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Parochial Normative Canons of Dominant Patriarchal Space on Women's Emancipation in Anita Nair's Lessons in Forgetting

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Abstract

Anita Nair's Lessons in Forgetting 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 and 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 a woman is denied such freedom and powers and keeps them in search of her spaces. The novel also focuses on the themes of women's emancipation and their constant struggle to get rid of the dominance in patriarchal space. Nair tries to evoke the demand for the creation of social, cultural, physical, psychological, mental, literal, and figural spaces for women within a patriarchal dominant system that has long been confined women in a restricted space. Almost all the women characters struggle to pursue their place and also fight to snatch the womanly rights and crossing the various geographical places to get transformative change and self-discovery from the existing limitations. The Space they try to occupy is an ideological one and not neutral or natural.

Key Words: *Patriarchal space, spatial security, male domination, women's emancipation, space of power and freedom.*

Introduction:

Anita Nair observes the ruling of masculine power over feminine space that results in gender discrimination. Meera, the protagonist of the novel who lives her simple life in her parental space. She resides in a very comfortable place that provides her to explore her spatial vision to live a stress-free life with her parents. Meera occupies her space as a writer of a cook book and very enthusiastically she gives lessons to the corporate wives. At the same time, she enters herself in a more confined space of serving the role of a typical Indian middle-class wife. She feels happy to depend on her husband, psychologically, emotionally, economically in her conjugal space. Meera is a simple, honest but workaholic traditional woman who fights to defend the space and place of her family. Meera gets a space to spread her feather freely in the air when she finds a source of earning money through her Lilac house when it is selected for the photo shoot. It changes her life and suddenly she shifts in space from miserable to comfortable. Further, she meets Giridhar, one of the members of the photoshoot, and falls in love with him at first sight. Gradually, Giri begins meeting Mira and becomes closer with her and her family members too. He creates intimate space and relationships with them and starts living with them as a family member.

Giri likes Meera's beauty, her simplicity, her Lilac House, and her family too. But he has a specific reason behind falling in love and marry Meera. Though they have two children, they fail to understand each other. Giri's cunning and suspicious nature lead to separation in their marital relationship. He never respects his wife but treats her as a slave. He has a spatial desire to become a successful and rich businessman and to achieve a place in the corporate world. He finds Meera as a fulfilled woman by beauty, heart and education. Giri dreams that her postgraduate degree in English helps Giri to prosper his buiseness. His desire replaces the love and intimate space for Meera. Also, she gives entry to Giri in her personal space.

She thought of the young women who were part of his professional world. Tall young women who wore their suitability like their hair. Shining, groomed and never out of place. Why does he prefer me to them? She asked herself. They are smart, competent and have careers. Whereas all I have is postgraduate degree in English and stewardship of this house. (Nair 41-42)In the masculine space, Giri dominates and persuades her to sell Lilac House to make available a handsome amount. But, Meera denies selling the house as it is an ancestral property and a symbol of spatial heritage. Her refusal results in Giri's exit from her life. Giri leaves her halfway through their marital relationship. A man can easily break the relationship and live freely in his masculine space but a woman remains to live her spatial life under the dominance of patriarchy.

Meera suffers in her private space whereas Giri makes himself free from his marital responsibilities and creates his world in public space. Malcolm rightly says, 'public spaces remain spaces of power governed largely by patriarchal structures and institutions, in which women have very little visibility and influence'. (Malcolm 256) Both the spaces are divide as an oppressive set of cultural norms that separates men and women as two different centers of one community. Further, it is said that the space of women is confined to the home. On the other hand, men occupy the freedom of public affairs and create their place in society. As Giri places himself on a high level and Meera is pushed into a marginalized, confined space of a divorcee.

Lessons in Forgetting showcases how Meera spends her life in an isolated space when her husband deceives her and breaks all the intimate marital relations. In her miserable space, she faces the challenging role of a traditional but educated woman, a dutiful wife, a caring mother, a loving daughter, and an honest cookbook writer. She learns how to forget her husband when she is left alone by Giri. Anita Nair rightly comments:

The woman is just doing her job. And it seems to Meera, wife of Giri, queen of her world, mother of two, author of cook books, mentor of corporate wives and friend to the rich and celebrated, that she who has everything can afford to be forgiving... Meera can afford to be generous. She gleams at the woman... (Nair 7)

In the early phase of her marital life, she is entirely dependent on Giri, physically, emotionally, economically, and psychologically. But now, she turns herself away from such confined spaces and dependence, and lives in more psychological space, more physical space, and the space of her 'self'. She obeys the restricted norms of society and spatial fixities applied to her by her family. Meera creates an imaginary space of being a corporate wife to merge herself into the corporate world. 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 voices against creating her own space of individuality and self-pride.

Meera is an orthodox woman living in a conservative, traditional and cultural space as she cannot enjoy the party culture of the upper-middle-class society in a modern world. There is a deep crisis in her space, as she mixes her own identity into her marital space. She manages to create her space as a corporate wife and tries to maintain her physique because of her husband's social status. In the beginning, she attends page three parties with the company of her husband. Such parties are designed for sophisticated corporate families. The nature of such sophisticated parties filled with western foods like pizzas, calamari rings, and coke which are replaced by traditional food and in drinks coffee is no more filter with a south Indian coffee, but Columbian, Brazilian or Kenyan coffee. It also provides a dress sense of a western style. These modern corporate people put on dresses to match different occasions. Meera is forced to wear a chiffon skirt at Giri's insistence, though she is forty. She protests Giri by saying, "I am forty years old, Giri. I can't dress like I am twenty." (Nair 120) She feels awkward wearing such fancy dresses but Giri forces her to be like other high-class women. This instance projects how food, drinks, clothes and smell become the markers of corporate space marked with pomp, sophistication and artificial flamboyance.

Meera keeps herself in a more confined and constrained space for her husband's spatial requirements and also she tries to give her best to complete all his wishes to maintain his social status. But the changing nature of his place in corporate world and the feeling of insecurity makes Giri selfish and self-serving in the corporate world that compels him to lose his value and principles. He is frightened by the uncertainty of maintaining the space and place on the corporate ladder. Anita Nair highlights the tendency of Giri as the universal tendency of men to achieve success in public domains by suppressing women at home.

Gradually, Meera appears as a new woman in a protective space as she lives her life in her way. A woman is supposed to keep herself attractive, desirable otherwise the husband would lose interest in her. A woman, thus, is worried about keeping her husband's interest in her. Apart from doing the household work, looking after the children, she must keep herself trim and desirable. Meera goes through identity crisis in her marriage with Giri as an impact of socio-cultural space. In her private space, she tells the woman at the salon to give her a new hairstyle for a new look. She transforms herself into a new woman. She shifts in space that gives her own identity as she reveals:

Give me a new hairstyle. Short. 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. But it's time I became a new woman. Someone I would like to be. (Nair 177)

This instance showcases how salon becomes a contact zone and an additional space for Meera to change her appearance. The author insists upon telling her readers that an external change brings internal change too. Meera who had been pupate in the hands of Giri, desires to rise as a new woman who is independent young and free like the phoenix. Further, Nair explores the example of a woman's spatial confrontation against ancient traditions and values through the character of Kala Chithi. She represents the ideal qualities of a woman and wife who usually occupies the space of love, modesty, loyalty, sympathy, self-effacement, and sacrifice. She marries Ambi and changes her name to Vaidehi. She is a well-educated and rational woman who lives in a simple and domestic space but being an educated woman she discards the age-old traditions and customs. She is aware of the fact that women are universally blamed in a patriarchal society as she also becomes a victim of patriarchal space and attitude.

Kala knows that she must keep her husband happy, in her personal space, as her husband likes her long hair that reach down her ankles. She says about her husband's love "At first I thought I must be the luckiest woman on the earth. How could I not? He loved many things about me. He loved even my hair that I hated." (Nair 217) But, she never gets a chance to make any change in her hair as her father and her husband deny her to look after her hair and even she is strictly denies entry into their masculine space. She cannot cut her hair short without the permission of her father and her husband. Such patriarchal space dominates her private and personal space and she remains silent before

the opinion in the patriarchal space. Her husband strictly orders her not to even touch her hair without his permission. Such patriarchal attitude denies women to acquire feminine spaces, instead they force women in their private spaces like, what to wear, how to wear, where to go, whom to meet and whom to befriend.

Kala's long hairs create a weight on her shoulder and this causes her neck pain. She expresses, "The weight of it made my headache, my neck droop. The hair made me a demure girl first and then a demure woman. I was the daughter who pleased my father and later a wife who pleased my husband." (Nair 217) Kala finds a space to express her problem to her mother by complaining about her neck pain because of the long hair. She cannot occupy her physical space as she is constrained in a more confined space by patriarchal domination. Even her doctor frequently suggests her family members, cut her hair short but, to maintain social space and social respectability of family in society her father denies her to cut her hair. He thinks that her long hair would help him to fix her marriage.

Kala, after heavy domination, rises as a new woman and decides to go against the patriarchal dominance and spatial male attitude. In her feminine space, she goes against her father's opinion and also her husband's love for her long hair and cuts hair short up to the neck. As a consequence of cutting her hair without permission, her husband punishes her in his masculine space. Kitcha advises her to cut her hair so that she can get relief from her headache and neck pain. Her husband breaks the marital relationship and punishes her brutally in his patriarchal space. She reveals her feelings, "For six months he didn't speak to me. Six months of not even a smile. We ate together, slept together, and even fornicated when Ambi had the urge, but he wasn't the Ambi I knew or loved. I loved. I was never more lonely or desolate than I was then." (Nair 205)

Generally, woman in patriarchal Indian society is supposed to carry all the problems and burdens of any odd things. This is a patriarchal ideology to blame the woman for any reason of failure. If she raises her voice against the patriarchal domination she is liable for punishment. In her feminine space, Kala decides to break all the norms of the age-old patriarchal system and decide to leave her husband. Her father loses her confidence as both the daughters are destitute without husbands. When Kala's father asks her about her abandonment of her husband, becomes a bold, straightforward, independent, strong, and new woman. She creates her own space to demolish patriarchal space makes herself efficient to create her existence. In her feminine space she tells her father clearly:

"I am not going back. And I will never grow my hair again', I said. 'If you force me to, I'll leave home. I will be a whore but I won't be a wife. Not Ambi's wife. And don't call me Vaidehi ever again. I am Kala, do you hear me?" (Nair 232).

Like Kala, Meera also suffers a lot in her husband's patriarchal space. They face many barriers in their marital space while playing the role of typical traditional wife. Smriti is another victimized woman character of male suppression and domination that the author introduces in this novel. She is a visionary candidate who wants to do something for her country. Vinnie is a corporate businesswoman who is beautiful, energetic, bold, confident, and independent. In her personal space, she gives less importance to marriage and considers it as just an appearance in human space. She maintains her marital relationship only for the sake of her security.

Thus, Nair explores the aspirations and spatial struggle of women characters who suffer in many ways in patriarchal space. They lost their spaces and places in the traditional and conservative male domineering society. All the female characters face challenges in acquiring their spaces as they spend the first half of their marital life in 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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