



MYSTERY TO MIRACULOUS CONTENTMENT IN ANITA NAIR'S *LESSONS IN FORGETTING*

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ABSTRACT

The core of Existentialism teaches that Man should live his life as he knows and as he wishes and it becomes his responsibility whether to attach meaning to it or not. The very title of the novel *Lessons in Forgetting* by Anita Nair gives solution to many of the problems of human kind especially of women. It portrays the character of Jak who wants to come back to reality withdrawing totally his past life. But he cannot forget anything. The horror story of the past and the current cruelties of the present in the form of his daughter Smriti make him toil in between. He undergoes an unbearable and unutterable existential crisis within him. He, as a responsible father wishes to dig the hidden happenings that have spoiled the life of his daughter. To him, "Lives changed. Smriti's, and his. That much he knows for certain" (Nair 51). Though Jak undergoes the entire existential struggle literally, it is Smriti who is the silent sufferer behind. One can take Jak as the voice of Smriti. For, through Jak's mental agony one can understand the unutterable anguish of Smriti, the bold feminist. He accepts this heart wreaking issue and its investigation as the work or job allotted to him and becomes ready to genuinely commit to it in the midst of all his discomforts. After knowing the cause for her helpless state he really feels proud. Smriti has attained what Sartre has celebrated as the ultimate aim of one's life – that is, it should end up in taking any social responsibility. She proves that and it is through her, Jak attains some sort of self-satisfaction and relief.

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Existentialism is the philosophy which focuses on existence of human being. Existentialism no matter whether its background is theism or atheism it stresses the fact that the meaning of one's life and how one should live will be the unanswerable questions in reality even though the dictums of God or system of the Nature are believed. It depends totally on the individual. When many conventions make one to ask how should I live

and what are dos and don'ts, Existentialism ponders on the questions - how can I live and what I am going to do?.

Everything in life involves uncertainty. None can rule over her/ his birth or death. But the only space given to her or him is the time in between life and death. In many of the cases before knowing what is life as such it comes to an end. None can deny reality. The core of Existentialism

teaches that Man should live his life as he knows and as he wishes and it becomes his responsibility whether to attach meaning to it or not.

The very title of the novel *Lessons in Forgetting* by Anita Nair gives solution to many of the problems of human kind especially of women. As by the ideas of many legends, in order to live one's life peacefully, one should know how to forget something that is bitter. The two words 'lessons' and 'forgetting' are two contradictory terms because 'lesson' is a word that needs high memory and 'forgetting' is something that is entirely opposite to that. But, this is where the talent of an individual lies- to learn lessons from forgetting. One can learn many numbers of valuable lessons from forgetting. Man needs to forget certain things in order to live his life peacefully.

The novel *Lessons in Forgetting* portrays the character of Jak who wants to come back to reality withdrawing totally his past life. But he cannot forget anything. The horror story of the past and the current cruelties of the present in the form of his daughter Smriti make him toil in between.

Existentialism is celebrated worldwide for its unhidden truths and realities but what is noted to be as its demerit is that, there is no set of philosophers or Existentialists to share and stress one unique doctrine. The Existentialists themselves differ in their attitude in approaching this concept. Since World War II two major types of Existentialism are celebrated. One believes in God and the other believes in Man as the saviour for man from his anguish in this absurd life. The first one is named as Christian Existentialism which is influenced by Soren Kierkegaard and this is supported by some exponents such as Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Gabriel Marcel and Karl Jaspers. These people stress the importance of God in the life of man. They believe that man may find solace in God and can seek freedom from all his tensions and frustrations.

The second and prominent development of Existentialism which is attributed to Jean Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger imbibe the idea that man is living in this godless world. In this atheistic belief, Man is viewed as an alien who roams alone sticking foolishly to the social law or convention which chained him from all sides. He struggles and never

finds way to satisfy his wishes by exercising his free will. Though one highlights the theistic belief and the other, the atheistic belief, these two developments aim at concentrating on the man's 'being'. Their entire attention revolves around giving importance to 'the being'.

Jak in *Lessons in Forgetting* is ready to risk his life, that is, his 'being' for the sake of his daughter Smriti's 'being'. Even though the family members Kala and Nina advise him to be casual in Smriti's case, he wishes to find out the truth behind Smriti's accident. Though Jak undergoes the entire existential struggle literally, it is Smriti who is the silent sufferer behind. One can take Jak as the voice of Smriti. Through Jak the dread, loneliness, anger, anxiety, alienation and absurdity of Smriti's life comes to lime light. The silent character Smriti is presented as a passive character but the entire novel revolves around this active feminist's bold assertive behaviour and the consequences of that. One cannot separate the physical torment of Smriti and the mental torment of Jak. For, through Jak's mental agony one can understand the unutterable anguish of Smriti, the bold feminist.

Smriti is presented as a stubborn character throughout the novel. She is presented as a bundle of flesh from the beginning till the end. Smriti's motionless state creates all the active movements in the novel. The way she is punished shows how men have become inhumane in dealing with his fellow human beings. Smriti acts as a riddle to her own father from the beginning and it is only in the end he identifies her real character and all its out comings. Her true nature gets reflected when she voluntarily risked her life to put an end to female foeticide at Minjikapuram. It is because of Smriti that Jak's life becomes absurd at one stage but the same Smriti brings reason for his very existence. Though she is presented as a passive character from the beginning of the novel physically, the quest of her father Jak brings to limelight all her active nature that are needed for a good humanitarian.

Even though all the parts of her body seem to be almost dead, it is through Kala one could understand her capacity for listening and responding. Even though she is not physically strong, she as an individual has proved who she is. She has

claimed authenticity to her living. She never allowed anybody to steal away freedom or individuality from her no matter whether it is her father or her lover. She did what she felt like doing. But at the same time, she became responsible to what all she did and never blamed anybody for her state in life. Even to Jak, her father she is like a puzzle till the end. She never failed to enjoy her freedom in her dressing, eating habits and behaviour etc., but she fixed her own limits and never crossed that in whatever situation she might be.

It is Smriti who has taught the realities of life to her father Jak. Jak who had been the master in studying cyclones has failed to study the people around him especially his mother, Smriti and Kala at times. Jak's tireless effort in finding out the truth behind Smriti's case can be taken as an example for Existentialism. Even when his wife and Kala told him to accept what had happened and be normal, Jak does what he ought to do. He continuously commits himself in finding the truth behind Smriti's freak accident. He is sure that even after finding out the truth nothing could be changed. But he does that considering that as his responsibility.

He undergoes an unbearable and unutterable existential crisis within him. He, as a responsible father wishes to dig the hidden happenings that have spoiled the life of his daughter. To him, "Lives changed. Smriti's, and his. That much he knows for certain" (Nair 51). When Jak asks the taxi driver to take him to Minjikapuram, they indulge in talk "You can study nature as much as you want, but you can't ever predict it. Actually, there is nothing in life you can predict" (Nair 44). This is not only true with nature but also can be applicable to life as such. This can be taken as a crux of what Existentialism stresses. One can study or use life as much as he wants, but none can predict it, because, the base and the destination of life cannot be predicted by normal human beings. To be frank, she/he has been given a life to live and she/he is destined to continue to do what is predetermined to him by the system of life as such many times. Though religious connotation for the word 'fate' cannot be applicable 'to life' in existentialism, here it represents the fact that man's fate is determined by the system of life itself.

The very important statement that strikes the heart of Jak is the driver's statement on children, "when it is for one's children, I suppose you don't want to take chances. Our children are our wealth, after all" (Nair 45). Though one likes or not, she or he is forced to attach herself/himself to something or somebody and becomes responsible for that, no matter whether that gives benefit to the individual or not. He should be ready to carry the burden which is the outcome of his close and dear ones. Whether that end up as a boon or a bane to human being she/he is in a way ordered by the system to commit to its sincerely. Man who is not even aware of his own life and its secretaries starts to take charge of his son's or daughter's life in his hands and struggles throughout his life to make them settle in their lives. Though that may be a hectic job which has the power to suck out the life of an individual, one cannot withdraw from it, for every human being thinks that it is through those relationships he finds meaning to his own life. This is what is believed and done by Jak too. Jak takes the responsibility of his daughter Smriti's life as his and struggles throughout the novel to find meaning to his own life. Thus, Man is bound to responsibilities always, and to satisfy those will become his ultimate aim in his life.

Knowing and then accepting something can be a bearable one whether it is happiness or sadness. But facing a thunderous stroke all on a sudden when one is not even aware of its root cause or its way, will kill a person like anything with the question such as How, from where, by whom and why to me? Certain statements of Nair present in the novel *Lessons in Forgetting* bears the essence of Existentialism as such. For example, while thinking about his daughter's physical ailments, Jak talks to him thus, "The knots will need to be undone. The knots of silence that seem to surround the days before the accident. But how and where will he find that first slack in the string?" (Nair 51). This is the real pathetic condition of Jak in the novel, but in general, this is the feel of almost all human beings while undergoing all his existential struggle, he cries bitterly to find ways to undone the knots which have tied him so tightly restricting him to move freely according to his wish. But every human being has to accept life as it is, and all his efforts will end up in

vain if he tries to find the first slack in the string to undone the secretes of life as such.

Jak bleeds mentally and wishes to escape from the cruel clutches of life's drama. The general fact that continuously encourages him to proceed further is that whatever happens life has to continue. He thinks, "Despite everything, despite the world falling around our ears, our bodies will never let us forget that we are alive and needy. That our hunger has to be appeared, our thirst quenched, our desires slaked; our lives spent. There is no escaping that, Jak thinks, as his hand reaches greedily to tear a piece of the dosa" (Nair 52).

For generation together man struggles to find what life is. This is true, for every human being in the process of finding what life is exactly meets up with death. Thus, the thirst to find solution to life's system results in vain. The silence that prevails around Smriti's sufferings makes Jak to investigate seriously of what has happened.

Jak worries a lot for the corrupted doctor who considers her as a naked accident case and lecture him on parental responsibility. Nina, his wife too at one stage prohibits her husband from investigating Smriti's issue. Being bold enough and practical, she encourages Jak to direct his attention towards their another daughter, Shruti. It is very hectic on their part to think that 'You have to believe that somewhere in her, there is a part that is still alive' (Nair 55) and this motionless state of Smriti kills everybody emotionally. It is very pathetic on their part to discuss that it would have been better if she had died. Because there is no slight change in Smriti's health that can give assurance that one day she will recover. Whether life is a bitter cup of poison or a sweet cup of honey, it depends on the individual's approach to taste it. There are two ways to face a sorrowful incident. One is to probe through it and to rectify it and the other is to quit that by putting an end to think about it. As Existentialism believes that people who tend to escape from bad situation without providing room for authenticity can cope with life easily but not successfully when compare to the people who are so stubborn to solve it by themselves thereby asserting their individuality. Nina belongs to the first stage and Jak, the second. For, Jak embraces the

situations as they are and struggles to assert his identity .

Nina, the mother of Smriti, who ought to be the incarnation of all motherly qualities appears to be normal in accepting and to some extent forgetting what has happened to Smriti. It doesn't mean that she doesn't have worries. But she directs her attention on Shruti purposefully and through that she wishes to find solace to her broken heart. This is one way of Existential struggle where the individual who is unable to cope up with the bitter life secludes themselves from the problem. Thus Nina undergoes all existential crisis such as fear, dread, alienation and despair but she being the mother of Shruti too, cannot fix herself so easily with the absurdity of life. It is through Shruti she tries to attach meaning to her existence. Nina comforts her own mind and tries to move according to the system of life. But, on the other case, what Jak has done is another way of approaching life's hurdles. He undergoes existential crisis and also could understand the existential crisis of his daughter Smriti and what is pathetic to note is that he searches for truth like an outsider totally detaching himself from the family members emotionally and all his concentration revolves around Smriti alone, which is clear from the statement of Kala, "Look at her, Kitcha. If her life is on hold, it's because of an accident. But You, Kitcha?... You behave as if to recover and move on would be an act of betrayal. Nina is dealing with this better than you are. What are you doing to yourself?" (Nair 57).

Loneliness starts to haunt Jak when he thinks about Smriti. He, who has not yet realized that Smriti will have her own world different from his, is forced to undergo shock when it is often stressed by the doctor that Smriti was with a boy. But Smriti informed once that she would be with a group there. This arises thunderous doubt in Jak's mind on what might have happened to those two boys and Asha.

Nostalgia plays a vital role in the novel. Jak has learnt many lessons from his past and he never forgets to carry the lessons that he learnt from his past while travelling in the present but with a fine holding on to his past. Though Minjikapuram has

become a place which has spoiled his daughter Smriti's life, it is the same place and it's preachings that he learnt long years back encourages him to proceed in the present. One such lesson that he learnt from Minjikapuram is "You don't run away from things that terrify you. The water scared me but not for long. If you understand it, it will never be able to dominate or scare you" (Nair 66).

Human beings in general are tied up by a chain of relationship and are pulled towards them stubbornly. Though there are few exceptions, all human beings in general become prey to it. Though some sort of willingness is needed on the part of the individual to attach and be ready to struggle for them, gradually it starts to take control over him. This is what happens to Jak. Even if he wishes to escape from the situation as Nina, he cannot because the life's crucial situation has taken him in its hand. So Jak in order to identify the real meaning of his existence searches for that like an outsider and the absurdity of life turns him into an absurdist at times. Because he himself is not sure of how his search will end up and also struggles a lot to make Smriti to exist first not bothering about any of the essence that she had attached to her life. This incident highlights the worthiness of Existentialism which believes in Sartrean concept of "existence precedes essence" (Flynn 8).

Existentialism is identified obviously with the name of this great person called Sartre whose noble ideas shake the pride of man over conquering life, and literally makes him understand the impermanence and nothingness of life. It is his philosophical thought that questions, what is the necessity of tradition and culture which fail to attach importance to the existence of a human being. He constantly stresses the importance of existence over essence and pays more attention in lending him free will and makes him understand his own power in making choices but at the same time highlights the anxiety that chases him throughout his life stressing the fact that life is nothing.

The question that continuously haunts Jak is that it cannot be a freak accident. As it is very clear that there was a sexual act to Smriti before the accident with more than one man, and as a father it is his responsibility to punish them. Though he

himself is sure that nothing will end up happily with any miraculous change, he fixes that as - it is his job to probe, question and find out the real culprits. Through his earnest thirst to undone the knots, he thinks that his life will have a completion. He accepts this heart wrecking issue and its investigation as the work or job allotted to him and becomes ready to genuinely commit to it in the midst of all his discomforts.

Existentialism denotes the fact that humans exist-in- situation. But to Sartre, this situation is an ambiguous mixture of one's 'facticity' and 'transcendence'. 'Facticity' implies the fundamentals of one's situation which include his past too. But 'Transcendence' is a step above that, that is, the reach that one's consciousness extends beyond these fundamentals, that is, it deals with one's facing or handling up of this facticity. Sartre himself admits that situation itself is ambiguous for no one can correctly measure up what is given and what is taken in each situation. Thus this ambiguity of the givens and takens involves in creating an individual and his social lives. Whatever may be one's situation, one has the possibility of moving beyond it. The mantra of Sartrean humanism strongly believes that one can always make something out of what she/he has been made into because she/he can always transcend her/his facticity.

Thus Jak's non-stop journey to transcend his facticity reaches it's destination. His continuous search for truth regarding Smriti's state finally comes to an end, when he comes to know the fact for her daughter's worse condition. After knowing the cause for her helpless state he really feels proud to know about his daughter than before. Smriti has attained what Sartre has celebrated as the ultimate aim of one's life - that is, it should end up in taking any social responsibility. She proves that and it is through her Jak attains some sort of self-satisfaction and relief.

By analyzing the two characters of Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting* it is very clear that they give importance to their own subjective truth. Whatever may be the problem, when it is viewed objectively, will not have originality or worth in it. For when it is viewed subjectively it carries with it the pain and sufferings of the victim and what is judgment if not

given with first hand experience is the main theme that one comes across in this novel. In no way these two characters feel bad for what they have done in their lives. Because these two characters do what they consider and believe as true without giving room for any secondary thought.

Thus, according to Karl Jasper, an existentialist thinker, man cannot live in isolation and he becomes responsible not only for himself but also for the other. Jak, the father of Smirti stands as an example for the following statement,

Nobody can win blessing alone. There is no truth through which alone I could reach the object aimed at. I participate in what the others are and am responsible for what exists beside me, because I can speak to it and enter into active relation to it, I am as potential Existenz to other Existenzen. Therefore, I reach the goal of my existence only if I comprehend what is around me. I become myself only when the world with which I can enter into potential communication, has come to itself with me. Freedom is bound to the freedom of the others, authentic Being has its measure in the authentic being of those closest to me and finally of all (Jasper 226).

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