

Mistress: A Saga of Misery and Dislocation

Dr. Anup V. Gumble

Dept. of English, Arts, Commerce and Science College,
Arvi, Distt- Wardha.

HHH

Abstract

The fictional world of Anita Nair displays epic distress and dislocation of characters. Mistress showcases the ethnic dislocation of Koman and Angela- a love lorn pair. The Kathakali dancers in live-in relationship, first in India and then in London shows the ethnic dislocation of Angela and Koman respectively. Settlement beyond the borders, financial problems and cultural issues, emotional reactions and cultural diversity enables reader to probe deep into the saga of misery.

Keywords: Kathakali, beyond the border, love and loss, ethnic dislocation

Mistress is a voluminous novel by Anita Nair, which portrays the emotional upheavals in the lives of Koman and Angela. This teacher- student relationship and their migration bring radical changes in their behavior and relationship. Though not a diasporic author, Anita Nair has forcibly and sharply portrayed the diasporic depression in the lives of these two characters. Thus, the present research paper focuses on the suggested subthemes of this webinar- diaspora of characters rather than the author.

The plot and theme of this novel is woven round the artists, Kathakali dances and men and women of elite class. Koman - a Kathakali dancer and a teacher runs a dance school at Shoranur. By devoting many years to this art, he becomes national as well as international figure. His loyalty towards this art form is evident from the fact that Angela falls for him as she learns Kathakali in his class. In a society like India, where even premarital or extramarital relations are highly censured, one can imagine the hazards of this live-in relationship between a Kathakali icon and his disciple. But they rigidly reject the social conventions and adapt the Western values. Koman's life and choices are free from any sort of mediocrity. His true companion is Kathakali. As he returns from Madras, he is introduced to Angela who has come from London to learn Kathakali dance. Her beauty and devotion to the Kathakali art form win Koman's heart. Similarly, Angela falls in love with Koman due to his temperament and knowledge. Thus, the pious Guru-Shishya relation turns into havoc making lover- beloved

relationship. The strict social codes of conduct during 1970s are rejected.

Blue eyed young girl whose father was German and mother was Spanish, raised in England, seeks her Kathakali course at Shoranur, is a miracle in 1970s. She selects Koman as her Aashan. Their first meeting is set on the backdrop of Nalacharitham drama in the month of monsoon. Angela selects Koman as a Kathakali teacher and adopts the dress and mannerisms of the Kerala society. She behaves like a Malayali woman. Within few months of training Angela identifies herself as Urvashi, Subhadra or Damayanti the mythical heroines, only because Koman has played the respective heroes. To the utter dismay of these lovers, Angela has to give up Kathakali as Koman declares, "I Can't be your teacher by day and lover by night" (372). Here, begins the loneliness and ethnic dislocation of Angela. Her idle days make her sad and desperate. She utters, "I feel suffocated here. What am I doing here, Koman? I Can't fritter my life away as I am doing now" (372). Her aimlessness crippled her soul and suck all her happiness. Even the anti-anxiety treatment proves fruitless. She swallows her pills dutifully without any questions. Her slack jaw and dull eyes create a sense of guilt in Koman. The art which has united the lovers became the root cause of misery. In a strange dream, Koman saw her in a hospital with her agonized face which had lost all traces of knowing.

These two lovers of different nationalities and religion have flaunted all the moral or ethical norms. Though dedicated to Kathakali-a noble art, they couldn't achieve the desired goal. Vacant and aimless hours at Koman's home fills her mind with melancholy and homesickness. It proves that love and lust cannot be the ultimate and sole hangout for human survival. Their licentious life soon turns into a morose one as Angela loses all vitality and smile. The small-town gossips about their relationship add to their problems and thus Angela suggests to move to London. Breathlessly she speaks about the Indian artists who had received wide popularity at European stage. Koman observes, "The rapture in her voice excited me. Her eyes sparkled and there was a lightness to her movements that I hadn't seen in a long

time." (Mistress, 375)

Wise Koman reciprocates her persuasion to settle in London. This brings back his happy, smiling Angela. Obviously, the couple had secret agenda. Their mission and ambition is to make imprint as a Kathakali dancer on international dais.

Now it's Koman's turn to face the ethnic dislocation. Many diaspora novelists and poets who immigrated in foreign lands have pointed out the rootlessness. Here, Anita Nair is no exception. Rather she is a grand success in the portrayal of Koman at London. His migration is not well planned. The lovers turn a deaf ear to necessary vision of socio-economic hazards and cultural differences. His relocation abroad is discouraged by the cultural patterns and values to which he is stuck firmly. The recipient society is reluctant to assimilate to this conflictual person. Thus, he is alienated in the host society of London.

Though Angela tries to launch Koman in London's art sphere, he doesn't get an opportunity to perform even once. Now, Angela is busy all day and Koman is aimlessly waiting for her arrival home. He is absolutely dependent on Angela for survival. The financial stringency and cultural differences soon develop clashes between the two lovers. Tolerance level diminishes as they are not tied by the bonds of marriage and Koman rightly compares his fate with Nala who becomes Bahukan - a dwarf. The novelist has perfectly painted the vacant hours and dislocation Koman suffers from. In the initial days of his stay at London we could observe Koman aching for petty things such as reddish-brown rice, curry of green papaya or a piece of fried fish. He asks himself, "where in this city could I find what I hungered for?" (Mistress, 378) or, when he thinks, "In my home even the sound of the rain was different.What had I exiled myself to?" (Mistress, 378) He complains about the grey skies, damp weather and rationed heat. The man who had lived the life on his own terms now becomes uneasy due to the atmospheric changes and loneliness. As per his routine habit, Koman used to wash the heel of his foot in the evening time. It was a part of his evening ablution. Koman has to wash his feet in the kitchen sink, as the bathroom would not be free due to shared bed-sit house. As soon as Angela realizes, she snaps Koman, "You can't do it in the kitchen sink. It isn't hygienic.....This isn't Shoranur, Koman. This is London. You can't do such things here." (Mistress, 383)

Gradually the differences come out. The words sounded different and she couldn't read a nod from a shake. Once upon a time, she was able to comprehend every move of his body, but now all the understanding was lost. At

London Koman would regularly visit Patel's shop near the tube station, because he could enjoy the smell of their Kitchen, their face looked like the faces of Indians. They could understand each other's language. He would like the way Mr. Patel counting on his fingers and his wife in a sari murmuring to her husband. Koman would feel more in touch with reality. This all happens only because Koman suffers the cultural dislocation and is willing to be constantly in touch with his people. He voices his hopelessness, "In this place where I knew no one and had nothing to do, I waited all day and night for something to happen." (Mistress, 386) Thus, further he could realize the agony Angela might have felt during her stay at India. He ponders, "It occurred to me that this was perhaps how she had felt in my little house by the river." (Mistress, 386). Koman feels stripped of everything and acknowledges himself as Bahukan - shrunken, useless and impotent.

Among the many pains Koman had suffered, the most hurting is the incident at the countryside house of James. James is Angela's god father whom they visit. He likes the real English countryside and the garden. But soon James' neighbour calls him and objects Koman's entry in his garden. When Angela tries to avoid Koman's doubts and says that the people at the village are not used to Indians and so tend to be suspicious, Koman immediately understands that it was the black color of his skin and nothing else. This insult is another fatal blow to Koman and made him reluctant to step outside. It adds to his misery and pain.

During these three months of stay in London, Koman could neither make any contact with the world of dance or performing arts. Fear of being a failure or mockery at the institute of Shoranur halts his decision to go back to India. Thus, he suffers endlessly. At the total loss of his dignity, he accepts a job of a cook at Kandaswamy's - the most famous Indian restaurant in London. Angela's friend Hellen could point out his sadness and failure. In the party at her home, Koman could reach the decision of quitting. By borrowing money from Damu and leaving a note for Angela, he comes back to India and leads a secluded, quiet life of Kathakali dancer and teacher.

Anita Nair had painted the ethnic dislocation of two characters. Angela's uneasiness at India and Koman's at London. Both are the victims of cultural variation of the host countries. Their displacement and existential rootlessness, pathos and nostalgia, alienation and quest for identity reflect the experience of the immigrant. Dislocated from a specific geographic origin they long for socio-cultural experience which provide them a temporary solace. Their nativity change and they enter into a new set of traditions, language which removes their identity.

To the true literal meaning of the word Diaspora, these two characters may not match. Rather one can surely use the word migration for these two parched souls. Even the author of this research paper does not claim that Anita Nair is a diasporic writer because she has not settled in a foreign land. It is only her literary genius that she could produce before readers all the sufferings and mental imbalance faced by her characters. The psychoanalytical depth with which she produces her protagonists is a rare example in Indian English literature. Thrity Umrigar aptly comments,

"None of the story's many illicit affairs comes to a happy conclusion. In fact, despite its provocative title, *Mistress* is really a cautionary tale about the wisdom of not having on or being one." (53)

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