

## INDOMITABLE SPIRIT OF SMRITI IN ANITA NAIR'S *LESSONS IN FORGETTING*

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### **Abstract :**

*Anita Nair is one of the most sensitive women novelists in contemporary India. Her novels Ladies Coupe, Mistress, and Lessons in Forgetting present various social issues, highlighting women's subjugation, sufferings, predicament as well as women's quest for identity and liberation in the contemporary male dominated Indian society. Her female characters seem passive on some occasions and on some occasions, they show determination and purpose to achieve their intention in the patriarchal framework of the society. Anita Nair's fourth novel Lessons in Forgetting is a touching story of redemption, forgiveness and second chances in life. The novel deals with the issues of women's dependency, sufferings and subordination of women in a male dominated society. The novel depicts the stories of women facing varied issues existing in a patriarchal society such as gender inequality, love, betrayal, sexual, domestic violence, female foeticide and rape. The present paper intends to examine how Anita Nair has depicted indomitable spirit of Smriti through her protest against social evils of female foeticide in her novel Lessons in Forgetting.*

**Key Words:** Patriarchal Society, Female Foeticide, New Woman, Quest, Women

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### **Introduction :**

As a writer Anita Nair has brilliantly depicted several issues of women through her female characters in her novels, viz. *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Mistress* (2003), and *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010). Nair's female characters fight against the traditional, cultural, socio-religious and patriarchal ideologies and search for their selves and struggle to gain independence. They perform various roles during their life and contemplate their self-identity issues during disappearance and manifestation of different roles during their lifetime. Nair's "new women" often embark on profound journeys of self-discovery and identity formation to define themselves beyond their prescribed roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. They seek individual identities, exploring their desires, ambitions, and dreams. Whereas Nair's female characters like Meera, Sarada, Kala Chithi in *Lessons in Forgetting* have been shown as the victims of patriarchy, they also succeed in asserting their self-identity and independence during the course of their individual life. The novel is a story of women's quest to move on in life as Nair shows how educated women try to assert their individuality in the male dominated society. Nair depicts Smriti's character as a new woman who wants to liberate Indian women and

sacrifices her life for the dying daughters of India. These female characters also project Nair's conception of the new woman. The present paper is an attempt to examine how Anita Nair explores indomitable spirit of Smriti in the novel *Lessons in Forgetting* and presents her conception of the new woman through Smriti's character.

### **Indomitable Spirit of Smriti :**

Smriti is depicted by Nair as an independent girl who desires to establish her identity as a social worker. She is strong, bold and stubborn character who never allows anyone to deprive of her freedom or individuality. She is nineteen years old daughter of Professor Jak who comes to India to pursue her higher studies. She is a typical NRI girl who drinks mineral water and keeps moist wipes and hand sanitizers in her bag. In the words of Ashish Gupta, "Smriti makes her life down for the noble cause. The novelist, through Smriti, presents the image of a new woman who is educated, courageous and capable of creating a path of their own in this patriarchal world and moreover her plight cautions the young mind against the containment and exploitation" (Gupta, 110). She strongly wants to do something for Indian women as she prefers to live with her father in Bangalore after the legal separation of her parents. She argues with her parents when she announces her decision to move to India for her undergraduate degree. Smriti wants to know and discover India for herself and her father supports her as he says, "Maybe it is time she got to know India. Discovered it for herself. She's going through a phase. Of wanting to save the world" (*Lessons in Forgetting*, 123).

Smriti doesn't like her father's relationship with Monique and although she accompanies them to Venice, she shows her repulsion for Monique. It is only when her father breaks up his relationship with Monique, Smriti becomes delighted and the following month she declares her decision to move to India. She succeeds in making her father aware of her dislike for Monique as Jak himself admits, "It is ironic that I who study the clouds and the sea, I who can forecast storms and chart their path almost intuitively, I can't read Smriti, her moods and phases. She defeats me" (*Lessons in Forgetting*, 236). Similarly, Smriti makes her father yield to her overwhelming desire to pursue her higher studies in India. Once Jak recalls about Smriti as, "he had succumbed to Smriti's superior will. She was still a young girl, wild, impetuous and wilful, but he had failed to see that" (*Lessons in Forgetting*, 124).

In India Smriti voluntarily joins the Stree Shakti forum that intends to conduct the workshop series regarding female foeticide in various districts of Tamilnadu. Smriti tirelessly works in the forum as a dedicated worker. She wants to do something for the dying girls of India. Shivu, whose theatre company is assisting the forum, gets impressed by Smriti's bold appearance and dedication and wants to develop relationship with her. As Shivu likes Smriti very much and wants to impress her, he introduces his friends, Mathew and Rishi to Smriti. Shivu recalls about Smriti as, "All of us hoped to have a girlfriend. But Smriti was the girl one dreamt of. She was cute, smart, and she had none of the hang-ups that our girls did" (*Lessons in Forgetting*, 125). Jak further realizes that Smriti's frank and open ways had attracted Shivu, Mathew and Rishi.

Smriti is fearless and liberated girl as Shivu tells Jak, "She thought nothing of holding your hand in public. Or greeting you with a hug. Or wrapping her hands around your middle when she rode pillion on the bike" (*Lessons in Forgetting*, 125). Meanwhile, Smriti clearly

tells Shivu that she considers Shivu, Mathew and Rishi as her friends and no one of them is her boyfriend. However, Mathew is jealous of Smriti's growing intimacy with Rishi. Both Rishi and Smriti like each other intensely. Smriti yearns for Rishi as she changes herself for Rishi: "She dressed the way he liked girls to. She ate what he ate. She switched to the music he listened to and gave up everything he professed a dislike for. She bathed using his bar of soap; she borrowed his toothbrush; she wore his shirts...She followed his every move and if he slammed a door between them, she would wait outside till he emerged" (*Lessons in Forgetting*, 264). Soon Rishi feels Smriti's love a trap for him. Smriti's obsessive love unnerves Rishi and he wants to break up his relationship with Smriti.

As Smriti is reluctant to be parted from Rishi, he decides to go with her to Madurai and intends to end their relationship by the end of the trip. During the bus journey Rishi tells her about her indecent dressing and asks her to put her shirt on to cover the undersides of her breasts. He tells Smriti, "But we are in a small-town India and they don't know how to behave when they see a girl like you...They haven't seen girls like you. And you always said you wanted to blend with the real India. You are hardly going to do that in a tank top and no bra" (*Lessons in Forgetting*, 281). Smriti is a bold and independent girl as she doesn't bother much about her manner of dress which, however, is considered improper in rural India. Nair narrates the remarks of one woman regarding Smriti's modern way of dress as, "Don't the men stare at you? They leer at us even when we are in a sari so when they see someone like you...I couldn't ever dress like you do. All those eyes stripping me naked. I would rather die!" (*Lessons in Forgetting*, 282)

Eventually, Smriti and Rishi reach in Minjikapuram. There they go for moonlight walk by the sea and drink two cans of beer. Smriti considers their walk as a moonlight picnic on the beach. The night air and the moon fill Smriti with a wildness and while running and twirling wildly on the beach she gets her foot injured by a broken glass. The following day Rishi and Smriti go to the Meenakshi Nursing Home for treating her injured foot. In the nursing home Smriti learns from a woman, Chinnathayi about the illegal process of the abortion and identification of the sex of the unborn babies in the hospital. Smriti decides to collect the proof against the mobile scan unit and persuades Chinnathayi to give her the required proof to file her complaint against that illegal process. Meanwhile, when Rishi is threatened by Dr. Srinivasan's men for Smriti's interference in the hospital matters, he tries to dissuade Smriti from her quest and insists her to leave Minjikapuram. Nevertheless, Smriti is bold and independent as she clearly tells Rishi, "You, or anybody else can't force me to leave till I have got what I want...I need proof to file my complaint. I need proof to take to the newspapers. No one is going to be able to refute the truth then. Not even your dangerous men" (*Lessons in Forgetting*, 297).

Smriti further learns that Chinnathayi's daughter dies while aborting her girl foetus and she assures Smriti to give some of the papers and reports to Smriti. Unfortunately, during her quest to get proof Smriti gets brutally raped and punished by three brawny men of Dr Srinivasan on the beach. Smriti sacrifices her life for saving the dying daughter of India. Smriti becomes the victim of the brutal rape and that deadly attack leaves her paralysed. She is unable to move or express herself and Jak's quest for finding out the reasons behind the freak accident of his dead-to-the world daughter reveals her true character. She seems to be bold and fearless in her

quest. Her self-identity crisis urges her to go beyond the expected roles in the male dominated society. In the words of Maya Vinai, “Smriti’s experience in *Lessons in Forgetting*, reminds the reader of the way women are brutally extinguished for the ‘crime’ of moving beyond the roles assigned to her by the society” (Vinai, 132-133). Though Smriti is presented as a paralysed and motionless character in the novel, her father’s quest brings to limelight her social activism. Smriti’s social activism encourages her father to carry on Smriti’s unfinished quest as he says, “I have to finish what Smriti set out to do” (*Lessons in Forgetting*, 325).

### Conclusion :

The aforesaid discussion shows that Anita Nair has depicted indomitable spirit of Smriti through her sincere efforts to liberate women and stop the practice of female foeticide in the male dominated Indian society. Smriti’s character impresses the reader by the way she sincerely struggles and sacrifices her life for a noble cause. She appears to be a modern, determined, and aggressive girl who doesn’t hesitate what she wants to do in her life. Nair has delineated her conception of the new woman through Smriti’s character who is bold, assertive and independent.

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