



CHALLENGING THE PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY IN ANITA NAIR'S
"LESSONS IN FORGETTING"

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ABSTRACT

The research paper aims to explore the elements of feminism in Anita Nair's Lessons in Forgetting. The paper seeks to study the work of Nair's Lessons in Forgetting as a text of feminine writing and deals with number of problems that are faced by the women characters in the novel Lessons in Forgetting such as female feticide, gender discriminations, love and dependence on family members, and explains briefly how they overcome such problems to move on in their lives. As per the title, the lessons that were taught to women are forgotten only to lead the ensuing, happiest life. Feminism lies not on worries and depression but on happiness and expectations. Fighting against Patriarchal society has become old as women have paved their path to make things better in their own way without any hesitation. Using it as a tool, Meera the protagonist, and other female characters think what comes next after the betrayal of their husband.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender discriminations, Feticide and Feminism

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INTRODUCTION

Carly Fiorina, an American businessperson and politician says, "Feminism doesn't shut down conversations or threaten women...a feminist is woman who lives the life she chooses and uses all her God-given gifts." (<https://thefederalist.com/2016/02/10/carly-fiorina-suspends-her-campaign-criticizes-feminism-in-farewell-statement/>.)

No matter what, but as a matter of fact, it is always questionable in the world of patriarchal society when it comes to feminism. Feminism is nothing but creating the strongest bond between women and society as well. Feminism can be described as a movement. The 'women's movement of the 1960s was not actually the start of feminism.' Rather, it was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing its classic books which had diagnosed the problem of women's inequality in society, and proposed solutions (P166*Beginning theory* by Peter Barry). Women have conquered the so-called patriarchal men and they are omnipresent because of the self-discovery of their own.

Women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Githa Hariharan, Sashi Deshpande, Anita Nair and others have dealt with gender issues mainly on how women characters have been dominated by male characters and they advocate woman as an individual, fighting against this patriarchal society. Women are not anymore to suffer under the hands of patriarchal society. Moreover, women have become capable enough to create a world for them like how Meera and other female characters create a world of their own after the absence of their husbands. Nair was born in Shornur in the state of Kerala. She has written many novels and *Lessons in Forgetting* is one among them which has been taken for the movie adaptation and Nair has also written the dialogues and the screenplay which makes her to acquire National Film Award. This novel is piled with a story within a story.

A Type of Male Domination

Nair has portrayed two very different stories in this novel which move one after another interlinked throughout the end of novel and in which the women characters are beautifully depicted especially the protagonist Meera, who plays her part as a cookbook writer, daughter, mother and wife. Moreover, she has been threatened by her husband who finds unimaginable paths to jeopardy her psychologically for Lilac house which he wants to be sold for his new business because of it Meera's husband separates himself from her.

"Meera and her husband Giri, son Nikhil, were found in a party there she meets her friends some applauded her for giving such tips to cook in her book and one praises her for Thai prawn recipe. Further she thinks that this is the place she wanted to be and spends her splendid time. Giri doesn't like it when she stays attached to his side 'We might as well stay at home then,' he said once." (P6 *Lessons in Forgetting*)

She happens to meet an aspiring actor who enjoys describing her beauty; she would rather stop him but keeps her lips closed and listens. Suddenly, Nikhil her son interrupts her by saying that he could not find his father anywhere and Meera goes in search of him hearing one of her friends saying that he has winded up two hours before. Meera understands that she is in trouble. The attitude of Giri has made her consciously sad. Her son Nikhil who keeps on asking his mother whether dad texts her or not. She says no and consoles him by saying that he may be out for some business meeting and promises him that he would be home in the morning. Moreover, she makes up her mind to lie to her mother if she asks anything about him but the ripe time is yet to come. After reaching her home she finds everyone asleep even her son Nikhil but he murmurs in his sleep about his dad suddenly and Meera consoles him again that he is to come home in the morning and makes him sleep. She can't endure the troubles that have been making a great impact in her life and she needs to know the reason for his absence for which she checks his mail but cannot find any information in the inbox and in sent items as it was erased and kept empty. But she has found an incomplete message in drafts and after reading the message she understands the reason behind his absence it is none other than the Lilac house.

Threatening Meera by making his sudden absence from the party is a kind of male domination and he wants her to obey whatever he says for Lilac house. But she has never given importance to his talks about the house. All those problems make her desperate but she continues to live with the hope that one day he would arrive. Later, after a span of time when Giri disappears, Meera's mobile phone receives a text message from her husband which makes her to check mail. She tries to get him back through mobile but she fails and hurries to check her mail which makes her feel the intense agony.

Meera, I know you must be worried by my disappearance. Furious even. I am sorry if I have caused you some anxiety over this. Please believe me, I didn't plan to do it this way. I wanted us to sit down and discuss it. If I told you how I was feeling, I knew you would understand. That our life together weighed on me.
.....

I tried, I want you to know that I tried, but I can't go on like this anymore. We have just one life to lead and I can't waste it.

I need to be more clear in my head about what I want to do. I will be in touch. Bear with me, Meera. Bear with me until then. (P 81)

After reading his email, she desperately cannot come to a conclusion that either he will come home and live with her or he won't. Later that evening she sees him walking towards her and she knows that he would no more accept his mistake. Moreover, she is taken to the coffee shop by Giri where they talk about their ensuing life. She thinks that after this conversation he could come home with her but everything goes in an unacceptable manner which she never expects. When Meera asks him the reason, he again points out the Lilac house which he desired to be sold so that he might lead a happy life with his family. But Meera remains stubborn whenever he talks about the Lilac house. Further he loathes his goose girl for the house and now it is very clear that he loves her wealth and property not Meera. Though they intimately loved each other and married such love ends in vain. Later on the absence of Giri her life has become questionable. The publisher who has been publishing her books fails to publish her ensuing book because Giri has promised to accord on buying hundred copies but fails which makes the publisher not to take risk.

God and Goddesses of Greek Mythology

Meera, throughout the novel has been referred to as the Goddess Hera and Giri, Meera's husband, referred to as the God Zeus. One could even see the God's domination over Goddess who disappears from her horizon without letting her know where he goes and the same desperation has taken place in Meera's life with which Nair acknowledges her readers to think from the classical history of Gods. Nair has rightly referred Meera as Goddesses Hera, Queen of all Goddesses and Goddesses of Women and Marriage. Hera, the Goddess gets to mingle with people and helps them and creates relationship. The same has been done after the betrayal of Giri, Meera creates a good relationship with JAK, Jayamkondan Anantharaman Krishnamurthy as his assistant and moves at a greater distance. She has become a Goddess of her family and wants things to happen in her own way. On the other side Zeus, is referred to as Giri, King of all Gods, and the God of the Sky and Thunder. Even in the Greek mythology Zeus and Hera's relationship was not fruitful. He usually keeps himself away from Hera to have affairs with other Goddesses. But Giri disappears from the party, like how Zeus disappears without letting the wife Hera know where he goes. Similarities between both the Gods are Revenge but the similarities between Giri and Mera is chaos. The chaos is that Lilac house; Meera does not want to let Giri know the truth behind the Lilac house. It is her grandfather who has taken it for ninety-nine years lease fifty-four years ago and it should reach the owner when the ripe time comes. Once Meera understands that Giri does not love her but the Lilac house she chooses for the life that she loves to be in.

.A Life within the Life

Giri's separation from Meera has made her life upside down and she keeps on asking to herself what next? She immediately becomes a breadwinner. Moreover, she has to take the burden of family and so she becomes a breadwinner of the family. Very soon she has to find a job to support her family for which she makes some changes in her home starting first by converting the telephone bill as a postpaid one for certain free calls and Saro, Meera's mother starts to share marmalade with anyone which she fails to do before. Her whole family supports her even though she has made vast changes in the existing things at home. All these things happen because of Giri's absence from her life. Moreover after Giri's departure Meera wonders what makes him to be separated from her. Kala Chiti sister of Sarada questions about her belief on her husband's return. And she says

You see, Meera, we are brought up to believe that our husband is our god. His wishes are ours, and without him we are nothing. There is a saying, Kal Analum Kanavan, pull analum purushan. Whether he is hard as a rock or as worthless as weed, a husband is a husband. Can you make a life without your husband? (P 200)

Meera is no more Hera; she has become independent to look forward to a new rightful life to support her family for which she joins as an assistant to Professor J. A. Krishnamurthy. As a matter of fact, women are not puppets to be used as men want. They have responsibilities of being a wife, mother, worker, and more but when they are dominated and given trouble many can't fight back and accept the troublesome life for the sake of society and for children. In this novel Meera never fights back but after Giri's separation she hopelessly thinks what next, what next like a refrain, because whatever happens, life must go on. Moreover, she would

have married someone after his separation but she wants to be a free bird so that she could take care of her family as a bird that spoons prey to its small ones.

Kala Chiti is another female character and aunt to JAK also undergoes the same problem that Meera has already undergone but in a different manner. Ambi husband of Kala Chiti keeps on adoring her hair but not her and one day he abandons her because of incapable of bearing a child and chooses another woman to get married but Kala Chiti paves a new way and starts to live with Sarada.

I finally had a reason to leave him. Not even my father could fault me for this. I was the wronged wife. So I left him. Before I went, I cut my hair at the nape of my neck. I gave it to Ambi. A long braid woven with jasmine and kanakambaram. This is all you ever wanted of me. Keep it. And let me go, I said, walking out. (P 232)

The portrayal of female characters in the novel is the representation of a life within the life. They never quit their life even their husbands leave them rather they are capable enough to choose a better life. When men have reasons then women have options. When life gives heavenly happiness to live the patriarchal society looks forward for the happiness that they want. Nair has beautifully pictured that how women characters discover new life even when they are in hard times.

Sanyas as a Weapon of the Patriarchal Society

Male domination is exhibited as a cowardly attitude which threatens the female characters. J.A. Krishnamurthy seemingly known as Kitcha, a cyclone study expert and whose childhood was a nightmare hardly recalls his childhood days when he sees Nikhil a thirteen year old boy with his mom. One fine morning, Kitcha hears his father talking about his way to sanyas. His wife cannot endure it though it is a pilgrimage; she hates it thinking of her child Kitcha. He fixes the dead line that after Kitcha's brahmoupadesham he will leave the house and willingly says that his parents know he never wishes for a wife and children. Kitcha thinks, he should not wish for brahmoupadesham so that Appa would be with me forever. His expectation ends in vain. The ripe time has come and his father leaves his home and Kitcha's mother Sarada Ammal in dilemma says:

'They tell me I ought to feel blessed to have been married to man who has taken up sanyas. I am cursed, Kitcha, that's what I am. Neither a wife nor a window. Who am I, Kitcha? You tell me. He says-it's not you. That's what I can't bear. If he left me for another woman, I would woo him back; I would bring him back to us. But this! How do I fight this, Kitcha?' (P18)

Later her husband's departure makes her live in hope that he would come home one day but everything goes beyond her thought when she receives a letter from him stating that he will never ever return home. This letter makes a great impact in her life. Like Meera, she goes further and joins in a school as a teacher and marries a physics teacher and starts a new life. Nair through the novel has portrayed "a life after the life" which remains an eye opener to all the female characters in the novel.

All the male characters like Nikhil's father Giri, and Kitcha's father make not only their wives to be doomed but also their children. Nikhil longing for his father's love without knowing that he would never ever come back home and the same thing happens in Sarada Amma's life; but Kitcha knows that his father will not come back home. Though these betrayals of male characters in this novel have made a great impact on their heirs but the female characters are worthy beings because they have accepted their new life with responsibility and expectations. It is not that male characters abandon female characters in the novel. It is all about female characters searching for a different ways of happy living.

Fighting Against Social Evils

Women fight back for the betterment of society. When women try to stop things that are not fit for society they are not allowed to move further as one of the daughters of JAK Smriti comes to India to continue her undergraduate degree and befriends Shivu at Stree Shakti forum. Moreover, Shivu has been invited to conduct workshop with the forum. The forum investigates on dowry and burning the women but the coordinator of the forum Rupa, wants to move on with female feticide theme around the town. Smriti is a volunteer from her college and becomes a dedicated worker to the forum. Her boldness makes her befriend Mathew and Rishi.

As the coordinator wants to conduct a workshop in Tamilnadu, Smriti arrives at Minjikapuram. During a walk near the beach, she sheds blood due to broken glass. Soon after she is taken to a hospital, she finds a plethora of pregnant women come over here to find the sex of their fetus and if it is found to be a girl they never hesitate to abort it either willingly or unwillingly. On glancing at all these things, she is determined to work on it using demos and disclose to the world about their illegal doings and collect more data on it. There she meets a woman Chinnathayi, whose daughter at the time of aborting a child is ready to share whatever she knows but fate turns Smriti's life upside down. It is because of the people who support abortion conspire and destroy Smriti. Finally, JAK investigates and finds the truth of what has happened to his daughter Smriti. At first he is walking on air because of the valorous behavior of his daughter at the same time becomes sad to know what has happened to her. When women fight the illness of society men are not in favor of joining their hands with them rather dominate them by troubling them in various aspects.

Conclusion

Lessons in Forgetting is about forgetting the lessons that are taught by male dominant characters only to lead a life in a castle without a king. This novel brings out gradual changes that happen in women characters and advocates femininity through different phases of women's life from marriage, and being a wife, a mother, a daughter and a friend. Property, spirituality, and failing to bear a child in womb are the unworthy reasons for male domination over their wives which push them to fend for themselves in the dark. But once they find themselves in the dark they are capable enough to bring them back to the light. In a nutshell, Nair delineates the trauma of female characters and leads them towards alleviating life with full of happiness. All they have to do is go further. Whatever happens, their life must move on through a life beyond the life.

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