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## Glimpses of Kathakali In Anita Nair's *Mistress* : A Study

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### **Abstract:**

Human life and art are interrelated to make the life complete and harmonious. Human beings take art as most valued and perform it in various ways like painting, sculpture, dance, architecture, music etc. Anita Nair presents her views on Kathakali dance in her famous Novel *Mistress*. Kathakali is an ancient, highly stylish dance form from southern India. It is the combination of storytelling and performance. The dancers paint their faces in bright colours to reveal the gamut of human emotions and with loud exaggerated gestures and expressions, re-enact stories from the two great Indian epics, The Ramayana and The Mahabharata.

**Keywords: Culture and Literature, Feminism, Art and Life, Navrasas in Dance, Relationships.**

Kathak means story, kali means dance. As the name suggests Kathakali is a beautiful amalgamation of dance and drama. Here precisely Kathakali is a harmonious blend of five forms of arts- Sahityam (literature), Sangeetham (music), Chitram (Painting), Natyam (Acting) and Nrityam (Dance). This art form is a form of regaining humanity. Anita Nair builds her novel to the structure of a Kathakali performance. Kathakali is the major classical dance form of northern India. The word Kathak means to tell story. It is derived from the dance drama of ancient India. When the patronage shifted from the temples to the royal court, there was a change in the over emphasis. The emphasis shifted from the telling of religious stories to one of entertainment. Today the story telling aspect has been doing? Ungraded and the dances primarily and abstracted exploration of rhythm and movement. Kathak was primarily associated with one institution known as the tawaif. This is a much misunderstood institution of female entertainers, very much like the Geisha tradition of Japan. It has the profession which demanded the highest standards of training, intelligent and most importantly, civility. It is said that it was common for royalty to send their children to the tawaifs for instructions in etiquette. Unfortunately when the British consolidated their hold over India during the Victorian era, this great institution was degraded as mere prostitution and was outlawed.

The most important aspect of Kathakali is theatre. Based primarily on acting, this dance gives a lot of weight to costume, make up and musical instruments and attempt to perform different

leelas in the form of dance drama gave birth to Kathakali dance. The origin of this dance is attributed to King Jamerin who, it is believed was instructed by Lord Krishna in a dream to prepare a dance drama. As a result 'Krishna attam' or deeds of Krishna was performed. This dance become popular, another neighboring king Kottakara also started Ramattamin an artistic way. Hence a tradition was formed to start the leelas outside way or outside the temple. This dance is now an integral part of Indian culture. Instead of gestures and symbols this dance uses a descriptive style. There are thirty forms of Kathakali which are it is very difficult to learn.

Traditionally, this dance can be performed in any open space in a moonlit night. Before the performance, the dance is announced in villages with drums, which is called *kelikullu*. To create curiosity for the main dance, before the performance, two boys enter the stage with a curtain in hand, which is called 'thotayam' dance, it is predominantly *nritta*. This is followed by 'purappadu', wherein with conch and *mridanga*, the hero enters with his co actors. With this the story narration for the dance begins. *Thironnattam*, which is considered a very interesting part of Kathakali, shows *tandava* of its excited characters. Similarly, one part is devoted to women, which is called *kummi*. Kathakali uses myths from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* for narration. In the end *mangalshlokas* are recited.

Elements of the act of Kathakali are discernible in the ancient ritual plays) of those were developed in Kerala from as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century until the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Many of its characteristics are very much older than its literature as they are a continuation of older traditions, but these did not crystallize until the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the *rajah* of *Kottarakkara*, a small principality in central *tranvancore*, wrote plays based on the Hindu epic *Ramayana* in *sanskritized Malayalam* which could be understood by ordinary people. The stories had been enacted in pure *Sanskrit*, which was known only to the learned few.

Kathakali as an individual style of dance-drama, appear as a 'people's theatre' from the traditional dances of the post. The plays were perform by the 'Rajah's own company of actors not only in temples and courts but from village and house to house. The new art form (called *ramanattam*) soon became very popular all over the Malayalam-speaking area as the area was then called began to vie with one another in their stab to produce the best Kathakali troupes and their competition contributed to the rapid development of the art in a very short period. The stories are imbued with rich metaphors of Kathakali positions, facial gestures and mythical stories. The reader discovers and experiences the dance without having to look up from the page. *Mistress* not only brings a traditional art form into spotlight but question its place in present –day India. *Mistress* is a well –written novel that gifts the reader with knowledge of a magical art form. For that reason it should be read by all, from the uncompromising artist to the champions of contemporary India.

The narrative mirrors the art of a Kathakali presentation, in all its colour, drama and high tined emotions, as a deliberation on how the past influences our decisions and destiny and how art is forgotten from personal experience, has been adopted for discussion in this novel. It is whole

redeemed by the author's infectious passion for Kathakali in addition to its performance and her lightness of touch when it comes to intimate human relationship. This is a responsive and nuanced work which makes a percussive case for the continuing significance of this ancient art form in modern India. Anita Nair has used the themes of meaning and desire in art and life. All the four characters, Koman, Radha, Crish and Shyam are in the drama of life where art is passionately involved in personal as well as in social life. Like many other novelists, Anita Nair has used Indian English to translate the life and culture of the nation and surrounding. Without such strategy she might have not succeeded in describing the indigenous culture, psyche of the people and thematic concerns. For this purpose she has found it necessary to borrow lexical elements from Indian language expressing culture, social relationship, different habits and manners. Sometimes the novelist reforms the British English to suit her purpose.

Anita Nair writes about man and woman relationship and complex Kathakali aesthetics with equal felicitousness. When you put down the novel, you feel as if you are walking back in the pale early morning light at the end of a night long Kathakali performances. What fills your soul then is shantam, the last of the nine bhavas. Kathakali is perhaps one art form that requires the artist to apply his mind and it allows one to be he/she. It is usually played by the upper caste that is familiar with the puranas and they give a mental and emotional magnitude to the dance activity it comes from one's own understanding within the frame of puranic story the artist gives his interpretations their world have a more dynamic explanation.

*Mistress* is a book on relationships told in any voices, going back and forth in time, diagonally continents. It is a book which deals with infatuations and fascination across the gulf of religion, marriage, legitimacy and confections. This book is set in Kerala and the story revolves around four main characters, with their lives viewed through the prism of the Navrasas or the nine emotions in Kathakali. Most of the affairs it develops come with aroma of bad endings like the river Nile which rarely has sufficient water and symbolizes the superficiality of the life of the main characters, guilt course through the book as a sympathy to the glory of love and beastliness of desire. It holds the book on premarital, marital, non marital and extra marital sex, is the way the author binds it with Kathakali the wonderful dance drama of Kerala. Not only one of the principal protagonists is a Kathakali artist of international fame but the special faces of interaction of the correctors is expressed through the navrasas the nine phases of human emotions which is brilliantly describe by her it has been an ancient literary maximum that an epic should depict the navrasas in the right portions. The nine : Shingaraam (love), Haasaym (laughter), Karunam (sorrowful-compassion), Raudram(fury), Veeram(vagour), Bhayanakaam (fearsome), Bheebhatsam (disgust), Adbbhutam (wonder), and Shantam (calm, serene). Properly enacted, keep audiences spellbound through the night of flickering oil lamps. But an epic does not have epochal correctors and Nair has deliberately decided that her characters are not larger than life even Koman, the kathakali Veshkaaran (payer, protagonist of the novel) a man of many masks but without the colours of masks, is a pale indecisive personality.

Anita Nair is pure, original and a powerful contemporary Indian Writer. As a Novelist she is quite aware of her artistic design and purpose as well as her responsibility towards her vision like how to carry relations. She diminishes male domination and exerts her rights independently at the cost of altering religions also. Her transformation of religion is also clear that she enjoys woman's individuality and liberty. Her *Mistress*, bases its structure on this art form Kathakali. The novel is divided into nine sections, each named after a different emotion- love, fear, contempt, wonder, etc. evoked by Kathakali dancers. An omniscient narrative voices of three of the four key Characters, all of whom interpret the unfolding events in their own manner and style, much as Kathakali performers do. The novel's structure- and its immersion in the rigorous, insular world of Kathakali artists- is its strongest suit.

In small gestures and brief terminology, the minds of all are revealed to an artist who is skilled to interpret emotions with finesse and perfection. The author uses Kathakali as her metaphor for life. The book is sectioned into nine parts, each named after one of the Navrasas, the nine emotions or the nine faces of the heart...love, contempt, sorrow, fury, valour, fear, disgust, wonder and affection...their customary names, of course, are used. Each section begins with an amazing piece on that particular rasa, in the voice of the educator, giving examples from nature to educate his students how to bring the expressions onto their faces. The framework buttresses Radha, the young, beautiful wife of an ambitious but gauche hotel owner in rural Kerala, what is otherwise a conventional plot line, leaves the confines of her loveless marriage to have a torrid and dangerous affair with an American visitor named Chris. The latter has come to Kerala to write a book about Koman, Radha's uncle and a distinguished Kathakali dancer. There is another reason for Chris's journey, one that will be revealed only gradually. The present-day story about Chris and Radha's immediate attraction and her husband's growing unease and suspicion runs parallel to the story. Koman tells Chris about his journey from a rootless, aimless youth to a man who has devoted his life to the rigor and discipline of his demanding muse. They are not 'coy "Mistress" who keeps quiet until something happens directly involving them or affecting them. They are broad-minded women with universal outlook and noble principles. They are advocates of peace and harmony everywhere and are always against injustices and cruelties of any kind.

The story of this love triangle is told from the overlapping first-person viewpoint of these central characters. With its structure of three books of three sections each, the narrative mirrors the arc of a Kathakali performance, in all its color, drama and heightened emotions. As a meditation on how the past influences our decisions and destiny and how art is forged from personal experience, *Mistress* could have been worthy but weighty read. It is wholly redeemed by the author's infectious passion for Kathakali and its performers and her lightness of touch when it comes to intimate human relationships. This is a sensitive and nuanced work which makes a persuasive case for the continuing relevance of this ancient art form in modern India.

Anita Nair deserves high praise for her willingness to tackle the big themes of meaning and desire in art and life, further.

Radha the protagonist is an avid Kathakali follower she practices this art as it is worrying and helps her to come up with the difficulties of married life. Kathakali, therefore, is the dominant tide of the novel, with much space given over to description of the art its tools-its aesthetics, terms, attitude, form, and subject, including a few salient episodes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. All these, though cautiously shifted for its relevance to the lives and loves of the characters, influences the story here and there. It is when she is not distracted by her own interest in the art when the author Anita Nair lets herself enter the skin of her characters. Shyam is the only character not remotely interested in dance. He is, in fact, the most tedious of the characters, a crafty businessman with no reluctance about selling Kerala and near- thee- Nila to tourists in the way tourists like to see it, through grand elephants and cultural performance. And yet, he's shown to be fabulous character who is though complicated man but at the same time hateful and compassionate,

Nair also coals some of the mythological stories, which are the staple of Kathakali finding parallels from the myth for the turmoil of her Radha, Shyam, Chris and Koman, especially of Koman. The liveliness and nastiness of the Kathakali characters come through the life and death of Aashan, the artist-teacher who develops Koman into a man who is there for art's sake, rather than Koman's contestant sundaram who reaps enormously the benefits of art's commercialization. Nair's love for the beauty of her narrative land comes across powerfully through the narrative of the seasons, fruits and plans of the verdant land of Kerala. Nair's enthusiasm makes one want to acquaint oneself with flowers like balsam, hibiscus, and birds like the Indian tree pie, Koel, woodpecker or paradise flycatcher by visiting Shoranur, even though it is not in association with the hot tourist destination of Kerala. Nair's imagination makes Kerala passion's own country, though the passion is accompanied by guilt and betrayal in her latest book, author Anita Nair has presented gods and demons in a more human light.

The book moves from Shringaram to Shantam, and each time we get an inkling of what is to follow. Nair searches for deeper meanings in art and life. Thought-provoking and absorbing, this is a brilliant book from a writer who does not hesitate to challenge herself, a book original in both structure and content. It must be read for byany lover of literature.

The most basic act of heavy-handedness lies in organizing the book around the Navarasas, the nine faces of the heart depicted in Kathakali, each dominating the mood of one chapter; and in having Koman recount his life story in a way that he might be mistaken for magical realism but is, in fact, pure Kathakali technique. While the resulting solidity is informative and lends the novel an edge of learning, it also creates the sneaking suspicion that Nair is interested primarily in writing about Kathakali, and is merely using her characters as a means toward that end, rather than the other way around. That would be fine if it weren't for the

fact that her novelist's sense of responsibility to her characters also continually reasserts itself. The upshot is that an uneasy tension intrudes upon the pages, training soft-focus lenses upon the art of Kathakali and making otherwise well drawn characters speak in stilted, didactic ways as Radha, the protagonist of the novel does here; on the outside, she lives a peaceful life. Her husband is a successful businessman who adores her and provides her with a desirable lifestyle. Nair explores the history of each of the characters, finding unexpected links between them. This history also involves inter-ethnic and inters-cultural conflicts which still have effects at the present time.

Anita Nair has used the themes of meaning and desire in art and life. Her all four characters are in the drama of life where art is passionately involved in personal as well as in social life. She has merged beautifully the art of writing with Kathathkali. The book is structured like a Kathakali performance and has nine chapters with each chapter named after an emotion from navarasas. This set the art form of Kathak into our downward spiral that was not revered until independence when there was a reawakening of interest in traditional Indian art forms. Kathakali is a complete art wherein you will find everything that is there in life. Like a true Kathakali spectacle performed by master Veshakaars that lasts all night. Nair evokes wonder, delight and grief in her readers.

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