

DOMESTICITY AS THE SIGNIFIER OF FEMININITY; A STUDY OF ANITA NAIR'S LESSONS IN FORGETTING

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Abstract:

The custom of domesticity tends to bring out femininity by restricting women to a domestic circle i.e., a women's role around home and they have been socially discriminated from establishing their identity. It is important to notice that women without their feminine qualities have been looked down and it is made to believe that, it is the femininity in women than men love and women must hold those attributes in them to be always pleasing men. The cultural norms and the domestic responsibilities formed by the society makes women inferior to men. The culture of India is constantly echoed in the present day writings of Indian writers and among them, Anita Nair one of the realistic writer in Indian writing in English focuses on the concerns of gender issues and women's cultural and domestic problems. The paper targets in bringing out how the cultural and societal norms restricts women to a limited zone and the consequences faced by those women who dare to come out to seek their individuality through the selected women characters in the novel *Lessons in Forgetting* by Anita Nair .

Key Words: Anita Nair, culture, discrimination, domesticity, femininity, lessons in forgetting

Anita Nair is one of the important writers in the twenty first century. She is best known for her fictions *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe* which is translated worldwide in twenty one languages.

Most of her fictions dominated themes like Patriarchy, South Indian marriage norms and familial relationships and relates everything that leads to the social and cultural changes. All of her characters especially women characters that she portrayed in her works fight against the social and cultural aspects of the conventional society. The novel deals with stories of various women regarding their domestic as well as their career life and these stories intervene and coincide with each other in exposing something real is what the challenging part it holds. It is not only their domestic battle that is portrayed but also their provocations with the outside world seem to have occupied much space in the book. A woman seems to be denied of their liberty due to the cultural aspects. The concept of culture holds many elements like Rituals, Belief and Emotions not relating to a particular individual but is applied to a certain society and that becomes the anticipating element from a woman to abide by those customs and rituals, and how that affects the women is given priority in the novel. Indian women tend to respect and value their family so much under any circumstance and that it has been a barrier for them in establishing their individuality and that is evident through the characters in the novel.

Meera, the protagonist of the novel is a well-educated woman in a corporate society in India striving to establish her individuality in the practice of traditional patriarchal society. She is never bothered about her role of being a corporate wife to her husband in spite of all the suppressions that she have undergone, maintaining family as well as her husband's corporate world, until her husband giri abandoned her with their two kids. Then begins the struggle of Meera to manage her kids as well as her mother and grandmother and it was complete hectic to be the sole breadwinner of the family who have always been joyfully dependent on giri. Though she felt happy and contented in her domestic life, she failed to realize that she is losing her individuality and eventually understood her selfhood once she steps out without her husband. Socializing becomes the main issue here, as Meera herself is a guide to corporate wives but after giri left, she couldn't step out that confidently and realized how dependent she was on giri. She transformed herself knowing giri did not love her and the society changed her into a cautious women and a responsible mother for her kids and she realized the importance of being economically stable. Meera depicts the importance of education and profession for a middle class woman in the urban society. Though Meera had good education and could go for decent jobs, she have always been dependent on her husband because of the cultural norms that prevailed in the society and how domesticity made woman to lock themselves in home is depicted through her character.

Sarada Ammal is the mother of jak who represents the ideal wife of the typical Hindi culture and custom, a God fearing woman. Her husband, like meera's husband abandoned her and his son and ran away. For Some few years she have been completely broken and then understood that her life shouldn't be stopping here and felt like remarrying but that have been something that her son looked down and her culture too restricted her to remarry having a teenage boy. Sarada Ammal did not give up and tried to

convince jak, her son but ended in vain. Jak hated her for the decision she made and left her. Till her death bed, he did not forgive her when kala chithi, his aunt told him, “Do you have to be so unforgiving even after her death? Till the day she died, she didn’t stop tormenting herself with the thought that she failed you... let her go in peace now, kitcha. Let her be.”[235]. Sarada Ammal as a mother suffered mentally a lot that she couldn’t get to hold her son. So this shows how her cultural boundary and domesticity limited her from living her personal individual life and even her son hated the decision that she made in order to break herself from the agony of her husband leaving her. The society as well as her son did not blame her husband who ran away but Sarada Ammal who chooses to lead her life the way she wanted, that is marrying another man. She represented the typical South Indian culture scenario where women is restricted to move against the traditional cultural norms and have been jailed in their domestic life.

Indian culture wife’s role have been precisely pictured by Anita Nair through the character kala chithi, a devoted wife from an orthodox Brahmin family tells meera that,

“You see, meera, we are brought up to believe that our husband is our God. His wishes are ours, and without him we are nothing. There is a saying, Kal analum kanavan, Pull analum purushan, whether he is hard as a rock or as worthless as a weed, a husband is a husband. Can you make a life without your husband?” [178]

It is the women who must cherish and practice the cultural values. Kala Chithi actually suffered from the weight of her hair; it was very long and thick that she couldn’t bear its heaviness on her head. Her father himself did not allow her to even shorten it a bit because it was believed by her father as an asset that with her hair maintained properly she can be married to a well-off family and unfortunately it happened that way, the man fell in love with her hair and even dowry have been very less but her pain is unbearable. She says to her mother, “The weight of it! My neck and shoulders hurt. It is worse than the menstrual cramp, amma.” [194]

Eventually she cut her hair very short knowing that her husband only loved her for her hair and he even did not talk to her for six months when she cut off only the split ends and he told her, “Such beautiful hair. Vaidehi, promise me that you won’t ever touch a hair on your head without my permission.”[196]. She has been very much emotionally disturbed that after divorcing her husband she told, “I will be a whore but I won’t be a wife.” [206]. To this extend the cultural practice actually affected women. It is very obvious in the fiction that all men tend to escape from their responsibilities and it is the women that is the wives who take responsibility and work hard to bring up their family and to maintain the welfare of the family but the society made them as domestic slaves and their public door. All these women characters presented in the paper had a life which is out of their world and once they encounter the reality, they have been flustered. In brief, Anita Nair brings out her women characters stating that whatever

happens life has to move on. All the cultural aspects that limited these women characters have been broken by them in order to regain their lost individuality and some women turn out to be rebellious and boldly faced the criticizing society. To conclude, it have been merely a trap for women in the name of Domesticity which block them from reaching their individuality and once if Women reach their hands out to public and then they lose their Femininity and labeled “Unfeminine”

Works cited

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