

## EXISTENTIAL FEMINISM IN ANITA NAIR'S *LESSONS IN FORGETTING*

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**Abstract:** In the contemporary modern life the very term 'marriage' becomes more materialistic, purposeful and is viewed as an opportunity to improve the lifestyle. While this is the condition of modern human life, expectations are more and the values of relationships are less even among the family, society, etc... Prior to the post modern era, human life existed under the roof of culture and tradition and so the relationships were strong enough to consummate the journey of life. The femininity was rooted firm among women in those days; hence it paved way for male domination. Woman suppresses her own gender in such a way that she considers education as unnecessary for her own daughter but cares much about her son's future. There begins the initial suppression and it all happens due to ignorance which is spoken by many feminists, activists, etc... But in the modern world both men and women are getting equal rights in every aspect and both are conscious of their own salvation and individuality. To attain those status and individuality, they refuse to live under marital roof, especially the women. Hence the present paper aims to explore feminism from the ideology of existentialism through the female characters in the novel *Lessons in Forgetting* by Anita Nair.

### INTRODUCTION

Anita Nair has written many novels primarily focusing on the struggle of women in the context of modern Indian society. *Lessons in forgetting* is the novel published in 2010 which pictures the post modern man-woman relationship in the institution of marriage. It depicts the story of women's rebel against patriarchal society. Nair concentrates on South Indian settings remarkably Kerala and Tamil Nadu in her works which portray the lifestyle, tradition and culture of South Indian people. She started her writing career with the short story titled "Satyr of the Subway" published in 1997 and excelled in the field of literature as a novelist, essayist, poet, short story writer, editor and reviewer. Indian feminist writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Manju Kapur, Shoba De and others have dealt about women's sufferings in the patriarchal society and their struggle against male domination. Anita Nair is unique in presenting women characters in her works. Nair's feminism is multi-faceted in nature. *Lessons in forgetting* is a novel which deals with marriage crisis, second chances, redemption, female feticide and ascetic. The title itself has contrast meanings, that the 'lessons' is something related to past which could not be forgotten forever and 'Forgetting' is also related to the past life. It can be assumed that one should not forget the lessons from the past but the bitterness should be forgotten to move on the life. *Lessons in Forgetting* is a story of redemption, forgiveness and second chances.

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## DISCUSSION

“In marrying, the woman receives a piece of the world as property; legal guaranties protect her from man’s caprices; but she becomes his vassal. He is economically the head of the community, and he thus embodies it in society’s eyes. She takes his name; she joins his religion, integrates into his class, his world; she belongs to his family, she becomes his other “half” (Beauvoir 506).

Existential Feminism is derived from the school of thought of Simon de Beauvoir. According to Beauvoir the great bane for women is entering into the institution of marriage. In the existentialist view, women are not necessarily dependent in a man-woman relationship. Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes existence and the way of human existence in the world. It is about searching the self and making decision from the experiences, beliefs and outlooks. Existential feminism promotes freedom, and the experience of living as a human body. *Lessons in Forgetting* can be analyzed from the perspective of existential feminism through the women characters. Anita Nair’s *Lessons in Forgetting* portrays two different stories interlinked in the later stage of the novel. The novel is about the two protagonists, one is Meera, a high-middle-class corporate wife living in Lilac house. JAK, the abbreviation stands for Jayamkondan Anantharaman Krishnamurthy who is the other protagonist. Meera has no big dreams and no desire for expensive clothes and diamonds unlike her mother Saro. She is meant for simplicity and authenticity. She is a cookbook writer for the society and is interested in attending parties. Meera is often compared to Hera (Greek Goddess of love, marriage and children) by the author and by herself in the novel. Life is uncertain; happenings in the life are undertaken by fate in most of the circumstances whether it is pleasant or unpleasant. Even though fate has no role to play in the philosophy of existentialism, the nature of the human mind forces to make decisions that will result in fatal end. Meera falls in love with Giri, a well educated guy from a poor family in Palakad (Kerala), when he comes to the Lilac house (with his team) for the photo shoot.

Giri graduated from IIM is selected for a job in the corporate world and dreams higher. After seeing Meera in such a big house he considers that rich life is laid before him and becomes close to Meera’s mother and grandmother. They both get married and begin their life in Lilac house and beget two children Nayantara and Nikhil. He wants to start his own business and for the capital money he targets the Lilac house. When he asks Meera to sell the house, she refuses to do so and as a result Giri leaves Meera in a party without acknowledging. Meera abandoned by her husband faces hard times in her life. Feminism is closely related to post modernism. Modernity brings changes in human mind that starts to search the meaning of life and its existence in the world. The ignorance of women in the name of tradition and culture gets broken by modernity. Meera cannot end her life after her husband’s betrayal unlike the conventional women. Instead she decides to struggle against

the society and fulfill her responsibility as a mother, daughter and a woman in patriarchal society.

Nair highlights the transition of the holy relationship in marriage into purposive and materialistic in modern age. Giri plans to fulfill his desire through Meera. Meera's wealth is more attractive to Giri rather than her love. Meera refuses to sell Lilac house because it is not her family's property. It was taken for lease for ninety nine years by her grandfather. When Meera tries to explain this to him he is not ready to listen to her. Money had the upper hand than affection in the case of Giri. Giri's decision shows self centered and cruelest part of human conscious due to which people around him suffer. Giri's ardent behavior towards wealth is expressed by him in the following conversation when Meera's mother Saro asks him about their wedding plan and future.

"Giri wanted them there. 'In the Lilac house,' he said. 'why would we want to live elsewhere? It is your home. Our home. Besides, after this, how can I ask you to live in a poky flat?'"

Meera felt another qualm. 'Giri, you mustn't get the wrong idea. I... We... don't have much. This house...' she began.

'Ssh. I know what you are going to say. This house is all there is. It is enough, goose girl! Just you in this house is all I ask for' (Lessons in Forgetting 38).

Hence his love towards Meera is purposeful and after marriage he always insists Meera to socialize with people in the parties instead of clinging to him. This shows his disinterest in Meera and he might not want to be identified as her husband. Meera claiming herself as Hera kicks away those thoughts as there is no Zeus. Similarly the female characters in the novel suffer from various hazards and they overcome those struggles to survive in the world. Meera left alone by her husband with her two children, mother and grandmother takes up a job as a research assistant to JAK, a cyclone expert who has returned from United States to find the mystery behind his daughter Smriti's death in India. JAK, divorced by his wife is another chief character in the novel with whom Meera finds genuineness. When her mother dies JAK helps her without any intention whereas Giri stays quite as if there is no relation between him and Meera. Meera finally decides to marry JAK, a perfect partner for her. In the long run of survival crisis Meera fixes up with identity for her existence.

According to existentialism man has to decide the life he is going to live. JAK finds his completeness in his sincerity towards his cyclone research and spends most of the time in lab and classrooms which gradually results in the divorce with his wife Nina. This is a way of existential struggle of JAK that his decisions were from his past experiences and childhood lessons he learnt from his village Minjikapuram.

JAK disturbed mentally after the news of Smriti's death, wants to escape from the hold of life. But the only fact that encourages him to live is his childhood lesson

that whatever happens in life, one has to move on. He decides to investigate the mystery in his daughter's death through which he can find the meaning for his existence. Nina, Smriti's mother accuses JAK who influenced Smriti by narrating his childhood stories of Minjikapuram that provoked her to do under graduate degree in India. Nina appears to accept what has happened to Smriti but blames JAK. It is not that she has no grief but she diverts her concentration towards Shruti, another daughter who is living with Nina. Through directing her attention towards Shruti she finds consolation and she is aware of her existence for the sake of Shruti. Hence Nina undergoes the existential crisis and as a responsible mother, she moves on in her life by accepting the fact. The existential struggle is there for both man and woman but the circumstances differentiate their struggle. Anita Nair pictures the various forms of struggle in the survival of life.

JAK's mother Sarada encounters both the feministic and existential crisis in the form of ascetic. When she comes to know that her husband, JAK's father is interested in ascetic from his childhood but his parents forced him to marry to propagate their generation, she sinks into terrific fear. Sarada feels insecure with her husband because her life along with her young son Kitcha's (JAK's childhood name) is under uncertainty. Sarada's dread becomes true when Kitcha's father leaves them one day. But Sarada has some hope that her husband will return and she goes on searching for her husband in every temple.

Karl Theodor Jaspers, German-Swiss psychiatrist and philosopher expresses the philosophy of existentialism in relation to man and his surroundings. He says that a person is responsible for what exists beside him and only with the support of those surroundings he reaches his goal and becomes complete as a human in the world. "There is no truth through which alone I could reach the object aimed at. I participate in what the others are and am responsible for what exists beside me, because I can speak to it and enter into active relation to it, I am as potential Existenz to other Existenzen. Therefore, I reach the goal of my existence only if I comprehend what is around me (Jasper 226)". JAK's father fails to understand the above concept as Karl Jasper interprets that man is bounded by the relationships and he is complete with what he has around him. But JAK abides by the above said statement and unlike his father he feels responsible to his position as a father, husband and a professional.

Sarada decides to lead a new life by securing a job as a school teacher after finishing B.Ed. She begins to live for her son and he becomes the motive for her redemption. Meanwhile she receives a letter from her husband that he is in search of peace and harmony in Rishikesh and asks her not to search for him. After receiving the information Sarada marries the Physics teacher working in the same school. Sarada's husband denied giving her love and affection which she needed and so she decided to live her life for her sake. Overcome with lots of existential struggle, the ideal woman finally chose to exist for her personal salvation.

Smriti known for her humbleness fights against female feticide, dowry, and the practice of sati (widow immolation). Impressed by the childhood stories of her father, she chooses to do her undergraduate degree in India. Eventually she falls in love with Shivu, a friend of hers, joins Sree Sakthi forum and works dedicatedly for women empowerment in the village of Minjikapuram (JAK's native). When she plans to prepare documentary against the brutality in the village she is destroyed by the men of the village and she undergoes a tragic death in a helpless condition. She boldly stands against the patriarchal society and feels satisfied in doing her service to the society. She wants to spend some time for the development of society. As per existentialism it is her wish and what has happened to her might be accepted by her soul. Even her father feels proud (in spite of his grief) that her daughter has fought for humanity.

Kala Chiti, Sarada's sister is another instance for resisting old traditions. She is renamed as Vaidehi after her marriage. She is abandoned by her husband because they have no child even after seven years of their marriage. Then she stays with her sister and plays important role in bringing up JAK after Sarada's death. Then Kala Chiti also remarries breaking out the tradition and culture. When expectation increases, satisfaction decreases. Thus all the women characters in *Lessons in Forgetting* are tested for their perseverance and determination and they succeed in that.

## CONCLUSION

Existentialism denotes that man should live his life in the way he wants. *Lessons in Forgetting* is the novel about existential struggle of women characters and redemption from the trauma of past life and elevation into a new way. Thus, it gives the meaning for the existence and their presence in the world. The time given to man is between the birth and the death. In the short span of life one must satisfy his/her soul. The novel evokes the value of life by exploring the thought that whatever happens, life has to move on.

## References

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