



Female Assertion in Anita Nair's *Mistress*: From Confinement to Choice

Ms. Nivedita Hembrom

Research Scholar,

Department of English,

Sido Kanhu Murmu University,

Dumka, Jharkhand.

niveditahembrom7@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n4.43>

Abstract:

Anita Nair's *Mistress* (2005) is an important novel in Indian English literature. It looks closely at how women feel desire and how they gain control over their own lives. The story is set at a riverside resort in Kerala. It follows two people: Koman, a retired Kathakali dancer, and his niece Radha, a woman stuck in an unhappy marriage. The novel centres on the nine navarasas, or emotions, of Kathakali. Nair uses this classical dance form to explore human feelings and the relationship between men and women. This paper looks at how Nair shows female assertion in *Mistress*. It argues that the novel shows a change. Earlier, women in fiction were shown only as victims of a male-dominated society. In this novel, Radha is shown as a woman who makes her own choices and builds her own identity, even while she stays within her family and traditions. This paper looks at three things: Radha's journey from being trapped to being free, how she uses desire to resist control, and how Kathakali becomes a way for her to find her voice. The paper uses ideas from Simone de Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter to study the novel. It shows that Nair is not asking women to reject their family or culture completely. Instead, she is asking for the right to control one's own body and self. This paper adds to the understanding of the modern Indian woman in twenty-first-century fiction.

Keywords: Anita Nair, *Mistress*, Female Assertion, Agency, Feminism, Kathakali.

Introduction

Anita Nair holds a special place among Indian women writers today, alongside names like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, and Manju Kapur. Her novels look closely at women trying to find meaning and identity in a society run by men. Older writers like Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai usually showed women only as people who suffer inside the home. Nair belongs to a newer generation. She shows women as thinking individuals who want freedom, even in modern life. *Mistress* is her third novel. Many consider it her most complex work, both in how the story is built and in what it says. According to Penguin Random House, the main characters are Christopher Stewart, called Chris, a young American travel writer; Koman, a famous Kathakali dancer; his niece Radha; and Shyam, Radha's husband. Shyam watches helplessly as Radha falls for Chris with a passion she never showed him. In an earlier novel, *Ladies Coupé*, Nair's women look for freedom outside the home, on a train. In *Mistress*, the struggle happens inside marriage, family, and art. The novel has three Books. Each Book is divided into sections named after the nine emotions of Kathakali: Sringaaram (love), Haasyam (laughter), Karunam (sorrow), Raudram (anger), Veeram (valour), Bhayaanakam (fear), Beebhalsam (disgust), Adbhutam (wonder), and Shaantam (peace). This structure is not merely decorative. It gives the novel its deeper meaning and helps it explore human relationships and female assertion.

This paper studies how female assertion is built in *Mistress*. It argues that Nair gives us a new kind of Indian woman. This woman does not seek approval through sacrifice or obedience. She finds herself through choice, desire, and self-expression. Kerala has a complex history around gender. Matrilineal traditions exist alongside male control. This makes Radha's assertion even more meaningful.

Literature Review

Scholars who study Anita Nair usually focus on how she writes about women. Anuradha Ghodke and Vinay Bhogle, in their study "Feminine Psyche: Female Perspective in Anita Nair's *Mistress*," argue that Nair's women are shaped by domination and subjugation inside a patriarchal society. They show how the women in the novel suffer emotional trauma and lose their sense of self because of male control (Ghodke and Bhogle 406). This paper agrees with their reading of Radha's confinement. However, it looks further at how Radha eventually uses her own desire as a way out of that confinement, not just as another form of suffering.

Dr. Shubhanshi Goyal, in her recent study "Feminist Thread in Anita Nair's *Mistress*," reads the novel's feminism as something quiet, an inner struggle for identity and self-respect, rather than loud protest. She points to how clearly Radha understands her own situation within her marriage:

For Shyam, I am a possession. A much cherished possession. That is my role in his life.
He doesn't want an equal. What he wants is a mistress. (Nair 53)

Goyal reads this moment as Radha's own recognition that she has been reduced to an object of value rather than a person with a voice, a recognition that sets up everything the rest of the novel will trace.

There is also research on Kerala's matrilineal system, the Nair community's tradition where women inherit property. This research shows that matrilineality gave women property rights, but not always emotional or sexual freedom. Nair explores this exact tension. Radha comes from a Nair family with this matrilineal background. However, her personal freedom is still limited by modern, patriarchal marriage rules. This historical detail adds depth to the novel's idea of female assertion. However, most studies on this novel look only at Radha's affair and treat it as a moral question. This paper looks beyond that. It studies assertion through three

angles: desire, art, and the act of telling one's own story. It also places *Mistress* within a bigger picture: the shift in Indian women's writing from the ideal of the sacrificing Sita to the assertive new woman.

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses ideas from two major feminist thinkers. First, Simone de Beauvoir's idea of immanence and transcendence, from her book *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir says that society traps women in immanence, meaning repeated, everyday tasks like housework and caregiving. Men, on the other hand, are allowed transcendence, meaning creativity, risk-taking, and control over their own direction (Beauvoir 27). At the start of the novel, Radha's life as a wife and mother is a state of immanence. Her journey toward making her own choices is her movement toward transcendence. Beauvoir's famous idea that a woman is not born but made into a woman by society fits Radha's story closely.

Second, this paper uses Elaine Showalter's model of women's writing. Showalter describes three stages: the feminine stage, where women absorb the values given to them by men; the feminist stage, where they push back against those values; and the female stage, where they build their own identity and their own art (Showalter 13). Radha's story can be placed on this same path, moving from quietly accepting her life, to protesting it, to finally creating a life of her own. Her shift from being a silent witness to being a woman who speaks openly about her own unhappiness shows this final stage. Together, these two ideas help this paper understand female assertion, not as something borrowed from the West, but as something that grows out of Indian culture, using local art forms like Kathakali to speak about issues that matter everywhere.

Marriage as Institution and Confinement

Radha is shown as the wife of Shyam, a rich businessman, and the mother of two children. On the surface, her life looks safe and comfortable. However, Nair makes it clear that this comfort comes at a price: her own sense of self.

Radha's marriage has no real emotional connection. Shyam loves her, but in a controlling way, not as an equal partner. He gives her money and safety, but he cannot understand her deeper needs, her thoughts, or her feelings. For him, love means providing and protecting. For Radha, love means being seen and heard. This is true for many middle-class Indian marriages, where a woman's identity gets lost inside her roles as wife and mother. She is expected to feel grateful for material comfort and not to ask for anything more. Nair does not show Radha's growing unhappiness as ungrateful behaviour. She shows it as a real and serious crisis about who Radha is. Nair describes Radha's daily routine in small details: breakfast, packing the school lunch, waiting for Shyam to come home, to show how this repetition slowly erases her sense of self.

Later in the novel, Radha describes this feeling directly, and her words connect closely to Beauvoir's idea of immanence:

I cannot continue to play wife merely because it frees me of worries. I have not done right by Shyam. I have played wife all this while, despising him. (Nair 426)

Here, Radha calls being a wife something she "plays," not something she truly is. It is a role she can only continue by giving up her own self. Her situation is made harder by her family background. She comes from a Nair family, where women traditionally had property rights through the matrilineal system. However, Nair shows that this old system does not automatically give a woman real personal freedom today. Radha's uncle Koman is an artist, but he still holds old-fashioned views about how women should behave. He loves Radha, but he

also judges her. So Radha is stuck between a progressive family history and a more conservative present. This is common for many women in Kerala today. It makes her fight for freedom harder, because she cannot simply blame tradition alone. She must also face these newer, hidden forms of control.

Desire as a Tool of Assertion

The arrival of Christopher Stewart, known as Chris, changes things for Radha. Chris is a young American travel writer who comes to Kerala to meet Koman and learn about Kathakali. Unlike Shyam, Chris listens to Radha. He asks about her thoughts. He treats her as a person with her own mind, not just as someone's wife or someone's niece. Nair writes about Radha's attraction to Chris with great care. She does not turn the affair into something shocking or scandalous. Instead, she uses the *rasa* of *Sringaaram*, the mood of love in Kathakali, to describe desire as something felt in the whole body. The novel opens with this idea:

Or do we know it by the widening of the eye, the arching of eyebrows, the softness of the mouth that curves, by that swelling of breath from each nerve end wanting to cup a contour? (Nair 7)

This description turns female desire into something beautiful, a way of understanding oneself, rather than something shameful or purely physical. For the first time, Radha feels her own body not as something she owes to duty, but as something that can give her pleasure. Her decision to act on this desire is her first big act of assertion. It matters that she does not explain it away as love, or as something she could not help. She takes ownership of it as her own choice. When she and Chris finally come together, Nair describes it using the same physical language of the eye and the body that opened the novel, tying Radha's private experience back to the larger meditation on desire the book began with. As Beauvoir argues, a woman's control over her own

body underpins her freedom. This is very different from older Indian novels, where a woman who had an affair was always punished, or made to feel deep shame. In older stories, such women died, went mad, or came back full of regret. Radha feels conflict, but she does not feel guilt. Her struggle is about being honest with herself, not about right and wrong in a moral sense. She wants to be true to who she is. In this way, the novel redefines the idea of loyalty, from loyalty to a husband, to loyalty to oneself.

Writing and Kathakali: Claiming Male Spaces

Two important spaces in the novel help us understand female assertion: Kathakali, and the act of telling a story. Kathakali has always been an art form only for men. Male performers even play female roles, using heavy makeup and costumes. Women were historically not allowed to learn or perform Kathakali. Even the one exception mentioned in the novel, an international student named Angela, is allowed only a short course, never full training. Koman's own story, as a talented Kathakali artist who faced humiliation and betrayal, echoes Radha's own experience of being kept out of spaces where she could speak and be heard. When Chris, an outsider, tries to get Koman's life story for his own use, Koman refuses to share it. It is Radha who steps in to protect her uncle from this intrusion. In this moment, she becomes a kind of gatekeeper, someone who protects the story, rather than someone locked out of it completely. This is a smaller act of assertion than actually writing the story herself would be. However, it fits a pattern we see throughout the novel. Radha often protects the men in her life, even while she withholds herself fully from either of them. The clearest sign of Radha creating her own identity comes instead from her argument with Shyam, where she names her own situation out loud:

Don't I have a right to an opinion? I am your wife. Your wife, do you hear me? However, you treat me as if I am a kept woman. A bloody mistress to fulfil your sexual needs and with no rights. (Nair 73)

Here, Radha uses the very word, mistress, that the novel's title will later give a new meaning to. The novel's structure, built around the nine rasas, also gives space to a full range of female emotions. Each rasa gets equal weight in the story. This means a woman's anger (Raudram), fear (Bhayaanakam), and disgust (Beebhalsam) are treated as just as valid as her love (Sringaaram). In a patriarchal culture, women are usually only allowed to show certain emotions, like love, sadness, and shame. By giving equal space to anger and disgust in the novel's structure, Nair makes room for the full range of what women actually feel. This is a quiet but powerful feminist choice in how the novel is built.

The River Nila as Feminine Space

The novel is set on the banks of the River Nila, and this choice of setting is not accidental. Nair describes the river with a sense of quiet loss right from the opening pages:

Beyond the railway lines is the riverbank. Or what is left of it. Most of the sand has been carted away to build homes. The river, when it is swollen with the monsoon rain, creeps into the houses that line the riverbank. Mostly, though, the Nila is a phantom river, existing only in the memories of those who have seen it when in full spate, swift and brown and sweeping into its waters all that dared stem its flow. (Nair 8)

The Nila is an important river in Kerala. In Malayalam literature, it is often linked with creativity and fertility. Nair uses the river as a feminine space, one that stands apart from the male-controlled spaces of the house and the Kathakali training hall. The river's own fading

condition quietly echoes Radha's own position in the novel. Radha finds comfort by the river, and many of her most personal, reflective moments happen there. This is a smaller, ecofeminist layer to the novel's larger argument. It suggests that nature is not something to be controlled or conquered, but something that supports women in their search for freedom.

From Confinement to Choice: The New Woman

Radha is different from Nair's earlier heroines, like Akhila in *The Better Man*, or the women in *Ladies Coupé*. Those women look for freedom together with others, or by physically leaving. Radha's journey happens inside herself. She claims an inner life that belongs only to her. In today's India, Radha stands for the modern, educated woman who already has material comfort, but is searching for deeper meaning. Her fight is not about earning money, since she could get that through her family property anyway. It is about emotional and creative freedom. Even Shyam eventually recognises this shift in the balance of power between them:

And, I think that I know it is true, but I cannot bear to be parted from Radha. I will give Radha the time she wants. I will not force her or ask her for more than she is prepared to give. I walk towards the wall that banks the river. A breeze rustles through the leaves. The night is bathed in a bluish haze. I look around and feel a swell of pride again. All this is mine, I think. Peace washes over me. I will regain all that is lost. (Nair 403)

This small moment matters because it shows that Radha's assertion does not just change her own life; it also changes how the people around her are forced to treat her, no longer as someone to be controlled, but as someone whose choices must be respected.

Critical Reception and Significance

Since its publication in 2005, *Mistress* has received a lot of critical attention for its bold approach to female sexuality and its unusual narrative structure. Unlike some early feminist writing that showed women as perfect, flawless heroines, this paper argues that Nair shows Radha as flawed, confused, and sometimes selfish. Late in the novel, Radha admits this herself, recognising that she once judged her own mother harshly for having an affair, only to find herself in the same position:

I think I thrust it out of my mind. Now I wish I had been more understanding and less judgemental. My mother was desperately unhappy. Perhaps if she had gone away with him, she would have been happier. I am beginning to know what my mother must have felt like, trying to divide her life between two men, each of whom seemed to have staked a claim to her. (Nair 214)

This makes her feel human and real, rather than an idealised figure, and it also avoids two common traps: making her either exotic or purely a victim. This kind of complexity is a sign of mature feminist writing. The novel also adds something to the wider conversation about Indian feminism and how it relates to Western feminism. By using an Indian art form like Kathakali to tell a story about a woman's freedom, Nair shows that feminism does not need to come from the West. It can grow directly out of Indian traditions. The novel also pushes back against the simple idea that tradition and modernity are always opposites. Radha does not reject her Nair background or Kerala's culture. She reinterprets it in her own way. She finds strength in her matrilineal past, even while she questions its limits today. This careful, balanced approach is what makes her assertion feel real and lasting.

Conclusion

Anita Nair's *Mistress* is a powerful look at female assertion in modern India. Through Radha, Nair shows women moving from being trapped to having choices, from staying silent to speaking up, from being defined by others to defining themselves. The novel's use of Kathakali, as both structure and symbol, gives it a strong cultural foundation to explore universal questions about gender, power, and identity. Radha's journey shows that real assertion does not mean rejecting family and culture. It means finding a way to negotiate with them, to make space for one's own self. She stays connected to Kerala and to her family history, but she also claims the right to desire and to choose things on her own terms. In doing this, she changes the meaning of the very word used to trap her. By the end of the novel, that word has a new meaning: Mistress no longer means a woman kept by a man. It means a woman who is in control of her own life. The novel's final image confirms this quiet self-possession:

She leans back in the rocking chair. She has time enough to think of what she wants to do with her life. She has time to count her joys and blessings. She has time. She rests her hands in her lap. And she rocks herself ever so gently. (Nair 426)

This change captures the larger shift happening for women in twenty-first-century India, from obedience to agency, from being trapped to finding one's own kind of peace. Nair offers no easy answers. Radha's future is still uncertain at the end of the novel. However, choosing your own uncertainty carries a different meaning than having certainty forced on you by someone else. Future research could compare Radha with other recent women characters in Indian English fiction to trace this changing idea of the new woman.

Works Cited:

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Jonathan Cape, 1956.

Ghodke, Anuradha, and Vinay D. Bhogle. "Feminine Psyche: Female Perspective in Anita Nair's *Mistress*." *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development*, vol. 4, no. 2, Feb. 2020, pp. 406–408.

Goyal, Shubhanshi. "Feminist Thread in Anita Nair's *Mistress*." *Integrated Journal for Research in Arts and Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 1, Jan. 2026, pp. 59–62.

Nair, Anita. *Mistress*. Penguin Books, 2005.

Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press, 1977.