



## **A STUDY OF GENDER AND SPACE IN ANITA NAIR'S *THE LESSONS IN FORGETTING***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The production of the gendered spaces is a hierarchical and oppositional system in the realms of public space of male domination over the private space of female subordination. The male gender is always considered as a superior than the female gender. Women always fight to get the proper place in society but male gender always dominates them to show their supremacy. Space and gender are interrelated to each other as both the phenomenon has connected with the power relations. The relation between masculine space and feminine space create the contradiction in both public and private realms that touches the gender concerns. It is considered that gender is the synonym for sex, as it identifies the different contradictory sexes i.e. man and woman. But according to the varied perspectives of the gender, it is quite different and dissimilar to the concept of the sex because sex refers to the biological realities of the two opposite genders-male and female and gender refers to the socially constructed phenomenon. The biological reality and socio-cultural perspective of the masculinity and femininity create the ambivalence in two opposite sexes. The present paper attempts to analyze the construction of space and gender issues in Anita Nair's *The Lessons in Forgetting*.*

**Keywords:** Space, Gender, Feminine Space, Masculine Space, Male Domination



## INTRODUCTION

Anita Nair skilfully explores the women's position in socio-cultural space. She discusses the suffering of women in the genre of Indian English literature that provides space for women. Further, she talks about how woman suffers from patriarchal system. They lost their space on the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in the traditional society and suffer in a marginalised space. It also displays a psychological space where their internal struggle come out due to the conflict between creating a space of self-construction and a space of social construction. Nair reveals the spatial struggle of women character for to search their own identity and space. Nair portrays the future of each woman present directly and indirectly in the novel. In the process of acquiring their space they lost their decisions, but later they resolves their mistakes by themselves and find their individuality. They occupy their own personal and private spaces and learnt a lesson of decision making, and refuse to acquire wrong choice and place. They shift in a space and forget all the lessons and wrong decisions that they occupy in the early phase of their life. The aftermath they suffer under the pressure of patriarchal space lead them a miserable space. Simon De Beauvoir, in her well-known book *The Second Sex*, explains the opposite genders like Masculine, the dominate sex, and feminine, the subordinate sex. Daphne Spain in her, *Gendered Spaces* (1992), recognizes the position of two different genders that women and men have different levels of status in society. Anita Nair skillfully discusses the differing spaces that are allotted to both men and women that is socially, culturally, mentally, emotionally, psychologically and physically constructed in their gendered locations. Such spaces help to design the role of an individual to reinforce the gender relations through the power relations that built the space. Nair focuses on the social status of the women that define the space and gender relation in a male dominating society. Generally, spaces that are occupied by the women character are drown in the issue of gender sensitivity as gender controls to construct the space and society.

Nair, through her narrative, raises various spatial issues of contemporary woman those are find difficulties to acquire their personal and private spaces while living in a patriarchal dominating society. They face the spatial issues like complexities of relationships, pre-marital and extra-marital affairs, man-woman relationship, cultural conflict, identity crisis, gender, space, orthodoxy, traditional thinking, mobility, migration, their inner conflicts, fears, oppression and suppression they face inside and outside the home that leads them to acquire their spaces. Nair, in her novel, *The Lessons in Forgetting* tries to portray the women's struggle to get freedom from the patriarchal domination. Her female characters are trying to get emancipated and empower themselves while occupying various spaces and places. They are suppressed and exploited in many ways because of their gendered identities. They try to create various spaces such as physical, emotional, cultural, social, psychological, familial,



personal and private spaces to create their existence in the society as space is a social construct that usually occupied by both feminine and masculine genders.

Anita Nair throws light on the issue of women's victimization in a dominant patriarchal space. To maintain the social status in society they set up a marital space as a social need where women seek spatial security to maintain their physical, mental, psychological and familial space whereas men find women as a source to maintain their respect and power in society. Male domination and patriarchal space are the traditional social set up in many cultures and societies through which man enjoys the space of power and freedom while woman is denied such freedom and powers and keep them in search of her spaces. The concept of gender shows the dissimilarity between two contradictory sexes. Meera, the protagonist of the novel, suffers a lot in her familial, marital, physical, psychological and mental space because of her feminine gender. She represents the various roles like a daughter, a wife and a mother and faces the perfect roles in familial space. She fails to acquire her own space as she never voice against to create her own space of individuality and self-pride. Like the Greek goddess Hera, the symbol of silence, who controlled the rebellious things in her mind and prefer to live in a confined and subordinate space. Her husband, Giri always shows a masculine power and dominates her in many ways. They are not happy in their conjugal space as he disowns her from his life. 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)

Meera's nineteen-year-old girl, Nayantara creates her own personal space and finds a reason to abuse her mother. She always considers that her mother is the only reason for her father's departure from their life. Hence, she in her personal space humiliates and insults her mother. Vinnie is another woman character who becomes the victim of gender discrimination. She denies to live with her husband because she considers herself more superior than her husband. She feels that her husband is not match to her status and personality. She creates a space to live her life in a manner that she wants and always takes such a decisions that avail happiness. Kala, another woman character who is exploited in the traditional institution of arranged marriage. Her husband Ambi dominates her because of her feminine gender. But, she creates the space that helps her to live independently in the male centric world. These women characters are the sufferer of the gender discrimination though they try to acquire the specific gendered spaces to sustain their lives in gender oriented society.

Subsequently, Smriti, the second protagonist of the story, rebels against the gender discrimination but she loses the battle because of the false traditions and rituals of the particular place. She visits the village of Minjikapuram, a spatial geographical place in Tamil Nadu for the spatial purpose of awareness campaign. She visits the hospital, where at the



door she is surprised to see the crowd of many pregnant women who happens to be there for the purpose of scanning to find the sex of the fetus. Their husbands were not ready to keep girl child. They make gender discrimination and spoil the status of gender space. In this place doctors are also includes themselves in the scheme and fixed the strategy if it is a girl child they aborted it. They were not following the laws and regulations of government but carrying forward the tradition of discovering gender of unborn baby. They denies the spatial entry of female in the new world. Smriti comes to know the fact of scanning foetus that women came to scan the sex of baby from the different geographical areas. They are forced to scan the baby's sex because those woman have already two or three girl child they usually not think for fourth one. The woman explains Smriti about the condition of woman in a patriarchal and gender space like,

‘She already has two daughters, she doesn’t need this third one. But she is forth months gone. I wish we had come earlier but this scan doctor comes only once a month. An abortion now would be dangerous. But she doesn’t want one more daughter either. Her husband is already furious with her. I don’t know what she’s going to do.’ (Nair 328)

The men from that particular area don’t want girl child and hence they forced women to do such sinful work. Though it is an illegal activity people from this place do it forcefully. Smriti being a new woman raised her voice, in her feminine space, against such disgusting work and decides to collect the proofs to stop the same. She meets Chinnathayi, a woman whose daughter dies at the nursing home during the process of abortion. Smriti asks her for some proofs of paper regarding this issue. Even she comes to understand that there is a spatial connection between the hospital doctors, who come from different areas, and scan doctors. Though Chinnathayi suffers a lot in her life as she lost her daughter in the illegal process of foetus scanning, she refuses to help Smriti due to her feminine gender. Nair rightly observes that the female gender is strictly denied by the society and maintains the existence of the male gender in order to save the heir for their family.

Meera, being a traditional wife, lost personal space because she is confused and worried about her traditional look that affects Giri to attract towards some other woman. Kala cuts off her long hair, and acquire her own feminine space but her husband loses interest in her. Though her father in his patriarchal space denies her to cut the hair and scolds her like, “Are you mad? he demanded. Look at your hair. Do you know what an asset it is? Not everyone has hair like yours.” (Nair 217) Sarada Ammal lost her husband because of her acquiring the spiritual space as she attends sainthood. Nina lost everything in her emotional space as she lost her daughter when she denies to live with her daughter in her natal space. Smriti, her daughter needed an emotional space of her mother but Nina, her mother was unavailable because of her practical nature. Chinnathayi lost her daughter because of her wrong decision



making or if she lives in a proper space she would have helped Smriti with evidence and helped her to move out of her village safely. Vinnie, Nayantara and Smriti, being strong independent woman from a new generation, lived in their own spaces but lost their lives.

Thus, Nair explores the desires and spatial struggle of women characters for their gendered identity and space. The female characters like Meera, Smriti, Kala, Nayantara, Vinnie, Lily, Saro, Nina, Sarada Ammal and Chinnathayi, who suffer in many ways in patriarchal space due to their feminine gender. They lost their spaces and places in the traditional and conservative male domineering society as society give more importance to male gender as a social practice. All the female characters face the challenges in acquiring their spaces as they spend first half their marital life in a more constrained and confined spaces. They become a victim of their husband's dominance and find difficult to achieve their spaces in time.

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