The Western Influence on Post-Colonial Indian Women in Anita Nair’s Mistress.

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Abstract: Indian art forms hold a special place in Indian culture and are losing their sheen in today’s world. But through literature, various Indian writers have tried to keep the art alive in their writing, thus enriching our culture. Anita Nair, an Indian women writer, writing in English, has made explicit use of traditional art form and the present paper will highlight how she has in her novel, Mistress (2005) made exquisite use of the traditional dance form ‘Kathakali,’ and has infused all the nine ‘Navarasas’ in the plot to highlight the existential state of mind of characters. The names of the chapters are based on each navarasa and corresponding to the name, the theme of post-colonial women trying to break from the traditional norms of the society under the influence of western culture has been dealt with accordingly. The novel has brought alive this classical dance form in the mind of readers, thus contributing towards better understanding and evoking interest in reader’s mind.

Keywords: Post-colonial, Western Culture, Traditional, Existential.

The novel Mistress (2005) is set in the backdrop of river Nila. People residing in the area want to adapt new culture but also want to cling to their old traditions. It is structurally based on the traditional dance form ‘Kathakali’ of Kerala. The author, Anita Nair, has made use of Kathakali dance throughout the narrative and used it as a medium to highlight the postmodern issues pertaining to man-woman relationship and disintegration of family. She has infused all the nine ‘Navarasas’ in the plot to highlight the existential state of mind of characters. The names of the chapters are based on nine ‘navarasas’ and corresponding to the name, theme has been dealt with accordingly. Therefore, we see an amalgam of tradition and modernity. Characters in the novel have to make their choices between culture, tradition and westernized way of living. Post-colonialism brought lots of changes in its wake. This novel has brought to surface the intricacies involved in man-woman relationship in post-modern era which is in stark contrast to the past.

In pre-colonial times, women were considered as showpieces to adorn homes of their husbands and had no authority to take decisions in household or financial matters. They had to follow the code of conduct laid down by Manusmriti (The Laws of Manu) which stated, “In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent.” This has been the scenario in India for a long time and is still prevalent in some rural areas. But post-colonial society has witnessed a metamorphosis in the position and status of urban educated women. Women have started searching for their identity and status in society in defiance to the patriarchal system prevalent in society.

Radha, the main female protagonist in the novel had pre-marital affair with a married man. She breaks the norms, maintains a sexual relation with him, conceives and had to abort the child. This is one of the features of post-colonialism and a reflection of western culture influencing the minds of Indians. On finding this ugly truth of her life, her father finds a match for her, who is below her standards. Even though well-educated, she is given no choice for choosing her life-partner and had to bow to her father wishes. This is the traditional way the women in India get married whether they find their husband compatible or not, whereas the bridegroom is given full choice of choosing a wife for himself. It’s a patriarchal tool to keep women under subjugation. The women are treated as birds in a cage, which are confined to a particular space. What we find here is the theme of rebellion, the post-modern era witnesses women who want to break free from the chains of patriarchy tied in their feet, and soar high in the sky like a free bird. People know that it is inhuman to keep a bird in a cage, which are confined to a particular space. How can you compare the two? Birds are meant to be free.” ‘And women are not?’ ‘Women need to be looked after. (Nair,74)
The condition of women is even worse than birds they are not allowed to be free. Marriage is like a chain for them which ties and confines them within the four walls of their home. It is like prison because they can’t exercise their will and have to sacrifice their desires to live life and thus, they have to bear the punishment of life-imprisonment.

Radha tries to raise her views and make Shyam understand her situation:

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 fulfill your sexual needs and with no rights. (Nair, 73)

The quest for self is the main motif of post-colonial Indian women. Shyam’s husband, Shyam, refers to her as “my Radha”. In patriarchal system, men like Shyam want to control their wife’s existence- the way she dresses, her behavior in society, even keeping an account of her menstrual cycle is a deliberate attempt to control their life, about which she furiously says:

Isn’t anything sacred to you?’ Her voice rose. ‘These red crosses are my periods, aren’t they? Why are they here? On your calendar? If anyone should keep tabs, it should be me. Why are you like this, Shyam? You seem to want to rule me. You won’t let me breathe. It isn’t right. (Nair, 203)

He even dictates her on what to do in her free time and what color of saree to choose. Her existence is nullified. She doesn’t have the right to exercise mental freedom nor is allowed to use her intellectual capabilities. She never wanted to be a docile wife but that’s how her husband expected her to be- in the role of a conventional woman as expected in a patriarchal system. Ram is standing on a boundary line where modernity meets conventional forms and he is not able to accept it. He shows his modern outlook for his business but clings to tradition when it comes to manage his home and represents true Indian male psyche. He is not able to accept Radha’s individuality and her fundamental right to lead a life based on freedom and choice. Male chauvinism is brought to forefront when he wants to upgrade his resort on the lines of western civilization. He adopts a western outlook for his profession but he can’t let go of his traditional patriarchal thinking that is deeply rooted in his spirit when it comes to dealing with his wife. Radha is the present day woman who knows and craves to lead an independent life that is not dictated by the terms of her husband. She wants to lead a life of a free bird that spreads its wings in horizon to reach the skies and measure unfathomable heights. No matter how hard she tries she always has to play the role of a caring wife whose only job is to make her husband happy.

Shyam feels that nature and woman have a similar role to play and they should be exploited to the fullest to derive benefits. He feels that nature should be exploited for commerce and trade. He uses tradition to interest his foreign customers who come to stay in his resort but provides them the comfort of western luxurious life. Western colonialism has destroyed the very fabric of society. It’s as if the society is infected with western virus. The main objective is to become rich and gratify one’s hunger for money and sex using whatever means is convenient to the male gender.

Radha is rich and he knows how to use the resources and keeps her under his thumb. The oppression becomes so stifling for her that she breaks away from the alliance. It’s a form of protest against the set rule of patriarchy that she sexually gets involved with Chris. She has reinforced a woman’s feminity by choosing with whom she wants to have sex and to have children; with whom and when she wishes.

When Shyam suspects Radha to have an affair with Chris, and tries to impose himself on her, she perceives it to be rape of her mind and body. Thus, domestic violence in the form of rape is another trait highlighted that a woman had to undergo. Rape of a wife by her husband only shows male domination as they see it as their right to force themselves upon their wife whenever they desire. It is another way to show oppression and subjugate women. In their case, the institution of marriage which is considered very sacred is put at the altar. It is just a platform for men to display their power and women had to bear it but with changing times, the post-modern women knows the power that lies within her and is showing her protest against any type of violence. They can no longer play the role of sacrificial goats, because there is a need in her to break all the shackles and breathe in the air as a free bird. Shyam doesn’t give her freedom and attention which she wanted from him and she gets drawn towards Chris. However, this extra-marital affair leads to guilt as she is torn between her domestic duties towards her husband Shyam and her inclination towards Chris. Her affair with Chris makes her feel lively and while being with Shyam makes her feel dreary and lifeless. With Chris she can be the way she wants but Shyam wants her to behave in a particular way as per the demands of the situation. He considers her as private property and believes in the ideology that a husband is the Lord for his wife and he can treat her in whatever way he wants. He always wants to use her for his benefit, thereby stamping all her desires. She is not expected to behave as per her whims. She is always expected by him to behave in a very mature manner. He disapprovingly comments on her behavior:

Does she ever consider that such silly acts have
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His ideology is in contrast to Radha’s feelings. She feels like she is not his wife but like his mistress whose sole job is to gratify him sexually. She hates to be treated as a sex-toy and strives to find her individuality. This makes her decide to break the stereotyped role of a woman. Her affair with Chris, although allows her to break the stereotype image, but makes her feel in unison with other modern women who have the right to make their own choices in life and also lead their life on their own conditions.

Anita Nair in her one of the previous novel, *Ladies Coupe*, had asked a question that can a woman live alone in this society or she needs a man to sustain her throughout her life? She gives a befitting reply in this novel through the character of Radha that a woman can live alone. Even the names of the characters are used ironically, Shyam and Radha as per Hindu mythology, are names of Lord Krishna and his beloved respectively. Radha as per mythology always longed for Krishna and couldn’t live without him. But character Radha of this novel has no interest in the character Shyam and does not cherish their relationship and finally breaks free to be an emancipated woman. It is entirely her choice whether she wants to spend her life with a man or without him. Radha leaves both the men in her life and chooses to be a mistress of her own life. She gives birth to a child and cherishes the joys of motherhood. Radha is the mouth piece of the author and through her character she has exhibited the postmodern tendencies. The complete metamorphosis of women is shown as she emerges out to be the awakened soul who knows to have full control of her mind, body and life which was in contrast with her female counterparts in the west. Thus, man-woman relationship has undergone a drastic change as compared to past. This change in the perception of women is not brought overnight but with the progression of time and post-independence women started getting education and proved their mettle in every sphere of life. Through Radha’s character, Anita Nair has brought to surface the ideology of the modern day woman – she is the ‘Emancipated one, who is rules the world with conviction, and leads an uninhibited life. They are no more puppets and know how to keep the reigns in their hands. Her defiance against patriarchal system has been projected very powerfully.

**References**


http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/TWR-05.html

