

## **Cultural Identity in Anita Nair's *Mistress***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Mistress* is one of the familiar novels of Anita Nair. She depicts the 'Navarasas' in the novel. It means nine faces of expression mentioned in the Kathakali dance. The novel *Mistress* is split into nine headings. They are Sringeram, Haasyam, Karunam, Raudram, Veeram, Bhayaanakam, Beebhalsam, Adbhutam and Shaantam. Kathakali is about the structure of the character and how the face must be changed according to their dance. The novel is about the relationship between a husband and his wife.

Anita Nair discusses the cultural clashes between Indian culture and western culture. According to Anita Nair, cultural identity is one of the important identities in society and also in the country. Koman is a person who can choose his own identity in the cultural aspects and also in religion. By birth he is a Muslim boy and his name is Omar Masood. This name was chosen by his mother Saadiya. After his mother's suicide, Sethu changed his son's name to Koman. Then he is brought up by a doctor named Samuel. He has a surrogate mother, a Christian nurse. The name of the nurse is Faith.

Keywords: Kathakali artist, cultural identity, traditional life, encounter, isolation.

Samuel Freeman says:

Multiculturalists advocates that one's cultural identity is so central to a person's good, each distinct cultural group in a multicultural society should recognize and respect the cultural practices of others and not impose its norms, particularly its liberal norms, on them (19)

Kathakali is one of the important forms of classical dance in India. It involves the art and life of the individual man. A Kathakali artist is a person, who wears colourful costumes. The dancer's face is painted with bright colours. The facial expression of the dancer keeps changing. In Kerala, Kathakali is one of the popular dances performed by a male actor.

Bhikhu Parekh declares on the value of culture:

Multiculturalism makes culture the central fact of moral and political life and is committed to some form of moral relativism. It holds that individuals, are culturally embedded and shaped, that their culture is the most important fact of their life, that cultures are self-contained wholes and neither permit nor can be evaluated by transcultural and universal standards, that they are or should be presumed to be equal value, and that cultural practices need no further authority than the fact they are part of a group's culture. (136)

One of the important characters in Anita Nair's *Mistress* is Koman. He is interested in studying Kathakali. He joins a Kathakali dance class. The artist who is involved in the Kathakali dance must perform on the stage with his heart and soul. Koman's father Sethu is highly critical of his son. He disapproves his son's interest in Kathakali.

Koman is in close contact with people of different religions. His father Sethu is a Hindu. His mother Saadiya was an Muslim. Koman is brought by a Christian nurse named Faith. Koman wants his own religious and cultural identity. Koman's Kathakali teacher Aashaan gives him information about the classical dance Kathakali. The mind and the soul must be united together and the expression of the face, eyes, lips etc. The Kathakali artist is under the control of art and also life. If he hears the drum beat, he realises that his body is suddenly responding to that beat.

Aashaan gives some thought provoking advice to Koman:

You can't be immune to ordinary feelings. Until you know what it is to be human, you can't play a mortal. Do you hear me? Koman, there is life beyond kathakali. The sooner you accept that, the better it will be for you. Aashaan said what he had to, but he knew as I did that there wasn't a life beyond kathakali for us. This was to be both our blessing and curse. (*Mistress* 275)

Aashaan helps Koman improve his Kathakali dance. He has a mutual understanding with his student Koman. They often talk about Aashaan's experiences in society. At first Koman lacks confidence because of the comments some critics. Aashaan told Koman that if the artist is not involved in his dance, the fact must be changed.

At first Koman is worried about others words of criticism and he is not happy about Kathakali dance. So he starts drinking and womanizing. When he drinks he gets some pleasures in the world and it seems to give some strength to his mind and body. He is a good man by nature, but he becomes a slave to drink.

Koman is involved in some activities like shooting. He gets a sense of power when he goes shooting. After some time, he realises that this activity has a positive effect on his mind. Aashaan tells Koman that the artist must be conscious of the different aspects of Kathakali

dance. He is scolded by the senior artists. After that he changes his attitudes and develops his personality. Aashaan describes the role of the artist thus:

An artist is a slave to his art. It rules him. It determines his life. It won't let him compromise. It won't let him accept mediocrity. It is his conscience. A performer? There are so many performers. People who go through the motions of exercising what they think is art. They are not artists. (Mistress 281)

Koman sits on the river bank and he thinks about the past. He also thinks about himself as a Kathakali dancer. Angela is one of the students in Aashaan's school. Her parents are German and Spanish. She is learning Kathakali for her dissertation work. The work must be for two years. Angela and Koman is meeting in the dance class. They fall in love. They start living together.

The relationship between Angela and Koman is not a peaceful one. They follow different cultures and religions. Angela cannot adjust to the different customs and traditions in India. She says, 'I feel suffocated here. What am I doing here, Koman?' I asked suddenly. 'I can't fritter my life away as I am doing now' (Mistress 372)

Angela does not like Indian culture. She is staying in India only for her dissertation work. She prefers to go back to her own place. Koman will become a popular man in London by using Kathakali dance. But their plan ends in a failure. So he feels sad about his artistic life in London. Angela says, "Think of it, Koman. You will be famous all over the world. Your talent deserves a worldwide audience. You do realize, don't you, that you are being wasted here' (Mistress 375).

Koman is depressed in London. Kathakali is not liked by the western people and his life becomes worthless. He is dependant upon his girl friend Angela. Koman keeps thinking about his native place Kerala. In India he used to eat different types of food. The climatic conditions in London are very different. In Kerala he used to eat delicious food and meals of brown rice. He longs for papaya cooked in butter milk.

Not these bleached white grains, but reddish-brown rice still tasting of the earth and sunshine. There would be a curry of green papaya cooked in buttermilk and a piece of fried fish. Dried sole, or chunks of dried shark. Pappadum on the side and mango pickle. My mouth watered. Where in this city could I find what I hungered for? (Mistress 378)

But in London he has to eat bread and drink a cup of tea. There is no variety of food. He thinks about his own culture and country. So the food items and climatic conditions make him nostalgic. He does not like London. He does not know other skills to do some work. He earns

some money by working as a cook. In London there is an Indian Restaurant. So he works in that place. He feels that he is inferior to the English people.

Angela gives cigarettes and books to Koman. He loses his name and fame in London. Koman says,

I saw the drops of water splash against the window. In my home even the sound of the rain was different. Here, the rain was feeble and the smell of it was a musty, dank odour of unwashed bodies and rational heat. Grey skies, the stale, sour smell of damp, and a perpetual hunger (Mistress 378)

In England, people are not familiar with Kathakali dance. He made a mistake when he listened to Angela's advice and went to London. He is ashamed of his job as a Kathakali artist. He has an inferiority complex about the colour. He remembers his independent life and self respect in Kerala. He was respected in Kerala, and laughed at in London. He mentions his complexion and asks Angela this question:

So it is because I am not white...' Perhaps it was then that I felt Bahukan's hues settle on me. I held her hand alongside mine. Hers was creamy. Mine, in contrast, was muddy. Coffee with a cloud of milk. 'Angela, tell me, does it make a difference to you? My colour?' (Mistress 389)

Koman believes Angela when she says she can help him by talking to some royal people about his dance performance. At a party in London, some people advice Koman to accept his mistake:

You should go back. People make mistakes. There is nothing wrong in admitting you made one. But to continue making a mistake when you know it is one, now that is wrong.' I saw Angela through the doorway. She was laughing with her head thrown back. I couldn't remember when I had last seen her laugh. And I realized that our life as a couple had destroyed all that had once drawn us together. (Mistress 393)

Koman feels that Angela may be laughing at his failure to become a successful Kathakali dancer in London. After facing trials and tribulations, Koman never gets a chance. He leaves western culture and comes back to the east. Decision making is one of the important facts in every man's life. He tries to adjust to life in London. However, he cannot adjust to live in the western world. Koman is in a dilemma:

I don't think I will ever dance here in London. All we are doing is play-acting that nothing is wrong. Angela knows it and so do I. Do you know that I work in a restaurant these days? I don't mind. I even enjoy it. But I am a dancer and there is no place in this life I lead here for dance. My kind of dance,' I snarled. 'No matter

how hard Angela and I may pretend to each other, I made a mistake coming here and I just wish she would accept that.’ (Mistress 393)

After he returns to India, he feels lonely and he says that there is nobody to help him. Then he meets Lalitha. She is one of the students in Aashaan’s dance school. She helps Koman for some days, Koman tells her about his worthless experiences in London. Lalitha and Koman have a mutual understanding about eastern culture. Lalitha is a prostitute and they lead a happy life together.

After the death of Lalitha, he has an affair with a married woman. Maya is the name of the woman and she is eager to listen to music and watch kathakali dance. She honours Koman and his art because she has an artistic mind.

Koman describes the relationship between himself and Maya in this manner:

A month later I went to Madras, where she lived. I called her; we met. Inevitably, we became lovers. There was a certain complicity that drew us to each other. In the curves of her body, in the undulations of her mind, I sought a partner who was my equal and she revelled in the love affair. That was all she would allow it to be. An affair of the heart and the body and no more. (Mistress 421)

He is very happy and leads a peaceful life with Maya. Both of them had faced difficulties and they are alienated from their families. Koman loves Maya and marries her. Koman and Maya have similar cultural identities, so they are able to understand and appreciate each other. Koman could not have a meaningful relationship with Angela mainly because of their cultural differences.

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