

## **Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting* : A Voice of Pain and Protest**

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**Abstract.** Anita Nair is a celebrated contemporary writer known for her fearless and honest portrayal of women's struggles and resilience. She challenges societal stereotypes, depicting women as strong and independent individuals rather than confining them to traditional domestic roles. Her novel *Lessons in Forgetting* is a compelling exploration of love, betrayal, and self-discovery, centered around its strong female protagonists, Meera and Smriti. Meera, a graceful and talented cookbook author, is abandoned by her husband, Giri, who married her for wealth and leaves her at a social gathering. Overwhelmed by responsibilities and career setbacks, she loses confidence. However, life takes a new turn when she starts working as an assistant to JAK, a cyclone expert and the father of Smriti. Smriti's story unfolds as a journey of transformation and resilience, adding depth to the novel's powerful themes of strength and survival. Smriti, a victim of sexual assault, faces a tragic and fatal accident. She courageously raises her voice against female infanticide in the village of Minjikapuram, but a group of men, threatened by her defiance, attempt to silence her. She is thrown into the sea, and the fear of oppression overwhelms her once-unyielding spirit. Historically, strict laws governed women's lives during the Vedic period, and remnants of these restrictions still persist. In a male-dominated society, the challenges faced by women are deep-rooted and unyielding, worsening across generations and social hierarchies. Anita Nair's women never give in easily. They relentlessly fight for their identity, knowing that true empowerment lies in reclaiming their dignity and space in the world. Their journey is one of resilience, as they defy traditional norms, challenge societal expectations, and assert their independence with unwavering determination.

**Keywords :** Identity; dignity; resilience; defiance; female infanticide.

Traditionally, Indian literature often portrayed women as victims of societal and cultural oppression. However, the rise of women writers has ushered in a new era, one that explores the awakening consciousness of women and their confrontation against the patriarchal structures that have long defined their lives.

Anita Nair emerges as a significant voice within this literary movement. Her novels delve into the experiences of women who, like many female characters in Indian writing in English, navigate a world with patriarchal challenges. Nair's characters, however, are not simply victims. They embody a strong feminist consciousness, demonstrating progressive and diligent efforts to forge their own identities.

Through her work, particularly *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010), Nair showcases the struggles and eventual triumphs of women seeking self-actualization. Her writing, characterized by its penetrating style and profound impact, offers a powerful testament to the resilience and strength of women in the face of societal constraints. Nair's contribution to Indian literature lies in her ability to portray the complexities of women's lives, their passionate pursuit of autonomy, and their unwavering posture of defiance against the patriarchal norms.

Anita Nair's novel delves into the lives of women navigating complex relationships and societal pressures. At the heart of the narrative is Meera, from *Lessons in Forgetting*, a woman of unwavering devotion and strength. She is a wife, mother, friend, and mentor, embodying the ideal of womanhood:

Meera never dreamt big dreams. She had no desire for designer clothes, diamonds or expensive holidays. In those hard years after her father's death, she learnt to worship at the altar of enough. That was all she ever hoped for. Enough to keep the roof over their head and food in their bellies. Enough to retain dignity and not have to ask reluctant removed relatives for a temporary handout. Enough to live as they did. (*Lessons in Forgetting*, 41)

Her life, however, is not without its struggles. Betrayed by her husband, Giri, who seeks to exploit her ancestral property, Meera stands firm, refusing to relinquish her power, "Meera reads the mail again. She has been so blind. Giri had wanted more than enough" (42)

The narrative highlights her resilience and unwavering belief in her own worth, even when faced with heartbreak and injustice. Meera, like the goddess Hera she is likened to, embodies strength and dignity, refusing to be defined by the actions of others. Betrayed and bewildered, Meera grapples with Giri's hypocrisy, his greed shattering her trust. Anger and hurt war with her desire to understand, but she refuses to succumb to despair. The weight of responsibility falls squarely on her shoulders - her family's health, their well-being, her very reputation. Her daughter's blame only deepens the burden — a painful result of Giri's calculated disappearance. Yet, Meera stands firm, determined to protect her family, drawing on a strength forged in hardship. She had never sought wealth or extravagance, finding solace in simple survival and dignity. Now, she channels that same resilience, facing betrayal with the quiet fortitude born of a life lived on her own terms.

Meera, bravely confronts her circumstances, balancing family duties against her own desires. Meera, embodies resilience, having faced life's hardships with unwavering strength. Meera resists conformity. She endures humiliation from her in-laws and sternly guides her son, Giri, who lives a privileged but ultimately empty life. Meera, though gentle and believing in virtue, yearns for personal growth. She seeks attainment and nice pertinence, suggesting a desire for self-discovery and meaningful connection beyond her prescribed role.

Meera's life is marked by financial hardship and professional disappointments, yet she forges an unlikely alliance with Jak, a renowned expert drawn to India by a personal tragedy and a quest for truth. This unlikely partnership highlights the theme of unexpected connections formed in the face of adversity.

The narrative confronts the deeply sensitive issue of female foeticide, exploring the societal pressures that lead to such devastating choices. The text argues for understanding the immense physical and emotional suffering women endure when forced to terminate pregnancies, referencing examples like Karuna, Ida, and Virmati from *Difficult Daughters*.

Smriti, from *Lessons in Forgetting* driven by a mission to eradicate female foeticide, leads a group to represent Stree Shakti (women's power) and combat the related evils of dowry and bride burning. Her leadership highlights the theme of collective action and resistance

against systemic oppression. The encounter with Chinnathayi, a woman whose daughter died during an abortion, provides a stark and personal testament to the horrors of foeticide, reinforcing the urgency of Smriti's mission and the human cost of societal injustice. Smriti's decision to document Chinnathayi's story using evidence underscores the theme of bearing witness and seeking justice through truth-telling.

Smriti uncovered a horrifying truth of Minjikapuram by revealing those people who were using scans to determine the sex of their unborn children, leading to the targeted annihilation of female fetuses. The seed of female infanticide, once sown, threatened to devastate the community. Smriti, driven by a commitment to protect women oppressed by fear and societal expectations, emerged as a symbol of resistance against the notion of daughters as burdens. She was relentless, refusing to give up on people or causes, driven by a deep sense of justice.

When the villagers of Minjikapuram, steeped in tradition, attempted to silence her by killing a newborn girl revealed by the scan, Smriti refused to be intimidated. Despite the danger, she confronted the perpetrators, determined to expose their crimes. In retaliation, they trapped and harassed her, attempting to break her spirit. Chinnathayi, a silent observer, witnessed the brutality, the horror amplified by the forced silencing of a child:

With more than one man... That my daughter, my smriti was... The accident happened on the beach. Do you think she would... His voice broke, unable to continue the thought – fuck on the beach like a bitch on heat with more than one man. (57)

Ultimately, Smriti's life was tragically cut short in a calculated accident, her body left broken and lifeless. Her meticulous approach to societal betterment was violently extinguished. Though despised by some, Smriti dared to act against the deeply ingrained injustice of female infanticide. Haunted by the knowledge of unborn girls being killed, she stood as a testament to the fight against a horrific practice, a fight that ultimately consumed her.

The evil that permeated society was not something Smriti merely talked about; she confronted it with a fierce determination, witnessing

firsthand the erosion of Minjikapuram's humanity, particularly towards its female inhabitants. Driven by a desperate need to expose the rot within, she underestimated the power of those she sought to challenge. For Smriti, Jak was the epitome of masculine virtue, a guiding force in her life. However, the creature lying before him, twisted and broken, was not the daughter he knew:

Are you in pain, baby?' Jak asks quietly.  
He sits at beside and looks at his  
daughter. Her eyes are open and staring.  
Smriti continues to stare. Then her jaws  
unclench and from the gaping hole that  
is her mouth, a scream emerges. An  
animal howl layered with pain , grief and  
anger, horror and disgust. An animal  
howl that goes on and on, snaring his  
soul and jerking him up from where he  
sat, pushing him out in blind panic. (256)

Driven by an insatiable need to understand the cause of Smriti's demise, Jak relentlessly pursued the truth. He sought answers from her friends, the villagers of Minjikapuram, and the doctor who had witnessed the devastation inflicted upon her body.

The doctor's words were etched in his memory: Unlike typical accident victims, her clothing was inexplicably torn, revealing exposed skin. It was clear she hadn't been wearing a stitch of clothing when the accident occurred. The research paper focuses on the tragic story of a young woman named Smriti, who is half murdered and thrown into the sea:

How can I forget? How can anyone  
forget? We were all shocked by the state  
they brought her in. You know how it is  
usually... we have to cut the clothing off  
an accident case but in her case, someone  
had just flung a cloth over her. It was  
quite obvious that she didn't have a stitch  
of clothing on her when she had the  
accident. It makes you wonder what she  
was up to. (53)

The narrative suggests that Smriti was a bold and vivacious woman who lived life to the fullest. Nevertheless, her vocal resistance to injustice ultimately resulted in her tragic downfall. The community, instead of supporting her, blames her for being too bold and spirited. No one comes forward to defend her, highlighting the societal apathy towards women's struggles.

Smriti's final thoughts, as she is being thrown into the sea, are filled with a sense of injustice and a desire to make a difference. She reflects on her life, her aspirations, and the violent act that is ending it all. The narrative connects Smriti's fate to the larger issue of female foeticide. The author expresses a wish for people to understand the emotional pain experienced by a female foetus when it is aborted. This connection is reinforced by the inclusion of Sujata Bhatt's poem, *Voice of the Unwanted Girl*, which poignantly depicts the experience of a female foetus being killed. The primary theme revolves around the systemic injustice faced by women in society. Smriti is blamed for her own murder, highlighting the victim-blaming culture. The lack of support she receives underscores the systemic oppression women face.

The imagery of the sea as a violent force underscore the brutality of the crime. The inclusion of Sujata Bhatt's poem gives voice to the voiceless, representing the unborn female child who is denied the right to life. In essence, the passage is a powerful indictment of the systemic injustices faced by women, using Smriti's tragic story as a lens to examine themes of oppression, violence, and the devaluation of female life. It serves as a call for empathy and understanding, urging society to confront the deep-seated prejudices that lead to such atrocities.

The womb, once a sanctuary of life, becomes a battleground for gender. In a society where sons are celebrated as torchbearers of lineage and daughters are perceived as burdens, the very act of being born female is a curse. The insidious demand for dowry, a relic of archaic tradition, transforms a newborn girl into a financial liability, a weight too heavy to bear. Mothers, caught in the crossfire of societal expectation and economic hardship, are forced to make the unthinkable choice.

The patriarchal mindset, rooted in centuries of tradition, casts women as subservient beings, their voices silenced, their dreams crushed. Illiteracy, a festering wound in the social fabric, perpetuates ignorance and reinforces the notion that a woman's worth is tied to her ability to

bear sons. The streets echo with whispers of 'heavy shoes' and 'canasta,' derogatory terms that strip women of their humanity.

Like Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, these women are trapped in a domestic cage, their lives defined by the expectations of husbands and fathers. The weight of tradition, like the oppressive regime in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, strips them of their autonomy, reducing them to mere vessels for reproduction. And just as Anand's *Untouchable* exposed the horrors of caste discrimination, we must acknowledge the intersectionality of oppression, where gender and caste intersect to create a double burden for women from marginalized communities.

The destruction of female life, whether in the womb or on the streets, is not merely a statistic; it is a testament to the deep-seated misogyny that permeates our society. To break free from this cycle of violence, we must dismantle the patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality, challenge the archaic traditions that bind us, and empower women to reclaim their rightful place in the world.

The contradiction in Indian society is stark: while demanding dowry, a practice that financially burdens families, many simultaneously reject the birth of a girl child, resorting to extreme measures to ensure a male heir. The author expresses shock at the paradoxical mindset that accepts dowry, provided by a daughter, while simultaneously advocating for female foeticide, the destruction of that very daughter in the womb. The author condemns those who hypocritically uphold notions of dignity while perpetrating female foeticide, treating the destruction of a female fetus as a mere trifle. This practice, driven by societal biases, has alarmingly increased, debunking the notion that illiteracy is the sole cause. Data reveals a higher prevalence of female foeticide in urban areas compared to rural areas, particularly in the years 1991, 2001, and 2011.

Deep-seated patriarchal beliefs permeate Indian society, manifesting in the devaluation of girl children. Their birth is often met with negativity, and mothers of sons are celebrated far more than mothers of daughters, receiving greater social recognition and material benefits. This preference for sons is rooted in the belief that they carry on the family lineage, a notion prevalent across social strata. Furthermore, the burden of dowry contributes to the reluctance of lower- middle-class families to have daughters as Jyoti Singh asserts, "gender has

psychological or culture rather than biological commutation. If the proper terms for sex are 'male' and 'female', the corresponding terms for gender are 'masculine' and 'feminine'" (34)

Historical progression has facilitated significant transformations in the societal roles and experiences of women, distinguishing the contemporary era from earlier periods. Exemplars such as Kasturi from Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* exemplify the plight of the submissive wife, burdened by pregnancy and societal expectations, yet lacking the autonomy to challenge her husband's authority. Conversely, figures like Smriti represent a contemporary shift, actively combating female foeticide through philanthropic endeavors.

Traditional, restrictive upbringings often inhibit female self-expression and foster a lack of self-confidence. Within rigid, dogmatic family structures, girls are socialized to prioritize self-sacrifice and accept culpability. Women are subjected to constant evaluation across various domains. Sympathy and compassion may be misconstrued as intellectual deficiency. Tolerance can be interpreted as timidity. Devotion to familial responsibilities may be deemed a lack of ambition. Professional success can be attributed to a compromise of decorum, and assertiveness may be met with social censure. Ultimately, women face systemic criticism and are subject to reproach regardless of their actions.

It is now asserted with conviction that the act of writing for a woman is an act of resistance. It is a struggle for fundamental rights, for truth, for integrity, for self-definition, for autonomy, and for equality:

Today, we may boldly assert. A woman writing is a woman fighting. She is fighting for her rights for truth, for honesty, for identity, for freedom and for equality. The muted voice has freed itself and came on stage to air the concern of the hitherto neglected; ill-treated and ignored "other gender". (Sree,55)

A woman's pursuit of personal happiness and contentment should be prioritized. She is under no obligation to compromise her zeal or enthusiasm, nor to seek validation from external sources. Self-respect and self-valuation garner reciprocal respect from the world. Conversely, self-deprecation invites societal marginalization and subjugation.

Contemporary women, such as those depicted in Nair's narratives, navigate the complexities of their lives with equanimity. They demonstrate a capacity for effective, nuanced, and empathetic problem-solving.

The author articulates these poignant and insightful observations in the aforementioned novel, employing the recurring motif, The butterfly flaps its wings, again and again... to evoke a profound emotional resonance. This metaphor equates womanhood with the butterfly, symbolizing the diverse and vibrant facets of female identity. Each facet necessitates the fulfillment of distinct responsibilities. Furthermore, the image of the butterfly underscores the inherent resilience of women, who, when subjected to oppression or attempts at subjugation, will inevitably assert their autonomy, as their innate nature is to soar freely, not to be confined.

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