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The Socio-Cultural Milieu as Depicted in Anita Nair’s

Lessons in Forgetting

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In the works of recent Indian writers in English, it is obvious that the writers are irresistibly preoccupied with their cultural moorings. They seldom escape from bringing in a quest for cultural values and identity, a quest for cultural order and stability, a cultural milieu, disintegration and degradation of culture etc., in their writings. Culture takes its shape, the shape society takes it to and hence society experiences a change as there comes a change in culture and vice versa. K. Balachandran says, “Great thinkers like Aristotle considered family as a federal society which unites three different groups or societies namely, the husband and wife, the parents and children, the master and servants” (3). Also “Leibniz (1646 - 1716), the German philosopher argued that the family system contained four societies, the above mentioned three plus the family as a whole. So family is a society in miniature” (qtd. in K. Balachandran 3).

And there is no doubt Anita Nair has depicted the socio – cultural milieu, by taking family as a society in miniature. She has chosen her novels as a medium of minute feelings to reveal the innate quality of mankind who form the society, where this formation is structured by traditional and socio - cultural perspectives on all dimensions. In the novel, Lessons in Forgetting she has made an intense look at marriage, parenthood, destiny and relationships. The book is a wholesome package of occurrences that unapologetically debunk recognized culture and convention, inclusive of love, dependency and betrayal, female foeticide and the page three party culture of South India. Thus Anita Nair has attempted to get in deeper and deeper into the many layers of society, such as socio – cultural, socio – economic and environmental issues.

Husband and wife relationship is an important aspect of the family life which reflects the socio – culture of a country. Anita Nair has done a meticulous cross – section of the modern middle – class husband and wife relationship. Meera, the protagonist of Lessons in Forgetting, is a corporate wife and writer of cookbooks. Meera is a wife in love with her husband Giri, who wants nothing but love, peace and affection in the family. She gives in to
all that he likes, least able to protest him even for little things she feels like. When he says that people of page three parties are real people, Meera is unable to relate such parties and real people and she wanted to protest but was afraid to shatter the fragile peace between them. She, like every other woman smiles when her husband does as “Wives are the same everywhere. When Giri smiles, so does she. A wife in love. Meera Hera” (4). She is a typical wife in a society where patriarchal culture has strongly rooted. Modernization affects the society and it affects the surroundings on which life depends. Giri seems to crave for a modern sophisticated life. But Meera is too innocent to think that Giri is in love with her grace and charm and little thinks the other side of Giri, a money-minded monster who is conscious of her upper-class-dom as it is said:

Giri rose six inches high. What man wouldn’t? He thought of the riches laid out before him. A bride with social graces and a beautiful old home. Giri had made careful plans about where he would be by the time he was thirty, forty, forty five . . . he needed to round off the edges that still clung to him from the small – town, lower middle class boy he was. Meera would make this possible, he knew with certainty Meera, who exuded upper-class-dom like the L’air du temps she wore. Discreet, elegant, and old money (37).

The husband and wife relationship has narrowed down so that they are not able to share their needs for each other face to face as there is a lack of tolerance when their needs are denied. And Giri is depicted as a cruel, uncultured beast when he chooses his personal computer as a medium to abuse his wife brutally when Meera denies of the Lilac house to be sold and this seems to be a reflection of the culture of the west. Meera is shocked as she reads the unfinished e-mail of Giri, “Sometimes I think I could strangle her. She refuses to listen my reason. I wanted to reach across and slap her face(41). This attitude of Giri is because he is not an exception of the patriarchal society, as he expects Meera to give him absolute surrender, when he demands for the Lilac house. And so when she refuses he suffers from inferiority complex, for he says, “After all, it’s Madam’s lilac house” (41). Meera a fragile wife is broken as she finds her Giri with such rancour and bitterness. This kind of money-mindedness and materialistic perspectives have become instances of socio-cultural degradation, as such money culture clouds the real love of the social set-up that leads to socio-cultural degradation in a family, which spreads its roots into the society. Neither Giri, nor Meera lets this matter out, and still it becomes a common social issue, in spite of its birth within the four walls of a room.
“Clifford Geertz focuses on the inherited elements of cultures and defines it as, “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which human beings communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about, and their attitudes towards life” (qtd. in Robert Pinto 140). Anita Nair probes into the relationship of Sarada Ammal, Jak’s mother and his father, who forsakes his wife and son, telling them simply that his attitude towards life was his search of truth and only truth, as he says, “One day, Kitcha, you too will know it. A moment of truth and then everything else will cease to be of any significance. Everything else will only seem a deterrent then. An irritant standing between you and your goal” (15). The concept of patriarchy peeps out when he says that it was his duty to provide his parents with a heir and that’s why he married for the family line to continue. This tendency seems to reflect the socio cultural milieu which fails to look at women, not more than something to beget children.

In society, one culture influences another and the influence of Western culture on India has been reflected through the relationship between Jak the cyclone expert and his wife Nina and their daughter Smriti. Though Jak and Nina have migrated to the States, at first they are not able to forget their home, for it is they are just physically present but their minds seeking India, they have left behind. As Jak says this, “Nina and I couldn’t at first forget home. We lived in the States. Our bodies did that is. That way what brought together. Bound us” (138). He is happy to share this with Meera, the Indian soil that has united him and Nina together. When Nina finds her daughter Smriti piercing and wearing studs in her eyebrows, the nose ring, the under lip, tongue etc. she is displeased as it is merely western, for which Smriti in turn shows her disapproval to her parents saying, “Oh, stop it, Papa Jak Don’t act so wet. This is my Goth look. It’s what I want for now. Don’t be like those Indian parents we know” (121). As Indian culture has framed a kind of modesty and decorum, Nina disapproves when the seventeen year old Smriti perches on Jak’s knee, at which he seldom bothers. This Nina who is pleased with Indian decorum, modesty and everything of India, later seems to remember only an India with a leaky tap in the garden and bird shit in the patio. She was, “A Nina who at faculty parties and her publishing dos talked at length about Indian spices and miniatures and kathakali and the chola bronzes” (150). But this Nina seems to be lost to say, “Well Kitcha, if you love India so much, why don’t you go back?”(50). And this Nina quick to anger and quick to change with the Western culture paves way for the rift to get widened and widened, that makes them live as strangers to each other’s dreams and bodies. This cultural change makes Nina, a stone – hearted mother, in who there’s no trace of
Indian motherhood while she says at the end, “I don’t want you to come anywhere near Shruti. I will get a court order if I need to. I won’t lose another daughter to you, to India” (69).

Anita Nair throws light on the way NRI tradition is looked upon by the society. Shivu, Smriti’s friend refers to the NRI girls as, “it was the foreign girls who came there as regularly as the boys did. They had money to spend. And I suppose it was like one of the places they would go to in their own countries. A place where you could hook up with someone. Everyone knew that. It was like a tradition” (120). It is depicted clearly how the NRI’s are looked upon by the natives when the Indian doctor blames the NRI’s as he says that they come to India with western thoughts and when something goes wrong, they simply blame India. The doctor blames their parents who fail to understand that grown – up girls need to be with their mothers. Thus the doctordifferentiates an Indian girl and an NRI girl as he says, “A man a group . . . Would any Indian girl be bold? They may have been classmates, but she was alone and who knows what transpired? Didn’t you or her mother teach her what to do and what not to do?” (54). And hence it seems that it is Indian tradition to blame the Western Culture, but in spite of this, Indian parents wish to send their children to America for higher studies. Joseph John, father of Mathew’s face beams as Jak introduces himself as Professor Krishnamurthy, the Head of the Department of Biotechnology at the University of Florida. Jak wins over the man as he lathers his words with his most pronounced American accent, determined to make an impression and buy the man’s complicity. Meanwhile Joseph John says that he will make a possible move to his family in Fort Worth and Long Island, “if Mathew made America his home” (143). And as a word of encouragement Jak approves of it and so “the seed of imminent migration was sown (143). When Mathew is reluctant to be free with Jak, Joseph John frowns at him to say, “Instead of making an impression on him, you are behaving like a frightened bridegroom. I know that your future lies in his hands. So go and be as he expects you to be!” (144). Thus Joseph John takes his place in the sort of fathers with the contemporary culture of sending their children to America for higher studies. Even Shiva doesn’t escape the small – town boys who are attracted towards American style while he says, “I was a small – town boy who was overwhelmed by her. By her American ways” (145). And hence such characters remind us of typical society where people are unsure of themselves and have no taste or style or culture of their own.
The societal chain is strengthened by the chords of families which constitute the relationship between husband and wife, mother and daughter and father and daughter. But the most intimate relationship of mother and daughter seems to get thinner and thinner in the modern society. Every mother thinks that her relationship with her daughter should be infallible. But unfortunately this fails in Meera’s life. Both Meera and Nayantara point their fingers at each other with accusations. When Meera finds a cigarette butt floating in Nayantara’s toilet bowl, a kind of fear and sorrow tussle in her. As she musters up courage to ask Nayantara, “I know you are smoking. How dare you?” Nayantara with little consideration slams the door and rushes out of the room and Meera sees for the first time her child has become a woman. Here Nayantara keeps a check for her mother from interfering her personal desires for she says, “Why don’t you let it be? You have to let me live my life. Please. Why can’t you understand?” Meera with astonishment traces the expression of dislike that has crept into Nayantara’s eyes as she continued standing in the room. She wonders how her own child could look at her as if she were the enemy while she has believed that mother – daughter relationship is considered to be an ideal, intimate and the most emotive one on earth. She is unable to believe how her daughter Nayantara has been a contrary to this. It is not a problem that runs between Meera and Nayantara but a societal change and a cultural degradation, where a nineteen year old girl smokes and expects her mother to keep away from her privacy. A mother is always a mother and thus, Meera’s motherhood has known to keep burning coals in her heart, ever since Nayantara became a young woman as she finds her Nayantara, “as a once angelic child turned into a cruel monster if she didn’t have her way” (255). Nayantara is the sort of a daughter who without a second thought jabs her mother with words. Little considerate of a mother’s feelings, she simply puts forth all her admirations for Giri’s girl friend as “O youngish, – Dresses nicely. Smart. Drives a swift. Like one of those girls in Daddy’s office, I think!”(203). A daughter who ought to have been more considerate for a mother fails her, whereas Nikhil is there to understand her mother’s feelings to say, “Stop it, Stop it, I don’t want to know. Mummy doesn’t want to hear this nonsense either he cried, his fingers covering her mouth” (222).

Motherhood is a wonderful gift of God that is an embodiment of love, sacrifice, kindness and full of grace. But Nina is no more a mother to call Smriti a tragedy, as she says, “What perverse idea is Kithca? What are you planning to do with the dolls? You are not making this any easier for any one of us. . . to handle this. . . to deal with this tragedy’(55). She doesn’t want to waste her life with tragic Smriti and tells with determination she can’t
wait anymore in India. She becomes a plastic woman in a TV newsroom in the modern – cultured world. And thus motherhood dies and becomes callous with the death of social values, tradition and culture.

It is true that there is a transition of values in the changing society of India. Transition of values includes the disintegration of the institution of marriage and family, and the individuals of the family lacking in morality. We find Jak, the father of two children and Lisa, Jak’s colleague’s wife, who has hidden behind the facade of a proper wife satisfying their carnal hunger mutually. And Jak convinces himself for, “He didn’t go looking for it but he didn’t disdain it either when it came his way (13). And for Vinnie, Meera’s friend, her marriage with her husband Kishore is not more than sharing a home and a business, and for the rest leading separate lives. For her, “It is the circle of security that has us enchanted. Not the house or the money, the sex or kids. Not even companionship” (185). Vinnie, out of her matrimony hooks up with Arun, her lover, who makes love of her, whenever he is in need of money. She doesn’t want to lose him as it is said, “Did she love him? She didn’t know. But she needed him and was petrified of losing him. And yet to give him the money would be changing the trajectory of ‘this thing, whatever it is’ as he called their relationship” (103). Thus the sanctity of marriage is losing its significance, that is least bothered in the society, all because of slaking of lust.

The events which take place in the society serve as barometers to measure its cultural value. Modernization is a factor that has its effect on culture. Modernization affects the life – style, and the emergence of ‘page – three parties’, that has rooted into South Indian culture reflect the posh culture, as it is where they with all rich sections of the society, show off their wealth and power with a drink in one hand, always someone hitting somebody as it has been depicted as, “Eventually they would all meet and play out the upper epidermis of emotion. That is the nature of such parties. You network with a drink in one hand and a smile on your face, clapping hands, air kissing . . . (5). It is ridiculous when there is no South Indian filter coffee available in a coffee shop in Bangalore; but has Columbian, Brazilian, Kenyan, for which Vinnie says, “Here we are in Bangalore, South India and you have, what is that? Columbian, Brazilian Kenyan and no good old South Indian filter coffee” (10). And hence it is obvious that with modernity the traditional culture has become extinct.

Light has been thrown on the social evil of female foeticide that still prevails in little towns near Madurai. This has become societal as ‘Despite the laws and regulations, women
still find a way of discovering the sex of their unborn babies… They abort the foetus if it’s a girl” (285). In the society parents, teachers, doctors and people of any profession have a social responsibility to take it towards the right path. But here a doctor who violates law and order and makes it a money yielding business, to reveal the sex of the baby through scan as Chinnathayi says, “The scan doctor said it was a girl child” (309). And it has also been a practice of the villages nearby to go to the Meenakshi Nursing home. Hence money makes one forget ones professional values.

To conclude with, it is to say that man, society and culture are non – separable. And through the study of the novel Lessons in Forgetting, it is obvious that Anita Nair has been conscious enough to paint in words an environment that grows and changes with an individual, the family and then the society.

Works Cited


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This is to certify that [Name] attended the International conference on Celebration of Ethnicity and Alterity for Cultural Diversity organised by the Department of English, Sarah Tucker College on 5 April 2013 and presented a paper on [Title of Paper].

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Espousal and Estrangement of Patriarchal Culture: A Study of

Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe*

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Literature is incredibly a versatile instrument and at the proper use of it one can revolt against the forces of evil and indemnify ignorance and prejudice and enhance national harmony and universal communication. It must carry the past, present the present and embellish the future. Anita Nair is a renowned Indian writer in English who through her writings carries the past, presents the present and embellishes the future and enables to develop a humane and liberal outlook on life, to realize and make a betterment of the life they have lived, the world in which they live, to understand themselves and plan ahead sensibly for a better future.

Patriarchal culture is one which men have power over women. This culture is a myth that has been acquired by the society since ancient times. This patriarchy led by men is espoused by women too. They strongly upheld their espousal by thrusting it upon their future generation too. But during recent times women try to estrange from this patriarchal culture and decide to walk out of this and live either in autonomy or live in silent rebellion, remaining in it. There are also women who question against this culture within them but live helplessly. Anita Nair has dealt with such women of diverse thoughts regarding this patriarchal culture.

The culture of patriarchy has been a culture of the world, since time immemorial. People, inclusive of women have strongly espoused this culture and are still rooted in it. Women like, the protagonist’s mother and sister fall into this sort. They echo the indefinite past of patriarchy, while Janaki Prabakar questions it but lives contented in it and women like Akhila and Karpagam question this espousal in their present and estrange it and mark symbols for the future. This paper thus makes an attempt to study these characters that espouse and estrange the universal patriarchal culture. As Talpade observes, “What binds
women together is a sociological notion of the ‘sameness’ of their oppression all over the world” (244).

*Ladies Coupe* is centered on family and finally the idea of “New Women” who question their existence in patriarchy and break the social order or make a silent war against it and succeed keeping themselves within social conventions. Estrangement begins with awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation within the family, at work and in society and conscious action by women and men and ends in bringing about a change in this situation.

Anita Nair takes a striking place in the series of these women novelists who have skillfully explored the agonized mind of the persecuted women. She has done a pioneering effort in giving voice against gender discrimination, rape, child sexual abuse, internal partner violence, through her various portrayal of characters. Though all these are the various forms that express the plight of women, the one and only cause behind these is the deeply rooted concept of patriarchy in the society. In *Ladies Coupe* Anita Nair deals with the concept of patriarchy and signifies a relationship of equality. Though Patriarchy is a common concept in every woman’s life, Anita Nair depicts carefully the diversity within each woman, as she did not want to put the lives of women to one ideal. In the words of Sunitha Sinha, “Nair’s India Suffers from a patriarchal system which has tried in many ways to repress, humiliated and debased women. The question she poses in her novels not only shake the ideological ground of man’s patriarchal role in our traditional society but also imply the existence of an alternative reality” (149).

Colonialism and the concept of patriarchy are inseparable in feminist discourse as it stresses a relationship of inequality and injustice. It seems that though the colonists have stepped out of the colonized countries, the impact of colonization is still felt in the form of patriarchy. The colonization still continues in the form of male domination towards women as S. Suressh Kumar and Leema Rose state, “Women continue to be colonized and subjected to the oppressions put into place by colonialism and consolidated by patriarchy” (49).

Akhila’s mother is known for her espousal of patriarchy. She has a strong belief that sons are superiors to daughters in a family. In Indian society sons are given more importance than daughters. They are respected and daughters are expected to respect their brothers as their superiors even if they are younger than them. Feminism is strongly against such a
gender discrimination, that has been since time immemorial. Akhila’s mother is a woman who is a strong believer of this gender discrimination. She lives with Akhila, but expects her to get permission from her brothers, the men of the family to go on an office tour. She says, “Perhaps you should ask your brothers for permission first. You might be older but you are a woman and they are the men of the family” (150). Akhila at the end boldly takes up a decision to live alone. Even then Akhila’s mother says without reluctance “Do you think the brothers will consent to this? Do you think they’ll let you live alone” (204). When Akhila breaks her silence to say “For heaven’s sake, I don’t need anyone’s consent” (204), Saying this, Akhila boarded the train to Kanyakumari hoping to live a life for her. Akhila’s defiance becomes stronger as she meets her friend Karpagam, who is a “new woman”.

Karpagam is a woman who estranges herself from the social conventions of patriarchy. As Keith May says, “A New woman was dissatisfied with ordinary society and was reluctant to become or to remain a mere wife” (105). Karpagam does not want to remain as a mere wife of her dead husband but violates the rules of society set for a widow and leads a life for her own. Anita Nair has used the character of Karpagam to bring an awareness to the society of women’s demands and their need for self-expression. Karpagam is portrayed as a strong woman striving for autonomy in a patriarchal social organization that says that a woman should be out of all her desires after the death of her husband. Karpagam is a widow but unlike other widows she wears the kumkum and colourful clothes. She is a courageous woman who does not bother about the society. She breaks the rules of the society. She lives a life for her. She does not bother about what others would say:

I don’t care what my family or anyone thinks. I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose. Tell me, didn’t we as young girls wear colourful clothes and jewellery and a bottu? It has nothing to do with whether she is married or not whether her husband is alive or dead. Who made these laws anyway? Some man who couldn’t bear the thought that in spite of his death, his wife continued to be attractive to other men (202).

Karpagam has lived alone for many years. She tells Akhila how as women, she and her daughter have challenged life after the death of her husband. Thus she breaks the dangerous framework of patriarchy that denies personal freedom to women. Her words to Akhila are, “Whatever you think you want to live alone. Build a life for yourself where your needs come first (202).
Anita Nair has carefully drawn characters like Akhila’s mother, to express how women are strong conservatives of the patriarchal structure that has imposed strict social, political and economic limitations on women. Akhila’s mother is a conservative and orthodox mother, a devoted wife with her own theory that a wife is always inferior to her husband. She is the sort of a woman who never takes decision on her own but leaves all decisions to her husband as she believes, “He knows best” (14). Moreover Akhila’s mother is a woman who could never accept a wife taking up a job. When Akhila wants her mother to take music lessons as her friend Karpagam’s mother teaches dance, she disapproves of it telling, “I don’t approve of what Karpagam’s mother is doing” (13). She reminds Akhila that her father had told her when they were first married, that he wants his wife to take care of him and his children and that she should not get caught up with her job so that she may not have time to take care of him the house and the children. So even after the death of Akhila’s father, her mother lets her eldest daughter Akhila shoulder the responsibilities of the entire family, taking advantage over her sense of duty and above all her mute acceptance to keep them safe, secure and comfortable.

Janaki Prabakar is different from Akhila’s mother in her attitude towards patriarchy. She understands that she has been trained since her childhood that a girl should be under the control of her father, and after marriage under the loving control of her husband as she has been blessed with a loving husband and in case if the husband passes away she has to depend on her son. She has not developed even the thought of living independently without a man’s help. She neither espouses patriarchy nor thinks of estrangement.

Through this paper it is understood that the female characters struggle against the negative forces often engendered by the ruthless and sapless patriarchy, with their new emerging ideas and views against the age-old norms of the patriarchal society. Anita Nair has portrayed the plight of women, who ignorantly espouse patriarchy, who silently accept this patriarchy and also the women who raise the question about their way of life in it and see it not only as the site of their exploitation at home and in society but also make it a war-field to slam their oppressors. She portrays how the freedom of women is curtailed by the dominant ideas of men and how they are able to overcome it or make a reconciliation to make the life perfect and beautiful. She also highlights the fact, how some women are very stubborn about not crossing the patriarchal code, as that of women like Akhila’s mother in Ladies Coupe. Hence Anita Nair is a feminist writer with her presentation of the feelings and aspirations of
the women, who has contributed her novels for the awakening of women who suffer in the patriarchal society to estrange themselves from it.

**Works Cited**


