



Research Paper

An Existential Predicament of Meera in *Lessons in Forgetting* by Anita Nair

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Abstract: The majority of human societies around the world are patriarchal. Women are portrayed as inferior to men in this society. The patriarchal mentality of women being subordinate to men is a mindset that permeates society everywhere. The mythological literature of both the western and eastern countries depicts it repeatedly. According to a narrative found in the Bible, the first man, Adam, gave birth to the first woman (Eve) out of one of his ribs.

Similarly, in Hindu mythology, Goddesses are given a secondary place to the Gods. They must undergo severe penance to win a god's favour and become their spouse. The tales found in various folk myths support this patriarchal mindset. Anita Nair has presented women as the victims of the patriarchal mentality. As the women in her story bear the burden of a tradition of the male-oriented culture, they undergo experiences of physical and mental suffering. The present paper attempts to analyse the book by relating one of existentialism's central ideas to Meera's psychological journey toward self-awareness. Meera's character does not come across as that of a woman liberated from the constraints of her humanity or womanhood but rather as that of a woman redefining her existential position on her terms and working it out in her own space. Thus Meera's journey from distress to confirmation is examined using absurdity as one of the major existential themes.

Keywords: woman's place, loss, identity, Meera, self-hood, patriarchal society.

Received 10 Nov., 2022; Revised 22 Nov., 2022; Accepted 24 Nov., 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

Anita Nair is one of the few internationally renowned Indian writers in Indian English writings whose work has been praised both at home and abroad. Her contribution to the realm of literature is outstanding and significant. Through her writings, she confronts intangible realities of existence, the innermost depths of the human psyche, and the chaotic underworld of the human mind. Her unique status as a writer stems primarily from her extensive usage of the stream-of-consciousness approach in her writings. Her writer's accomplishment is remarkable because she masterfully exploits a relatively new technique in her stories. Anita Nair's works have become more self-analytical and introspective, and the individual search for personal identity has become an unavoidable topic in her work. As a result, she focuses on the absent mind's movements and patterns, as well as sight and sound. These have an impact on her characters' consciences.

Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) has established itself as one of the most well-liked novels, not just in English literature in India but also on the global literary scene. **India Today** comments- "*Lessons in Forgetting* is like an experience in fine dining. It tantalizes your palate and makes you want to chew slowly upon its offerings, and it makes you want to linger at the table just a little while longer. Here, indeed, is a novel well worth remembering".

Nair depicts female characters in *Lessons in Forgetting* whose lives are profoundly impacted by masculine supremacy and male hegemony. Although Meera is the main character, the author also portrays several other female characters and their struggles due to the cruel patriarchal mindset. Meera, the protagonist, holds a master's degree in literature. She is a component of urban culture and is well-known in the affluent urban community for writing recipe books. She shares her Bangalore home, the Lilac House, with her grandmother Lily, mother Saro, and her teenage son and daughter. Initially, Meera plays the part of a contented housewife who is financially and emotionally reliant on her husband, Giri, who consoles her and her children.

At the beginning of the novel, Meera's husband, Giri betrays her by abruptly disappearing during an occasional celebration. Meera, who had been married to Giri twenty-two years ago, feels again vulnerable without him. She tries to keep herself busy while she waits for him every day. When she turns on the computer and checks Giri's email, she discovers that all of the emails have been removed, but one incomplete email

remains in the drafts folder incidentally. Meera is taken aback when she reads it. She becomes aware of a vast communication gap when she discovers that Giri has been swindled by substantial cash provided by a real estate developer. He was struggling in his corporate job and desired to start his own business, which would cost a lot of money. However, he never told Meera about it. She was unaware of his intentions to sell the Lilac House. Since he did not want to come across as weak in front of Meera, he kept his financial troubles a secret from her. He always desired to be a flawless man in Meera's eyes. Meera is dismayed when she reads in the message that he planned to strangle her and spank her when she refused to sell the house. She had no idea when Giri began to dislike her. She was still living in a fantasy world.

Meera's life revolves around Giri. She had suspicions about Giri as he used to walk away from her while hiding his phone in his breast pocket and changing his clothing. She would not want to offend him. Meera becomes emotionally and financially reliant on Giri because she believes he is the only one who can provide her a sense of security and comfort and give her life meaning. She thus attempts to emulate the perfect woman, much like her mother and grandmother.

Meera loses her identity and independence as she blends with her family, going with Giri to events and even dressing for him in his preferred fashion. She does not like going to these parties or does not identify with the women present, but she must maintain her appearance. Meera appreciates her responsibilities as a homemaker and mother to her two children and is content to be a housewife. As a responsible corporate wife, she goes to parties with Giri but does not like the atmosphere. There, she takes on an entirely different identity. Meera dislikes those gatherings and is unaware of Giri's attempts to control her at home and in public. She is capable of getting a job and has already established herself as a writer. Nevertheless, she is content to take on a supporting role in her relationship with Giri. She writes cookbooks and party planning advice that business wives use as manuals. Evelin Shindya (2012) describes her as one of those Indian housewives:

"...the women in India who feel proud that they are well protected by their husbands without realizing that they are making themselves helpless." (p.198)

Meera is so preoccupied with her responsibilities as a homemaker that she loses sight of her own "self," her essence, and her uniqueness. She is greatly shocked when Giri decides to leave her out of the blue. She experiences mental distress and is unsure how to react when her world suddenly turns upside down. After her father's demise, Meera developed the ability to be happy with what she had. She never harboured fantasies of living a fashionable, opulent life full of designer clothing, accessories, and trips overseas. However, when Giri abandons her out of the blue, she loses all sense of reality. She is now responsible for taking care of her mother, grandmother, and two children, Nikhil and Nayantara, and maintaining her home independently. In fact, given that Giri frequently goes for solitary evening walks while carrying his cell phone in his breast pocket, Meera should have learned about his secret relationship. However, she thinks to herself:

"I am not Hera...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 home to." (LIF, P.39)

When Giri finds that Meera has only a lease on her Lilac house rather than owning it, he loses interest in her. He believes he can force Meera to sell her home, which is how he can raise the money needed to launch his own company because he is tired of working for others. Selfish Giri is more concerned about Meera's home than with Meera herself. Meera is emotionally paralyzed and helpless in the face of Giri's abandonment. She first fails to recognize that she must rely on herself and that, as an educated woman, she has a tremendous sense of "self." The terrible incident makes Meera conscious of herself. She knows that she must assume responsibility for her mother, grandmother, and children. She makes her aware of her "self." When Giri disappears from her life, she feels lonely and accepts a job with Jak (a cyclone expert) as his research assistant. After learning that Giri has requested a divorce, she intends to abandon her previous persona. Here, Meera best portrays that women's aspirations change. Once when Giri begs to see her in contemporary (modern) clothing, Meera says:

"I am forty-four years old, Giri. I can't dress like I am twenty..... 'I have a daughter who's nearly twenty years old,' 'It looks so silly for me to dress as she does...'" (P.107)

Everyone learns by experience how to adapt to their environment to thrive in society. Meera is now Jak's research assistant. She freely accepts to change her previous identity. She visits the beauty parlour and requests a new hairstyle. The attendant is slightly surprised and asks for confirmation, "Are you sure?" She remarks-

"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.....It's time I became a new woman. Someone I would like to be." (p. 177).

Meera has changed the ideology. She is responsible for all household duties. She educates her kids well and prepares them to take on the rigours of the outside world. She says;

"If you love your life, you are lovable. If you hate your life, you become hate worthy." (p. 82)

Meera is learning about herself. She had lost her sense of self because she had blindly trusted Giri and had never doubted his devotion to her. She is now able to stand up for herself. She has a strong will and is circumspect.

The way Meera overcomes her terrible marriage shows her sense of self. She is unable to shirk her familial responsibilities as Giri did. Anita Nair shows Meera as an example of an abandoned lady who does not disregard her relations. After the first shock, she overcomes this catastrophe in her life by taking charge of her situation, reducing her expenditure, and securing employment for herself. She needs to overcome her loss and disappointment so that she may inspire confidence in people who rely on her. After being married for eighteen years, Giri deserts his wife and kids. Meera has to fight to stay alive. Meera cannot linger in her sorrow forever. She needs to maintain the family while dealing with the problem.

Meera must face her life's realities. She overcomes her anguish and reinvents herself as an independent, self-respecting woman. She develops a greater sense of objectivity with time. Meera has a good education, is a writer, and can have a successful job. Now she adopts the position of a career lady. Her time with Giri was limited and confined. She must now use all of her abilities. She is discovering her skills and self-hood for the first time, all by herself.

Thus, the novel does a remarkable job of conveying women's aspirations, struggles, and salvation. In the contemporary male-dominated world, the narrator promotes the equality, liberty, and self-independence of women. Here, Anita Nair focuses on the attitudes of the male protagonist like Giri, who believes in confining women to domestic chores and never allows them to acquire independence. They would like to obtain the right to their spouse's property simply because they are the family's head as per the patriarchal system, as though women have little or no right to own property. Anita Nair demonstrates how selfish and overbearing men like Giri can be. Meera was not allowed to pursue a teaching career by Giri. He does not want her to be self-sufficient. She is made responsible for the children and the household only. This typical patriarchal mentality places the husband in charge of the family, even though the wife is perfectly capable of earning a living.

Savitha Singh comments in her paper '*Searching for and (Re) Creating the Self: A Study of Anita Nair's Lessons in Forgetting*' that-

"Anita Nair has done a commendable job in bringing out the positive role and positive transformation of women in the ongoing battle of establishing female self-hood" (IJETALS p.29)

The study concluded by claiming that Meera resolves to give voice to the various roles she plays in her life through self-examination and investigation. When she overcomes her obstacles, brings the hidden self to the fore, and recognizes how her self-worth, she ultimately emerges as the real Meera, the champion. She is conscious of the limitations of her self-expression when she looks back. The character's path reveals the restrictions on a woman's ability to contend with freedom in society.

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