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Breaking Free of Man Box: Redefined Masculinity in Anita Nair's "Lessons in Forgetting"

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic world we inhabit today, traditional notions of masculinity are being challenged and redefined. Anita Nair, a renowned Indian author, explores this theme in her novels. Through her profound character development, Nair presents a thought-provoking analysis of how individuals are breaking free from traditional male roles and societal expectations to embrace a redefined masculinity that is androgynous and fulfilling in nature. Men, as seen in Nair's novels, at times contradicted their upbringing, and began to explore new ways of being masculine that is not oppressive towards women and children. In this regard, Nair encourages men and women to become partners and allies to each other, promoting mutual respect, support.

1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

A wave of female novelists, including Kiran Desai, Arundathi Roy, Anita Rau Badami, Suniti Namjoshi, and Anita Nair, entered the fourth phase of Indian English literature following the 1990s. These authors rejected gender norms and conventional understandings of what constitutes appropriate behavior for both men and women. They gave gender a new face by beginning to realistically concentrate on personal approaches to life and relationships. "*Lessons in Forgetting*," written by Anita Nair, does, in fact, mark a dramatic turn in Indian English literature, especially in the fourth wave that followed the 1990s.

1.3 TRYING TO BE MAN ENOUGH

Nair's protagonists go through a transformative journey, learning to embrace their authentic selves. This process requires conscious effort, introspection, and deeper understanding of one's emotions. In "*Lessons in Forgetting*," Nair's protagonist embraces vulnerability, sensitivity, and respect towards women which is a significant step towards breaking free of the man box, and embracing a more holistic and empathetic approach to masculinity. In this regard, men are trying to strike a balance between their "upbringing and contemporary expectations" (Bell 151).

One can witness an emerging picture of equitable sharing of responsibilities within families. The trend of co-equal parenting and shared responsibilities are slowly ushering in a more balanced and fulfilling family dynamics. In this context, in recent times, in the Third World, one observed an emerging picture of a new father who is engaged in care, ideally co-equal with the mother (Dowd, *The Man Question* 105). It's encouraging to witness these changes taking place in different parts of the world. In this vein, it's interesting to observe how Jak in *Lessons in Forgetting* assumes the role of a single parent. Jak gives a new take on what it is to be a father by illustrating the challenges of real parenthood and the intricacies of parenting.

Instead of his wife Nina, Jak offers his child, Smriti mental stability and social development during her adolescence. His role as a father highlights the fluidity of gender traits within the family. By portraying

men as equally capable caregivers and supporters of their families beyond the traditional breadwinner role, Nair's novel challenges the oppression of women

Jak's response to Smriti's sexual assault in India and her consequent vegetative condition transcend male stoicism and emotional detachment, as he opts to care for his daughter despite the immense emotional and physical toll it takes on him. Nina's suggestion of putting Smriti into organized care which contrasts with Jak's commitment to being her primary caregiver sheds light on the complex dynamics of gender roles and interpersonal sensitivity within the context of familial relationships. The man whose father left in his young age, whose mother married another man, whose daughter is "dead-to-the-world" (Nair, *Lessons in Forgetting* 280) goes beyond his karma to render justice to Nina

While Nina chooses to cope with the grief by distancing herself and returning to the US, Jak shows a deep sense of compassion and resilience by choosing to stay and care for Smriti in India. These evolving gender roles portrayed through Jak's character in the novel reflect the shifting cultural and social landscapes, particularly concerning women's empowerment and men's roles in caregiving. It is once again revealed that gender traits are just the "intended or unintended product[s] of a social practice" (Haslanger 97).

Jak is one-of-a-kind and hard to replicate. He used to stare at his newborn daughter Smriti all night long. He would rock her and cuddle her against his chest when she refused to go asleep. The more he embraced her, the more secure she felt (Nair, *Lessons in Forgetting* 359). Much to everyone's dismay, he would let his teenage daughter, Smriti merely bump into him and sit on his knee. As such, Smriti was able to trust men in the same way as she did her father.

Jak is able to navigate between traditionally masculine and feminine traits as needed. This flexibility can be a valuable asset in the world where rigid gender expectations are being challenged and individuals are encouraged to express themselves authentically. It's refreshing to see how Jak blends the perceived masculine and feminine characteristics in a single action, while at the same time, Nair's women such as Nina defend their beliefs and are self-reliant.

Jak's characteristics debunk the stereotypes of uniform gender disparities in literature and society. It is amazing how Smriti senses Jak's presence at all times, even in her most terrifying form. She is so desperate to be with him that she howls anytime he leaves. Jak's adult daughter never flinches at his touch, not even when he had to separate her legs and use a washcloth around the creases in her vagina to clean her (277). She is the infant he fed and bathed, she is his cherished daughter. One can witness here that Jak effortlessly builds a relationship with his child beyond the primacy of the mother-child bond. Even if Smriti does not offer anything exciting, Jak's love for her just grows stronger every day, creating an enduring relationship between him and his child.

Men have evolved into liberated fathers in today's world sharing housekeeping and childcare even more when they are no longer burdened with the responsibility of providing for their families and are truly in touch with their expressive and nurturing side.

One is reminded of Karung Kom in the Indian sociocultural setting, who sacrificed his own career to help his wife Mary Kom reach the pinnacles of boxing honor. As the family's principal caregiver, he has always made sure that Mary Kom's motherhood does not stand in the way of her job (Suneetha and Tharu 212-214). This has reached a new standard that strikes a balance between attributes that are both masculine and feminine.

Likewise, through the character of Meera in *Lessons in Forgetting*, Nair explores the complexities of gender roles and societal expectations in contemporary India. Meera's sudden transformation from a contented corporate wife and cookbook writer to the primary breadwinner and manager of her ancestral home is indeed a journey towards self-discovery and empowerment. Meera emerges as a symbol of strength and agency in the face of adversity. Through her narrative, Nair contributes to the evolving discourse on gender in Indian literature, presenting a refreshing perspective that resonates with contemporary readers.

PRIMARY SOURCES

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