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TRADITION VERSUS MODERNITY: WOMEN IN ANITA NAIR'S NOVEL
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ABSTRACT

Feminism is a criticism of the prevailing social conditions, which have excluded women from the dominant male culture, social, political and intellectual pursuits. Modernity is clearly evident in the emergence of the new woman writing. The differences are notable in the pioneering work of modernist women writers. The focus of this paper will be on the expectations and also on the approaches the women examined to adopt either conform to them or revolt against them, by taking into consideration Anita Nair's *Mistress*. It is an undeniable fact that women have not only been denied existence as complete human beings, physically and mentally set to perform on a egalitarianism with men, but also destitute of the opportunity to give expression to their feelings, their fears and their distress.

Key Words: Changing roles, Quest, Marriage, Patriarchy.

The Indian Writing in English from its beginning is strongly connected with the growth and development of India as a nation. Wide ranges of themes are dealt in Indian Writing in English. This literature reflects Indian culture, tradition, social values and even Indian history through the depiction of life in India. Raymond Williams has pointed out in *The Long Revolution*, "There is an undeniable relationship between literature and society. As a society changes, its literature changes . . . for it is a part of social growth and not simply its reflection" (528). The nature and form of Indian fiction in English has undergone a tremendous change with the advent of the new generation writers.

Anita Nair highlights all the shades of sufferings and dilemmas of educated middle-class Indian women in her novels. Nair's fictional world is overwhelmed by the presence of women characters influenced by the modern education and thinking, economic freedom and employment opportunities. They are self-assertive, pragmatic and bold enough to think freely, take very casually even the serious issues like love, marriage, family and sex.

This paper focuses on how the women characters of Anita Nair cope with the opposing influence of conservatism and modernity in their lives. It tries to consider the innumerable counteracting force in any woman's life, which directs her actions and choice to choose between a traditional and modern perspective in her life. Anita Nair realistically portrays traditional and modern women in all her novels.

Anita Nair is the living writer of this century an Indian English writer par excellence. Her creativity and intelligence stood by her in all her novels. She is regarded as one of the leading novelists in Indian English literature. She was born at Mundakottakurissi near Shoranur in Kerala on January 26, 1966. Anita Nair is a writer of many novels. Her novels are *The Better Man* (2000), *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Mistress* (2005), *Lessons*

in *Forgetting* (2010), *Cut Like Wound* (2012), *Idris: Keeper of the Light* (2014) and *Chain of Custody* (2016). The novel selected for this study is *Mistress*.

In the novel, *Mistress*, the story revolves round the Kathakali dancer Koman, his niece Radha, and a travel writer, Christopher Stewart who comes to India to write about Koman. The locale of the novel is the banks of the river Nila in Kerala. Koman, a famous Kathakali artist, and her niece Radha receives Chris at the railway station. From their first meeting, both Radha and her uncle are deeply impressed by this young man. Radha is a true representation of the modern Indian woman. In spite of her origin as a daughter of a middle class traditional family, while studying and in the years following her education, Radha became well aware of her possibilities. Living in a large city away from home, having a job and later even a lover, she likes to think of herself as of an independent young woman who can freely decide about her life.

Ironically, it is precisely her independent way of life that makes her go back to her family. By being married to Shyam, she is forced to become the traditional woman. Shyam's relationship to her is somewhat ambivalent. On one hand he is proud of her being a modern woman who knows what she wants to achieve in her life, on the other hand, he hinders her from achieving it. Radha impresses him and is willing to follow many of her decisions. Thus, Radha finds herself in between her longing for independence, which is acknowledged to a certain degree and the traditional role that she is to play. Although she, at the beginning of her marriage, decides "never to flout the rules of custom again," (54), she still feels trampled by the expectation that Shyam has. In his eyes she is to play a modern wife whose utmost wish is to please her husband. While her first violation of the social rules was motivated by the urge to pursue her love and conduct herself according to her wishes rather than social convention brought her to the decision to follow the social conventions, the actual following of the conventions brings back the longing in her to follow her wishes regardless the rules. This dilemma is inevitably the theme of the novel—and Saadiya's pursuit of freedom can be seen as a variation on the theme.

The closer to the ideal of a housewife Radha gets, the more she feels the need to escape. The more boundaries she crosses, however, the more she tends to get back to her role of a wife. The longing for adventure as well as the guilt she feels while pursuing it is the main driving power that makes her sway between her duty to Shyam and her attraction to Chris.

The two men stand for a safe yet dull and tiring life full of stereotypes in which she is unable to realise herself fully on one hand and an exciting yet strange life full of the unexpected that makes her feel alive again. She feels trapped by the expectation that are applied to her, such as having a baby or being a "glossy, silly wife" (61) and struggles to find a way out so that she could breath freely. While Chris gives her, at least in her eyes, the space she needs in able to breathe freely, Shyam expects her to behave in the way his situation requires, denying her own individual choices. "I look at him. With every moment the thought hinges itself deeper into my mind: what an attractive man" (8)

Radha feels that for her husband, she is merely "a much cherished possession" and what he really wants is a mistress" (54), His expectations "Does she ever consider that such silly acts have repercussions? Besides, what will my friends and their wives say if they find out? We have a place in society. Radha has always treated rather carelessly" (70) in contrast to Radha's feelings "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 fulfil your sexual needs and with no rights" (72).

In the face of several confrontations with Shyam and the anguish of being, denied freedom, she longs for the intimate company of Chris. Her affair with Chris is such an attempt to engage herself fully in a relationship with a man who appreciates her needs and lets her breath. This is a second major violation of the rules that is supposed to help her realise herself in a relationship where she would be, just like the women she reads about or whom she sees in the television, able to realize herself. The violation does not, however, prove to be an efficient one, in that sense that she does not find the space for self realization she is looking for. Nonetheless, it helps her redefine her self-image and point out what she is, and even more so what she is not looking for in her life. But the narrative resolves the dilemma in an entirely novel way, with Radha realizing the flaws of and in a sense, also the similarity between— Chris and Shyam.

As the novel ends, Radha is in a dilemma when she thinks of returning to Shyam for support: "It is fear that makes me seek him, not regard for him..... I cannot continue to play wife merely because it frees me of worries: (426). It is ironic then, that the point of life when she finally finds the strength for the greatest revolt in her life and leaves her husband in order to realize herself is the point, when she becomes an undercoated woman in the eyes of the tradition that is when she finally conceives a child.

For Radha, the main motivation to violate the rules that limit her life is to find the freedom she is looking for and the expression for her life as she wants to live it. However, most of the individual violations are empty attempts to achieve this goal. Never being really able to find her place in the society, being first a lover of a man who did not appreciate her fully, then a wife to a husband she did not love, she is trying to retrieve her true self. It is only through struggles and arguments with her husband and an affair with a stranger that she finally manages to determine her future and gathers the courage to realise it. So Radha is called "a new Indian woman" in this modern world. The life of a woman is considered a public affair, her personal revolts are consequently revolts against the society as a whole, and the punishment their responsibility. The public character of the lives of women gives the society the authority to exercise power over them and make them conform to the social codes. The degree in which women accept this authority differs, yet the pressure of the society and the principle is the same.

In the article "From Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism" Jean Francois Lyotard expresses:

A postmodern artist is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged, according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. (337)

Anita Nair highlights all the shades of sufferings and dilemmas of educated middle-class Indian women and portrays realistically traditional and modern women in her novel. The new empowered modern woman character of Anita Nair is constantly, and consciously engaged in a battle against the ideological impositions, and power operations of patriarchy. The novelist proves that this struggle is painful but unavoidable because nothing worthwhile in the life of women comes without a battle against patriarchy and prejudices.

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