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Mistress' Shyam: An Oppressor or Oppressed

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Abstract:

Anita Nair's *Mistress* is divided into three books, each consisting of three emotions. Thus there are nine emotions starting with love, contempt, sorrow, fury, valour, fear, disgust, wonder, detachment. The novel introduces us to the traditional dance style Kathakali, which is a drama as well as a dance form. Nair has made brilliant use of mythology. Her non-belief in heroic heroes inspires her to create characters who are ordinary men and women. Its setting is Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and the unique town of Arabipatnam. The novel has three narrators Radha, Koman, and Shyam.

Keywords: Male domination, love triangle, adultery, identity, personal space.

Anita Nair is a popular novelist with a unique ability of characterization. Her second novel *Ladies Coupe* was a big hit and it was translated in twenty-one languages. Uncle Koman was Radha's father's half-brother. Christopher Stewart or Chris, a foreigner, wrote to uncle asking if he could find him a house to rent for three months because he wanted to write about his dance art in his book. Shyam searched about him on the internet and came to know that he writes a column for a travel magazine. He hoped that Chris will write about his resort and it will profit his business. So, he welcomed Chris to his resort and provided him the best cottage. Radha was fascinated to see Christopher Stewart or Chris, who came with his musical instrument called cello. Chris also liked her at first sight. His staying arrangements were in her resort named Near-the-Nila. According to Radha, she is the mistress of the resort only in name, in reality, her husband had full control of the resort who was according to her an uncouth boor.

During the introduction, Chris was not able to pronounce Shyam's name properly. He called him Sham, which made Shyam irritated. Shyam tried to make fun of his musical instrument cello, he called it violin's grandfather. When Chris keeps his cello on the back seat of the ambassador, there was not enough room for them all to fit in. So, Chris decided to come by an autorickshaw with Koman. Shyam felt insulted because he came to receive Chris in his

favourite car, but he put his stupid musical instrument in it. Shyam's disliking for Chris began from this early meeting. He had planned to describe and show him the family property on the way, as the chimney towers by the river that used to belong to Radha's family, a modern three-story building, which was used to be a cinema house Murugan Talkies. It belonged to Radha's grandfather. By showing the shopping complex, a rice mill, a rubber plantation, a mango orchard, and so many things his plan was to impress Chris so that he can write good things in his travelogue about him and his resort. Shyam needed a good publicity for increasing his business. When Shyam lost this opportunity, he poured his anger in front of Radha, "Who does he think we are? His porters? To follow with his bags and his silly buffalo of an instrument..." (Nair, 13). Radha thinks that she neither feels pity nor affection for him but only responsibility.

Radha disliked the golden colour of two giant statues of lions on the gate of the resort. She wanted them to be white or terracotta. But they are golden because Shyam liked it. He doesn't care about what Radha likes or dislikes in the resort and in the house but he concerns only his own choices. Indirectly he was robbing Radha's identity in this way. On seeing the elephant in the resort, Radha surprisingly asks Shyam whether he has purchased it. Shyam informs her that elephant's name is Padmanabhan and he wants to purchase it but he can't afford. Shyam thinks that Padmanabhan will attract the tourists in the resort and thus will increase his business. Radha disliked his taste and said that it is clichés.

Shyam always tried to prove himself more intelligent than Radha in all the walks of life, whether it is a business matter, public relations, interior decoration or anything. For him Radha is merely a beautiful doll and she should behave like this. She should obey his orders only and should not argue with him. Unni was a descendant of the royal family, a prince. Although he was well educated but couldn't find a job. When he came to Shyam in search of job, he offered him the post of clerk in his resort, so that he can utilize his being prince to impress his guests. While talking to them he mentions that a prince is on their service. Some of the tourists almost apologize for asking him their room keys or call them a taxi or sell them postcards.

Whenever Radha and Koman talked of art and literature, Shyam felt excluded, he didn't understand what to say, for he has not adequate knowledge about these aesthetic fields. Soon he came to know that Chris was also interested in art and literature like them and he will be an outsider among them. His planning to make Chris taste the special Kerala dishes also failed as Chris was not much hungry. Shyam recalled how he hired his cook Baby George on very low salary than he deserved. Once he had a chance to visit a resort, with the relative of the owner

of the resort, where he tasted the best Kerala dishes he ever ate, made by Baby George. He immediately offered him three times his pay, “You are wasting your talent here; come to my restaurant and you will be appreciated” (Nair, 23). Baby George agreed and joined his resort but Shyam is always conscious for not letting him get too friendly with Chef Mathew. For Mathew was paid twelve times more than Baby George. He was from a catering college and knew how to prepare the dishes that appeal to the foreigners. Such was the character of Shyam, who can go to any extent to improve his business and make money. Koman and Radha were both surprised when Shyam wrote a beautiful story on the cards of the restaurant. Instead of being happy he felt like they are insulting him by appreciating his little work of art as if he does nothing greater than it. Koman noticed that the dissatisfaction that was always visible on Radha’s face is disappeared now in the presence of Chris. She looks happy and radiant. It was clear that Chris was also happy in her company. When Koman saw they both embrace each other with their eyes, he began to think: “I think of Nala and Damyanti. Of lovers in Kathakali who embrace without actually doing so. Only an experienced veshakaaran, an actor with more than mere technique, can perform that embrace. With arms that do not touch the woman, and with only his eyes, he lets her know that he desires her” (Nair, 29).

Koman sometimes imagines the real people with the characters he played on the stage, as he feels that Shyam is like Keechakan, who wants to possess Radha and sometimes he is like Bheema, whose goodness Radha makes use of. Sometimes she avoids him when his senseless behaviour is intolerable. Finally, he knew that Shyam is like Aashaari, a carpenter, both fool and master craftsman. He warned the Pandavas that the wax palace will be burned and he himself made the way to rescue them. Shyam although wearing a guise of a fool, never missed any step. Radha feels that she is neither happy nor unhappy with Shyam. Her marriage is just a responsibility for her not a source of happiness. She thinks why Shyam is not as sensitive to her emotions and feelings as he is for his business. He wants a wife with feminine wile, while she wants to be an equal companion to her husband. For Shyam, she is a mistress and a cherished possession. For this attitude of Shyam, she blames herself. She was a victim of male domination. According to her it was the result of a cruel act that she committed in the biology lab, when she was in the school. She sympathetically remembers the butterfly, she pinned to a board when it was still alive. She is feeling now the same yearning of the butterfly, to fly, to be free.

Whenever she wished to join a job, he always created a problem. When she wanted to teach in a primary school or start a tuition class, he said it was too much work for so little

money. When she wanted to start a crèche, he said that he did not like the house filled with babies. She said “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” (Nair, 73). She wanted to make her own identity apart from being a wife, but Shyam always turned her down. When she goes to see her uncle with Shyam. Her sad face lights up when she found Chris sitting with Koman. Chris also became happy to see her. But there were clouds of darkness in Shyam’s eyes. Koman thought if something is making her niece happy, then it cannot be bad. She also has the right to become happy. If she is not satisfied with her marriage and gets happiness in adultery, then it is also ok for him. First Koman decided not to interfere with what she is doing and he will be indifferent but soon he started supporting her spontaneously. He loved his niece and wanted to see a smile on her face anyhow. He never saw her so radiant and happy in the last eight years since she was married.

Shyam began to dislike Radha’s meetings with Chris as she goes to meet uncle when he is narrating his stories to Chris. Shyam tried his best to keep her away from Chris in many ways but Radha was getting more and more attracted to Chris. Sometimes Shyam thought that he should murder Chris with the help of his friend, who was SP of Shoranur. But the next moment the thought comes to his mind that Radha will start worshipping Chris if he is dead. So he dropped this idea. He is afraid of what will happen if Radha will leave him and go with Chris. He does not want to lose her. He loves her. Sometimes Shyam seems to be a pathetic character.

Radha thinks about her past when she was working in a company. She fell in love with a senior manager working in the same company. She became pregnant but he was fooling her by saying that he will give divorce to his wife and will marry her. When his wife came to meet Radha one day and revealed the real face of her husband, that he had many affairs before her. And he tells the same story of divorce to every new lady also. She felt disgusted for her husband when she looked at Radha, for he was choosing younger girls one after another. After knowing the reality she got an abortion and returned to her home, where she had to marry Shyam as her father ordered her, to avoid shame in society. Her father told Shyam that all his property will belong to Radha so as to him.

Shyam often becomes nostalgic especially while traveling for his business and compares his present prosperous life with the past. He thinks of his childhood days when after his father’s death they depended on Radha’s father. As a kid Shyam was always hungry, his

mother tried her best to fulfill their requirements with little money. Sometimes he was so irritated with his mother for her insensitivity, that he wished she should have died instead of his father. But now in retrospect, he can understand her helplessness. When her mother milked the cow, she told him to take milk to the tea shop. As he reached the shop, the boys began to tease him as maharaja of Cochin, his highness Shyam with the milk cane. Every day they had a new comment to injure his self-esteem, but he pretended not to hear them. Shyam feels proud to see them at the present time when they are working for him. He is their lord and master. Whenever he is nostalgic it is like he is watching a horror movie.

When Radha's father came with a proposal of marriage with her, Shyam's mother was very happy that her son will live a luxurious life which he was devoid of since his childhood. Shyam had always longed for Radha, so this proposal was like a dream come true for him. In spite of knowing the reality of Radha's mistake, he accepted the proposal. After her father's death, Shyam took the responsibility for the business and expand it with his marketing skills. He was eager to make more and more money so he bought a summer palace by the river Nila and converted it into a resort Near-the-Nila. He felt his resort was his kingdom. He tried to win Radha's love with his money but failed.

When Radha came to know that Shyam is keeping a record of her periods in a calendar in his office, she was shocked and disgusted because he wanted to have full control over Radha's life. He sometimes arranges her bedside table and washroom cabins, which also irritates Radha. She wanted to feel free at least in her personal things. She advised Shyam that instead of doing these mean activities he should check if he can father a child or not. Since it was eight years of their marriage and they were childless, so Shyam decided to go through some tests. He chose to go to a fertility clinic in another city, where nobody can recognize him. There he was shocked to know that he was infertile, but it was curable. The doctor gave him many instructions to improve his health. One night when she was back from a Kathakali performance, where she went with her uncle and Chris, everyone noticed that she was looking most beautiful that day. She wanted to look perfect for Chris. When she came back home Shyam quarreled with her and told her that he is the husband and he has full rights over her. His hate resulted in marital rape.

It was getting impossible for Radha to live with Shyam after meeting Chris. Shyam is jealous of Chris. He suspected Radha of having an affair with Chris but he also realized that he cannot stop it. He felt pity for himself. He wants to kill her and he thinks he will not be hated

by people when they will know about her adultery. He remembers the incident when a man cut his wife's head from her body and took it to the police station, the inspector offered him a chair to sit rather than being cruel to him, because she was having an affair with another man, and cheated on her husband. On the other hand, Shyam loves Radha and feels that he cannot live without her.

When Shyam says that he wants to arrange a Kathakali performance for his western guests in the resort, Radha and Chris opposed him by saying that he is turning magnificent Kathakali into a circus act. But Koman became happy to hear this. He erased their confusion by telling about the misfortunes of one of his students. After eight years of training, every morning he wore a full costume with makeup and crown and waited in a film studio that one day they will require his presence in the film city. They have no money for daily wages. In modern society, a Kathakali dancer has nothing to do. If Shyam will pay them for their performance, it will be good for them. Shyam's intention was to insult Koman but now he was feeling like he himself was trapped.

In Radha's view, Chris was modern, intellectual, liberated, sensitive, and an admirer of women's equality and opinion while Shyam was just the opposite of it. Gradually Radha realizes that Chris begins to feel that he is not doing fair to Shyam, he feels shame when he is in front of him. He also thinks himself responsible for destroying Radha's marital life. Radha cajoled him that her marriage is already dead. But Chris felt guilty and got upset. Tears filled into Radha's eyes, she felt that Chris does not love her while she is mad in her love. She remembers how barren her life was. Then Chris came and gave her a prism of light and happiness. With other colours she can see even the grey colour refracted through this prism. The novel portrays a perfect picture of love triangle. At the same time, it also shows the dirty face of marriage, that is adultery, which led Radha to the state of guilt and regret. Radha realised that love was from her side only and for Chris it was only lust.

She felt a sense of guilt. She also felt guilty that she betrayed him, humiliated him, and robbed him of his pride. Although she has sympathy for him, but still, she feels that she cannot love him. She decided to leave him and give him back his dignity and pride. Nair has made her female characters powerful to make their own choices. Radha has the power to choose between Chris and Shyam or none of them.

Chris has a secret motto of coming to India, which he opens at the end of the novel that he suspects Koman of being his father because he was son of Angela. And he knew she and

Koman were once lovers. Koman denies it and Chris decides to go back to his country. Radha did not tell anything to Chris about her pregnancy. Radha was feeling so guilty and ashamed that she decided to live neither with Shyam nor with Chis, but alone with her child. Shyam decided that he will convince Radha that he is the father of her child and will not let her go. He hoped one day she will learn to love him. Thus, finally he realized his priorities and he kept away all his ego and pride. There he found an inner peace hurling within. He became a better Shyam.

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