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# Gender Roles and Feminist Interventions in Anita Nair's Lessons in Forgetting and Kavery Nambisan's Mango-Coloured Fish

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### Abstract

This paper examines gender as a crucial aspect of identity that plays a major role in shaping women's experiences in society. It explores the gender-specific roles and the other factors that affect their growth and development. Women have faced discrimination over the years and have been expected to do specific pre-aligned gender based roles. They often lack awareness and hence accept the injustices that happen to them without questioning. They were forced to devote their entire lives to family responsibilities and made to do it without recognition. They were made dependent on men at all phases of their lives. This study focuses on how Anita Nair and Kavery Nambisan portray these women's realities in their works. Through a comparative study of Lessons in Forgetting and Mango-Coloured Fish, the paper highlights how their female characters face neglect and numerous hardships for being women. The study emphasizes women's personal struggles in relation with gender. The findings aim to get justice and equality by giving insight into their experiences and challenges.

**Keywords:** Gender role, identity, feminism, patriarchy, discrimination, oppression, negligence, women's writing.

### Introduction

Men in the form of societal and cultural norms within family structure typically shape women's identity in India. Women are expected to be traditional and conservative from a young age. Therefore, they hesitate to step out of those boundaries. They are taught to do household things, maintain good values and take care of the family. They are educated to hide their pain and sacrifice their entire life for the wellness of their family. The difference in gender is not based on biological factors but rather on the influence of society, which shapes the behavior of men and women from birth, as evidenced by Simone de Beauvoir's famous quote, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."

Anita Nair is a well-known Indian author who focuses on women's sufferings in society and their struggle to get liberation from patriarchy. Her female characters deny societal norms and refuse to fit into imposed constraints. She mirrors the Indian society by differentiating between men's patriarchal role and women's sufferings, paving the way to study gender dynamics. Nair voices against violence and injustices to women through the character. Nair displays various discrimination faced by women in a realistic way. Women's suffer leads them to find their own identity. Both genders are not the same and hold different statuses in society. Simone De Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex*, explains the two genders, where masculine gender is the dominant and feminine gender is the subordinate.

Kavery Nambisan is a surgeon and novelist who bring forth a feminist perspective in her writings. She skillfully writes about the authority of men over women, the expected behavior of men and women, and the varied inequalities between men and women in terms of opportunities and power. She carefully constructs her characters socially, physically, culturally, and psychologically based on the gender dynamics that exist in society. Nambisan crafts the issue of women as victims in a male-dominant society. Women view marriage as a security, whereas men view it in terms of gaining respect and power in society. A male-dominated society is a default traditional setup where women are treated inferior and denied freedom. Women are considered to be a possession to hold, not a life partner. Gender dynamics clearly figure out the dissimilarity between the two genders.

### Literature Review

This section discusses the already conducted research and includes scholarly theses, scholarly articles from research journals as a data analysis in relevance to the works of Nair and Nambisan.

Shahzadee N Khan (2020), in his work "Man-Woman Relationship in Anita Nair's Lessons in Forgetting" has made a study with the female characters Meera, Kala Chiti and Smrithi. He has clearly mentioned how they push forward with courage despite male dominance.

R. Subashini (2022) in her work "Gender Roles in Anita Nair's Lessons in Forgetting", she figures out the gender role and life lessons of Meera and Jak where Meera is cheated by her husband and Jak is cheated by his parents.

Siddharth N.Kale (2021) in his work "A Study of Gender and Space in Anita Nair's The Lessons in Forgetting", talks about the relation between feminine and masculine space which in turn points out to gender concerns. He analysed the female characters like Meera, Smriti, Kala, Nayantara, Vinnie, Lily, Saro, Nina, Sarada Ammal and Chinnathayi, who suffer due to their feminine gender. They lost their spaces as society prioritizes male gender. They live in very constrained and confined spaces and face the challenges in their marital life. They become a victim in achieving their spaces in time.

Sambhaji Dashrath Kamble (2025) in his work "Exploring Gender, Identity, And Societal Norms In Anita Nair's Novels: A Critical Analysis", he analyzed Better Man, Ladies Coupe and Lessons in Forgetting and figures out the themes of each novel.

Neelam Mulchandani (2024) in his work "Analyzing the Traditional Gender Roles in Anita Nair's Lessons in Forgetting", shows the struggles faced by Meera, Sharda, Kala Chithi, Lily, Smriti and their transformation to find their identity.

B. Kalyani (2021) in her work "Dynamics of Human Relationships and Identity issues in Mango Coloured Fish by Kaveri Nambisan", lists out how the relationship attitudes and the issues of identity that the Shari character faces throughout her journey which in turn helps her to get clarity in life.

Jennifer L (2019) in her article "Gender Differences In Emotion And Bigotry In Kaveri Nambisan's Mango-Coloured Fish" explains that the emotions of men and women differ based on their surrounding and biased in nature.

Kalishwari. K (2019) in her research work "Quest for Identity in the Novels of Kaveri Nambisan" focuses on the search for identity and says that everyone finds their identity only after facing obstacles.

Jagadeeshwari (2016) in her article "An Interview with Kaveri Nambisan", talks about how women's mind work and how they realize their own self and change them to be the better version of themselves to be independent.

This literature review highlights an overview of the already done research works under various theoretical frameworks. The present research focuses on gender discrimination, gender issues and gender based violence, the women character undergoes which leads to the study of gender dynamics in feminist aspect. The present study is only limited to gender dynamics through feminist viewpoint focusing only two novels: Lessons in Forgetting from Anita Nair's work and Mango-coloured Fish from Kaveri Nambisan's work.

Though there are many writers and scholars voicing out on gender issues, there is still a need to focus on the same as it reflects the current problem prevalent in our society. This research focuses on two Indian women writers pouring out their view of feminism through their novels, which gives better idea on how discrimination exists in various form. This research delves deep into each women character of their novel as they undergo struggle because of male dominance. This research is a writer's concern as it is important to focus on women to overcome the injustices by not following age-old myths and to rise up for themselves.

## **Gender Studies**

Gender studies are an analysis of gender, their behaviors under societal expectations and construction. This gives expected qualities of men and women and they both face different experience for the same scenario in the same society. Earlier, women are undervalued and portrayed as epitomes of tolerance, which has been clearly seen in old novels where women are victims. They uphold societal restrictions by following taboos. They lack independent identity and work toward the benefit of others. Postcolonial women writers have significantly changed the way of writing and redefine women. They break the already established norms, free themselves from oppression, battle to define themselves and their individual identity over inherited family roles.

## **Lessons in Forgetting**

Women in Nair novel are determined to gain their identities though they faced gender discrimination. In the novel Lessons in Forgetting, the protagonist Meera lives with her family in Lilac house and has an effortless lifestyle with no ambition in her life. Meera's life changes after she marries her husband Giri. He is a member of a shooting crew who came to shoot Lilac house. Giri likes her because of her elegance and who possess a stunning ancestral residence. He desires to get a very sophisticated and lavish lifestyle by marrying her and to upraise his social status. "With Meera, he would be able to move on. Finally, he would be free of the yellowing past and the stench of making do. Meera. His. Like a lilac house. L'air du temps" (Nair 37).

Meera is a very good wife who assumes herself as Hera and her husband Giri as Zeus. She is a great mother of their children Nayantara and Nikil. Giri advises Meera to nurture social significance, so she establishes

herself as a cookbook author. Giri dominates her always and shows his masculinity. Women dress themselves according to husband's wish is evident with this statement "Meera loses her identity and independence as she blends with her family, going with Giri to events and even dressing for him in his preferred fashion." (Singh 286) He controls her life and wishes to establish his company to upraise his status and gain more wealth. Giri demands Meera to sell the lilac house where Meera refuses as it was a lease property. She fails to recognize that she is being exploited until her husband abandons her until Giri abandons her at the social gathering considering no more benefit out of her.

Kala Chithi highlights women's stand against regressive tradition and practices. After marriage, her husband gives her the name Vaidehi to symbolize the ideal traits of a wife. Her husband Ambi dominates her in all possible ways. When she cuts down her long and heavy hair, her husband asks, "You didn't even think of asking permission?" (Nair 203) He punishes her by not talking and even smiling for six months. He comes to normal state only after she grows her hair back to original length after eighteen months. Even Kala's father scolds her and denies trimming and shorting the hair when she feels it weighed down by saying, "Are you mad? Look at your hair. Do you know what an asset it is? Not everyone has hair like yours." (Nair 194)

Kala Chithi and her husband Ambi have no child in seven years of marriage. Therefore Ambi decides to remarry. She trims her hair and gifts him long and thick braid garnished with jasmine and kanakambram by saying "This is all you ever wanted from me. Keep it. And let me go" (Nair 206) and walks out. She gets back to her original name Kala Chithi after her divorce.

Smriti, unlike Meera and Kala Chithi, fights against the gender discrimination with all her effort only to lose her life because of male domination. Smriti, daughter of Jak shows opposition to dowry system and female foeticide. She is an educated and brave contemporary woman who warns young women about the dangers of being subjected to control and abuse in patriarchal society. Smriti participates in a forum "Dying daughters once more" (Nair 152) to raise awareness among women about the injustices. On her campaign to the village Mingikapuram, she is shaken to see many pregnant women opt for gender-determination scan. Though current legal provisions exist, pregnant mother and their family abort girl baby by figuring out the gender. Nair clearly points out the fact that only boys are treated as the heir of the family and girls are denied even as foetus.

Smriti considers it as criminal act and against the law. She meets Chinnathayi, whose daughter dies during abortion procedure due to familial pressure. Smriti tries to gather all details and documents from her to report it. Doctor Srinivasan and his associates trick Smriti by impersonating Chinnathayi and asking her to come to seashore with a fake message. Then at the seashore, three persons try to assault Smriti and kill her. Later she transforms into a lifeless person by voicing out the injustice which she considers as her responsibility to create awareness among women. According to Maya Vinay, Smriti becomes a victim of mistaken identity. Her story reflects how men are not prepared to face a person with good education and advanced upbringing. Smriti is deeply committed to social change with her active involvement to eradicate violence. However, she faces harsh consequences from a patriarchal society. The community views her act as a threat to them and tries to punish her.

### **Mango-coloured Fish**

The novel *Mango-coloured Fish* explores the balance between family and self with the experiences from the protagonist Shari's journey. With all the women character Shari encounters, gender discrimination and inequality prevails in all of their life. Shari, a young contemporary woman struggles to figure out societal expectation in arranged marriage and her personal freedom. Like every other Indian family, Shari's family also practices arranged marriage rule where it carries family status, honor and values. Shari is expected to marry a man, her family chooses. Her preferences and feelings are not valued. Nambisan states, "Marriage is a mirage because people choose to see only the icing on the cake. Every person longs to meet another all the way. Even DNA is a double-stranded molecule, pair-bonded with its mate. The best relationships improve with time" (Nambisan 56).

Gender discrimination is very evident from Shari's mother Bimmi. She treats her son with more love than her daughter. This gender inequality makes Shari to overlook independence and existence of gender based cruelty. Shari considers her parents' marriage is peaceful but finds out no love. Shari's father is actually a puppet but her mother portrays him as a man who is heading the family while dictating at the back. She does since the societal framework of men's responsibility to overlook the family.

Bimmi arranges Shari's marriage with Gautam. He is a materialistic and self-centered person. He prefers Shari just to fulfill his needs with no love or emotional attachment. For him, Shari is just a possession to uphold him in society. The conversation between Gautam and Shari makes her clearly understand his intention behind the marriage and his expectations from her. He says "It's you I want. You can be moulded." for which she asks "Moulded. How? Pulled, pushed, elongated, flattened, hammered, punched and gouged out until I was the right specimen, the perfect wife?" (Nambisan 73)

Bimmi and Gautam mock Shari for ambitionless, her hobby, her beauty and her desire to have a leisure lifestyle in her village. Shari feels compelled to transform physically to the most polished version of women

rather being herself to keep up his status in society. Shari's mother convinces her to marry Gautam and never tires saying that he will bring stability and security in her life. Gautam says that "You must have a purpose in life" (Nambisan 74).

Shari meets certain people before her marriage for clarity. First, she meets his brother Krishna and his wife Teji who are doctors by profession. Shari finds that though Krishna is a good character by nature, he is adamant and denies fulfilling his wife's wish, when Teju informs her that "Krishna's lack of ambition bothers me. He doesn't want a post graduate degree, doesn't care about his future as a surgeon. Working here is a wonderful experience but there's no hope of furthering his career. I worry sometimes." (Nambisan 54)

Then, Shari meets her childhood friend Yash. Listening to her parents, Yash discontinues her undergraduate studies and marries Satyamurthy, microbiologist. She sets an example of stereotypical Indian wife who sacrifices studies and dreams, becomes housewife spending all her life doing household chores and takes care of her children. Their marriage is just a projection to the society as they don't have good relationship where he spends his entire time in lab and shows no interest in her. Yash says Shari there is no happy marriage but everyone pretends to be happy.

Shari thinks of her Uncle and Aunt Paru. Initially, they seem to be perfect couple until one day Aunt informs her, "Your uncle has a drinking problem" (Nambisan 184). Later, she gets to know that Uncle fights with Aunt, beats her and steals money from her. Though Aunt is a bread winner of the family, she does household chores also. Aunt believes that he will change over time. But Uncle cheats her, exploits her only for money and later abandons her.

Shari even remembers her maid servant Ruku's concern regarding marriage. One day, Ruku tells her that groom family rejects her considering appearance and dowry. Ruku says "See, if I had a pretty face, he would have agreed for five thousand." (Nambisan 28) Even when Shari insists her to get education, Ruku's mind occupies with marriage and replies, "If I learn English, I can get a good job and a husband." (Nambisan 28) Shari loves Naren, a blind teacher and wishes to marry him initially. But he is full of ego and exploits her just to let out his failures and disappointments. Though Shari is a kinder garden teacher, he insults her saying she is not ambitious enough. This clearly shows how men treat women inferior to them.

## Conclusion

Indian women writers in English frequently express their concern over unequal valuation of gender roles which contributes to gender inequality. Anita Nair and Kavery Nambisan voice out for gender discrimination through their novel by highlighting patriarchal constraints in women's life. Their protagonists and other female characters go through gender based social hardships but get back redefining their destiny.

The female characters in their novels like Meera, Smriti, Kala Chithi, Shari, Teji, Yash, Paru, Ruku are the perfect example for the ones who suffer due to their feminine gender. They are placed in the traditional and conservative male dominated society with lots of constraints. Women are made dependent on men for their living and finds identity based on her father, brother or husband. Men treat women not as a human being but as a possession to showcase his success to society. By sculpting detailed characters with broader social concerns, Nair and Nambisan ensure that their works are relatable and relevant in today's society. By delving into character development, gender dynamics, and realistic depiction of society, they have established themselves as prominent voices in feminist literature.

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