

The Sound of Silence in the novel of *Lessons in Forgetting* by Anita Nair

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Abstract

Anita Nair is a popular Indian English-language writer. She has much insight into the concerns of studies, family, love and striving for fame and fortune. She makes an attempt to show the quality of strength in a woman. Anita Nair also adds that strength is not usually considered a woman as this. Her styles ultimately differ from other feminist writers. In other words, she is a feminist with difference. She traces the real position of women in the families as well as in the society. Her attempt to exhibit the plight, fears, dilemmas, contradictions and ambitions of her women characters is remarkable. Her primary focus of attention is the world of women, the struggle of women in the content of modern Indian society. Her novel reveals the effect of social conditioning on women especially in the novel *Lessons in Forgetting*.

Key words: Women's suffering, violence, suppression, patriarchy and self-identity.

Anita Nair is a popular Indian English writer. She is a living postmodern writer. She is considered to be bold and straightforward writer. 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* which was published in 2010. This novel has a strong feminine flavor 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. And 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 Meerapartakes 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 on 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 mean time, she 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).

Jak's story is also interesting. Jak is a divorcee. His wife Nina also besides in America. They have a rebellious teen-aged girl Smiriti who comes to India, and something dreadful happens to her which a guilty Jak sets out to find out more about that. Smiriti left comatose after a vicious attack on her while on holiday at a beachside town. A wall of silence

and fear surrounds the incident- the grieving father is helped neither by the local police nor by her boyfriend in his search for the truth. It is Smiriti who courageously rushed to uncover the terrifying truths that are hiding behind the grimy curtains of the hospitals in which such social fester and spreads, is sentenced to a screaming agonized death-in-life that becomes the axis.

The characters are well etched which are full of life and absolutely real. Their life opens for our voyeuristic pleasure. Anita does a great job to take us through this journey with their life. The realistic portrayal of Nair's character is inducement enough. 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's integral to the plot, yet Nair does not offer any sort of closure to it. And there are too many characters such as Meera's mother, grandmother, Jak's aunt- each with their own background story, whose sole purpose seems to distract from the narrative.

After a long time, Meera gets a mail from Giri that he is settled in Madras. He reveals the reason that 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 ours and we have to pay for staying here. For that he gets angry and his words chilling "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 vengeance. 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. Saro's fussy daughter. Giri's elegant wife, and Nikhil's and Nayantara'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

another woman, I would woo him back. I would bring him back to us. But this! How do I fight this, Kitcha? (17)

Jak does not know to console his mother as he is in the position, because he also misses his father.

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 who 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 and 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 silly reason. Later on, she 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” (204). 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 wronged wife and 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 daughters 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. The book has been made well to

echo the stages of cyclone, as the jacket says, Cyclogenesis of despair, the cirrus canopy of denial, the spiral band of deceit, the eye wall of destruction and finally, the eye of calm.

In this novel, 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 seed 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 a 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 up with personal crises such as loneliness, ill-treatment, rape, abortion, madness and betrayal at different stages of their lives.

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