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Anita Nair's *Mistress*: A Shattering Portrayal of Marriage in the Light of Tradition

Dr. S. Nagammal

Associate Professor of English,
Pioneer Kumaraswamy College,
Nagercoil-629003.

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the issue of marriage in the light of tradition in Indian context. As marriage is considered a holy affair not only for bringing offspring but also to a relationship which gives meaning to the concept called family. The meaning of the existence of all living beings rests on bringing offspring. But man gives meaning to the life of him by following certain duties which can be accomplished by entering through wedlock. When the purpose of marriage shatters, not only the lives of the two in it collapse but also the meaning of family is in question. Hence the meaning of life rests in the understanding between the man and the woman. Secondly compromise is an inevitable part of marriage as one cannot win over all things one desires. Hence a successful marriage for a couple rests on giving importance and meaning to it by overcoming all types of ordeals and it is in their hands to ensure of its continuity.

Keywords: Tradition, marriage, commitment, compromise, family, understanding, love, patriarchy.

Anita Nair, the famous Indo-Anglian writer of this era of postcolonial period evokes in readers modern and revolutionary ideas by discussing themes against traditionalism in marriage and sex. Her themes are mainly on issues related to women with regard to their domestic and social problems unique to Indian setting. Her main concern for her women characters is to voice for their liberation against tradition and patriarchy. Man-woman relationship in India since ages has been in a stage of dependence, not the man on a woman but the woman on a man. Man for ages has been feeling and enjoying the position of independence and he considers that it is the tradition in a society that a woman should be dependent on him. As such woman has long been held as submissive and subservient to man. Nair in an interview to Pepononi says that "it is the traditional norms that keep women tied down and the fear that if she were to swerve from the accepted path, she will be ostracized." In the matter of women becoming self-reliant she says

The 2000 year old Indian culture expects her to be the custodian of the traditional culture and hence she puts her desires on a back burner. Men tend to move on with giant strides while policing women's progress and curbing it. I think women in India dream of the same

things that women all over the world do. Freedom. Security. Dignity. Love. Laughter. Sex.

Happiness....

Anita Nair's novels deal deftly the nuances of man-woman relationship in Indian contexts. Her novels *Betterman* and *Ladies Coupe* deal mainly with human emotions in context with tradition and patriarchy. The portrayal of her women characters exemplifies her compassionate understanding of women and their suffering with all the entanglements of human behaviour. In an interview she asserts, "It's perhaps the priority that's different. It's only fair that women in India be allowed to move on and move up as much as the men are doing." Her novel *Mistress* deals with the mental sufferings of women particularly in relation to religion, marriage, and tradition. Nair employs a unique technique in relation with her mode of narration in her novels. She uses the railway compartment as the locale in *Ladies Coupe*. In *Mistress*, it is interesting to note that it is through navarasas, she presents the dominant emotions of the characters. The novel gives one a delightful reading from the first to the last. One will immerse into it and will be eager to know more and more as the story unfurls at the eyes of the readers.

Nair's *Mistress* opens with a young and beautiful travel writer from America named Chris with a cello case standing at a railway station in Kerala. The three parts in the novel are differently titled on the emotions shown in a dance form, here the highly stylized ancient dance form of Kerala, Kathakali. The novel is divided into nine sections, each section naming after the nine emotions otherwise called the 'navarasas', thus representing the various emotions of the rather minimum characters and the three parts of the novel consisting of the plot are set within the framework of the emotions. The narration is done by the main characters themselves and it is interesting to note that the mood of the characters can well be understood through the navarasas on which the entire story is built.

The novel *Mistress* delineates the delicate relationship between man and woman. This article deals with the aspect of marriage. Marriage, the so called social function for a holy union between a man and a woman does not come out well with all its holiness for most couples nowadays. V. Jayaram in his "Hindu Marriage's Purpose and Significance" asserts "Marriage ... is not just a mutual contract between two individual or a relationship of convenience, but a social contact and moral expediency, in which the couple agree to live together and share their lives, doing their respective duties, to keep the divine order and the institution of family intact." In the case of many couples marriage gets deflected though the concept of marriage is its fruitful continuation in the relationship between the husband and the wife. In the novel the marriage between Shyam, the protagonist and his wife Radha becomes a mismatch. Radha had an extramarital relationship with a married man through whom she becomes pregnant before her marriage. Marriage in this case has lost its value as tradition has it that it is a sin to have extramarital relationship. Radha's lover is a man with very high passions. Both commit a mistake as they do not consider marriage a holy affair. The man whom Radha wants to marry has a grown-up son. He is a much older and senior colleague of Radha. They were lovers for two years

and he promises to marry as soon as his son leaves home. Her dream did not materialize when his wife comes to Radha and says, “He is not a bad man, only weak and he will never leave me. He needs me....And I him. He is the father of my children, you see” (*Mistress*113).

In this triangular relationship, the man’s wife is a dependent one and hence she atones the actions of her husband. She is ready to accept him even after the injustice her husband has done to her. She accepts his many extramarital relationships at various stages of his life. She is not ready to consider the slur of society on him but considers this as a way of his life. She is not ready to part from him the reason being he has fathered her children. If anyone falters in the path of marriage, one can see failure on the part of the person. The wife might come out of this entanglement taking her children and can lead an independent life of her own. Hence though a very minor character, she stands for tradition.

When a man or a woman goes for extramarital relationship, both are responsible for causing mental agony to both families. This situation does not allow a family to have peace and happiness forever. They have the tendency to antagonize many people around them. As such marriage has lost its traditional value. The concept of marriage in India lies in its dependency of one on another. Here it is mainly the wife who stands for dependency on man for ages. But during the postindependent era, India has been witnessing progress in the social as well as in familial spheres. Women slowly start gaining independence by undergoing education and then being employed. This independent status of women at times takes her to go for this type of relationship causing problems to her and to others.

At one stage, Radha finds out that she is pregnant with that man. When her father arranges her marriage with Shyam, she has no option but to abort the child as she knows well that the man’s wife will not part from him. Hence she agrees to her father’s decision. This marriage proves to be a failure for her and she regrets everyday for becoming a spouse of Shyam. Her husband just considers her to be a possession thus depriving her of her freedom in every matter. For example Radha is shocked when finds out that Shyam has been maintaining a record of her periods. She reacts angrily thus:

Isn’t anything sacred to you?’ Her voice rose. ‘These red crosses are my periods, aren’t they? Why are they here? On your calendar? If anyone should keep tabs, it should be me. Why are you like this, Shyam? You seem to want to rule me. You won’t let me breathe. It isn’t right (203)

It is very essential to have commitment and compromise in a marriage. Dr. A.V.Srinivasan in his “Hindu Philosophy of Marriage” asserts in this regard that “this institution is a permanent one capable of not only bringing happiness to two young people but also providing a delicate balance so that the family enjoys the fullness of life within the framework of what they called

Dharma, the Hindu code of right conduct". When an issue does not come out of the couple, the tradition of any society blames that the woman has to suffer the brunt of it. Here Radha, having known well that she is fertile she has to face the malevolent ire of her husband's family members. She is called by her sister-in-law barren. She is not able to bear this when she is not allowed to go for traditional functions connected with pregnancy. She is tempted to reveal her infamous past when she is disgraced by her in-laws. There is no openness between the couple and these aspects make the event of marriage a misleading one.

Shyam hides the defect of him, having a low sperm count, to Radha. Here each one has one's own defect. If the defect is shared and a compromise is made between them, they might not have confronted this conflict. Radha's hatred grows all the more when she is blamed as sterile by society and by her family. If there is anything wrong in the marriage, the fault always falls on the part of the woman and not on man for the man is infallible beyond any question. Shyam too does not come forward to acknowledge the defect in him. By doing so, he only allows Radha to bear the reproach of everyone. This results not only in her hatred towards him but also she has an inclination to have extramarital relationship with Chris who has come there to learn music. Their relationship ultimately leads to make her pregnant with him. This liberal attitude to sex and sexuality had never been seen in the traditional Indian society as the woman from her childhood to old age is always in the shadow of a man. Shyam here is a representation of an egoist as he is considered a successful businessman.

The emotional attitude of Shyam makes Radha to have a contemptuous attitude to her husband and she always distances herself from him. This is why when Christopher Steward arrives, she is easily enamoured of his charm. She considers her marriage a dead one and does not mind in having an extramarital relationship in the presence of her husband. Anita Nair herself in an interview to Deccan Herald comments about Radha "Koman ...watches Radha embrace Chris with an immense passion. He tries to advise Radha and she tells him that all her life she's been dictated and that it was time that she made her own choices. She decides to break free of everything." She is not ready to come out of marriage quite for some time. By being the wife of Shyam, she has relationship with Chris. This attitude is considered as against nature and tradition. She does not bother about the qualms of people as she is ready to have a relationship with Chris because she considers this love to be a true one. When Chris is not able to pronounce the name of Shyam, she cannot but smile at it. "I turned away in embarrassment. He wasn't just a Sham, he was an uncouth boor, this husband of mine" (9). The emotions she shows to Shyam are hatred and sarcasm. She comments "An action hero. Shyam knows that other women look at him. That he incites interest and perhaps even lust. I, however, feel nothing for him except perhaps a habitual annoyance" (13).

Radha feels at every stage of her married life to be a mistress. Shyam holds complete possession of her without giving her any right to think or to act as Shyam exhibits himself always a male chauvinist. Hence Radha deliberately fails to make their marriage alive. His interest in her spending time at the beauty parlour or at the tailor's shop is to show possession

over her. She violently reacts to his suppressing attitude thus, “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 a kept woman. A bloody *Mistress* to fulfill your sexual needs and with no rights”(73). In the case of this couple, marriage is in no respect an example of “made for each other”. There is a striking contrast in the amount of hatred, Radha has for Shyam and Radha has for Chris which is love only. Shyam knows very well that Radha’s hatred grows since the arrival of Chris.

The next couple for whom marriage is a failure is Sethu and Saadiya. Their marriage initially becomes a revolutionary as well as a reformist one. Sethu is Radha’s uncle Koman’s father. Koman is a professional Kathakali dancer. Sethu serves as an assistant to a doctor Dr. Samuel at Arabipattinam, a coastal village where Muslims live as a majority community. He and the daughter of the Muslim community head Saddiya love each other barring the orthodox and conservative set up. Once Saddiya along with her family members goes to have a glimpse of the seashore. The father gets infuriated so much that she is burnt with a red hot iron on her calf for daring to defy the norms laid down by the society. As love anywhere and anytime has the nature of defiance to the traditional norms, they forbid their religious sentiments to unite with one another in marriage. When the doctor comes to know of this, he advises Sethu, “You talk of marrying her. But who will marry you? You are of one faith and she of another. In the eyes of your god and hers, this will never be a marriage. Of bodies, perhaps. But never of souls”(183). With very high hopes and dreams like every other man and woman in marriage, Saddiya leaves her home to go with Sethu relegating her family. She considers him as her hero as she goes on calling him “Malik”(185).

Saddiya feels contentment as whatever she desires, Sethu is ready to get her and he gets her everything. They move to Nazareth to get a job for him from one James Raj, a businessman. Moreover he runs out of money very shortly. For one year, no one would more happy than Saddiya is. When she gives birth to a boy baby, the problems start. She compels him to do the five duties to become a true Muslim. This shocks Sethu so much though he never objects Saddiya for giving the boy a Muslim name and he retaliates her adamancy. He also becomes stubborn saying “What’s wrong with you, Saddiya? You sound like a fanatic and hence he resolutely tells her “May God go with you. Your god, not mine, because in your narrow mind there is no room for any God but yours” (228). From this time onwards friction occurs between them which ultimately drives her to commit suicide. Sethu names the boy Koman and leaves him under the care of a nurse. Hence Saddiya’s strict adherence to tradition and culture is the cause for the broken relationship.

Koman, when he grows up joins his father Sethu, though Sethu is married to a woman named Devayani and has two sons. Sethu trains Koman in Kathakali as he shows interest in this art and not in studies. He starts his own school for Kathakali where his former schoolmate Angela comes as a student. They fall in love with each other and they have a live-in relationship. She promises him to make him known to the entire world and takes him with her to London. But ultimately, he is not able to fit himself in any job and sits around idly. Anjela becomes the bread winner.

Koman loses all his hopes of having a bright future. Hence he decides to leave London and comes back to India for good.

Thus marriage proves to be a failure for the major characters such as Shyam and Radha, and Sethu as well as for Koman. In the case of Shyam and Radha, it is patriarchy playing the pivotal role that brings a mismatch between them. In the case of Sethu and Saadiya, it is fanaticism and emotional thinking the root cause for the failure of their marriage. If religious practices are not given importance, their relationship would have been proved as an example of true love. In the case of Koman and Angela, financial constraints bar them to continue their relationship. Anyhow to have a successful married life according to tradition, the couple should overcome all these ordeals. When they have commitment and compromise in certain important issues and also understanding between them, their married lives would have become fruitful ones. They can have prosperity in every sphere of life.

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