



## THE THEME OF MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP IN ANITA NAIR'S NOVEL 'MISTRESS'

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### ABSTRACT

Anita Nair is one of the eminent and leading Indian women writers in Indian writing in English. She is at once a novelist, poet, travel writer, essayist, short story writer and writer of stories for children. She has written many novels and children's books. Some of her novels are *The Better Man* (2000), *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Mistress* (2005) and *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010). She concentrates on the predicament of modern woman in male dominated society. She exposes the present condition of woman with wit and humour. She examines the theme of man woman relationship in all her major fictional writing which is also marked for its representation of the south Indian culture. Men are apt to be rational and women are sentimental and emotional. Their attitudes and interests are different. Naturally, they look at things in different ways and react to situations differently. Not only is the man himself different, but also as often happens, in a society of changing values, family ways, surroundings, to which the woman is expected to adjust herself, are entirely different. In *Mistress*, Anita Nair depicts the changing relations between husband and wife in the society. Her concept of free woman transcends the limits of economic or social freedom, but relates to her mental and emotional attitude and wellbeing. It deals with infatuation and obsession across the gulfs of religion, marriage, legitimacy and conventions.

KEYWORDS: Contributed, Concentrates, Predicament, Relationship, Sentimental, Emotional, Transcends, Social Freedom, Infatuation, Legitimacy and Conventions.

Literature is in fact the most explicit record of human spirit. It is a medium through which the essence of our living is made paramount by linking it to imaginative experience. A creative writer has the perception and analytical mind of a sociologist who provides a record of human life, society and social system. The theme of man-woman relationship seems to be of particular interest to Anita Nair. She depicts this theme in her third novel *Mistress*. In this regard, M. Shobha writes, "Anita Nair writes with the urge to reconstruct and re-examine the depiction of body from different angles and to render fresh articulations of the female body" (130).

The novel also deals with human relationships, man-woman relationship and analyses pre-marital, marital and extra-marital relationships and estrangement between husband and wife. In the opinion of Anita Nair, social consciousness of today, is leading us to the point where circumstances for better growth of two complementary components, man and woman, would be ensured by their separate and individual development. Economic independence is incidental and not important in man-woman relationship, what matters most is the importance of surroundings and environment.

Anita Nair's novel *Mistress* is a grand saga of human relationships. It deals with several themes like art and adultery, the excitement of new found love, ugliness of love, abuse and dark secrets of a family. It deals with pre-marital and post-marital sex, legitimacy and conventions. Most of the affairs that develop come with a whiff of bad endings, like the river, Nila, which has enough water and symbolizes the shallowness of the life of the main characters of the novel.

*Mistress* is a colourful vibrant novel set in Kerala as a background. The novel is set in the backdrop of Nila and an institution which teaches performing arts, possibly Kerala Kalamandalam. The principal protagonist of the novel Koman is a Kathakali artiste of international repute, but the different cases of interplay between the characters are expressed through the navarasas-the nine phases of human emotions. Before knowing about Koman, it is necessary to know about his parental background. Sethu, father of Koman, is a Hindu orphan and trained as health inspector before coming to Nazareth. He works under Dr. Samuel. He takes him to a village by name Arabipatnam where Sethu sees Saadiya, daughter of Haji Najib Msdoof. She belongs to very orthodox and conservative family. When Saadiya's parents come to know about her love for Sethu, a Hindu boy, she is expelled from the house. She joins Sethu and they lead a happy life. After sometime, Saadiya gives birth to a male child. Both wife and husband argue about 'Khitana' to be performed on the newly born child. Sethu tries to convince her not to perform such things but she does not agree with him. Then he asks her to leave his son and go to her parents. Disagreement of Sethu forces Saadiya to commit suicide.

The death of Saadiya makes Sethu alone in his life. It's very difficult for him to bring up the child without mother. He decides to get second marriage. He has not informed his previous marriage or about the child with his new wife Devayani. One fine day Koman comes to his father's house. The arrival of Koman disturbs Devayani very much. Sethu feels that time will settle all the problems. Like every father, he wants to give his son good education. His father comes to know that his son's interest is in Kathakali. Aashan, the dance teacher, trains him

many years as a Kathakali dancer and on the advice of his dance guru Koman starts teaching in dance.

Angela, a student learning Kathakali under the dance guru Aashan, comes to Koman to do her dissertation work. She joins dance class as a student at Koman's dance institute. She starts admiring him and feels that she is not just a student of his but something more than that. She feels that she is part of his being, like Ardhanareeswara, Lord Shiva having the Goddess Parvati as half of his body. Koman starts to have an affair with Angela. They start living together as husband and wife without being married. Sethu, father of Koman, is worried that this world be a replay of his own life. He tries to reason with Koman regarding his marriage to Angela. But he does not listen to his father. They lead a happy life. Slowly the perception of Angela changes and she wants him to move to the West so that he can get international recognition. Koman's ego is bloated. He does not plan nor does he learn from the past. He is going to land in an uncertain future. Treatment of human relationships greatly depends on social status. In society different people have different requirements to fulfill. This is visible both in upper and lower status people. In the words of William Walsh: "What is so attractive about the treatment of family relationships is charm and authenticity of its Indian coloring. What makes it immediately recognizable is that it seems to belong to a substantial human nature."

Indian concept of a man-woman relationship has always been that they are inseparable and have equal rights and responsibilities towards society in which they are living. In ancient times, Indian women were treated with great respect both by men and women. It was only in the later stages that man has started asserting his supremacy over the female counterpart. In this context, Sri Aurobindo says: "Women in ancient India, contrary to the sentiment of other ancient people, were not denied civic rights; although in practice this equality was rendered nugatory for all but a few by their social sub-ordination to the male and their domestic preoccupation."

Koman and Angela move to London to lead a happy life. They are very happy for some time and then problems arise, pop up, one after another.

Koman is totally dependent on Angela both financially and emotionally. This causes friction between them. Naturally male ego is hurt and Koman decides to move out of Angela's house as he has become a parasite and living off her. He does not find any progress in the art world. Finally he returns to India and rejoins his dance school. Koman is offered a teaching fellowship by a German University. He declines the offer. He decides to teach this art to new students. Sundaran, the fellow dancer, is very much longing to utilize the opportunity. Koman recommends Sundaran's name for the teaching assignment and scholarship. Thus, Sundaran gets a chance to go to a foreign country to exhibit traditional art form to western audiences. Here Koman is very happy with his dancing. Aashan, the artist teacher who makes Koman into a man who is there to perform, art is for art's sake, where as Sundaran reaps spectacular commercial benefits from the art. During his stay in Delhi, he meets Maya. He is comfortable, has peace of mind as long as he is in her company. Koman has acclaimed success as dancer and praised by the audience wherever he has given performances.

There is an interesting aspect of Anita Nair's novel *Mistress* that is the treatment of man-woman relationship which is based on her entrenched faith in 'new humanism' according to which woman is not to be as a mere sex object, but man's equal partner. Her concept of a free woman, who has transcended the limits of economic or social freedom, developed a mental and emotional attitude. This novel on one aspect looks at the turbulence of large families where dependency breeds strong emotions.

Shyam, a self made entrepreneur has been humiliated by his uncle, Radha's father. His uncle comes with a proposal of marriage with his daughter: 'What is wrong? Shyam asked as gently as he could. She has been involved with a man. So why don't you get her married?'(MS 121). Shyam is in love with Radha. Even though she had pre-marital relationship, he asks his uncle if she is agreeing. His mother approves their marriage. Despite his sister's protest, marries Radha and on their marriage night, she waits for him in their nuptial chamber with a face that seems hewn out of stone. She looks at him, when he tries to crack a

joke to make her laugh, she remains stoic. 'I am not a virgin' she said. 'Did my father offer you money to marry me?' I looked at her carefully. 'You are insulting me', he said quietly. 'Do not you know how beautiful you are?'(MS 123). Shyam is a growing business man and an entrepreneur in Kerala. He is ambitious and wants to become rich. Shyam and Radha do not have children though being for eight years. She is unhappy about the marriage because of the behavior of her husband.

Man and woman are complementary to each other. Neither of them can claim any superiority over the other. But in human civilization, in earlier days, women were merely portrayed as dependent souls. Women's identity is hidden behind the mask of sacrifice and dependency. But, nowadays, women have enough courage to exhibit their individuality at various levels. They are ready to undertake challenging journey of self-discovery to make the whole world recognize them. Radha knows that it is a sin to woo another man, a foreigner, Chris. Chris is a writer-journalist. He is interested in music. Shyam suspects that Radha is attracted towards Chris. Her frequent secret visits to Chris make Shyam worried and put him in a vulnerable situation. It is surprising that, Shyam, throughout his life, even during the worst days of hardship and suffering, never says harsh words to his wife, Radha.

Temporary relationships may give momentary pleasure, lasting pleasure can only be achieved when man and woman understand each other and commit themselves to the relationship. R.K. Narayan states: "Totally different conception of man-woman relationship from ours and it can certainly be demonstrated the marital bliss is a more frequent subject in Indian romantic novels". Radha fails to restore her life even after her marriage to Shyam. As a wife, she must protect her husband's reputation. She never bothers about her husband's reputation and she tries to quench her thirst for sex, by romancing with Chris. She has forgotten that Shyam had given her a new life by marrying her when her life was in ruins and her family at crossroads. Unfortunately she forgets Shyam's help. He feels deceived, but he loves her very much.

To conclude, we can say that Anita Nair in her novel *Mistress* throws light on different aspects of human relationships and brings out the factors, which are responsible for the change of behavior of man towards woman. She feels that man have been successful in suppressing woman for centuries. She does not waver in her version of better world where men and women can live and work together harmoniously, developing a higher level of consciousness by means of a closer sharing of meaningful concepts, meaningful to the conditions that are present. The novelist expresses her thoughts through various *rasaas- raudram* and *bhyanakam* etc. To quote from Bernard Shaw: "Man and wife do not, as a rule, live together; they only have breakfast together, and sleep in the same room. In most cases the woman knows nothing of man's working life. He calls it her home life". So man-woman relationships as we find in many of the characters in *Mistress* of Anita Nair, between Sethu and Saadya, Koman and Angela, Radha and Shyam are not very happy affairs, but very much compromised upon after initial euphoria.

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