

---

**CONSTRAINTS OF FEMININE SELF AND THE PATRIARCHAL PRESSURES: AN ANALYSIS OF SAADIYA OF MISTRESS**

---

**N. Kanchana,**

Assistant Professor of English,  
Yadava College (Autonomous), Govindarajan Campus,  
Thiruppalai, Madurai – 625 014.  
Email: [kanchanaa@yahoo.com](mailto:kanchanaa@yahoo.com)

**Dr. C. Raju,**

Associate Professor, and Head,  
Department of English, Yadava College (Autonomous),  
Govindarajan Campus, Thiruppalai, Madurai – 625 014,  
Email: [v\\_rajou@gmail.com](mailto:v_rajou@gmail.com)

---

Abstract

One of the important creations of Anita Nair, a new generation writer of excellence, is Saadiya of *Mistress*, an enchanting work of art. She happens to be the daughter of Vapa Haji Najib Masood Ahmed who is endearingly addressed as Vapa. And he happens to be one of the six Chiefs of the Arabipattanam, a Muslim town. This family considers themselves to be from the lineage of the Prophet himself. And they consider that they must protect the sanctity of their family. But for Saadiya, she feels herself being cramped both physically and mentally by the family. She has the only freedom of mastering the Arabic language and towards that purpose, a tutor is appointed. As she is of a different stock, she yearns to explore the outside world, travel across the globe, move to far-off places. For her, there is no boundary. She does not want to be confined to familial status. The family plans to get her married to Akbar Shah's second son, who is to come from Hong Kong. But Saadiya has other plans. She falls in love with Sethu, a doctor's assistant. What follows centers around this incident. And this paper proposes to consider the feminine power that makes a character make individual decisions and the problems that come with that.

Keywords: *family sanctity, physical and mental cramping, feminine power*

-----

Mistress is one of the most significant works of Anita Nair. The novel sets off with the appearance of Christopher Stewart, a writer of travel monologues. He arrives at a resort which is

near a river to record the story of Koman, the famous Kathakali artist. This is only on the paper; actually, he has come in search of his hitherto unknown parentage. He is welcomed by Koman, his niece, Radha, and her husband, Shyam. At the first instance itself, Radha is quickly pulled towards the foreigner. This unforeseen appeal and sensual craving create a psychological perplexity for Radha.

The protagonist of Mistress is Koman. A better understanding of the novel is possible only when one learns about Koman and his parental milieu. Sethu, the father of Koman, is a Hindu orphan. He is trained as a health inspector before he moves to a small town named Nazareth. He starts to work under Dr. Samuel. There is an epidemic in the village and its neighborhood. They offer necessary assistance and service to the affected population. The doctor has tremendous confidence and faith in Sethu. In a village by name Arabipattanam, Sethu sees Saadiya, daughter of Haji Najib Masood. Her family is very orthodox and conservative. Women and girls are not allowed to see any strangers except their parents, brothers, and husbands.

Saadiya is exasperated and annoyed of being fastened to the very dingy twenty by thirty feet sky above her head since the Muslim women are shut inside their homes perennially. They are never permitted to endeavor out on the main road where they might come across and be seen by the other men. The main roads and the sea-shore of Arabipattanam were only for the men. The women were not allowed to see and be seen by fellow beings. Saadiya who is the last of the daughters of the family yearns for liberty which the other gender benefitted from. Her hunger for knowledge cannot be satiated. Her psyche is so immersed in knowing things that she nurtures dissatisfaction that only men are allowed to do whatever they like.

Her family plans her marriage with Akbar Shah's second son. He has come from Hong Kong. As a young girl, Saadiya used to hear stories of the sea-faring people of the distant lands. But as a woman who wants to be independent, she is not content only with the stories. She wants to see reality and experience it. She yearns to visit the far off places, the green hills, and gardens without walls. Saadiya has listened to the romantic stories of Arab prince riding a stallion. She hankers after the pleasures of life. She wanted to know more and have more. But the strict rules of her house confines herself within the four walls of her house. Whatever the dreams she had, she had inside that room. Saadiya hankers after the world beyond these four walls:

Saadiya stared at the square of blue over her head. Twenty feet by thirty feet.

That was the measure of her sky, the peripheries of her life. She touched the grey walls of the terrace roof. Even if it stood a solid six feet and two inches high making sure she would never see what was not meant for her eyes, ensuring that she was not visible to anyone. Saadiya felt what was by now a familiar sense of despair.

Would she like her sisters and every other woman born here, live and die hidden by these walls? Was there never to be a way out from here? (99)

The strong desire for reality and the wish to attain different experiences in the world propels Saadiya to venture out of her house. She is not pleased with the images she established of the glamorous places and people in her pursuit. So she decides to flee surreptitiously out of the house. She covers her face with the black cloth and once she is out of sight she throws it away on her shoulder. Saadiya's exploits are driven by the prejudice that the religious conviction has brought between men and women. She would wish to grumble to her father about this unfairness, the erroneous injustice heaped on women. She says:

It isn't fair that you men get to go wherever you want, see and do whatever you like and we are expected to be content with this patch of blue and this maze of alleys (99).

Saadiya is not satisfied with sheer thoughts or stories. For her, the reality was important, "Reality to be able to see, to touch, to hear, to feel, to sense, to know, to experience"(101). Saadiya, as a result, wants to discover the world around to see things for herself. This inquisitiveness makes her leave. The stories she reads from the picture books awaken in her the dream of the prince, who would come and take her away on horseback. She is suppressed in her ghettoed life. When she disobeys rules, she is severely punished. Neeru Tandon observes (2008):

More than 2000 years ago, Roman law gave a man a life and death authority over his wife. In the 18th century, English common law gave a man permission to discipline his children and wife with a stick or whip no wider than his thumb. Feminists claim that men are more likely to use violence to keep their dominant position. While society claims to abhor violence, we often make heroes of men who are aggressive (140).

The canvas of the blue seas, green hills, the roads endlessly going somewhere and the gardens without walls enchant her. She thinks she can discover these landscapes in reality. Saadiya's unquenchable quest drives her out. Being in her teens, and also adventurous, she dares out. She does not know what is beyond the streets. But she has no fear and she is not aware that she is transgressing. It is this adventure that gives her the first glimpse of Sethu, who has come to Arabipattanam along with the doctor. Saadiya's face colors as she finds Sethu looking at her uncovered face, and she feels hankering after the unknown hero. Saadiya is smitten by that single glance of Sethu.

However hard Shyam wants to make her understand this reality, Radha shows attitude about her royal taste for books and the welfare of the poor. But words slip out from the lips of Shyam. He wants her to understand that those poor employers dislike her intellectual writers: "You are

breaking that."(72) She is angry about her inactivity and Shyam who has brought her to this level. She feels that Shyam curbs all her interests in working just because he doesn't want her to involve in money-making: "Don't I have a right to an opinion? I am your wife. Your wife, do you hear me? But Shyam is used to all these bitter words that Radha uses when she is upset. She decides to come to the restaurant with him. She pretends that those harsh words are never spoken and does not care to soothe Shyam's feelings. When she enters the restaurant and Shyam is a briefing to her about his oncoming project, she seems disinterested and looks at the Sahiv. Shyam feels a heartbreak when her eyes meet Chris': "I see that Radha isn't listening. She is standing by the window looking out. The Sahiv is walking by. Suddenly he turns and sees her. His face lights up. Hers, too. And I feel a darkness cloud my eyes."(74)

Saadiya's story turns out to be a tragedy because in her innocence she takes Sethu to be Malik. Merely sixteen years old, and living a ghettoed life, she is totally ignorant of people of other faiths who could exist around her in her small world of the back alleys of Arabipattanam. She is brought up as a devout Muslim, but she is ignorant of the world outside. She tries to adhere to her faith and would like her son to be brought up as a true Muslim, hardly unaware of the complexity of her life created by marrying a Hindu. There is a clash of faith, which triumphs over the love between Sethu and Saadiya.

#### Works Cited

Nair, Anita. *Mistress*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2007.

Tandon, Neeru. *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publisher, 2008. Print.