

Cultural Outrage in Anita Nair's *Lesson in Forgetting*

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Abstract

This paper's objective is to outline the cultural perspective and distinct trait of an individual and their need to focus on the relationship between culture and society's perspective on the changing minds of the generation. Anita Nair is aware of the subordinate and secondary status of the Indian women who have been under the customs and traditions of the society. Their urge to redefine their life to fulfil their quest and move on in life is depicted in her novel. The changes in the culture cause changes in the norms of our social structure. These changes depict the picture of society where the nonchalant behaviours are interpreted.

Key Words: Tradition, culture, change, identity, socio – economic aspects.

Culture always plays a vital role in shaping the society. Due to Migrancy, hybridity and dislocation, loss of personal and national identities, multiculturalism, cultural clashes and cultural assimilation, there is a flow of people from one country to the another, mostly to the western countries. Cultural forces in globalised India are constantly pressurizing the native Indians through the processes of assimilation, transformation, reassertion and recreation. The characters in the works reflect the conflicts and tensions arising out of the attempt to negotiate between tradition and desire to lead lives that education taught us.

Anita Nair upholds the rich cultural heritage of India and highlights the moral, ethical and Indian cultural values and the impact of multicultural embedded natives' life. Nair is a novelist of the twenty-first century where values, traditions and beliefs are changing very fast. She takes up the cultural, social and economic aspects and provides a perfect example of victimized women in a patriarchal environment.

Human and culture are inseparably connected. Genetic traits casually affect the nonchalant activities of a person in the name of culture. Thus, everything is reversed. Social customs form a barometer of culture. One of the most challenging features of the culture is the assault on traditional categories of gender and sexuality.

As the woman has not been given due importance since ages past, Simone de Beauvoir remarks:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (295).

The role of the institution of family is significant in Indian culture. Joint family generations prove their adjustability and ability to survive in any circumstances. The eldest male member is the head of the family. He makes all important decisions and rules, and other family members abide by them. Meera and her family entered the lilac house in this way. It was an ancestral house which is fantasized by everyone and was used for ad shoots. The house was taken on a lease of ninety-nine years by Meera’s great grandfather. So, she never had the right to sell it or move out. Thus, the male member figured out their life for few more years. But others have no idea about it.

I wish I could. That’s the whole trouble. The house isn’t mine or my mother’s or grandmother’s to sell. We are just allowed to live in it. It’s the strangest bloody thing. My great-grandfather took the house on a ninety-nine-year lease. That was fifty-four years ago. Forty-five years from now, it will revert back to the original owners. I don’t know what he was thinking of. Maybe he meant to provide for his daughter and granddaughter; the following generations would have to look out for themselves, etc. I have no idea why such a deal was struck and my grandmother had no logical explanation either” (Nair, 110 - 111).

Meera’s husband, Giri, was fond of her only because of her house, so she didn’t even reveal to him. This shows him as the head of the family where she is afraid to reveal with the fear that he might leave her abruptly. When Vinnie, Meera’s friend, inquired about the rent and the allowances she did for the house, she wondered whether her friend would be able to afford the price.

Traditions are highly revered by the old generations rather than the younger generations. The house belonged to her great-grandfather’s friend. He could have imposed high prices for the house or could have asked them to leave when his family members tried to take house back. But he respected the friendship more than the assets.

After Giri’s departure, Meera’s life became miserable which she says as “*We may starve to death but it will be in gracious surroundings*”(111). So, she took a job as a research assistant to JAK, the cyclone expert. Giri started a new life and demanded divorce. So Meera decided to give up her identity of Hera as there is no Zeus in her life. She started her second

life as Giri does. She did not change her hair, home, dreams, even herself as she had Giri in her life. Now, as he had left her, she wanted a change, which would give her feelings of new woman. In order to give less burden to Giri, she took the responsibility of her children. Her realization came in the way of her decision to start the second innings of her life with JAK.

By taking the entire responsibility of the family on her young shoulders, Meera undermined the myth of patriarchal society regarding woman and bailed out the family out of economic crisis. By doing so, she challenged cultural, economic and social aspects of traditional society. Thus, the novelist projects the problem of betrayal and how the traditional set up of society is getting transformed into the new one.

The Indian society has been following a custom of arranged marriages for centuries where people demand dowry, which had been outlawed by the Indian government, but Indian society and culture still promotes and maintains it. The vast majority of Indian marriages are made after taking into account factors such as age, height, personal values and tastes, the backgrounds of their families like wealth and social standing, their castes and the astrological compatibility of the couple horoscopes.

Kala Chithi was married to Ambi. She was renamed as Vaidehi after her marriage to represent the ideal qualities of woman and wife. She is an example of woman's confrontation against ancient traditions. Her father's mindset was that her daughter would be married only if she had the long-braided hair and it was the best asset. More than dowry her hair overwhelmed them.

I was right. If I had let you cut your hair, you would still be here, waiting for a suitable boy. But this is fantastic, Bhanu. Did you see it? I was watching them. The boy couldn't take his eyes off Kala's hair! Do you see why I insisted that she keep her hair? (Nair, 195)

When she questioned against the concept of marriage, she was asked to be quiet. She was a rational woman who raised question when her sister, Sarada, was considered responsible for her husband's desertion of home and duties. But he left to attain sainthood. She was married and had life happily until her son, JAK, was born. Her husband wanted to be independent shutting off his responsibilities. Kala Chithi spoke for her sister questioning how could she be blamed when he was the one who went away when she was not responsible for that.

Unlike her sister, she decided to take her life's happiness in her hand. Her husband was attracted to her hair the most. She was asked permission to let him marry another woman after their seven years of marriage as his impotency gave a way for everyone to talk about her chastity. Once when she cut her hair, Ambi chose to punish her by staying away from her to teach her a lesson. She didn't fight or talk back.

“She knew it would be of no use protesting. He wanted to do it so civilly, so gently, that no one would even reproach him. That was his greatest weapon: to be the most reasonable being even when he was crumbling her life and self-respect into a million pieces”(Nair, 206).

Finally, she stepped out. She felt that not even her father could find fault with her for this. Before she left, she cut her “long braid woven with jasmine and kanakambaram” till the nape of her neck and gave it to Ambi as he wanted it the most from her apart from herself. She led her life with Sarada resuming her old name, Kala Chithi. It showed her resistance against her suffering and emergence as revolutionist.

The novelist presents the image of a new woman, Smriti, who is educated from abroad, bold, capable and courageous and knows very well how to make her own path in this fast-changing world and side by side the novelist warns that gone are the days of their suppression and exploitation. Just as the poor being exploited by the rich, women are being suppressed by the male-dominated society.

Inspired by the stories of her father, JAK, she came to India in pursuit of the higher studies. She represents the mistaken identity. In India she was an active member of a forum inspired by slogans of the forum, ‘**The dying daughters of India need you.**’ For an awareness campaign she went to her father’s village, Minjikapuram in Tamil Nadu. She came to help them raise their voice against the cruel attitude against them.

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. (Nair, 285)

Being an NRI, she was humiliated and treated as a whore at her back. But due to her appearances and nonchalant activities, she was the centre of attraction among everyone. Neither she knew nor thought, she would be the reason for her life’s end. When she came to know about the gender reveal and abortion in a hospital, she began to collect proof against this illegal act to make a report. Due to some misinterpretations and maneuver, when she went for collecting, three men destroyed her.

They were animals, these men. They tore at the girl and it seemed the more she screamed, the more excited they became. Even from where she stood, she could feel the girl’s fear. It was the smell of the blood.(Nair, 317)

She became motionless, pathetic and frozen figure. Smriti, a girl brought up in United States had got into the troubles when identifying herself with the fellow Indian women. Smriti’s life misery is revealed to her father, JAK, who considered it as his sole responsibility to fight against evil prejudices in India. 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 offshoot 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. (118-119)

Lessons in Forgetting is a story of women's quest to move on in life. The question Anita Nair raises in the novel makes us rethink about the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in the traditional society and about the existence of alternative reality. Anita Nair writes about the search of self of her woman characters and assertion of the individual self. Indian society which has conventional norms and values are losing their ground because of modernity and globalization. The impact of these factors is clearly discernible in Anita Nair's novels. True picture of society is being posed and it marks the mode of twenty-first century where norms have been changing to the suit of the taste of new generation.

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