

## Exploration of Psychological Conflict in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

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### Abstract

Anita Nair occupies a prominent position in Indian English Literature. Her novels have women characters as the central point of focus. They reflect women's entanglement in the structures of society. They are culturally, socially and economically suppressed by the patriarchal society. Nair's novel *Mistress* (2005) offers a captivating exploration of women's desires. The book delves into the complexities of Radha's married life as it becomes entangled in a love triangle. At its core, the novel unfolds the tale of Radha, a Kathakali dancer, and her waning affection for her husband, Shyam, which is reignited when she encounters Christopher Stewart, an author who arrives in India to document Koman's story. Radha emerges as a quintessential modern Indian woman, struggling against the confines of traditional gender roles. The novel explores the complex dynamics in the relationship between Radha and Shyam. With the introduction of Chris, their relationship becomes more complicated. This novel delves deep into Radha's internal conflict, her wish to be adventurous, her personal desires and the tension around by societal expectations.

**Keywords:** Traditional Gender roles – struggle of women – women's entanglement – *Mistress* - Anita Nair – women's desires – patriarchy – suppression

Anita Nair made a significant contribution to literature of contemporary era. She occupies a prominent place in Indian English fiction of the post-modern era. Her novels have women characters as the central point of focus. They reflect women's entanglement in the structures of society. They are culturally, socially and economically suppressed by the patriarchal society. She gives voices to the silenced, by depicting the victimization of women. The repressive society strangles and subjugates women who actually try to restore their identity. Women who were smothered, undergo journey and realize themselves. By focussing on the psychology of the women characters, she projects the depressed condition of women and shows their issues and inequalities which are quite common in society. She artistically depicts the realistic condition of women who move from their state of ignorance to bliss. By projecting the inner occurrences of women, she brings to light the conventional ideologies of patriarchal society and realization of her true self.

Nair's novel *Mistress* (2005) offers a captivating exploration of women's desires. The book delves into the complexities of Radha's married life as it becomes entangled in a love triangle. At its core, the novel unfolds the tale of Radha, a Kathakali dancer, and her waning affection for her husband, Shyam, which is reignited when she encounters Christopher Stewart, an author who arrives in India to document Koman's story. Radha emerges as a quintessential modern Indian woman, struggling against the confines of traditional gender roles. However, in the presence of Chris, she feels liberated, sensing that life still holds many unexplored possibilities. "I look at him. With every moment the thought hinges itself deeper into my mind; what an attractive man" (8) But when she is in the company of her husband, she thinks, "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 right" (72)

Radha experiences both physical and emotional closeness with Chris, indicating that they share a deep connection and perhaps even engage in a romantic or passionate relationship. However, alongside this connection, Radha also feels a sense of guilt. This guilt likely arises from the fact that she is married to Shyam and is thus betraying her commitment to him by being intimately involved with Chris. Radha faces internal conflict and moral dilemma as she navigates her desires and actions, torn between her attraction to Chris and the guilt stemming from her marital obligations. She is described as the one who actively pursues her desires, even if they lead her away from societal norms and expectations. She seeks a life filled with passion and fulfillment, prioritizing her own wants and needs. She acknowledges that there is no valid justification for adultery, indicating that she is aware of the societal norms and moral standards she is violating by engaging in an extramarital affair with Chris.

Despite this awareness, Radha is willing to breach these societal rules because she believes in prioritizing her own self-fulfillment and self-realization. She is on a path of self-discovery and self-expression, seeking personal growth and achievement. Self-actualization encompasses fulfilling one's potential and realizing one's true self. Her actions challenge the conventional patriarchal ideologies of society, which often impose rigid roles and restrictions on women. By pursuing her desires and seeking self-fulfillment, Radha breaks free from these constraints and finds happiness in discovering and expressing her authentic self, regardless of societal expectations or norms. She undertakes her journey toward personal liberation and self-realization.

The complex dynamics of Radha's decision to defy societal expectations and betray her husband in a patriarchal society where a woman's chastity is highly valued and often serves to assess her character. In Radha's perspective, her decision to engage in an extramarital affair is a way to reclaim agency and control over her own life. She has endured a loveless marriage and has been subjected to physical abuse and domination by her husband. By deciding to deprive him of physical intimacy, she is taking a significant step to break free from the oppressive system that has confined her to a submissive role. Her actions reflect her desire to assert herself and resist her husband's dominance. It symbolizes her unravelling from the traditional role society expects her to play as a faithful wife.

While she takes a bold step towards personal freedom, her husband's continued dominance over her is suggested by "her bodily gestures," indicating that she might still be subject to his control, even if she rebels temporarily. Pretension becomes a tool to gain a fraction of freedom but it underscores the complexity of Radha's situation. It implies that she might be using pretense or secrecy to maintain a facade of obedience while secretly pursuing her desires. It is one of the strategies to gain some degree of independence within a restrictive society. She is portrayed as a character who desires to pursue her dreams and ambitions, defying societal expectations of what is considered appropriate behavior for a woman. Despite coming from a traditional middle-class background, she experiences a transformation during her education and subsequent life in a bustling city. She sees herself as an independent woman capable of making her own choices. However, her marriage to Shyam forces her into a more traditional role, creating a conflict within her. This conflict between her longing for independence and the societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles forms a central part of her character's journey. After her marriage, she decides "never to flout the rules of custom again." (54) But Shyam's expectation tramples her. successful and financially-driven individual. He excels in his business ventures and is eager to seize any opportunity for profit. But his inability is that he never understands Radha as an individual with her own thoughts and desires. He fails to acknowledge her need for independence and personal agency, treating her in a way that disregards her autonomy.

The relationship between Radha and Shyam highlights the tension and dichotomy between modern and traditional roles in Indian society, particularly within the context of marriage and gender expectations. Her desire for independence clashes with the traditional role she is expected to play as Shyam's wife, and this conflict underscores the challenges faced by women in asserting their individuality and pursuing their dreams in a society that often places rigid expectations on them. It also sheds light on his character as a successful but somewhat oblivious individual who fails to

understand or respect her desire for autonomy and independence. Simon de Beauvoir mentions this kind of masculine behaviour in *The Second Sex*:

...subordinated economically and socially to her husband, the good wife is the man's most precious treasure. She belongs to him so profoundly that she partakes of the same essence as he; she has his name, his gods, and he is responsible for her. He calls her his 'better half'. He takes pride in his wife as he does in his house, his lands, his flocks, his wealth and sometimes even more; through her he displays his power before the world: she is his measure and his earthly portion. (207)

Radha's struggle for autonomy and her willingness to challenge societal norms and her husband's dominance. It portrays her as a symbol of the power women can wield in a society that often seeks to control and restrict them.

The novel explores the complex dynamics in the relationship between Radha and Shyam. With the introduction of Chris, their relationship becomes more complicated. This novel delves deep into Radha's internal conflict, her wish to be adventurous, her personal desires and the tension around by societal expectations. Shyam symbolising society wants Radha to conform to the role of a wife in the modern society by pleasing her husband, which is considered to be the primary task of a modern wife. He wants her to fit the ideal image of a dutiful wife, which includes fulfilling traditional roles and responsibilities. This expectation creates a dilemma for Radha because the more she tries to meet these expectations and become the ideal housewife, the stronger her desire to break free from these confines becomes.

Shyam's attitude towards Radha is ambivalent. On one hand, he takes pride in her independence and her clear goals in life. He appreciates her as a modern woman who knows her aspirations. However, on the other hand, he hinders her progress and personal growth, effectively preventing her from achieving her dreams. When Radha encounters Chris, she senses a connection between them, as if he shares her sensibilities and appreciation for art and literature. Her decision to become involved with a stranger like Chris as a mistress may be rooted in her dissatisfaction with her sexual life with her husband, Shyam. Shyam not only has medical issues that affect their intimacy but also approaches life with a highly calculated and profit-driven mindset, in stark contrast to Radha's more artistic and nuanced perspective.

Koman, with his expertise in kathakali, comprehends Radha's love for Chris. As a master of this traditional Indian dance form, he possesses a deep understanding of the subtleties conveyed through the eyes and voice in kathakali performances. Using this knowledge, Koman is able to read the emotions and desires expressed in Radha's eyes, offering an interpretation that goes beyond words. He reports:

Now Radha's gaze follows mine. I see that, like me, she cannot keep her eyes away from him. She walks forward. 'Do you need any help?' There is a lilt in her voice. Where has the discontent seeped away to? There is no need for Abraham. Her face is radiant. Her eyes throw him a side long glance. Chris turns to her. Her smile gathers her in his arms. (29)

In essence, the above lines underscore the connection between Radha and Chris based on their shared sensibilities, and it highlights the reasons behind Radha's extramarital involvement as well as Koman's ability to discern her emotions through the lens of his kathakali expertise. The arrival of Chris disrupts the lives of all involved, especially Radha. She falls deeply in love with him, and this love challenges the traditional values and expectations of marriage. Her feelings for Chris drive her to cross boundaries, pushing her to seek adventure and excitement. However, at the same time, she struggles with guilt over her pursuit of this forbidden love while being married to Shyam.

Radha's internal conflict is central to the story. She feels trapped between the contrasting lives represented by Shyam and Chris. Shyam symbolizes a safe but monotonous and unfulfilling life full of stereotypes and societal pressures, while Chris represents excitement and the unexpected, which make Radha feel alive again. Her desire for adventure and the guilt she experiences create a constant tug-of-war within her. She is depicted as being suffocated by the expectations of society which is

forcing her, such as the pressure to have a baby and conform to the role of a "glossy, silly wife." She yearns for the freedom to make her own choices and breathe freely. Chris provides her with a sense of space and liberation, which she craves. However, Shyam expects her to prioritize his needs over her individual choices, intensifying the conflict.

Radha faces internal as well as external conflicts as she grapples with the expectations of society, her desires and her relationship with Shyam and Chris. It reveals her journey towards self-discovery, fulfilment, amidst the pressures of society. It deals with the theme of societal control over women's lives and their struggle for independence and identity. It also deals with the social conditioning and the necessity of declining the oppressive forces and practices in the civilized society. In the conventional, patriarchal society, woman's life is taken as a public affair. Her personal choices and actions are subject to scrutiny and judgment by the society. Any rebellious action or deviation from societal norms can be seen as a revolt against society itself, and women are held responsible for their actions.

The society's perception of women's lives as public gives it the authority to exercise power over them and enforce adherence to social norms. While the extent to which women accept this authority may vary, the pressure to conform to these norms remains constant. It emphasizes the importance of individuals in a civilized society rejecting practices and beliefs that oppress others. It suggests that social conditioning affects everyone to some degree, but it is crucial for individuals to stand against oppressive norms that limit personal freedom and autonomy. Radha's primary motivation for breaking the rules that restrict her life is to find the freedom to express herself as she desires. She has experienced different roles, first as a lover who was not fully appreciated and then as a wife in a loveless marriage. She is on a quest to rediscover her true self and assert her identity.

Radha's journey involves struggles and conflicts with her husband, as well as an affair with a stranger (presumably Chris). Through these experiences, she eventually gains the courage to determine her own future and take control of her life. It underscores the idea that personal transformation often comes through challenging societal norms and embracing one's true self. Nair portrays characters as unique individuals who face their own trials and tribulations. Each character stands out with their distinct place in the story, adding depth to the narrative. Her affair ends suddenly, leaving Radha alone and emotionally shattered. However, it also suggests that her story ends with a sense of new hope, symbolized by a new birth and a new role. This implies that despite the challenges and setbacks, there is potential for personal growth and renewal in Radha's life.

This novel highlights the societal constraints on women's lives, the importance of challenging oppressive norms, and Radha's journey towards self-realization and personal freedom within the context of her complex relationships. It also acknowledges the potential for transformation and hope in the face of adversity. The novel's conclusion delves deeply into the expectations placed upon married Indian women and the choices they make within their relationships. These women find themselves caught between the pain they endure and their desire to rebel against the constraints imposed upon them. However, their stories also carry a message of hope, emphasizing the potential for change through courage and proactive efforts.

Society should strive for a balanced gender dynamic where both men and women can find their rightful place and opportunities for personal growth. In the words of Shashi Deshpande: "A world without frightened, dependent, trapped, frustrated women is a better world for all of us to live in" (85). *Mistress* is a powerful and emotionally charged novel that authentically portrays the intricate, enigmatic, and complex emotions that are prevalent in real life. Each character's story unfolds gradually, ultimately converging into a passionate tale of life. In this novel, all the characters possess a deep passion that significantly influences the course of their lives, akin to a demanding and consuming mistress.

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