

## Unveiling Radha's Quest for Identity in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

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### **Abstract:-**

This research paper examines the theme of identity and self-discovery in Anita Nair's novel *Mistress*, with a specific focus on the character of Radha. The study explores Radha's journey towards unveiling her true identity and the challenges she faces in a society bound by traditional values and expectations. The paper analyzes the various elements of Radha's quest for identity, including her struggles within her marriage, her extramarital affair and her confrontation with societal norms. It examines how Nair portrays Radha's inner conflicts and her search for personal freedom and self-fulfillment. Through a comprehensive exploration of the novel's themes and narrative elements, it highlights the complexity and depth of Radha's journey, ultimately shedding light on the universal human desire for self-discovery and personal fulfillment.

**Key Words: Identity, Freedom, Self-realization, Self-discovery and Gender Roles.**

Anita Nair's novel *Mistress* is divided into three books, each further divided into nine chapters. These chapters represent the nine elemental emotions, known as 'Rasas,' in classical Indian poetics. They encompass Srirangam, Hasyam, Karunam, Raudram, Verram, Bhayanakam, Beebhalsam, Adbhutam, and Shaantam. These emotions serve as prominent states of life and reflect the struggles faced by the novel's protagonists. The story is set in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and the town of Arabipattanam. It is narrated in the first-person perspective, featuring multiple narrators. The mood of the novel is set by the prologue in the beginning of the novel:

Look at me. Look at my face. The naked face, devoid of color and make-up, glitter and adornment. What have we here? The forehead, the eyebrows, the nostrils, the mouth, the chin, and thirty-two facial muscles. These are our tools and with these

we shall fashion the language without words. The navarasa: love, contempt, sorrow, fury, courage, fear, disgust, wonder, peace. (MS 1)

The main protagonist of the novel is Radha, who faces challenges in her married life. She is a beautiful, well-educated, and financially independent woman before her marriage. However, she becomes involved with a senior manager at her workplace and becomes pregnant. When she confronts him and meets his wife, she realizes that he has deceived her with false promises of marriage after divorcing his wife. She also discovers that he has been involved in numerous affairs in the past. To protect the family's reputation, Radha's parents decide to arrange an abortion for her and force her into a marriage with Shyam, without considering her own wishes. Reluctantly, Radha accepts her father's decision. As Beauvoir observes, "The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage" (452).

Radha's marriage to Shyam is not a result of love or mutual understanding, but rather a compromise made to protect her family's reputation. She is not content in her married life and sees it as a sacrifice. On their wedding night, she openly admits to not being a virgin, as she did not want to live a life of a spinster. Shyam, on the other hand, agreed to marry Radha primarily for the wealth she would inherit from her father. He exhibits traditional behavior, seeking to control Radha's life. While he does not mind her engaging in activities to enhance her physical appearance, such as going to the parlor, he disapproves of her involvement in the factory and interacting with workers. He insists that Radha prioritize household responsibilities over her work at the factory. This dynamic reveals the unequal power dynamics and expectations placed on Radha as a wife within the confines of a patriarchal society.

But Radha becomes irritated about his behavior and says that, "I hope that is not going to undermine your standing in society. Is there anything I can do that won't? I wanted to teach in one of the primary schools and you said it was too much work for too little money. When I wanted to start a tuition class, you said the same. Then I wanted to start a crèche and you said you didn't want the house filled with bawling babies. So I thought I would find something else to do which didn't involve making money, but even that isn't right. Don't I have a right to an opinion? I am 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." (MS 73)

The arrival of Christopher Stewart, a foreigner, at Shyam's resort brings about a significant change in the lives of both Shyam and Radha. When Radha, accompanied by her uncle Koman and Shyam, goes to receive Chris at the railway station, she is immediately captivated by him as he pronounces her name, Radha, with precision. Radha finds Chris attractive and is intrigued by his presence. However, Shyam is displeased with Chris as he struggles to pronounce Shyam's name correctly, referring to him as "Sham" instead. Despite this, Shyam extends a warm welcome to Chris, hoping that he will write positively about his resort, Near-the-Nila, in his travelogue, thereby boosting his business. Shyam takes pride in discussing his efforts and achievements concerning the resort in front of Chris. This encounter with Chris sets the stage for new developments and potential shifts in dynamics within the story. He says:

Each time I look at Near-the-Nila, I feel a great frisson of excitement shoot through me. This is mine, I tell myself, all of it, from the concept to the last tile. If it wasn't for me, Shoranur would have remained a dying railway town. Now there is a tickle of life, which I have breathed into it. I, Shyam, twice removed poor nephew and outsider. It is I who have done this, nor the heaving bulwark of Radha's family.  
(MS 17-18)

Shyam consistently seeks to undermine Radha's opinions and assert his superiority over her. When Radha suggests painting the two giant statues of lions at the resort's main gate in white or terracotta color, Shyam immediately dismisses her idea, insisting that golden color is superior. In doing so, he subtly undermines Radha's identity and disregards her preferences. He expects Radha to always comply with his orders without expressing her own opinions or engaging in any arguments. Shyam constantly strives to demonstrate his intelligence and expertise in areas such as business matters, interior decoration, and public relations, attempting to establish himself as more knowledgeable than Radha. For instance, when Radha expresses her dislike for having an elephant in the resort, Shyam disregards her feelings and asserts his own perspective, he says:

Clichés are clichés because they are true. Besides I am not wrong in saying my guests expect it. Look you go to Rajasthan and you expect to see camels. You come to Kerala and you expect to see the elephants. Tourists like these things. It makes

travel exciting for them. Seeing thing they don't see at home, doing thing that they don't do at home. (MS 19)

Radha perceives her marriage to Shyam as a heavy responsibility and a burden, rather than a source of happiness. She yearns to be an equal partner to her husband, but Shyam regards her merely as a mistress and a prized possession. When Radha expresses her desire to pursue a career in teaching, Shyam dismisses it, claiming that it would offer little financial reward for a great deal of work. Similarly, when Radha suggests opening a crèche in their home, Shyam objects as he dislikes the idea of having many babies in their house. These rejections frustrate Radha, prompting her to seek solace by visiting her uncle Koman. To her delight, she discovers Chris sitting with him. Their eyes meet, and they both experience a sense of joy. Koman observes the uneasiness reflected in their gaze and begins to contemplate:

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. (MS 29)

Gradually, Koman becomes aware of Radha's growing attraction towards Chris. However, instead of objecting to their relationship, he feels joy seeing his niece happy. He decides not to interfere and starts supporting her in her pursuit of happiness. Koman realizes that Radha has not experienced this level of happiness in the eight years of her married life as she does now with Chris. He invites Radha and Shyam to his house to share his life story with Chris. However, Shyam is displeased with Radha's visits to Uncle Koman's house and her growing connection with Chris. He becomes jealous whenever he notices Radha's increasing interest in Chris. Radha herself is surprised by her attraction towards Chris, as she reflects on it:

I don't understand what is happening to me, a married woman, a wife. When I married Shyam, I swore I never to flout the rules of custom again. How have I become so disdainful of honor, so contemptuous of convention? (MS 54)

Although Radha's relationship with Chris proves to be a marital deception, she takes it as a reaction towards the challenges she has faced in developing her selfhood. When she develops physical relationship with Chris, she feels guilty after thinking about her husband Shyam. She

thinks, “What can I do? You knew I was married. I didn’t spring it on you, all of a sudden. Do you think I like lying, or that I enjoy this deception? It makes me feel sordid, too. It kills me, this guilt over what I am doing to Shyam. He has very frail sense of dignity and if someone found out about us, he wouldn’t be able to handle it” (MS 252).

This situation creates a sense of fear and doubt in Radha’s mind, leaving her feeling disgusted by her disillusionment. She finds herself caught between two conflicting emotions - on one hand, her relationship with Chris represents her protest against Shyam’s oppression, while on the other hand, her conscience makes her feel guilty for engaging in an extramarital affair. Radha confronts her inner thoughts and confesses to herself, “I feel disgust for what I am doing. Can anything be worth this repugnance? How much longer can I do this? This cheating, lying and pretence?” (MS 290)

Some critics argue that Radha’s actions of breaking the conventions of conventional marriage are justified as they enable her self-realization and transformation into a new woman. However, it is difficult to justify her actions solely based on the pursuit of freedom, as Radha herself questions the nature of her passion. She acknowledges that her relationship with Chris is driven by lust rather than genuine love or a sense of liberation. Radha’s inner voice raises an important question:

I am not listening to Chris. All I can hear is the beating of my own hart and an inner voice that berates me. How can you let lust rule you? There is nothing more stupid than careless lust. There is nothing more disgusting than your inability to control your wantonness. Do you want to undo all that you have been trying to build? Chris might want you like this, reeking of abandonment and sex, but in his heart he probably thinks you are a slut! Disgusting, disgusting, disgusting, it snickers. (MS 291)

Radha's journey of challenging societal values and exploring her own morality in the face of her extramarital relationship is complex. While she does not completely break free from her marriage with Shyam, she also doesn't find true identity or satisfaction in her affairs with Chris. Her actions cannot be seen as a justified expression of fidentity for a new woman. Despite breaking trust with both Shyam and Chris, Radha ultimately finds herself alone when Chris leaves for

London. Discovering her pregnancy, she decides to raise the child without its father, but Shyam unexpectedly expresses his love for her and accepts the child. In the midst of this, Radha confronts her own truth and confesses to herself:

All my life, I have stumbled from one thing to another, persuading myself that this is how I should be. I have never behaved as if I have a mind of my own. I have never made a decision. I have let myself be swept along. Isn't it time I assumed some responsibility for my life? What will you do? I don't know. But I will, one of these days. (MS 402)

At the end of the novel, Radha attains her self-realization in bringing up of her child by playing the role of a caring mother. Thus, the journey of Radha's life paves the way for her future happiness. As Beauvoir aptly observes, "If she is not complete individual as a wife, she becomes it as a mother: the child is her joy and justification. She reaches sexual and social self realization through him; it is thus thro' him that the institution of marriage has meaning and reaches its aim." (592)

In conclusion, Anita Nair's novel *Mistress* presents an insightful exploration of Radha's quest for identity. Through Radha's journey, the novel examines the complexities of self-discovery, personal growth, and the impact of societal norms and cultural influences on individual identity. Through a thorough character analysis, the paper examines Radha's evolution, her choices, and the internal conflicts she faces. It highlights her attempts to break free from societal expectations and traditions while also grappling with the consequences of her decisions. The exploration of Radha's relationships, particularly her extramarital affair with Chris, sheds light on her search for fulfillment and the complexities of human desires.

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