

A Comparative Study of Parent-child Relationship in Anita Nair's two Novels, Ladies Coupé and Lessons in Forgetting

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Abstract

Ladies Coupé and Lessons in Forgetting are Anita Nair's most famous and critically enquired novels. Both novels have some similarities like female protagonists and common themes like human relationships, family, parenting, etc., but the present researchers have observed a rise in the complexities of content and the way these have been projected from the earlier novel published in 2001 to the latter one published in 2010. The present research paper has tried to compare these two novels on the basis of the writer's treatment of parent-child relationship. For this, biological, sociological and psychoanalytical theories like attachment theory, types of parenting, engrossment theory, and theory of bidirectionality and psychoanalytical development of children have been used. The first novel projects many parent-child relationships but depicts only limited aspects of them. On the other hand the latter novel has less number of parent-child relationships compared to the earlier one but the writer includes almost all complexities and aspects of parent-child relationship. The present research paper is an attempt to project the rise in Anita Nair's ability to handle complexities of parent-child relationship from earlier to the latter novel.

Key Words: parent-child relationship, neglectful parents, authoritarian parents, attachment, engrossment, bidirectionality, patriarchy

By the time I realized my parents were right, I had kids that didn't believe me." -- Hussein Nishah

Introduction

Ladies Coupé is Anita Nair's second novel after *The Better Man*. *Ladies Coupé* is an engaging account of the discovery of inner strength of Akilandeshwari alias Akhila. She, after listening to the similar journeys of five other women belonging to different strata of the society and age groups into a ladies coupé of a train to Kanyakumari, discovers the source of energy within. Published in the early years of Nair's career, this novel established her place in

the canon of Indian English novel. *Lessons in Forgetting* is a novel about a father and a mother who are struggling hard to make their relationship with their respective children work. It has been arranged in the form of different stages of cyclone resembling different upheavals in the life of the two central characters. Both novels talk intimately about human relationship especially parent-child relationship. They mark Nair's journey as a novelist towards a more mature writer who is bold enough to address all the complexities and fluidity of human relationships like parent-child relationship to play freely in the narrative of the novel. The following argument

discusses the rise in Nair's ability to handle the complexities of parent-child relationship from *Ladies Coupé* (2001) to *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010).

Some prominent similarities in these two novels form a strong base to compare them. Akhila, the protagonist of *Ladies Coupé* and Jak, one of the two protagonists of *Lessons in Forgetting*, had neglectful fathers. Diana Baumrind (1966), on the basis of the amount of warmth and demandingness parents bring into the upbringing of their children, identifies four parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, neglectful, and indulgent. Neglectful parents are neither demanding nor responsive to their children's needs. They might fulfill material needs but fail to be emotionally available to their children. The same happens with Akhila and Jak. Besides, their fathers depart from their lives early, shrinking their childhood and quickening their adulthood which happens with some irreparable damage to their inner world. Akhila gets crushed between the familial responsibilities and her own desires; she is almost on the verge of collapse. Jak initially becomes asocial and later is haunted by the possibility of becoming a failed father like his own father. Their respective fathers affected the life of Akhila and Jak in a very fundamental and radical way. But more than the similarities the differences give the researcher a rationale to compare them on various aspects.

Ladies Coupé is a group of several narratives linked together with the major narrative of Akhila. Besides her there are five more narrators who contribute their own stories in order to help Akhila find answer to the question whether women can

live alone or they need a man to feel complete. The commune includes Janaki, an elderly confused mother and a pampered wife; Margaret Shanthi, a Chemistry teacher who avenges her husband in her own but eccentric way; Prabha Devi, a rich house wife who has never been given essential autonomy required for being able to take and bear her own decisions; Sheela, an adolescent girl who has lost her beloved grandmother and is on the verge of identity crisis due to lack of understanding and warmth from her parents; Marikolanthu, a bisexual working class lady who has been raped by a relative of her rich landlord. The novel depicts how, regardless of their class, creed and age group, women are crushed under the expectations of patriarchal ideology. Almost all women are victims and men culprits. On the other hand *Lessons in Forgetting* moves around the question, "Am I a good parent?" Jak and Meera are the two protagonists of the novel. Both have got separated from their spouses and are struggling hard so that their relationship with their children does not fail. They are single parents raising adolescent children facing critical ups and downs in their personal as well as familial life. Considering these things it becomes clear that *Ladies Coupé* deals with the issues of mothers and daughters while *Lessons in Forgetting* deals with parents and children.

Parent-child relationship like any social entity does not function in isolation but in multi-layered contexts - smaller like family and larger like the society. Patriarchy is an inseparable part of Indian society working at many levels of signification. *Ladies Coupé* shows mirror to the ugly face of unfair and brutal

practices working under direct or indirect patriarchal authority. Sometimes the suppression of women is louder and overt as in the case of Marikolanthu whose life turns upside down from the night she is raped. Sometimes these ideologies work in disguise as in the case of Janaki who cannot even think of her life without her husband or Akhila who shoulders the responsibilities of her family at the expense of her own happiness but is never given the position of the master of the family. Even at the age of forty and in spite of being the earning source of the family she is subject to the authority of her younger brothers. *Lessons in Forgetting* does not fail to address the issue of patriarchal malpractices. It shows more subtle and covert ways of its functioning. While addressing its cruelest by-product - female foeticide, it depicts how it is deeply rooted in the society.

In *Ladies Coupé* only women and mothers are the victims of patriarchal constraints. They are not allowed to cross the traditional boundaries and realize their true potential. *Lessons in Forgetting* goes a step ahead. Jak is a combination of rationality and sensitivity. He is a genuine intellect and a true seeker. His charm lies in the integrity of his personality, his ability to listen to his inner voices and his courage to respond to them. He has two daughters- Smriti and Shruti. After getting separated from his wife Nina, he starts living with Smriti and Nina lives with Shruti. His whole life he is haunted with the fear of failing his children like his parents failed him. He gives full autonomy to Smriti. He loves her beyond prevailing patriarchal ideologies. As a result Smriti has become an independent and a free person. She comes to India from US to get

education in Women Empowerment. When she is brutally raped and gets trapped into a comatose condition, Jak is blamed for wrong parenting and for making Smriti reckless. A mystery is formed around this incident. Prima face it seems that Smriti had sexual relationship with more than one boy and she got this accident during some irrational adventure. Jak is blamed not only by the police and the doctor but even by Nina for this calamity. They blame Jak for raising Smriti to be such bold and wild girl. When Jak gradually resolves the mystery and reaches at the centre, he comes to know that Smriti was actually trying to dismantle a racket of mass female foeticide involving local mafias and political authority. When she refused to be scared of their threats, they raped her. Nair intentionally chose a father to seek the truth in order to show that any rational any sensitive person regardless his or her gender suffers due to patriarchal ideologies. In the earlier novel there is a wide range of fathers but they do not truly understand their children especially daughters and love them beyond the patriarchal creed. Almost all narrators in the first novel have authoritarian fathers who show little warmth but are very demanding. A possibility of a sensitive father like Jak is absent in the novel.

Generally parent-child relationship is thought in terms of strong bonding between parents and children. Schaffer (2006) defines bonding as, "the process whereby parents form emotional ties with their children" (168). Klaus and Kennel, while propounding bonding theory, elaborate the concept of sensitive period by which they mean first few minutes after the birth of the infant. They believe that immediately after birth the mother must

have skin to skin contact with the neonate in order to become emotionally tied with it. They stress close contact between mother and her child for the best possible relationship between them. Greenberg and Morris call father's emotional involvement in the neonate, "engrossment". Richard Reed describes a father's state of mind when he first sees or cuddles his child:

Fathers become filled by the image and idea of their new child. Most fathers feel elation at the sight of their newborn. The feeling comes over them in the first few minutes of seeing their child and remains for several days. (2001: n.p.)

The relationship between Jak and Smriti is an epitome of Engrossment and its influence on the relationship. Kala Chithi, Jak's aunt, describes Jak's reaction when Smriti was born:

When Smriti was born you spent all that first night gazing at the child. You had never known anything like it before. This liquification, this sagging of your heart when her tiny fist clutched at a finger of yours... when she woke in the night, you would wrap her in an old blue denim shirt soft with many washings. In those dark solitary osmoses you knew yourself to be one with the universe and your child. If her eyelid fluttered you felt it in the beat of your heart" (50)

This emotional involvement has taken their relationship to a different level. It goes beyond peculiar ideologies and Jak loves Smriti unconditionally and unfathomably. When the novel opens Smriti has been viciously raped and has got trapped into a comatose condition. Her only voice communication with the outer world is her occasional and horrifying scream. Even in that dead-to-the-world

state Smriti realizes Jak's presence and absence around her. She still feels secure in his presence. Smriti has a strong trust since her childhood that her Papa Jak will always protect her. It is this guilt of breaking that trust that Jak battles hard while chasing the genesis of Smriti's scream. Meera's bonding with her talented IITian girl Nayantara and her thirteen year old adorable boy, Nikhil, is also alluring. After being left by her husband, Meera starts shouldering her family. She starts working with Jak. When she witnesses Smriti in that vegetable stage and comes to know what happened to her, she is shaken by imagining Nayantara in Smriti's place. The haptical communication and mutual understanding between Meera and her children allows Nair to achieve more depth while rendering these relationships.

Ladies Coupé does not project even a single instance of such strong bonding between parents and their children except that between Sheela and her grandmother and the short lived relationship between Marikolanthu and her father who dies when she is just nine years old. There is even a negative example of *Attachment* theory in this novel showing what happens when a mother does not have skin to skin contact with the child during the sensitive period. Marikolanthu, the last and strangest of the passengers in the coupé, belongs to a poor working class. But there was a spark of individuality in her. When she was a teenage girl she had dreams of having a sober life. Before realizing those dreams she is raped by a relative of her rich landlord. This turns her destiny upside down and her hopes are doomed. She gets pregnant. She hates the child even before it is born as it reminds her of her misfortune. She, along with her mother and aunt, try

every non-medicinal way to abort the child but the child is born alive. She does not touch it or breast feed it. On the other hand she tells her mother, "It's not too late. Shove a grain of paddy into his throat. Wring his neck and kill him" (250). Marikolanthu hates the sight of her son, Muthu. She only provides money to her mother to raise Muthu. Later on when she is in need of money to pay for her stomach operation, she mortgages Muthu to a loom in Kancheepuram for five thousand rupees.

Parent-child relationship is not only about what parents are contributing in raising their children. Any relationship gets seasoned by bidirectionality of influences. Schaffer defines it as "an idea that in the course of dyadic interaction the behaviour of each partner affects the behaviour of the other partner" (34). According to him parent-child relationship is a joint product of parent influence and child influence. There are six major characters in *Ladies Coupé*. Their relationship with either their parents or their children seems strong on their part but weaker on the other side. Akhila realizes why Chandra, her mother, loves her father so much and why she disapproves self-dependent mother of Akhila's friend Karpagam. On the other hand Chandra fails to apprehend and respond to the turmoil in Akhila's inner world. Sheela, the youngest of them all, tries hard to understand why her otherwise friendly and liberal father has suddenly turned into a rude authority. She does not even fail to recognise why her mother is so scared of Amumma's (Sheela's grandmother) absence in her life. But both fail to sense the possible harm their family friend, Naazar can cause to their daughter. They do not comprehend a different bond between Sheela and her grandmother.

In *Lessons in Forgetting* almost all parent-child relationships go through a transformation. Jak has many issues with his parents. His father leaves their family when Jak is just thirteen years old. This absence of father has a very deep impact on him. His mother first keeps waiting and hoping for his return. When he declares his total recluse from family life, she moves on in life, marries another man and goes to Tanzania. Jak never forgives his parents. He never goes to meet his mother even when she dies of cancer. He enters his parenthood with a fear that he may fail his children like his parents failed him. Years later, he gets separated from Nina and decides to start over again with a multilingual and talented Monique. He wants his children to understand and accept his decision. But Smriti takes Monique as a usurper and makes every attempt to spoil their relationship. Now he realizes how wrongly he reacted to his mother's decision of moving on in life. The narrator voices his thought,

Perhaps, we start learning to forgive only when our sins come back to visit us. It was when Smriti became sulky, fractious, recalcitrant fifteen-year-old that Jak began to understand the torment he had subjected his mother to. It was when Smriti refused to accept that he could have a life of his own that his own bristling, unyielding stance at his mother's attempt to rebuild her life seemed childish and unjustified. (238)

Lessons in Forgetting underlines the importance of forgiveness, forgetting and second chances for a relationship especially, parent-child relationship to flourish. It stresses the continuity of human lineage. This novel projects a

circular nature of parent-child relationship. Children have many conflicts at every stage of their psychological development. Some of them are solved while some are pushed on the background and children enter the next stage.

According to Erikson and Julia Kristeva when adults enter parenthood they reconsider their relationship with their own parents and the conflicts that were unresolved, mostly at adolescent stage, get resolved. This can be observed in the case of Jak and Meera. They try hard not to repeat the mistakes of their parents in order to become good parents but commit the same mistakes. They learn the lesson of forgiving and forgetting when their children deny accepting and forgiving them for the stand they took for their personal actualization. Instead of such fully developed parent-child relationship there are only chunks of it in *Ladies Coupé*. The novel is like synchronic gallery projecting the struggle of six women for self-realization and self-

actualization. "Who am I?" is the central question in this novel. So other aspects including parent-child relationship are pushed into background.

Conclusion:

The two novels discussed in the present research paper mark the escalation in the projection of complexities of parent-child relationship from *Ladies Coupé* to *Lessons in Forgetting*. The first novel *Ladies Coupé* is a portrayal of a spinster in search of individuality and independence who is helped by five other women who share their battles of the same kind with her. The novel does not represent full development of parent-child relationship which covers the whole life span of a person. A complete parent-child relationship is a web of influences of three generations. *Lessons in Forgetting* talks about two child-centred families and portrays complete, bilateral, reciprocal, and complex parent-child relationships. Going a step ahead it gives insights to decipher and solve the conflicts involved in parent-child relationship.

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