

The Portrayal of New Woman in *Lessons in Forgetting*

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Abstract

*The social condition of woman has changed during the past few decades and the woman of the contemporary India is making herself audible to the world. She is trying to emancipate from the clutches of traditionality. In her fiction, Anita Nair has addressed a number of social and domestic issues of the woman of modern India. Her socially conscious female characters make her a unique writer. The present paper aims to express the new age woman of contemporary Indian society, with reference to Anita Nair's female characters in the novel, *Lessons in Forgetting*. The woman of modern day Indian society has brought a change in her conventional mental set up that used to chain her on the name of marital bond.*

Keywords: *Tradition, identity, oppression, woman, Patriarchy, defiance.*

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Woman has suffered a worst kind of oppression in the culturally determined Indian society. In the institution of marriage woman has not enjoyed the equality status. Our culture is so programmed that it grants all powers to its men and prohibits a woman even to exist. There comes many phases in the life of a woman which undermine her sense of identity. The violence against a woman starts when her sex is determined in the very womb.

The living writer Anita Nair is leading fiction writer of Indian English literature. Her fiction is predominantly Indian both in setting and characterization. Anita Nair in her novels talks about woman and her experiences into their day to lives. Nair in her creative writing argues that woman all over India face the same problems. She mainly focuses on the sentiments and emotions of the woman whose intentions are not accepted by the society they live in. They impose a number of questions to the conservative society about the pains and sufferings she comes across, but her questions go hardly answered. The woman of Indian traditional society is so conditioned that they face a lot more difficulty in breaking the conservative mind set which perpetually chains the. Her life becomes miserable she tries to come out from these strict social norms and customs.

Rape, Marital rape, female feticide, dowry, female subjugation, frustration, oppression, freedom, identity, self-discovery, individuality and social issues are the recurrent themes of Nair's narrative fictions. Nair gives a main role to her socially conscious female characters. Her female characters are demanding equality from their male counterparts. Such characters help Nair to unveil the conservative outlook of the Indian society and the evil practices she practizes on woman folk.

The novel *Lesson in Forgetting* by Anita Nair is a narrative of redemption, forgiveness and second chances. Meera is the central character of the novel, when we experience her for the first time in the novel, we notice her a perfectly trained wife, who cares nothing but only her husband's wishes. But when one day she is left alone in the party by her husband Giri, a corporate. She seeks for her self

Women in India are trained to fulfill the desires of their life partners even if they had to kill their own ones. Meera loved her husband too much. She doesn't want to disappoint him at anytime. She strangulates her wishes for Giri, her Zeus. The quote from the text proves her dedication and devotion towards her husband is as:

**She was tired. It had been long and weary day
but she wanted to make up to Giri. Smoothen any
wrinkles that had kept between them. Restore the**

limbo their life was all about. If he wanted to make love she was willing and ready. If somewhere deep within, a little voice taunted her that she was bartering her body for peace, she knew how to silence it effectively” (p. 110).

Meera’s presenting her body and soul to Giri shows the daily sacrifices of Indian conventional women. Evenly Shynda while commenting on Indian femininity says that Indian woman felt a sense of protection and gratification by their spouses without thinking that they are making themselves vulnerable and weak. His attitude towards Meera was a bolt out of blue to her. Even more shocking was that her own children blamed her and turn their backs to her. Being rooted in conventional setup she was totally dependent on her husband. That dependency has failed her to realize her potential and strength. Commenting on her predicament Partha Sarthi says,

“The soft and cozy shell of matrimony which most Indian woman fit can break one day and leave the couple exposed to horror and trauma”

Being a typical Indian woman who is engulfed by her family responsibilities Meera had hardly the time to focus on herself. But when abandoned by Giri she became conscious of herself. She is like a cornered tigress that is left with no option but to pounce back. She compares herself to the Greek Mythical goddess Hera who was deceived by her brother and husband Zeus. It is said that if your sources are limited try to save more and same policy was followed by Meera. She tried certain economic measures to limit the expenses. With her husband no more around her to dictate her she can do things as she pleases. Lily while talking to her about the tall trees in the garden says that Meera should cut them down if they bother her. Meera didn’t know how to respond. She had hardly thought of her wishes and desires during her marital life. She was used to care more about the likes and dislikes of her husband. Her dreams and aspirations were always choked and crushed before the wants of Giri. Commenting on Individual relationship Bhasker A. Shukla says,

“There are three fundamental “affects” that can exist between the self and the other; attachment, frustration and rejection”

The above mentioned three factors are a hurdle in self accomplishment of not only Meera but Indian women in general. Meera loved Giri too much due to which she developed an attachment. She sacrificed her own wishes to please her husband. Giri’s abandonment left her frustrated and she was left with a feeling of exclusion and rejection. She was a post graduate and could have pursued a career

easily but for the sake of her husband she accepted the conventional role Meera's grandmother and mother noticed the change in her:

“they looked at each other, Lily and sons. This was a Meera they didn't recognize. A Meera with home and economies. A button a call, the pink papers and news magazine cancelled. No more half loads in washing machine. Lights and fans switched off when not needed. Reheated leftovers. And a measuring spoon that didn't brim any more. But they said nothing. The stern cast of her face alarmed them more than Meera realized” (p. 84).

Giri's desertion made her a transformed woman. Now she decided things on her own. She realized that Giri never loved her. It is only reason to marry her was that he thought that he was the owner of Lilac House. She thinks that he won't have married her had he been aware that the house was a leased one. She says,

“It wasn't that I chose willfully to hide it from him. At first when I brought it up, he didn't want to know. He kept shushing me. Then later, I was much too scared. I knew that we came together as the package, the house and i” (p. 111)

She perceived that Giri married her only because he thought he could possess the house. Giri's renouncement made her search for new job to keep her house functional. She became assistant professor J.A. Krishnamurthy (Jak) who was a cyclone expert. First as a daughter, then as a wife and a mother. She had hardly any time for self analysis. Besides these multiple role's she was also now the lone bread winner of her family. Her husband deliberately abandonment left her denumb and in a state of shock. She was almost paralyzed by his rejection. She was mentally and emotionally unnerved and could not realized what to do. It was like a mental trauma like to her. But she knew that she could not let herself down. She had to face the harsh reality of life and she could not escape from this better truth. She while reacting to Giri's abandonment of her says, **“gropes with herself. Searching for some clue, tha will tell her who to react. Grief, betrayal, anger, fear, loss, resentment, hatred what she s to feel” (p. 73).**

Meera gave up all luxuries that she was enjoying so that she coiled sustain and support her family. Her mother and grandmother supported her in this purpose. Lily says **“I don't need a cell phone, Meera, anyone who wants to reach me can call me here. It is too much of a nuisance really! All kinds of strangers**

calling at strange hours, wanting to sell you things you don't need" (p. 84)

Meera was never disarmed by her inexperience and by the hard ships she had to face. She thinks, **"if you love your life, you are lovable. If you hate you life, you became hate worthy."** (p 82)

She doesn't feel going to parties all alone. As Nair says, **" a women by herself at a party is like a man by himself"**

She had her weak moments but she didn't let herself get carried away by these moments. She was infuriated and cursed herself for falling pray to the physical needs. She was seduced by Soman and she cursed herself for letting him to take advantage of her. She says:

"This is false Meera. Like there ones was false Hera.

...I am the false Hera. None of this is really happening to me. It is happening to me. It is happening to another women, the women he thinks I am what , whether she was Hera or Meera, could remain unmoved when a mouth trailed a line of wet kisses down her spine"(p 220-21)

Meera changes herself from a women confined to domestic chores to a working women, from a totally dependent women to a bread winner women. She made changes in her physic; she cut the short her hair, started a new inning of her life with Jak. Being an educated woman she could take responsibility of a family without being dependent on someone else.

The next character in the novel who suffers because of the male dominance is Kala. Sarda's husband when decides to become a Sanyasi. She is accused by her father of being responsible for that. Kala becomes victim of patriarchal society. She could not cut down her ankele long hair just because her husband likes them. Even though she suffered neck pain because of her long ponytail, doctor advised her to cut them short. But both her husband and father considered it as an asset, a jewel of a married woman and she couldn't do anything but just to lament in anger **"what am I to do then? Live with this pain till I die? (p. 194)**

Even her mother did not pay attention to her wales. Like a conservative mother she makes Kala to compromise with these pains and suffering from which the woman can't get freedom. She says to Kala **"The pain will go away, Kala. I promise you. Besides there is much greater pain waiting for us woman in our lives. How can you be cowed down by something so negligible? (195).**

The Indian Stereotype is that women are taught be like an ideal woman Sita and Sarasvati. They are taught that their husband is their armeshwar and they need

to obey them. Kala suffers constantly from headache because of her hair. But can't cut them down, because her husband has not permitted her to do that. Her husband considered it an offence and said **“you didn't even think of asking my permission” (203)**. This reflects the possessive nature of Indian men folk. Kala couldn't even argue with him though inwardly she raised the question that when her husband didn't inform her about his hair cuts why should she seek permission from him for cutting her hair. Hue and Cry was raised over this minor issue by her husband, in-laws and parents as well. It was as if she had committed some crime or had broken the any moral code. His husband says **“you have deceived me. Would you have told me if I hadn't found out? You made a fool of me. How can I trust you ever again? (p. 204)**. This expresses the controlling and dominating nature of not only Kala's husband but Indian men in general. Who consider even the petty mistakes of their wives a deception. But if a sane person ponders on the situation this is not even a mistake on Kala's part. Her hair caused her pain that too unbearable and the intensity of pain was such that she cried. She told her mother that because of her hair her neck and shoulders get hurt and the burning ache of it was worse than the 'menstrual cramp'. So how could her cutting of hair be compared to deception, making fool, breach of trust. The intolerant and over possessive nature of her husband is expressed when he says that **“you flouted my authority. You betrayed my trust. You broke my heart” (p. 204)**. This portrays that he considered her, his monopoly and not as an equal one or his better half. Had he consideration, love and affection for her he would have suggested her to chop her long ponytail. He liked her hair but didn't consider the pain it was causing her. When the pain became unbearable she at last cut her hair down. Her husband considered it as a betrayal. He deemed to punish his wife **“For six months he didn't speak to me. Six months of not even a smile. We ate together, slept together, even fornicated when Ambi had the urge” (p. 205)**. Kala wanted her mother in-law to intervene and make a patch up between her and Ambi but she too started lecturing her. She said **“you betrayed his trust, our trust in you. It's not the hair. I hope you understand that. But you should have consulted us before you did what you did. You should have spoken to him” (p. 205)**. The attitude and behaviour of Kala's in-laws made her wept and sought forgiveness. Her mother-in-law told her that the only way to get back her husband's love is to regain those long hairs.

Kala was aware that after few years of her marriage she was conceiving. While reflecting on the situation she said **“we had been married for two years now. No one had spoken the word yet but I heard it in my inner year:**

barren...barren...barren” (p. 203). Her fears came true when her husband justified his second marriage. He said **“it would be amicable and civilized. That new wife and I would live like sisters, he said. The child he would father would have two mother’s, he said our son would be twice blessed” (p. 206).** Kala couldn’t say anything nor could she protest as she knew it was useless to argue. She thought her husband is crumbling her life and destroying herself respect. She finally decides to leave her husband as she couldn’t tolerate another woman sharing her bed. Before leaving she cut her hair at the nape of her neck decorated them with flowers and offered them to Ambi **“this is all you ever wanted of me. Keep it. Let me go” (p. 206).** Her chopping of hair is symbolic, it conveys the message that she was no longer ready to endure more pain and finds a reason to break her relation in which more care was given to hair than to her as a human. The reception at her parental home was also an orthodox one. The orthodox Hindu families of India often believe that a girl goes to her in-laws house in palanquin and if she returns it should only be her Aerthi. The return of a daughter in such families is not welcomed even if she suffers at her in-laws. Same is the case with Kala when she returns home her father wept and said **“What sins I am paying for? He hit his head several times. I have two daughters and they are both destitute. One abandoned by her husband. The other abandons her husband. What am I to do?”(p. 206).** Kala being the product of the modern Indian society wants to affirm her individuality. She is no longer ready to be used as a scapegoat and being blamed for everything that happens in her marital life. She doesn’t want to be restricted like the contemporary woman. She tries to defy these restrictions and decides to live her life on her own independent will. She displays the character not only contrary to her mother but to the conventional code of conduct. She tells her father **“I am not going back. And I will never grow my hair again, I said. If you force me to, I’ll leave home. I will be a whore but I won’t be a wife. Not Ambi’s wife and don’t call me Vaidehi ever again. I am Kala, do you hear me?” (p. 206).** She doesn’t now want to perform the role of Vaidehi another name of a mythical Hindu goddess and spouse of Lord Rama. She is not ready to go through the Agni Pariksha (ordeal of fire).

Conclusion

In *Lessons in Forgetting* Meera initially was a traditional wife who does everything to please her husband. But when she realized that her marriage was all about the material needs of her husband she started a phase of life. She suffered while living as a lone bread winner for the family of five members. But she showed

strength and indomitable will and courage. She says **“we may starve to death but it will be in gracious surroundings”** (p.). She shuns the mythical role of Hera and became the Meera of the practical world. Earlier in conventional set up she doesn't liked to be touched but now in the changed scenario she shared her body with Sonam, her friend. Meera's grandmother suggests her to be honest with herself and to love her own dream. Kala Chithi also goes against the orthodox set up when she cut her waist long braid, she rejects the dependency upon her husband the name Vaidehi, he has given her after the marriage. She resumes her new life as Kala Chithi. All the woman characters in Lessons in Forgetting emerge as radicals who don't want to cling with their traditional roles of wives. They defy the age old orthodox that a woman can't be independent without their husbands. They have discovered their independent selves after breaking the orthodox custom. Meera, Kala, Sarada, Lily, Vinni and Smriti are the examples of new woman who are no longer other but the human beings who are demanding equal rights. Meera resumes her financially sound life with Kitcha. Lily goes to her friends home starts to working on film industry again. Kala gets a job at Sarada and lives there.

Nair emphasis on the point that though the mentality remains the same (patriarchal) yet the contemporary woman struggles against these forces to ascertain her identity.