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**CAUGHT IN THE BETWEEN: A COMPARATIVE READING OF THE
EFFECTS OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN ANITA NAIR'S
*MISTRESS***

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Abstract

The conventions and moral obligations that list down to rules for women in India are being tarnished with the spread of nuclear families. Women have started becoming partners in decision-making, thereby replacing the authoritative decisions from the head of the family (normally men). The novel *Mistress* written by Anita Nair portrays the conflicts of a woman who is independent with her mind and yet is forced to live in subjugation. The levels of subjugation entrusted in the bondage of marriage in India and the inescapable concept of 'helpless' women are considered in the paper. The paper also deals with the plight of the Indian woman who is caught between modern and traditional stereotypes.

Introduction

It is an enormous cage, but I have heard an occasional comment about how cruel it is to keep birds in a cage. Then I ask the person who made the comment, 'How different is it from keeping your wife and daughters at home? Isn't that a cage, too?'

And he, for it is always a man, would laugh in disbelief. 'How can you compare the two? Birds are meant to be free.'

'And women are not?'

'Women need to be looked after,' he would tell me, and his eyes would demand: What do you know about it? You don't have a wife or children to worry about. (Nair, 74)

Womanhood as far as concerned by the Indian society is caught between models of ancient epics and the western culture. They are supposed to be looked after, but then they have started earning on their own. Confusions in such matters rise from insecurities in families as to what would be the new roles assigned to each gender in the family. When efficiently and conveniently, women were assigned with the household tasks and men were made the bread-winners; now women were breaking stereotypes and earning for a living too. This is contradictory. Can a bread-winner do the household chores or is it the gender that is responsible for the jobs. When in certain strata sharing of jobs would seem efficient, in other parts it would still be considered that no matter whether women earned their bread or not, they are destined to do the household work. And if in case the woman, like Radha, is privileged of having servants more than fingers can count, she was supposed to be the trophy wife. This is all because of the underlying notion that women unlike birds are not free and are supposed to be looked after.

The conventional woman, who was destined to be married off as a property exchange found it the duty of the husband to provide for her, like her father. It is a make-belief that men are supposed to provide for women which further gives them the right of ruling over the "property" that was thrust upon them. But the contradiction came with the modern women feeling equal amounts of self-respect that bade them from doing the same. In the novel *Mistress* it can be seen that Radha's husband was willing to provide her with the moon had she asked for it. But the disparity rose with the lack of emotional attachment between the two and her self-respect of having to "ask" even for the trivialities she had as necessities. When this notion would seem out of box for the traditional woman, it was a stretch that rose to breaking point for the modern woman.

Marriage in India is a system that believes that love is not a necessary equation for marital bliss. As an arrangement between families, the people marrying often had no idea about the institution of marriage. The passing fancy of lust nor the eternally acclaimed fancy of love were considered important for marriage in India. The necessary ingredients preached about were sacrifice and children. Routines that rose including sex are supposed to be a necessity that included no feelings from the couple which was to be continued with a life dedicated to the children devoid entirely of a plan for old age. This in turn made the aged depend highly on the children instead of their own life which reflected a declining society in times of technological development and nuclear families.

In India they don't seem to put the same emphasis on romantic love. Couples copulate when necessary and get on with their separate lives. (Kureishi and Kureishi)

But with the system of education lighting up the intellects of women, they started seeing light and understanding the value of being understood and started seeing marriage as more of romance than of a requirement. Being a *silly, glossy wife* was not up for debate and women started wanting their own space. When the purchase of sanitary napkins by the husband was perfect in the olden days to avoid the woman from embarrassment, Radha in the novel is seen to be agitated at the fact that nothing could be personal anymore. She needed space and rights over her own bodily functions. This was and is according to the society an unwanted train of thought since a woman is a property and is supposed to be bossed over. The concepts and ideals that relate to the specified cultural identities also become an important factor with the notions being linked to the ideal womanhood. Women who are kept away from significant issues of the world due to the constructive structure that fixates them at home are also depicted as factors which undermine them.

I think that for Shyam, I am a possession. A much cherished possession. That is my role in his life. He doesn't want an equal; what he wants is a mistress. Someone to indulge and someone to indulge him with feminine wiles. I think some of the cruel acts I committed as part of biology projects in school. I think of the butterfly I caught and pinned to a board when it was still alive, its wings spread so as to display the markings, oblivious that somewhere within, a little heartbeat, yearning to fly. I am that butterfly now. (Nair, 53)

Being a wife was a full time job that was entrusted with the marriage. But this job was mandatory for the woman while the man could continue his life uninterrupted and definitely not bossed over. Though the duties handed over to a woman post-marriage did not change much, the educated women of the present world were reduced to reading magazines and spending upon trivial things just for the fun of it. The technological advances which provided women a lot of free time also made their remaining time worthless since they were not allowed to benefit neither from their education nor from their societal attachments. A woman as shown in the novel is shown to possess interests over business affairs or in her husband's social life. But the only condition stated was that the interest must be superficial enough to encourage the husband when their original opinions were to be strictly held within since a woman could not handle or think above a man. When Radha is shown to have interest in working and in her husband's business affairs, the reaction she receives is exclusively inherent to the independent minded women of India. Shyam says,

There is something else I don't like. You are my wife and you have a place in society. When I ask you to show some interest in what I do, I mean just that. Display interest and not hobnob with my employees or share meals with them.(Nair, 72)

The concept of Pathi Parmeswar in the minds of women is still kempt along with the uprisings of women empowerment. In India, the husband is given an image of God where the wife becomes a devotee at his mercy. She becomes a personification of submission and when she objects to it like the protagonist Radha, she becomes an object of ridicule. The mentality that demands the keeping of women in their place was what in the first place created a setting that women belonged to. It was not in the interest of the women but in those of the men in power to decide the place of women to be it in the house or in the society. The marital rape committed on Radha is proof enough that marriage takes away the right of a woman to say no. The humiliation of the mind and the body becomes a legal right and the factor that the attraction between the couple is dead wouldn't be enough to even buy a divorce. When her uncle notices that there is no real emotional attachment between them he is found saying that perhaps she should leave the marriage but the question he raised was which court would consent to a divorce due to boredom. In the novel, the wife is aware of the repercussions that she would have to face. But she is determined to commit adultery to pay her husband back for mutilating her body and her life. The desperation to lead a normal life and the dependency titled upon her head by the society has her

bound to live in a loveless marriage pretending all was fine. And the longing to do something that rises herself in her own eyes, which would not tarnish her image in the society if done properly was adultery. The hasty decision which would change her life irrevocably was therefore the result.

I woke at dawn and crept back into bed. My mind was made up. I would pretend that nothing had happened. I would cheat him of the pleasure that nothing had happened. I would cheat him the pleasure of having imposed his will.(Nair, 165)

When chastity is what binds a woman to her character in a patriarchal society, the biggest decision a woman could make would be to betray her husband physically. Radha, with the mentality of a physically abused and trodden lady, finally decides to deprive her husband of the pleasure of dominating her. The explanation she provides of denying him the one thing he holds dear in life is her unraveling. She steps out of the system that has forced her to remain faithful in a loveless marriage whereby she falls into her bodily desires even though it implies an end to her marital life. This step she takes is in opposition to her bodily gestures which indicate that she has once more been 'put into place' with her husband's domination. She is merely portraying the power a woman yields over the society by yielding the power of acting. Pretension as the final tool to gaining a fraction of freedom makes her a potent weapon here.

The paper therefore assesses the situation in the novel *Mistress* where Radha is treated as a property as is demanded by the society. Money and social status binds this woman and her cherished dreams into what is named marital bliss and the required adjustments. The notion regarding marriage to which the term love could not be connected is also proof that arranged marriages are done with to merely copulate. The book in a way justifies the adultery committed as a way in which she finally unbinds herself from the shackles of marriage. The courage born from the relation and the child in her is what lets her move away from a loveless marriage without considering the society.

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