistakes and forgiveness. The common thread that runs through the three stories of Molu, Aunt Sheila and Uncle Bali is the importance of following one’s dreams however difficult the path might be, because the alternative to following one’s heart is to merely exist without any love or hope. It is a theme that is very close to Nair and is a recurrent motif in her writings and talks. Nair writes in the author’s note to *Gypsy Masala*:

On a cold December day in 1999, I caught a fleeting glimpse of the African dancer, jumping out of a window and asking me to follow him. He held my dream of being a writer in his hand.

Fearing insanity, I resisted the call at first and went to work, continuing to write in stolen moments of my tube journey. And then one day shortly after seeing the dancer, feeling that there must be more to it, I left my job and decided to go wherever he wanted to take me.

The journey for me has at times seemed impossible and the moments when I doubted, for there have been many, I suspended my disbelief and continued, believing that somehow it would all come together.
Gypsy Masala is a product of that dream. Little did I realise back then what I would have to go through to get this book out because maybe if I had, I would have gone straight back to work….And yes, I still maintain that dreams come true… if you want them to. (Nair, 173 – 74)

Molu had lost her parents in an accident in Kerala and her ailing grandmother had sent a letter to ask Uncle Bali to come and take back Molu with him and raise her as a daughter. With no mental preparation or warning Molu finds herself catapulted from her idyllic life in rural Kerala with her grandmother to London with Uncle Bali and Aunt Sheila, childless themselves. Uncle Bali always remains a kind but somewhat distant father figure in Molu’s life, always busy as he worked as a doctor in a big hospital. Aunt Sheila brings Molu up and though she loves Molu as her own daughter she believes in tough love and is not very demonstrative of her love. Molu perceives them as ‘a very practical couple’ (Nair, 4) who preferred reality to the world of imagination. Molu had already lost one set of parents and been uprooted once. She seeks her Uncle and Aunt’s approval and is scared of losing them is she does not abide by the choices they make for her. She chooses to be the obedient daughter and goes to private school, followed by college where Aunt Sheila chose the most appropriate courses for her and then did ‘the most uninspiring, monotonous’ (Nair, 11) job rather than follow her dreams of becoming an actor:

I’d always wanted to be an actress and my Auntie Sheila keeled over when I first told her. Her impressions of what it was to be an actress went something like this: images of an Indian woman with a wet sari clinging to her body in the rain, prancing around like a stunned fairy… It was that ‘filthy’ love scene etched in her mind that summed up what an actress was, so, understandably, she was having none of it. (Nair, 11)
However, her dreams refuse to be suppressed and she starts hearing African drums in her head and even has fleeting glimpses of an African dancer who urges her to follow her dreams. Though initially like Nair herself, Molu tries to ignore the drums in her head she is ultimately coaxed by the drummer to quit her uninspiring job as a telephone researcher in an economic periodical and take a leap of faith to a magical journey to follow her dreams of becoming an actor. Molu’s struggle is also Nair’s and are echoed by many children of Indian immigrants who are burdened with overbearing parental expectations and expected to conform to their parents’ ambitions for them and stifle their own. Molu says:

I have managed to make myself fit into a bottle and have bobbled up and down for a long time now on the crest of other people’s expectations.

Desperately yearning for the bottle to break but not quite sure what I’ll do if it does. (Nair, 4 – 5)

Molu falls asleep on a Sunday evening trying to avoid thoughts of returning to her boring job on Monday and has a dream where she has embarked on a journey and sees different people with huge coals inside them. People who were living their dreams had their coals lit and their eyes shining brightly with an inner glow, people who hadn’t followed their dreams had unlit coals in their hearts and had eyes that looked dull and listless. A woman approaches her and asks Molu what her dreams were, she was just about to reply when she is awakened by a very faint sound of a drum coming from a far away. When she half-opens her eyes she sees a tiny African figure dancing across her room who whispers to her to follow him. Thinking she was hung over from the half bottle of brandy she had downed earlier to heal her sore throat she ignores the voice but she hears the request again. Fearing she was going insane she turned up the volume of the radio and went to have a shower to clear her head.
Molu is twenty-seven years old and she is aware of the fact that there is no real security in the world and that random acts of fate such as her parents’ sudden death that had changed her destiny can happen anytime. However, she stills lives in the cocoon of a life that her Uncle and Aunt had defined for her. Only in her imagination is she free to become who she would like to be – an actor and a dreamer. There she is Evita the woman who fearlessly follows her heart. However, her dreams chase her into the Tube when she is travelling to go to work on Monday morning, refusing to leave her alone. When Molu sits down to work she is filled with questions about her dreams and their significance. Suddenly the sounds of the fax machines and telephones seemed to fade away and in its place she hears the resounding beat of a drum in her head. The beats grow louder and louder and suddenly the African dancer springs on her typewriter. The dream takes over and finally Molu is free of her job:

A slight tremor of a rhythm took a hold of my fingers and I began to type out my resignation letter. It was as if my fingers worked automatically, requiring no thought from me. After I’d typed it, I reached for an envelope, stuffed the letter inside and walked over to my boss’s desk. The dancer followed beside me.

The tension which had knotted in my throat during the last three years diffused into the air as the letter landed on his desk. An enormous smile spread across my face. (Nair, 15)

The African dancer disappears right in front of her eyes. Molu grabs her bag and gets out of her office desperate to follow him. Though the dancer is nowhere to be seen she meets the lady she had met earlier in the Metro and the lady asks her to follow her heart:
‘Follow the African dancer, my child; take your heart in your hands and follow him. As you walk, tread firmly on fear, clear the path and let the African dancer dance, dance his way into reality.’

When I managed to glance up, she had disappeared. (Nair, 16)

Molu finds that once she has taken a decision to follow her heart, the laws of nature plotted and conspired to send her to a fantasy land which is quite similar to the leap of faith she had had to take as a small child of five when she had lost her parents and had to come to London from Kerala. For both the journeys she has no recollection of the specific details just that her reality seemed to change forever:

All I know was that one moment I was living happily with my grandmother on her farm in rural India, playing with calves, chickens and goats. Then suddenly, on a flip of a coin, I had to exchange all that for a battered merry-go-round, swings and slides, and this couple called the Vishavans whom I had never met before.

Twenty-two years later it was a similar scenario: one moment I was crying on the pavement of Marylebone High Street and the next I was on a beach, far off the beaten track. (Nair, 16)

Nair has adopted the technique of magic realism to describe Molu’s spiritual journey within her heart to find out who she was and what she wanted to do with her life. Magic Realism also known as magical realism has its roots in older literary movements like Realism and has been employed by authors through centuries. It gained immense popularity on a global scale at the beginning in the 1960s, when a number of Latin American writers began pushing the boundaries of reality, often with political and artistic aims. The term ‘magical realism’ was
first introduced by Franz Roh in 1925, a German art critic, who considered magical realism an art category to describe German post-expressionist painting. However, though the lineage is direct the term ‘magic realism’ was first applied to literature in a very different sense in the 1940s by Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier.

Magic realism is a narrative strategy that is characterized by the matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction. It is defined by contradiction and is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a so-called rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. Magic realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. It draws on the Realist tradition in literature, which is all about depicting the world as we see it, and then fills this realist world with the fantastic, the extraordinary and the supernatural. As a literary movement, it embraces the irrational dimension of life which is also as much a part of reality.

Many scholars have successfully argued that magic realism is a natural outcome of postcolonial writing, which must make sense of at least two separate realities—the reality of the conquerors as well as that of the conquered. Magical realists incorporate many techniques that have been linked to postcolonialism such as with hybridity. Magic realism technique is employed by juxtaposition of opposites such as urban and rural, pre-industrial and post-industrial, the perspectives of the colonizer and the colonized and Western and indigenous. The works of magic realists often involve issues of borders, mixing and change to reveal a deeper and truer reality than conventional realist techniques would allow.

A magic realist should have an ironic distance from the magical world view for the realism not to be compromised. Simultaneously, the writer should strongly respect the magic or else the magic dissolves into simple folk belief or complete fantasy, split from the real instead of synchronized with it. In magic realism, the supernatural is not displayed as
questionable. While the reader realizes that the rational and irrational are opposite and conflicting polarities, they are not disconcerted because the supernatural is integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictional world. To borrow the words of Coleridge who wrote in his *Biographia Literaria* published in 1817 that poetry must encourage the readers to into a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ so that they plunge into the world of imagination voluntarily and are moved to a reality higher than their own mundane everyday reality. This is also the aim of magic realism. Some of the most popular Latin-American magic realists include Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Amado, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortazar and Isabel Allende.

British Indian writer Salman Rushdie and Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri are also noteworthy postcolonial magic realists who have used this technique skillfully in their writings. Nair uses the technique of magic realism to describe the transformational journey of Molu becoming Evita and her journey provides a counterpoint to the other two stories in the novel, that of Uncle Bali and Auntie Sheila, two scarred and disappointed people who were too scared to love again and open their hearts to fresh pain of heartbreak. Evita’s disappearance makes them face their suppressed emotions and go in search of their own dreams of happiness. Molu wakes up in a strange beach with her hair covered in sand and finds a strange man trying to sell her watches and necklaces. Disoriented she tries to find out where she is but she is merely told that her call for adventure was heard, she had taken a leap of faith and this place could be wherever she wanted to be.

Molu looks around and finds sea and sand in front of her and lush green foliage and purple mountains behind her. There was no sign of human habitation anywhere. When she begins to panic the man gently advises her to take deep breaths and keep her disbelief suspended. Molu is jolted when the man addresses her as Evita, the name she had given herself in her imaginary world. The man informs her calmly that he knows everything about her.
Suddenly they hear a horn and a taxi pulls up beside them. The old man advises Molu to trust in her adventure and be patient. José Del Rey, introduces himself as the King of the Taxi Drivers and ushers her in his taxi to embark on the next stage of her journey.

José also addresses Molu as Evita and drives fast through many hairpin bends as they climb higher into the mountain. The air felt lighter, cooler, fresher and the greenery was dense. Molu could see women carrying urns and walking to some internal rhythm. The faint sound of drumbeats gets louder and louder as they climb up the mountain till they reach a plateau. José stops the car in a village square and Molu finds small houses painted in pastel colours around her. People young and old alike were gathered in the open space of the village square and were listening to musicians who had brought out their drums and most people were dancing to the drums. They welcomed Molu openly and Molu was entranced to find them dancing so freely without any inhibitions: ‘they carried a different rhythm in them, one that was so passionate and carefree. It could not have been more different to the sounds of North London – the drone of the traffic; people locked away in their houses.’ (Nair, 22)

José introduces Molu to his wife Dolores who looks about the same age as Molu and she is informed that she would be staying in their house for the duration of her stay. Their little boy of seven or eight is also called José. As she sat eating delicious food in the open surrounded by the villagers and hears little José’s grandfather telling him a story about how the rains came she is reminded of her childhood in India where her grandfather used to tell her stories. The next morning Molu wakes up to a domestic tiff between José and Dolores with the latter suspecting José of being a little too free with offering rides to voluptuous women. Dolores tells Molu they have been married for ten years and they had fallen in love instantly. Staying with the Del Rays gave Molu an insight into the ups and downs of a truly passionate relationship. The river Aynia that ran from the top of the purple mountain to the sea joined by many tributaries along the way sustained the lives of the village folk and Dolores informs Molu that
if she followed Aynia for exactly four kilometres she would come to an enormous
bougainvillea tree and on turning left and following the path from there she would reach the
Gypsy who would answer all her questions.

Dolores warned Molu to make the journey alone for the solitude would allow her to frame
the right questions and they were even more important than the answers. Molu reaches the
Gypsy’s cave and is stunned to find her to be the same woman she had already met twice
before, once in the Metro and then outside her office after she had quit her job. She too
addressed her as Evita. True to her Gypsy persona she answers in riddles and avoids giving
straight answers to Molu’s prosaic questions:

‘How did I get here? Where am I? What’s happening to me?’

‘One at a time, my dear. This is the land of possibility where intentions are
set and dreams manifest into reality,’ she replied, putting her hand over mine.

‘Where’s that then?’

She laughed. ‘You know the answer to that.’

‘So how did I get here?’

‘By leaving all that you know to be true behind – the safety of your home,
your family, your routine – you took a leap of faith.’

‘It was only because I knew I saw him. I’ve never seen something like that
with such clarity. I’ve come in search of him you know.’

‘I know,’ she replied.

‘Do you know where he is and how can I find him?’
‘He’s not as far as people think but few really find him.’ (Nair, 29)

The Gypsy warns Molu that if she sets out to search for the African dancer her life would change forever. But Molu knew that her life had already changed. The Gypsy warns her not to have a set of fixed outcomes in her mind, because the whole point of the adventure is exploring the beauty of not knowing, of not being certain. After many days passed Molu woke up one morning with her instinct telling her to climb the mountain and complete her journey. José packed a few necessities for her and she started her journey early morning. As she climbed up the trek was long, hard and undefined. The long trek exhausted her completely, pain radiated from her toes and the backpack felt heavier by the second. As night fell the trees grew denser and the brambles began to cut her hands. It began to rain and the ground turned slippery making it more and more difficult to walk on. Focussing solely on reaching the summit Molu carried on walking in the dark frozen night until she reached the top.

Utterly exhausted to feel scared anymore, Molu falls asleep. She woke up to find the sun shining brightly and the mountain top a shimmering gold. The beginning of the River Aynia lay glistening in the sun and Molu knew instinctively that she had to wait there. As she waited there she relived her past and saw again some of the events from the past that she had suppressed in her heart:

And as I closed my eyes, half-dazed, I saw some of the things that I had chosen to forget in my life: the death of my parents, my Uncle Bali taking me from my grandmother, the journey to my Auntie Sheila’s house. I understood how everything pieced together and had led to this moment – sitting there, alone on the mountain-top.
As these images passed in front of me, I let them go one by one. I sat with
my head resting between my knees and I just cried and cried, a limitless
fountain of tears, and then I felt a deep sense of release. (Nair, 35)

Later that evening Molu is filled with anticipation as bird songs and animal cries filled the
air. In the dim light of the moon suddenly she spots the African dancer appear and dance in
front of her. The rain fell hard and the dancer continued to dance in front of her till her fears
and doubts washed away in the rain and the spirit of the dancer dissolved slowly into Molu.
She knew anything that she wanted enough was possible in the future. She flies back to
Heathrow airport on a freezing cold morning and arrives home determined to live her dreams.
The bag lady at the airport also addresses Molu as Evita and takes her to see a group of bag
people who had resigned to their fates even though they had seen the African dancer too. Seeing
their empty lives Molu realises the truth of the Gypsy’s words that to follow her dreams would
also mean following her fears and facing them. The bag lady warns her to be gentle with her
family when she breaks the news to them for they had only wanted the best for Molu. Molu
had already realised this on the mountain top and agrees.

Molu’s spiritual experience of the African dancer and her magical escape into the land of
possibilities where she comes to terms with not only her past but accepts the challenges of her
future is different from the ‘universal’ white feminist experience prescribed by the western
feminists and can be read in the light of postcolonial feminist theory that stretches both the
experiences of feminism and postcolonialism to accommodate such unique experiences. As
writers writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Nair undermines the clear
division between home and abroad found in the diasporic writers of earlier generations of
women writing in Britain. She creates an imaginary third space for Molu that is neither India
nor the UK where anything is possible.
The novel is a poignantly told story of three heartbroken people coming together to play at being a family again – Molu orphaned at an young age and arriving in London at age five to her Uncle and Auntie who have also suffered many heartbreaks and disappointments and grabbed at this last chance of playing a happy family. The first generation immigrants Uncle Bali and Aunt Sheila had both escaped to the UK to heal their broken hearts. Too scared to even confess their love for each other both Uncle Bali and Aunt Sheila had suppressed their dreams for too long until Molu’s sudden disappearance makes them confront their love for each other and Molu. Using multiple narrators to describe a single incident is another brilliant technique used by Nair to examine different perspectives and throws a totally different light to the incident. For example, Molu recounts how she changed from being a Cancerian to a Scorpio after she arrived in London because her Aunt Sheila changed her birthday suddenly and gave her no explanation. Aunt Sheila’s narrative puts an entirely different spin on that incident:

When I felt she was comfortable with Bali and me, we decided to send Molu to school. The first day I took her I hid behind a tree and watched her play by herself. She wasn’t a shy child, she was just cautious having been through much upheaval. In spite of the fact that I knew she would eventually make friends, I willed someone to go and talk to her, and when after three days she was still sitting on her own I took matters into my own hands. Despite the fact that it wasn’t her real birthday, I organised a party and began talking to some of the mothers so that they would bring their own children. (Nair, 102)

Though she was an adventurous girl herself, the same desire to protect Molu from getting hurt that had made Aunt Sheila so determined to see Molu walk the tried and tested path rather than seek the uncertainty of having a career in acting. She finally let’s go of the bottled fears and disappointments within her heart and releases Molu to follow her own dreams rather than follow Sheila’s dreams and be safe and empty. Sheila acknowledges how easy it is to blame
others for things that go wrong in one’s life rather than accept responsibility for it and then set
to rectify it. She releases the anger, resentment and sadness from the past and forgives her
family and more importantly, herself. Her heart is cleansed again and she hears the African
dancer dancing in her heart offering her another chance to follow her dreams. Uncle Bali too
comes to the same realization and he is finally ready to throw away the safety net of his busy
life and start afresh with Aunt Sheila who he loved with all his heart but had never had the
courage to tell her about his feelings and be vulnerable again after the loss of his first wife to
child birth.

The novel seamlessly travels between the narrators and their homes in India and the UK.
Uncle Bali’s rural Kerala and Aunt Sheila’s Goa come alive with as much vividness as does
the purple mountain top of Molu and the freezing north London landscape. Nair is as
comfortable with the Indian scenes as she is with the London scenes and has an insider’s
perspective on both India and the UK. Uncle Bali had lost his first wife and the love of his life
to childbirth in Kerala and had gone away to London to escape the memories. His rise as a self-
made man from a servant boy in a rural village in Kerala to an established doctor in London
mirrors the struggles of many Indian first generation immigrants who arrived in Britain to make
better lives for themselves.

Aunt Sheila born into a Christian family and raised by a devout Christian mother is married
off to Uncle Bali, a complete stranger, after her father manipulatively ends her relationship
with her boyfriend. Her father refuses to even tell her that her husband Bali, a Hindu, had been
married before and that she would be going away to London with him. She marries him and
finds out these facts at various stages of her life from others and does not confront Bali about
it, allowing the bitterness to grow between them. She gives birth to a stillborn son and until
Molu comes to her life she lives an isolated, depressed life in London typical of many first
generation women who marry strangers through arranged marriages and find themselves living
an isolated life in a strange country. Molu fills her heart and she remembers the day Molu came to her as the happiest day of her life though she never tells it to Molu until much later when Molu tells her she is going to become an actor.

Their lives in London give an accurate description of the lives of many Indian immigrants in the UK. Nair’s first novel is about family and the hurt that family members can inflict on each other unintentionally. It is also about forgiveness and the knowledge that one can begin afresh anytime they want to if they open their hearts to possibilities and cleanse themselves of bitterness and resentment about past events. The strong and silent love story of Bali and Sheila provide a counterpoint to José and Dolores passionately verbal one and is a reminder that grievances need to be sorted out and love needs to be expressed. Aunt Sheila says:

Cool, refreshing, simple love, a bottled fragrance that is there every day, is how I wanted to describe my feelings for Bali. It is like this on occasions when I watch him sleeping, innocently like a child. Then I am triggered by a weakness that is perhaps my own vulnerability. I want to be kind to him but all that comes out of me is rancour. (Nair, 116 – 17)

After Aunt Sheila allows Molu to follow her dreams of becoming an actor the tight control she had been exerting on herself breaks too. She lets go of Molu, her husband, and what people would think of her and finds her heart filled again with courage, passion and a new zest for life. She remembers the instances of her past like Molu did in the mountain top and accepts the incidents and forgives her family that had hurt her. She sums up her realisation as:

I have learned about hopes and dreams: if you supress them, you pollute a clean river with fear, regret and disappointment, and that makes it very difficult to swim and find the place which is home.
I will also tell you another thing about the magic of hopes and dreams: at any point along a journey, the day you decide to take back responsibility for your actions and put your trust and faith not in fear but back in yourself, those hopes and dreams will come flooding back…you have to take a risk; take everything you believe in, and jump…And when you see the African dancer who has finally managed to escape from somewhere deep inside, follow him, follow him with fearless courage and go to wherever he may want to take you. (Nair, 121 – 22)

When Aunt Sheila does not intervene and allows Molu to follow her heart Uncle Bali is initially very disappointed. Molu was throwing away a good education and a stable job for a profession that was notoriously difficult and uncertain. Molu leaves her parental house to stay on her own and Aunt Sheila too disappears from the house after two days. Uncle Bali receives a postcard from her after a few weeks from Goa saying that she was fine. Only in the empty house does Uncle Bali realize the mistake he has made by letting fear win. He realizes that if one is afraid to open his heart due to the fear to getting hurt again like he did after the loss of his wife and then again the loss of his stillborn son he is anyways deprived of love:

Do you think what you fear most is what you attract? I am looking directly at the face of loneliness, loneliness imbued with all the connotations of rejection. I see it so clearly, though the strangest thing is that I think it has been with me all these years… What I have learned is that the older one gets, the more confusing it all appears, so make use of the clarity of youth which is sent with so much energy. Maybe I will also say that whatever happens to you in your life, try not to close your heart. If it is at all possible, leave just a little space so that this space can grow bigger. What happens with a closed heart is that, no matter what is sent to fill it, it will still remain empty. I will
leave you with that as I am really very tired, tired of being afraid, tired of worrying about what may or may not happen, tired of thinking.

‘Go follow her, Bali – tell her, dare to love, to be hurt. Come, follow me.’

It is only the second time that I have seen him. He danced in front of my eyes and ran away.

I sat there for a while longer and then I went to get my suitcase…it was time to go and bring my wife home. (Nair, 171 – 72)

Nair’s second novel The Colour of Love also published as Beyond Indigo is almost a continuation of her first novel. It follows from where the first novel had ended. In the first novel Molu decides to follow her heart, in the second novel Nina carries forward the dream and struggles until the dream becomes a reality. The novel is a fictionalized account of Nair’s own struggle to establish herself as a writer leaving behind her stable job as a Management Consultant. In The Colour of Love, the protagonist Nina too is forced to live a life of lies in order to fulfil her dream of finding acceptance as an artist:

‘I knew deep down that life was too short to be doing anything other than what I really wanted to do … But that wasn’t the problem – there were the occupants living in the semi to consider. I had a duty to make sure that they were happy, and keeping my job as a lawyer was fundamental …’ (Nair, 18)

Like Molu Nina knew from age six that she wanted to be an artist but that was never an option. Her father wanted her to be a lawyer:

His career choice for me was not based on any long-standing family tradition.

He was a bus driver and I think he just wanted to give me the best possible start, and make sure I would not have to face the instability that he had
suffered … At sixteen, when I expressed a desire to go to art college he went ballistic and didn’t speak to me for weeks. When he did it was to say, ‘Nina, I have not sacrificed the life so you can do the hobby, the lawyer is a good profession. Not that I am pressurizing you, not that I came to the England to give you the good education and work every hour and make sacrifices.’

Put that way I could clearly see his point. So I did an art A level without him knowing about it – just in case, by some miracle, he changed his mind. He didn’t and so I went to university to study law. (Nair, 18 – 19)

For most Asian parents, education and white-collar jobs are synonymous with the children’s happiness and finding them suitable spouses within the community through the list system of traditional arranged marriages. Arranged marriages with suitable partners from within the community is another key aspect of determining their children’s happiness in the eyes of the parents. The parents along with the community elders to work unofficially and tirelessly as marriage brokers have a complicated list system to determine the suitability of a candidate and love and passion were not considered to be of any importance.

Mum and Dad’s short list was devoid of any kind of love or passion…The long list was drawn up by a group of well-connected elderly women in the community, whose demure presence betrayed what they were really capable of. The criteria that had been set to filter the candidates were that they had to come from a good family background, be well educated and have lots of money. One of my mum’s roles was to whittle down the long list, but her primary task was to set the PR machinery in motion; to cover up any negatives, then to promote and hype the candidates and make sure they were shown to me in a favourable light. This week she had managed to get the list
down to three potentials whose vital statistics were presented in the form of handwritten CVs. (Nair, 4 – 5)

Written in a humourous, non-confrontational style and with a ‘happy’ ending the novel falls short of providing a genuine understanding in Nina’s parents as to what makes their daughter happy. Perhaps for Nina acceptance of her choices by her parents is a good enough start for the rest of her life. The Colour of Love discusses many issues that are particularly relevant to the Asian diaspora in Britain. Lack of choice-making power about their own lives in the children of the Asian diaspora is one of the main motifs of the novel and is illustrated both in terms of choosing a career and a life partner. In this novel like many other novels on contemporary Asian diaspora experience, education and white-collar jobs are synonymous to the parents with happiness and finding a suitable life partners for their children through traditional arranged marriages.

Nina is forced to study law by the ingrained sense of duty that Asian children have towards their parents, she works hard even though she does not enjoy her work and finds herself a place in one of the prestigious law firms in London. However, Nina realizes after the death of her best friend and loss of her fiancé that life was short and offered no guarantees. She decides to pursue her career as an artist to find out if she was any good at it. Nina is honest to admit that though the life planned for her by her parents is very boring it is perhaps the safest. Her job and the list of highly qualified suitable guys would perhaps have given her a more comfortable life yet Nina wants more. She wants to take risks and follow her heart even though she is aware that it would increase the risks of heartache and failure manifold. Jean Michel Nina’s French boyfriend proposes marriage to her and Nina avoids taking a decision not because she doubted his love for her but because she was too tired to even contemplate the battle ahead of her to convince her parents to agree to the marriage. Nina was still grieving and trying to make sense
of the death of her best friend Ki and felt tired and depressed most of the time. Her depressing job further tied her down.

Perhaps because she was desperately looking for signs from Ki and found nothing in the one year that Ki had been dead that she got drawn to the Guruji she met outside the grocery store. His bright saffron robe stood out against the cold, grey rainy morning. Unable to make a decision about Jean Michel Nina impulsively makes a decision to go and meet Guruji the following day and ask for some direction. Nina was understandably happy and excited at the same time, it was the first positive step she had taken in a long time. After waiting for half an hour Guruji’s assistant asks Nina to follow him and Nina enters a room filled with warm jasmine incense, soft music, candles and statues of different gods on pieces of colourful silk. Nina removed her shoes and sat down on the floor next to him. The Guruji asked for her date of birth and proceeded to do complex calculations and charts.

At last he was done and he rattled off past events like a burn at age six, a romantic liaison at age eighteen that did not lead to marriage and at age twenty-five another. He frowned at this point and asked Nina if he was a Western man and Nina nodded. He asked again if her parents were aware and when Nina answered in the negative he asked of his parents were not arranging anything. The Guru stopped at age twenty-six with the death of her best friend and declared that the worst part was over and things would change soon. He said her life was stagnant and she was unable to move forward or to take decisions. He performed a ceremony by first asking permission from the gods to treat her. He used a coconut in the ceremony which was supposed to represent Nina. He stained the coconut with saffron and did the same with her forehead so that Nina and the coconut were united. He mumbled a prayer and asked Nina to take the coconut to the river and hurl it down. The river was supposed to represent her new life.

Nina chose London bridge to hurl the coconut down and went to work after wiping the saffron from her forehead. When a colleague casually commented on how pretty she was
looking she blurted out that she was getting married. She was suddenly sure she wanted to marry Jean Michel and decided to tell him the news in person when he returned from his tour the next day. Hurling the coconut in Thames had given Nina a fresh lease of energy and filled her with positivity. All obstacles suddenly appeared surmountable and Nina went that evening to Guruji to thank him. He asked her to come for a follow up session the following morning. The following day starts on a bad note. When she reaches Guruji’s door she finds the door slightly ajar and so she enters after a knock. She finds Guruji lighting candles, humming and swaying to Sting which was playing loudly. Startled to spot Nina when he finally turned around he switched off the tape immediately and tries to defend himself by saying he was trying to see what was corrupting today’s youth.

He asks Nina to sit on the floor and he sits down next to her and holds her hands. Nina feels a tingling warmth as he whispers kind words and prayers. He then asks her to lie down and proceeds to touch her all over the body and then undresses her. His breath becomes rhythmic, his chanting louder, his holy beads pressed against her chest. Nina realizes what is happening but for the longest time she can’t believe what is happening. He was after all a holy man. As he put his wet lips on Nina’s and pulls up his robe Nina smells him and that finally shatters the hypnotic spell for her. For he smelled of coffee. She finally yells no and runs out of the room while Guruji curses her to a miserable life. Spirituality has been an integral part of diasporic women’s writing, be it in the writings of Black women, Muslim women, Hindu women, Sikh women or Christian women.

Nair’s first novel *Gypsy Masala* takes the readers to a mystical journey of hearing the African drummer within them and following their hearts. The spiritual experience in this novel however is tainted with reality and thus makes Nina feel dirty and scared. Even though the coconut hurling ritual had filled Nina with positive energy the Guruji’s cruel and groping hands add a note of caution that not all holy men are good or pious. That individual experiences might
be more valuable than the god men mediated ones. Shattered with the events of the morning Nina arrives to the office late and totally rattled. Nina is expected to soothe the ego of an artist Boo Williams represented by her firm but she can’t find kind words and quits her job after a spat and her boss lets her go. Nina decided to buy grocery and cook her boyfriend a dinner and wait for him to come home to tell him the news that she would marry him. She opens the door of the apartment with her keys and finds Jean in bed with a red-haired woman. She runs out of the door, having managed to lose her job and boyfriend all in the same day.

Nina runs heedless of the traffic and finds herself sitting on a bench in Green Park, totally lost and disillusioned with life. She looks up at the heaven and cries in desperation for one sign from Ki, her dead best friend. The rain starts pounding and she goes down on the grass and cries her heart out, finally allowing herself to mourn for Ki, accepting that she was dead and there would be no more waiting for signs from her, for her loss of dreams, her faith, her job and Jean the only person who had known her inside out apart from Ki and had still rejected her. After sometime Nina finally manages to assimilate the day’s events and unable to bear the cold any longer decides to go home. She had dismissed any idea of dreams and romance from her head and had realized that life was only about survival. She goes home and tells her mother that she was ready to meet Raj, the accountant that her mother had shortlisted for arranged marriage and see if she got along with Raj.

Even though Nina loves her parents and her parents love her telling them the truth is never an option. Her father’s worst nightmare is she losing her job through recession. Her status as a lawyer is everything to her dad:

He was sitting there in the front row when I graduated. That’s when he really got into power dressing – wearing red and looking like Santa. It also gave him a certain amount of status in the community to say that his daughter was
a lawyer and he would often get out the graduation photo and tears would form in his eyes.’ (Nair, 31)

Feverish and sick as she was Nina is forced to get out of the house on Monday morning to keep up the pretence of going to work and after whiling away a few hours in a café drags herself to Tate and finds that they were holding an exhibition on Matisse’s paintings – whose work Nina had always enjoyed even more because he also was a lawyer who became a painter by a stroke of fate while recovering from an illness. Even though Nina had not painted for almost ten years since she took up law the moment she entered the room with Matisse’s paintings she could feel the warmth and energy from them. The paintings with their vibrant colours transported Nina to his world where anything was possible and at last Nina found peace. She spent the day at the gallery and went home. Her arranged marriage potential Raj rang her at the exact appointed time and Nina supressed a sigh at the predictability before she answered the phone. Their first phone call progresses well and Nina agrees to meet him.

Nina heads back to Matisse’s exhibition the next day too and finds herself sharing lunch table at the cafeteria with an Australian girl Gina. They both love Matisse and it takes Nina another day or two to open up to her. Gina casually offers Nina the use of her studio by subletting it to her for three months because she was going to Australia on a holiday and Nina grabs the studio. The encounters with Gina had been filled with signs that Nina had deliberately ignored so far. For the first time in a long while Nina begins to feel excited. The only drawback was it would lead to even more lying to her parents. Nina decides to tell his father that she would be taking a three-month sabbatical to paint so she could better understand her artist clients and goes home and decides to start the topic with her favourite quote from Matisse. However, it does not go as planned:
I had to rephrase the sentence. ‘An artist who is worth a lot of money said that there are always flowers for those who want to see them. What do you think of that?’

‘He’s your client?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Very good quote.’

‘Really, do you think so?’

‘Yes, that is why he is the rich. Wastes no money in buying the expensive flowers from the petrol shops and saves the money that the flowers are taking. Not giving the peoples the flowers every time he is seeing them.’

I wanted to bury my head in my hands in despair. He would never understand. (Nair, 47)

In Gina Nina finds a friend who totally gets her. Gina too had lost her mother to cancer like Ki and both of them end up believing that Gina’s mother and Ki had conspired to bring them together. For their first meeting Nina asks if they could meet in an art gallery and Raj suggest they meet at Tate and is aware that there is a Matisse exhibition there. Nina doesn’t feel any instant connection with Raj but is not too disappointed either. She is well aware from her parents’ arranged marriage that in arranged marriages one grows to love the person they have married gradually. Raj candidly admits that he had more than twenty girls and had gotten engaged to two before but none had worked out for him. Raj keeps quoting from Matisse much to Nina’s surprised delight but does not reveal the source. Nina finds herself engaged to Raj even though she had not really agreed to it verbally.
Nina took to painting in the office hours at the studio and used her burnt, scarred left hand. She had been a leftie at birth but her father had forced her to use her right hand as left hand was considered inauspicious. In the studio Nina faced her deepest insecurities, hurt and pain and stopped hiding and pretending. In the studio she gradually became what she was meant to become. For her first painting she covered the entire canvas with black. For black holes was what she saw in her life and in relationships. She painted a discarded pair of shoes left by her neighbour and allowed all the anger in her system to flow out of her as she pounded the canvas with the fingers dipped in paint. She dropped down to the floor when her arms were too fatigued and stared at the painting of the shoes. She felt her life was like those discarded hoes after Ki had died and Jean Michel had betrayed her. But gradually hope resurfaced and she started adding yellows, green and blues to her painting to represent the optimism she felt. She finished the painting by adding confident red shoe laces. The bright colours made the painting look vibrant and full of life. She signed off the painting as ‘For Ki’ and not liking the distance between the words she added a ‘u’ so it read ‘Foruki’. Nina comes home from the studio to find her engagement had been scheduled in two weeks’ time and her wedding in less than four months. She feels so guilty about her dual life that she gives in, dismisses her doubts to the superficiality of the arranged marriage system than about whether Raj was her forever guy.

For the second canvas Nina chose to paint elephants as she reminisced about her early childhood in Uganda surrounded by nature in the plantation her father managed. The elephant set they had in their drawing room there. She remembered her pretty elder sister Jana who had eloped with a ‘white boy’ and was disowned by her parents and never mentioned again. She remembered how her sister loved her and the day Nina had burnt her and chest from the pressure cooker while her sister had been talking on the phone and how her mother had blamed her sister for the accident. She remembered how her parents along with thousands of immigrants had been forced to leave Uganda and come to England after Idi Amin came to
power and how her parents had been forced to start afresh in cramped quarters in Croydon that they shared with a host of other relatives. She remembered her dad’s weeping after her sister left. All the pain that she had kept bottled within her kept flowing out of her. She remembered how she had met Ki for the first time when her sister Jana had taken her to the newsagent’s after school to buy her sweets and meet with her boyfriend David.

For the third canvas Nina was thinking of her friendship with Ki and remembered the Buddha she had brought for Nina from Bangkok. Staring at the blank white canvas she drew inspiration from a crushed red and white coke bottle in front of her and painted that in the shape of Buddha. The painting brought Nina peace and Ki’s energy and boldness. Nina’s family took to Raj immediately after they saw him for he knew all the correct responses and Nina only hoped that all would be well and she would start to fall in love with Raj before the wedding day arrived.

Nine painted six more buddhas in one single canvas experimenting with colours and contrasting styles before she came to the conclusion that her relationship with Raj could not progress any further unless she was honest with him about who she was and what she was doing. Nina decided to be completely honest with him the next time they met but the time was never right to bring this up. Desperate to get it off her chest she rolled up her sleeve and showed Raj her burnt hand for the first time hoping Raj’s questions will give her the opening but he merely said she was very beautiful and that scar did not matter to him at all. Nina went to meet Raj’s parents at their big and immaculately furnished house and didn’t get a good feeling about Raj’s mother. She appeared snobbish and fake and very proud about both her house and her son. Once they started discussing wedding plans and Raj’s mother had very strong opinions on everything Nina realised that Raj’s mother could have been one of the main reasons behind Raj’s two broken engagements in the past. Raj’s mother was dressed in Western clothes, they had butlers, served ‘English food’ like quiches and salads. Nina couldn’t help thinking about
the huge difference between the two families and his dad’s complete distaste for English food. Raj asks Nina after the visit if she was having any second thoughts about marrying Raj and Nina sees a vulnerability about Raj that confirms her earlier guess. She reassured Raj that she would not be backing out.

Nina left the wedding organization to others and escaped to her world of art as she felt the space between her two worlds widening:

All the anxiety and doubts were splattered onto canvas and the more I needed to believe that it would all work out and that marrying Raj was absolutely the right thing to do, the more inanimate the objects I chose to paint became and the more I tried to bring them to life. One day it was a concrete brick painted on rough strokes of green grass; the next it was a red iron-oxide bicycle wheel on fresh white snow.

The following week I went through a phase of painting houses. Derelict houses whose colours and symmetry hid their state of disrepair; and then I painted houses in the style of rich sari fabrics set against grey backgrounds, and then grey houses set against rich sari-coloured backgrounds. When I got home, a selection of engagement saris were sprawled across my bed and my mother sat waiting for me asking me to choose. (Nair, 101 – 02)

Christmas came closely followed by Nina’s engagement day. One cold day in January Neena went to frame the Buddha she had painted to the frame shop in the corner. A shiny black Bentley was parked outside and a well-dressed man was having an argument with the farmers. Nina heard the name Mangetti but minded her own business and chose a silver frame to frame the painting for Ki’s mother. Tastudi Mangetti was the Director of Fiorelli Gallery in Milan and also had several high-profile business interests in London. One of Nina’s clients had fallen
out with him and Nina knew that he was a very hard man. When Nina went back after a few days to collect the painting she was told by the framer that Mangetti’s assistant was so impressed by the painting that Mangetti himself had come to take a look at the painting and had pronounced it original. They had mistaken the dedication ‘Foruki’ to be the name of a Japanese painter. Mangetti had left his visiting card and had expressed an interest to immediately meet Foruki.

Nina couldn’t tell Mangetti that the painting was done by her because she felt Mangetti would not be interested in her because she was a complete no body. Nina also lacked the confidence and could not think of herself as a serious artist yet. So she decided to pretend that she was Foruki’s agent. She had no way of knowing what a complicated web of deceit she was entering into and things soon began to go out of her hand. When Mangetti insisted on wanting to meet Foruki Nina had to invent a Japanese man who she could pass off as Foruki fast. Nina met Mangetti for lunch and confirmed that Foruki would be holding an exhibition in six weeks, two weeks before her wedding, in London and how she had quitted her job at Whitter and Lawson to be Mangetti’s agent. She found herself office space and named her PR Company Kendal Brown. She started calling the contacts she had from work and hyping Foruki as well as looking for a venue for exhibition. One of the ladies from a PR company suggested that there was a restaurant chain Artusion who already had restaurants in New York and Tokyo. They were planning to open their London restaurant soon and they might be the perfect venue for exhibiting Foruki’s work.

She went to meet the owners of Artusion and the moment she entered the restaurant located in Mayfair the place felt right. It was spacious, elegant and minimalist and painted in white, black and red. Emanuel Hikatari managed the restaurant and his partner Michael Hayland managed the gallery. Both the men were in their early thirties and Nina felt drawn to Michael in a way she had never felt drawn to Raj. By then she had realised that all she felt for Raj was
brotherly affection but she had hoped that with time she would grow to love him like her father had come to love her mother even though he was disappointed initially. Artusion agrees to exhibit Foruki’s paintings and when Michael visits the studio to return a folder Nina had left in his office he realises that Nina is Foruki. But neither of them say anything about it. Feeling terribly guilty that Michael knew her secret while Raj didn’t Nina takes Raj to see the paintings.

Raj’s inane and banal commentary again drives home the differences between them. Nina’s mother went to India for ten days to shop for the wedding and Nina spent every day hyping Foruki and pitching him to the press and artists she knew. She took to attending all the major openings and tirelessly doing PR for Foruki, using every trick she had learnt in her four years in the art world. This journey closely mirrors Nair’s own journey for marketing for her first novel under the alias of Pru Menon. She finally makes a call to Mangetti to invite him to the exhibition. As the exhibition drew nearer and she worked at a hectic pace Nina found comfort in telling Michael the entire truth except for her engagement bit which she already knew was a big mistake. Michael told him his family was based in Galway, Ireland even though he lived in New York and what an artist’s delight Galway was with its year-round beauty.

Michael’s faith in Nina overwhelmed Nina when she realized that he had sent her two contracts. One for Foruki and one for her as Nina for a year later under her own name. Nair had also managed to win a three-book deal with Harper Collins. No one had believed in Nina’s work apart from Ki before and Michael’s trust in Nina’s ability filled her with confidence. The exhibition and the wedding plans kept spinning as the dates drew nearer and Nina had no escape from the web of deceit that kept getting more and more complicated. She found herself confessing to Michael about Jean Michel and Michael told her that he had been ditched by his fiancée a month before the wedding and he knew what Nina was going though. She felt herself getting drawn to Michael but she didn’t own up to it.
Nina goes invited to a radio talk show and that gets Foruki even more publicity. She runs into Jean Michel in Artusion soon after and finds that she feels more strongly for Michael than she had ever felt for Jean. However, when Michael tries to confess his feelings for her she snubs him out of desperation totally trapped in her web of deceit. In desperation she fills canvas after canvas with blues as she vents her feelings on deception and names the series *Beyond Indigo*. Nina promised herself that she would come clean the moment the exhibition got over. She was tired of her lies and she was tired of hiding her feelings for Michael from the world. But she is not given the chance. Everything comes to a head on the exhibition evening when people from different parts of her life walk in. Raj comes in with her mother uninvited as does Jean Michel. Raj breaks his promise of remaining anonymous and introduces himself to Michael as Nina’s fiancé. Mangetti the man for whom Nina had arranged the exhibition doesn’t turn up and Nina feels she had gone into so much trouble for nothing.

When Raj comes back after the exhibition Nina is too distraught to pretend anymore and breaks off her marriage with Raj. The next morning she took courage in both her hands and explained to her parents that she had broken off the marriage. Nina’s father tells her to leave the house and never come back and that she was a bigger disappointment than her sister. Nina leaves the house and no one stops her. As Nina goes out of the house she thinks of the relationship her father had with her and her sister:

The problem, he said, was that he had loved us too much and given us too much freedom. Maybe he didn’t love us enough. If he did, he could have let us be ourselves.

Maybe loving us didn’t even enter into the equation. It was all about keeping us clothed and fed and doing his best to do his duty and this was, for him, loving us. Seeing me married off was being a good father. No matter how
much I argued that it was important to be happy, he wouldn’t understand. Happiness was a luxury, an expectation, you were supposed to get on with it and try to make the best of every situation …

Maybe that’s what happens when you are forced to move continents and come to a foreign place; you become incredibly practical and don’t get attached to anything again, not even your children. (Nair, 243)

Michael refuses to take any calls from Nina or respond to her messages. He had already left for New York she is told and even after Nina confesses that she has fallen in love with Michael and broken off with Raj she doesn’t hear from Micheal. She hears from Mangetti a few days later and he insists that he would like to meet Foruki and was thinking of nominating Foruki for the prestigious Turner prize. Desperate she persuades her Japanese grocer Rooney to pretend to be Foruki. She made up Foruki’s fictitious biography with the help of her friend Gina. The two friends train Rooney how to impersonate as Foruki. Gina agreed to be the translator. The interview goes well and Mangetti is very pleased to have had an exclusive access to Foruki. The paintings had all sold too, and after the gallery’s cut Nina was given a cheque of £ 25,000.

In the next few months every attempt of Nina to get in touch with her parents failed. She didn’t hear from Michael either. She focused on painting but found herself unable to do the portrait of Mangetti that he had commissioned for a hefty price. Foruki gets shortlisted for the Turner prize and Nina finds herself unwilling to go through the charade again. A reporter gets particularly nasty and asks too many questions about the background she had provided and Nina’s uneasiness increases. Foruki’s pursuit of identity mirrors Nina’s, Nair’s and diaspora writers’ pursuit for identity. They teach Rooney what to say at interviews and even how to hold the brush and pretend to be very busy with painting. Their exhibition is held at Tate and Nina
along with Rooney and Gina feel overwhelmed at how far they have come. When the day dawns for the announcement of the Turner prize from the four short-listed ones, the Tate where the exhibition was being held is packed.

Richard Morris the insistent journalist from The Guardian confronts Nina with the truth that none of the details checked out and that she is Foruki. Nina is not able to deny it and stutters ‘no comment’. The journalist walks up to Mangetti and informs him the truth and Nina can see Mangetti losing colour. Amidst this Foruki is declared to be the winner of the Turner Prize and Nina knows she has to confess and save Mangetti’s face for she had grown to respect and like him. Nina announced on stage after Rooney had finished his practiced speech that it was all part of their stance that art is beiger than the artist and that Nina is the artist. She introduced Rooney by his real name and claimed that Mangetti always knew what was going on and that he had supported Nina in her stance.

Once Nina’s identity is exposed there is obviously a lot of interest in the press. The journalists manage to interview Nina’s parents despite Nina warning them not to give an interview and it is illuminating to see how little they actually know about the daughter they have raised. They answer all the questions wrong and perhaps that is why the journalists leave them alone after a few questions. Nina’s father forgives her now that she is a celebrity and her mother is back to being worried about if she is eating properly. As a face-saving bid Mangetti warns Nina to tell the journalists at the press meet that the judges were aware all along that Nina was Foruki and Nina received the prize money of £20,000. After the press meet Nina decides to go away to Ireland for a few months until the controversy dies down. Raj gets in touch with her to congratulate her and informs her that he is getting married to his long-term friend Pinky.

Rooney and Gina move in together because they have fallen in love. Nina goes away to Galway for a few months to paint in solitude for her next exhibition. When she returns she
finds out that her sister Jana had a daughter named Nina and Jana had reunited with her parents while she was away. Michael comes to her studio when she was expecting his manager to sort out the paintings for her next exhibition and after they make a fresh start with each other again. In her second novel too Nair remains a strong believer of taking the leap of faith and following one’s dreams. Nina thinks of her journey that started on a bench in Green Park:

A year ago I was here on my knees, stripped off everything, and a year later I had finally learned to see flowers; I had kept believing even when there was clearly nothing there. And in my moments of doubting, people were sent to show me otherwise. I had defied all odds and won the bloody Turner. How mad was that? Was it because I had taken a leap of faith and done something out of the ordinary? Or was it because I was pushed or swept along? Whatever it was, on the journey I found parts of myself that I never knew existed.’ (Nair, 315)

Nair’s third novel *One Hundred Shades of White* is the most ambitious of her three novels and stands out for her deep insight into the lives of the immigrants and her empathy for the characters. The novel is a poignant story of three women with alternate narrations between Nalini and Maya, mother and daughter while the grandmother Ammu is ever present with her stories and wisdom in the memories of her daughter and granddaughter. Nalini arrives in Britain with her two young children Satchin and Maya at the age of 24 when Maya is just four. Food is a symbol of identity and culture because it varies greatly from region to region or country to country. Food is much more than just filling the hunger because food is often the strongest link an immigrant has with their homeland. Food evokes memory and nostalgia. Food from home provides comfort and familiarity to a first generation immigrant who is trying to fit in a foreign land. Nair like many diasporic writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Divakaruni,
Salman Rushdie, Amy Tan and Bharati Mukherjee attributes mystical and healing powers to the spices.

The great Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar in his masterpiece *Thirukkural* translated as Holy Couplets points out the link between food and physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing. The ancient Indian medicine system worked in tandem with the food a patient took and avoided to cure medical conditions. British literature is also replete with thinkers and writers who have written about the centrality of food in describing the human condition. Terry Eagleton’s essay “Edible Ecriture” brings out the link between food and literature. Eagleton argues in his essay:

Language is at once material fact and rhetorical communication, just as eating combines biological necessity with cultural significance. Hunger-striking is not just refusing food, but a question of not taking it from a specific oppressor, and thus a dialogical affair. Starving here is a message rather than just a physical condition, semiotic as well as somatic. Food is cusped between nature and culture, and so too is language. Nobody will perish without Mars bars, just as nobody ever died of not reading *Paradise Lost*, but food and language of some sort are essential to our survival. (Eagleton, 1)

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. *One Hundred Shades of White* is an unforgettable journey 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. Being able to cook up sumptuous Indian meals is one gift that Nalini had inherited from her mother. The gift is her legacy from her mother and rescues Nalini whenever she faces difficulties in
Like Chitra Divakaruni in her novel *The Mistress of Spices* Nair too attributes certain healing power to spices and food if prepared with correct proportions and good intentions. Nalini remembers her childhood in Kerala where she assisted her mother in preparing food for the wealthy family where her mother cooked:

> 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 … My mother would watch situations and then prescribe accordingly under the watchful eye of Annapurna, beautiful pale blue Goddess of food and abundance. (Nair, 55 – 56)

Food of the home country is often the only tangible ‘home’ in the life of a first-generation 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 mother’s 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 embrace the duality of her identity and begin to enjoy the delicious aromas and flavours of Indian food.

The novel is alternately narrated by 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 had inherited her mother’s gift of cooking and healing power of spices and food. The village astrologer had warned Nalini when she became of marriageable age:

Many men will come from afar to marry you and you will be a beautiful woman but you must not readily accept the first proposal and you must not marry in pursuit of love, for this, too, is an illusion, just a state of mind. 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. (Nair, 58)

Despite the warning Nalini falls in love with Raul, the son of the rich Kathi family where her mother worked. Unable to stay away from Raul she elopes with him to Mumbai two weeks before Raul was scheduled to get married to the girl of his parents’ choice knowing the villagers would make her mother’s life very difficult and she would never be able to return to the village again. Nalini finds herself taken to a bungalow filled with servants and decorated tastefully with rich fabrics and silks. Raul is very caring and loving to her and Nalini couldn’t have been happier. However, Nalini soon discovers that she is pregnant and Raul is sorely disappointed with the news though he pretends to be happy. As Nalini gets bigger with the baby Raul is hardly ever home, busy with setting up a new office in the Gulf. Nalini feels needy, isolated and lonely with the pregnancy and she desperately misses her previous life with her mother filled with peace. She longed for her mother but she could not write to her for help due to her guilt.
She gives birth to her son Satchin alone except for the servants with Raul being away in the Gulf. The sleepless nights with Satchin crying continually breaks Nalini and writes to her mother to come immediately and sends her a train ticket. Her mother arrives two days later with sacks of spices much to the disgust of the driver. Though Nalini knew by then that she had made a mistake by marrying for love she did not acknowledge it to her mother. Instead she chose to play the happy wife and her mother never said a word about her elopement and the trouble it made for her in the village. Raul returned when Satchin was three months old and seemed to be entranced with the little baby. Gradually relation between Nalini and Raul improved too. Two years later Nalini’s daughter Maya was born. Raul was even more captivated by her than he had been with Satchin. Raul’s business trips increased both in frequency and duration but Nalini did not miss him much as her world was complete with her mother and children. Nalini was also aware that her mother did not approve of Raul though she did not say anything.

When news came that Raul had been chosen to run the Indian Oil Export Company in the UK they had assumed it to be a short span of a year or two. However, after a year Raul asked Nalini to join him there with the children. Though Nalini is very unhappy to give up her settled life in Mumbai, she does what Raul asks her to do. She sells off their house in Mumbai. Nalini’s mother refuses to accompany them and returns to the village. Nalini’s first impression of England is hardly encouraging:

England was damp, despite it being the middle of summer, and there were hardly people on the streets. I didn’t understand a word the driver Raul had sent to collect us was saying to me and felt frightened. I held my children tightly as we went to meet my husband. Raul looked like a stranger when I saw him again… But my children were happy; they were with their father and about to begin a new adventure. Children adapt, it is adults who find
change hard. I longed to go home and be with my mother and when the children went to school and when my husband was away or at work, this solitude ate into me and made me ache, a nagging pain in my chest that would not go away. I tried to go out, but hated the constant reminders that I was in a foreign place. (Nair, 80)

Nalini found settling down very hard because there was no friendly neighbours to talk to and she did not understand the language. Raul made no attempt to help her settle down. Instead on the rare occasions he took out with his friends he ridiculed her and made fun of her lack of British manners and knowledge of handling the cutlery. To fill her time and to feel closer to home and her mother she took to cooking huge Indian meals whole day.

From morning to night, I would concoct dishes, remembering recipes and stories from my mother, cook and forget the place I was in. I would polish the cutlery and decorate the table. Nobody ate what I made. Raul had either eaten at the office or with clients or friends, and the children preferred their new-found meals of burgers and fish fingers. I would secretly garnish these with spices so that they would never forget where they were from. Every day I got instructions from them to make new English foods. (Nair, 82)

Nalini’s isolation is typical of the experiences of many first generation immigrant wives who arrived in the UK later than their husbands who had by then already acclimatized to the new culture and had lost interest in their Indian wives who appeared unsophisticated, unaccomplished, unglamorous and unsmart when compared to their liberal Western counterparts. Raul had already being losing interest in Nalini since she became a mother and was more preoccupied with her children. In the UK Nalini’s Indian ways kill whatever feelings he had left for her. Raul disappeared one autumn to America on work and weeks went by
without him contacting Nalini. While cleaning one of his coats she found a photo of Raul with a blonde woman and a young child. Confused and scared Nalini upended his closet and found pictures and letters in a shoebox. She waited for Raul to contact her but he never did.

Raul’s company contacted her after a few days while Tom her deliveryman was there and through him she found out that Raul had embezzled money from the company and absconded. The company expected Nalini to vacate the house within a week. After Tom left Nalini made herself do a thorough search of the house, but there was neither any money nor any hidden air tickets for them to go home. Raul had deserted them cruelly without a thought for them. Friendless and destitute in a foreign country with two small children Nalini is at a total loss. Nalini hardens her heart and promises to herself that this was the last time Raul would hurt her or her children. Only thinking of sparing the children the knowledge of their father’s cruelty she tells them that he died in an accident trying to save a little boy from going under a bus. The white lie that Nalini tells the children will have repercussions later on for truth has a way of coming out.

Tom finds her cheap boarding with his elder sister Maggie and Maggie escorts the children to get admission to a local public school instead of the expensive private school the children went to. The children have it really tough as they had always lived a sheltered and privileged life. Nalini is forced to take up employment in a sewing factory and in the darkest phase of her life 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 dreams 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… (Nair, 91)

Gradually Maggie becomes Nalini’s best friend and after the initial resistance from the children, she becomes their second mother. Tom too became an integral part of their lives. One of Tom’s customers ask for a bottle of pickle that was not too spicy but sweet and zesty and tom is unable to find one in the Asian market. Maggie half-jokingly suggest Nalini to make it and that marks a turning point in their lives. Nalini rediscovers her vocation:

There was a ripple of excitement as I chose the fruit and spices from the market stalls: soft Alfonso mangoes imported from India; deep red chillies; root of ginger; mustard seeds and coarse cinnamon sticks. I got back to the house and washed and peeled the fruit, cooking them, experimenting with the proportions of lemons, mangoes and spices, until I came up with the combination that I felt was right. (Nair, 94 – 95)

The client loves it and orders more and 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.’ (Nair, 101)

Nalini 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. (Nair, 265)

She 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. (Nair, 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 elder daughter narrates their story from her point of view and it provided a valuable counterpoint to Nalini’s narrative. Nalini tells the story from the perspective of a first generation immigrant who arrived in the UK as an adult. Maya tells the story from the perspective of a second generation immigrant who has been raised and educated in Britain and thinks of Britain as her home as opposed to her mother who would always think of India as her home though Nalini never goes back to India even for a visit. Maya 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 fish fingers 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. (Nair, 24)

On her first 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? (Nair, 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. (Nair, 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. (Nair, 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. Maya’s journey to Spain and finding a Spanish boyfriend and learning Spanish is a path often undertaken by second generation immigrants who seek to find a neutral space away from their fraught hyphenated identities and the constant pull between the country of origin and the country they grew up in. In Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* Gogol’s estranged wife Moushumi, a second generation Indian immigrant in the USA like Gogol falls in love with a French man Dimitri and goes with him to Paris to settle down there, away from both India and USA.

Lahiri herself has settled down in Italy and has now even written a book in Italian translated as *In Other Words* where she writes about how tired she is of using English because it is so heavy with memories and connections from her past. Even though Maya loved Suri, Satchin’s best friend, and had known that Suri was blameless she had blamed Suri for Satchin’s accidental death and broken away their relationship because she had not been able to face the idea of facing Suri without Satchin. She had ran away from her painful past to Spain to start afresh and to heal. Only when she is able to forgive the past and reclaim her identity is she able to rebuild her relationship with her family and Suri.

Lies that family members tell each other to protect them from hurt is one of the central motifs of this novel. Nalini had wanted to protect her children from the truth that their father had abandoned them cruelly and had told the children that their father had died in an accident, a true hero who had died trying to save another child. The lies only bring trouble for Nalini, Raul blackmails her and poisons Maya against Nalini, who had sacrificed so much to bring up
the children. Nair parallels Nalini’s story with Maggie’s story and her lies to her son too only estranges her from him. Maggie was an Irish village girl from a poor family who found herself single and pregnant. She ran away from home with her son Tom and did everything to give him a better life including prostitution. She hides the truth from Tom that she is his mother and not his elder sister to protect their relationship.

But the white lie explodes when Tom finds out from a trip to Ireland that he is Maggie’s son. Her profession becomes unacceptable to Tom and the love he had for Maggie is instantly converted to hate and rejection. Hurt inflicted by family in the name of love is a recurrent theme in both Lalwani’s and Nair’s novels. True to Nair’s optimistic philosophy the novel ends on a note of hope as the mother and daughter manage to forgive and forget their past and start afresh:

I clung to my mother as I have never clung to her before. For all the times I have wanted to hold her; day one at the factory when she came back with swollen hands; the morning she married Ravi; the day Satchin died and she sat alone in the rain; when I was sick on the sidewalk in Chicago after seeing Raul’s son. We stood there holding each other as if we were the only two people left in the world. (Nair, 280)

With forgiveness and acceptance of the past Maya began to show an interest in Nalini’s cooking and Nalini passes on the legacy of her mother to both her daughters. 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 and Anita Desai are just to name a few authors who 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, the smelly and messy Indian food is a source of much ridicule and bullying in school.

Maya 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. She needs to gain maturity to stop resisting her roots and embrace the duality of her identity. Nair’s novels like Lalwani’s are also bildungsromans because they follow the lives of young second generation immigrant protagonists like the authors themselves who attain maturity and learn to embrace their dual identities through emotional hardships and sufferings. The five protagonists of the five novels examined in this study learn to follow their dreams and take responsibility of their own lives and choices. There is hope that the parents would someday understand their children and be proud of them for the right reasons and not just for fulfilling the parents’ thwarted dreams.

‘I only ever wanted you to be proud of me,’ I began to cry.

‘Don’t cry, Nina. You made us very proud. Who can say they have been on the news at six? Who can say they are going to meet the Cilla Black?’

‘Cilla?’

‘Yah, part of the ITV deal for first exclusive interview. I tells them, nothing comes for free, I do this if you let me meet the Cilla.’

He held out his arms to hug me. He never did that.

I held on to him and wept and then my mum did something I never thought she was capable of. She put her arms around both of us. (Nair, 320)