

Anita Nair's Mistress – A Grand Saga Of Relationships

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Abstract

Mistress states the contradicting and complimentary life situations of travel writer Christopher Stewart, a Kathakali dancer whom he meets in Kerala named Koman, and the niece of Koman, Radha, who happened to be locked up into the traditional housewife's role. Chris and Radha's affection for each other, perplexed situation of Radha's husband Shyam and Koman's life story and his relationships, are slowly revealed in the story. Mistress repeatedly questions paternity ranging from Chris to the unborn child of Radha. Written against the background of Kathakali, repressed emotions of characters are unveiled through Navarasas or the nine emotions of Kathakali in the novel.

Keywords - *Man-woman relationship, Pre-marital, Marital, Extra-marital relationships.*

Introduction

In *Mistress*, Anita Nair depicts the changing relationships of husband and wife in society. Her concept of a 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. It also deals extensively with pre-marital 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 shallowness of the life of the main characters of *Mistress*. The three major female characters in the novel namely Saadiya, Angela and Radha who belong to different time and space, yet connected to one another, as they can be roughly introduced as Koman's mother, Chris mother/Koman's ex-girlfriend and Koman's niece/Shyam's wife respectively, are getting affected by the shift of environment from their natal place to marital life. The different cases of interplay between the characters are expressed through navarasas- the nine phases of human emotion.

Sethu and Saadiya

Saadiya, daughter of Haji Najib Msdoof lives in Arabipatnam. Her family is very orthodox and conservative. Sethu is a Hindu orphan who is trained as a health inspector who works under Dr Samuel. The doctor takes him wherever he goes on medical rounds. Sethu sees Saadiya in Arabipatnam and fell in love. Women and girls are not allowed to see any strangers except their parents, brothers and husbands:

What have you done, Saadiya? When I tell your father, he will be furious. She turned to Zuleika and pinched her forearm. And you? Who else saw her there? Tell me the truth, you lazy cow. Where were you when she decided to put the honour of the family in jeopardy (129).

When Saadiya's parents come to know about her love for Sethu, a Hindu boy, she is expelled from the house. She joins Sethu. He is confident that Dr Samuel would help him. Dr Samuel asks him to leave immediately. Saadiya gives birth to a male child. Sethu and Saadiya argue about "Khitan" to be performed on the newly born child. He tries to convince her not to perform such things. Saadiya's upbringing through indoctrination about religion is strong and common sense is not allowed to work. Daily disagreements with Sethu lead to dejection and force Saadiya to commit suicide. "In Saadiya's case, the unmarried girls were kept at home and were supposed to be guarded at all times" (Saravanakumar, 165).

Sethu and Devayani

Sethu migrates to Shoranur and buys properties. He marries Devayani and has children through her. The description of Sethu's second wife Devayani, may give us an idea of what a desirable traditional wife is like. Being regarded as a good wife, she is portrayed as "loving and considerate, and not given to emotional excesses. She smiled easily and seldom lost her temper. She ate well, slept well and loved well" (238).

Koman and Angela

Koman is the protagonist of *Mistress*. Sethu is father of Koman. Like every father, he wants to give his son a good education. Koman is an average student. Koman's interest lies in Kathakali. Sethu encourages him to learn the art of guises. His teacher, Aashan, trains him for many years to make him a good Kathakali dancer. Sethu wants to see that Koman has a house of his own, purchases one for him near the river Nila.

Angela is a student learning Kathakali under Aashan. She has been learning Kathakali for two years. She is here to do her dissertation work. Her parentage is both German and Spanish. She now joins Koman's class as a student. She finds him attractive. He is playful, mischievous and an affectionate teacher. He is generous and romantic by nature. She starts desiring him. Koman starts to have an affair with Anjela. They start living together. Sethu is worried that this would be a replay of his own life. Koman and Anjela start living as husband and wife, without being married. Slowly, perception of Anjela changes and wants him to move to the west to get international recognition, fame and fortune. Koman's ego gets a boost. He does not plan nor does he learn from the past. He is going to land in an uncertain future as the future events reveal. No wonder the author decided to bring in characters so that the themes of adultery and lust can be interwoven into the novel. "Western breeze blows, something directly, and sometimes more significantly indirectly. Before 1947, novels are influenced by western literature" (Srinivasa Iyengar, 317).

Anjela and Koman move to London. They are very happy for some time and then problems arise, pop up, one after another. Naturally male ego is hurt and Koman decides to move out of Angela's house. For survival he starts working in a hotel. He feels estranged and lonely as long as he is in London. Finally he leaves for India. Lack of planning at work and in their lives, people fall short of their dreams and goals. Here Koman having no goal to achieve feels frustrated and dejected thereby becomes estranged.

Koman and Lalitha

Koman on his return rejoins his dance school as Ashan. Koman meets Lalitha. Koman proposes to Lalitha his long time mistress. She refuses to marry him because of her fear of people in society. She knows that Koman's family would never accept her as his wife. She would always be treated as his mistress. He has an uncanny knack of enticing and building sexual relationships with women.

Koman and Maya

Maya is a voluptuous woman. Koman meets Maya during his stay in Delhi. She is lonely. A month later Koman goes to Madras where she lives. Inevitably they become lovers, an affair of the heart and body. He is comfortable, has peace of mind as long as he is with her.

Radha and Shyam

Shyam is in love with Radha. He had foolish dreams since his childhood wanting to possess her at any cost. Even though he knows that she had pre-marital relationship with a married man, he thinks 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 agreeing. His mother approves their marriage. His sister, Rani Oppol 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, 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.

I am not a virgin,' she said,' I want to you to know that I have had sex,' it does not matter. I have had sex, too. I have slept with other women, too. 'Did my father offer you money to marry me?' I looked at her carefully. You are insulting me,' He said quietly. I don't need to be paid to marry you. Do not you know how beautiful you are'? (123).

Shyam is ambitious. Shyam and Radha do not have children though married for eight years. Radha is unhappy about the marriage because of the behaviour of Shyam. Shyam wants a dutiful wife.

Radha and Chris

Chris is a writer, a journalist and a foreigner. He is interested in music. "Chris comes to their life as a villain, as a storm and what not" (Velavan, 2). Radha knows that it is a sin to woo another man. Her husband loves her despite her guile nature. He suspects that she is attracted towards Chris. Her frequent visits to Chris make Shyam worried and put him in a vulnerable situation. Koman has had many affairs. Radha, herself has to grapple with the question whether her uncle, who had an affair with her mother, was her father. Radha meets Chris secretly. Koman made many mistakes of romancing with Radha's mother who was his own brother's wife. As a wife, she is a symbol of the glory and prestige of her family and transmitter of tradition from one generation to another. Radha fails to restore her life even after her marriage to Shyam. As a wife, she must protect her husband's reputation. The illegitimate relationship gives a chance to others to comment about her husband. 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. This shows his good nature and his true love for Radha and question arises that "will she continue to live with Shyam and rework the rules of their marriage? Will she eventually go to Chris while holding on to her own cultural identity? Will she strike out alone, with or without another man?"(Bhatt, 97).

Conclusion

The grand saga of relationships in the characters of Mistress, between Sethu and Saadya, Sethu and Devayani, Koman and Anjela, Koman and Lalitha, Koman and Maya, Radha and Shyam, Radha and Chris, are not very happy affairs. 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 shallowness of the lif.

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