

“From Uncanny Absence to Rapturous Presence” - Preethi Nair’s *The Colour of Love* as a Female Kunstlerroman

Marudanayagam, P.

Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, one of the most influential thinkers of the literary world, considered writing as a means to personal contemplation; a writer writes desirous to know his own internal cravings and emotions. From this process arose his *Wilhelm Meisters Lejhare* (*Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*) (1796), in which the title character, disillusioned by life and love, seeks a different standard and becomes an artist and a playwright. This novel, which traces the trajectory of the life of an artist, became the prototype from which the tenets of modern Kunstlerroman are drawn. Works of Kunstlerroman generally reflect the moral battle of writers questioning their appropriate standing as objective artists. In a standard work of the form, the protagonist begins in a state of confinement, often in childhood restricted in their horizons either by the limitations of their home life or the interference of the people around them. Through force of will, they escape to another location, one far-removed from their origins and more hospitable to their dreams and desired vocation (a Kunstlerroman can be about any type of artist, such as a writer, dancer, painter or blues musician), though there are still crises of confidence and struggles to succeed. During the course of their journey, they derive inspiration and direction from innumerable sources, though often these teachers exist in the shape of two counteracting forces—one that nurtures their artistic career, and one that acts as an obstacle to their inevitable triumph. Ultimately, they reach a standard of success, sometimes at a cost to their own personal well being, either morally or physically.

Kunstlerroman thus entails the journey of the protagonist from a dilemma of the self to convictions and selfhood as an artist. In a Kunstlerroman, the protagonist is in a struggle to become a successful artist desiring to create a space for himself. Kunstlerroman translates to English as ‘artist novel’ – ‘artist’ from the German ‘Kunstler’ and ‘novel’ from the French ‘Roman’. Therefore, this is the development of the artist from childhood until his artistic maturity, focusing on the man as artist, rather than the man in general. Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a young Man* are both examples of English Kunstlerroman, as both the protagonists are writers.

With the emergence of feminist literary theories, a feminist critical perspective has risen that deviates from that generalized plot line of a Kunstlerroman. Feminists have noted that in the male-authored Kunstlerroman, the lead character is often a delicate, sensitive type taking on many feminine and stereotypically artistic characteristics, but when that protagonist is a woman she is defined by the world as fearless, pushy, and masculine. The female Kunstlerroman attempts to chart the woman's freedom from traditional roles, ironically putting her in opposition to the males in her life. Maurice Beebe in his seminal work on Kunstlerroman, *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts* lists the conventions of the writer’s self-portrait in fiction. Examining numerous artist novels, he concludes that the creative artist is always sensitive, dreamy, passive, bookish, egocentric, tormented and misunderstood. According to Beebe, the woman artist also conforms in personality to the conflicts of an “archetypal” or universal artist. In his conception, “every artist is a man, always the same man, who must go to woman in order to create” (qtd.in Marudanayagam 117). But Lynda Huff in her *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Woman* argues that the traits and troubles of artist heroines are different

from those of artist heroes and women artist's novels have their own tradition and development. Huff's contention is that if the artist hero is passive, sensitive and shy, the artist heroine tends to be stalwart, spirited and fearless. If the artist hero is split between his sensual longings and his commitment to art, his female counterpart is, besides this conflict, torn between her role as a woman and her aspirations as an artist.

Preethi Nair's *The Colour of Love* is a woman artist's novel, where the protagonist is caught between her role as a woman and her aspirations as an artist. *Kunstlerroman* is very often born as a result of the author's own struggles to succeed as a writer. Nina Savani, the protagonist of *The Colour of Love*, struggling to fulfill her artistic career is modelled after Preethi Nair herself, who had to strive hard to establish herself in the literary field. Maurice Beebe again in his *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts*, characterizes the inner turmoil faced by an artist as one that eventually forces its creator into one of two groups: "Ivory Towers" and the "Sacred Founts", terms regularly used in the criticism of *Kunstlerroman*. The inference of the 'Sacred Fount' myth is that life and art are so closely related that one can exhaust or destroy the other. And, fearing that life may sap their creative energies, some artists retire to the 'Ivory Tower', ceasing to live in order to create. Professor Beebe sees this dichotomy as central to the artist.

In a *Kunstlerroman*, the concept of 'Divided Self' entails the conflict between the individual who has to conform to the social moral norms of his society and the artist in him who refuses to acknowledge any restraints and taboos other than those of his art. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter clearly brings out this conflict faced by a woman artist:

It needs little skill and psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled apart by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her own health and sanity to a certainty. (263)

Elaine Showalter's words aptly bring out the predicament of Preethi Nair's protagonist Nina Savani wherein art and life make conflicting demands. An artist whose distinctive creation demands attention for itself faces a cruel dilemma of opposing needs. It is this dilemma that characterizes the life of Nina, a lawyer by profession with a long lasting dream of becoming a painter. The path to her goal is strewn with hurdles and challenges which baffle her strength and confidence. She encounters innumerable problems from her family, her profession and also in her personal relationships. The profession of a lawyer was thrust upon her by her father and the pursuit of her artistic career can be done only by thwarting his ambitions. She is caught up in the midst of a family that is out to oppose her desires. The moral crisis of Nina is her implicit obedience to her father's demands and her innate craving to take up a painter's career. Nina's father Mr. Savani was only a bus driver and was determined on educating his daughter so that she would not have to lead a life of uncertainty. Nina gets no support from her father. The father becomes a forbidding presence in Nina's life with her sister's elopement with a White man. All hopes of the family are pinned on her. This makes Mr. Savani particularly strict with Nina, trying to shape her life and career in tune with his desires. In his struggle to get Nina into a profession, he conveniently ignores her talent with the brush.

In a *Kunstlerroman*, the protagonist begins in a state of confinement, restricted in their horizons either by the limitations of their home life or the interference of the people around them. In Nina's life, her mother represents the traditional role against which the artist heroine has to constantly fight. The support and encouragement that a woman's soul needs from her mother remains unsatisfied and her home becomes a prison that induces in her a sense of claustrophobia. This feeling of Claustrophobia – the sense of confinement in a space too small for comfort and growth – is the central image in the life of many women as in the case of the protagonist. And this confused aspirations and dreams and the claustrophobic femaleness are most suggestively embodied in the life and works of women writers. Nina strays away from the forbidding presence of her mother who is only interested in protecting her 'Indianness' and getting Nina married appropriately. Here too the space she is to relish as an artist is disrupted.

Even when mother-daughter relationships turn problematic in many works, many women writers celebrate friendship between women as an essential aspect of self-definition for a woman. In her struggle for self-affirmation, it is very often another 'woman' who assists her reach the goal. It is this 'sisterhood' that is celebrated by Preethi Nair in Nina-Ki relationship. The only person who knew Nina truly and deeply and with whom she could be her true self was her best friend Kirelli whom she called Ki. Nina experiences the terror of pain and loneliness after Ki's death. Yet Nina has a strong feeling that Ki is somewhere listening and responding through sending her signs. Ki had made Nina promise to live her life passionately and do things that she really liked to do. This relationship is contrasted with the one face which lingered in her mind at the time of crisis, the face of Jean Michael, the one with whom she was passionately in love but the very one who deceives her for

another woman. This shatters her morale as a loyal partner, shaking the confidence on which she tried to build her future as an artist. Julia Kristeva defines ‘femininity’ as “that which is marginalized by the patriarchal symbolic order” (qtd.in Moi 165). When Ki becomes a protective force even in absentia, Jean Michel becomes an archetypal symbol of that patriarchal order, when he betrays Nina for another woman. The central moral issue of a female *Kunstlerroman* is how much a woman should subordinate herself to the needs and desires of others which leads to a ‘divided self’. In literature as in life even if the woman’s commitment to art was a serious one, she was expected to drop her career and give up this commitment at the behest of love and marriage. Nina, however, refuses to conform to this norm and resolves to lead a life of self-affirmation and self-realization.

In a *Kunstlerroman* which traces the journey of an artist, he/she finds education from various corners and walks of life – sometimes, a sort of teacher figure who nurtures his artistic career. Like the “intangible phantoms” which inspire Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus to be an artist, Nina too is inspired by Matisse, the great painter. The words of Matisse: “There are always flowers for those who want to see them...creativity takes courage” (39) instil her with inspiration and courage. The hues of reality and splashes of imagination in his paintings fill her with a sense of peace. Moreover, a line from a book on Matisse fascinates her:

In art, truth and reality begin when one no longer understands what one is doing or what one knows, and when there remains an energy that is all the stronger for being constrained, controlled and compressed. (35)

This admiration for the artist Matisse introduces her to another woman Gina which becomes a re-enactment of Nina-Ki friendship. Nina is once again initiated into the art world by a chance meeting with Gina, another admirer of Matisse's paintings and it paves way for the development of a new bond. Gina becomes a substitute for Ki instilling in Nina confidence and boldness to take up challenges. Gina is willing to lend her studio as she has to take a trip to Australia. Nina considers it a sign from Ki and decides to take up the studio as the first step towards fulfilling her promise to Ki and of resisting the pressures of life. Without letting anyone know she withdraws into the silence of her studio to paint. Patricia Meyer Spacks considers the artist to be a dreamer and a revolutionary. It is this artistic dream which enables an artist to escape the burden of the real. The powerlessness and failure to resist and effect any change in a restrictive environment enforced by society drive the woman to a realm where she can assert the omnipotence life denies her. Nina's Studio becomes for her an inner space to which she can retreat and be her true self. There is nothing for her to hide, not even the ugly scar on her arm.

Quasi-biographical, the central plot of the story of a *Kunstlerroman* is driven by the creation of a singular work of art – much like the writer's creation of the novel itself. Nina's painting of Buddha can be considered as that 'singular work of art' which marks a turning point in her life. To fill herself with life, Nina captures the Buddha on canvas in red and white and dedicates it to Ki as 'Foruki' (For You Ki). The decision to frame the painting to be gifted to Ki's mother exposes it to the Director of Fiorelli Gallery in Milan and promoter of artists, Mangetti, who mistakes the dedicational words for the artist. In her bafflement Nina pictures Foruki as opposed to publicity and introduces him as a man in his

early thirties, born in Britain to a Japanese mother and who had to return to Japan and hence could not speak English. This becomes a turning point in her life. Mangetti demands an exhibition of Foruki's paintings.

Nina engrosses herself in a world of her own, painting pictures that she always wanted to paint putting down feelings she was unable to express so long even when multiple intimidating forces make her sick as in the alliance of Raj, the upper class man chosen by her parents. However she has to strike a balance as her responsibility accentuates with her preparations to hold an exhibition of Foruki's paintings in six weeks time. It gives her more exposure and the boldness to face the world. The preparation for the exhibition also acquaints her with Michael Hyland, one of the owners of Artusion, the gallery where Nina is to exhibit the paintings. If her preoccupation with painting gives her a sense of satisfaction, it is her relationship with Michael that is a reassurance for her. He even identifies Nina to be the real Foruki and backs her to fulfil her dream. The exhibition titled 'From Obscurity to Light' is smooth and grand except for the revelation to Michael that Raj is Nina's fiancé which ruptures the relation between Nina and Michael. Though Nina is shattered, as a part of self conviction and assertion, she walks out of her home without any guilt feelings treating the traditional notions of self-sacrifice and family responsibilities with utter disgust.

The novel takes a dramatic twist with Foruki's nomination for the Turner prize. Nina has no option but to invent a Foruki and decides on the Japanese vendor Rooney. However she is unable to escape the eyes of the media, in particular, Richard Morris from The Guardian. Foruki wins the Turner and Nina is forced to unravel the true story before she is considered deceptive. "The woman's most

potent fear is likely to be of abandonment, her most positive vision of love” (Spacks 160). Nina realizes that it is her fear that her people will not love her that has made her lead a deceptive life. But after winning the Turner, she feels a sense of emptiness within. Even amidst her success, a terrible loneliness haunts her in the confines of the studio. According to the critic George Henry Lewes, art and domesticity offer a conflict in the life of many women. But there are those who achieve a balanced life in which the domestic role enriched the art and the art kept the domestic role spontaneous and meaningful. Mrs. Gaskell tried to explain her feelings about this conflict to her friend Tottie Fox in 1850:

I’m sure it is healthy for them [women] to have the refuge of the hidden world of Art to shelter themselves in when too much pressed upon by daily small Lilliputian arrows of meddling cares; it keeps them from being morbid as you say; and takes them into the land where King Arthur is hidden, and soothes them with its peace. (qtd. in Showalter 69)

But for Nina, “the hidden world of art” makes her emotionally unstable. Nina’s reconciliation with her parents marks her return to the world from where she had retreated. As opposed to early feminism, the post-modern feminism or post-feminism lays emphasis on individual woman’s inner freedom and awakening, on resolving the issues and problems raised by feminism and on understanding the relationship of interdependence between man and woman. Preethi Nair, writing in a postfeminist era, cannot negate a balanced man-woman relationship. Hence, her protagonist cannot find salvation inside her studio. Even amidst all her victory, Nina feels the vacuum of Michael’s absence. No more secure in her ‘ivory tower’, Nina’s

solitude begins to scare her. She leaves for Ireland and immerses herself in her paintings. She had had a picture of Ireland from the descriptions Michael had given her. In Ireland, she captures the beauty and vivaciousness of the place into her canvas.

Patricia Mayer Spacks observes in her *The Female Imagination: A Literary and Psychological Investigation of Women's Writing*: "The conflict between and yearning for artistic expression and the desire for relationship is not peculiar to women, but women are likely to experience it with a special intensity" (166). Thus Nina in spite of the freedom she enjoys as an artist yearns for Michael's company. The only lacuna in her life is the silence of Michael. Hence Michael's return to her life makes her life complete and meaningful filling her life with colours – the same colours which she used to give life to her paintings.

In essence, the *Kunstlerroman* is often considered a therapeutic exercise in self-exploration for a writer: Who am I, how did I come to be here, and finally, was the result worth what I've given to achieve it? Not necessarily written with the intent for concrete answers, the *Kunstlerroman* still seeks a way to find a better understanding of the value and suffering inherent in the eternal struggle to create. In her struggle to create, Nina has found an answer to those questions, and all that it has cost her is a job which has never given her personal satisfaction. Hence, she can look back at her life with no regrets. In tracing Nina Savani's struggle to become an artist, *The Colour of Love* falls in to the genre of *Kunstlerroman*, reflecting Preethi Nair's own travails to shape her artistic career.

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