

## QUEST TO MOVE ON LIFE IN ANITA NAIR'S LESSONS IN FORGETTING

**Padmavati Vasantrao Phutane**

Ph. D. Scholar,  
Dept. of English, Shivaji University,  
Kolhapur (Maharashtra)

### ABSTRACT

In the present article Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting*(2010) is discussed to redefine the role and the quest of women to move on life. Her writing reveals a story about real people, about second chances and fresh beginning. It deals with love, dependency and betrayal. *Lessons In Forgetting* narrates a tale of individuals, who manage to work through all the odds. Nair writes about how women want to be free. They fight against the burden on them. In short, Anita Nair writes about the rebel against the traditional role of the women. She narrates women's breaking the silence of suffering, trying to move out of the caged existence and asserting the individual self.

In Indian culture and heritage, individualism, quest for identity, protests and concepts of rebelliousness have often remained alien ideas, as far as women are concerned. Women are not supposed to raise voices for their rights, protest against injustice or question the already existing beliefs, customs, rituals and superstitions. They have to exist merely subjected to the patriarchal system. Women have to be obedient, quiet, submissive, and passive not claiming any of their rights neither as women nor as human beings. Even the earlier Indian women novelists have been portraying woman as silent sufferers, the upholder of traditional values and ethics, a strict observer of social taboos, an essence of tolerance and patience, an exemplar to their successors, a being with no space for herself, a woman without an identity or identified as subordinate to men, a worshipper of their counterparts, unfortunate and ignorant about her rights as human and so on. Postcolonial women writers have brought a tremendous change in the trend of depicting women characters. Women writers as Kamala Markendaya, Nayantara Sahagal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Githa Hariharan, Anita Nair, Manju Kapur and the others have intuitively perceived the gender issues upsetting women and presented women as an individual who fights against suppression and oppression of the patriarchy. A major preoccupation in recent Indian Women's writings has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationship. Women are no longer characterized to surrender, submit and suffer to martyrdom.

Women novelists unveil the hidden secrets and enfold the deliberate denial that are refutable in today's context. They have highlighted significance of portraying woman as an individual rebelling against the traditional role, breaking the shackles of exploitation and oppression, awakening with a sense of identity, to assert their individuality. Their novels speak about women's frustrations, refusals, retaliations, and their breach of conventional expectations. The women's question today is no longer an issue confined to the position of women within the family or their rights to equality with men in different aspects of social life. It is the part of the total, broader question regarding the direction of change that our society is taking- economic, social, political, and, the intellectual perception and analysis of that process. The issue is related to the status of women in society. Women's location in most of the situation is not only different but less privileged than or unequal to that of men. Considering power relationship between men and women, women are always oppressed, restrained, subordinate, molded, used and abused by men. Women writers redefine women in their literature.

In the present article Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting*(2010) is discussed to redefine the role and the quest of women to move on life. Her writing reveals a story about real people, about second chances and fresh beginning. It deals with love, dependency and betrayal.

Anita Nair gets inspiration from life and what she sees around her. In one of her interview she talks about the setting of her writing. She mainly writes about South India because this is the setting she is most familiar with. Bangalore and Kerala to her represent two ends of the spectrum. On the one hand Bangalore is very cosmopolitan, and has to its aspects of urban life. It represents a life style that it is fast and happening. Anita Nair in her fiction talks about how woman suffers from patriarchal system which has tried in many ways to repress, humiliate and abuse women. The question she raises in the novel makes us to rethink about the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in the traditional society and to think about the existence of alternative reality. It presents an opposition between ideological appearance represented in mythic and metaphysical understanding of the material world and reality represented in the material oppression of women. The novel describes how a woman has to make painful choices in order to assert and retain their sense of self. The story explores duty, betrayal, forgiveness, redemption and second chances. The story covers various issues like cyclones and catastrophes, love, dependency, female feticide and Page Three parties. Anita Nair about her title says that both the characters in her novel Meera and JAK have had devastating experiences in life. They need to get past it all and move on. They are constantly wrestling with their memories. Even the minor characters need to put behind their past lives and surge ahead.

*Lessons In Forgetting* narrates a tale of two individuals, who manages to work through all the odds. Meera the protagonist of the novel lived in Lilac House with her grandmother, Lily, her mother Saro and two children. In 1930s her father Raghavan Menon begins working in Calcutta. He falls in love with a Charo, a Bengali woman, and marries with her. Both of them have a girl child, Leela. Charo dies earlier, therefore Raghavan Menon sends Leela to Shantiniketan. The well-known Bengali director spots Leela. She starts to work in Hindi cinema but there is already one woman named Leela. So her name is changed as Lily. She becomes a famous actress. She marries Sandor, Hungarian painter. They come to live in Bangalore in Lilac House that Raghavaan Menon has found them. Saro is their daughter. Saro educates in expensive school. She buys books. She lies to be thought of as a woman of taste, whether it is in clothes, jewellery or books. She falls in love with her best friend's brother and marries him. They have one daughter, Meera, the protagonist of the novel. Saro's husband dies earlier. At that time, Saro

is thirty nine years old. She comes to Lilac House, seeking refuge for herself and her nineteen year old daughter, Meera. After her father's death Meera has some hard years which teaches her to worship at the altar of enough. She does postgraduation in English. She never dreams big dreams. She has no desire for designer clothes, diamonds or expensive holidays. She is described as Hera, a Greek goddess.

Once, the Lilac house is chosen for photo shoot. Giri is one of the member of it. He sees Meera and falls in love with her. He lingers at her side chatting between the shots. He becomes closer with her family. Giri thinks of the riches laid before him, a bride with social graces and a beautiful old home. He meets Lily and Saro. Giri has never known such people before. He comes from village, Palakkad. He thinks of his father in his yellowing banian and dhoti and the old decrepit house and relatives as stingy and penurious as his father. He is good in study and his Maths teacher, Sivaraman Iyer, guides him for further education. He joins the Regional Engineering College, for the first time he sees a world he never knew existed. He joins IIM in Ahmedabad. He is selected in campus recruitment and has found a job in the corporate world. He makes careful plans about where would be he by the time of his thirty, forty. He is a good planner. Giri on his work abroad, spends many hours in observing gracious living style of the people. He wants to acquire that polished lifestyle. He thinks after, marrying Meera, he would be free of the yellowing past. With this purpose in mind he marries Meera, but Meera is unaware of it. They have two children, one daughter, Nayantara and one son, Nikhil. Nayantara is nineteen year old and studies at the Indian Institute of Technology. Nikhil is thirteen year old. Giri does not like when Meera stays attached to his side in the party. He suggests her to be socialized, to meet new people, to circulate. Meera becomes a cookbook writer. People love her recopies. She becomes the mentor of corporate wives and friends to the rich and celebrated. Meera loves to attend the celebraties parties with Giri. Giri wants to start his own business, for that he needs money. He wants to sell the Lilac House but Meera does not agree to it. She strongly rejects which disturbs Giri because he is worried about his place on the corporate world. He has fear of being made redundant or, worse, passed over for a promotion. He feels that Meera is unaware of all such things. Giri wants more than enough. Therefore, in one fine day, in a party, he leaves Meera and goes away. He disappears from her life, leaving her with two children and her mother and grandmother. Meera finds it difficult to manage, financially in Giri's absence. Her daughter, Nayantara, reacts harshly for Giri's leaving home and finds Meera responsible for this situation as she does not support Giri. Meera finds her life full of clichés: big house, poor inmates; boy comes on work to house, falls in love with house and girl; they have two children-boy and girl; man rises in career, wife trails him, happy to be his helpmate, the crisis of middle-age; man abandoned wife; family divides- boy with mother, daughter declaring her allegiance to the father. Meera does not agree to sale the Lilac house because she cannot sale the house. Her grandfather takes the house on ninety nine years lease. That is fifty four years ago. It means after forty five years it will revert back to the original owners. Giri does not know about this. Meera tries to tell him but he does not show any interest in it. Then Meera becomes scared. She thinks Giri has accepted her as a package. If he could not have the house, he would not want her either. She thinks the lease would expire only when they would be very old or dead and it would not matter then.

After Giri's leaving of Meera, everything has been changed. Meera's book has not taken off as expected it to. The publisher does not agree to publish her next book. Giri has promised to

find a tie-in to buy back hundred copies, but he does not work on it. As Meera and Giri are separated, publisher refuses to take a risk.

Meera is a socialite. She finds her life in chaos when her husband walks out on her leaving with her two children, mother and her grandmother. Meera takes up a job as a research assistant to JAK. Giri starts new life and demands for divorce. When Meera's mother dies in an accident, Giri does not come to help Meera but JAK helps her.

JAK stands for the abbreviation of Jayamkondan Anantharaman Krishnamurthy. He comes to India, when he learns that his daughter, Smriti, has met with a fatal freak accident. JAK is called by his boyhood name Kitcha. His father Appa tells decision to join an ashram. Appa never wishes of a wife, a child, the murkiness of grihasthashrama. His parents wants heir to continue family line. Therefore, he marries Sarada and they has a son, Kitcha. After fourteen years of marriage, Appa walks out of the house. Sarada visits various temples in search of her husband. She takes bachelor degree in Education and becomes a teacher. Then she marries to a Physics teacher and a year after their marriage, they go to Tanzania. His mother dies of cancer. Kitcha goes to US for his further study and becomes JAK. His auntie Kala Chithi takes care of him. She abandons her husband. He decides to remarry because after seven years of marriage they remain childless.

JAK marries to Nina. She belongs to Madras. They have two daughters Smriti and Shruti. Smriti is named by this name as a symbol of JAK and Nina's past memories. JAK is known as the reader of omens, the collector of warnings, the storm warning boy. He is accurate in his predictions. He is called as the guru of simulated cyclones. He spends more time in his study of cyclone. Most of the time, he remains out of the house. He becomes more busy in classrooms and labs. He fails to sense the change. It creates a distance between he and his wife. As Nina is quick to anger their marriage comes to an end. Both take divorce. Smriti lives with JAK and Shruti lives with Nina.

Smriti is impressed by JAK stories about India. She comes in India for her undergraduate degree. She meets Shivu one of her friend, at Stree Shakti forum. Shivu and his theatre company have been invited to conduct workshop by the forum. Rupa, the coordinator of this forum, wants to take a play on female foeticide to little towns. The forum has worked on dowry and burning the women, successfully. She joins the forum as volunteer with some girls from her college. She is a dedicated worker and curious about everything. Shivu, Mathew and Rishi are Smriti's friends. They all are the active member of the theatre group. Shivu is impressed by Smriti's boldness. The workshop series of Stree Shakti are planned to conduct in Tamilnadu. The coordinator asks them to join to cover all of Tamilnadu.

With her friend Rishi Soman, Smriti goes to Minjikapuram. The place about which her father used to talk about all the time when she was a child. While walking near the sea beach, she is injured by a bit of broken glass. As bleeding does not stopped, they go to the doctor. In the village, there is only one hospital. She sees there many pregnant women and knows that all these women come for scanning to find the sex of the foetus. If it is a girl child, they do abortion either willingly or forcefully. Smriti finds it illegal and wants to stop it. She tries to collect proof against all this for making a report. She meets a woman, Chinnathayi whose daughter dies at the nursing home after an abortion. Smriti wants some paper regarding this issue from Chinnathayi. She also promises Smriti for cooperation. But the people supporting this scanning warn Soman to live the village. They also frighten Chinnathayi. They pass wrong message to Smriti by Chinnathayi and call her at sea beach. When Smriti comes there, three of them destroy her. She

becomes motionless, pathetic, frozen figure. According to Nina, JAK is responsible for Smriti's condition, because he always tells her about his Indian memories associated with Minjikapuram. Minjikapuram has a very important place in his life. The lesson he learns there is that do not run away from things that terrify. He believes in the teaching of religion i.e. to accept everything that happen and will happen in the life as it is inevitable. It has all been decided by someone somewhere before time or before one's existence. Therefore, there is peace in accepting each day, each twist of fate. His father, Appa's leaving home, his mother Amma's marriage to another man, his divorce, his dead-to-the-world daughter, the stilling of his own life etc. are the inevitable in his life. But his education had taught him to ask questions, to go beyond the surface and to probe. That's why he comes India to know the truth of what exactly happened with her daughter as there are some evidences of sexual activity before accident. JAK being a father does everything for Smriti, a pathetic frozen creature. He opines that when it is your child, and she is suffering none of the norms of civilized society has any meaning. What a parent may or may not do for a child is irrelevant.

He determines to find out the truth behind his daughter's accident. JAK starts to retrace his daughter's path on the days that led to her accident in a small town in Tamil Nadu. With a strong desire to know the truth, JAK embarks on his own investigation. He meets with the people who were close to Smriti. They give different versions on what they felt about her. JAK feels he is getting closer to the truth. But his hopes are shattered when he reaches a dead end.

Nair writes about how women want to be free. They fight against the burden on them. Sarada, as her husband leaves her and her parents blames her for that starts to live on her own with her son Kitcha, i.e. JAK. She began to work in a small school in the neighbourhood school. She is graduate with Mathametics. As the school needs a primary teacher in Maths, she joins it and also completes her B.Ed.. Once she received a letter from her husband, in which he writes that he is not coming back but going to Rishikesh where the ashram would help him seek the unconscious better. After that, Sarada stops to talk much about her husband. Finally, she accepts that her husband is not coming back. She becomes aware that her life is not over. She marries a physics teacher from Hyderabad. It is a fine example of woman's struggle to live a life without husband.

Kala Chiti is another example of woman's resistance against age-old traditions. She is renamed as Vaidehi. The name is associated with qualities of ideal woman and ideal wife like loyalty, humbleness, scarification etc.. Kala Chiti is well-educated girl. She does not believe in such age-old traditions. When her sister, Sarada, is considered responsible for her husband leaving the home, she strongly raises the question about how she is responsible. Even after her marriage, she cuts hair as she gets. She feels that she is no longer Vaidehi with the downcast eyes. Ambi, her husband decides to remarry because after seven years of marriage they do not have child. Kala Chiti leaves him and her married name, Vaidehi. She starts to live with Sarada. She cuts her hair. She takes her old name again, Kaka Chiti.

Stree Shakti is one forum that works to make awareness among the Indians, especially among villagers about dowry, burning women for that and killing girl child at the womb of mother. Smriti is part of this forum. This forum plans to cover all Tamilnadu by arranging workshop series female fetus. It gives Smriti an opportunity to see true India, to talk to the women who kill their daughters in their wombs without a qualm. The forum is intended to stoke up guilt, regret, remorse. Smriti was the dedicated worker. "The dying daughters of India need you"(Lessons In Forgetting: 153). Smriti impressed by such statements joins the forum and



works dedicatedly. Her engagement in this matter result into the worst happening with her. The powerful men in village destroy her. Though it makes her a pathetic frozen, she struggles in this situation and finally shows a sign of life.

Meera decides to give up her old identity as Hera as there is no Zeus. She starts her second life as Giri does. Meera does not change anything, her hair, home, dreams, herself, as Giri comes in her life. Now, he has left her so she wants a change, which would give her feelings of new woman. She learns to burden Giri less with the demands of fatherhood. She takes the responsibility of her children. She attends party on her own. She does not need anyone with her. She does not feel awkwardness in the party, which she supposes to feel and for that she wants to refuse the invitation of the party. She realizes that Giri is entombed in a past and no one has interest in him. The party members just talks with her about her. Nair writes: “A woman by herself at a party is like a man by himself”(Lessons In Forgetting: 183). Nair suggests that women have to be there for women. Sisterhood is a key to the woman who is alone. Nair also describes marriage as the circle of security that has enchanted the husband and wife. It is not the house of the money, the sex, kids or companionship.

Meera’s grandmother, Lily after her daughter’s death, becomes lonely. She advices Meera: “I don’t want to talk about the wind or the trees. If they bother you so much, chop them down!”(Lessons In Forgetting: 269). Meera finds Lily right. Men and trees are the same. Meera agrees that if the trees bother, it’s good to do something about it. Meera no longer worries about pleasing her Zeus, Giri. Lily suggests Meera to start a new life if she has a chance:

“It isn’t about cutting your hair or acquiring a new wardrobe....A new look that turns you into a new woman. Get real, Meera. Get real before you life slips away from you”(Lessons In Forgetting: 274).

She advises her to be honest with herself and to have her own dreams. It inspires Meera to dream once more. Giri does not support her for her research. He all the time talks about her role in children and his life. But JAK encourages Meera to complete her research.

Lily has proud of her being a national award winning actress. She wants to help Meera by easing some of the burden on her as she has the responsibility of all family members. Lily decides to go to her friend Zahira, the actress, who gives it all up some years ago and lives in Mysore now with a house full of animal. Her son is a very successful television producer and he wants Lily to act in a new series. Lily is too old but excitement in her voice shows how happy she is to work.

*Lessons In Forgetting* is a story of women’s quest to move on life. Meera searches for job. She becomes an assistant of Prof. J. A. Krishnamurthy. She becomes financially independent, adjusts expenditures and takes the responsibility of her family. She decides to start her new life with Prof. J. A. Krishnamurthy. Sarada becomes a teacher in the school. She also becomes independent. Though she waits for her husband, she finally losses the hopes of her husband’s returning to home. She marries to her colleague and starts new life. Kala Chithi leaves her husband and a name after marriage, Vaidahi. She continues her old name, Kala Chithi. She cuts her hair, which cause weight to her. It shows her resistance against her suffering. She lives with JAK to take care of him. JAK finally finds the truth of her daughter’s misery. Throughout the finding this story, JAK and Meera come close and decide to start a new beginning as both of them have troubled souls. Meera’s grandmother, as she remains alone due to Saro’s death, decides to stay at her friend house. The novel ends with a new beginning and learning a lesson in forgetting to move on life.

In short, Anita Nair writes about the rebel against the traditional role of the women. She narrates women's breaking the silence of suffering, trying to move out of the caged existence and asserting the individual self.

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