

Women and their decisions in Anita Nair's novel "Lessons in Forgetting"

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Abstract

Life skill is a skill that is necessary or desirable for full participation in everyday life. There are set of human skills acquired by us in our day to day life via learning and experiencing various challenges and unpredictable situations in life. In the life skills, 'Decision - making' stands as the foremost skill as per WHO which is identified by 'Delphi Method'. In psychology, decision-making is regarded as the cognitive process resulting in the selection of a belief or a course of action among several alternative possibilities. Every decision-making process produces a final choice, which may or may not prompt action. Decision-making is the process of identifying and choosing alternatives based on the values and preferences of the decision-maker. In today's scenario 'decision making' being an important skill, lacks in many women. Due to this lack of ability, they tend to suffer in their personal as well as societal life. So, the quest for the reasons of wrong decisions, the remedies for their flaws and the ways of rectifications are explored from the woman characters like Meera (protagonist), Smriti, Kala, Nayantara, Vinnie, Nina and Chinnathayi in the renowned writer Anita Nair's fourth novel *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010). She is one of the highest-flying modern Indian writers with international reputation. Her novels express the need for emancipation, education and decision making of women. Thereby, Anita Nair's novel *Lessons of Forgetting* is placed in discussion to get a better understanding of the present topic "decision making in women".

Keywords: inability, decision making, quest, independent decisions

Introduction

Life skills are abilities for adaptive and positive behavior enabling humans to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. They are a set of human skills acquired via teaching or direct experience that are used to handle problems and questions commonly encountered in daily life. The subject varies depending on social norms and community expectations but skills that functions for well-being and aid individuals to develop into active and productive members of their communities are considered as life skills.

In the life skills 'Decision - making' stands as the foremost skill as per WHO which is identified by 'Delphi Method'.

Decision making is the thought process of selecting a logical choice from the available options. When trying to make a good decision; a person must weigh the positives and negatives of each option, and consider all the alternatives. For effective decision making, a person must be able to forecast the outcome of each option as well. Hence, based on all these terms, one must determine which option is best for that particular situation. In today's scenario 'decision making' being an important skill lacks in many women, due to this inability they tend to suffer in their personal as well as social life. Though women are educated, are they allowed to make decisions of their own? If yes, why there are many failures and breaks in marriage life? Why an educated woman can't decide her life further when she gets a blow in her personal life? If decision making was an important skill, why didn't she possess it from the first? Where things go wrong in women's life? What power lacks in her deciding ability? The quest for the responses of these queries is explored in the renowned writer Anita Nair's fourth novel *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) [1].

Anita Nair is one of the most prominent and modern Indian writers with an international reputation. She was ingenious and

most innovative director in an advertising agency in Bangalore. When she wrote *A Collection of Short Stories*, her debut book, she realised her addiction for writing and dropped her advertising career and took full time writing. As she remarks herself that,

"being writer is a necessity for me, an addiction.

The best thing being a writer is to be anonymous in one's writing,

Being genderless, ageless, classless, writing about

People completely different from myself." (Sinha, P. 147).

Anita Nair was the most eminent writer, who is famous for fiction and poetry. All her novels were bestselling and famous, among those novels *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe* have been translated into 21 languages. 18004251600

In her novel, *Lessons in forgetting* (2010) [1], she rewrites the role of women and the search for their own identity as well as the quest for their life. She portrays the future of each woman of this novel, their decisions, twist and turns in their life based on those decisions. It deals with the wrong decisions taken by women in the first phase of their life and the remedies to jump out of these problems with their approaching decision. It shows the importance of decision making, the wrong choices, the second chances and fresh beginnings. It deals with love, lack of identity for woman, dependency and betrayal based on that. In this novel, she shows us the way to come out of the formal traditional system of 'others deciding on our behalf' and the consequences each woman faces because of that. This novel makes us to think and question about the traditional decision making system prevails in our society specially spotlighting on women's life and how as well as in what ways it affects their life.

In this novel, all the women characters like Meera, the protagonist, Smriti, kalachithi, Nayantara, Lily, Saro, Vinnie, Nina and Chinnathayi, in one or the other ways get affected by the decisions they make in their life, but later rectifies their mistakes by themselves.

Meera the protagonist of the novel was introduced to us as a beautiful corporate wife, immense women, perfect mother and an apt guide to other women in her societal standard on how to be a perfect corporate wife. She thinks herself as goddess Hera of ancient Greek myths.

'Why is this happening to her? All this grace, such joy, all of life heeding her bidding, this perfect September day....' (Lessons in Forgetting, P.1)

The above line clearly portrays the luxurious life enjoyed by Meera as a perfect corporate wife. The posh lifestyle, the life she relished with her husband and children, the people she meets in each and every party she goes, always enhances her dignity and makes her feel as the most happiest woman on earth. She feels everything around her was really perfect. She feels the same perfectness even on the above mentioned 'September day'; ironically her perfect world exists only till that day. All this beautiful and elegant glass tower of happiness that was built around her crushed into pieces and proves itself fake on the very September day, when Giri, her husband abandoned her in that party. Even though she's educated, she felt aloof scattered, broken, afraid to face the life ahead without Giri's presence and guidance.

"A pool side brunch and real people? You must be joking, she had wanted to protest but she was afraid to shatter the fragile peace between them." (Lessons in Forgetting, P.4)

Her decisions were predominantly based on Giri. She never wanted to take her son to the party filled with adults. But she doesn't say that openly to Giri as she was afraid that it would create issues between them. Meera, when she comes to know that her husband left and abandoned her to suffer with two children, neglected her with nil support, her world collapsed.

"She wanted him. Poor Meera. She never asked what he wanted. Her, the lilac house or together what they represented" (Lessons in Forgetting, P.40)

Meera, the poor solitary soul was denied from making her choices since her childhood. Giri had married Meera only for her property – The lilac house. Little known about this, she loved him, adored him as her entire life. Although she wanted to confess the truth about the lilac house, she was curbed from speaking as her mother and grand-mother denied. They wanted the marriage to happen. When Giri abandoned Meera after years of wedlock, realizing the fact that he just loved her for property, Meera started making her own decisions. She decides to take care of her family members on her own. She molded her decisions then and there in every walks, she gets hurt by her husband and family members, insulted and humiliated by her daughter, even gets flattered and wooed in times by men she meets. In spite of all the sufferings, she succeeds because she decides her own destiny.

"She sits there not knowing what to do. It come to her soon, [.....]. But what are you going to do? What are you going to do now?" (Lessons in Forgetting, P.82)

Meera left with no choices but to decide her life further from where she was left alone by Giri; started to frame her life on her own. When she gets a job as an editor, she decides to replace that job with the job as Jak's assistant as she felt it is more comfortable. The moment she decides to be with Jak, the times she decides to avoid Rishi the actor, the moment she decides to take full responsibility for her children and all the members of her lilac house, she runs everything with her wise decisions. At last, when she decides to share the rest of her life to be with being with Jak, she decides not to quickly jump into a conclusion; deciding her second life.

"All her aches to rush forward and give herself to him. To make his battles hers. To mesh their lives and hopes. To fashion something out of nothing. But she knows that if she does this, the Meera she has become will wither and die forever. She will be there for him, Meera decides, but to keep herself alive, she will need to dredge all the selfishness that lies deep within her. That alone will ensure that Jak does not swallow her up, as once Giri did 'Yes, you must,' she says" (Lessons in forgetting, P.365)

When she gets a chance to take a new journey with Jak, she did not accept his proposal right away and falls slave for him as she first did with Giri by giving first priority to him in her life. Instead, she decides to stick on to her own identity which she created from the very day Giri left her. She wants to accept Jak's proposal slowly, she decides that in all walks she will be there with him in his life, in all his important decisions, as a good friend till she decides about his proposal. Even though she suffered, she made her own decision after her husband left her; she felt alive. She carved her life beautiful this time with her bold, beautiful and strong decisions. From being her children's mother, from Giri's wife, Meera decides herself to be Meera - an independent woman again like Akila in *Ladies Coupe* and Radha in *Mistress*.

"She was always an extension someone's identity. Chandra's daughter, Narayana's Akka, Priya's aunt, Murthy's Sister in law [...] Akila wished for once someone would see her as a whole being". (Ladies Coupe, p.169)

Akila, the protagonist of *Ladies Coupe* wants a break and she decides to have a quest for what she is. Thus, she slips out normal routine and so called relations and transforms herself into an independent woman. Like Akila, Meera too decides to be independent and never wants to lose her identity. Not depending on anyone in her second life.

"I hope that is not going to undermine your standing in society. Is there anything I can do that won't? I wanted to teach in one of the primary schools you said it was too much work for too little money. [.....] Don't I have an opinion? I am your wife, do you hear me?"

But you treat me as if I am a kept woman. A bloody mistress to fulfil your sexual needs and with no rights". (Mistress. P.73)

Radha, the protagonist of *Mistress*, when suppressed by the dominating views of her husband she decides to lead a life alone and creates her own identity. Like Radha, Meera redefines her life with Giri, with her carrier and sticks on to her new born individuality.

Nayantara, a nineteen-year-old girl Meera's first child who thought that only her father was right and her mother was a pride filled woman, always found ways to insult and humiliate her mother for her father. Even though she knows that her father left them for an another woman, she supported only her father. But when she was living with her mother she realizes her father's true colour and later decides wisely to leave her father. The real feeling she got when knowing his true colour

"And Nayantara, who hasn't until then spoken a word of censure about Giri, turns away from Meera with 'what a bastard!' (Lessons in Forgetting, P.256)

The rage and anger on her father crossed all the limits and provoked her to call him "a bastard" when she learnt that he did not turn up for her grandmother's funeral. She felt mortified and decided to leave her father forever. She started making wise decisions and becomes more practical, decided to encourage her mother for a second life.

"Don't. I am Vinnie. I am sure whatever is troubling you can be resolved." (Lessons in Forgetting, P. 117)

Vinnie, the beautiful, pulsating, independent business woman introduces herself to Meera like this. Vinnie, the vibrant, refuses to live with her husband not because he's bad in his needs and deeds, but only because he's not her type of man. When her husband said 'yes' to tradition and 'no' to split - ups, she deals it with calm and ease. But she leads her life as she decides. She's in relationship with a musician named Arun, which she never felt affronted in revealing. Even though her physical appearance in the novel is twice, she lives throughout the novel on each thought, deed and daring decision of Meera. She was loved for her audacious decision she took in her personal life and for the suggestions she gives to Meera on puzzled moments of hers. She always sticks on to the decision that makes her happy. So, even though her decision being morally felt wrong, she'll always be acclaimed for her bold decisions and never compromising nature.

Lily and Saro, most posh ladies of lilac house lives in their past fantasies and pride. They always think that their pride is everything and their old life portraying fake richness is everything for them. But when Giri leaves the house both these ladies decide to be supportive and strong mentally, so that they won't be a burden to their Meera. They understand where things went wrong in Meera's life and they try their best to resolve. They decide to unburden Meera from her debts by leaving their pride filled life and leading a normal life. The most heartbreaking moment comes when Saro leaves them in an accident. Lily, the old actress decides to act again, Meera was afraid and even sneers at her as she hates money paid on her discomfort. Thus she says...

"You don't have to say anything. I am not asking your permission. I am informing you of my decisions, Lily Bristles" (Lessons in Forgetting, P.307)

Even at that age, Lily decides to act again and stick on to her decision by supporting Meera financially. Thus she proves to be proud and awesome lady of lilac house.

The other woman who is introduced as calm and just another member in Jak's house later proved herself to be strong and independent because of the decisions she took in her life. She is Jak's kalachithi, the one who looks after Smriti, is Jak's paralyzed daughter. Kala was famous for her long hair, which she hated the most. She was loved by her father, felt her hair as a pride. When kala demanded that her hair is so thick that her neck is aching because of its length and weight she asked her father's permission to cut her hair little. Kala's father almost fainted hearing that...

"Are you mad?" he demanded. Look at your hair. Do you know what an asset it is? Not everyone has hair like yours." (Lessons in Forgetting, P.217)

He told her that her long lock was an asset and that she should not cut it down until she was married. In fact her mother also believed this and firmly denied her from the very thought of cutting her hair down. Kala got into matrimonial relationship with Ambi because his family was simply impressed by her long tresses. They took a lot of interest in caring her long hair. Once, when kitcha (jak) visited her, they travelled to minjikapuram seashore to play in the water. While playing, her hair got heavy and so she cut her hair off a few inches thinking that it would be left unnoticed. Ambi, her husband who was out of town, found out that her hair was short by few inches. His rage knew no bounds. He didn't speak to her until the hair grew back, which took at least six months. Kala understood that she was loved and adored by her family and others only for her long lock which was considered as an asset to be 'proud' of. She made up her mind to walk out of her marital life, when her husband decided to marry another woman as Kala could not beget a baby. Unaffected to her feelings, Ambi's family wanted Kala to comply with their decision of the second marriage and rearing his child as Kala would still remain their daughter-in-law and still take pride of her long hair. Without respecting her feelings she was told to comply with their decision and suggested that she can be another mother for Ambi's son. She felt insulted and humiliated. There she decides to end that life, but in the most empowering way.

"I finally had my reasons to leave him. Not even my father could fault me for this. I was the wronged wife. So I left him. Before I went, I cut my hair at the nape of my neck. I gave it to Ambi. A long braid woven with jasmine and kanakambaram. 'This is all you ever wanted of me. Keep it. And let me go,' I said walking out" (Lessons in forgetting, P.232)

Thus, she cut off and gave her long tresses to her so called husband Ambi and walked away from his life forever and ever. Her father questioned and cursed himself for both of his daughters' state, who was left destitute in their life, he felt heart breaking.

"I am not going back. And I will never grow my hair again," I said. [...]

And don't call me Vaidehi ever again. I am Kala, do you hear me?" (Lessons in forgetting, P.232)

When he saw his daughter's hair cut off he was heartbroken. When he asked her what took her to do this Vaidehi? (Kala was named as Vaidehi after her marriage as per their tradition) she was in a huge rage saying that 'I will even be a whore instead of being Ambi's wife, so don't call me by that name, I'm no more Ambi's wife. So don't call me Vaidehi anymore'. She also stressed that if he insisted her to go back to her husband or ask her to grow her hair again she will go to her sister's house and will never return to her father ever. She strongly stood by her decisions and did not regret on the decisions she made.

Smriti's existence, though felt more in the second half of the story, is the second protagonist of the novel around which the story revolves. Smriti was brought up in abroad but wanted to have her higher education in India. So she stays at their house in Bangalore alone with her friends Shivu, Mathew and Rishi. Unfortunately, her friends fought themselves to win the love of this beautiful NRI Smriti. She is shown paralyzed in the first half of the novel; she was accused of doing adultery at the sea shore and got hit by a car naked near Minjikapuram sea shore. That is how she was framed in the newspapers which all believed except her dad Jak. With his effort the real reason behind her condition was revealed.

She loves Rishi, changed her attitudes as an Indian to lead a happy life with him. But his aim was to win her love before his friends but not to marry so he wanted to get rid of her at. Meanwhile, she was about to join her friend's troop who were on a campaign to save daughters and to ban the brutal murders of girl child in the womb. She felt broken when she finds that Rishi has stopped loving her. She decides to visit Minjikapuram as it is reported of girls foetus death to be more. She takes chance; stays there to fight for those unborn girl child. She tries to collect evidence against those brutal acts, in that process she was brutally raped and torn by those native gundas. She was framed as 'characterless NRI got hit by a car when doing drugs and adultery' which later came as a mere car accident in the newspapers, an ordinary news. When Rishi was about to escape leaving Smriti behind she decided to stay back to collect evidence and to fight for those unborn girl children. That strong decision and determination kept her alive from inside. Jak felt that those decisions that flames somewhere inside her will bring her back. Some may think that the decision she took was wrong which led her to being paralyzed. But, her thoughts were not abused, her strong will was not hit by that car, her decision to help those unborn buds was not paralyzed, it still fumes somewhere inside her waiting for the phoenix to rise her from her paralyzed ashes.

Nina, Jak's wife, mother of Smriti and Shruti, was a very practical woman. She always thinks about the wellbeing of her daughters. When she realised that there was no hope for Smriti, even though she loves her, she decides to go back to Shruti abroad. She decides to give equal importance to both her daughters when Smriti's condition is helpless. She takes practical decisions. Her main aim is, at least, to look after Shruti carefully. This might look as a wrong decision from an emotional point of view but a right one from a practical point of view.

Chinnathayi, a native woman from Minjikapuram, who lost her

daughter in process of illegal abortion which was done to her during her fifth month of pregnancy, lives with her two granddaughters in that village. Like other women in that village she was also afraid of the gundas with whose support these illegal abortions are performed. The sad part is that they consider this as ritual and feel pride in doing the same. Because of this illegal act, most of the innocent women die. No one has the guts to question them or raise voice against them. Even Chinnathayi was not ready to help Smriti with the evidence she asked for to file a case against those gundas. When her granddaughter revealed about Smriti, by mistake, she decides to come out of her fear and tried to warn Smriti and save her despite being cautioned by those gundas not to do so. She didn't step back from helping her. Though she didn't succeed in helping Smriti, her decision to go out and save Smriti was a brave move.

Conclusion

All the women characters in this novel that were well educated (except Chinnathayi) and decide wisely at their second call were not given their chance to decide with their first choices. They were not given rights to decide what they want in their life. When we see Meera, the protagonist of the novel; if she would've rethought the suggestions given by her parents, if she had decided to tell the truth about the lilac house to Giri before their marriage, would've ended up with the person who loves her instead of lilac house would've stayed with her for her love not for the house and wouldn't have left her for other women. All these were because of preventing her from deciding at the right time by her mother and grandmother.

If Kala was given the rights to decide to cut her hair at the right time without being afraid of her father, her father would have been unhappy with her but and she would've have ended up with the person who loves her for who she is instead of her long tresses.

Nina, even though her decision not to stay with her daughter in Bangalore was practical, this played a part in her daughter's cruel incident. Her daughter needed an emotional guidance which was unavailable because of her absence.

Chinnathayi, if she had decided bravely from the first she would have saved her daughter from dying, or at least if she had decided properly she would have helped Smriti with evidence and helped her to move out of her village safely.

Vinnie, Nayantara and Smriti, being strong independent ladies decided wisely on what they want in their life and they never regretted their decisions even if it went wrong, because it's their own decisions. Women suffer to decide on important situations in their life only because they were not given the right to decide what they want to from first. Women should be given the rights to decide on things in their life by themselves from the first so that even if certain decisions go wrong at their starting phase they will decide wisely when it comes to deciding vital phases of their life.

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