

Identity Crisis in Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting*

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Abstract

Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) explores material relationships in the high – middle class family along with the problem of parenthood in the context of family life in the corporate world. Educated women in India try to assert their individuality, though they are constrained in their family life by the traditional patriarchal culture. The relations in the corporate world are affected by the feeling of tension, love, betrayal, competition, ambition and greed etc. and the life of Meera is vitiated by this. The feeling of insecurity makes Giri selfish and he betrays Meera. He is panicked by the uncertainty of maintaining his place on the corporate world. This insecurity makes people and self serving in the corporate world, which results in the loss of values. Nair has tried to show how life of the middle class in the modernized cities has changed, becoming callous, with the loss of tradition and culture.

Key Words: Identity Crisis, Betrayal, Emancipation, Patriarchy & Culture.

Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) explores material relationships in the high – middle class family along with the problem of parenthood in the context of family life in the corporate world. Educated women in India try to assert their individuality, though they are constrained in their family life by the traditional patriarchal culture. Meera in this novel is a well educated housewife, married to a corporate husband and has two children, a daughter and a son. Meera is a writer of cook book and guides for corporate wives. She is also a typical Indian middle class wife, who is happy to be dependent on her husband.

Meera feels like a queen in her domestic world. She is blissfully unaware of her own individuality her selfhood, her own independent world. She is married to Giri, who hails from a comparatively poor social background. Giri was enchanted with the Lilac house, the garden around, and Meera in her white nightie cashing geese away. He came as a model co-coordinator to assist shooting for a film, and was enchanted by the house as well as the girl, Meera. Giri was impressed as he had never known high-middle class culture and ladies and their house presented. He hailed from a poor family, but he had done his IIM in Ahmedabad and secured a job in the corporate world. Giri married Meera under the impression that the family owned the beautiful Lilac House, in fact, was only on a lease with them.

Giri and Meera got married after the marriage, Meera's grandmother and mother even Meera, expected Giri to move his house or his apartment. But Giri's refuses to move out of the Lilac house. Giri desperately wants to sell the Lilac house and Meera keeps opposing it, but does not tell him the truth the house is on a lease with them.

Meera does not have big dreams. She would not crave for clothes or ornaments and expensive holidays. She is happy with the enough she gets. But, she realizes very painfully that

her husband is not satisfied with enough. And one day Giri vanishes from her life, leaving her with her children. Meera's marriage ends with Giri abandoning her. Meera does not know how to react to her situation. She had never thought of her own desires, expect for becoming a perfect housewife for Giri. She became so much emotional dependent on Giri, that her own self was almost forgotten. She lost her self –identity becoming dependent on Giri and ignoring her own likes and dislikes, as a dutiful wife. Being a Post Graduate in English she could easily have carved a career for herself. Now, with Giri abandoning her, she becomes aware of herself and becomes a changed woman. Her mother, Saro and grandmother Lily notice this, they looked at each other and this was a Meera, they didn't recognize, a Meera with home economics.

Meera tells Vinnie that she badly needs a job. She now realizes how things changed between Giri and herself. Meera now realizes that Giri's choice to marry her was dictated by the prospect selling this beautiful house, and not really the love for her. She now emerges as new women. When Giri abandons her, she has to become the bread–winner for the family. She finds a job as a research assistant to Professor J.A.krishnamurthy, or JAK, the cyclone expert, who comes to Minjikapuram. He has really come to find out why his daughter, Smriti, had come here, and what really happened to her.

Meera has gone through an identity crisis in her marriage with Giri. She is basically conservative in the sense that she cannot enjoy the party culture of the high-middle class society. She tries to become a corporate wife merging herself into the life of her husband. But, when Giri leaves her abruptly, she is at a loss of know what to do with herself. There is a deep crisis in her life, as she had merged her identity into her married life. Giri banked upon selling her Bangalow, Which he thought she owned. And when he realized she could not sell it, he abandoned her. So far Meera had seen herself as the corporate wife, in her life, performed the role of a daughter, a

wife and a mother the roles imposed on her by the circumstances, and never thought of her own individuality, her own self.

Meera had cast herself in the role as a corporate wife though she did not like it. She tries to maintain her physique because Giri wants her to look like those elegant party women. Meera's self is threatened by the attachment she has for Giri and other members in the family. She is frustrated when Giri rejects her. Her attachments were the barriers for the realization of her selfhood. She is emotionally unsettled by the feeling of grief, sense of betrayal, anger and fear of how to cope with responsibility.

She, for the first time, realizes that she has to look after her family, that she has to be strong and not to reveal her state of mind to the members of the family and must acquire empowerment of sustain it. How is she supposed do it? Meera took up the challenge. She started economizing for everything. All the members of the family started forsaking the facilities once they were enjoying. Lily, for instance, "I don't need to cell phone, Meera. Anyone who wants to reach me can call here. It is too much of a Nuisance really! All kinds of strangers calling at the strange hours, wanting to sell you things you don't need" (84).

Meera transforms herself from being this weak woman and becomes an enlighten self. Her decision to accept as a research assistant of Prof, Jak, in his studies and house hold responsibilities gives her confidence. She loves her job and also the companionship of Jak, and his comatose daughter Smriti as well as Kala Chiti, the housekeeper. Now, as a secretary to Jak, Meera decides to be on her guard about how far she can go in her relationship with Jak and his household.

Meera is an example of a new woman, the result of the growth of the educational and employment opportunities. She is also the emancipated woman, economic and emotional dependence on a patriarch, a traditional husband. She realizes how her life as a housewife had deprived her of her identity and made her subservient in every way, and the kind of life she lived with Giri would hardly do justice to her abilities and also her needs. She now learns lessons not to be emotionally swallowed by anyone. She discovers love again in Jak, the love born of the sympathy she feels for him the tragic state of his daughter. She is there for, lending her support to him, in his intense sorrow.

In the patriarchal set-up, whatever happens in the man- woman relationship, it is the woman who is universally blamed. When Sarada's husband leaves her to become a 'Sanyasi' her father blames her. Kala, Sarada's sister, is also the victim of the patriarchal attitudes. Her husband is enamored of her long hair which reaches down to her ankles. Kala knows she must keep her husband happy.

And her husband is happy with her long hair. Her father also did not allow her cut her hair short. But her voluminous hair was the cause of her neck pain. Even the doctor often advised her father to make her hair short, but her father thought her long hair was her asset in the marriage market. Kala often complained to her father and mother for the pain her hair caused her. She often fell ill account of it. She angrily said to her mother, "What am I to do then? Live with pain till I die?" (194). But, her mother would not listen to her complaint, she would say, "Besides, there is much greater pain waiting for us women in our lives. How can you be cowed down by something so negligible?"(194).

According to Kala's mother every woman has to undergo some sort of plight and pains in the life. It can be warning to her about her forthcoming marriage. Her prospective groom and his family were impressed by her long hair. Kala, when she got married to Ambi, was named as Veidehi and she was supposed to be the ideal wife.

Her autocratic husband ordered her not to touch hair without his permission. This is typical patriarchal attitude that dictates a woman what to wear, where to go, and whom to be friend. Taking care of her hair was a big job for all the member of the family. Kala had to suffer headache constantly, but even after the doctor's advice her husband, would not allow her to cut her hair short. Her husband would not bother about her headache.

It was Kitcha, the boy, who advised her to cut her hair short, but when Ambi, her husband, came home, he was mad at her, that she betrayed him. Ambi did not speak to Kala for eighteen months as a punishment, though he ate and slept with her. He ignored his duties as a husband. Marriage makes husband and wife as one unit, a couple. A woman's existence is incorporated in man's existence she is, therefore, not an equal of man, in practice, she is believed to be inferior to him. Even her mother-in-law was angry with her. As a result of Kala's action to cut her hair and her childless even after seven years of married life. Kala's husband decides to marry again. This is another patriarchal trait. If a marriage is childless, the blame lies with the woman.

Kala decided to leave her husband because in a patriarchal society the childless woman has to say, and when her husband remarries, her life becomes unbearable and she has to leave. Kala decided to leave her husband cut her hair short up to the neck, plaited her with jasmine and other flowers and left her house to leave her own life she was not willing to share her life with

another women. Kala goes back to her parent's house, cutting her hair short, and ready to face her life. As a wife of Ambi, she had suffered willingly the burden of her hair, but could not accept another woman in her house. She decided to leave her husband and defies her tyrannical behavior. She sets an example for modern women by asserting her individuality.

Life of a girl is controlled by many inhibitions and do's and don'ts when she is married, her personality, her own self is controlled by the demands of the husband and his family. Kala did not have a child even after eight years of marriage, for which again is blamed. A husband is not blamed for a childless marriage.

In a patriarchal Indian society a women is to carry the burden of any failures. Kala after the abandonment by her husband, becomes an independent, strongwoman, and is able to think her own life. She would be different from her mother who was self-sacrificing obeying her husband's wishes for the whole life. She tells her father in plain words," I am going back. And I will never grow my hair again.... If you force me to, I will leave house, I will be a whore but I won't be a wife" (206).

Jak feels very sorry, because he was partly responsible for Kala's broken marriage. But, Kala tells him no one is responsible for what happens to anyone, that one must accept it. J.A .Krishnanurthy's mother, Sarada Ammal, is another example of a women asserting herself. She was, in fact, the perfect wife carrying out her duties, observing rituals meticulously, performing Puja and even played the Veena on the Puja day. She accepted her home religious playing the part of an obedient wife. But even such a traditional religious wife faces the abandonment by her husband.

He leaves her because he wants to become a 'Sanyasi'. He had married as his father wanted him to produce children and continue the family life. Sarada Ammal sets an example of abandoned women. She marries a physics teacher from Hyderabad and migrates with him to Tanzania, and starts a new life. Meera and Kala also go through the same situation, Kala and Meera, face the same fate in their marital life. Kala shows the strength of her mind when she decides to leave her husband and lead independent life. Meera takes time to come to terms with her new responsibility.

Nair is focused in this novel the attitude of the male protagonist like Giri, who think of pinning down women to the household duties and never allow them to achieve independent entity. They would like to acquire the property of their spouse just because they are the head of the family, thinking as if the women have no right to hold property. Even JAK's father was irresponsible and merciless in his act of forsaking his wife and son because he got married against his own will, left the wife and children, never wanted to have a family life, lived in the Griheshthashrama. JAK's wife, Nina, divorces him as he is too much preoccupied with his work. It can be seen how the married life of Meera and Jak both, results into a failure affecting their children adversely.

In *Lessons in Forgetting*, Nair has presented women, who have been the victim of patriarchal hegemony and oppression. Meera suffered the same fate as JAK's mother had to suffer. The only difference is that Meera's husband, Giri proved to be crass self-seeking crude husband. Kala was also the victim of patriarchal wimps, JAK's mother had said to him, "I am cursed Kitcha, that 's when I am neither a wife nor a widow" (17).

JAK'S mother, Meera and Kala all represent the universal plight of women in the patriarchal society. The young men like Shivu and Rishi also express their contempt for the NRI girls like Smriti, who carried money with them and spent it in India. No one appears to care for Smriti's zeal for social work, her concern for the both of girl children. Even Rishi, who was close to Smriti did not realize her genuine concern for social work, especially the problem of killing a girl child even before it is born. Rishi and others, though native Indian, appears to be insensitive to these problems

The relations in the corporate world are affected by the feeling of tension, love, betrayal, competition, ambition and greed etc. and the life of Meera is vitiated by this. The feeling of insecurity makes Giri selfish and he betrays Meera. He is panicked by the uncertainty of maintaining his place on the corporate world. This insecurity makes people and self serving in the corporate world, which results in the loss of values. The atmosphere has affected the children as Meera's daughter Nayantara, takes to smoking but her mother is afraid of asking her about it, as the daughter resents such questioning.

This is the example of how the corporate world has affected socio-cultural life and has caused is degradation. In this novel, Nair has tried to show how life of the middle class in the modernized cities has changed, becoming callous, with the loss of tradition and culture.

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