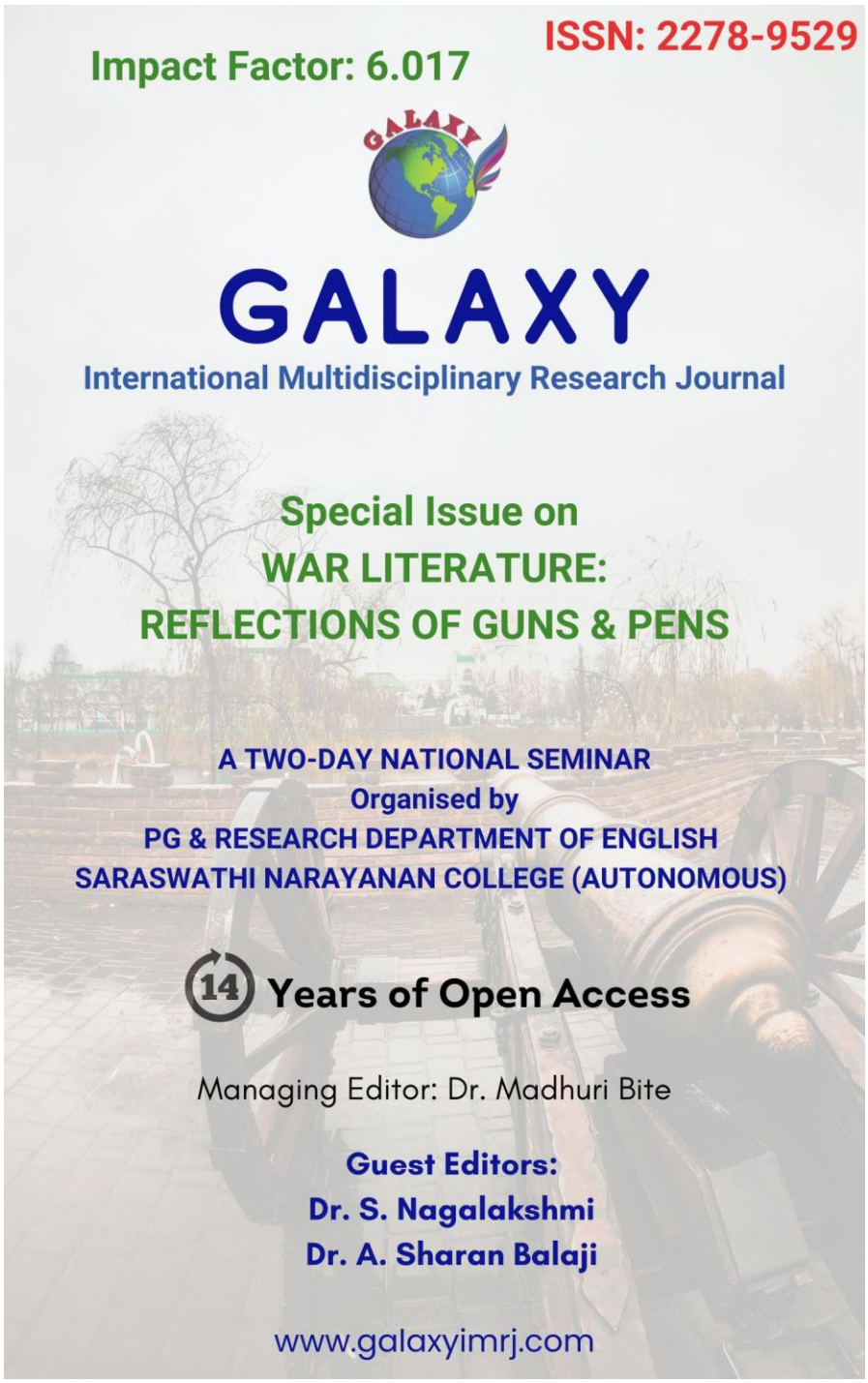


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Confronting Trauma and the Path towards Healing in Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting*

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Abstract:

Anita Nair is a conventional writer in portraying domestic and social vulnerability and the impactful ways to address it. Lessons in Forgetting explores the trauma of a rape survivor and the deep anguish of her father. The main character is Meera, who is left to struggle alone after her husband's disappearance. She undergoes emotional trauma as she grapples with her new reality. She later begins working as a research assistant to Cyclone Expert Jak, who is also burdened by personal tragedy. Another important character is Smriti, Jak's daughter, who lies in a coma after a mysterious accident. However, Jak senses that something is hidden in Smriti's case. As the truth unfolds, it is revealed that Smriti was brutally raped, leaving Jak devastated and struggling to accept the injustice. This painful revelation exposes the grim realities of society. This paper engages with trauma studies, drawing from Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which posits that traumatic experiences are often repressed and only resurface when triggered by a later event. Additionally, it focuses on how both Meera and Jak, despite their individual

struggles, embark on a journey of inner liberation by learning to accept, forgive, and ultimately overcome their past.

Keywords: Subordination, trauma, rape survivor, impact on family, forgiving, and forgetting.

Anita Nair is a notable writer who writes about household disputes and moral standards. Like Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Sudha Murthy, and Amrit Dhillon, she also focuses on domestic issues, faceless, voiceless and local people's life. She currently lives in Bangalore, yet her hometown is Kerala. It is also known as Malabar. It is known for fresh waters, greenery, Ayurveda, spices, the land of elephants, and the land of peace. Many of her writings evidently depict longing for nativity. She gives a nostalgic touch in her description of place, characters and relationships. Her writings kindle aesthetic appeal.

In this novel, the Jak family settles in America. He used to tell the stories of Indian ethnicity and cultural practices to his daughter. He always appreciated Indian society and the geographical landscape before Smriti. These delineations captivate Smriti, she became very curious to experience the life where her ancestors used to spend their lives. She comes to India to complete her degree. One day, Jak gets devastating news about his daughter. He comes to India to find out the truth about the accident that happened to Smriti. Even though Smriti is not the main character, her story creates an impact on the readers. Her visit to her native place plays a vital role in the novel. Through Smriti’s character, Nair's longing for her hometown is noticeable. Her character symbolizes nostalgia and pain.

In recent years, trauma studies have gained interdisciplinary attention, particularly in literary theory. Initially associated with war veterans and victims of severe abuse, trauma is now recognized as a response to both catastrophic and minor distressing experiences. Emerging in the 1990s, trauma studies drew on Freudian theory, which posits that traumatic events exceed

linguistic expression and disrupt personal identity (Caruth 3). While early models framed trauma as unrepresentable, later theories acknowledged its varied manifestations (Whitehead 12). The field explores psychological trauma, its representation in literature, and memory's role in shaping identity. Theoretical frameworks, including psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, inform analyses of how trauma alters perception and selfhood (Luckhurst 15).

Freud's foundational work, Studies on Hysteria (1895), co-authored with Breuer, and Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), introduced key trauma concepts. He proposed that "traumatic hysteria develops from a repressed, earlier experience of sexual assault" (Freud and Breuer 157). Freud and Breuer further argue that "the original event was not traumatic itself but only in its remembrance" (190). Trauma's effects surface belatedly, triggered by later events, making memory central to its understanding (Breuer and Freud 192). Freud termed these recurring distressing memories "pathogenic reminiscences" (195). Despite its psychological toll, trauma can be processed over time, allowing integration into the self (Van der Kolk 67).

Smriti is a service-oriented young woman who fought with her mother to return to India and dedicate herself to social service. However, months later, her father, Jak, received the devastating news that she had met with an accident and was in a coma. Determined to uncover the truth, he inquired with her friends and eventually discovered that she had traveled to Madurai with Rishi as part of an NGO welfare program. There, Smriti came to know that in a private scan center called Meenakshi Nursing Home, the mobile scan unit and the radiologist revealed the sex of the fetus. And if it's a girl, they are also arranging abortions if needed. She couldn't withstand this merciless act. Their action is illegal and morally wrong. She has to prove it with evidence to take further action. Rishi warns against getting involved in this. Because they are dangerous, their local politics are powerful, and they surely hurt her. But she is determined to get justice.

Finally, she came to know about Chinnathayi, who lost her daughter in the midst of an abortion. That pregnant lady already has two daughters, so her husband forcefully asked her to abort and she dies. So, Meera went to Chinnathayi's home to inquire about it, and she planned to tape video evidence to report it to the police with the proper proof. Chinnathayi promised Smriti to come to the seashore in the evening to give scan reports, a death report, and all the evidence needed to take action. After a while, Srinivasan, who is one of the hooligans involved in the illegal activity, came and inquired about Smriti's arrival. Before she tries to hide, Chinnathayi's granddaughter unknowingly shares the truth with him. "Srinivasan smiled. ' I'm not a rowdy. What do you think we'll do to her? We'll deal with her as she deserves to be dealt with. No more…" (Nair 350).

Here, it is clear that he subordinates women in the name of sex. When men try to show their superiority, their cheap act is to violate the bodily integrity and honor of a woman. The sexual torture of women has been observed across different cultures and religions throughout history. Rape, the act of engaging in sexual activity without consent, including underage or unwarranted sex, is considered as an offense in India that goes against fundamental human rights. Abduction and sexual assault were interchangeable terms when they were used to describe the theft or sexual offense against the will of a woman. "Chinnathayi prayed that if there was a God, he would watch out for her. But God, she knew, sometimes closed his eyes when it came to women." (Nair 350). She ran to save Smriti from attack, but already three local rowdies had rounded her. In front of Chinnathayi's eyes; they raped her and made her shattered. Poor Smriti, unaware of anything, tried to help others, bring about a change in the society, stand for justice, raise a voice against female infanticide, and lose herself. Chinnathayi painfully describes, "They were animals, these men. They tore at the girl, and it seemed the more she screamed, the more excited they became. The pleasure they derived from the girl's

fear She would not forget, till the moment she died, their vile minds and bodies…Panting. Heaving. Sobbing. Seeking to escape" (Nair 356-57).

Chinnathayi explains all these details to Jak and Meera. He is devastated; he lost his little angel; he cries; he feels rape is the most gruesome and barbaric act. He became depressed, and his sorrow made him heartbroken. They destroy the entire physical and mental composure of Smriti, push her into deep mental trauma, and reduce her to a living corpse. Their vengeance pushed her into a coma. It's a melancholic situation for him. They violated her life. Even if they killed her, she would have died in peace. But rape is a crime that kills a victim throughout their lifetime. He regretted sending her to India. Here, rape is one of the most common crimes against women and a serious national problem. According to India Rape Statistics, 31,677 cases of rape were registered in 2021, an average of 86 daily, while nearly 49 cases of crime against women were lodged every single hour.

In this novel, all the main characters are inflicted with trauma. Meera became stressed after her husband's betrayal; Jak underwent mental agony after knowing what happened to his daughter; and Smriti went into a coma after the awful incident. Their bitter experience depressed them. And trauma theory is employed to relate their inner turmoil. Trauma does not happen to a few unlucky people; it is the bedrock of every human being's psychology. When trauma is regarded from this perspective, one understands that suffering is universal, and with logic, one's pain connects to the world on a more fundamental level. The way out of pain is through it.

Meera lives in Lilac House with her mother Lily and her grandmother Saro, three generations living together. She is a writer by profession. Her book, "The corporate wife's guide to entertaining," is highly appreciated. She marries Giri, and she has two teenage children named Nayanthara and Nikhil. He marries Meera for her own abode and her beauty. Men always expect something from women in the form of money, property, an heir, beauty, or a

caretaker of the family. A woman's role is diminished to a commodity rather than a wife or a partner. Meera's family has owned the house for a hundred years lease, he is unaware of it. So, he shares the idea of selling the house and buying two apartments and a sum of money to start his own business, she refuses. This made him furious because he dreamt of living alone with his wife and children in one apartment and old people in another. Then his boss is very bothersome, so he is inclined to start his own business. As he stated "..... But we are not one, are we? You are the landlady, and I am the tenant. There is no us. It is always you, your house, your family, and your friends. Has it occurred to you how I feel?"(Nair 10).

The reason for his anger is that he feels inferior to the members of that house regarding the possession of property. He wishes to be in a superior position than Meera and her family. She could have explained that the house cannot be sold. But she resisted, thinking he might leave her. She clearly knows he adores the Lilac House property, and that is the reason he is living with her. If he gets to know the truth that the house is leased, he will walk out of the relationship. Day by day, their marriage became loveless. He came to know that he could not get anything from her. So, like Meera feared, one day he disappeared without a word. She searched for him; she was clueless about what to tell the children, mother, and grandmother. She became void of emotion. She thinks hard about his reasons for his disappearance. House, money may be the reason. But leaving the children and wife without a word is gruesome. She thinks about a police complaint. Yet her intuition clearly said he has not disappeared, not been injured, and not anything has happened to him except that he abandoned them purposefully. Later that week, he asked her to come to the coffee shop, and he explained rubbish about his disappearance. He said, "That afternoon, I hadn't planned it, I swear. I hadn't meant to disappear like that. Or frighten you" (Nair 89). "And I watched the young man so full of ambition and dreams, and I thought, What have I done with my life? I felt as if I was being strangled, slowly but surely. I

had to move on" (Nair 90). "You may have to seriously consider selling the house now. I won't be able to contribute much until I have sorted things out. The kids' education and their essentials—that is my responsibility'... I have other responsibilities, too, now" (Nair 92).

His final words stab like a sword, so this is the reason for all the drama. He has another woman in his life. That is the reason for his abandonment of a twenty year relationship, his children, his role as a father, his responsibilities and so on. When men easily walk out of a relationship, women have to pay the consequences. She felt used, and her dreams became ashes. All these years, she didn't know he had another woman. She felt bad for her stupidity. At least he has to be guilty for leaving children; furthermore, 'he walks out first' from the cafeteria like nothing happened. She sat there, everything destroyed, no future in her eyes.

After the incident, she started facing a lot of financial crises and she is unable to cope with expenses. She has to pay fees for children and spend on medical expenses. So, she searched for the job and joined as a research assistant for cyclone expert Jak. His wife left him, so his mom's sister Kala Chithi, takes care of him and the household chores. He is a nice man, and slowly she is attached to him. His care for his daughter made her respect him so much. Kala Chiti advises Meera, "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 weed, a husband is a husband. Can you make a life without your husband?" (Nair 200). She asks her to make a decision and she explains that she is fully capable of leading a happy life, he already left her, so she has to move on. At that moment, she is determined to lead a better life without him. Because she has responsibilities to take care of her children. So, she decides to live strong.

Meera and Jak are the two productive people who cling to each other. Meera came out of trauma when she got support from loved ones. Slowly, Jak attached himself to Meera to discuss his feelings. She didn't let him be alone; she shared his pain, and she became the

shoulder to lean on. Jak finds a way to cope with his trauma by finding solace in Meera, and he takes good care of his daughter. Meera will be there for him. But she is not sure whether she could make him happy but she gave her best. She thinks of her favorite fruit, "...the pomegranate. She savors it best when she eats it as a seed rather than as a handful thrown into her mouth. She will take a cue from that. Of how resurrection is to be fashioned one day at a time" (Nair 325).

At the end of the novel, Nair talks about forgetting the horrible past and to live in the present. The novel is open-ended. But then, the intimacy between Jak and Meera will perhaps draw them closer. One day Smriti may come out of a coma, but it's not precisely mentioned. As the day passes, fresh beginnings appear where there seemed to be only happy endings. *Lessons in Forgetting* is a story of disremembering the distressing event, forgiving for our own inner peace, redemption from sins, and giving second chances in life. It is ultimately a story about individuals in deep trauma coming together to offer succor to each other. It is ultimately a story told by an accomplished storyteller about transforming trauma into solace. Because the characters finally understand that forgetting the bitter past and believing in a promising future is a way to live a hopeful life, because it gives liberation.

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