

## Gender, Resistance, and Compromise, a Critical Study of Anita Nair's *Mistress*

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**A**nita Nair's *Mistress* narrates the predicament of contemporary women, who has an identity tag of the educated, productive class; yet rejected by the male dominated society unwilling to accommodate the woman into the mainstream. The novel is also interplay of two parallel stories where one is about the conveniences of man and the other is about the inconveniences of woman in a patriarchal society. The novel mocks at the institution of marriage imposed by the patriarchal society to regulate the sexual desires of human. Marriage turns out to be the destiny for both man and woman by the patriarchal society to hold it from disintegration. The novel celebrates the idea of live-in relationships where the question of commitment and fidelity is irrelevant, rather it ensures liberty for the individual. Even today there is a stark contrast in being a woman against being a man. The society has accepted the capability of productivity of woman along with her capacity of reproduction but has not ceased the exploitation on the basis of gender at multiple levels. The idea of home as a safer place for woman is challenged from centuries till date; she is tortured and harassed inside, at the same time, the patriarchal conventions eloquently cautions on the dangers waiting outside to reinforce the confinement. Woman is treated as yet another mythical piece of precious property owning which a man could be proud of his possession. Many a time the interpretation of her freedom and independence is disgusting; in fact it is another form of subjugation in disguise. Woman shows her resistance to the patriarchal conventions; but that is limited to adultery or infidelity and defiance; going beyond to assert one is relatively impossible in the present social settings. The condition of woman need to be changed and the change shall not be brought by woman alone, but society should be flexible in its approach for incorporation of the change accordingly. In a time when women also

excel with men in almost all areas, the strength of female does not lie in adultery or skin show or winning hearts or compromises; instead in the assertion of her 'self' which the society has to generate and encourage. Marriage should not be imposed rather it should be embraced, if one feels so; or else society should accept the alternatives as reality. A gendered society is inept to solve the problems of woman. The society shall shed its repressive notions on gender for a gender-free life to flourish for the sake of humanity.

Keywords: gender, patriarchal society, marriage, resistance and compromise.

### Introduction

A series of accounts on art, adultery and apathy is what one may sum up Anita Nair's *Mistress*. The author has done an in-depth study of the world renowned art Kathakali for the incorporation of the novel's plot and theme. The novels' each chapter starts with a lesson by the Ashan on one among the nine rasas in the order of the story line. The chapters based on rasas more or less correspond to the mental state of the novels' characters at the respective point of storytelling.

The novel starts with the arrival of Christopher Stewart, the travel writer who comes to stay in the riverside resort to write on Koman, the famous Kathakali artist; who also has a hidden mission to find his parentage. Chris is received by Koman, his niece, Radha, and her husband, Shyam. The first chapter is *Sringaaram*. From the first exchange of glance, Radha is swiftly attracted to the foreigner; the *sringara* rasa corresponds to the mood of Radha. The second chapter is *Haasyam*. *Sringara* give rise to *haasya*, laughter. An unexpected attraction and sexual desire causes a mental confusion for Radha.

Her decisions and actions thereafter show ineptness in her mental makeup which creates an atmosphere of haasya for others. Radha tries to avert the situation but she cannot suppress her desire for long. The third chapter is Karunam, the tragic mood. Radha's adultery and Saadiya's breaking of religious conventions for her love is depicted as tragedies but for both Radha and Saadiya it was a short period of resistance and self-assertion. The following chapters, Raudram, Veeram and Bhayanakam correspond to the fury, heroism and horror that befall on the characters in the novel, the resistance they manifest. The final chapters, Beebhalsam, Adbhutam, and Shantam show the aversion, wonder and peace, the compromise everyone makes throughout life at decisive times, irrespective of gender.

The artist of the novel, the male protagonist, Koman is married to his veshams and he fulfills his personal life by taking a few mistresses whenever he has a need for a sexual relationship. Radha feels herself as a mistress of her husband. Radha was once involved in a live-in relationship with a married man, which she was forced to break, to save the family life of her partner. Soon she was offered to her poor cousin, Shyam, who always secretly admired her. He grabbed this opportunity also eyeing his uncle's property.

Life turns out to be monotonous for both Koman and Radha; and their scope of adventure is limited in such a way that both of them resort to adultery the primitive form of adventure and revulsion respectively for man and woman. Koman, in fact secretly admires the illicit relationship his niece has with Christopher Stewart, the foreign travel writer. The novel seems to be a celebration of adultery as an instinctive desire of human, which breaks the conventions of patriarchal norms.

## Gendered Self

According to Judith Butler, 'gender' is a construction of every 'self', done through repetitive 'actions', 'utterances' and 'behaviour'; in short gender is "performative". To quote from Judith Butler's Gender Trouble "gender proves to be performative –

that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed"(25). Radha, Koman and Shyam are such performative selves who dance to the tune of the patriarchal society. The characters don't realize their universal struggle instead they are affected by the actions of their dear ones and anxious about the outcomes; equally eager for modifications at regular periods. Koman's identity is that of a Kathakali artist who leads a life inseparable from his art. He always slips into an imaginary mythical world, in every scene of sorrow and happiness to find its simulations in episodes from epics. Koman's life is a performance on mythical lines, his thoughts and actions are actively influenced by the veshams he enacted. His gender is determined more through his male veshams than a masculine self. However the society is liberal for him and he lives life without any constraints that is set for the other gender.

Radha embraces her feminine gender in every state of confusion and disorder. She was an adventurous college student with no botherations on her gender until the society and her parents find out and reveal to her that she is in an illegal and prohibited relationship. She identifies herself as the suppressed gender and easily gives in for a marriage. The marriage is another social contract where property is compensated for virginity. Radha goes through a latent period of 8 years after marriage to disclose for her that this was not her real 'self', but this is something constructed for her by the patriarchal society. She was another lady of the societal norms presenting her in the best costumes and make up; for others to envy on her husband's precious possession. "I am a blessed man, I think. I have a beautiful home and a prosperous business. And I have Radha." (66) Radha performs as best home maker for her husband in situations of public or professional importance. She is taken to all the important events of her husband's life to declare for the world that the man owns a woman who enables him to hold his head high. The man's ego works here, where he get a few things done with the mere elegant presence of his wife. Radha, the modern wife is at an oblivious level of submission.

Gender does not come into direct play in the novel, until it is implied in the case of Radha. The novelist portrays the mistresses of Koman; Lalitha, Angela, and Maya as independent women who chose their relationship without setting any conditions or commitments. Saadiya another mistress, of Sethu, both of whom are Koman's parents, is a victim of not just gender constructions; but hers is a multiple identity of an uneducated, highly religious woman who took an extreme step of indiscipline to accomplish her desirous love; soon got disillusioned with the immature, fragile relationship. Saadiya was so devastated, that her victimization was natural and fatal according to patriarchal norms.

Gender is totally disregarded when it comes to exploitation; the sexual exploitation of an adolescent Sethu by his savior Maash; the fanciful feeling for an art transform as admiration for the artist and Angela's selfish shifting to England with Koman; the exploitation of Shyam by his wife Radha being the rich heir; the exploitation of Chris, the travel writer by Radha. One may easily sum up gender as a thin opaque film which hinders to behold multiple facts of human relations and life in general. Gender may be undermined to better understand the plight of human without differentiating gender as superior and inferior.

## Resistance of Body and Mind

As Simone de Beauvoir remarks in *The Second Sex*, "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" (Butler 8). A section of human on the basis of anatomical differences is treated as secondary; however, the case of transgender is not mentioned. But given the resistance they manifested over centuries of suppression, the secondary status is not doubtful. It's a complex structure of archetypal beliefs and customs that need a revision through enlightenment of humanity.

Radha belongs to the secondary gender, being the only heir; her duty is to transfer the property and the goodwill from her father to her husband. She is a vehicle for the exchange of power and prestige.

The confinement of woman to her limited space is repeatedly narrated in the novel. Saadiya as a girl was confined within the four walls of her home, and as mistress of Sethu her area of involvement was the house, her husband and son. The case of Radha is also not different; she is always cautioned against a trespass into her own firms run by her husband. The ambitions of Radha to gain independence appear to be bizarre for Shyam and for the readers; in fact she appears totally insane and impractical; lecturing the workers of the match factory on nutritious diet; reading out from the newspapers and even Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Radha seems to be disappointed enough to make such insane acts as one may in a prolonged state of inactivity, living away from the realities of the current world

"I wanted to teach in one of the primary schools and you said it was too much work for too little money. When I wanted to start a tuition class, you said the same. Then I wanted to start a crèche and you said you didn't want the house filled with bawling babies... Don't I have right to opinion? I am your wife... But you treat me as if I am a kept woman. A bloody mistress to fulfill your sexual needs and with no rights." (73)

Both Radha and Saadiya express their resistance; the resistance may be directly to the spouse; but it is part of an individual rebellion against the odds of the society. When the rebellion fails the mind repels or challenges the body to perish, or to rejuvenate only to further the emotional imbalance of the mind. The confinement of the person is absolute so as to harm one's own personae. Saadiya kills herself and Radha takes revenge by committing adultery. The scope of resistance is minimal. However Koman has a different strategy to adopt for being the man. He goes from one woman to another with ease and without commitment and liabilities. He is not demanded by anyone to prove his purity. He easily goes from one relation to another; from Lalitha, the off and on mistress to Angela, his student, to Maya, an educated married lady who is present at his beckoning for a companionship. Once, when he felt tied to the life of a woman, with Angela in England, not being able to retain his identity as an artist to

himself; left the baffling relationship, thereby finding his way for free life back home; and after several years when a Whiteman, Chris comes in search of his possible father; he is cool enough to prove his innocence in the parentage. That's how the patriarchal society liberated the masculine gender from his obligations.

### Compromise of the gendered self

Anita Nair brilliantly exposes the gendered responses to odd situations that repeatedly surfaces in the narrative of *Mistress*. The male ego of Sethu feels for no penance on the responsibility he holds in the death of Saadiya. He moves on with another marriage, children and family. Once when he was asked to be the custodian of Koman, son he had from Saadiya, he includes him into his new family. Devyani his wife is just a mute witness to the developments posing little threats to this induction. It's a compromise a gendered society expects from a woman. The weak resistance of woman makes no difference to the society instead she is forced to accept a compromise on her 'self', labelling as mistress, adulteress and the likes.

Radha wanted to revenge on Shyam for her 'kept' status but that was pointless; she cannot go with Chris also where her future is uncertain. "Yet, when I think of Chris, What I see is the shadow of Shyam. And when I think of Shyam, what I see is the possibility of escape with Chris. I know for certain that I cannot live with one or the other"(398). Radha's realization is of man's authority and woman's helplessness on gendering in all relationships inside and outside the institution of marriage. Neither she denies access to Shyam for her property, nor she starts an independent life instead she finds a new joy of being pregnant; looking forward to execute her maternal duties. In effect Radha is another woman of the patriarchal society, living a conservative life except for her occasional sensitivity on her futile life and existence. On the other side, Shyam compensates the loss of Radha by an elephant. The wife's loss is compromised by the possession of a majestic elephant. He is a cold patriarchal man who cannot tolerate unorthodox behavior; he is a coward who

ignores the ambitions of his spouse.

Once Lalitha, Koman's local mistress reveals to him that she was no prostitute but was just mistress to him; here comes into question the patriarchal ego of the author, who justifies on the fidelity of a poor woman to an upper-class, famous artist. What was wrong with her being an original prostitute is an unanswered ambiguity in the novel. The assumption may be is that men like Koman or his class of educated, trained, elite people can have many relationships and those involved in them should be literally chaste; while that is not the case with woman like Radha, again of the educated, wealthy upper-class. Having mistresses and committing adultery are two extremely different sins of the patriarchal society where the former is ignored; the latter is punished by the world or the destiny.

### Conclusion

For Judith Butler, both 'sex' and 'gender' are 'culturally' 'constructed' and there is little difference between sex and gender. In Anita Nair's *Mistress*, the characters struggle to perform their 'gender'; their struggle is universal where the actions and utterances are predetermined to perform. *Mistress* portrays the combat of the 'self' against the cultural constraints on 'performance'. Radha, Koman, Shyam and Sethu have predetermined cultural norms to perform and the 'performative' behaviour hurts oneself and others as it is against the essence of the person.

The subservient status of woman cannot be changed overnight; it requires a social conscience which should uproot the patriarchal norms. The collective conscience of human can do wonders in changing the perception on gender in society. The term gender is a huge matter for debate for feminists like Judith Butler, where the masculine, feminine and transgender are considered as a single category; and the difference is man made for better power execution in society. Words like gender and sex may turn obsolete for a better life for all.

As we see around society is bend for the masculine; more men reaches greater heights

than women, simply because they are given more opportunities. These times modern world also assures same opportunities for woman but that awareness has failed to reach many of the woman population, and those who stand out excelling in the opportunities are either misled or misinterpreted or celebrated as unique; on the contrary woman need acceptance and empathy from her society. In short a gender free society alone can bring permanent solution to the problems on gender.

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