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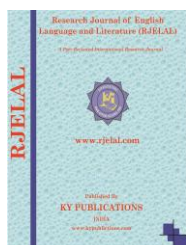
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A CRITICAL STUDY OF ANITA NAIR'S *MISTRESS*

USHA JAMPANA¹, Dr. L. MANJULA DAVIDSON²

¹ Associate Professor in English, Ph.D Research Scholar (Part Time)
Miracle Educational Society Group of Institutions, Bhogapuram.

² Professor of English, Arts College, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam.



ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Anita Nair's *Mistress*. *Mistress* is all about art and artists, and all this not as distant from the daily chores of life, but as being very much a part and parcel of regular routine and thus also explores the depths of relationships and the ups and downs in life. Singaram – Love, Haasyam – Contempt, Karunam – Sorrow, Raudram – Fury, Veeram – Valour, Bhayaanakam – Fear, Beebhalsam – Disgust, Adbhutam – Wonder, and Shaantam – Freedom (Detachment), these are the Navarasas, the fascias of life and the main facial expressions of Kathakali. And these become the platform on which Anita Nair rests her entire third novel '*Mistress*'. It is a tribute, an accolade and an ode to Kathakali.

Key Words: Kathakali, Artist, Relationship, Freedom

Introduction

Mistress is all about art and artists, and all this not as distant from the daily chores of life, but as being very much a part and parcel of regular routine and thus also explores the depths of relationships and the ups and downs in life. *Mistress* is divided into three parts; the first book – chronicles the breaking of convention; the second – examines the consequences of that step and the ways in which one can become both lost and found in the process; the third – traces the slow unravelling and recalibration of various lives. As is clear from the other novels, Anita Nair's habit of questioning continues in this work too. This work of hers is propelled with a searing question, that is "who decides whether an artist is successful: the artist himself or the world?" This unquestioned question and many more like questions about the nature of Shyam and Radha's relationship, a compelled continuation of marital relationship compel the reader to think and attempt to comprehend, not just the plot of the novel, but life

and its many intricacies, its meaning, its purpose and what we make of it. Anita Nair, as is typical of her, leaves these questions unanswered and once again prompts the readers to make decisions for themselves by not offering readymade answer.

'*Mistress*' is set in God's own country, also the birth place of Kathakali. Both Koman, a Kathakali artist and Kathakali itself, can equally be considered the protagonists of the novel. Two plots run parallel, one being that of Radha, her marital life, her relationship with Chris, her dilemmas, and breaking away from all these relationships. Second one being that of Koman, in his own words as expressed to Chris and Radha, starting from his own father, Sethu's youthful days.

Koman, with no tags or tails to his name, is Radha's uncle and one with whom Shyam easily identifies himself only because they both are outsiders in the family. Koman's mother is Saadiya, descendant of a Haziya from the eccentric Arabipatnam. His father is Sethumadavan who fled from his uncle to Ceylon and then back to be a

refugee, and turns a helper to Dr.Samuel, later a loyal subject of James Raj and then his own master and master to many.

Koman's childhood was with Sr.Faith once his father's associate when still with Dr.Samuel. All his life Koman's desire was to flee and find refuge, and he finds a sanctuary in Kathakali, where he is comfortable donning colours and masks, and being somebody else, gods at times and demons at the other.

Being human, he craves for recognition till a certain point in life where he allows his ego rule his sense; but very soon rectifies his mistakes, retraces his erred path and makes the artistry in him his first priority and an artist his second. He craves no more and is able to reconcile himself with what he is, aspiring nothing and seeking nothing. In all this Koman becomes the mouth piece of the author in voicing out her views and asking questions and provoking one to think about what is important in an artist's life? And what is the measure for an artist's success?

Chris is a travel writer and comes to visit Koman, with an expressed proposal to stay for a while with him to write a book on Kathakali and Koman himself as an artist. But he has a secret mission to accomplish that is to confirm his paternity. His secret agenda to confirm his own paternity, his very open dealings with Radha, his indifferent attitude towards Shyam, makes him wanted and unwanted at the same time. At last this his mission ends on a sad note fetching him nothing, neither confirming his paternity nor a life long commitment of his already married lover.

Radha, Koman's niece, at the very first sight of Chris, is attracted towards him and is smitten by his charm and falls for him. During Chris's long stay she knowingly and willingly walks into the snare of a very passionate affair that is so very clear to Koman her uncle, who remains a mute and helpless witness to their calamitous relationship. Towards the end they, Chris and Radha, part with broken hearts. Chris not knowing what he wants and Radha, pregnant but not knowing for sure who the actual father of the growing foetus is, or what is it that she

wants and what should be her immediate plan of action.

One other mute onlooker is Shyam, Radha's husband, who is extremely surprised to see life and light in the eyes of Radha when with Chris. This in her eyes is what he himself was unable to draw from her and failing in doing so withdraws into himself unable to win back Radha from the spell cast by Chris. His interest in allowing Chris to visit and in allotting a river view cottage in his 'Near – the – Nila' tourist resort, is only to find a free ambassador for his resort and advertisement in his book, on whatever it is that Chris is writing, about which he is least bothered. Though indifferent to the person that is Chris, Shyam finds it difficult to accept them, Chris and Radha, so involved and entangled; but only his excessive love for Radha stops him from taking any step to prevent it from progressing, wishing something to happen that would bring Radha back to him. Towards the end Shyam is left in a disgusted and depressed mood unable to comprehend what his mistake is, what he lost and what he should be doing?

Arabipatnam itself is presented as a place where people crave for an identity that is their own. A clash between genders is clear and all men's efforts are to keep women in their place with no freedom what so ever. A vast sea near by is a distant place for them to think and enjoy; sky, the symbol of infinity is but a small blue patch for them. Any attempt to seek freedom ends with a burnt patch on ones body as was in the case of Saadiya, the Haji's daughter. Haji considers this of his daughter's trespass as his failure as a father and as a responsible member of their society and punishes his daughter for thinking of freedom and himself for giving her freedom.

More surprising in this context is the role and reaction of Zuleika and Ummama, who act as agents of male ideology, sternly opposing Saadiya and trying to neutralize any desire that arises in her of freedom. Nadira her sister is all the more reluctant to come out of the confines of the protected land.

Saadiya, in this context stands as a harbinger of a changing mind set; she stands as a

representative, a prototype of all freedom seekers. Her meeting Sethu for six continuous days on either side of the wall and asking him to come over on the seventh day resembles the day by day narration of the biblical creation story and thus creation of a new woman in the person of Saadiya.

Rani Oppol, sister of Shyam, is a tormentor in the case of Radha. Rani, or even a mention of her name, turns a nightmare for Radha. It is her nagging nature and finding fault with everything Radha does, that displeases Radha. And all what Rani Oppol wants is to degrade Radha in the eyes of Shyam, who adores her very much and for whom everything is next to Radha. Anita Nair thus successfully drives her point home in showing how women turn enemies to women and present a class of perpetrators within a class.

Shyam's attitude towards women too throws light in this direction, showing his feeling of insecurity, his life in hidden fear and overshadowed with his larger than life image of Radha dominating him, overthrowing his authority. Thus, we see Shyam forcing his will onto Radha, a usurper in his thoughts, and saying,

"..... women like to be made to feel like women, dominated and put in their place ..." (164).

But his attempts are so very clear that Radha herself feels and understands that

"..... he does not want an equal in his life". (53)

Nurturing the centuries old male ideology, Shyam feels that with marriage Radha is his possession and finds it difficult to accept Radha enjoying full freedom and being least bothered about conventions and indifferent to others feelings. Thus, by subjugating her, he wishes to win an identity at home and in his own mind.

Shyam who is very serious about having an identity fails in one thing, and that is in setting limits to his cravings. Thus, we see his every thought as commercial, either to make money or to win people. Thus, his uncle Koman, with whom he associates himself as outsider, is well taken care of by Shyam,

not just with the sentimental feeling as outsiders in the family but waiting for his death and then to inherit his property, for he says:

"... .. when he dies, it will be Radha's. I don't want anything jeopardizing her inheritance". (124)

Lack of depth in his character is shown when he orders Baby George, a chef in his 'Near – the – Nila' resort to heat a little coconut oil only to spread the aroma in the restaurant and to appease the senses of his customers.

Shyam, after crying his heart out in a closeted room over parting with Radha, comes out to behave like nothing ever went wrong with him. His feelings at the next moment show the same,

"I look around and feel a swell of pride again. All this is mine, I think".(403)

He in this desperate state, at the spur of the moment, decides to buy Padmanabhan, an elephant that is paid to visit the resort at regular intervals to give it a complete Kerala colour, at any cost and tells himself,

"It is an omen, I tell myself. When I have Padmanabhan, my life will be mine again". (403)

It shows that something that gives you simple undiluted pleasure is more precious than all the riches in the world or ones given by one's family be it parents, spouse, children or friends. A parallel to this is seen in 'Ladies Coupe' where the different characters indulge in various activities just to find this pleasure for themselves.

All through this work of Anita Nair a disquiet, a restlessness, a strong undercurrent, an afterthought after every word and every deed is perceived. The most disturbing of all is the disgusting mess the characters make of their lives and relationships. And thus Maitali Saran comments,

"For every twist and turn in the novel it loses a little humanness and tangles itself in abnormality and nauseating illegal relationships". (33)

Though disturbing every move in the novel has a purpose. Maitali Saran feels that:

“There is much angst about identity, whether biological, professional, or socio-cultural, much fretting about who one is and whom one therefore loves”. (33)

All the characters play their own roles but run more or less in the same line.

Conclusion

Anita Nair received rave reviews for this her work and is specially applauded for the amount of work that went into researching into the art form, Kathakali, the source of inspiration and the cause that compelled her to pen this work. Though she makes it clear that she is nobody to judge what artists make of their art, she vehemently opposes the sheer commercialization of art. Anita Nair in an interview to The Hindu, tells of her encounter with a Kathakali artist who was just a rate card who became the inspiration behind ‘Mistress’, to work on the art form. For this her heart goes out to Kathakali and she decides to work for the cause of Kathakali and says:

“What you do may mean nothing to the world, but what matters is

that it means everything to you”.

A task taken thus turns out to be an ode to this art form, Kathakali, that is unique to Kerala and which is part of parcel of its culture.

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