

Marital Subjugation and the Erasure of the Self in Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting*

¹M. Vasanthamalar, ²Dr. M. Devi Chandra

¹Part -Time Research Scholar in English &

Assistant Professor of English, Mangayarkarasi College of Arts and Science for Women.

Madurai Kamaraj University,

Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Assistant Professor of English,

Government Arts College,

Melur, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India

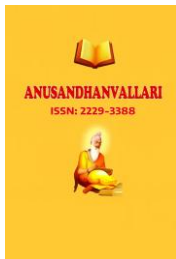
Abstract

This research paper explores how the marital subjugation leads to the gradual loss of female selfhood in Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting*. It argues that the novel depicts marriage as a patriarchal structure that enforces erasure through economic control, emotional manipulation, emotional silencing, and social undervaluation of their labor. Using Simone de Beauvoir's idea of "immanence," Erving Goffman's concept of "spoiled identity," and latest discussions on "agentic forgetting," the study analyzes the experiences of Meera and Jak's mother to trace how subjugation can result in self-erasure. The paper demonstrates that Nair transforms the idea of "forgetting" from trauma to resistance that allows women to unlearn patriarchal expectations and rebuild their identities in the novel. The article concludes that financial independence and female solidarity emerge as essential responses in resisting marital erasure. By situating the novel to contemporary debates on domestic confinement and economic abuse, it highlights financial independence and female solidarity as paths out of marital erasure and underscores Nair's contribution to post-millennial Indian feminist thought.

Keywords: Anita Nair; *Lessons in Forgetting*; Agentic Forgetting; Domestic Immanence; Female Solidarity; Indian Feminism; Marital Subjugation; Self-Erasure.

Introduction

Anita Nair is one of the most prominent voices in Indian writing in English. She encapsulates the suffering of women in the genre of Indian English literature and known primarily for her uncompromising presentation of complex family and social issues. *Lessons in Forgetting* is among her most acclaimed works. The novel highlights the aspirations, struggles, and challenges faced by women in contemporary Indian society, where patriarchal rules continue to shape their lives. "I forgot who I was" (Nair 154). This admission by Meera, the protagonist of Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010), embodies the central concern of the novel: the gradual annihilation of female selfhood within marriage. The novel centres on Meera, who lives in her ancestral home, Lilac House, along with her mother and grandmother. Their life is peaceful and happy until the death of Meera's father, brings them financial and emotional difficulties. These unexpected sufferings force the family to adapt to a simpler way of life. In spite of these challenges, Meera remains a person of modest desires, never seeking more



than what is necessary. The novel's significance lies in its refusal to romanticize endurance. Jak's mother is not physically restricted, but her art and identity are stigmatized until suicide appears as relief. Nair thus establishes 21st-century marriage as a structure of "quiet violence" that leaves no legal evidence but produces deep psychic damage. This article argues that *Lessons in Forgetting* traces marital subjugation as a three-stage process: silencing, dependence, and erasure. The novel either focuses on trauma or on Nair's feminism, but not on marriage as a mechanism that produces erasure and then imposes strategic forgetting as cure. The aim is to demonstrate that *Lessons in Forgetting* contributes centrally to current feminist debates on domesticity, economic abuse, and agency.

Objective of the Study

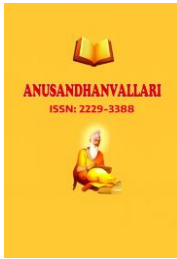
The primary objective of this study is to examine how marital subjugation functions as a structural process in Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting*, focusing on economic control, emotional silencing, and social devaluation as mechanisms that produce female self-erasure. To investigate Nair's reconceptualization of "forgetting" from a trauma symptom into "agentic forgetting," and to evaluate how this feminist praxis functions as a strategy of resistance against patriarchal conditioning. To interpret the novel through the theoretical frameworks of Simone de Beauvoir's concept of immanence and Erving Goffman's notion of spoiled identity. Through feminist discourse by engaging recent concepts such as "economic gaslighting" and "domestic immanence," thereby demonstrating the text's relevance to post-millennial Indian feminism. This study hopes to contribute to situate the novel within contemporary discussions of patriarchy, economic abuse, and post-millennial Indian feminist discourse.

Literature Review

This literature review examines how Anita Nair portrays women's struggles against emotional suppression, social expectations, and domestic subordination, establishing the novel as a significant contribution to contemporary Indian feminist discourse. Recent critical scholarship on *Lessons in Forgetting* has increasingly focused on its exploration of patriarchy, female identity, and resistance within the institution of marriage. M. Arthi rightly observes, "Whether it is a man or woman, when they loses their partner, psychologically gets affected and break the marital norms which finally pushes them to think of their individuality alone." (M. Arthi 27)

A recent study by Shalini Yadav and Rohitashwani (2024) examines the novel as a narrative of feminist self-discovery under patriarchal domination. Their study discusses that the female characters in the novel confront several forms of oppression, including betrayal, emotional trauma, and gender discrimination, ultimately moving toward self-realization and liberation. The work interpret "forgetting" as a conscious process of neglecting patriarchal conditioning and rebuilding female subjectivity. This reading is especially relevant to discussions of marital subjugation as it frames resistance as an active feminist choice rather than passive endurance. Sarah Joseph identifies *Lessons in Forgetting* as exposing "corporate feminism's failure in the private sphere," arguing that Meera's professional success gives no protection against marital control (Joseph 2023, 203).

Menon also notes that Nair's innovation lies in recording "non-evental violence" — the daily erosion of self that leaves no legal evidence (Menon 2019, 118). On marriage and selfhood, Rituparna Chakraborty contends that 21st-century Indian fiction portrays marriage as "institutionalized intimate control" rather than cultural tradition (Chakraborty 2020, 77). Manali Desai's 2022 study introduces "economic gaslighting" to describe strategies like financial opacity and trivialization of women's labor, which produce submission without physical violence (Desai 2022, 91). Sneha Krishnan updates Simone de Beauvoir for South Asia, coining "domestic



immanence” to explain how women remain confined to relational identities even when employed (Krishnan 2024, 12).

Debjani Banerjee notes that South Asian women’s trauma often expresses as “enforced forgetting” of the self to survive patriarchal homes (Banerjee 2021, 5). Divya Thomas’s 2023 intervention is crucial: she theorizes “agentic forgetting” as feminist practice, wherein women strategically discard internalized subordination (Thomas 2023, 210). This reframes Nair’s title beyond loss. Venibha and Jaisy (2020), in their study of feminine perspectives in the novel, analyze Meera’s life reflects the psychological significances of marital collapse and societal suppression. Their work highlights the crisis of individuality experienced by women who are socially conditioned to define themselves through marriage. The study emphasizes that Meera’s eventual assertion of independence represents a movement from subordination toward selfhood.

Further extending this discussion, Venibha and Godsen (2024) focus on the portrayal of women’s aspirations and struggles in the novel. Their analysis identifies betrayal, suppression, and subordination as central thematic concerns and argues that Nair critiques the patriarchal family structure by showing how women’s desires are often silenced within marriage. The study concludes that the protagonist’s journey reflects the larger struggle of contemporary women to reclaim agency and identity.

Despite these significant contributions, there remains limited research that specifically examines marital subjugation through the interconnected frameworks of economic gas lighting, self-erasure, and identity reconstruction. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the patriarchy in broad terms without closely analyzing the emotional silencing and financial dependence contribute to the destruction of female selfhood. These studies collectively demonstrate Nair’s sustained engagement with the psychological and social mechanisms through which patriarchy shapes women’s lives

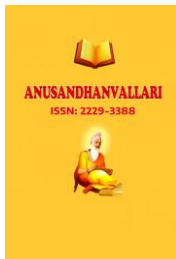
Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative descriptive research methodology to examine marital subjugation and the erasure of female selfhood in *Lessons in Forgetting* by Anita Nair. The research is based on thematic analysis and textual evidence of close reading for interpreting the novel’s representation of patriarchal oppression and female identity reconstruction. The study employs a theoretical framework grounded in feminist literary criticism, drawing primarily on Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of immanence to analyze how women are confined within domestic and socially prescribed roles, and Erving Goffman’s notion of spoiled identity to examine the psychological and social consequences of marital subjugation. In addition, the concept of agentic forgetting is used to interpret the protagonist’s process of self-reconstruction as an active feminist strategy of unlearning patriarchal conditioning.

Primary data for the study consists of selected passages, dialogues, and narrative descriptions from the novel that reveal themes of economic dependence, emotional silencing, domestic marginalization, and resistance. These textual instances are critically examined to identify patterns of female erasure and transformation, with particular focus on the characters of Meera and Jak’s mother.

Secondary data includes scholarly journal articles, feminist theoretical texts, and recent critical studies related to Anita Nair’s fiction, gender studies, and postcolonial feminist discourse. These sources are used to contextualize the textual analysis within broader academic debates on marriage, patriarchy, and female agency in contemporary Indian literature.

The analytical approach is interpretive and thematic, categorizing proof under significant themes such as marital oppression, identity loss, economic gaslighting, resistance, and self-recovery. Through this framework,



the study aims to demonstrate the novel analyses patriarchal marriage and reimagines forgetting as a way toward female empowerment and identity reclamation.

Analysis and Discussion

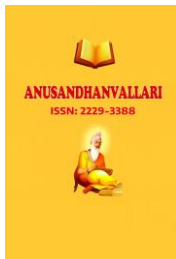
Patriarchal Marriage and Female Subjugation

Lessons in Forgetting by Anita Nair examines marriage as a Patriarchal Institution, offers a profound insights of marital subjugation and its destructive impact on female selfhood within patriarchal society. Meera, the female protagonist lived in her old and traditional Lilac house in Bangalore with her mother, grandmother, two children Nayantara, Nikhil and her husband Giri. Meera was a normal woman who keeps herself happy by doing all household activities, Giri was a fictional man always planned to lead a refined and sound life. So he insisted Meera to become a modernized women. She started writing a cook book for corporate wives and very soon she became a notable cookbook writer in the society of rich people. This gave her aspiration to attend various parties along with her husband. Giri, who have seen the success of his wife as a cook book writer, plans to run a business to earn more money in the corporate world. He also wished to occupy a great place in the corporate field. As he needed money to run business asks Meera to sell the Lilac house. But when Meera was helpless, Giri did not know the Lilac house that was in lease for 99 years cannot be sold, He leaves the family secretly and never turned to his family. Sudden disappearance of Giri, makes Meera in stress and placed various responsibilities upon her, Her cook book copies were also not sold, Meera suffered economically. Accepting the reality she arise with a great spirit and a rebellion mood, and started to run like a Bee to earn for her family by joining as an assistant to JAK.

Kala Chithi is another female character in the novel becomes victim of patriarchal society. Kala Chithi is a educated woman. She holds a beautiful lock of hair. She could not cut down her long hair just because her husband likes them. She suffered neck pain because of her long hair, doctor advised her to cut her hair short. But both her husband and father prohibits her to do so because they considered it as a wealth, an ornament of a married woman and she had no choice but to tolerate the pain. She says, "What am I to do then? Live with this pain till I die? (Nair 194). Even her mother is not able to understand her. Whenever she complains about the neck pain and headache. She begins massaging her neck and says "The pain will go away Kala. I promise you. Besides, there is much greater pain waiting for us women in our lives. How can you be cowed down by something so negligible?" (Nair, 195).

Economic Subjugation and Professional Erasure

Nair depicts Meera's marriage to Giri as a study in "economic gaslighting." Though Meera is a successful cooking consultant, Giri systematically trivializes her work: "He made her feel that her job was just a hobby. Something she did to keep herself occupied till she had children" (Nair 56). This rhetoric imposes "domestic immanence," confining Meera to relational identity despite employment (Krishnan 2024, 12). Giri further ensures dependence through financial opacity: "She had no idea how much they had in the bank. Or where the money was invested. Giri took care of all that" (Nair 102). Later, when Meera discovers Giri has emptied their accounts, she realizes: "She had been living on borrowed time and borrowed money" (Nair 178). Meera's eventual job loss after Giri's abandonment is thus not misfortune but the culmination of marital design. Denied transcendence through work, she embodies Beauvoir's woman trapped in immanence (Beauvoir 291). Meera joined as Jak's research assistant. She is ready to change her previous identity. She visits the beauty parlour and demands a new hairstyle. When the parlour attendant is surprised and asks for confirmation, "Are you sure?" She remarks- "I am. I've had this same hairstyle for the last twenty-two years. Ever since Giri came into my life. And I didn't want to change



a thing. My hair, my home, my dreams, myself. I so wanted it to be what he wanted.....It's time I became a new woman. Someone I would like to be." (Nair 177). Meera has changed her thought. She accepts all her responsibilities for household duties. She educates her kids well and prepares them to face the outside world. When she begins to rebuild her life, she acknowledges: "Perhaps freedom was simply this—the ability to choose oneself" (Nair 248). This statement symbols her transition from subjugation to autonomy.

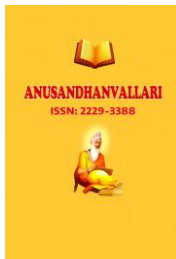
Identity Erasure and Psychological Trauma

Meera's character exemplifies the patriarchal construction that self-sacrifice is central to womanhood. The shock of Giri's abandonment reveals Meera's identity as a fragile women. On the following day of Giri's disappearance Meera thinks about her frightened future and in the span of sixty seconds: "her mind leaps, vaults, hops, skips, tumbles, cartwheels, gyrates and contorts into a million possibilities of anguish in waiting" (Nair, 69-70). When she knows that her husband has left her for another woman, she did not get anger but her response were confusion and disbelief. This reaction highlights her selfhood is tied to her marital status. Nair emotionally captures Meera's psychological collapse when she reflects: "She could not remember when she had stopped being Meera and become merely the wife of Giri" (Nair 117). This moment encapsulates the novel's central concern—the gradual erasure of female individuality through marital expectations.

The emotional abandonment Meera experiences also reflects what sociologist Erving Goffman terms "spoiled identity," where an individual's social worth is diminished through stigma and rejection. Meera's negligence not only shatters her personal life but also exposes her to social judgment. In Indian culture where a woman's identity is often validated through successful marriage, Giri's disappearance becomes a public mark of failure. Meera's internalized shame is evident when she admits, "It was as though she had failed some test she had not even known she was taking" (Nair 124). This statement emphasises how deeply patriarchal structures condition women to equate marital stability with personal value. Female solidarity is another important force in Meera's transformation. The support she receives from other women enables her to confront her pain and reclaim her identity. Nair suggests that resistance to patriarchy is strengthened through combined empathy and shared resilience. This reflects postcolonial feminism emphasis on social empowerment rather than isolated rebellion.

From Traumatic Forgetting to Agentic Forgetting

Meera's recovery begins when she consciously "forgets" Giri: "She would have to learn to forget him if she was to remember herself" (Nair 298). This supports with Thomas's "agentic forgetting," where women discard conditioned subordination as feminist praxis (Thomas 2023, 210). Banerjee's claim that "women learn to forget themselves before they are forgotten" directly describes Meera's condition (Banerjee 2021, 7). However, Nair subverts the trope. The novel's title, *Lessons in Forgetting*, ultimately refers not to loss but to strategy. Meera's recovery begins when she consciously "forgets" Giri: "She would have to learn to forget him if she was to remember herself" (Nair 298). Similarly, Jak's excavation of his mother's past resists patriarchal erasure. He remembers what the family chose to forget, transforming private grief into testimony. Thus, forgetting operates dually: as symptom of marital violence and as cure for it. As the title suggests women forgets the lessons they were taught by the patriarchal society to live their lives independently by reclaiming and reconstruct an erased self. Nair suggests that forgetting as resistance and renewal in *Lessons in Forgetting*.



Findings and Discussion

Marriages in *Lessons in Forgetting* produce erasure through economic opaqueness, depreciation of female labor, and imposed anonymity. The process moves from silencing to dependence to suppressed denial. Nair refuses victimhood descriptions. By theorizing “agentic forgetting,” the novel contributes to feminist debates on trauma and resistance. Recovery is exposed to require financial autonomy and female solidarity. Meera’s bond with Nina proves crucial, suggesting Nair’s pragmatic rather than utopian feminism. The novel thus redefines forgetting: from passive trauma response to active unlearning of patriarchy.

Conclusion

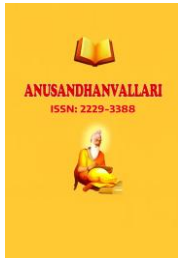
The study “Marital Subjugation and the Erasure of the Self in Anita Nair’s *Lessons in Forgetting*” examines how the exploration of marital subjugation and the gradual erosion of female selfhood within patriarchal domestic structures. Through Meera’s journey from emotional dependence to self-realization, Anita Nair discloses how marriage often functions as where women’s identities are silenced, their labor undervalued, and their individuality dominated by socially imposed roles. By applying the theoretical perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir and Erving Goffman, this study demonstrates Meera’s experience reveals both domestic immanence and the psychological fragmentation caused by social stigma. Nair does not point her protagonist merely as a victim of patriarchal structures. Instead, she presents self-reconstruction as a transformative process made possible through forgetting—an active rejection of internalized subjugation and restraining gender expectations. Meera’s transformation implies that liberation begins when women redefine themselves beyond marital and societal expectations. Thus, *Lessons in Forgetting* stands as a significant contribution to post-millennial Indian feminist literature, offering a nuanced criticism of patriarchal marriage while affirming the possibility of female agency, renewal, empowerment and reclaiming selfhood beyond marriage.

Scope for Further Research

Future research could explore the male characters like Giri and Jak’s father through masculinities studies could reveal how patriarchal privilege produces psychic costs for men, expanding the analysis beyond victim-offender binaries. Further studies can be done on other similar works like *Lessons in Forgetting* to analyze similar themes in other contemporary Indian novels, emphasising diverse perspectives experiences and narratives of self-reclamation. Comparative studies can be done to examine how marital oppression and identity reconstruction are represented across diverse socio-cultural contexts. Another possible area of research also focus on the theme of economic abuse and financial dependency in contemporary Indian fiction, exploring how literature reflects changing discussions around invisible domestic labor and women’s financial autonomy. This would help situate *Lessons in Forgetting* within broader debates on gendered economics and domestic power relations.

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