



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Female Psyche and the Quest to Move on in Life in Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting*

Shiji. S

Research Scholar,
SreeNarayana Guru College,
K G Chavadi,
Coimbatore-641105
Tamilnadu
India
&

Dr. Narasingaram Jayashree

Assistant Professor,
PSGR Krishnamal College,
Coimbatore-641004
Tamilnadu
India

In India, today, the woman is neither free nor dependent. She is lying somewhere in between the two. However, the urge for identity and independence is present in the women-folk of the Indian society. The focus of this paper will be on the empowerment of female protagonists in Anita Nair's novel, *Lessons in Forgetting*. Anita Nair's, *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) is a heartwarming story of redemption, forgiveness and second chances. *Lessons in Forgetting* contains two inter-twined narratives of loss. The novel narrates the tale of two individuals, who manages to work through all the odds. In the present article Anita Nair writes about the search of self of her woman characters and their assertion of the individual self.

INTRODUCTION:

In India, since ages, a woman's role in life was strictly compartmentalized; she was a daughter, a wife or a mother. In all these roles she had to adhere to certain appointed norms; she had no separate identity as a human being. Things are changing nowadays especially amongst the sections where education and material prosperity have ushered in a degree of enlightenment. In common with women all over the world, Indian women is also voicing her desire to be emancipated, to get rid of the unjust restrictions imposed on her and the pervasive discriminations against her. She is seeking the right to be regarded as a whole human being, not simply as an adjunct to her male relatives. In India, today, the woman is neither free nor dependent. She is lying somewhere in between the two. However, the urge for identity and independence is present in the women-folk of the Indian society. The focus of this paper will be on the empowerment of female protagonists in Anita Nair's novel, *Lessons in Forgetting*.

Anita Nair's, *Lessons in Forgetting*(2010) is a heartwarming story of redemption, forgiveness and second chances. It deals with love, dependency and betrayal. *Lessons in Forgetting* contains two inter-twined narratives of loss. One strand of the narrative concerns about Meera, who has been deserted by her husband, Giri, and lives in the old Lilac House in Bangalore and the other strand of the narrative relates to the Professor J. A. Krishnamoorthy, a cyclone study expert settled in the USA. They both had devastating experiences in their lives.

The novel narrates the tale of two individuals, who manages to work through all the odds. The story begins with Meera, wife of Giri, queen of her world, mother of two, author of cookbooks, mentor of corporate wives and friend to the rich and celebrated, that she who has everything can afford to be forgiving (LF: 6). Meera, throughout the novel has been referred to as the Goddess Hera and Giri, Meera's husband, referred to as the God Zeus. Meera remains in constant comparison with Hera: "She smiles when her Zeus Giri smiles. She hears his laugh emerge from a group of men. She smiles. The wind is Hera's own. But it is only when Zeus smiles that Hera can puff the sails and winnow the fields or what use is the wind to Hera? Wives are same everywhere....A wife in love. Meera Hera" (LF: 5). Meera, the protagonist of the novel lived in Lilac House with her grandmother, Lily, her mother, Saro and two children Nayantara, Nikhil and her husband, Giri.

In the 1930s, when Raghavan Menon began working in Calcutta, he fell in love with Charu, a Bengali woman, and married her. Both of them had a girl child, Leela. Charu died earlier, and therefore Raghavan Menon decided to send Leela to Shantiniketan. Then a well-known Bengali director spotted Leela. She started to work in Hindi cinema but there was already one woman named Leela. So her name was changed as Lily. She became an actress. She married Sandor, Hungarian painter. They come to live in Bangalore in Lilac House that Raghavaan Menon found them. Saro was born to Lily and Sandor. Saro was sent to expensive school. Saro fell in love with her best friend's brother and married him. Sandor died, and a year later Saro was widowed when she was thirty-nine. She came to Lilac House then, seeking refuge for herself and her nineteen year old daughter, Meera. After her father's death, Meera had some hard years which teaches her to worship at the altar of enough. "Enough to keep the roof over their heads and food in their bellies. Enough to retain dignity and not have to ask reluctant removed relatives for a temporary handout. Enough to live as they did" (LF: 41).

Meera's life is changed when the Lilac house is chosen for photo shoot. Giri is one of the crew member of it. He sees Meera and falls in love with her. He becomes intimate with her and her family too. Giri is swayed by the richness laid before him. For him, Meera is 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 a village called Palakkad. He wants to forget the reminiscences of his father in his yellowing banian and dhoti and the old decrepit house and relatives. He wants to acquire the polished lifestyle. So he marries Meera hoping to free of the yellowing past. With this purpose in mind he marries Meera, but she is unaware of it: "With Meera, he would be able

to move on. Finally he would be free of the yellowing past and the stench of making do. His. Like the lilac house, L'air du temps" (LF: 37). 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.

Meera has been a wife to the expectations of her husband. She confines to the concept of the ideal woman as represented by her mother and grandmother—the one who doesn't have an independent identity, a woman who sheds her "I" and loses her identity to her husband. She has always dressed to Giri's choice, as she believed men always desire their wives to be charming and attractive. Meera never dreamt big dreams. She had no desire for designer clothes, diamonds or expensive holidays. But Giri was a fantasy man who always wished to lead a gracious and sophisticated life. He insisted Meera to become a socialite by writing a cook book for the corporate wives and very soon she became a notable cookbook writer amongst various rich people. Giri wants to start his own business to achieve his dreams so he wants to sell the Lilac house but Meera rejects it. He is worried about his place in the corporate world and wants more than enough. Hence one fine day at a party, he deserts Meera and disappears from her life leaving her to battle with their two growing children, 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 holds 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.....(LF: 76). Meera does not agree to sell the Lilac house because she cannot sell the house as her grandfather takes the house on ninety nine years lease. The house has to surrender to the original owners after forty five years. Giri does not know about this. Meera tries to tell him but he does not show any interest in it. Giri leaves home without a word. She now realizes that Giri has accepted her as a package.

Indian society characterizes women as ideally warm, gentle, dependent and submissive. According to Sarabjit Sandu "The position of women appears to be very strange. Like a pendulum she is swinging between the contrasting forces of acceptance and rejection, flexibility and rigidity, fantasy and reality and revolt and compromise." The expression of identity mostly lies in dissolving one's self.

After Giri's departure Meera's life becomes miserable which she shares as, "We may starve to death but it will be in gracious surroundings" (LF: 111). Meera's book hasn't taken off as it expected to. The publisher does not agree to publish her next book, as Giri has promised to find a tie-in to buy back thousand copies, but he does not work on it. All these days, the publisher of cook books, who with no second thought chose Meera's recipes to publish, rejects her work after Giri has left her and tells to her that, "I had to make some enquiries and I hear that you are

separated. That changes the whole angle, you know. And just Desserts-Desserts for when the Boss comes to Dinner' is too niche and too much of a risk" (LF: 89). When Giri disappears from her life, She urges to become a new woman. She becomes aware of herself as an individual and can face boldly the adversities of life with determination and conviction:

They looked at each other, Lily and Saro. This was a Meera they didn't recognize. A Meera with home economies. A button a call. The pink papers and newsmagazines cancelled. No more half loads in the washingmachine. Lights and fans switched off when not needed. Reheated leftovers. And a measuring spoon that didn't trim anymore. But they said nothing. The stern cast of her face alarmed them more than Meera realized (LF: 84).

The process of seeking her individuation begins when she becomes a totally disoriented Meera, when Giri forsakes her and her family one night. After the dismissal of Giri from her life, then begins the story of her transformation into a strong and an independent woman. Meera takes up a job as a research assistant to a professor of cyclones from the University of Florida, JAK or Kitcha. Giri starts a new life and demands divorce. So Meera decides to give up her old identity of Hera as there is no Zeus in her life. She starts her second life as Giri does. Meera was once who had chosen her perfume, lipstick and dress as per Giri's choice. But now Meera says with determination to the woman in the beauty parlour that she wants a short hair-cut. She feels confident in her starched cotton saree and pearl jewellery:

Give me a new hairstyle. Short.

I am. I've had this same hairstyle for the last twenty-two years. Ever since Giri came into my life. And I didn't want to change a thing. My hair, my home, my dreams, myself. I so wanted it to be what he wanted. But it's time I became a new woman. Someone I would like to be (LF: 177).

Meera knows what lies ahead. A life to live for her and to love that life. "From somewhere in the back of her mind a thought rises, If you love your life, you are lovable. If you hate your life you become hate worthy" (LF: 82). The new Meera starts loving her life as a research assistant to Prof. Jak, cyclone expert and fulfills her responsibilities as a mother and as a daughter. She starts loving the job, the companionship of Jak, his Kala chithi and Smriti, his daughter:

She will be there for him Meera decides. But to keep herself alive, she will need to dredge all the selfishness that lies deep within her. That she also will ensure that Jak does not swallow her up, as once Giri did. So Meera does what she can. She rests her head against his arm. This is all she has to offer for now. Perhaps one day there will be more. And a thereafter (LF: 325-326).

The problem of the Meera begins because of her husband Giri as in the case of Professor Jak, all his problems come to an end due to Meera.

Will it never end? Will the past never leave us alone? (LF: 151).

All it takes is one fleeting second for an entire lifetime to shift its axis (LF: 201).

Anita Nair introduces Jak as an intense and resilient NRI professor whose teenage daughter Smriti slumps in comma after visiting sea side Indian town with her boyfriend. Jak, a cyclone study expert by profession suffers a terrible blow when he comes to India, and found the wretched body of his elder daughter who came to India to pursue further studies. JAK stands for the abbreviation of JayamkondanAnantharaman Krishnamurthy. JAK is also called by his boyhood name Kitcha. After his mother's death, he goes to US for his further study and becomes JAK. His aunt Kala Chithi takes care of him.

JaK marries Nina. She belongs to Madras. They have two daughters Smriti and Shruti. JaK is known as the reader of omens, the collector of warnings, the storm warning buoy. He is accurate in his predictions. He is called as the guru of simulated cyclones. He spends more time in his study of cyclones. Most of the time, he remains out of the house. He becomes more busy in his classrooms and labs. He fails to sense the change in their marital relationship. It creates a distance between them. As Nina is quick to anger their marriage comes to an end. Both takes divorce. Smriti resides with her father after the legal separation of her parents and Shruti lives with Nina.

Inspired by her father's Indian stories, she comes to India in pursuit of her higher studies. Smriti is portrayed as a carefree spirited person. She rebels against the existing social orders such as dowry system, female foeticide, etc. As the novelist writes "Despite the laws and regulations, women still find a way of discovering the sex of their unborn babies. If not the women, their families. They abort the foetus if it's a girl. Soon there may come a day when there are no women left" (LF: 285). She is a dedicated worker and curious about everything. Anita Nair focuses on female foeticide which is still a problem in 21st century India. As the emerging problem in our country, Smriti wants to help the Dying Daughters of India. As Mathew tells her, Here is your chance to do something. To talk to these women who kill their daughters in their wombs without a qualm. It is not awareness that is needed here. It is to be able to stoke up guilt, regret, remorse, the works.... They need you now. The dying daughters of India need you. (LF: 152-153).

For an awareness campaign she goes to her father's village, Minjikapuram in Tamil Nadu with her friend, Rishi Soman. While walking near the sea beach, she is injured by a bit of broken glass. When she visits a hospital there for treating glass injury she is shocked to find there many pregnant women who have come there for scanning to find the sex of the fetus. If it is a girl child, they do abortion either willingly or forcefully. Smriti finds it illegal and wants to stop it: 'It's illegal' Smriti's voice rose. 'They do it here. Why do you think we came here? The scan doctor is not from this town. They bring him from somewhere else, and he tells us if we ask

him,' the woman whispered 'All these pregnant women, they come from various parts of the district... It's because of the scan doctor. And then, if you want it, they'll do the abortion here as well!'(LF: 292)

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. But the people supporting this scanning warn Rishi to leave 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 hefty men approached her. Those three of them behaved like animals, the worldly beasts attacked her. They detained Smriti down and slapped her. One by one tortured her and that wasn't enough for them. Finally, Panting.Heaving.Sobbing.Seeking to escape. The booming treacherous sea waited,but anything was better than what these predatory beasts could do to her.And then the monster king of the rubbish – the giant twisted log that lay on its side- rose with the wave and came to slam against her head. (LF: 318)

She becomes a victim to gender violence leaving her completely in a vegetative and comatose state. Smriti in the process of saving the dying daughters of India (female foeticide), she herself became a dying daughter. She is cruelly punished by the male society for her interference in the local matters. When she raised her voice against the injustices, she received a brutal attack. This is the plight of Indian women when they start to voice out their problems.

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 from there is that one should 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. JaK being a father does everything for Smriti, a pathetic frozen creature. He determines to find out the truth behind his daughter's accident. With a strong desire to know the truth, JaK embarks on his own investigation. He meet the people who were close to Smriti. They gave 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 wished to be free in order to unburden their life through Jak's mother, Sarada. Her husband deserts her with a son for attaining sainthood. He marries Sarada, as his parents compel him saying that they wanted a heir:If someone is to be blamed it is me for being such acoward. I should have told you. My parents knew I neverwished for any of this. A

wife, a child, the murkiness of grihasthaashrama... It was my duty to provide them with heir. For the family line to continue... I couldn't hurt them. So I was obliged to shelve my desire (LF: 14). Sarada becomes an abandoned wife, with his young son Kitcha and She is confused at her status, "Neither a wife nor a widow, who am I Kitcha?" (17). To the eyes of the society, she was a failed woman, unable to keep her husband. This is revealed through the words of her sister, "They held Akka responsible for her husband leaving her. She just wasn't a good enough wife, one who could keep her husband at her side. She was a failed woman" (LF: 196). Though Sarada is forsaken by her husband she lives in his memory. She waits for him to return. Even a single word about him makes her happy. This is revealed when a relative comes to their house bringing them a holy pouch saying it was sent by her husband from the ashram. She is overwhelmed to say, "He has sent this for us, Kitcha. He has. What does it say? He hasn't forgotten us" (LF: 232).

Sarada later finds a job in a small town school and has a steady income. Sarada gains this independence of mind, body and spirit through education. When her husband sends her a letter narrating the impossibilities of his return, she understands the real facet of her life and determines to lead a life for hers. She does her B.Ed. Then she marries a Physics teacher and a year after their marriage, they go to Tanzania. She becomes a courageous woman to choose her life with another man who loved her, "And this time Amma chose a man who loves life" (LF: 234). Thus Sarada stands as a fine epitome of woman's struggle to lead a life of her.

Kala Chiti is another example of woman's resistance against age-old traditions. She is a rational woman who raises the question when her sister, Sarada, is considered responsible for her husband's desertion of home and its duties as: "But how can you blame Akka? Athimair is the one who went away, all of us know that!" (LF: 195). Kala's husband chose to marry her as he was overwhelmed by her long hair. Due to the effect of her voluminous hair she suffered neck pain. Neither her father nor her husband realized the pain that she had due to the heaviness of her hair. For Kala, her long hair was a burden that gave her an unbearable pain on her neck.

Like Jaya was named as Suhasini by her husband in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, on her nuptial night Kala was given a new name as Vaidehi by her husband Ambi. She was expected to be an ideal wife to the ideal man. She is tormented by her husband when she dared to get her hair cut without his permission: "Ambi chose to punish me. I had to be taught a lesson, he deemed. For six months, he didn't speak to me. Six months of not even a smile....I was never more lonely or desolate than I was then. My father was ashamed of me. And I was the reason" (LF: 205). He becomes normal when her hair reached the same length. Kala wanted to ask "Do you love me or my hair?" (204) but she couldn't. When Ambi, her husband decides to remarry, because after seven years of marriage they do not have a child. Kala Chithi decided to leave and announced her courageous decision to him, "I left him. Before I went, I cut my hair at the nape of 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”(LF: 206). She starts to live with Sarada resuming her old name, Kala Chithi. She is the character in the novel who is much ahead of time.

Meera’s grandmother Lily, after her daughter’s death, becomes lonely. She advises Meera: “I don’t want to talk about the wind or the trees. If they bother you so much, chop them down!”(LF: 269). Meera finds Lily’s views as right as, “Men and trees are the same- give them an inch and they turn unmanageable after a while.”(LF: 270). She 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 your life slips away from you” (LF: 274). She advises her to be honest with herself and to have her own dreams. It inspires her to dream once more. Lily was proud of herself 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 the entire family. Lily decides to go to her friend Zahira, the actress, who gave it all up some years ago and lives in Mysore now with a house full of animals and whose 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. Thus she identifies herself with her role for T.V programmer and she is very independent in her decision as,” Youdon’t have to say anything. I am not asking you for permission. I am informing you of my decision” (LF: 273).

Lessons in Forgetting is a story of women’s quest to move on in life. Nair has epitomized the realities of the lives of Indian women and registered a clamorous protest against the chauvinistic patriarchal society through the different female characters in the novel. Meera, by becoming an assistant of Prof. Jak becomes financially independent, adjusts the expenditures and takes up the responsibility of her family. She decides to start a new life with Prof. Jak. Sarada becomes a teacher in the school and she also become independent. She marries her colleague and starts a new life. Kala Chithi leaves her husband and her name after marriage, Vaidehi. She continues to resume her life with her old name, Kala Chithi. She cuts her hair, which causes pain to her. It shows her resistance against her suffering and emergence as a revolutionist. She lives with Jak to take care of him and Smriti. Meera’s grandmother, as she remains alone due to Saro’s death, decides to stay at her friend house. In fact, Smriti in her comatose state generates a message of positivity and hope. The novel ends with a new beginning and learning a lesson in forgetting to move on life. Anita Nair writes about the search of self of her woman characters and their assertion of the individual self.

Works Cited:

Sharma, K. K. (Ed.). *Feminism and Literature: New Points of View*. New Delhi: K K Publications, 1996.

Pandey, Miti. *Feminism in Contemporary British and Indian English Fiction*. New Delhi: Sarup& Sons, 2003. Print

Nair, Anita. *Lessons In Forgetting*. India : Harper Collins, 2010. Print.