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**SPECIFIC MALAYALI'S CULTURAL TRAITS AS REFLECTED IN ANITA NAIR'S *MISTRESS*
AND *IDRIS*: A CRITICAL STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

Culture is both local and global and it is reflected in language, literature and religion. This paper attempts to identify the Kerala cultural traits as reflected in a well-known modern Malayali writer, Anita Nair's novels in English viz., *Mistress* (2005) and *Idris* (2014). The major focus is on Kathakali, a classical dance tradition and Kalari, a school of martial arts, which constitute an integral part of the culture of the State of Kerala in India. Kathakali a unique dance form of Kerala, is practiced by dance-artists known as veshakarans, who perform different roles in mythological episodes drawn from classical Indian literature in depicting the navarasas of Indian aesthetics viz., Sringaaram, Haasyam, Karunam, Roudram, Veeram, Bhayaanakam, Beebhalsam, Adbhutam, and Shaantam. It is also attempted in this paper to show how some of these rasas are reflected in the lives of the major characters of the selected novel. Likewise the impact of Kalari in the life of Kandavar, a major character in *Idris* is also explained.

Keywords: Kathakali, navarasas, kalari, martial arts

Introduction

Culture as a unique possession of mankind has two dimensions: local culture and global culture. In India all states share a single culture as the national culture while each state has its own shades of distinct culture. Likewise, there is a universal or global culture shared by all civilized nations of the world while each nation is marked by its own individual or national culture. The culture of a nation is reflected in its language, literature, and religion, a number of social practices, rituals and folklore. For example, western culture is reflected in classical literature, the *Bible*, their mythologies and folklore. The Indian culture likewise is found in *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata* etc. as also in different folkloristic traditions. As a famous American socio-linguist, Ferguson, remarked "India is a linguistic giant." This applies to Indian culture and literature also because in India there are a large number of languages with their literatures and folklore, different religions and socio-cultural practices. Each state in India has its own distinct culture though it shares the pan-Indian culture. In this respect Kerala as a regional state of South India is marked by different local cultural traditions. In the field of dance, if Tamilnadu is known for Bharatanatyam, Andhra Pradesh for Kuchipudi, and Orissa for Odysse, Assam for Kathak, Kerala is known for Kathakali. Likewise, there are different schools of martial arts all over India, but Kerala is distinguished for Kalari. Many works of modern literature in Malayalam and as

well as in English deal with the distinct culture of Kerala, in particular or general terms. The works of modern writers like Anita Nair also share this quality. If her realistic novel *Mistress* has Kathakali for its backdrop, her historical novel *Idris* deals with Kalari.

In this paper an attempt is made to discuss how Anita Nair highlights these two distinct cultural traditions viz. Kathakali and Kalari in her two novels *Mistress* (2005) and *Idris* (2014) respectively.

Mistress: Kathakali

Mistress is the story of Radha, the protagonist of the novel. The theme of the novel is woven around a triangular love affair between Radha, Shyam and Chris. Radha has pre-marital sex and an abortion, and afterwards marries Shyam, an upcoming entrepreneur at the behest of her father without much love for him. Later she falls in love with a young British journalist, Christopher Stewart, who visits their town in Kerala. Koman, Radha's uncle, is a Kathakali dance artist and lives alone on the banks of the Nila in a cottage. He has a paternal affection for Radha and silently supports the illicit love between Radha and Chris. Shyam is jealous and suspicious. Radha becomes pregnant obviously through Chris because Shyam's sperm is clinically declared to be infertile. Following the conflict of opinions about East-West, Radha and Chris are faced with a strained love relationship. Chris comes to India from England under the pretext of writing a book on Koman as a Kathakali artist. He has a suspicion that Koman, the past lover of his mother Angela, may be his father. When his suspicion is resolved by Koman, who says that he is not Chris's father, Chris leaves for England suddenly. Radha is greatly disappointed while Shyam is jubilant. Finally Radha decides to live independently and look after her prospective child because she is financially independent.

The major characters of this novel are Koman, Radha, Shyam and Chris. Each of these characters is affected by Kathakali directly or indirectly. Koman is the uncle of Radha, who is a professional dancer of Kathakali and runs the dance school on the banks of the Nila.

An important theme in the novel is the Kathakali dance art form, which is performed by professional veshakarans depicting each of the navarasas of Indian aesthetics in different dramatic performances of Hindu mythological episodes. The navarasas are interwoven into the stories of major characters.

The nine rasas are 1. Sringaaram (love/amour) 2. Haasyam (humour/laughter) 3. Karunam (mercy/compassion) 4. Raudram (anger/rage) 5. Veeram (valour/bravery) 6. Bhayaanakam (terrible/fearful) 7. Beebhalsam (horror/repugnance) 8. Adbhutam (wonder/amazement) 9. Shaantam (peace/serenity). These rasas are embodied in each of these major characters either in single or collective manifestation. This may be explained as follows.

Koman learns Kathakali dance from Aashan and later establishes a dance school. He successfully plays the major roles in certain Malayali Kathakali performances like "Kirmiravadham", "Subhadraharnam", "Kalyanasougandhikam", and "Keechaka Vadham", which have continual allusions to *Nalacharitham*, written in Malayalam by Unnayi Warriar. In Kathakali, the nine rasas are enacted by different roles in dance-drama performances. The stories of Radha, Shyam, and Chris are presented as mythological parallels to the performances above, through Koman's sensibility.

Radha: Radha is the protagonist of the novel and this is symbolically represented in the title of the novel *Mistress*.

Oxford Reference Dictionary (1995) gives the following six meanings of the word "mistress:"

1. A female head of a household,
2. a. A woman in authority over others, b. The female owner of a pet,
3. A woman with power to control etc.,
4. a. A female teacher b. A female head of a college,
5. a. A woman (other than his wife) with whom a married man has a (usu. prolonged) sexual relationship, b. Archaic or poetic. i.e. A woman loved and courted by a man,
6. Archaic or dial. Cited (As a title) = MRS.

The very title *Mistress* basically refers to the character of Radha in the novel. Most of these meanings apply to Radha's story and character. The nine rasas are symbolically dramatized in Radha's life as follows:

Sringaara rasa in its perverted form (Sringaara Rasabasa) manifests itself in Radha's life in her love-relationship with Chris, in spite of being a married woman. Her real husband is Shyam.

Haasyam in Radha's is manifested as irony or satire. For example she compares herself in bed with Shyam, to a butterfly under deception.

Concerning the rasa of Karunam, we find several instances in Radha's life that move her into tears. One such example is the episode in which she happens to watch, as a girl of seven years, her mother succumbing to the advances of love made by Mani, her father Babu's elder brother. In fact her mother was to marry Mani, but circumstances forced her to get married to Babu. Radha who does not know about this, misunderstands her mother who is in the embrace of a man who is not her husband. Child Radha observes tears in her mother's eyes and her mother's secret love with a stranger is outrageous to Radha. Noticing her mother's fears, Radha also weeps. Karunam manifests itself in this episode.

Raudram as a rasa is not displayed in Radha's character. Regarding Veeram, we find this rasa in abundance in Radha. She is a very courageous person as a girl, as a teenager, as a married woman and as a pregnant woman. In all these different stages of life she behaves in a courageous way but her courage is not directed to do any socially accepted righteous deed. Her courage and carelessness is displayed when she as a small girl wants Mani to leave her mother and reports this to her father, in her pre-marital sex with a married man and father of three children, her tolerance of her husband's amorous behavior though she does not love him, in her courage to withstand separation with Chris, her lover and finally her decision to live alone independently after she becomes pregnant through Chris. In all these crucial situations of her life Radha behaves in a brave manner though her bravery is misdirected.

Like Raudram there is no room for Bhayaanakam, Bheebalsam and Adbhutam in Radha's life except her own deviant behavior.

However, there is a situation in which Radha envisages Shaantam when she decides to live alone as an independent woman and to look after her prospective child.

Shyam: In the case of Shyam, Radha's husband, we find the rasas of Shringaaram, Karunam, Veeram, and Shaantam. There is no scope for Haasyam, Raudram, Bhayaanakam and Adbhutam in his unromantic and profit-seeking life.

His Sringaara is manifested as his blind love for Radha whom he marries in spite of his knowledge about her pre-marital sex, only for the sake of material gratification. Having been born in poor circumstances he develops an ambition to become rich and marriage with Radha is a god-send for him.

The rasa of Karuna can be found in Shyam's character when he forgives his wife Radha for her adultery.

His Veeram is displayed in his courage to take risks for material growth as an entrepreneur and his success and future plans to expand his business. His courage is manifested in his firmness of character to continue his love for Radha, in spite of the fact that he can't father any children.

His Shaantam is revealed when he compromises with the disturbances in his, connubial relations, forgives his wife, accepts her pregnancy and decides to live happily and peacefully with his wife having been relieved by Chris's departure to England.

Chris: A young British journalist, Christopher Stewart (Chris for short), comes to India from England under the pretext of writing a biography of Koman, a famous Kathakali artist in India. He wants to verify whether Koman is his father because the latter being his own mother, Angela's lover in the past. However, this is only a suspicion on his part. In one of his interviews with Koman his suspicion is resolved when Koman candidly declares that he is not Chris's father. Meanwhile Radha lures Chris into the secret love affair and Chris leaves for England after sometime. Radha's husband Shyam develops a suspicion about the relationship between his wife and Chris. Radha becomes pregnant through Chris but their separation becomes indispensable when Chris decides to leave India for three reasons: he is ashamed of his adulterous relationship with Radha, secondly, he has a dispute with

Radha regarding East-West relations and thirdly his main question about his paternal identity concerning which he has come to India, and he is answered unambiguously.

In the case of Chris the only rasa manifested is Srīngāra in its perverted form; it becomes *shringāra:ra:bha:sa*. The other rasas are little displayed in the character of Chris. His journey from England to India and his acceptance of Radha's love despite its adulterous nature may be considered to be indicative of his valour/bravery (*Veeram*) in a negative sense.

Koman: Koman is Radha's uncle and he is an old man now living in peace and solitude in a cottage on the banks of the Nila. He is a famous Kathakali artist and *veshakaran*. He also ran a dance school in the past where Angela, a British woman, joined as a student and subsequently became his lover.

In Koman's case Srīngāra is manifested in his love affairs with Angela, Maya, his friend and fan of Kathakali from Chennai, Lalitha, a village prostitute at different stages of his life.

Rasa of *Karunam* is dramatized in Koman's life on different occasions. For example his narration of his father's checkered and adventurous life unambiguously reflects his empathy with his father's changing moods and fortunes. Sethu, his father, as a boy, ran away from home having been afraid of mathematics in his school studies, passes through a number of ups and downs. He boards a train to go to Madras. But it is a wrong train that goes to Rameshwaram. In the compartment, when he cries over his mistake, an elderly couple console him and take him to Rameshwaram and then from there to Colombo. The woman likes him very much and the man encourages Sethu to complete a one year course in health inspector's training. He moves to Kandy where he meets Balu another young man, who after sometime is transferred to the Quarantine camp. After one year, Sethu goes there and intimacy develops between them. One evening after continuous drinking, Balu recollects his Colombo days and reveals the evil side of his master who happens to be Maash, who is none other than Sethu's mentor at Colombo. When Balu reveals that Maash has died at home in Colombo Sethu stabs Balu in a fit of anger and runs away to the sea. There, he is taken into a fisherman's boat which after some time is capsized and he is about to drown. Then he is saved by the Kondai sisters who are nurses, and is taken to the hospital which is run by Dr. Samuel Sagayaraj at Nazareth.

Dr. Samuel and the three nurses mistake Sethu for a Christian and make him join the hospital service as Dr. Samuel's assistant. The epidemic of cholera breaks out in the villages nearby. To help the affected people, Dr. Samuel and Sethu go round the villages giving medicines to the victims. When the stock of medicines is exhausted at the hospital, Sethu steals the necessary medicines from a government pharmaceutical store in a neighboring village and brings them to Nazareth hospital on a bicycle. Dr. Samuel is very happy over Sethu's courage and congratulates him. In their health service tours they pass through a small village which is a Brahmin ghetto. The doctor and his assistant are surprised to know that the Brahmins of that village eat pork secretly as ordered by their deity.

The health service team goes to a small Muslim town called Arabhipatnam where the doctor is called to help a pregnant woman. For the first time, Sethu accompanies the doctor, happens to see a young and pretty Muslim girl, Saadiya Mehrunnisa by name, a daughter of the local Hazi. The next day Sethu wanders out and meets Saadiya in a desolate lane. They fall in love with each other and continue to meet secretly. When her father arranges her marriage engagement, with a young man from a local Muslim family, Saadiya expresses her unwillingness to marry that Muslim youth.

One night, she comes to Sethu's room secretly and Dr. Samuel who notices this, gets infuriated at the breach of trust by Sethu. When Saadiya's parents and other Muslims come to know about the forbidden love between Saadiya and Sethu, the local Muslim religious council sentences them to severe punishment. Hazi and his family are ostracized and Saadiya is expelled from the family. Sethu is dismissed from his hospital service. He is employed by James Raj, an illiterate Christian businessman, to look after his accounts. Sethu and Saadiya live happily for some time. When Saadiya becomes pregnant, Saadiya feels nostalgic and requests Sethu to bring her a copy of the *Koran*. Sethu feels intrigued, realizing that Saadiya is sinking back into her religious superstitions.

She does not want the baby to come out, thinking that the baby is the result of their sin. The change in her attitude shocks Sethu. After the baby is born there is a quarrel between them about the baby's name.

One day, when Sethu is away, Saadiya leaves the male child at home, runs to the sea and commits suicide by drowning herself. Sethu feels helpless, leaves the child under the protection of one of the nurses at Nazareth. He goes to Shoranur, buys a piece of land with his savings and settles down there. He prospers in his business and agriculture, marries Devayani and becomes father of two sons. The doctor brings back to Sethu, his first son, who is now twelve years old. The boy is called Koman and invited into the family by his step mother and step brothers.

Almost all the rasas are manifested in Sethu's life. While narrating his father's story Koman experiences all these rasas vicariously. When he is active as a professional Kathakali dance, he play different roles in different mythological performances and successfully enacts almost all the rasas.

Idris: Kalari

Idris is a historical and eponymous novel that portrays the character and life of Idris, a Somalian tradesman who describes himself as "Idris, Maymoon Samataar Guleed, and Previously of Dikhil, now an eternal traveler, seeking the measure of earth and man." (IS 19)

Another institution that deserves mention is the "kalari" system in Kerala. Years ago it so happened that a group of twelve Thulanadu Brahmin warriors were invited by the king Cheramau Perumal to serve his court of Valluvanad. These warriors are the masters of all the eighteen concepts of warfare of which the eighteenth concept involves flinging sand in the enemy's eye with a quick moment of the shield and feet, which makes them invincible. They move to the new land, establish a version of "garadi" (or their martial arts school) also called "kalari" locally. They maintain gymnasiums and fight battles for the king which makes him more powerful than ever. When King Cheraman Perumaal leaves for Mecca, the Zamorin becomes king. Once it so happens that after a victory when the twelve "Gurukkal" (i.e. masters) return home, an untouchable, Nayadi, in distance beats coconut husks with a stick. He does not care for them nor does he respect them. Outraged by his total disregard, they apply their eighteenth concept of war i.e. flinging sand in his eyes. To their surprise he resists and protects himself with little leaps and other bodily movements. One of the "Gurukkal", Deva by name, asks him how he could do that and Deva suggests that they can learn the new concept from Nayadi. The remaining "Gurukkal" laugh at him and walk away. Deva walks towards the Nayadi, offers him a pouch of gold coins along with two beetel leaves and areca nuts, requests him to take him as his student and teach him that new concept. This is the nineteenth concept called "marmachikilsa" healing or hurting by pressure on the sixty-four vital spots. Deva is not allowed to enter his house after his return because he is already excommunicated and his funeral rites have been performed because he associates himself with an untouchable. Caste traditions have been so severe in that part of the country. Left with no other alternative, he goes to Ponnani temple of Islam and becomes a Muslim like Cheraman Perumaal. He sets up a new "kalari", a version of their "garadi" or martial arts school, replicating the original house of Tullanadu Brahmins. This is inherited by Baapa "Gurukkal".

Training for boys in a "kalari" is also part of the education system during the seventeenth century with particular reference to Kerala. There is a mention in the novel of two "kalaries" or schools of martial arts and other exercises for physical fitness and discipline. One is the "kalari" maintained by Baapa "Gurukkal" and the other is Ravunni "Gurukkal". The former mainly gives training the boys to become "Chavers" or warriors who want to attack the Zamorin while the latter provides training not only in martial arts but also in moral principles, mental discipline and application of herbal medicine. Kandavar is admitted in the Ravunni "Gurukkal" because his uncle Chandu Nair does not want him to become a "Chaver". There is a detailed description of the "kalari" of Ravunni "Gurukkal", as follows.

Ravunni "Gurukkal" is located on the banks of the Nila which becomes ferocious during the rainy season, on a wide elevated ground. The "kalari" is excavated on ground two and half feet (one "kol") and on the ground, the walls are built to a height of another "kol". From these walls the roof is built on the bamboo poles that rise to the air. In other words, the "kalari" is constructed according to principles of the traditional

architecture prescribed for “kalari”. This tradition is followed to avoid “mritayogam” or accidents or deaths. Idris wonders at the tradition and is reminded of how sailors are guided by the stars. Ravunni “Gurukkal” descends into the “kalari” and salutes the earth. He explains to Idris that all these are part of the “kalari” tradition to inculcate concentration and single-mindedness in the students. There are seven steps leading down to the “kalari”, each step presided and blessed by a deity of power as explained below.

“Vignesh” on the first step, wards off obstacles, “Bhumi” on the second step, teaches patience, “Vishnu” on the third step, gives power to destroy enemies, “Vadukika” or Lightning on the fourth step bestows power with speed and quickness, “The Guru” on the fifth step imparts power with his blessings, the “Kali” on the sixth step provides the fury of courage and finally “Vagastapuruso” on the seventh step blesses the warrior with a fierce animal roar that scares the enemy. Similarly different corners of the eight directions are presided by different deities and gurus. “Andhiveran” guards north-western corner, “Badrakali”, the north-eastern corner and the west is guarded by twenty one past gurus. All of them are worshipped so that they make the “kalari” their home and bless the students prosper. The “Gurukkal” takes only eighteen students for this season so that he is able to pay individual attention to each student. Idris is slightly disheartened whether Kandavar completely forgets his ambition to become a “Chaver” under the influence of the training given in martial arts at this “kalari”.

It may be said that the education system in the seventeenth century Kerala is totally traditional and confined to a study of Vedic and classical Sanskrit texts, Arithmetic, Music, martial arts and herbal medicine while girls are excluded entirely from this system of education under the influence of patriarchy, in spite of the fact that Kerala culture is matrilineal in nature.

Kandavar, the son of Kuttimallu through Idris displays an unusual enthusiasm to get trained as a “Chaver” warrior. Chandu Nair is fully aware that the career of a “Chaver” warrior is suicidal and Kandavar’s life may be nipped in the bud, if he becomes a “Chaver”. After some deliberation they admit the boy in Ravunni “Gurukkal” where physical training and martial arts are taught along with health regulation, discipline and good manners unlike in the Baapa “Gurukkal” where the main focus is only on Martial Arts and revenge.

Earlier on their way to “Vattoli tharavad”, Idris along with Kandavar happens to witness a cruel punishment inflicted by the local jury headed by Neelakantan Namboodiri, the present consort of Kuttimalu, on an innocent barber wrongly accused for the theft of a gold chain. The barber’s hand is burnt and he is imprisoned in a cell on the ordeal ground. On the third day his guilt or innocence is to be proved. Idris takes pity on the poor and innocent barber and on the first night he goes to the barber under the cover of darkness and applies herbal medicine made of papaya on the barber’s burnt hands. When the cover of cloth on the hand, is removed on the Day of Judgment, the burns of his hands are completely healed. This incident highlights Idris’s love and help for fellow human beings, particularly the poor and helpless as well as his expertise in herbal medicine.

During his four month stay at “Vattoli tharavad” and Baapa “Gurukkal”, Idris goes to Kodanglur to offer his prayers at the famous Juma Masjid during Ramzan. This reflects his religious faith as a true Muslim.

Idris promises to Chandu Nair that he takes care of the boy after some time and leaves for Mishkalpalli in Kuttichitra near Kozhikode, where he makes acquaintance with Sala Pokkar, an Arabic khalasi who is destined to be his follower during his travels in Malabar, Ceylon and the Coramandal coast in south India. Waiting for a ship to resume his voyages at Mishkalpalli, Idris remembers his son and decides to see him as there is enough time for the ship to set sail. He returns to “Vattoli tharavad”.

On Chandu Nair’s request to divert Kandavar’s mind from his ‘Chaver’s’ passion, Idris agrees to take the boy along with him on his tours so that the boy experiences the wide world and learns to think practically and logically to become worldly-wise.

Conclusion

In this paper two important cultural institutions of the state of Kerala in South India, viz. Kathakali and Kalari have been explained as they are portrayed in *Mistress* and *Idris*, two English novels by Anita Nair, a well-

known contemporary Indian woman novelist. Today these two cultural institutions of Kerala have gradually spread into other states of India as a result of migration due to employment of Malayali people. These two cultural traditions or now well known throughout India due to individual and collective efforts of people of Kerala as well as their government. Likewise, the other states of India should make their own specific cultural traditions spread all over the nation. The basic assumption underlying this paper that literature reflects culture is amply proved in the discussion above.

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