

From Subordination to Liberation in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

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Abstract

This paper examines the movement from subordination to liberation in Anita Nair's *Mistress*. Nair's women are placed within social structures that define marriage, sexuality, religion, and domestic duty largely from a patriarchal point of view. Radha and Saadiya, the two major women characters discussed here, reveal different forms of resistance to such control. Radha's married life with Shyam exposes the reduction of a wife into a possession, while her attraction to Chris becomes a troubled search for desire, dignity, and selfhood. Saadiya's story, placed within another religious and familial order, presents a more tragic form of assertion. Her crossing of domestic boundaries, her marriage to Sethu, and her insistence on religious identity show the force of individual will in a society governed by male authority. The study argues that *Mistress* does not present liberation as a simple achievement. It is shown as painful, contradictory, and often incomplete. Yet Nair gives her women the power to question the institutions that silence them. Through Radha and Saadiya, the novel turns the private lives of women into a field of social criticism and shows how the struggle for identity begins inside the home itself.

Keywords: subordination, liberation, patriarchy, identity, marriage, Anita Nair

1. Introduction

The twentieth century brought major changes in education, science, technology, communication, and social life. In postcolonial India, these changes altered public life as well as domestic life. Women's position also began to change with the spread of education, employment, political awareness, and feminist writing. Yet social change did not immediately remove the older structures of male power. In many families, women continued to be treated as dependents, subordinates, and guardians of family honour. Their desires, choices, and ambitions were often measured by the rules of marriage, caste, religion, and respectability.

Feminist movements and feminist writing have questioned this unequal order. They have demanded equal access to education, employment, property, bodily freedom, and self-decision. In literature, these concerns are expressed through women characters who struggle against silence, loneliness, emotional neglect, sexual control, and domestic confinement. The woman in such fiction is no longer presented only as wife, mother, daughter, or sacrifice. She becomes a thinking subject who examines her own life and asks whether obedience can be called virtue when it destroys self-respect.

Anita Nair's fiction belongs to this field of inquiry. Her novels repeatedly return to women who live within familiar social structures but refuse to remain inwardly passive. Nair is interested in the ordinary spaces in which power works: the bedroom, the kitchen, the family house, the religious home, and the marriage bond. *Mistress* is one of her important novels in this regard. It deals with desire, art, memory, marriage, and selfhood. The present paper studies how the novel presents women's movement from subordination to liberation, especially through the characters of Radha and Saadiya.

2. Indian Women's Writing and Feminist Sensibility

Indian women writers in English have contributed significantly to the growth of Indian fiction. Their works often bring into view the inner lives of women, the tensions between tradition and modernity, and the emotional cost of living within male-dominated institutions. Early Indian novels dealt with social issues such as child

marriage, sati pratha, denial of education, widowhood, and the unequal status of women. Later fiction moved more deeply into the psychological and emotional condition of women. It examined loneliness, marital dissatisfaction, sexual anxiety, economic dependence, and the search for self-worth.

The importance of Indian women's fiction lies in its ability to connect private suffering with social structures. A woman's distress in these novels is seldom a purely personal problem. It arises from inherited customs, family expectations, gendered labour, religious codes, and the authority given to men over women's bodies and decisions. The conflict between tradition and modernity becomes especially visible in the lives of educated middle-class women. They receive education and acquire self-awareness, yet the domestic order often expects them to remain obedient and silent.

Anita Nair's fiction adds a distinct voice to this tradition. Her women characters are neither abstract symbols nor passive victims. They are often restless, wounded, desiring, angry, and self-questioning. Their lives show how patriarchy enters ordinary relationships and how women respond to it in different ways. Nair's art lies in her close attention to human contradiction. Her women may seek freedom, but they also feel fear, guilt, longing, and emotional dependence. This makes their struggle more human and more convincing.

3. Anita Nair's *Mistress*: Marriage, Desire, and Selfhood

Mistress presents a world where art and life constantly overlap. Kathakali, memory, storytelling, marriage, sexuality, and longing are woven into the novel's structure. The novel depicts contradictory and complementary life situations and also examines the changing relationship between men and women. Nair's portrayal of characters brings out the fears, dilemmas, ambitions, and suppressed desires of women from different social locations.

Radha, the woman suggested by the title of the novel, is one of Nair's most significant women characters. She represents the educated Indian woman who is placed within marriage but denied meaningful agency. In Shyam's house, Radha has comfort, status, and material security. Yet she has no real space for her own choices. She is given to Shyam in the "ritual and routine called marriage" (45). The phrase itself reduces marriage to an inherited social procedure rather than a bond of mutual recognition.

Radha's life changes after the arrival of Chris, an Englishman, in Shoranur. Her attraction to him is immediate and unsettling. She says, "Twenty-four hours since he moved into Cottage No. 12 and into my soul" (54). This sentence shows the emotional hunger beneath her outwardly settled married life. Chris becomes less a person alone and more a sign of another possible life. Through him, Radha begins to recognise the emptiness of her marriage and the denial of her own self.

Shyam's treatment of Radha exposes the possessive logic of patriarchy. He decides what work she may do, where she may go, and how she may spend her time. Radha's anger becomes clear when she confronts him:

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. 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. (73)

This outburst is one of the strongest expressions of Radha's suppressed self. She does not merely complain about boredom. She questions the structure of her marriage. Shyam gives her the status of wife, but he denies her the rights of a person. The word "mistress" becomes important here. It refers not only to the other woman in a sexual relationship, but also to the wife who is reduced to sexual availability and domestic display.

Radha continues the same protest when she asks what kind of life is being offered to her:

Your sister comes here and tells me that I am wasting my education and time. What is right? Visits to the beauty parlour and the tailor's? Washing the leaves of the house plants and dusting the curios? Stopping by at the supermarket and calling on your friends' wives? This is not how I expected to live my life. (73)

The passage brings out the waste of female education within a marriage that values appearance over self-development. Radha's education gives her self-awareness, but her domestic life offers only decorative activity. Her anger comes from this gap between what she is capable of and what she is permitted to become.

Shyam's control extends even to Radha's body. His marking of her menstrual cycle on the calendar shocks her because it turns her body into an object of calculation. She asks him, "Isn't anything sacred to you? ... These red crosses are my periods, aren't they? Why are they here? On your calendar? ... Why are you like this, Shyam? You seem to want to rule me. You won't let me breathe. It isn't right" (203). The calendar becomes a sign of bodily surveillance. Shyam presents it as concern for conception, but Radha experiences it as violation. Her body, in his view, belongs to marriage and reproduction. In her view, it belongs first to herself.

Radha's affair with Chris must be understood within this emotional and social background. It is not presented as a simple romance or a simple act of adultery. It is part of her search for warmth, attention, and self-recognition. She begins to feel that Shyam may think he owns her, but ownership is false: "Shyam might think he owned me, but he didn't. I was never his. And I never will be" (165). This statement marks a crucial moment in her movement from subordination to self-assertion. She rejects the idea that marriage gives a husband possession over a wife's mind and body.

Radha's past also complicates her present. Before her marriage, she had loved a senior manager while working as a trainee in the human resources department. She trusted him, entered into a physical relationship, became pregnant, and underwent an abortion when she found herself without support. This earlier episode reveals the vulnerability of women in relationships where male desire carries fewer social consequences. Her later attraction to Chris repeats the danger of emotional dependence, yet Radha is more conscious this time. She knows that society will condemn her relationship, but she also knows that her marriage with Shyam has already lost moral meaning for her.

When her uncle warns her that Shyam may come to know of her relationship with Chris, Radha replies, "I don't care. ... My marriage is dead. And Shyam means nothing to me" (207). The statement may sound reckless, but it comes from a woman who has reached the end of endurance. Radha's rebellion is morally complex. Nair does not idealise it. Radha feels desire, guilt, courage, confusion, and anger together. Her movement towards liberation is therefore troubled rather than smooth.

Radha's final decision is important. At first, she imagines escape with Chris. Later, she chooses neither Shyam's possession nor Chris's romantic promise as her destination. She wants to leave Shyam and retrieve her true self. This movement gives Radha the form of a new Indian woman. She is not free because a man rescues her. She moves towards freedom when she recognises that her life cannot be lived as another person's property.

4. Saadiya: Free Will, Religion, and Tragic Resistance

Saadiya Mehruunissa, the first wife of Sethu and the mother of Koman, is another important woman in *Mistress*. Her story is set within a different social and religious world, yet it also concerns the struggle for choice. Saadiya is born into a Muslim household governed by strict codes of female conduct. Her movement outside the permitted domestic space becomes an act of rebellion. She comes out of the confinement of the four walls and visits her sister Nadira. She walks into the common alley, a space associated with men, and discovers life in its full movement:

Life in so many colours and shapes. Life that breathed and walked. Life that chewed and spat. Life that screamed and shouted. Life that mumbled and tumbled, hissed and crawled. Life that waited. Life that would never be hers. (102)

The passage shows Saadiya's hunger for the world beyond seclusion. The common alley is ordinary for men, but forbidden and thrilling for her. It becomes a place of sensory freedom. She knows that her father will punish her, yet she values the moment because it gives her a glimpse of a life denied to her.

Saadiya's exposure of her face to Sethu violates the code of her household and religion as interpreted by her family. She is punished with a hot iron, yet she holds on to the "heady moments of freedom" she has experienced. Her fault, in human terms, is small. In the eyes of patriarchal authority, it becomes grave because it

threatens the control of female visibility, movement, and desire. Saadiya's body is treated as a site of family honour, and her curiosity is punished as disobedience.

Her love for Sethu develops "with words and a thousand sights" (154). By marrying him, a Hindu man, Saadiya defies her family and crosses a religious boundary. This choice shows her courage, but marriage does not give her complete freedom. After marriage, she experiences loneliness and asks Sethu for a copy of the Quran. Sethu reminds her of their earlier promise that they do not need religion or religious teachings. Saadiya replies that "this has nothing to do with religion" (194). Her statement is significant. For her, the Quran is not merely doctrine; it is memory, identity, language, and continuity.

The conflict deepens after the birth of her child. Saadiya names him Omas Masood and wants Sethu to utter the Islamic prayer into the child's ears. She also insists on khitan for the child. Sethu resists, wishing to delay it until the boy is older. Their quarrel becomes a struggle over the child's identity. Saadiya feels that the child is being taken away from her lineage and faith. When Sethu says in anger, "You can go back to your family and your religion, but you can't take this child" (208), Saadiya hears a final denial of her motherhood and identity.

Her suicide is the tragic end of a woman whose desire for choice is crushed between family, religion, marriage, and motherhood. Unlike Radha, Saadiya does not reach a living form of liberation. Yet she remains an image of free will because she repeatedly crosses boundaries laid down for her. Her tragedy reveals the violence hidden in systems that deny women the right to define themselves.

5. Conclusion

Anita Nair's *Mistress* presents women's struggle for selfhood within the structures of marriage, religion, family, and social respectability. Radha and Saadiya belong to different narrative worlds, but both experience the pressure of patriarchal authority. Radha is confined within a marriage that gives her material comfort while denying her autonomy. Saadiya is confined within religious and familial codes that regulate her movement, visibility, and motherhood. Both women resist the lives arranged for them.

The novel does not present liberation as an easy or purely victorious state. Radha's search for freedom involves desire, guilt, anger, and moral uncertainty. Saadiya's assertion ends in death. Yet both women disturb the order that seeks to silence them. Through them, Nair shows that subordination is maintained not only by law or public custom but also by intimate relationships. A husband's calendar, a father's punishment, a family's honour, and a society's judgement all become instruments of control.

The movement from subordination to liberation in *Mistress* is therefore inward as much as social. It begins when women recognise the nature of their confinement and speak against it. Radha's declaration that she was never Shyam's and Saadiya's repeated crossing of forbidden boundaries reveal the novel's feminist force. Nair's achievement lies in showing women not as silent sufferers alone but as questioning beings who seek dignity, desire, identity, and a life of their own.

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