IDENTITY CRISIS IN ANITA NAIR’S MISTRESS

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Indian writing in English has attained an independent status in the realm of Indian literature. Wide ranging themes are dealt with in Indian writing in English. While this literature continues to reflect Indian culture and tradition, social values and even Indian history through the depiction of life in India and Indians living everywhere, recent Indian English fiction has been trying to get expression to the Indian experience of the modern predicaments.

Fictions by women writers constitute a major segment of the contemporary writing in Indian English. It provides insights, a wealthy understanding, and a reservoir of meanings and basis of discussion. Through women writer’s eyes one can see a different world and with their assistance one can realize the potential of human achievement. Every appraisal of the Indian English literature will certainly result in an appreciation of the writing of women.

Indian writing in English by women is a distinct phenomenon today. The creative output of the Indian women writers, especially novelist, is marked by the choice of English, and expression of the women’s reaction to the varied situation in which tradition, culture and modernity clash as well as synthesize. Indian women writers are dynamic witnesses to the peculiar socio-cultural, historic, political conflicts faced by women especially Indian.

Anita Nair is one of the finest writers in Indian Writing in English with an international reputation. Anita Nair is a writer of repute and has a number of popular novels to her credit. True to herself she believes in artistic integrity. She feels strongly and deeply about corruption of pure traditions and art to give them popular appeal in her novels.

Anita Nair’s first novel The Better Man (2001) followed by her second novel Ladies Coupe (2002) has been published in 21 languages. Her novel Mistress was published in the year 2003. Nair places major
emphasis on examining women’s lives and their psyche within the context of south Indian family, representing women in their traditional roles as mothers, wives and daughters. She has an intense emotional understanding of human motivations and a sharp, flexible intelligence.

Anita Nair’s characters do not postulate themselves as absolutes, to be acclaimed or abandoned, rather inspire us to look honestly at ourselves, our passions and our actions in family relationships and society. Mistress is an explicit visual description of feminine psyche and the vehemence of passions it produces. When we discuss the changing cultural identity of women, we need to explore who is responsible for this change. Is it a man who is responsible for changing the cultural identity of the Indian woman or is it a woman who is responsible or is it the society?

The first implication has to be ruled out because it is man who has exposed certain identities on woman with the powerful instrument of patriarchal ideology and he is not going to initiate the process of change unless there is compulsion- as the law of inertia would put it things remain in a state of rest or uniform motion unless otherwise disturbed. Similarly the third option too has to be ruled out because the human society is ruled by the dominant ideology of the superiority of man over woman. Ultimately the responsibility of changing the cultural identity of woman lies on the shoulders of woman.

The next question that arises in the mind is that whether there is an identity for ‘the Indian woman’? The phrase ‘the Indian woman’ itself suggests two identities, the national/ethnic identity and the gender identity. In all human societies woman has got used to living with multiple identities without any option of her own. So the phrase ‘Indian woman’ poses two levels of strong ethnic/cultural and gender. Thus the cultural identity of Indian woman is a complex social reality and writers like Anita Nair have played major role in changing it in a desirable direction.

In the novel Mistress the story line progresses through the point of view of three major characters- Koman Asan, Radha and Shyam - women together through the silk thread of art. The novel is written in the backdrop of ‘Kathakali’ the unique art form from Kerala. Anita Nair has used the expressions called the ‘Navarasas’ that lay the foundation of the novel. The novel has been divided into three books and each book comprises three expressions from the Navarasas.

It is an intense novel of full of deep, mysterious, complex emotion that are so true to life. The story of each character unravels slowly and in the end culminates into a passionate story of life. Each of the character in this novel has a passion in life and in some way or other it decides the course of their life, and hence it becomes a demanding Mistress. That is what the title of the book signifies.

The motif of objectification of women is omnipresent in the text. When Shyam in Mistress speaks or thinks of his wife, he always refers to her as “My Radha”. To Shyam it is totally natural to want to exercise control over her, from the way she dresses to her behavior in society to the most intimate aspect of her life. His records of Radha’s period, mentioned several times throughout the text, are a symbol of his attempts to control her life. To tell her what to do in her free time is as normal for Shyam as to tell her how to dress her hair and that color of sari to wear. Even in case of marriage Radha’s father decides her husband thus she plays a passive role in terms of marriage made to marry below her standards, thus ruining her father’s expectation for her “to make a brilliant marriage into a family that will match them in a status and Wealth”(119).

In Mistress there are several female characters who adopt the traditional role. However, most of them are broad brush characters without individual traits. Their appearances are scarce and always very short. The only one who appears repeatedly throughout the novel is Rani Oppol, Shyam’s older sister. She seems to be independent having more of individuality yet still when it comes to her behavior the decisive factor in her conduct are traditional rules. Actually, what is known about Rani Oppol’s life is usually information that emerges from her conversation with Radha and Shyam. There is not much information on Rani’s life before she got married. It is mentioned however that her marriage was in compliance with tradition an arranged one and casted all the family’s fortune.

In spite of her marrying to a man of lower social status than Radha she feels superior to her not only on the grounds of being a married woman who has had children. Unlike Radha she is verifiable, fertile and therefore extolled woman. Besides she is a woman who honors tradition that something that Radha does not seem to care about.
When Shyam was very particular in lighting a lamp, especially by Radha at home in the evening, Radha thinks that it is only an accessory to the house and she feels even a maid can do that. These two facts are the reason why she feels the need to tell her what to do and criticize her improper behavior.

Radha’s behavior is considered improper for various reasons, what they have in common is that on one hand hardly ever conforms the traditional female role that Rani expects her to play. Yet, on the other denies even the role of a modern woman that Radha would like to be. Radha’s staying at home instead of finding herself a job is considered as Radha’s greatest flaw and a reason to denounce anything in her behavior, her clothes, and even her cooking.

Rani Oppol, herself sticking to the traditional image of women, expects others to act in the same way. Her motivation for conforming to the rules is never explained. Rani may resemble a modern woman and even may try to be one, yet her demeanor as well as remarks shows that she values most the traditional way of life. Even though implying that Radha should find herself a job as a modern young woman, Rani still expects, her to dress modestly in sari and have children. Unless Radha fulfils such expectations, Rani is not willing to consider her equal. To her, Radha’s reluctance to fulfill the traditional role is of greater significance than her higher social status until she gives birth to an offspring. Radha’s life is to be dedicated to Shyam and Rani who knows her responsibilities and want to make her meet them.

The dilemma and oscillation in Radha’s mind about the importance of her marriage life with Shyam is clearly made known to the readers by Anita Nair. “I can’t say that I am unhappy with Shyam. If there are no heights, there are no lows; either… I think that 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.”(53) The agony that Radha undergoes by the treatment of Shyam considering her as a Mere Possession is explicit through these lines “I think of the butterfly I caught and pinned to a board when it was still alive, its wings and so as to display the markings, oblivious that somewhere within, a little heartbeat, yearning to fly. I am that butterfly now.” (54) These lines not only expresses Radha’s mind but the voice out the feelings of many married women who undergo the same kind of treatment by their husbands and how men do not want to consider them as their better half but only as a Mistress. The genuine expectation of a woman to be considered as equal by her husband is very neatly expressed.

Adultery being one of the main aspects dealt by Nair in this novel, Radha is not the First person to indulge in an extra marital relationship. It was her mother who had deep rooted this thought in her mind at a very early age. But then Radha felt that her mother shouldn’t have done so but later on commits the same mistake. Even this incident was shared by Radha not with her husband Shyam, but with Chris whom she had taken into confidence. The secret which she discarded as irrelevant until then, was shared with Chris shows her intimacy with him.

Radha experiencing the same kind of situation as her mother tries to justify the act thereby convinces her own self. Radha feels constrained in her marriage of convenience, her artistic soul needs freedom and seeks expression, and she is barely tolerant of Shyam, who sees as materialistic and boorish, with lowbrow aesthetic tastes. The sudden appearance of Chris in their midst causes her latent vibrancy to erupt with volcanic fury of emotions which changes the relationships she has with all three men.

When Koman talks about his past the readers get introduced to Lalitha. Both Koman and Radha have had a post marital relationship, when Koman proposed to marry Lalitha she instantly gave a reply through which she made it very clear that she was not interested in marriage, because she considered that it was the best way to lead her life. Lalitha is one more example of Anita Nair’s characters who feel that marriage would deprive her of her self-identity and freedom. Nevertheless she did not mind having an affair with a man without getting married to him.

The novel has splendid imagery and strong metaphors. It can be aptly called as a poem in prose. The blend between Kathakali and literature is unique in this novel. The novel fills the reader’s mind with emotions as filled by the unique art of Kathakali. Being a consummate writer with a deep understanding of human nature and matters of the heart, using a traditional dance form from India “ Kathakali” which depicts traditional ancient tales and characters, Nair weaves them into parallel lives set in modern India. She skillfully uses the
“moods” the traditional dances depict, such as love, peace, anger etc. into the stories of the main characters who struggle with issues of jealousy, fear, love and other desires.

Anita Nair is considered as a bold and straightforward writer. The novel *Mistress* reveals the effect of social conditioning on women in the name of culture and tradition. The characters of Anita Nair’s novels commit adultery and sacrilege as depicted in *Mistress*. They break the leash of social norms and do not confine themselves to the boundaries of women. Her female characters are bold and confident enough to fulfill their desires by going against the cultural norms of the society. Many of her characters experience sex before entering into the social institute of marriage or indulge in extra marital affairs that are strictly against the Indian society. She breaks the chains of the society portraying her women.

Some similarities can be found between the protagonists who learn to resist against such social atrocities by going beyond the family boundaries. In *Mistress* the character of Radha is bold and dominating. Being dissatisfied with her husband she opts for an extra marital affair with Chris, her husband Shyam tries his level best to bring her back to him, he is ready to forgive her for all her follies, he is ready to accept her at any cost.

In many of her novels, Anita Nair has depicted husband-wife relationship. Her female characters are bold enough to fulfill their desires by negating family bond and go up to the extent of establishing physical gratification with other men. The faithfulness in husband-wife relationship is lost, with a big question on the existence of such relationship.

Search for self or identity crisis is no longer confined to the individual. It can characterize a group, an institution, a class, a profession or even a nation. Anita Nair merges fiction with reality and makes female voices authentic. Her fictional women can be seen as pattern feel real women in everyday life, self effacing and self-sacrificing women, one can meet anywhere in Indian middle-class society. Most of them experience the burden of tradition.

Anita Nair doesn’t write to shake the system or the society. She is not an activist. She says that she doesn’t wear her ideology on her sleeve. She merely holds up a mirror of the middle-class society. She never intends to start a revolution in the society. Search for self and identity is the predominant theme with many writers especially in the postmodern writings. Anita Nair, a living postmodern Indian woman writer in English, has earned much critical attention and has been acclaimed both in Indian and abroad as a significant novelist.

The control identity that is imposed on women in the name of marriage by the society is no more a welcome aspect among the modern women who have started looking out for an individual identity with no tags attached to them in the name of any institution such as marriage and family. It is also evident that Indian writing especially by women writers reached a different phase or rather an advanced stage. The writers are enough to discuss sensitive issues and to break or change the cultural identity of women through their writings and are least bothered about negative criticism. They pave way to Indian women a life of their own.

**WORKS CITED**

