



Art as a Mirror of Suppressive Emotion: A Traumatic Study of Anita Nair's *Mistress*

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Abstract:

Art is a medium that reflects the unspeakable and unheard emotions of the people. Artists channelise their traumatic experience through their skills, be it writing, painting, or performance. The present study examines Anita Nair's *Mistress* through the lens of Trauma theory. It explores the unspeakability of suppressed emotions, which is constrained by society's prescribed values. Methodologically, the study draws on the Caruthian concepts of 'belatedness' and 'unspeakability' and examines how they interrelate with the character's everyday events. Neglected and silenced feelings should be confronted to maintain a stress-free, healthy life. In Art, Kathakali becomes a medium for expressing suppressed emotions. The narrative of traumatic emotion is exposed through the nine faces of the heart. Each face aligns with the character's emotional journey towards healing. As Caruth's delayed response to the events shows, ruptures in relationships leave a scar and haunt people now and then. The study highlights the mental Trauma of the characters and how they navigate and reconcile with themselves to cope with their life. The study concludes that people should connect with Art and engage with it, which can help them express their suppressed feelings. As failing to confront the buried feelings can lead to mental illness, the necessary steps should be taken to channelise the muted emotions.

Keywords: Cathy Caruth, Trauma, Mistress, Kathakali.

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Introduction

Human beings are emotional and intellectual, and yet many fail to navigate their emotions. Unlike other beings, people live by their memories and suffer most from their own emotions. There is a necessity to express one's emotional turmoil to lead a better life. The study interprets the novel *Mistress*, written by Anita Nair, a well-known Indian writer hailing from Kerala. The novel's major characters reflect the inner conflict between guilt and social constraints as they reconcile with their true selves and societal expectations. A major part of the novel revolves around Kathakali and synthesises the navarasa with the characters' emotional turmoil. The article builds on Cathy Caruth's concept of the "delayed" nature of Trauma, suggesting that it is understood through flashbacks and memory. People use writing or any other art as a medium of language to get rid of their emotional pathology. When one fails to release the burden of the traumatic event, mental stagnation occurs. Anita Nair, a well-acclaimed writer in Indian literature, portrays multiple characters with realistic depth and insight. In Anita Nair's *Mistress*, the characters Ashaan and Koman make use of the Art of Kathakali to channel their feelings through the roles they perform. Koman and Ashaan find purpose in Kathakali, which gives their lives meaning. Shyam and Radha are a married couple; their part forms the subplot of the novel *Mistress*.

Art as a Mirror of reflecting the suppressed feelings

The title *Mistress* interprets multiple meanings. The Mistress plays a significant role in the novel. A married woman, Radha, seems like a mistress to Chris, who comes to Kerala to write about the kathakali dancer Koman. Devayani is the Mistress of Sethu, who married an Islamic woman named Saadiya and had a son named Koman. Maya is the Mistress of Koman, who lived with his student, Angela, for some years in London. Later, he returned to Kerala and was with Lalitha, a whore. After her death, he met Maya and was with her. Apart from human relationships, Art becomes the Mistress who dominates Koman's life, a Kathakali dancer. Art

takes control of the Artist's mind and body. It makes him throw away Angela and London life. Though Koman has many Mistresses to help him deal with his emotions, his Art holds the upper hand in healing his complicated feelings and helps him stay grounded. Art is the Mistress of the Artists. It navigates their emotions and influences them to achieve the highest good in life.

Kathakali expresses the navarasas of human life in every phase. The first Rasa, Sringaram, can be incorporated with Radha's feelings for the travel writer Chris. A married woman attracted to an unmarried boy is socially unacceptable. The buried and unsaid feelings will settle deep in their unconscious mind. The space between the event of Love and its aftermath is complicated. Sringar conveys the pure emotion of Love without societal restrictions or moral values. Her emotions and longing can be the expression of the first navarasa.

Cathy Caruth's concept of delayed responses can be integrated with this event. When she commits adultery by being with another man, the moment does not remind her of the sin and guilt. Her conscience wakes up when she goes home and is with her husband. Guilt strikes her after the event, a delayed response. Unlike *Rajmohan's wife*, she continues with her husband. One could compare the character Radha to Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter*. Both suffer Trauma, which is unacceptable socially and culturally, and torments them throughout their life in silence. The sringar rasa celebrates Love that knows neither virtue nor sin. Entanglement of expressed and inexpressible emotions is incorporated in the sringar rasa.

Memory plays a vital role in human life. The flashes of the past and reliving them in the present are what Aashan does in his Art, Kathakali. His identity is based on his Art; he feels nothing and lacks purpose without it. Here, he deliberately asserts his repressed emotions and wears a socially acceptable mask. Art is a medium for expressing hidden emotions, and the Artist lives through it. As Sinthu asserts, "Kathakali becomes a lens through which the reader can view the interplay of appearance versus reality in human relationships". (Sindu 112)

The paper projects the different emotions that are expressed and unexpressed in life due to socially framed convictions. The delayed haunting of memories is integrated with Caruth's concept of delayed response and the event's ambiguous timing, as illustrated by the navarasa. His nostalgic return to his childhood days represents elements of a Trauma narrative. Radha prefers to continue living with her husband, which explains the character's moral righteousness. The study explores the Koman's psyche in the novel. The art form kathakali seems peculiar in how it expresses the navarasas. The main characters of the novel also express their hidden emotions, which go parallel with the artistic expression of navarasa. Here, Art is the key to getting rid of and balancing the emotion. Nair describes the rasa of Sringaaram through the Love for the unknown, which indirectly depicts the love affair between Radha and Chris. As Saran writes, Love lives in the present, unknown and unbothered, which is the Face of Sringaaram:

Human relationships flourished with the essence of Love. In Kathakali, Love is termed as Sringaaram. The harvested fields stare at the skies with forlorn vacancies: the past and present. The present is the harvest that lies in homes, in wood-walled manjas, golden and plump. Love lives in the present. All else is memory and hope. There are no fruits. Neither cashew apple nor jackfruit, mangoes nor palm fruit. Perhaps in some untended part of the garden, a pineapple rests, nestling among ash-green swords. The fruit of the month is paddy. Kernals filled with the sweet fullness of plenty. This is how Sringaaram feels (Saran 34).

The author explains the abstractness of Love with the cycle of natural Love for the unknown. That, too, is the face of Sringaaram. In this novel, Radha fell in Love with an unknown person named Chris, who came from London to meet Koman. Radha is married, yet she gets attracted towards Chris:

Chris stands there and takes a deep breath. I try to see the view as he is seeing it: the gleaming line of water, the many pools that dot the driver bed, the herons fishing, the treetops and the

tall grass that grows alongside the river, ruffled by a breeze, the distant hills and the clear blue skies, and I know fear. Already, in these few minutes of being with him, the familiar is endowed with a new edge. I look at him. With every moment, the thought sinks deeper into my mind: what an attractive man (*Mistress* 8).

The feelings of Love influenced Radha's psyche. Anita Nair portrays "Her women feel their emotions strongly, yet retain a constant value judgment, about themselves as well as about other relationships they have to live through (Cherian 4) when the novel explains what Adbutam is, which is implied in the characters of the novel as well. It literally means wonder. When people think about jackfruit, they never wonder about the golden pods covered with a green, thorn-like surface. Oval white seed covers up with golden pod. This is the wonder jackfruit blessed naturally. In the same way, Radha was wondering about the new Shyam, who knows what she has done for him. She has never seen Shyam like that before, "As I look at Shyam, and see that his face reveals nothing, neither anger nor pain nor even a hint of suspicion, I see my love as sordid, the wonder diminished" (*Mistress* 348).

There is a short story narrated within the novel that emphasises the essence of Kathakali. Once, a kathakali artist became insane and was admitted to the hospital for his treatment. One fine day, he hears a drumbeat in the distance. He reached the location from where the sound came. It is a spot where Duryodhana Vadam will be played. The insane man asked the Artist if he was going to play the Duryodhana vesham. He got dressed and put on makeup for that vesham. He plays Duryodhana with clear expression, and the audience starts clapping and whistling for him. He is insane at Kathakali, which makes him expressive and insane. One can understand how Art heals the Artist's mind through the mask of self-expression. It demonstrates the impact of Kathakali on perception and way of life.

Mistress emphasises Kerala's regional Art throughout the novel. One incident in the novel where Shyam talks about the elephant Padmanabhan, which resembles the Onam festival in

Kerala, shows how the Art and cultural landscape weaves into the story. This novel shows the thirst of a Kathakali artist. When Koman's father does not wish his son to be a dancer. Koman was very adamant and stuck to his regional Art. It expresses the nature and emotion of the people. Though there are other professions, Kathakali is the Mistress of them.

Travel writer Chris is indirectly connected to the Art and the Artist, Koman. He is destined primarily to serve as a catalyst and an object of desire for Radha, an object of suspicion and loathing for Shyam, and an object of reminiscence for Koman. "The most basic act of heavy-handedness lies around the navarasas, the nine' faces of the heart' depicted in Kathakali, each dominating the mood of one chapter. Each chapter begins with a similar introduction to the rasa concerned" (Saran 33). Nair draws lyrical analogies with the natural world to explain the nuances of meaning and the skills of portraying *Sringaaram* (Love), *Haasyam* (contempt), *karunam* (sorrow), *Raudram* (fury), *Veeram* (courage), *Bhayaanakam* (fear), *Beebhalsam* (disgust), *Adbutam* (wonder), and *shanti* (peace). Not only is Ais, the leading character, a Kathakali artist, but there is also an interplay of unspoken emotions expressed through different characters in the work. The paper explores the unclaimed, unspeakable, and unrepresented emotions of the leading characters, which parallels Cathy Caruth's concept of the unspeakability of Trauma. The character's repressed emotions are revealed through the nine faces of the heart. Here, the author describes the character's emotion through the navarasas of the Kathakali art form. The first face of Kathakali, Love or Sringar, is explained through the Love between Radha and Shyam. The feeling of Love is portrayed in the poem that Shyam wrote for his wife, Radha. "Once upon a time, a young maiden fell in love with the moon..." (*Mistress* 25). It shows the unreciprocated Love between Shyam and Radha.

Unspeakable and inexpressible Love between Radha and Chris knows no moral righteousness or any other societal boundaries. When Koman witnessed their Love, he could compare them to the mythical figures Nala and Damayanthi. He could not place Shyam in either a positive or

a negative role, as he kept comparing him with Bheema and Keechagangan Akkechagangan. “Chris turns to her. His smile gathers her in his arms. I think of Nala and Damayanti” (*Mistress* 29). Koman compares Shyam with Bheema and Keechakan. “Sometimes I think of Shyam as Bheema. A great, big, good- hearted creature whose goodness Radha makes use of. And sometimes I think that perhaps he is Keechakan. All he wants to do is possess her” (*Mistress* 30).

Next emotion, Haasyam deals with the laughing moments of life. Laughter is laughter. Convulsive movements of the facial muscles, a crinkling of the eyes:

Raise your eyebrows slightly, high at the bridge of your nose and low at the farther corners. Keep the eyelids slightly closed and the lips drawn down on each side. Indent the upper lip muscles. This is Haasyam. Pay attention to the mouth. It is not merely an orifice to devour and spit and make sounds. It is the mouth from your throat to your nose. The pressure is the degree of Haasyam (Murthy 426).

The rasa of Haasyam is explored through the married couple, Shyam and Radha. She lies beside Shyam, thinks of the laughter in their Love. She could not say that she is unhappy with Shyam. It is the moment of neither highs nor lows. “Shyam is sleeping. His arm pins me to the bed. His bed. I think that for Shyam, I am a possession. A much cherished possession. That is my role in his life. He does not want an equal; what he wants is a mistress” (*Mistress* 53). This is another version of Haasyam that people experience in their lives. Shyam perceives Radha as his possession, an object to feel happy with and to feel owned—the feelings of contempt run through their life. There is a parallel to the mythical character Ahalya, who, like Radha, commits adultery and is cursed to be stoned.

The unspeakable perception of Ahalya is never spoken or heard. She is judged by the parameters society has framed to fit in. If she is not bound by society and given the chance to speak for herself, she cannot fully express herself because the moral framework would

constrain her. According to Shyam, Radha is his only possession, “I am a blessed man, I think. I have a beautiful home and prosperous business. And I have Radha. My Radha” (*Mistress* 66). Contrast between Ahalya and Radha lies in their husband’s treatment after the event, and the guilt Radha felt deep, giving up her temporary affair and returning to her husband. Ahalya is cursed, while Radha is accepted. Shyam’s perception of possessing her does not let him curse or leave her.

After the event, the rasa of contempt is reflected in Radha. Ambiguous feelings of liking someone and liking to be loyal to someone traumatise her, which goes parallel with the stands of Caruth’s ‘unspeakability’. Realistic picture of Radha in her unclear state, “Then I feel Shyam’s breath ruffling my hair. What am I doing, I ask myself. I lie here in my bed in my husband’s arms and think of another man. What kind of a woman am I? I feel contempt for myself” (*Mistress* 59).

She feels guilty over what she is doing. Chris is compared to Lord Indra, who appears as a distraction, creating ambiguity in the lives of Radha and Shyam. Shyam gets worried about Radha. “I was not certain I liked the way Chris looked at my Radha. Alternatively, the manner in which she seemed to flower in his presence. Women are such suckers for flattery—even a woman as self-contained as my Radha” (*Mistress* 64). Shyam’s emotional turmoil is inexpressible. The Trauma of experiencing infidelity hits Shyam hard when he feels his wife acts differently. “I knew I was being silly, but I worried. I saw a threat everywhere. I worried that Radha would leave me someday. That a sweet-talking, pretty boy would turn her head and she would go, lured by his flattery and charm” (*Mistress* 65). The mythical characters of Ahalya and Indra are allegorical to the real characteristics of Radha and Chris:

When Radha wished to be with Chris, her uncle asked Chris to come tomorrow. Then her face becomes dull. Koman understands Radha’s feelings and starts comparing her to Damayanti. There comes an allegorical reference from Nalacharitam. In Nalacharitam, there is a scene in

which Damayanti describes her misfortunes to a messenger from her father's kingdom (Murthy 426).

She begins with the moment her husband decides to play a game of dice with his brother, loses his kingdom, and is forced to retreat into the forest, and ends with her husband abandoning her and all the troubles she faces thereafter.

In that scene, Damayanti shows thirty three expressions of loss in a few moments. Radha's face depicts the thirty-three emotions of loss when she realises she has no excuse to be with Chris tomorrow. That feeling of loss is meant to be Haasyam's. The next emotion is karunam, which means sorrow. Everyone experiences feelings of sorrow, the reasons for which are sometimes indescribable. The unspeakability of sorrow is intertwined with the characters' everyday lives within the Indian family structure.

Karunam, all of us have known sorrow at some time or another. The rasa of Karunam is reflected when Shyam becomes worried as his wife becomes involved in an affair with another man. Analysing through the framework of Trauma, the silence of experiencing feelings of betrayal parallels Karunam. Radha experienced Karunam whenever she belatedly encountered her husband. Memories remind people of the actions that generate feelings of sorrow. The reason behind the feelings cannot be expressed freely; it has to be digested internally. These Navarasas define human life irrespective of class, Caste, Gender, or region. These are ongoing events, unlike major catastrophes that happen once and haunt later, now and then.

The impact of adultery evokes Karunam in the Artist's heart as he predicts its consequences. "I feel a great grow in me. What will happen to this love? Then I think, I will tell them of another time and another love. I will tell them about Seth and Saadiya, and about love's consequences." (*Mistress* 128).

Koman had the reminiscences of his parents' Love and the consequences they faced in their lives. When the memory resurfaced, he felt sorry for her niece and helpless to convince her of

it. He could not spoil Radha's temporary happiness; his moral conscience directed him, though, because Radha felt happy upon Chris's arrival. He did not want to collapse her temporary happiness. Again, there is a myth regarding the intense desire of Radha and Chris:

Duryodhana, the cruel kaurava prince, and his wife Bhanumati are in beautiful garden. It is night. The combination of the beauty of the moment and the loveliness of his wife arouses in Duryodhana a great desire to make Love to her. Then his wife said him cant you see how much I long for you? (*Mistress* 128).

The completeness of desire, which meant the desire of Chris and Radha here. Her uncle Koman is well aware of the relationship between Chris and Radha. He feels humbled by the intensity of their intimacy. It is the feelings of karunam, a kind of sorrow, which he feels for his niece. Shyam also feels the same when he sees the new Radha. Their Love makes Koman remember his lady love Maya. He feels great fear grow in me regarding Chris and Radha. He thought about what would happen to their Love. He called Radha and advised her. He tells her about Seth, Saadiya, and the consequences of Love. Karunam's feelings influence the characters' psyches.

Raudram is another degree of fury. The fury makes the earth crumble or blood fall. This is the fury of passion. For, while other birds have mating calls to attract the mate, the wood pecker has only its drumbeat with which to beckon and call, "It is quiet fury, not any less intense or raging in its power, but locked within you, so that only you know it. For only you hear it in your heart. Such is the fury of a passion that rules you" (*Mistress* 152).

Raudra rasa also impacts the life of the major character. When Shyam came to know about the illegal affair of Radha, he exploded. At the same time, he could not bear to leave his wife, Radha. He expects his Radha to be with him. Nair displays the face of fury through Shyam. An explosion of fury is revealed through the character of Shyam. The common fallacy is to think

Raudram is a synonym for anger. Nothing wrong with that, for Raudram wears the countenance of anger:

Wrath, even. Look at this: you start with the eyes. Widen them so that they open fully, until your head tilts backwards, the nostrils flare, the mouth sets, and your jaws clench. You must inhale as usual, but try to exhale through the eyes. Intensely. Powerfully. Then the cheeks will acquire a mobility of their own (Saran 33).

The author compares the passion with the natural sounds of trees and woodpeckers. She differentiates Raudram from fury and anger. Anger is expressed through the characters in the novel. When Shyam made Love to her forcefully, she got furious. She compares that Love making with rape, “There are no categories of rape. Rape is rape even when sanctified by marriage. Moreover, the rapist doesn’t have to be a stranger emerging from the shadows. He could be your husband. What Shyam did was to rape me.” (*Mistress* 164-165). Thus, the different emotions are interconnected with the Art and everyday events in the novel. Parallel references to myth facilitate the character’s deep emotions that traumatise their life and seem inexpressible. The Art of Kathakali attempts to express the voiceless feelings through its performance.

Conclusion

Thus, the character’s emotions parallel the novel’s description of the navarasas. When people fail to express, it brings psychological wounds over a period, which causes mental stagnation. The article focuses on Trauma in domestic life. Though it is not majorly discussed like the Holocaust event, it should be a matter of concern to lead a harmonious life in society. Here, Trauma is caused by social and cultural constraints imposed on the characters that go unclaimed, as Caruth suggests. The extension and scope of further study could suggest some practical strategies to channelise and offer a voice to the silent.

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