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## The Theme of Man- Woman Relationship in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

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### Abstract:

Literature is in fact the most explicit record of the human spirit. It is a medium through which essence of our living is made paramount by linking it to imaginative experiences. A creative writer must have the perception and analytical mind of a sociologist who provides a record of human life, society and social systems existing at that point of time. Theme of man - woman relationship seems to be of particular interest to Anita Nair. She depicts this theme in her third novel *Mistress*. She concentrates on the predicament of modern woman in a male dominated society and her destruction at the altar of marriage. These days, most marriages appear to be unions of incompatibility than compatibility. Men are apt to be rational and women sentimental and emotional. Their attitudes and interests are different. Naturally, they look at things in different ways and react to situations differently. Not only is the man himself different, but also as often happens, in a society of changing values, family ways, surroundings to which the woman is expected to adjust herself, are entirely different. In *Mistress*, Anita Nair depicts the changing relationship between husband and wife in the society. Husband - wife alienation resulting from lack of communication and temperamental compatibility forms the theme of *Mistress*.

**Keywords:** Human relationships, man-woman relationship and analyses pre-marital, marital, extra-marital relationships and estrangement between husband and wife.

### About the Author:

She is the author of bestselling novels "The Better Man" and Ladies coupe", poetry collection of Malabar Mind", a collection of short stories " Satyr of Subway' and Eleven other stories and has written two children's books –The Puffin Book of world Myths' and Legends. She has also edited an anthology of writings about Kerala titled" Where the Rain is Born."

Anita Nair is a novelist, poet, travel writer, essayist, short story writer and writer of stories for children. She is working as a creative director in an advertising agency in Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore).

### Introduction:

Anita Nair is one of India's popular female writers. She depicts through her expression, the present condition of women in society, with wit and humour. Story telling is an art and she does it exceptionally well. She delves deep into human psyche and allows the reader to enjoy a wonderful journey by presenting absorbing stories that have colourful and unique characters. She evokes experiences that are drawn from day-to-day life and her approach often enables the readers to suspect the character to be one of their neighbour's or of a friend.

I have restricted myself to focus attention exclusively on Anita Nair's third novel 'Mistress' which deals with human relationships, man-woman relationship and analyses pre-marital, marital, extra-marital relationships and estrangement between husband and wife.

Anita Nair, an eminent, leading Indian women writer, writing in English, holds revolutionary ideas about marriage and man - woman relationship. In her opinion, social consciousness of today, is leading us to the point where conditions for better growth of two complementary components, man and woman, would be ensured by their separate and individual development. Her main stress is on development of personality and genius, which is quite difficult to achieve. Economic independence is incidental and not important in man - women relationship, what matters most is the importance of surroundings and environment.

Anita Nair has proposed a new philosophy regarding man-woman relationship in the context of modern times. She firmly affirms that social and conventional basis of marriage is being eroded and this would ultimately lead to a situation where marriage may not be solemnized or performed at all. Recently the supreme court of India has recognized the right of individuals to stay together without getting married. This is called live-in relationship. Man – woman may live in mutual companionship. The relationship may be continued as long as they trust each other and as long as the basic emotional bonding subsists.

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.

*Mistress* is a grand saga of relationships. The novel deals with several themes like art and adultery, excitement of new found love, ennui in conventional relationships, squalor and ugliness of love, abuse, dashed hopes and dark family secrets. It is a book which 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*.

What holds the novel *Mistress*, on pre-marital, non-marital and extra- marital sex is the way, the author binds it with Kathakali, a popular and rigorous dance form of Kerala. The principal protagonist is a Kathakali artiste of international repute. The different cases of interplay between the characters are expressed through *navarasas*- the nine phases of human emotion.

### **Koman:**

Issues of Identity and self-definition remain uppermost in the novel. Koman is the protagonist of *Mistress*. Before learning about Koman, it is necessary to know about his parental background. Sethu, father of Koman, is a Hindu orphan, trained as a health inspector before he moves to Nazareth, a small town. He starts work under Dr Samuel. There is an epidemic in the village and its neighbourhood. They provide necessary help and service to the affected population. The doctor has tremendous confidence and faith in Sethu. The doctor takes him wherever he goes on medical rounds. In a village by name Arabipatnam, Sethu sees Saadiya, daughter of Haji Najib Msdoof. Her family is very orthodox and conservative. 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”  
(Mistress P-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.

Sethu is very fortunate. Whenever he is in trouble, providence comes to his rescue. He is offered a job by James Raj, the richest man in Nazareth. After sometime, saadiya gives birth to a male child. Sethu and Saadiya argue about “Khitan” to be performed on the newly born child. He feels very bad because this may cause pain to the child’s penis and testicles. He tries to convince her not to perform such things on the new born baby. She is stubborn and wants to follow every instruction that is said in the Koran.

Saadiya’s upbringing through indoctrination about religion is strong and common sense is not allowed to work. Sethu does not allow such things to be performed on his son and asks her to leave his son and go to her parents. When he comes home, only the child is there. She commits suicide.

In moments of extreme distress and tension such individuals cannot cope and commit mistakes or take extreme measures that are irreversible. Daily disagreements with Sethu lead to dejection and force Saadiya to commit suicide.

Though Saadya leaves her parents house because of her love for Sethu, she cannot leave her religion. This categorically tells us that Mind and Body are different. Body is willing but the mind unwilling.

Sister Faith, a nurse, is free and accepts to look after the child so that Sethu can get along with his life. He makes arrangements for delivery of money every month for maintenance of the child. He migrates to Shoranur and buys properties. He marries Devayani and has children through her. Sister Faith marries; there is none to look after the boy, Koman. Sethu has not discussed his previous marriage or about the child with his wife Devayani. She is disturbed by the arrival of Koman. Sethu feels that time will settle all problems. 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. He receives an invitation to play Keechakan in Keechaka Vadham. People praise his performance.

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. She never misses to witness any performance given by him as it helps her research of recording as many veshams as possible. She feels that she is not just a student of his but she is something

more than that. She feels that she is part of his being, like Ardhanareeswara, Lord Shiva having Goddess Parvati as one half of his body.

Koman starts to have an affair with Anjela. It is very difficult to restrain oneself from the amorous advances of a determined woman. They start living together. Sethu is worried that this would be a replay of his own life.

Look at the past and learn from it. Time to learn is the time when one wants the present to be better than the past. Any time one is unhappy in the present, it is time to learn from the past or plan for the future:

“You are old enough to know what you are doing”, he said. ‘Why don’t you marry her? All your life has been wasted on Kathakali. Will your art fetch you a glass of water when you are thirsty? Will it lay a wet cloth on your brow when you are burning with fever? Will it hold you up when your legs tremble? That is why you are lonely? That is why you need a family and home”. (P-371)

Sethu tries to reason with Koman regarding marriage with Anjela. Sometimes relationships don’t need rituals to sanctify them. 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. Planning for the future reduces fear and uncertainty. 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.

With the current generation of Indian writers in English, depiction of Man – woman relationship is not as advanced as in western culture, dealing with adultery, treachery and lust in all forms.

No wonder the author decided to bring in characters so that the themes of adultery and lust can be interwoven into the novel. Srinivasa Iyenger states:

“Western breeze blows, something directly, and sometimes more significantly indirectly. Before 1947, novels are influenced by western literature”<sup>1</sup>

After Independence, new found freedom, has really affected the writers, especially those writing in English. To claim that they are free to express whatever they desire, they created characters contrary to Indian ethos and culture or its national character. Sex sells. Sex is big business. A new business model emerges. In the west, we have had writers like Harold Robbins and others, who were not only very popular but also bestselling authors, exclusively because of narration of sex in their novels.

Srinivasa Iyerngar has states :

“The novels come to be valued not so much upon their power as fiction, as upon their content of the national quintessence.”<sup>2</sup>

Experienced people do know that there is no true love. What goes on in the guise of love is lust or infatuation. Affection has to develop gradually and transform itself into love. Temporary relationships may give momentary pleasure, lasting pleasure can only be achieved when man and woman understand each other and commit themselves to the relationship.

R.K. Narayan states:

“Totally different conception of Man-woman relationship from ours and it can certainly be demonstrated that marital bliss is a more frequent subject in Indian romantic novels”<sup>3</sup>

Treatment of human relationships greatly depends on social status to which the characters belong. In society different people have different requirements to fulfill. This is visible both in upper and lower strata of people. Morality has become the Band Wagon of the middle class. In the words of William Walsh:

“ What is so attractive about the treatment of family relationships is charm and authenticity of its Indian colouring. What makes it immediately recognisable is that it seems to belong to a substantial human nature”<sup>4</sup>

Indian concept of a Man- woman relationship has always been that they are inseparable and have equal rights and responsibilities towards society in which they are living. In ancient times, India has had women like Ghosa, Sikata, Nivavari, Lopa Mudra, Mytreysi, Ubhaya Bharati, Leelavathi, Gargi and others who were treated with great respect and veneration both by men and women.

It was only in the later stages that man has started asserting his supremacy over the female counterpart and started looking upon the female as one of his possessions along with, land, building, cattle and utilities. In this connection, it is worthwhile to quote from the words of Sri Aurobindo:

“Women in ancient India, contrary to the sentiment of other ancient people, were not denied civic rights, although in practice this equality was rendered nugatory for all but a few by their social sub-ordination to the male and their domestic preoccupation.”<sup>5</sup>

India, in ancient days was a rich country. Every individual had ample work and was respected in the society. It was the responsibility of the ruler to ensure equitable distribution of state’s resources. The system of universal employment was created based on occupations.

In India, the institution of slavery was practically absent and women had at first a freer and more dignified position than in Greece or Rome. Quoting about women, no one can dispute that at the time of suffering and illness it is their hands that give solace and comfort. <sup>6</sup>

Anjela and Koman move to London. They are very happy for some time and then problems arise, pop up, one after another. Koman is totally dependent on Anjela both financially and emotionally. This causes friction between them. Money can make the best of friends into enemies. Naturally male ego is hurt and Koman decides to move out of Angela’s house. He does not find any progress in the art world. 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 on his return, rejoins his dance school as Ashan. Two years later the institute troupe is invited to Europe. They perform at various places. Koman is offered a teaching fellowship by a

German University. He declines the offer as he is aware of the shallowness of perception of the people in the western world.

It is the sense of purpose that ties the past, present and the future together. One must live with a purpose. How one responds on purpose. One has to respond to what is important now. It is important to him to teach this art to new students who are coming to join the dance school.

Success is becoming what one is capable of becoming. Progressing or moving towards worthwhile goals is very important. Koman by nature is a good human being. He recommends Sundaran's name for the teaching assignment and scholarship, abroad. Thus Sundaran gets a chance to go to a foreign country to exhibit traditional art form to western audiences. He never returns to India. Here Koman is very happy with his dancing school.

One has to adapt to the changing needs of society. One should not be afraid of change. The performance of Kathakali characters comes through life and death of Aashan, the art teacher who developed Koman into a man who is there to perform, art for art's sake, where as Sundaran reaps spectacular commercial benefits from the art.

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. During his stay in Delhi, he meets Maya. Maya is a voluptuous woman. 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.

Koman is acclaimed as a successful dancer and praised by the audience wherever he has given performances. A well-known filmmaker makes a short film on him. A journalist attempted what he called a fly-on-the wall biography. He is invited to perform at prestigious venues and participate in workshops and seminars. There have been many interpretations of his technique and style. He is detached from all. It is of no consequence to him how he is perceived by others or what the world thinks of him, as a man or as a dancer.

Men reach a stage where they generally become witnesses. In fact the Gita says, be a Sakshi (witness) to the events unfurling in front of you. Do not get entangled in the proceedings. Koman has reached a stage of detachment, where he can view things with the help of a detached mind.

## **Radha:**

There is an interesting aspect in Anita Nair's novel *Mistress* that its treatment of man-woman relationship is based on her entrenched faith in new humanism according to which woman is not to be treated as a mere sex object, but man's equal partner. Her concept, of a free woman, who has transcended the limits of economic or social freedom, developed a mental and emotional attitude. This novel on one level looks at the turbulence of large families where dependency breeds strong emotions. Shyam, a self made entrepreneur has been humiliated by his uncle, Radha's father. His uncle comes with a proposal of marriage with his daughter:

“What is wrong? Shyam asked as gently as he could”?

She has been involved with a man,'

So why don't you get them married"? (Mistress p-121)

They say that nemesis always has a way of catching up (Mistress P-121). 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,' (Mistress P-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, she remains stoic.

"I am not a virgin,' she said, 'I want 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'? (Mistress P-123)

Shyam is ambitious. He wants to flourish and become rich. His uncle gives him money and property. He is a growing business man and an entrepreneur in that part of Kerala. He is a crafty businessman. He has a resort near river Nila where tourists and foreigners visit and stay. On the marital front, Shyam and Radha do not have children though married for eight years. Radha is unhappy about the marriage because of the behaviour of Shyam. What Shyam wants is a mistress. He wants a dutiful wife.

Men and women are complementary to each other. Neither of them can claim any superiority over the other. In human civilization, women are often gifted with foresight, which contributes to the happiness of others.

In earlier days, women were merely portrayed as dependent souls. They prefer happiness of others. Women's identity is hidden behind the mask of sacrifice and dependency. Their voices are no better than the voices of the dumb, not audible to the world.

Nowadays, women have enough courage to exhibit their individuality at various levels. Though they possess the voice of the dumb, they have made it audible in recent years and started shaking the convention of dependency. They are ready to undertake challenging journey of self-discovery to make the whole world recognize them. A certain percentage of women have successfully reached their destination and remaining are on their way to the destination of 'Self-discovery'.

Radha knows that it is a sin to woo another man, a foreigner, Chris. 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.



Chris is a writer, a journalist. He is interested in music. He has come to probe and find out if Koman was his father. 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.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Anita Nair throws light on different aspects of human relationships and brings out the factors, which are responsible for change in behaviour of man towards man. She feels that men have been successful in suppressing woman for centuries. She does not waver in her version of better world where men and women can live and work together harmoniously, developing a higher level of consciousness by means of a closer sharing of meaningful concepts, meaningful to the conditions that are present and prevailing.

The novelist expresses her thoughts through various rasas-raudram, bhyanakam, etc. To quote from Bernard Shaw:

“Man and wife do not, as a rule, live together, they only have breakfast together, dine together, and sleep in the same room. In most cases the woman knows nothing of man's working life. (he calls it her home life)”<sup>7</sup>

“Literature provides the resonance that lingers in the mind  
long after the last headline has fled the memory,  
while it lingers there is neither black and white. There is only human Brotherhood.”<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, relationships we find in the characters of Mistress, between Sethu and Saadya, Sethu and Devayani, Koman and Anjela, Koman and Maya, Radha and Shyam, Radha and Chris, are not very happy affairs, but very much compromised upon after initial euphoria.

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