

Study of the Complexities of Human Emotions in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

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Abstract

The 'modern' or the 'feminist' or the 'path-breaking' women writers have carved a niche for themselves in the male dominated world of fiction writing. Anita Nair stands out as a postmodern feminist writer in India. Her two major novels 'Ladies Coupe' and 'Mistress' have earned her the 'feminist' tag, as in these novels she delves deep into the psyche of her female characters and presents an unexplored world of the their inner self which has had remained concealed from the male world.

Key Words: Feminist, Man, Woman, Conflicts, Submissive, Assertive

The postcolonial period in English has witnessed a large number of writers focusing their writings on a number of social, cultural, political and religious issues. The last four decades have, however, been remarkable as the focus of writing shifted from the general to the individual, from the impersonal to the personal. In India, women's writing in English came in being as an entity in the middle of the 19th century. Since then it has passed through various phases of growth, crossed the threshold of infancy, bloomed in its youth and later matured into an enticing beauty of which the world stood up and took serious notice. Moving from the social oriented writing to the more introspective writing of the inner world, the women writers have ultimately come into their own. Rather than glorifying the stereotype roles allotted to women by the patriarchal society, these women writers have taken upon themselves the responsibility of redefining their role in the social and family set-up. This phase was called as the 'feminist' phase which was not to be taken as a complement. The uproar caused by such writings had its repercussions for a short

while but soon this writing found its place in the mainstream literary world.

The 'modern' or the 'feminist' or the 'path-breaking' women writers have carved a niche for themselves in the male dominated world of fiction writing. All the writers differ from each, other in some respect but the basic concern in their writing is the same i.e. to present a woman's world in its true light.

Feminism originates in the perception that there is something wrong with society's treatment of women. It Attempts to analyze the reason for a dimension of Women's oppression, and to achieve women's liberation. To some, liberation is defined as social equality with men, While other fell that the narrow definition reflects the Class bias of that is described variously as bourgeois Feminism, career feminism, mainstream feminism or Liberal feminism.

Anita Nair stands out as a postmodern feminist writer in India. Her two major

novels 'Ladies Coupe' and 'Mistress' have earned her the 'feminist' tag, as in these novels she delves deep into the psyche of her female characters and presents an unexplored world of the their inner self which has had remained concealed from the male world. The female protagonists are not presented as docile, submissive and meek creatures but they are assertive and independent women who believe in leading lives of their own. In 'Ladies Coupe', the protagonist Akhilandeswari is haunted by the question –

Can a woman live by herself and be happy, or does a

Woman need a man to feel complete?

In the process of finding an answer to this question, she struggles to find her place in the social set-up and she, interestingly, discovers that her fight is not against the men in society, but against her own 'conditioned mind' and her 'inner demons' in order to be able to emerge as a new independent woman. The crusade for identity and self-esteem leads the protagonists on the path of self-discovery and self-expression.

Anita Nair does not present herself as a campaigner for women's rights. She rather pens down the reality as she sees it and leaves the readers to reach their own conclusions. In one of her interviews, she makes her position clear;

The fear of society is a great impediment to personal

Freedom whether it is for a man or a woman and in a

Country that has always considered women to be inferior

Beings, women and in a country that has always

Considered women to be inferior beings, women are that much more hesitant to assert themselves or merely claim their rights. And this make me eager to present India woman as she is rather than the doormat kind of person she is often projected to be as the way I see it, an Indian woman is someone who has a core of steel despite being wrapped in many layers of tradition.

'Mistress' is a three generation story which is spread over a long period of 90 years. It is a poignant tale of the innate struggle of Indian women and a tool for them to voice their protest and assert their rights. Nair has divided the plot into three sub-plots and all these blend harmoniously into one whole. In this sense they are feminist. Belonging to three different generations, the three women have feminist stance in common. The characters narrate in first person and this makes their voice more prominent.

The novel runs on two parallel plots. It deals with Kathakali, a dance form of Kerala. Kathakali is the Mistress and Komal is besotted by her. The other plot revolves around Radha – Shyam and Chris. In the background, Nair presents the drama of human emotions through the nav-rasas. Her skill to portray all the possible human emotions makes her stand apart from the contemporary Indian women novelists. However, it is the Shringarum (love) around which the lives of these characters are women.

Kathakali is the mistress that governs Komal's life. Mistress is a symbol of both, power and surrender. She has a strong hold on the character and at the same time suffers the agony of being the 'other self'. Woman, as defined by our culture, is the 'other-self'. She is defined by her

relationship with the men. There is no identity accorded to her which is devoid of a male relation. As Simone de Beauvoir points out,

Men fundamentally oppress women by characterizing them on every level, as the 'other', defined exclusively in Relation to men. He extends out into the world to impose His will on the world whereas the woman is doomed to Immanence or inwardness. He creates, acts, invents; she Waits for his to save her.

Nair does not deliberately get into the preaching mode regarding feminism though she is conscious of the problems women have to face in the patriarchal society. She states,

I don't particularly address gender issues in my novels. However I do have a great preoccupation with what it is to be contemporary Indian woman. As I do believe that it isn't easy to be contemporary Indian woman. This is a woman more aware of what is right and wrong and who knows there is an option to choose how she wants to live Indian culture which expects her to be the custodians of The traditional culture and hence put her desires on a back burner while men tend to move on with giant strides while Policing women's progress and curbing it.

Mistress is about Koman's relation with Kathakali. Koman is the son of Sethu and Saadiya, a Muslim mother and a Hindu father. Radha is the niece of Koman and both of them share a wonderful

relationship. Radha is married to Shyam, a man much below her status. They two have 'irreconcilable differences' and both are emotionally not compatible. Chris is the travel writer who visits Koman to know more about the world of art. He is there with a secret agenda. In the process of discovering himself gets involved with Radha and soon realizes that they have no future in common.

Though novel Mistress has Koman as the protagonist, yet there are three female characters who dominate the theme. The female characters in the novel are strong and confident, eager to live life on their own terms and least bothered about the social norms. Belonging to three different generations, the female characters evolve into individual beings, transcending their gender and sexuality. Nair focuses on the individual traits in the character rather than on their gender. The focus is on the person and not on the sex. Anita Nair has created some very bold characters in the novel that defy the age-old social norms and create a world of their own. Nair has the knack of delving deep into the minds of the characters and unveiling the complexities of human psyche.

Nair presents the inter and intra familial relationships among the characters in her three-generation story, each generation representing different sets of values that shape their relationship and destinies. Sethu and Saadiya belong to the first generation. Both belonging to different religions fall in only to discover the socio-cultural differences. Saadiya is string-willed, confident and a rebel brought up in a Muslim community where there are separate lanes for men and women. She comes up with strikingly modern views who wish to explore the world on her own.

*There is singing in my head that says
there is so much to
See, so much dreams to do, so much
to know.*

She dreams of the open sky and aspires to fly high. Her discontent regarding the limitations on her freedom is apparent when she states,

*It isn't fair that you mean get to go
wherever you want, see and do
whatever you like, and I am expected
to be content with this patch of blue
and the maze of alleys.*

She boldly enters into a relationship with Sethu in extreme adverse circumstances. When the relationship fails, she walks into the sea and ends her life leaving behind Sethu and their little son Koman. In both the situations, she shows equal courage. In the novel Saadiya is the first generation feminist whose need and desires are suppressed as the story unfolds itself. She dares to fulfill her dreams even at the cost of her life. She views herself as an individual rather than the 'other-self' and in the process tries to escape the imposed role of the 'other'. For Saadiya marrying Sethu is not just an act of assertion, it is rather an attempt to emerge as an individual.

*Our culture does not permit women
to accept or gratify their basic need
to grow and fulfill their potentialities
as human beings, a need which is
not solely defined by their sexual
role.*

Nair brings out the essential elements of modern feminism when she portrays the character of Saadiya. The second generation has Maya, another strong character portrayed by Nair. Maya meets Koman at a very late stage in her life and is instantly drawn towards him. She is not

an eager teenager curious to experience life. Though certain decorum prevailed in her married life, bit by bit she realized that she is leading a very monotonous and unexciting married life. She became aware of the fact that she was cheating on herself by pretending to be happy.

*And there isn't a day in my life that I
don't wonder if I
Should have been more kind to
myself.*

Koman attracts her with his intelligence and knowledge of Kathakali and one fine day she decides to meet Koman. Nair presents Maya as the emerging new woman who does not put her desires on the back burner to conform to the patriarchal rules. Overcoming the initial hesitation, she takes the plunge and respects her heart's desire. Maya maintains a fine balance between tradition and modernity.

The third generation feminist is Radha, a modern contemporary woman. The feminist stance is most prominently seen in Radha. The young, beautiful and wealthy Radha makes certain choices in life relying on her own instincts rather than what is expected of her. Her pre-marital involvement with a married man leads to an abortion. When she refuses to take any responsibility she marries the man her father had chosen for her simply because she is unable to find any other alternative. Married to an insensitive man, she dares to question her role in marriage,

*Don't I have a right to an opinion? I
am your wife. Your wife, do you
hear me? But you treat me as if I am
your kept woman. A bloody mistress
to fulfill your sexual needs and with
no rights.*

She challenges the traditionally defined role of a woman when Shyam, her husband, asks her to fit-into the mould of an Indian woman;

What is right? Visits to the beauty parlour's, tailors, washing the leaves of the plants, calling your friends wives, they are your friends not mine They bore me and I don't expect live my life in this way. This is not what I want from life.

Time and again she asserts her identity and refuses to bow down. Radha's relation with Chris can be viewed as an act of defiance. She is instantly drawn to Chris and on one occasion Shyam, in a very pathetic and helpless manner watches Radha passionately embracing Chris with a passion he (Shyam) has never known. He desperately tries to save his marriage by becoming more aggressive and violent. This however, only helps to worsen their relationship for this makes Radha a rebel, "he may be daddy, but I refuse to be the trembling penitent child."

Radha faces the real crisis when she tries to put a relation-tag on her relationship with Chris. Radha, in her desperation, tries to find a name for their relation and Chris, with his western upbringing, sees no need for it. Unaware of the mental turmoil Radha is going through, Chris fails to understand her mood swings. It is when Radha discovers that she is carrying Chris's child that she decides to take the reins of her life in her hands. She breaks off from Chris without telling him about the child. She confesses to Shyam about her relation with Chris. And giving up her relationship with her to men whom she loved in respective phases of her life she decides to live alone. When Koman, her uncle wants to know what she intends to do with her life, she answers,

*I don't know. I really don't know. All my life I have
Stumbled from one thing to another,
persuading myself
That this is how it should be. I have never behaved as if I
Have a mind of my own. I have never made a decision. I
Have let myself be swept along. Isn't it time I assumed
Some responsibility for my life?*

Radha emerges stronger from the crisis in her life. Nair does not project Radha as an adulterous. She presents her character as an individual in pursuit of her happiness. Radha emerges as a dignified, strong and capable individual.

Anita Nair's major concern lies in depicting the age old suppression of women at the hands of the male dominated society. She attempts to portray the modern women who despite their modernity have to fight against the marginalization of their gender. Nair understands the complexities of a woman who is modern in views but still grounded in the traditions. She offers no comments on feminism, and she has not painted die-hard feminist characters. Their conflict is not against the male but rather against the male attitude towards women. Nair speaks of no permanent solution to the problem. She is basically a good story – teller and it is up to the readers to draw their own conclusions. The question that haunts Akhilandeswari in 'Ladies Coupe' does not get any concrete answer. Is it necessary to make a woman feel complete and happy? The question remains unanswered. While Akhilandeswari asserts her identity through her sexual independence, Radha ponders over the question whether she will manage her life without Shyam or should she return to

him. She leaves the option open. Nair deters to prescribe any solution rather she urges the readers to have their own prescription. Her novels are unified only by their expression of a certain “reasoned attitude” toward women. Her women reject

male-chauvinist attitude more so when they find their female masculinity is repressed. They are unaffected by the typical male prejudice. They also seem to falsify the social truth that women cannot come out of their nests.

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