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**Changing Perspectives in Human Relationships: A Study of Anita Nair's
*Lessons in Forgetting***

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Abstract

Anita Nair's Lessons in Forgetting (2010) depicts the changing perspectives of human beings due to the impact of globalization and modernization that have affected life and manners as never before. The narrative reflects the dilemmas in human relationships of the twenty-first century India. Meera, the protagonist, is a victim of broken marriage as she is divorced by her ambitious, self-centered, corporate husband Giridhar. As a wronged wife, she explores the possibility of second chances when her employer J.A. Krishnamurthy (Jak) is drawn to her. Based in U.S.A. Jak too is a divorcee and a wronged husband. He has arrived in India to investigate the freak accident of his daughter Smriti who is in a comatose condition. As Meera's job as his assistant draws her deeper into his personal life, the facts surrounding the mystery of Smriti's condition are unravelled. Smriti, who is victimized by her parents' separation, has escaped to India for higher education. Her search for the self and her roots brings her to her parents' motherland. But, as a product of westernized upbringing, she strikes a discordant note with her friends and associates in India. Her liberal ideas and behaviour contrast with the conservative values and the traditional environment. Her extrovert nature and relations with boyfriends betray traits of the foreign culture in which she is raised, bringing her into many conflicts. Her misplaced idealism, bold activism and unthinking heroism lead her to her crisis. The present paper seeks to study the dilemma and consequences of the major characters due to changing values and changed perspectives.

Keywords: changing perspectives, human relationships, conservative values, traditional environment, second chances

The current era of globalization that has wrought rapid modernization has affected human life and manners as never before. Its impact is visible in the changing behaviour and attitudes of human beings in their inter-personal relationships, particularly in traditional societies. This metamorphosis finds expression in the literature of concurrent times as a testimony of the ongoing change. Anita Nair's novel *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) is one such example that depicts how the changing perspectives and deviant behaviour affect and alter human life and relationships.

The narrative reflects the dilemmas in human relationships in the twenty-first century society of India that is greatly influenced by the transforming times. Meera, the protagonist, becomes a victim of broken marriage when she is divorced by her ambitious, self-centered husband Giridhar (Giri) with whom she has had a love marriage. She is compelled to seek employment as a means of survival and salvage. As a wronged wife, she also tries to make her life meaningful by exploring the possibility of second chances when her employer J.A. Krishnamurthy (Jak) is drawn to her. Based in U.S.A. Jak too is a divorcee and a wronged husband. He has arrived in India to investigate the freak accident of his daughter Smriti who is in a comatose condition. Smriti has come to India for higher education as she is victimized by her parents' separation. But her westernized upbringing, liberal ideas and candid behaviour that contrast with the traditional values and

conformism wreak havoc in her life. The present paper seeks to study these major characters in terms of their changing perspectives and shifting values that bring them into conflicts, leading to their personal crisis.

The relationship between Meera and Giri is marked by class differences from the beginning and it is for this reason that the latter is allured to the former. Meera's grace and elegance of the upper class are in contrast with Giri's life of the rural, lower middle-class, thus making her a much desired match. His love for her is partly prompted by the tempting prospect of a profitable alliance as he is ambitious of upward mobility. He is totally enchanted by the well-educated Meera, her elite family and the Lilac House, their rambling old bungalow in Bangalore. The only daughter of her widowed mother Saro and the only granddaughter of Lily, her maternal grandmother who is also a widow, Meera is well groomed by the two matrons who are proud of their lineage, social status and connection with celebrities, with each pursuing her life with great zest.

The Lilac House plays a vital role in the making and breaking up of Meera's personal relationships. Her life is defined by her location at this bungalow that directly influences the course of her life and shapes her destiny. In the eyes of Giri, she is synonymous with the iconic bungalow as her sophistication and "gracious living" are inextricably fused with it. He is so enchanted by its affluence and ambience that he is charmed into marrying her and even moves into the house thereafter, without even bothering to set up his own home. Their marital bliss is subject to its agency as Giri banks on it for his career escalation.

In spite of the class differences, it is a balanced relationship initially. Giri, an engineer and a management post-graduate, thrives in his corporate job which is a blessing of globalization. Meera reigns at the centre of her husband's life as she satisfies his ambitions. She excels in playing her roles of a "corporate wife" and a hostess. She becomes a society figure of page three parties as desired by her husband. She also gains her independent recognition as an author of cookbooks and social etiquette. Giri's own complexes make him take pains to groom himself to suit the upper-class society, to acquire ". . . that veneer of polish Meera seemed to be born with" (37). Bent on ascending in his career as a "corporate guru," he upgrades himself on his clothes and accessories, creating a public image of himself.

Meera loses her central position in her husband's life when she fails to support his overriding ambitions. When Giri forces her to stake the Lilac House for his prospective entrepreneurial ventures, her refusal to comply enrages him. It leads to cracks in their relationship, causing alienation between them. Meera remains loyal to the family secret though her failed pre-marriage attempt to enlighten him the truth about the bungalow now backfires and becomes a thorn in her life. She is unwilling to disclose it later due to her foregone conclusion: "I knew that we came together as a package, the house and I. If he couldn't have the house, I thought he wouldn't want me either" (111). Being aware of her husband's self-seeking intentions in marrying her – his assumptions that they are the wealthy owners of the house – her lips are sealed forever on the ninety-nine-year lease contract of the bungalow.

The fissures in their relationship widen due to Giri's discontent and frustration. Meera becomes a victim of male domination and male ego. The ambitions of Giri symbolize the globalized era's greed to speedily ascend the professional ladder at the cost of family and personal relationships. Meera even becomes the 'other' and bears the brunt silently as she senses the presence of another woman in his life.

Treated as a stumbling block in Giri's life and career, Meera becomes the scapegoat of his misplaced ambitions. His abrupt desertion of his wife and the grown up children, leaving them in a dilemma, exposes his extremely selfish nature and self-centered motives. His decision to quit the family when his ulterior motive fails to serve his purpose, reveals his downright materialism, heartless disregard and lack of commitment.

The relegation of Meera from the centre of her husband's life to the periphery reveals the changing perspectives in human relationships in the Postmodern era. Meera's world crumbles and falls apart due to his revenge of unfulfilled greed. She suffers greatly from the blow of his betrayal and marginalization. Faced with the risk of losing her own identity as a well-known hostess and a noted author, she fears the threat of identity crisis.

When their marriage of twenty-two years ends in divorce, it reduces Meera to the 'divorcee' status for no fault of hers. While Giri begins his "second life" with his "new trophy wife," the estranged Meera struggles with the ensuing deprivations and economic insecurity that adversely affect her life and relationships at both, personal and social levels. Once the queen of page three parties, she becomes an outcast of social circles due to her "fall from grace."

Due to the taboo of 'divorcees' in the society, Meera suffers from alienation and isolation when she fails to re-enter social life as a single woman. But as an educated and emancipated woman, she does not give up her pursuit of fulfilling the self. Forced by necessity to look for employment, she gains economic security and independence when she is appointed as a research assistant to Jak, a college professor returned from U.S.A.

The changing perspectives in human relationships in the current era are reflected in Meera's responses to her situation. She is essentially a Postmodern woman as she does not lapse into self-pity or pessimism due to her broken marriage. Instead, she firmly propels herself out of her quandary through strong self-assertion. She boldly regains the grip of her life in two months despite the humongous consequences of separation. Regaining her self-confidence due to her job and financial security, she embarks on her own "second life." She resumes her avocation of writing books and authors a sequel to her bestseller. She also keeps her eyes open for second chances.

Meera's exploration for a new life leads her into relationships firstly with Soman, a small time actor, that comes to naught, and then with Jak. She finds a soul mate in Jak as the similarity of his situation as a wronged spouse, with his broken marriage and severed relationships, provides a parallel to her own condition. Her empathy for him and his comatose daughter Smriti, and her active assistance in investigating the mystery surrounding the latter's condition, draw her deeper into her boss's life.

The ambivalence about her feelings for Jak is resolved after their physical union at Minjikapuram. It proves her uncertainty and doubts that it will not be an "enduring bond" nor rise above the "slaking of need" of two desperate souls. Once bitten, she is wary and wants to retain her own self intact although she perceives the openings of a second life. She does not want to commit herself to Jak until she is absolutely confirmed about it herself. Her resolution that she would not give herself wholly to him but satisfy her desires little by little, like savouring the pomegranate seed by seed, is indicative of prioritizing her own needs and choices.

The case of Meera who attempts to redefine her life with fresh beginnings despite her personal crisis, highlights the Postmodern women's changing perspectives of human relationships. Firstly, her decision to forget the past and make new beginnings reveals her as a realistic and practical woman. Secondly, her postponement of the decision of a second marriage implies her

perceptive need for self-preservation. Thirdly, her boldness and self-reliance stemming from her financial independence illustrate her as an empowered woman who has achieved full autonomy over her life.

Jak's story that forms the subplot of the narrative also underscores the crisis in his marital life due to the changing perspectives in human relationships. His love marriage with Nina in the U.S.A. has gone wrong in mid-life when their daughters are in their teens. Their divorce has divided the family with the elder daughter Smriti remaining with the father and the younger one Shruti with the mother who has had a second marriage. The separation of the spouses throws light on how the sacred relationships like marriage are treated lightly and broken easily due to the influences of Western culture like materialism and self-centeredness. Jak's affairs with Lisa Sherman, wife of a colleague and with Monique, his girl friend whom Smriti loathes, reveal the unethical relationships of a materialist society and culture.

Jak's visit to India on a sabbatical is aimed at seeking justice for his wronged daughter Smriti who is a victim of a "freak accident" in Minjikapuram that has resulted in her comatose condition. It has added to his burden of guilt as Smriti, an emotional wreck due to their broken home, has left him on the excuse of studying in India. His assiduous investigation of the mystery of her present condition, his tireless vigilance and his constant attendance on her brings him closer to, and enlists the sympathy of, his research assistant Meera. Jak hopes that it would materialize into a serious relationship as she is abandoned and divorced by her husband. Despite her lack of positive response or confirmation, he remains patient and hopeful since both are victims of disintegrated marriages, trying to find a new meaning to their lives.

Smriti, born and brought up in the U.S.A., is an emancipated girl of a liberal society. Her obdurate choice of pursuing higher education in India is in reality an escape route from her estranged parents and her traumatic adolescence. She makes it her project to come to her parents' motherland in search of her roots and her 'self.' But her liberal ideas and candid behaviour contrast with the expectations of the traditional society. Her extrovert nature, dress and demeanor which reflect her western upbringing make her an object of curiosity in the college and outside.

Her relationship with boyfriends betrays traits of foreign culture like unbridled personal freedom which is the cause of many of her troubles. Her permissive behaviour in her friendship with Shivu, Mathew and Rishi makes them take her seriously. Smriti's live-in relationship with Rishi reflects the changes that are creeping into the society, changes that are defying the traditional culture and eroding the timeless values. But this relationship is short-lived as her partner is repulsed by her possessive nature and clinging habit. His plan of getting rid of her makes him accompany her halfway on her journey to Madurai where she would join the social organization for spreading awareness against female foeticide. He believes that her engagement with this latest obsession would ease his break up.

Smriti's response and retaliation to Rishi's slacking interest in her, during their stay at Minjikapuram, is again characteristic of her westernized culture. The accidental discovery of the female foeticide racket at the local hospital there makes her divert her energies to expose the scam. But her impulsive behaviour in her attempt to bust the racket, despite ominous warnings, makes them pay a heavy price. Her misplaced idealism makes her ignore the threats to their life and they become victims of dire consequences. While Rishi is beaten to near-death at the hotel, Smriti is gang-raped by the racketeers on the beach and then, accidentally hit by a log of floating wood that leaves her in coma. Smriti's rash resort to social activism on a rebound against Rishi wreaks havoc in

her life as she unwittingly becomes the sacrificial goat. She lies in coma for months with bare signs of returning to consciousness.

Rishi, an actor by profession and known to Meera as Soman, courts the divorcee who is older to him, on a rebound to his experience with Smriti who is much younger to him. He has lost track of the latter due to his long recuperation running into months. Soman's failed relationship with Meera is followed by the exposure of his relationship with Smriti during Jak's investigations. In all his relationships, Rishi Soman is revealed as a self-seeking opportunist and a speculator, approximating Giri in his vested interest and calculative nature in ascending the social and professional ladders.

Thus we observe how the current era of globalization that has ushered in modernization has influenced humanity and humanistic values. It has greatly impacted the traditional ways and views of human life and relationships. A desire for change, leading to a shift in the value system, is discernible as opposed to conformism. Meera who becomes a scapegoat of Giri's unfulfilled ambitions rejects her tag of a 'divorcee' when she is thrust into this status for no fault of hers. She refuses to remain on the periphery in her marginalized status, refuses to conform to the conventional stereo-type of a divorced woman with no hopes or scope to a life of her own. The injustices being manifold – her husband's disloyalty due to his affair, his breaking the vows in divorcing her, his marrying again and starting a new life – contest contrast with the facts that Meera is faithful to him, does not instigate the separation and does not even re-marry despite the openings for second chances. However, she rebounds from the margin to the centre as she moves on to re-establish her identity as an author and affirm her claim for second chances. This changing perspective is definitely a desirable change in women as it empowers the victims by positively providing them with a new lease of life.

Smriti cannot be judged by the same yardstick. She symbolizes the new woman of the west since her way of life is a pointer to the changing patterns of relationships there. Though her lineage is Indian, she is born and raised in an alien culture which is manifest in her free association and relationship with boyfriends. Whereas compromising virginity before marriage is a taboo in India, it seems to be a pattern of life in the western world. So, she has neither inhibitions in satisfying her bodily desires nor any prick of conscience about it. Nor does she even imagine it to be objectionable or offensive. But her bold activism and unthinking heroism in fighting against the perpetrators of social evils make her vulnerable, as she is avenged heinously by sexual torture. Her freedom and free life become the cause of her undoing and personal crisis, as she suffers a terrible blow.

Giri and Rishi too, as husband and lover respectively, break the mould as they characterize the unchivalrous men of the current era. While Giri breaks his vows in walking out on his marriage, Rishi uses Smriti like a commodity to be discarded when he tires of her. Both of them represent men's changing perspectives of relationships, lack of commitment and slack principles. They are driven by selfishness, obsessed by money and controlled by greed. This can be partly attributed to globalization, modernization and technological progress that have augmented the degenerate qualities in them, making them regressive. This negative impact needs to be urgently addressed and corrected. *Lessons in Forgetting* is one such insightful document in this regard, commenting on the harsh reality of divergent behaviour and collapsing human relationships.

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