

## **ART AND ADULTERY IN ANITA NAIR'S MISTRESS**

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### **Abstract:**

Anita Nair, one of India's popular women writers describes the present condition of women in society with wit and humor. She probes deep into the human psyche and takes the reader along a wonderful journey by presenting absorbing stories that have colorful and interesting characters. She is perhaps, the most brilliant observer of women's world, in particular, that of Indian women, confronted with an acute sense of helplessness. The story of this love triangle is narrated from the overlapping first-person viewpoints of these central characters and with its structure of three 'book' of three sections each. The narrative reflects the art of Kathakali performance in all aspects. Mistress could have been a worthy but a noteworthy read. The locale of the novel is the banks of the river Nila in Kerala, where the prestigious dance form, Kathakali, exists. Koman, a famous Kathakali artist, and her niece Radha receive Chris at the railway station. From their first meeting, both Radha and her uncle are very impressed by this young man with his cello and his inquisitiveness about the dance form. Radha is a typical modern Indian woman. She is aware of the expectations of the society from 'a married woman', 'a wife'. The confrontation of opposites directs her into a state of helplessness. Her desire for Chris overshadows her responsibility towards her husband and respect for the rules of the society. She plays mistress to Chris, meeting his physical needs and in turn her own.

**Keywords:** human psyche, overlapping, inquisitiveness, .etc

Anita Nair, one of India's popular women writers describes the present condition of women in society with wit and humor. She probes deep into the human psyche and takes the reader along a wonderful journey by presenting absorbing stories that have colorful and interesting characters. She is perhaps, the most brilliant observer of women's world, in particular, that of Indian women, confronted with an acute sense of helplessness.

Nair, a contemporary Indo-English novelist, has presented the appalling conditions of Indian women, who are straddling between traditional and modern roles. Nair's works are based on purely Indian milieu. She has shown the subservient position of women in the orthodox tradition-bound Indian society. She has dealt with gender discrimination and social influence on women, husband-wife relationship; the assailant and the suppressed, and the sexual exploitation of women within and outside the marital purview. Marriage is set as an ultimate prerogative for girls. Women have to mold and transform themselves to cater to the requirements of their male counterparts and in this process, they seem to lose their identity. Set in picturesque Kerala and with Kathakali as a background, Anita Nair's *Mistress* is colorful, active and interesting. *Nava rasa* revolves around emotions and life is interspersed with them. Based on this, the development of the plot and the characteristics of the protagonist are set in this novel- *Mistress*. The maze of human relationships and the 'games' people play, at times, in the name of tradition, culture, and art are many. In spite of the social changes and political freedom, women in India, still struggle to secure their rights. This is the main idea of the novel.

*Mistress* is set in the surroundings of the river Nila -Kerala's own Ganges – that are famous for art and literature. Many immortal writers and Kathakali artists have lived and died there while certain others still live. Nair's *Mistress* revolves around the life of Radha, Shyam and their grotesque marriage against the backdrop of the narratives of Radha's uncle Koman, who is a Kathakali exponent. The novelist uses some appealing techniques in the novel interweaving the dance form of Kathakali, its mythical characters and the story of Radha. Her unhappy situation in the mismatched marriage drives her into the arms of Chris, an American writer. The novel finally ends in Radha finding her voice and deciding to live independently.

The novel *Mistress* explores the magnitude of the relationship between Shyam and Radha. In their relationship, Radha's role as a wife restricts her freedom. Beauvoir believed that the institution of marriage has constrained the spontaneity of feelings, between the husband and wife by "transforming freely given feelings into mandatory duties and shrilly asserted rights". (The second sex: p.445).

The story of this love triangle is narrated from the overlapping first-person viewpoints of these central characters and with its structure of three 'book' of three sections each. The narrative reflects the art of Kathakali performance in all aspects. *Mistress* could have been a worthy but a noteworthy read. It is wholly redeemed by the author's infectious passion for

Kathakali and its performance. It is sensitive and nuanced work which makes a compelling case for the continuing relevance of this ancient art form in modern India. The author deserves praise for her willingness to deal with the big themes of meaning and desire in art and life.

The author employs Kathakali as her metaphor for life; the book is divided into nine parts, each named after one of the Navarasa, the nine emotions or the nine faces of the heart... love, contempt, sorrow, fury, valor, fear, disgust, wonder and peace or detachment...their conventional names, of course, are used. Each section begins with the wonderful piece on that particular rasa, in the voice of the teacher, giving examples from nature to teach his students on how to bring the expression to their face.

In *Mistress*, Anita Nair depicts the ever-changing relationships of husband and wife in society. Her definition of a free woman transcends the boundaries of economic or social freedom but relates to her mental and emotional attitude and well-being. *Mistress* is a beautiful journey of relationships. The novel deals with several themes like art and adultery, the thrill of newfound love, ennui in conventional relationships, squalor and ugliness of love, abuse, dashed hopes, and dark family secrets. It is a book which deals with infatuation and obsession across barriers of religion, marriage, legitimacy, and conventions. It also deals mostly with premarital and post-marital sex. Most of the affairs that develop come with a whiff of bad endings like the river Nila, which rarely has enough water and symbolizes the callousness of the life of the main characters of *Mistress*.

Anita Nair's postcolonial novel '*Mistress*'(2005) narrates the enthralling tale of a woman's desire. Radha in *Mistress* is a character whose status caused her to marry below her standards, thus ruining her father's expectations for her to make "a brilliant marriage into a family that will match them in status and wealth"(119). Her father wants her to marry Shyam. She hesitated but relented only because she longed to flee from her conscience. To her, their relationship with her husband was ritualistic. She understands the relationship as "I can't say that I am unhappy with Shyam: if there are no highs, there are no lows, either some would call this content, even"(53)

The locale of the novel is the banks of the river Nila in Kerala, where the prestigious dance form, Kathakali, exists. Koman, a famous Kathakali artist, and her niece Radha receive Chris at the railway station. From their first meeting, both Radha and her uncle are very impressed by this young man with his cello and his inquisitiveness about the dance form. Radha is a typical modern Indian woman. In her study of the imaginary of Indian women in literature, Rajan states that "the image of the new Indian woman" is, of course, derived mainly from the urban educated middle-class woman"(Rajan 130) and describes her as "attractive educated, hardworking, and socially aware"(Rajan 131).

Ironically, it is precisely her independent way of life that makes her return to her family and leave her newfound life behind. By being married to Shyam, she is forced to become the

traditional woman. His relationship with her is ambivalent. On one hand, he is proud of her being a modern woman who knows what she wants to achieve in life. On the other hand, he dissuades her from achieving it. Radha impresses him with her self-sufficiency and is willing to follow many of her decisions, eg the diet she decides that they follow, yet still, he is not able to accept her personality as a whole. Thus, Radha finds herself at crossroads, between her longing for independence and traditional role that she is to play. Although she, at the beginning of her marriage, decides "never to flout the rules of custom again", (54) she still feels crushed by the expectation that Shyam has. In his eyes, she is to play a modern wife whose utmost desire is to please her husband in all respects.

Shyam is in love with Radha. He had absurd dreams since his childhood. He desired to possess her at any cost. Even though he knows that she had a pre-marital relationship with a married man, he imagines that it is an innocent relationship. It does not matter and he will be happy to marry her. He asks his uncle if she is interested in the proposal. His mother approves of their marriage. His sister, Rani pool is suspicious that Shyam has been forced to agree. "You can get any girl you want. you don't have to be saddled with her just because we owe her father a debt of gratitude" (122). Despite his sister's protest, Shyam marries Radha and on their marriage night, she waits for him in their nuptial chamber with a face that seems hewn out of stone.

Shyam has her aspirations. Shyam and Radha do not have offsprings though married for eight years. Despite marriage being the main goal, a young woman has in her life new expectations she is supposed to perform. A marriage only becomes fulfilling when the wife gives birth to a baby, preferably a son, thus increasing her husband's respectability in society. Once they fulfill it, her marital duties are over.

It is never considered to be the couple's choice whether or not they want to have children. Just like a marriage is the only reliable option for a respectable single girl, having a child (or several) is the only possible future for a married wife, unless she is barren. Yet still, being barren is considered bad and often the wife's critical defect. There are many prejudices that women must face when they do not have children. Radha is reluctant to visit a social event on the grounds of being childless in spite of her being married as long as two years.

The reason for Radha's indifference towards Shyam is the ill-treatment and when she suggested to him that she would like to start a business on her own. While responding, he told her that he has a status in the society and she has to behave as a wife to him and not spoil his status. She raised her voice and said that he behaves as if he was superior to her but all are human beings, no one is superior or inferior in this society. Behind this incident, she was very angry and went into her room. As a rebel, she started to revolt to her husband but he does not bother about her behavior. The quest for self is the main motif of post-colonial Indian women. Radha's husband, Shyam, refers to her as "my Radha".

He likes her a lot and he does not react in a way that they are equal and partners in life, he wanted her to be under his. He wants her to spend time in the beauty parlor or at the tailor's shop or shopping. He does not want her to spend time in intellectual pursuits. She stomped off the room door and in the evening she uttered that she was going to meet his uncle.

Shyam is the perfect mold of a modern, educated tech-savvy Indian man who finds it hard to get rid of his traditional role as a man. Shyam is a twenty-first-century Indian man. Unlike Manu, Shyam is extremely successful in his business, which is his undoing in away. He is never reluctant to turn any opportunity into money-making the undertaking. His only failure perhaps is his inability to understand his wife and his failure to treat her as an independent individual. To him, Radha is another gift which he is proud of like he is of his business ventures. He repeatedly refers to her in the novel as "my Radha" as if to reiterate his ownership. In place of an understanding and meaningful relationship that marriage can be, Shyam wants an unequal relationship that would make Radha his prized possession.

Shyam's concept of marriage is to keep a pretty wife, indulge in her whims and fancies and make her rely on him. He does not desire an assertive woman as a wife. Radha and Shyam are incompatible in different ways and Radha feels stifled in her marriage. She compares herself to the butterfly she caught and nailed to a board as part of biology projects in school and feels that "somewhere within a little heartbeat, yearning to fly" (54).

A day after Chris' arrival Radha finds her mind full of pictures and words of Chris. When Radha meets Chris, she finds her true companion because he shares thoughts in art and literature. He had shifted into two places at once, cottage No.12, and her soul. She is worried and is unable to understand her feelings.

She is aware of the expectations of the society from 'a married woman', 'a wife'. The confrontation of opposites directs her into a state of helplessness. Her desire for Chris overshadows her responsibility towards her husband and respect for the rules of the society. She plays mistress to Chris, meeting his physical needs and in turn her own.

When Shyam suspects Radha's affair with Chris, he is jealous. Like any other husband, Shyam monitors her behavior through his staff and even at times tries to control her but he evades him.. Finally, Shyam knows that he cannot reign over Radha's mind and hence decides to reign over her body. Later, he feels rather satisfied with what he has done and arrogantly says, "woman like to be made to feel like women, dominated and put in their place. Even my Radha. So I wasn't wrong, after all(164). By a single act of physical transgression, Shyam strips Radha of her dignity, her control over her body and her right to say 'no'. Radha is left shocked and bruised after Shyam's attack on her body.

On her way home, Radha went to meet Chris at the cottage and there Radha took up the place of the cello in Chris. Many times in the absence of their husbands, these women do not hesitate to develop an extramarital relationship with persons who show sincere affection.

Here Nair's woman, Radha appears as a split subject who is aware of the gaze of men but she musters the strength to attain freedom from the patriarchal society. She does this by living a life of her own choice through revolt. The woman's quest for recognition is fulfilled when she takes a lover and rejects her husband. The author seems to think that it is correct that such a selfish husband deserves such treatment from their wives. Radha has no malice against her husband Shyam for his earlier treatment her. She thanks him as it was his desire that turned her as an independent woman and thus gave her choice in life and succeeded in carving a niche for herself.

Shyam resorts to molestation to assert his identity as a husband and as a virile man. He is blind in his pursuit and does not care for Radha's feelings. Nair also discusses another important factor in Shyam in the novel, which is his sterility. When Shyam comes to know that he is the reason for Radha's not becoming pregnant, he keeps it from her. Shyam thinks: "How can I have an infertility problem?[.....] women were infertile not men"(204). He wants Radha to look at him as a "full-bodied, red-blooded alpha male capable of fathering a hundred and one children"(205).

Radha's parents bring her up with all comfort and give her the best in everything. After completing her studies, she goes to Bangalore and works in a company. Because of the much freedom and no exposure to the wisdom of the world, she is prone to all the vices in the outer world. She was attracted to her senior officer, who was married and half the age senior to her. She is completely blind to all the complexities in their relationship. She completely gives herself over to him and was thinking to marry him. But one day his wife met her and tells her the truth that he is a womanizer and she is one of the many young girls he had cheated. She also tell her that they have two little boys and he will not divorce her as she loves her so much. It was just a weakness of him to be with women.

Radha is completely shattered. She resigns her job and leaves Bangalore at once. She goes back to her house and confines herself in her room, feeling guilty of her foolishness and empathizing for being cheated. Her parents somehow come to know about what happened to her in Bangalore and arrange her marriage with her cousin, Shyam. She hesitates much to get married at first but later she agrees to marry Shyam.

Unlike Radha, Shyam was born into a poor family. When Shyam was a young boy, his father died leaving his wife, grown-up daughter and small son to suffer the entire burden alone in this world. Shyam's mother worked in Radha's house. Though they are relatives, Radha's family treat Shyam's family as servants only, as they were low in social status. Shyam suffers a lot in his life due to the economic deprivation in their family. During this time, Radha comes home after the traumatic Bangalore experience. Radha's family asks Shyam to marry her, though he knows what happened to Radha, he agrees to marry her. Because from childhood he had nurtured a special love for Radha and her luxurious life, so readily he accepts the proposal.



Shyam who longed for the luxurious life all the time starts enjoying it, but Radha thinking of escaping from one danger fell into another trap. Girija Nambiar in her A Feminist Reading of Anita Nair's Mistress observes:

To Shyam Radha is feminine but he views her as a passive resource, a decoration asset in addition to being a material asset. He will not credit her with any knowledge and enforces 'idle domesticity' upon her wherein She begins to suffer from what Betty Friedan called "the problem without a name"(266).

Considering her marriage to be meaningless, and tired of being a golden cage of 'idle domesticity', Radha is drawn towards Christopher Stewart, a travel writer from America. Chris has come to write a book on Koman, who is an acclaimed Kathakali artist. Chris and Radha are attracted to each other almost at once and plunge headlong into a passionate affair. This is being watched by a bewildered Shyam and a troubled Koman. Chris is the son of Angela, the lover of Koman. He has come to know whether Koman is his father. Angela tells him that she is not sure whom his father is but surely Koman is not his father. But to know the truth he has come to India using his book writing as a chance. Koman explains to him that his mother and he had an affair; still, Chris is not his son. But Chris is not so convinced yet.

Radha is feels drawn towards Chris. At the arrival of Chris in her life, Radha feels that she started enjoying her individuality. Radha- Chris enjoyed pure love and ecstasy all over the Nila Resort. The love life of Radha gets fulfilled as described in Freudian theory that delivers explains about the dream analysis. Radha gets more mental energy out of her love. She never felt odd in loving Chris when Shyam is very much alive and more than that he was watching their love as a silent spectator. Even though Radha's action is against the culture, it can be compared with Freud's masterpiece The Interpretation of Dreams(1900), on the nature of dreaming. Dreams do not focus on conscious work.

Radha's dream along with Shyam's came to nothing and so it lost the essence of the dream. Uncle Koman has surrendered himself to the art of Kathakali and has put his self on it. Being the elder of the family, he knows very well about the marriage life between Radha and Shyam. Later, when he comes to know about the relationship between Chris and Radha, his subconscious mind traces his past and about his mistresses. When Chris came to Uncle Koman he learned about the art. He doubted in his mind which later gave meaning to his meaningless life. The life of Uncle Koman is put under pressure after the coming of Chris. In the course of Radha and Chris relation, Uncle Koman was shocked to realize that Chris might be his son.

The main purpose of Chris to visit India was in search of his father. Staying with Uncle Koman provided him an unforgettable experience; loving Radha showed him the other world of eternal peace. Her affair with Chris is an attempt to involve herself fully in a relationship

with a man who appreciates her needs and gives her space. This is a second major violation of the rules that are supposed to help her realize herself in a relationship where she would be, just like the women she reads about or who sees in the television. The violation does not, however, prove to be an efficient one, in that senses he does not find the space for the self-realization that she is looking for. Nonetheless, it helps her redefine her self-image.

After some days went by, the misunderstanding between Christopher and Radha started. Chris comments on India's stand-in being neutral to the issue of giving the name tolerance in place of laziness. To have an opinion and to stand by it necessitates making an effort, and you don't want to make that bloody effort”(292).

Radha's difference of opinion with Chris can be attributed to the conflict in her self. She considers herself to be a land that was invaded, depriving it of liberty and form. She argues with Chris with her position in the background. She feels that she was under siege sans motif and says that her life with Shyam though filled with turmoil, was amidst a set up called family. She adds that her privilege got stripped off leaving her with challenges without a vision.

Radha comes to know that Christopher was also dominant like her husband Shyam. So she neglects both Indian and western culture. Therefore, she decided to lead her life as per her desires. She seeks her individuality. The whole incident which happened in Radha's life is affected by the patriarchal culture. Hence she never wants to live in tradition and society, so she breaks the limitations and family customs of tradition. It is ironic then, that the point of life when she finally finds the strength for the greatest revolt in her life is the point when she becomes a woman in the eyes of the tradition when she finally conceives a child.

For Radha, the main motivation to violate the rules that limit her life is to find out the freedom she is looking for and the expression for her life as she wants to live it. However, most of the individual violations are empty attempts to achieve this goal. Never being able to find a place in the society, being first as a lover of a man who did not appreciate her fully, then as a wife to a husband she did not love, she is trying to find her true self. It is only through struggles and arguments with her husband and an affair with a stranger that she finally manages to determine her future and gathers the courage to realize it.

Radha who had a pre-marital affair with a married man had an abortion, later her post-affair with Christopher, She struggles for the true sense of love, completely divorced from the sense of guilt. She wants to understand the secret behind Christopher's visit and her Uncle's delay to narrate his own life story. She plunges into the past and realizations occur to her. The shocking revelation that Christopher with whom she had an extramarital affair is her cousin, leaves her stunned beyond words. In the process of knowing her past, she is transformed into



a new being. This transformation gives her the inner strength to submit to Shyam's wish to take her back home.

Finally, she rejects both Shyam and Christopher and in doing so, releases herself from the roles of wife and mistress. In her attempt to break away from both men in her life, but keep her urban baby, she gives her baby a maternal identity through maternal care only, by rendering it "fatherless". Radha, who had been a mistress to two men (Chris and Shyam) and wife to none, move towards becoming "mistress" of her self.

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