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Analyzing the Traditional Gender Roles in Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting*

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Abstract:

Gender consistently assumes a crucial role in the existence of every individual, regardless of their biological sex, social class, racial background, or religious beliefs. Various indigenous customs involve the mistreatment of women, with some even regarding them as unfamiliar individuals despite being their loved ones.

Gender stereotypes frequently contribute to gender-based violence over time. A gender role refers to the societal expectations and norms regarding the behaviors and attitudes that are deemed acceptable, proper, or desirable for individuals based on their perceived or actual sex.

This paper aims to examine and challenge the conventional gender norms depicted in Anita Nair's novel, *Lessons in Forgetting*. Anita Nair subverts societal norms by portraying one of the protagonists, Smriti's character in her work as a female who defies stereotypes. This study challenges the principles promoted in the patriarchal society and highlights the transformation of women from the restrictive and suffocating environments of a society ruled by men to a state of self-assertion, self-identity, and empowerment, as portrayed via the characters of Meera, Smirti, Lily, Sarada, and Kala Chithi.

Keywords: Pivotal, Stereotyped, Claustrophobic, Self-proclamation, Identity, Gender role, Empowerment.

Gender Studies

Gender studies are an interdisciplinary topic that focuses on the analysis of gender identity and gender representation as key categories of study. This discipline encompasses Women's Studies, which focuses on the topics of women, feminism, gender, and politics, as well as men's studies and queer studies. Gender is intricately intertwined with other determinants of an individual's social standing, including sexuality, race, class, ability and religion, place of origin, citizenship status, life events, and access to resources. This comprehensive collection seeks to provide readers with an introduction to gender studies in a broad sense. This demonstrates the progress the subject has made in the past few decades and highlights its interdisciplinary nature, which provides a variety of instruments for comprehending and analyzing our reality.

The examination of gender is a crucial component in the fields of Humanities, Fine Arts, Social sciences, and Natural sciences. Gender studies facilitate the analysis of gender within various academic fields and explore the societal expectations and behaviors associated with males and females, as well as the societal construction of masculinity and femininity. This theory posits that masculinity and femininity can be understood as a collection of qualities that are generated in collaboration and influence the experiences of both men and women. It questioned or contested notions of masculinity and femininity, as well as the traditional view of men and women being bound by biological factors in their historical roles. By excluding these concepts from the domain of biology, it enabled the emergence of a historical perspective.

Previous Indian novelists have shown women as stoic victims, defenders of traditional values and ethics, rigorous adherents to societal taboos, embodiments of tolerance and patience, role models for future generations, individuals devoid of personal space, and women lacking an independent identity. Throughout history, women have been consistently undervalued and overlooked. Simone de Beauvoir astutely observes, "A woman is not born, but rather becomes one." The societal portrayal of the feminine figure is not determined by biological, psychological, or economic factors. Rather, it is the collective influence of civilization that shapes an intermediary representation between males and eunuchs, commonly referred to as the female gender.

Postcolonial women writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Nair, Anita Desai, and Manju Kapoor have significantly altered the portrayal of female characters in their works. The primary focus of these writers has been to portray the interior thoughts and emotions of characters, as well as explore nuanced interpersonal connections. They reveal concealed truths by emphasizing the need to depict women as individuals who defy established norms, liberate themselves from exploitation and oppression, and awaken their sense of identity to proclaim their individuality. Female authors redefine the concept of women in their literary works. The essence of the self is inherently intricate. The countless cells within an individual give rise to ongoing internal conflicts and disharmony, raising the hypothetical question of one's self-identity.

Lessons in Forgetting

Anita Nair is an accomplished Indian author who has been actively producing a wide range of literary works in English since 1997. Her repertoire includes novels, short stories, poems, essays, children's stories, plays, travel logs, and editing projects. She gained widespread recognition for her literary works, particularly her novels titled *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe*. Her works portray the authentic experiences of her characters, exploring the impact of societal conditioning on women and their liberation from these constraints. They defy societal norms and refuse to be constrained by the limitations imposed on women. Nair defies the conventions of depicting her female characters and consistently reveals the unvarnished truth, regardless of its harshness. Her works provide a comprehensive record of the socioeconomic conditions and issues prevalent in the 21st century. The novel *Lessons in Forgetting* urges us to reconsider the ideological basis of men's patriarchal role in traditional society and contemplate the possibility of an alternate reality. The novel explores the arduous decisions women must make to establish and maintain their identity. Despite facing discrimination, women are determined to reclaim their identities within the patriarchal social order. Savitha Singh thinks that Anita Nair has successfully portrayed the significant role and empowering metamorphosis of women in the ongoing struggle for female self-identity.

The novel, *Lessons in Forgetting*, tells the story of Meera, the main character, who resides in Lilac house with her grandmother Lily, her mother Saro, and her two children Nayantara and Nikhil. During the 1930s, Raghavan Menon, her great-grandfather, started his life

in Calcutta. He develops a romantic attachment to Charo, a woman from Bengal, and enters into matrimony with her, resulting in the birth of their daughter, Leela. Charo passes away, prompting Raghavan Menon to send Leela to Shanti Niketan. It is there that a renowned Bengali director discovers her. She establishes herself as a renowned actress in Hindi movies under the name Lily. She weds Sandon, a Hungarian artist, and they relocate to Bangalore, residing in Lilac home, which was discovered for them by Raghavan Menon. Saro, their sole offspring, develops self-reliance and perceives herself as a woman with distinctive preferences. She develops romantic feelings for her best friend's brother and eventually enters into a marital union with him. The novel has Meera, their daughter, as the main character. Following the death of Saro's husband, she and her daughter Meera find sanctuary in Lilac's house. Following her father's demise, Meera endured a period of adversity that compelled her to choose a modest and uncomplicated lifestyle. She lacks ambition and does not aim for significant achievements.

“Meera never had ambitious aspirations. She lacked any inclination toward luxury clothing, jewelry, or extravagant vacations. Her only concern was ensuring that she had enough resources to provide shelter and sustenance for herself and her family. Sufficient to maintain one's dignity and avoid seeking temporary financial assistance from unwilling family members. Sufficient to sustain a lifestyle similar to theirs”, (Ibid, Pg.41)

Meera's life undergoes a transformation when the Lilac house is selected for a picture shoot. Giri, a member of the shooting crew, coincidentally encounters her and develops romantic feelings for her. He develops a close and personal relationship with her, as well as with her family. Giri is captivated by the opulence shown to him, and he sees her as a bride who possesses both elegance and a stunning ancestral residence. Giri, a strategic and driven individual, desires to plan for his future opportunities and break free from the challenging circumstances of his impoverished life in the hamlet of Palakkad. He secured employment in the corporate sector while actively seeking the chance to achieve the pinnacle of success in life. He desires to erase all memories of his father, including the faded yellowing clothing he wore and the dilapidated old house where he lived, as well as his impoverished family. He desires to attain a refined and sophisticated way of living. He weds Meera in the hopes of liberating himself from his tarnished history. Intending to elevate his social standing, he marries her, although she remains oblivious to his true intentions.

“Meera's presence would facilitate his ability to progress and let go of the past. Ultimately, he would be liberated from the lingering effects of his deteriorating history and the unpleasant remembrance of settling for less. He has a preference for the Lilac house fragrance called 'l'air du temps’” (Ibid, pg. 37). Meera identifies herself as Hera, the Greek goddess, earnestly awaiting the love of her Zeus, Giri. They have two children, Nayantara and Nikhil, in rapid succession. He advises her to cultivate social relevance, and as a result, she quickly establishes herself as a cookbook author. He exerts ultimate control over her life.

Giri aspires to establish his enterprise to elevate his social standing and attain wealth. Consequently, he intends to sell the Lilac house. He is concerned about his position in the corporate realm and desires greater opportunities. However, Meera refuses to sell the Lilac house because her grandfather had obtained a 99-year lease on the property. After 45 years, the house must be relinquished to its initial proprietors. Giri, recognizing the absence of any tangible or social advantages, concluded that his relationship with Meera had reached an impasse. Consequently, at a social gathering, he abruptly abandons Meera and vanishes from her life, leaving her to care for their two children alongside her mother and grandmother. Meera subsequently comprehends that Giri had acknowledged her as a meal ticket.

Following Giri's departure, Meera's life descends into misery, as she expresses, "We may perish from hunger, but it will be in an elegant environment" (Ibid, pg. 111). Consequently, she accepts employment as a Research Assistant to Jak, an authority on cyclones. Conversely, Giri initiates a fresh chapter in their life and requests a legal dissolution of their marriage. Meera chooses to abandon her previous persona as Hera since Zeus no longer plays a role in her life. She embarks into her second phase of life, just as Giri does. When Giri entered her life, she had made no alterations to her home, hair, dreams, or personal identity. After he left her, she desires a transformation that would make her feel like a completely different person. In the words of Meera, "Now that she has rediscovered it, she feels empowered" (Ibid, pg.186). In addition, she chooses to alleviate Giri's obligations as a parent and assumes complete accountability for her children. She goes to the party alone. She is self-sufficient and does not require the presence of others. She is not experiencing any discomfort at the gathering that Nair describes as "a woman by herself at a party is like a man by himself" (Ibid, pg.183). Her epiphany manifests itself in her choice to embark on the next chapter of her life with Jak, as she acknowledges that the person

she used to be will fade away and cease to exist indefinitely. Meera resolves to be present for him.

Smriti, the other protagonist, exhibits resistance towards prevalent societal norms, including the dowry system and female feticide. Anita Nair, the author, portrays this rebellion as a significant aspect of Smriti's character.

Notwithstanding the existing laws and regulations, mothers continue to find means of ascertaining the gender of their unborn offspring. If not the ladies themselves, then their families. If the fetus is female, they terminate the pregnancy. In the future, there may be a time when the female population ceases to exist.

Smirti's character portrays a new type of woman who is educated, brave, and able to forge her path in a male-dominated society. Furthermore, her struggles serve as a warning to young people about the dangers of being controlled and taken advantage of.

Smriti, the offspring of Jak and Nina currently resides with her father after the official separation of her parents. Drawn by her father's captivating Indian tales, she embarks on a journey to India to seek her advanced education. She embodies the concept of mistaken identification. In India, she actively participates in a forum that is motivated by powerful phrases such as "The dying daughters of India need you" (Ibid, pg.153). These slogans aim to raise awareness about pressing issues including dowry, violence against women, and female feticide in small villages. She visits her father's hamlet, Mingikapuram, in Tamil Nadu with her friend Rishi Soman as part of an awareness campaign. Upon her return to the hospital for the treatment of a glass injury, she is taken aback by the presence of numerous pregnant women who have come for ultrasound scans to determine the gender of their unborn babies. If the unborn kid is female, they may choose to get an abortion, either voluntarily or under coercion. Smirti, driven by her ideological fervor, views the practice as criminal and is determined to put an end to it.

"It is against the law!" Smirti's voice escalated, "This action is performed in this location. What is your rationale for our presence in this location? The scan doctor is not a resident of this community. The woman quietly revealed that the doctor was brought in from another location and was willing to answer our questions. These pregnant women, who come from different areas

of the district, are here because of the scan performed by the doctor. Furthermore, if you desire to, they are capable of doing the abortion procedure at this location as well, (Ibid, Pg.292).

She endeavors to gather evidence to substantiate these claims to compile a report. She encounters a woman named Chinnathayi, whose daughter passes away in the healthcare facility following an abortion. Smirti requests documentation about this matter from her. Doctor Srinivasan and his disgruntled associates deceive Smirti by sending her a false message under the guise of Chinnathayi and summoning her to the seaside. Upon Smirti's arrival, the trio proceeds to annihilate her. These men were behaving like animals. The individuals aggressively assaulted the girl, and it appeared that her increased vocalizations just heightened their arousal. "The odor detected was that of blood" (Ibid, Pg. 217). Following the harrowing and distressing ordeal, she transforms into an immobile, pitiful, and inert form. Smirti, a girl raised in the United States, encountered significant difficulties in aligning herself with her fellow Indian women and the actions she believes are her responsibility to rectify societal injustice. According to Maya Vinay,

Smirti, a character in the novel *Lessons in Forgetting*, falls prey to a case of mistaken identity. Many men in India are not adequately prepared to deal with the type of modernity that arises from advanced Western education and upbringing. Despite her lighthearted nature, Smirti is also a girl who aims to initiate societal change through her social engagement. She is harshly penalized by the patriarchal society for her involvement in local affairs. She is perceived as an anomaly by her community because she showcases the potential of our society to a group of individuals who are not yet prepared to seize or recognize these possibilities (Ibid, pg.118-119).

Nair discusses the desire of women to liberate themselves from the burdens of life through the character of Sarada, Jak's mother. Her husband abandons her and their son to pursue sainthood. His parents hold her responsible for this and as a result, she begins to live independently with her son, named Kitcha or Jak. This is due to her husband's dissatisfaction with everything in his life, including his home, wife, and son. She initially started her career as a primary Mathematics Teacher at a local school and subsequently obtained her Bachelor of Education degree to achieve financial autonomy. Upon receiving a letter from her husband detailing the insurmountable obstacles preventing his return, she gains a clear understanding of the true nature of her existence and resolves to live a life of her own. Therefore, she enters into a

new marriage with a Physics Teacher hailing from Hyderabad. Therefore, Sarada serves as a prime example of the challenges women face in striving for independence and autonomy.

Kala Chithi exemplifies women's defiance of archaic customs. After her marriage, she is given the name Vaidehi to symbolize the exemplary traits of a wife and woman. She is a logical woman who questions the blame placed on her sister Sarada for her husband's abandonment of his house and responsibilities, asking "But how can you hold Akka accountable?" Athimbel is the one who departed, a fact that is widely known among all of us" (Ibid, Pg. 198). She experiences a sense of relief from her anguish when she washes her hair in the waves, as it is the first time she feels a sensation of weightlessness. "Spontaneously, I untied my hair and allowed the ocean water to permeate through it. My hair stood on end and the pain in my neck disappeared. I erupted with laughter"(Ibid, pg.198). When she trims her excessively lengthy and burdensome hair, her spouse penalizes her by refusing to communicate with her. He returns to his usual state when she retrieves a lengthy strand of hair. When Ambi, her husband, decides to remarry due to their inability to conceive a child after 7 years of marriage, Kala Chithi presents him with a lengthy braid adorned with Jasmine and kanakambaram flowers, along with her marital name, Vaidehi. She trims her hair and presents it to him, saying, "This is everything you have ever desired from me." Retain it. "Allow me to depart, I stated as I walked away" (Ibid, pg.206). She begins cohabitating with Sarada and reverts to her original name, Kala Chithi.

After the loss of her daughter, Meera's grandma Lily has feelings of loneliness. She counsels Meera, "I have no desire to discuss the wind or the trees. If they are causing you significant annoyance, then proceed to cut them down" (Ibid, Pg. 204). Meera agrees with Lily's perspective that men and trees are equivalent. She will cease to be concerned with appeasing her Zeus, Giri. Lily advises Meera to embark on a fresh chapter in her life, emphasizing that it does not solely involve changing her appearance or updating her clothing. A transformation that results in a metamorphosed individual. "Be realistic, Meera. Gain a realistic perspective before your life eludes your grasp" (Ibid, pg.79). She counsels her to practice self-honesty and cultivate her aspirations. It rekindles her inspiration to dream once again. Lily took great pride in her status as a National award-winning actress. She desires to assist Meera by alleviating some of the weight on her shoulders, as she bears the duty of all the members of her family. Lily chooses to visit Zahira, a former actress who abandoned her career some years ago and currently resides in

Mysore. Zahira now lives with a multitude of animals and her son, who has achieved great success as a television producer. He has expressed a desire for Lily to participate in his upcoming series. Lily's advanced age notwithstanding, her exuberant tone of speech reveals her profound joy in her work. Therefore, she aligns herself with the position of a television programmer and she exhibits a high level of autonomy in her decision-making, stating, "There is no obligation to express any opinion. I am not seeking your authorization. I hereby notify you of my judgment" (Ibid, Pg.273).

Conclusion

Lessons in Forgetting chronicles the journey of women as they strive to progress in life. Furthermore, people actively shape their future. By becoming an assistant to Professor Jak, Meera achieves financial independence, manages her expenses, and takes on the burden of supporting her family. Sharda assumes the role of a teacher at the school and achieves independence by marrying her coworker and embarking on a new chapter of her life. Kalachithi changes her name to Vadehi following marriage. She divorces her husband and restarts her life under her former identity, Kala Chithi. She trims her hair, resulting in a decrease in its weight. It demonstrates her resilience in the face of her pain and her transformation into a revolutionary. She cohabitates with Jak to provide him with care. Meera's grandma, Lily, is experiencing feelings of being alone and isolated because of Saro's passing. Consequently, she decided to reside at her friend's residence and resume her employment in the television industry. Smirti's existence brings about immense suffering, as she confides in her father Jak, who feels obligated to combat unjust biases in India, particularly inside their hometown of Minjakapuram. The novel concludes with a fresh start and acquiring knowledge about the process of letting go and progressing in life. Anita Nair's writing revolves around her female characters' quest for self-discovery and their determination to assert their individuality.

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