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## Applying Emotions to Nature in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

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### Abstract:

*Cankam* tradition is a tradition that existed in Tamilnadu during the time period in between fourth century B C and third century A D. The literature during this age is renowned for its peculiar relationship with nature and known as *Cankam* literature. This is the purest of the ethnic literature of India but forgotten by Indians because of the invasion of Western literary theories. This research paper aims at exploring the influences of *Cankam* tradition in *Mistress*, novel written by Anita Nair and published in 2005. This novel deals with love in relation with art, nature and culture in Kerala and bears resemblance with *akam* poetics, the category that deals with love and emotion.

**Keywords:** *Cankam, Akam, rasa, nature, muthal, karu, uri, thinai, ullurai umamam, art, culture.*

Nature has been a reservoir of inspiration for poets and writers since the beginning of literature both in orient and occident. When it comes to East especially to Indian culture, human beings are considered as a part of nature which is worshipped as a deity from ancient times both in Aryan and Dravidian culture among which Dravidian culture is counted to be more indigenous. But historians and linguists have traced similarities between both the cultures. *Natyasastra* and *Tolkappiyam*, two authentic texts from both cultures have connections and parallels. *Natyasastra* is mainly related to the performing arts such as dance and drama and *Tolkappiyam* is about linguistics, grammar and poetics of *Cankam* period; on the conventions and usages of language and the themes and stylistics of poems then.

*Cankam* era is the legendary time period in the history of Tamilakam that starts in 300 BC and ends in 300 CE. The word *Cankam* is the Tamil form of the word *sangha* in Sanskrit which means association of people. In Tamil *Cankam* stands for an academy of bards of poets who flourished during this era whose works are collectively famous as

*Cankam* literature. The most peculiar feature of *Cankam* is the relation it has with nature. *Cankam* poets identified nature as an extended version of the human psyche which is beyond the spiritualisation and personification of nature. It is the uniqueness that *Cankam* poetics possess from Sanskrit literature. Though there are descriptions about nature in Sanskrit literature like in Kalidasa's *Ritusamhara* which deals with the reactions of erotic lovers to the change in climatic temperaments in nature, there is nothing comparable to this. *Cankam* poems delve deep not just to nature and climate but also to the culture and life of the people with a nonpareil deftness.

*Cankam* tradition has been an influence on the poets in Tamil which was weakened because of the advent of western theories and concepts in literature. But the novel *Mistress* written by Anita Nair exhibits a great influence of *Akam* poems whose subject matter is love and relationships in *Cankam* tradition. The word *akam* means "inner field" that stands for the interior emotions of the mind. Another category of poems based on subject matter is *puram* means "outer field" that is comprised of heroic poems. This is a thematic distinction in *Cankam* literature and theme of *akam* poems are love. *Puram* deals with all other kind of themes. There are clear distinctions about *akam* and *puram* in *Tolkapiyam*. In *akam* poems no names of particular persons are mentioned. The dramatic personae in *akam* poems are types, such as men and women in love. Similarly landscapes are more important than particular places. *Cankam* literature illustrates the thematic classification scheme first described in *Tolkapiyam*. It opens its outline of *akam* poetics with a statement about the world of the poems. When we examine the materials of a poem, only three things matters: *muthal, karu* and *uri*.

*Mistress* is an intense novel that takes the readers to the deeply coloured world of art and love. The novel is about the meshed life of protagonists Koman, a Kathakali artist; Radha, his niece; Shyam, Radha's husband and Chris, a traveller writer from west whom Radha falls in love with. The novel starts when Chris comes to Shornur, a small town in Kerala where Koman and his relatives live to meet Koman for some obscure means. Chris' arrival makes waves in the stagnant and insipid lives of people there, especially in Radha's life who was suffocating under the unhappy married life with Shyam, a common businessman. Radha falls in love with Chris whom she considers more as her type while Koman sneaks into the world of his quirk past and deep inner psyche where his repressed emotions manifest in the form of art.

Published in 2005, this novel has been translated into more than 25 languages including French and German. It has 18 editions all together till the date. This explains the international acceptance Anita Nair has got which is exceptional for an Indian English writer who is settled in India.

Anita Nair is a Bangalore settled *Malayali* writer who was born on 26 January 1966 in Mundakottukurissi, a scenic village near Shornur in Kerala. But she was raised in suburbs of Chennai because of her father's job there. But they used to pay frequent visits to Shornur to meet her grandparents who were still living there. This retreat to the beautiful and green village from the harshness of life in arid Chennai made Anita Nair love her native place; its nature and culture.

Shornur is the background of most of her novels including *Mistress*. And the characters in her novels resemble the kind of people she sees in and around Shornur whose lives are very much influenced and related to the culture and nature there and this is rather a part of their lives.

In this novel, we see river Nila which is an integral part of the lives of the people on its banks is used as a motif. The river otherwise called as Bhrathapuzha is very much attached to the hearts and souls of protagonists in the novel mainly Koman and his father Sethu. Nila is a part of Koman's own identity both as a person and an artist. Nila was the first thing he gets attached to when he sets foot on his father's place, that is Shornur, where he was respected as a person, a son and an elder brother. The house which his father bought for him was on the banks of river Nila where he spent the rest of his life through different phases and meeting different people.

But for Sethu, on the other hand, the river was something that reminded him of his inabilities: his inability to swim and his inability to learn mathematics. He wanted to run away from it and he ran away only to reach the sea where Koman starts to narrate his life story. The river catapults the catastrophe in the plot. Near-the-Nila is the name of the resort run by Shyam situated on the banks of river Nila as its name suggests where Chris and Radha became more intimate.

Sky was the symbol of freedom for Sadiya, Koman's mother. Her desire for a larger portion of the sky made her love Sethu and finally become one with the sea which was forbidden to the woman folk of her kind. Here the background of the novel shifts from

Shornur to a seaside village named Nazareth in Tutukudi district in Tamilnadu. So Anita Nair employs the sea and sky to the part done by Nila in Shornur as the life and livelihood of people in Nazareth is connected to sea. They are nostalgic even about the sound of the sea. Sadiya's brother Sulaiman goes to take a walk by the sea because he would be missing its sound in Nazareth.

Culture is formed as a consequence to the geographic peculiarities and art is born out of culture. Anita Nair in this novel traces back through this chain and blends them with such a matchless artistry. Kathakali, the ethnic art form of Kerala that comes under Bharathamuni's *Natyasastra* is the art she uses here. Koman, the Kathakali artist in the novel could be the artist who performs the *rasabhinaya* in the beginning of each chapter in the novel.

The novel is divided into three books each of which is further divided into three chapters that are named as *navrasas* in Kathakali. The novel has four perspectives of narration from the point of view of protagonists Radha, Shyam, Koman as their interior monologues and an omniscient third person narrative of Koman's life story performed by himself with the craftsmanship of a storyteller excluding the *rasabhinaya* in the beginning. *Rasabhinaya* is the performance of *rasa* through which the *bhava* felt by the artist and to be felt by the spectator is expressed by means of facial expressions. Anita Nair evokes these emotions in readers by relating them with the temperaments of nature which is the distinctive and unique feature of *Cankam* poetics, especially of *Akam* poem.

Kathakali being the background and a motif in the novel, the author has obvious reasons to connect it with *Natyasastra* and thereby use *rasabhinaya*. But the influence of *Akam* poetics is more predominant in this novel though the author has not expressed it on a surface level. This is not just the presence of *meypattu*, the accepted parallel of *rasa* in *Cankam* literature which is an overlooked factor by the historians, though.

*Meypattu* stands for the emotions which are transported by the poems and Anita Nair as a *Cankam* poet did, used native raw materials to transport these emotions to the readers and she did concealing her identity as an author. There is no third person omniscient narrator except when Koman narrates his own life story. This is a plot which is narrated by one of the protagonists. This absence of author in the work is another distinctive feature of *Akam* poems. They are monologues as the three other narratives in *Mistress*. A *cankam* poet does not speak his words, but the language demanded by *uri* or the phase of love and that is comprised of flora, fauna, and people of different kinds, Gods and everything that are

connected with the life of people during that time period as a monologue with zero awareness of the spectators or readers. This makes poetry another kind of language with a different structure and grammar formulated by nature, culture geography and art within the plain communicative language. In the case of *rasabhinaya* there are clearly laid principles regarding the enactment. A performer is not allowed to alter it because of him being the character. This is the point in the absence of poet in *akam* poems. Moreover the novel follows a structure and pattern in explaining the *rasas* by means of temperaments of nature which confirms the principles of *Cankam* poems.

According to *Tolkappiyam* there are three components in the content of poems; *muthal*, *karu* and *uri*. Among them *muthal* stands for the “time and space” where the poem is set in, *karu* is “the native elements” and *uri* means “human emotions” aptly set in *muthal* and *karu*. Among these three *uri* is considered as the core of the poem which determines how other two components are used. *Uri* in *Akam* poems are different phases of love which are the reason for the emotion and are inseparable from them.

There are seven kinds of love according to *Tolkappiyam* of which five are considered to be well matched and named after corresponding *thinai* or “landscape”. *Karpu*, “the love after marriage” and *kalavu* “the clandestine love before marriage” are included under well-matched love. The remaining two kinds of ill-matched love are called *perunthinai* which is about loveless relationship between two unmatched people and *kaikkilai* is the “unrequited love” or “one-sided love”. These are not related to any particular landscape region. The *thinai* or the kind defines the dramatic personae in *akam* as they are not named. Names of characters and places are relevant in *puram* that deals with heroic poems which are related to history.

In *Mistress* too Anita Nair presents different kinds of love. The love of each character in the corresponding stage in novel represents each kind of love in the novel. But they are named because the characters are to be named in novels because of its length and loose structure. In the first chapter which is named after *sringaara* or “erotic”, where Radha meets Chris their love resembles the kind of love that happens in *mullai thinai*; that of patient waiting. The author herself has confirmed that *sringaara* is the pleasure in the patient and fanciful waiting for the union with one’s lover. But their love develops to *kurinci thinai* or “the union of lovers” later in the novel. Shyam’s love for Radha falls under *kaikkilai* because Radha is unaware of Shyam’s real feelings for her. But their relationship is *perunthinai*, “the major kind of relationship” born out of necessity and not out of love. This is a major excursus

from *akam* poetics as this is the relationship meant for servants and lower characters. Sadiya, though left her home because of her love for Sethu could not find happiness in the life with him. Her case is clearly the one of *palai thinai* which is set in arid wasteland.

In poems which are compact and specific these type of classification based on the nature is very much possible as they deal with some particular aspect or instance taken according to *ceyyulvalakku* or the “rules of the poetics”. But when it comes to novel with complete plot which is not at all specific and about many themes and contexts, it is difficult to maintain this distinction on the basis of the nature of love. So we see that in *Mistress* they evolve from one phase to another as the novel progresses. The love of Angela and Koman which was in *kurinci thinai* in the beginning of their relationship changes their nature and moves to *marutam* in the later part of relationship. The same situation repeats in the case of Chris and Radha. But the relationship between Maya and Koman is stable which remains the same along the whole novel and falls under *mullai thinai* of domesticity and patient waiting for love even though their relationship is discussed for a short while in the novel. The word *thinai* here is intended only for “the kind of love” that comes under a particular landscape and not the landscape or its other features.

The word *thinai* originally stands for “landscape regions” and not love. But it implies to types of love when practically used in literature as love is set against the physiographic settings of one of those landscapes. These come under *muthalporul* in *Tolkappiyam*. *Thinai*, as Tolkappiyar explained, is the combination of time and space with appropriate native elements called as *karu*. There are five kinds of landscape regions. They are the mountainous region, the forest pastoral region, the agricultural pastoral land, seashore and the last one is the wasteland or arid region. And each of these is further connected to divisions of time called *poluthu*. The year is divided into six: *kar* (means “rainy season”), *kutir* (means “winter”), *munpani* and *pinpani* which are “early dew” and “late dew” consecutively and *ilavenil* and *utirvenil* (means “young warmth” and “ripe heat”). This division is named as *perumpoluthu*. Day is again divided into small time periods which are known as *cerupoluthu* or “minor times of day and night”: dawn, midday, sunrise, sunset, nightfall and death of night. *Muthalporul* of *anpin ainthinai* given in *Tolkappiyam* is the intersection of these factors as the coordinates of time and space. When the poet picks raw materials from the native elements that include the flora, fauna, food, art and occupation of people found in these *ainthinai* they are called *karu*. *Akam poets* connect these *thinai* with phases or aspects

of love which are five in number. Poet picks the common life situations found in these regions which are according to *ulakuvalakku* or “rules of the world” for his poetic exercise.

Mountains are connected with night in the cool season to portray the union of lovers and the name given to this *thinai* is *kurinci* which means a particular kind of flower found in hilly regions that bloom only once in twelve years. The second *thinai* is named as *mullai* or “jasmine” which is the association of forest or pasture land with late evening in rainy season that signify domestic love and patient waiting for the lover. Next is *marutam* means “queen’s flower” set in agricultural lowland in the morning and no particular season is associated with this *thinai*. Seashore in nightfall signifies anxious waiting for a lover which is named as *neytal*, blue coloured water Lilly. The last one named *palai* which is a desert tree is a wasteland in midday or noon. These are the five *thinais* collectively called *anpin ainthinai* which are watched over by *Murukan*, *Mayon* or Vishnu, *Ventan* or Indra, *Varunan* or the wind God and *Korravai*, a demonic Goddess of war respectively. But it does not mean that this kind of love is present only in that *thinai* in a literal sense.

During *Cankam* age, the life of man was so much connected with the nature as he depended on it for his livelihood. The life in different landscape was very different indeed and so was the mode and expression of love. Fishing was the livelihood of people who lived near the sea which was too dangerous and the wives of fishermen had to pass anxious hours in night when their husbands were away in the sea. This is the common scene of love and life in seaside area. The poets pick this feature from seashore and converted that to a *ceyyulvalakku*, “the rule of poetics” of *akam* genre. So is the case in other *thinais*. *Mullai* which is set in forest and pastoral land in evening time represents domestic love. Here too wives are supposed to wait for their husbands in the evening who are out in the wilderness to fetch their livelihood. But this is less dangerous and wives are patient in this case.

This feature can be traced in every *thinai* and the landscape described here is that of Tamilnadu and the setting of *Mistress* is Palakkadu in Kerala. Though this place is very close to Tamilnadu, the landscape in Kerala is significantly different from that there. Moreover, the geographic setting in the novel is same throughout the novel though there are small digressions. But the existence of *mullai thinai* in *Mistress* is very obvious. *Sringaara rasa*, the first chapter have almost all the qualities decreed by *mullai thinai*. Radha and Shyam were leading quite placid family life and Shyam was very much content for this. Radha was not very happy about her life. But she was expecting something good to happen in her life

patiently though not with much hope. These are the features that are seen in *mullai thinai*. Besides, the setting given is the pastoral land with many wild flowers and unkempt growth of bushes under which snakes slither. The month is August which is the late rainy season in Kerala. Anita Nair has portrayed the description of night with the orchestra played under the moonlit sky by crickets and frogs. She premises that there are no fruits in this season especially jackfruit which belongs to *kurinci thinai* implying that this is not the season for the union of lovers as one may assume provided with the fact that *sringaara* is the *rasa* of the *bhava rati* or "love". The legend of *Mullapandal* or "jasmine bower" written by Shyam from Shyam's stream of consciousness in this chapter pretty much resembles a poem from *mullai thinai* in its nature:

Once upon a time, a young maiden fell in love with the moon. Every night she stood under the night skies and appealed to the moon to make her his. The moon bathed her loveliness with his light but remained far away. One night he could resist her beauty no longer and kissed her on her lips. She felt herself flower and so great was her joy that she became a jasmine. A flower that blossoms at night only when the moon touches it. (Nair 25)

*Karu* or "the native elements: things born into or exist in a region" can be explained as the objective correlatives of the phase of love discussed in the light of western literary theory. But they are not exactly the same as the objective correlatives in western theory that is completely up to the writer's choice where *karu* is a convention followed by all the poets of that school. They comprised of everything that was present in that particular landscape from the food they eat to the Gods and mythical characters irrespective of their nature. This is a heterogeneous mixture classified into six according to the degree of sentience which points out the Buddhist influence in *Cankam*. That is why Devy said that "To understand them is to enter Tamil poetics, and much that is crucial to Tamil culture" (346) in his book *Indian Literary Criticism*. The same is the case with Anita Nair's novel *Mistress*. The background of the novel is largely Shornur in Kerala and so the novel is full of the cultural factors from Kerala. Kathakali, the traditional art form of Kerala itself is a motif and the author has also made use of Hindu mythology. Koman, the Kathakali artist here always compare the situation he encounters in life with situations in mythology. When he meets Chris for the first time in railway station the syllables "*Ajitha Jayahare Madhava*" (Nair 27) popped into his mind. He also compares Shyam with Keechaka and Bheema who are the two characters in *Mahabharatha*. The protagonists Shyam, Radha and Koman falls into the first category of

*karu* as their thoughts are clearly portrayed in the novel. Though Chris' thoughts are not expressed he cannot be counted into the fifth category of minor human beings.

Everything Anita Nair used to explain the *rasa* is garnered from the landscape of Kerala. Crested lark or *vanampadi* is a much celebrated song bird by Malayalam poets from a very long time ago. Anita Nair brings in the *thiruvathirakkattu*, the Malayalam name for the "December winds" to express how nature expresses *haasyarasa*. She describes the heat of *cheenamolaku* or "green chilly" which is a spicy vegetable inevitable in Kerala cuisine to explain the experience of *raudram*. The keenness she has on the climate in Kerala surfaces when she talks about different kinds of rain in different seasons that bring forth varied feelings in human mind owing to the fact that life and culture of Kerala are very much connected to rain.

The last and more important component is *uri* or "human emotions". This is considered to be the core of the poetry that determines the genre of the poems which is love in the case of *akam* poems. *Karu* and *muthal* which are the remaining components in poems are used in accordance with *uriporul*. They are seen in insets or *ullurai uvamam* which are formed by correlating them to *uri* that integrates different elements and are used as metonymy. Here signifier and signified exist in the same universe that is *muthal*. Signified is *uri* and signifier is *karu* and are connected without using conjunctions. This absence of connecting phrases adds up to the depth of the emotion conveyed.

The theme in the novel *Mistress* is love. But the *uriporul* in the novel is *rasa* which is conveyed through the insets created by the author with the geography and climate in Kerala as its *muthal*. The presence of insets is the key feature that connects *Mistress* with *Cankam* literature. The author uses insets to convey the *rasa* making them the *uri*. The plot which is connected to the *rasa* in the novel is transcended to an artistic realm with a new colour by the artist who performs the *rasabhinaya*. He is performing the part of the voiceless poet in *akam* poems. He picks the plot from its original background and brings it in a new physiographic setting that can convey the emotions in a better way. And this need not follow the chronological order of seasons. The first chapter *sringaara* is set in the month of August and next chapter named *haasya* comes in December after which comes *karunam* that happens in the month of July. Then the raw materials or the objects in which the author exerted emotions and feelings are picked from these setting. To express *bheebhalsam* or "disgust" Anita Nair employed the stench emerged before the pollination of elephant yam, a common plant found

in the kitchen gardens in Kerala. Anita Nair has shown great expertise in identifying the emotions connected with each things and using them in appropriate contexts.

This is exactly what *Cankam* poets did in their time. But that time has gone long ago. The life and culture of people have changed extensively and there by the way they perceive things though the basic emotions are the same. The influence nature has on the life of people is weak compared to old times. Moreover, those *Cankam* theories are formulated with the geography of Tamilnadu as its background. So Anita Nair through this novel creates a new set of *ullurai uvamam* for her purpose with the native elements gleaned from the culture and physiography of Kerala, Shornur to be exact following the pattern put forth by ancients.

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