

## Cultural Identity amidst Modernity in Anita Nair's Lessons in Forgetting

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### Abstract

The term 'tradition' is a comprehensive one and it includes all social conventions, cultural practices, religious faiths, familial and familiar relationships. The consistent burden of traditional authority has generated a rebellion against the organized forces of oppression and injustice to women. Through her novels, Anita Nair promotes the idea that women must try to come out of their suppressed roles. Anita Nair has been successful in creating strong women protagonists who refuse to get crushed under the weight of their personal tragedies, and face life with great courage and strength. My paper analyses the Cultural Identity amidst Modernity with special reference to Anita Nair's Lessons in Forgetting respectively.

**Keywords:** Women, Modernity, tradition, Identity.

### Indian Women and Modernity

The Indian woman experiences a perpetual conflict between a traditional mode of life and the modern outlook. Traditionally she is safely ensconced within her home, engaged in managing household and family matters throughout her life. Modernity promises her individualism, mobility and permissiveness. Contemporary fiction in English by Indian writers often explores the contention and consequences between tradition and modernity in India on the lives of women. Anita Nair, New Indian woman writer, has explored the nuances of this issue in her fiction. She has presented the impact of modernization, the feminine psyche and behaviour, and its repression in the traditional set-up of Indian society. Caught between the deadening influence of orthodoxy and the liberation forces of modernity, her woman protagonist provides a challenging study.

Anita Nair holds in great worth as an Indian English woman novelist of the 21st Century. We can see the familial relationships and the burning problem of women's identity in Indian society through her novels. She is very much aware of the sub-ordinate and secondary status of the Indian women who have been caught under the customs and traditions of the ancient Indian Society. The illiteracy of the women and their weak and submissive nature and their love and affection towards their husbands and children have thrown them into sub-graded status, as they lack strong willingness and

courage to fight against the age old traditions and taboos. How to come out of tradition bound society to become a new woman is the challenge of the educated married woman. Prasanna Sree comments on Indian women thus:

*The Indian woman – She is the one who is torn between tradition and modernity, she is one who is in search of self-identity, she is the one who tries to give shape and content to individual existence in a sexist society (Conflict and Identity in Shashi Deshpandes' novels, 12-19).*

Traditions, that teach women to behave like ideal mythical women like Sita, Sakuntala, and Savitri, tempt them to be called ideal, and prohibit them to come out of the traditional circle. "In our civilization of enduring patriarchal traditions, marital infidelity is still more serious for the woman" (Beauvoir: 610). Nair's women at the beginning of the plot remain docile, obedient and complying with all the requests of their husbands. But gradually drift away from their spouses due to natural quarrels and conflicts. Nair seems to believe the sentiments of de Beauvoir who she admits has influenced her and according to whom it is women who have to define, measured and explore their special domain. Simone De Beauvoir holds, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman"(293) shows women are not born or made up by norms and conditions of society. They have to keep their individual identity. But in patriarchal society woman is expected to remain obedient, unquestioning and supposed to remain meek and submissive.

Anita Nair highlights all the shades of sufferings and dilemmas of educated middle-class Indian women in her

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novels. Nair's fictional world is overwhelmed by the presence of women characters influenced by the modern education and thinking, economic freedom and employment opportunities. They are self-assertive, pragmatic and bold enough to think freely, take very casually even the serious issues like love, marriage, family and sex. This paper focuses on how the women characters of Anita Nair cope with the opposing influence of conservatism and modernity in their lives. It tries to consider the innumerable counteracting force in any woman's life, which directs her actions and choice to choose between a traditional and modern perspective in her life. Anita Nair realistically portrays traditional and modern women in her novels. She is the living writer of this century an Indian English writer par excellence. Her creativity and intelligence stood by her in all her novels. She is regarded as one of the leading novelists in Indian English literature. She was born at Mundakottakurissi near Shoranur in Kerala on January 26, 1966. Her novels are:

*The Better Man* (2000), *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Mistress* (2005), *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010), *Cut Like Wound* (2012), *Idris: Keeper of the Light* (2014) and *Chain of Custody* (2016). The novel selected for this study is *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010).

### Lessons in Forgetting-Meera the hero

Anita Nair's fourth novel *Lessons in Forgetting* turned out in 2010. Meera is the hero of the novel who carries on with an upbeat life. She is a M. A. in English writing. Be that as it may, the story takes a turn when her husband neglects to get back home. She winds up in a major issue. As she remarks: "how is it that my life has never risen above a series of clichés...man rises in career, wife trails him, happy to be his helpmate; the crisis of middle - age; man abandons wife; family divides" (LF 76). This seems to show clearly, the pathetic condition of a household female. But she does not want to remain traditional life like woman of the previous centuries who used to face oppression and suppression without raising any protest. She knows her own potential, and would like to undermine the traditional view regarding this. And we hear: "we are brought up to believe that our husband is our god. His wishes are ours, and without him we are nothing...whether he is hard as a rock or as worthless as a weed, a husband is a husband. Can you make life without your husbands?" (LF178). By assuming the entire liability of the whole family on her young shoulders, she undermines the fantasy of male centric culture with respect to lady and rescues the family out of financial emergency. Thusly, she challenges social, financial and social parts of customary society. By doing so, she challenges cultural, economic and social aspects of traditional society. In this way the novelist projects the problem of betrayal and women's suffering and highlights how the traditional set up of society is getting transformed into the new one.

### Smriti's Vociferation against Social Evils

Smriti is the second most significant character who raises her voice against the social disasters, for example, settlement framework, female foeticide, and so forth. 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, due to this, is murdered. Smriti, a girl brought up in the United States has got into the troubles when identifying herself with the fellow Indian woman; she considers it as her duty to amend the social injustice. In the words of Maya Vinay,

*Smriti in Lessons in Forgetting is a victim of such a mistaken identity. Men in India are still unequipped to face such a kind of modernity, which is an off shoot of progressive western education and upbringing. Smriti with all her frivolousness is also a girl who wants to bring about a reform in the society by her social activism. She is cruelly punished by the male society for her interference in local matters...she appears freak in the eyes of her community since she demonstrates the possibilities of her society to a group of people who are not yet ready to either grasp these possibilities or acknowledge them.*

In this way, she lays her life down for the respectable purpose. The author, through Smiriti, presents the picture of another lady who is taught, striking, able and fearless and realizes very well how to make her own way in this quick changing world and next to each other the writer cautions that gone are the times of their concealment and abuse.

### Suppression and Oppression of Women

Just as the poor are abused by the rich, moreover ladies are persecuted and smothered by the male-commanded society. The ladies in the past have been totally conventional, uneducated, superstitious and were manikins of the male-ruled society. Because of this, she couldn't think about a world outside the house, however remained mulling inside the four dividers of her home. So she couldn't grasp that she has more tasks to carry out on the planet. She couldn't keep her pace with the progression of time and stayed cut off from the standard of the dynamic world. This happened to her because of the male centric set up of society. The ladies living in such a universal and complex set up of society became habituated to this oppressive lifestyle. From very the beginning of their birth, they are trained that they will undoubtedly follow the sets of the male and the marriage is their predetermination to which they need to follow energetically or reluctantly their obligation is to manage and raise youngsters, for keeping up the customs of this male centric culture. Meera, the poor solitary soul was denied from making her choices since her childhood. Giri

had married Meera only for her property – The lilac house. Little known about this, she loved him, adored him as her entire life. Although she wanted to confess the truth about the lilac house, she was curbed from speaking as her mother and grand-mother denied. They wanted the marriage to happen. When Giri abandoned Meera after years of wedlock, realizing the fact that he just loved her for property, Meera started making her own decisions. She decides to take care of her family members on her own. She moulded her decisions then and there in every walks, she gets hurt by her husband and family members, insulted and humiliated by her daughter, even gets flattered and wooed in times by men she meets. In spite of all the sufferings, she succeeds because she decides her own destiny.

### Legitimate versus Considerate Relationship

The two genders are important to one another in marriage. It is a lawful connection between a couple. It is a social need where lady looks for security and man regard. It is a socially recognized and affirmed relationship. There are numerous types of marriage predominant, for example, love marriage, court marriage, between rank marriage, live-in-relationship, bargain marriage and paid spouse. By and by, India is going through an essential mode as at no other time. Meera in *Lessons in Forgetting* shows a similar method of contemporary society. Yet, marriage in the books of Nair is the main driver of their misery and exploitation. It is the obstacle which checks their opportunity and places them into an illusionary world. She defines the true meaning of marriage: "I think it is the circle of security that has us enchanted. Not the house or the money, the sex or kids. Not even companionship"(LF 185). But this bond of marriage has been the cause of all their sufferings. They, under this guise, have been sufferers and victims. Woman has always been man's dependant. In the event that an evaluation is made of the most recent three decades, it very well may be seen that industrialization, segment changes, social portability, modernization, progression of data innovation, globalization, entrepreneur creation, commercialization, degree of urbanization, etc are the elements which mark the method of social analysis. So the young men and young ladies themselves are approaching in choosing or dismissing their life-accomplices. Marriage in the books of Anita Nair assumes a key job in uncovering the patterns of contemporary society. In this way, we can see how the norms of this institution - marriage are under change.

### Tenacity of Conventional Norms

Indian culture still depends on numerous traditional standards and qualities which ladies need to follow. In present occasions, standing and religion are not as inflexible as in prior hundreds of years. They are losing

their ground quickly due to advancement and globalization. The effect of these components is plainly perceivable in the books of Anita Nair. Being the piece of the new age, for the most part the entirety of her significant characters are not away from its impact. On the off chance that they are situated in the light of position and religion, a genuine image of social change turns out. This denotes the method of the twenty-first century where standards of the significant organizations are under change. These progressions draw out another sort of culture which suit the flavour of the new age. These are the consequence of westernization, privatization, headway in the field of information and innovation, expanded degree of instruction, and such.

### Desire for independence

In fact, Anita Nair writes about how women want to be free to unburden their life through Jak's mother Sarada. Her husband deserts her with a son for attaining sainthood and her parents blames her for that starts to live her own with her son Kitcha, i.e. Jak. She begins to work in a small school as a primary teacher in Math in the neighbourhood and later completes B.Ed. to be economically independent. 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. So she remarries a physics teacher from Hyderabad.

As such, Sarada stands as a fine epitome of women's struggle to lead a life of her. Kala Chithi is another example of woman's confrontation against ancient traditions. She is renamed as Vaidehi after her marriage to represent the ideal qualities of woman and wife. 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? Athimbel is the one who went away, all of us know that!"(LF195). When Ambi, her husband decides to remarry, because after seven years of marriage they do not have a child, Kala Chithi leaves him a long braid woven with jasmine and kanakambaram and her married name, Vaidehi. She cuts her hair and offers to him as, "This is all you ever wanted of me. Keep it. And let me go, I said, walking out"(LF206). She starts to live with Sarada resuming her old name, Kala Chithi.

Nair's women are role models of the new society who thirst for modernity, elevation and upgradation. Her modern women protagonists are assertive with individuality and quest for self identity in the male dominated society. Caught between tradition and modernity, her protagonists search for their individuality within married life.

In Anita Nair's novels the protagonists love-hate relationship symbolizes the conflict between tradition and modernity. Looking at the man-woman relationship objectively, the novelist does not blame entirely men for the subjugation of women. Nair, as a writer of realism,

likes to create the new atmosphere and widen the scope where the women live happily and satisfactorily. She also likes to maintain a balance between old values of life and modern fashions coupled with individual and economic freedom.

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