

Role of Silence In Anita Nair's *Lessons In Forgetting*

Serina K.

PG and Research Department of English, St. Mary's College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu, India.

Anita Nair's novel *Lessons in Forgetting*, highlighting the struggles of women in a patriarchal society. Nair, a bold postmodern writer, delves into the complexities of female identity through her protagonist, Meera, who grapples with her husband's abandonment and societal expectations. The narrative intertwines Meera's journey with that of Jak, a father searching for his daughter, Smriti, who becomes a victim of gender violence. The novel address themes of female infanticide, societal norms, and the quest for self-identity amidst oppression. Nair's characters embody the fragility of modern Indian marriages and the challenges women face in asserting their independence. Through vivid storytelling, the chapter emphasizes the need for awareness of women's issues in contemporary India, ultimately advocating for empowerment and resilience in the face of adversity.

Key Words: Female Infanticides, Struggles, Silence.

Unlike the novelists of thirties, Anita Nair exhibits confidence in tackling new themes and experiments with new techniques. Her novels depict the real life of her characters without hiding anything from the readers and she reveals the effect of social conditioning on women and how they survive in the patriarchal society and find solution to come out from their suffering especially, in her novel *Lessons in Forgetting*. This novel has a strong feminine flavour where the author portrays her female protagonist as strong, determined in the same hand. She has stressed about marriage being an integral part of a woman's life or no one cares about it. She is concerned with the studies, family, love and striving for fame and fortunes. She has portrayed such a life in this novel. In India, it is the traditional norms that keep a woman tied to. The fear of society and of being a misfit is a great impediment for a woman. In India women are always considered to be as inferior beings, women are denied of their rights. So, naturally this contradiction needs to be reflected in her characters as well. Anita Nair portrays about the fragility of the modern Indian marriage and the overwhelming challenges of raising their children in a milieu. This is an ambitious layered novel.

The protagonist of the novel is Meera, who is happily submerged in the role of a

corporate wife. She is forty-four-years old and has been showed as a sacrificial lamb. She is cool, poised, and urban writer of cook books. She is educated and erudite, and mother of two teenagers. She is a successful corporate honcho for her husband Giri. Nayantara is her daughter and she is in the IIT. Nikhil is her son. She and her family live with her mother, Saro and her grandmother, Lily in a lovely old house in Bangalore. In the beginning of the novel, Meera, Giri, and their son participate in the party. In these, she always wants to be with Giri, but he suggests to her to mingle with others. It seems that she is more possessive, but he does not like that. When Meera partakes in the party, she mingles with other people as advised by Giri. In the meantime, Meera searches for him, but she cannot find out anywhere. Later she comes to know that he has escaped from the party without telling anything and that shocks her. In these circumstances, Meera compares Giri with Zeus, the husband of Hera as follows “My Giri is not Zeus. He does not frolic with nymphets or even goddesses. He is prone to fits of rage; he is ambitious. But he is eminently trustworthy. Meera hears again the censorious voice in her head: That’s exactly what Hera must have thought each time Zeus disappeared from her horizon.” (10)

After the disappearance of Giri, she manages to stand on her own feet. She finds a job and manages to fulfil her responsibilities as a mother, a daughter, and she slowly accepts that life has more to offer, even though she does not know exactly what is in store for her. In the meantime, Meera faces so many difficulties to run the family without having money for her own. Looking for a job, she lands on one as a research assistant to a professor of cyclones from the University of Florida, Jak or Kitcha, who is here on his own mission. Meera gets acquainted with other men after Giri has walked out, including the philanderer cine star, Soman Rishi and Jak, the storm predictor. Anita Nair depicts Meera as one leading a meaningless life. She suffers a lot without male guidance for her family, because she has no father and grandfather as they are also passed away. When she enters in her marriage life, she feels very happy, but it does not last long. Even though he lives, he leaves away from her without bothering of his wife and two children. She faces so many difficulties for running her family.

In this novel most of the characters suffer having no life partner although they have been married. The author portrays the character of Meera as an organized person. She does not have any identity of her own, because she is considered as a granddaughter, daughter, wife and mother. She subsumes herself into the identity of her husband and allows her to the other roles to contain but she finds it difficult and would not even know

where to begin. In the absence of Meera's identity is revealed a sad reality of today's women's position. Anita Nair says,

The woman is just doing her job. And it seems to Meera, wife of Giri queen of her world, mother of two, author of cook books, mentor of corporate wives and friend to the rich and celebrated, that she who has everything can afford to be forgiving... Meera can afford to be generous. She gleams at the woman (6)

The realistic portrayal of Nair's character is inducing. For example, Jak's quest to learn about his daughter takes him to a small Tamil Nadu village where large female infanticide racket thrives. It is integral to the plot, yet Nair does not offer any sort of closure to it. There are too many characters such as Meera's mother, grandmother, Jak's aunt each with their own background story. After a long time, Meera gets a mail from Giri that he is settled in Madras. He reveals the reason why he leaves away from her that is after their marriage. He requests her to sell the house for the development of their family. But she refuses to do that and tells him that it is not their home and they have to pay for staying there. For that he gets angry and says "That's what couples argue about. But we are not one, are we? You are the landlady and I am the tenant. It is always you. Your house. Your family. Your friends. Has it occurred to you how I feel?" (108). Later, he asks her to divorce him because he wants to marry another girl. As Meera does accept to sell the house, he wants to punish her. This is childish vengefulness. In the beginning she compares herself as Hera but after the disappearance of Giri, she gets disappointed and says,

I am not Hera, she tells herself. I will not panic. I will not spew venom or make known my rage. I will not lower my dignity or shame myself. I can live with these shadows as long as it is me he comes from to. Besides, Giri is not Zeus. He is not a compulsive philanderer, merely a middle-aged man who has had his head turned (39)

Meera's character is determined by Lily as serious granddaughter. Giri's elegant wife, and Nikhil's and Nayanantara's dependable mother. As for as Jak is concerned about Meera, "A silly cookbook writer. A pathetic and abandoned wife. A desperate and no skills employee." (133) Jak is a weather expert and specially a cyclone specialist. He is working on a book on cyclone. There is a lot of data to wade through, a lot of information to source and collate, and he needs help and for what he appoints Meera as a research assistant. Jak comes to know about the life of Meera and thinks of the life of his

mother, Sarada Ammal who is a perfect wife and mother. But his father wants to go to Ashram leaving his wife and son. His mother feels a lot to allow him to go and Jak discovers his mother who lays as a stone and after his father has gone. His mother asks him,

What do I do now? They tell me I ought to feel blessed to have been married to a man who has taken up sanyas. I am cursed, Kitcha, that's what I am. Neither a wife nor a widow. Who am I Kitcha? You tell me...If he let me for Jak does not know to console his mother as he is in the position, because he also misses his father. (12)

In this novel, Nair shows two kinds of broken marriage relationships. The first, who is abandoned by her husband, and the second one, who is abandoned by his wife. The two protagonists of this novel are abandoned by their partners without having any valuable reasons. That is, Meera is abandoned by her husband Giri and Jak is abandoned by his wife Nina. Both are helplessly living in the same situation. The next character is Kala Chithi who lives with her husband Ambi happily. She has a long hair which attracts her family. Her hair makes her a demure girl and then a demure woman. She is a daughter who pleases her father and later a wife who is pleased by her husband. Her husband is very much impressed by her long hair which makes him marry her. Always he gets promised her not to do anything on her hair without his permission but she disobeys his words and cuts her hair without his knowledge. Then misunderstanding comes into their life and they want to break their relationship just for this reason. Later on, Kala chithi Jak's aunt realizes her mistake and thinks about her sister who is also the responsible for her husband leaving her. This action disappoints her,

You deceived me. Would you have told me if I hadn't found out? You made a fool of me. How can I trust you ever again? You flouted my authority. You betrayed my trust. You broke my heart... His anger is revealed in the following passage: For the first six months Ambi choose to punish me. I had to be thought a lesson, he deemed. For six months he didn't speak to me. Six months of not even a smile. We ate together, slept together, even fornicated when Ambi had the urge, but he wasn't the Ambi I knew or loved. I loved. I was never more lonely or desolate than I was then. (205)

Ambi is not ready to forgive her, so he wants to marry another girl by giving the reason that she also finds the reason to leave him. She herself thinks that she is unfit as

wife and so, she wants to go away from him. Before she leaves him, she cuts her hair at the nape of her neck and gives it to Ambi and declares, “This is all you ever wanted of me. And let me go” (206). After departure, she returns to her father’s home. Her father is worried about his daughter and confesses as, “What sins am I paying for? He hit his head several times. I have two daughters and they are both destitute. One abandoned by her husband. The other abandons her husband. What am I to do?” (206). Finally, Jak worries about his daughter and feels that he is responsible for her bad condition and Kala Chithi consoles him telling that “No one is responsible for what happens to someone else. You have to accept that. Whether it is my life or Smiriti’s” (207). Each and every character in this book is beautifully described. Be it Meera, Jak, her mother, her daughter, or even Jak’s aunt, and Kala Chithi, who has a own story to tell. Like any other Anita Nair’s book, this one is unputdownable.

Anita Nair portrays the condition and status of women and how they suffer in the patriarchal society without having any identity on their own. Her novel reveals the effect of social conditioning of women. She has portrayed her protagonists who are economically independent but still they do not have control over their own life and even major decisions of their life are taken by others. In this novel, she tells how women suffer after getting married and without marriage. Whatever situation a woman is, she has to suffer a lot in the patriarchal society.

Meera and Jak are the two desperate people who cling to each other. Meera will be there for him. But she is not able to give him the reassurance of what he wants from her. She thinks of her favourite fruit, “the pomegranate. Of how she savors it best when she eats it seed by rather than as a handful thrown into her mouth. She will take a cue from that. Of how resurrection is to be fashioned one day at time” (325). Nair’s novel talks about forgetting and coming to terms with second life. The novel has been open ended. But then, the intimacy between Jak and Meera will perhaps draw them closer. As the day passes, fresh beginnings appear where seemed to be only endings.

Lessons in Forgetting is a story of real people in a real world but far from perfect country, where female infanticide still happens with impunity. It is also a story of forgiveness, redemption, and second chances. It is ultimately a story about individuals in deep crises together to offer succour to each other. It is ultimately a story told by an accomplished storyteller who may oftentimes touch upon stodgy topics and ultimately a story that deserves a chance. Forgetting is as much a blessing as the ability to memorise. Conclusively, her female characters have no identity. But they are bold

enough to fulfill their desires by negating family bond to go to the extent of establishing physical gratifications with other men. Women are kept in silence in the male-dominated society as they have no rights to do anything and this is portrayed in this novel. The story is about how women open with personal crises such as loneliness, ill-treatment, rape, abortion, madness and betrayal at different stages of their lives.

J.A. Krishnamurthy, also known as Jak, a single father who is skillfully portrayed is at the centre of the narrative. Jak ruthlessly follows a trail left by subtle clues to discover what transpired to his daughter, Smriti, in a small coastal village in rural Tamil Nadu. Smriti, the daughter of Jak and Nina reside with her father after the legal separation of her parents. Inspired by her father's Indian stories, she comes to India in pursuit of her higher studies. She represents the mistaken identity. She meets her fatal end as she tends to bring change by pointing out the prevailing social evils.

A single mother named Meera who struggles to understand her husband's callousness and abandonment of their marriage, forcing her to raise their two adolescent children and take care of her ailing mother and grandmother alone, joins Jak in his pursuit. Jak's frantic search for answers regarding a horrific occurrence involving his daughter and his yearning for redemption lead Meera and him down a treacherous path that completely upends his life. The story addresses some extremely delicate themes with gender, such as masculine gaze, skewed sex selection, and gender violence. Jak and Meera are two souls on a journey brought together by fate.

Anita Nair expresses the need to make readers aware of the dark side of the developing nation and also the plight of anyone who questions it. She discusses how women suffer in the social system, which has driven them in various ways to repress, degrade, and abuse, in *Lessons in Forgetting*. In her book, she poses several issues and prompts readers to consider the theoretical underpinnings of sociology's place in conventional society. She writes for women to give them a voice in society even though she does not intend to label herself as a feminist author. She is among the best examples of an author who strives to highlight the violence that women experience, how to combat it, and how to set an example for themselves and patriarchal society. She encourages women to have independent lives in each of her novel.

In India, a woman is bound by the ancient customs. For women, one of the biggest obstacles is their fear of societal structure and of fitting in. Women are also denied their rights in India since they are often viewed as lesser humans. Hence, it follows that her characters also need to represent contradiction. Anita Nair depicts the

frailty of the contemporary Indian wedding and the enormous difficulties associated with parenting the kids in a certain environment.

Jak's thoughts over life and its uncertainty inspires his daughter, Smriti. Jak tells Smriti that it is impossible to predict exactly the phenomena of nature and life as well. Everything in nature and life carry uncertainty. No one knows what will happen at the next moment. Jak remarks: "You can study nature as much as you want, but you can't ever predict it. Actually, there is nothing in life you can predict" (44). This seems as a warning sign to Smriti for her awaiting danger. She goes to India to get her degree since the story her father, Jak, told her about India captivated her. She desires a personal encounter with the customs and culture. She joins the campaign at college, "Save the girl child". She embarks on a journey with her companions to raise awareness about the existing societal structures, such as the dowry system and female feticide. They are developing the play "Dying Daughters". She visits the village of Minjikapuram during this campaign since she has heard her father refer to it frequently. Her foot is hurt while wandering close to the sea beach by a piece of shattered glass. She goes to the neighbouring hospital to receive first aid.

There is a sizable crowd of people gathered for various types of check-ups because there is just one hospital in the area. She encounters a number of pregnant women in the hospital who have gone there to learn the sex of unborn children, which is against the law. Women still manage to learn the gender of their unborn children. Smriti makes up her mind to oppose female foeticide. She develops a strategy to combat this category of social ills.

Meera collects documents against the illegal killing of female fetuses. Elaborating female foeticide and its impacts in India concludes that the intentional killing of newborn female offspring is known as female infanticide. The practise of gender-selective abortion is frequently considered as a closely connected issue in nations with a history of female infanticide. Female infanticide is a serious problem in several countries, including China, India, and Pakistan. It has been stated that bias against women exists because of how poorly patriarchal civilizations see women. In only one other large nation, India, do more girl babies die than boy babies. There is an 11% gender gap in child survival. According to the United Nations, India performs an estimated 2,000 unlawful abortions per day of unborn girls.

India has a long history of killing female infants. The causes of the phenomenon of female infanticide in India have included impoverishment, the dowry system, births to

unmarried women, malformed infants, starvation, a lack of support services, and maternal disorders such postpartum depression. Although being made a crime in India, infanticide continues to go unreported due to the scarcity of accurate statistics.

Anita Nair remarks, “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”(285). She sacrifices everything for the good cause. She feels that knowledge is essential for resolving problems of this nature. to make mothers aware of the importance of giving the girl foetus a chance. that they can enjoy their daughters as well. Smriti investigates the circumstances at the hospital.

Through Smriti, the novelist depicts a modern woman who is intelligent, brave, and capable of forging her own path in a patriarchal society. In addition, her plight warns the young mind against confinement and exploitation. Her views on Western culture makes her think that anything against the law could be stopped lawfully without any interruption. But very well she forgot about the loop holes that could accept any unlawful activities with a bribe.

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. Look around you, she added. All these Pregnant women, they come from various Parts of the district. Do you think there are no hospitals Where they live?

It’s because of the scan doctor. And then, if you want it, they’ll do the abortion here as well. (292)

In order to make a report, she tries to gather evidence to refute everything. She meets Chinnathayi, a mother whose daughter had an abortion and later passed away in a nursing facility. Due to Smriti’s interference in their business, Dr. Srinivasan and his men were furious with her. Using Chinnathayi’s name, they call Smriti at the seashore and deliver a false message. That was a ruse, but Smriti was ignorant of such heinous conduct. The three strong men attack Smriti as she approaches the location and assaulted her.

Chinnathai is the only person who witnessed and she remarks, “They were animals, these men. They tore at the girl and it seemed the more she screamed. The

more excited they became. It was the smell of blood” (317). Chinnathai opens up as she knew Smriti tried hard to help her regarding her dead daughter. She transforms into a lifeless, pitiful, and frozen figure. Smriti, an American-born girl who identifies as an Indian woman, encounters difficulties when doing so. She feels it is her responsibility to address 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. (119)

When Smriti’s father Jak learns that her life has brought her suffering, he feels it is only his duty to fight against discrimination in India, especially in his hometown of Minjakapuram. Jak remarks “It is true that tattered cliché about time being a healer. My daughter lies there in her tomb of silence. And I can sit here and gaze at the horizon with what seems to be pleasure. Should I feel guilty? Or should I think that this is wisdom, this acceptance of circumstances.” (145). The plight of Jak over his daughter’s state is expressed through the emotional sayings. The outset of his thoughts over his daughter is very emotionally portrayed through Jak, also the novel does a great job of conveying the aspirations, struggles, and salvation of women. In the contemporary male-dominated world, the narrator promotes the equality, liberty, and self- independence of women.

The author of the novel illustrates how familial upbringing and cultural differences contribute to women’s oppression and subordination in society. Smriti was raised in the United States, where gender issues are treated with more candour and freedom. Yet she encounters numerous issues in India, from her home to the hospital and from her college to her campaign. A government doctor that Jak visits to discuss the incident makes a comment,

You see, that’s the problem with you people. You NRIs you don’t understand that grown-up girls need to be with their mothers. You think this is America. You send your daughter back filled with all the Permissive ideas you teach them in the west and then when something

goes wrong, you blame India for it. She was here with a man. I hear. By herself. (54)

The word “tradition” is all-inclusive and refers to all social customs, cultural activities, religious beliefs, and interpersonal ties. A rebellion against the institutionalized powers of oppression and injustice against women has been sparked by the ongoing burden of traditional authority. The traditional way of life and the contemporary perspective are in constant confrontation for Indian women. Women typically spend their entire life safely entrenched in their homes, managing housekeeping and family concerns. A woman is promised individualism, mobility, and permissiveness by modernity. Indian society still adheres to a number of traditional values that women must uphold. Standing and religion are not as important today as they once were rigid as it was for hundreds of years before. Through *Smriti*, the author presents the picture of another woman 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.

The narrative of real individuals in a genuine, if not quite perfect, society, where female infanticide still takes place in impurity, is told in *Lessons in Forgetting*. Also, it is a tale about repentance, forgiveness, and second chances. In the end, the story is about people coming together in times of great need to support one another. The story is ultimately one that deserves a chance because it is delivered by a skilled storyteller who occasionally touches on heavy subjects. Both the ability to remember and the ability to forget are blessings.

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