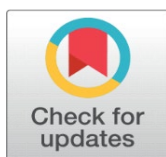
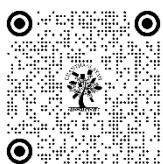


AUGMENTATION OF FEMINIST DISCOURSE: REBELLION AGAINST PATRIARCHY IN ANITA NAIR'S *MISTRESS*

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ABSTRACT

Anita Nair's *Mistress* delves into the intricate interplay of patriarchy and how women in Indian society negotiate and eventually resist it. By portraying the characters and their journeys, Nair reveals the multifaceted system of power and societal expectations that influence the lives of women in modern-day India. The paper shall focus on how the female characters in the novel react against male domination and how characters in this novel shall be put under a certain frame of rebellious women to examine them critically and to understand the author's message in creation of these types of characters. This study examines the novel to dissect how the female leads confront and oppose patriarchy through their decisions, actions, and interpersonal connections, shining a spotlight on women's strength and self-determination when confronted with societal limitations.

Keywords: Feminism, Feminist Criticism, Gender Inequality, Patriarchy, Identity

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1. INTRODUCTION

Patriarchy is deeply rooted in Indian society, historically imposing strict gender roles and expectations on women. It has been argued consistently about how its presence in society has limited the freedom and agency of women, through traditional systems and normative social structures. However, literature has frequently provided a platform for authors to critically assess and question these conventional structures. In the novel *Mistress*, the character Radha, a middle-aged woman, found herself seemingly trapped in an unsatisfying marriage. She openly expressed her unhappiness and resisted the underlying societal norms by engaging in an affair with Christopher, a much younger man

Radha's actions can be interpreted as a direct defiance of the traditional role expected of a married woman, which often disregards a woman's suffering, such as enduring abuse or even marital rape. In Radha's case, her rebellion signifies her dissatisfaction with her marital status. Through her affair, the protagonist endeavours to reclaim her own desires and autonomy, challenging the patriarchal belief that a woman's value is exclusively tied to her role as a wife and mother. The female protagonist Radha knew very well that whatever she was doing for herself would be denounced by the so-

called patriarchal society but she does not care. She had also spent so many years complying to the rules of traditional patriarchal society but also on the other hand she was also very bold and determined and wants to live her life the way she wants to. When her husband Shyam does not allow her to work then she replies to her husband that "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" (Nair 73).

In the novel's text, the author paints a rich storytelling backdrop where characters traverse the intricate realms of love, matrimony, and societal anticipations. Through her expressive writing style and finely detailed character portrayal, Nair questions established ideas of marital loyalty, individual liberty, and the quest for joy. On one hand as Radha confronts her stagnant existence, she also starts to scrutinize her personal wishes, aspirations, and the potential for finding love outside the boundaries of her marriage. But on the other hand, she also questions herself this is what she really wants or is it just desires. She starts questioning her morals and blaming herself for just running after adulterous desires and decide to get control of herself. "How can you let lust rule you? There is nothing more stupid than careless lust. There is nothing more disgusting than your inability to control your wantonness. Do you want to undo all that you have been trying to build? (Nair 291)".

Radha's bold attitude and strong determination can further captured by instances like the following, "She was defying the rules she had set for herself, smashing the glass house of her own creation. Yet, there was a sense of liberation in this rebellion, a taste of forbidden fruit that was strangely exhilarating" (Nair 127). This powerful description not only underscores Radha's defiance but also highlights the complex emotions that come with such defiance. The fact that there is a feeling of liberation, makes it clear that women like her have to adhere towards societal expectations and live a predestined life. One may also state that the normative structure of marriage is a limiter of agency for women who are raised within such traditional settings, and seldom allows them to express themselves freely. Such structures also highlight taboos that evoke fear in the minds of characters, as seen in the novel. The following quote, which is Koman's expression of despair, can be noticed as he tries to read the situation between Chris and Radha. "Only an experienced veshakaaran, an actor with more than mere technique, can perform that embrace. With arms that do not touch the woman, and with only his eyes, he lets her know he desires her. Chris, I see, desires Radha. And she, him. Who is he, I wonder again. The young man from across the seas, with a cello and a smile on display. And knowledge he hides in his heart" (Nair 29).

It is quite evident that through Radha's character, the author offers a nuanced exploration of female agency and the right to pursue one's desires, even when they defy societal expectations. Radha's journey becomes emblematic of resistance against the suffocating conventions that limit her. Furthermore, the novel delves into the idea that infidelity can serve as a pathway to self-discovery and personal fulfilment. Radha's affair with Chris becomes a means through which she rediscovers her own desires and passions. Nair's eloquent prose captures Radha's awakening. "She felt alive in Chris's arms in a way she hadn't felt in years. It was as if she had been sleepwalking through life, and now, she was finally awake" (Nair 256). Yet, the novel doesn't shy away from examining the consequences of Radha's choices, both for herself and her family. Nair provides a sobering reflection on the intricacies of human relationships and the price one may pay for defying societal norms.

2. EMPOWERMENT THROUGH FEMALE FRIENDSHIP

The novel also explores the significance of female friendships in challenging patriarchy. The character Malathi finds solace and strength in her close friendship with Radha. This friendship provides them with a supportive space where they can discuss their frustrations with patriarchy and explore alternative ways of living. "Their friendship was a sanctuary where they could openly discuss the injustices they faced as women. It was in these conversations that they found the courage to resist and rebel" (Nair,112). The story weaves a compelling tale of women's relationships that transcend

societal expectations and traditional roles, offering readers a nuanced exploration of the strength and support that can be derived from female bonds. It is somewhat natural to expect unified relations or bonds that stem from their state of oppression. In other words, people or the characters in the novel tend to bond over their own discontentment with the system. In this case, Malathi and Radha's friendship becomes uplifting and invigorating.

One other portrayal of female friendship here is the relationship between Radha and Sita, who happened to be her childhood friend. Their friendship serves as a source of solace and understanding in Radha's otherwise stifling marriage. As Radha grapples with her unfulfilled desires and the complexities of her extramarital affair, Sita stands as a steadfast pillar of support. This highlights the profound impact of female friendship on Radha's journey towards self-discovery and empowerment. Nair beautifully encapsulates this theme with an intricately placed quote from the novel. "Sita was the one person who truly understood her. They had shared secrets since childhood, and now, in adulthood, they shared their dreams, their disappointments, and their hopes." The bond between Radha and Sita indeed transcends societal expectations and norms, providing both women with a safe space to confide in one another. This friendship empowers Radha to break free from the shackles of her unfulfilling marriage and societal constraints, ultimately allowing her to reclaim her sense of self or individuality.

Furthermore, the novel also introduces the character of Mallika, a strong-willed and independent woman who becomes a source of inspiration for Radha. Mallika's unapologetic pursuit of her desires and her unconventional lifestyle challenge Radha's preconceived notions of how to live in this traditional patriarchal society and what are its consequences. Mallika's friendship with Radha encourages her to question and redefine her own identity as well as aspirations. Nair's narrative skilfully captures the transformative nature of female friendships. She illustrates how these bonds can serve as sources of strength and inspiration, enabling women to think and rebel against patriarchal structures. The friendships in the novel basically act as empowerment mediums for the female characters to make choices that align with their own desires and needs, rather than having to conform with traditional roles.

3. QUESTIONING TRADITIONS AND STEREOTYPES

The aspect of traditions or the existence of norms have been expressed strongly in the novel. Perhaps the author intended to lay special emphasis to tell readers how monolithic the presence of patriarchy is within Indian traditional settings. "Rules are necessary. I agree we must segregate and protect what is our own. But I suggest we amend this one to No strangers allowed beyond the Juma during the day and none may stay the night. You can then choose who you invite into your home," the leader said, listing the rules on a piece of parchment" (Nair 98). This expression is a distinct reflection of the same, wherein characters are seen expressing the vitality of norms and futility of one's effort to evade them. The novel challenges traditional gender stereotypes by presenting female characters who question societal expectations. The character Angamma, for instance, defies the traditional role of a submissive widow and takes control of her own life. Her actions challenge the patriarchal idea that widows should remain in the background, mourning their husbands. "Angamma refused to be confined by society's expectations of widows. She had dreams and desires of her own, and she was determined to pursue them, even if it meant going against tradition" (Nair,145). The theme of questioning traditions and stereotypes is quite central to the entire narrative. The focus on such characters and bringing them to the forefront of Indian tradition is indeed a statement against the oppressive norms imposed upon widows and married women.

One prominent aspect of tradition and stereotype in the novel is the conventional role of Radha's character, embodying the archetypal Indian wife, who is often expected to prioritize her family's needs above her own desires or aspirations. She thinks that there are no real emotions between them, they both are just fulfilling their duties and her husband Shyam consider her as an asset not as a life partner. This expectation is encapsulated in the following quote from the novel. "He doesn't want an equal; what he wants is a mistress. Someone to indulge and someone to indulge him with feminine wiles" (Nair 53). As the narrative unfolds, Radha begins to question this traditional role. She realizes that her desires and aspirations are equally important, prompting her to challenge the stereotype of the self-sacrificing Indian wife.

The strife of finding contentment in one's search for identity can be difficult amidst the presence of patriarchy. The novel at times highlights how expectations lead to social contentment. In other words, the title of ideal wife or good wife is only given to the ones who are subservient. Like one of the characters in the novel named Sethu describe that his wife Devayani is perfect wife figure because "She smiled easily and seldom lost her temper. She ate well, slept well and loved well" (Nair 238). As one may read here, the mention of "emotional excesses" means an individual's innate desire, passion and aspiration. The ones who claim it through rebellion and opposition eventually get scorned by society, whereas the ones who compromise their dreams to become the ideal figure of a wife and mother gets praised incessantly. These are

instances where one can see how the author juxtaposes the existence of patriarchy and the act of rebellion under one cultural background and traditional setting. "He expects his daughter to make a brilliant marriage into a family that will match them in status and wealth" (Nair 119). Through this quotation one can also see how familial background and class hierarchy plays an important role in defining a women's position in society.

4. RECLAIMING SEXUAL AGENCY

The novel also explores the theme of sexual agency among women. Through Radha's affair, Nair portrays the importance of women reclaiming their sexual desires and choices, even in the face of societal condemnation. Radha realized that she is going to explore her physical desires without any shame and does not let the patriarchy to command her desires. An extra-marital affair becomes a vehicle for Radha to rediscover her sensuality and experience physical and emotional intimacy in a way that had been absent from her marriage. It symbolizes her liberation from the constraints of societal expectations and her reclamation of her own desires. Nair captures this journey of sexual agency with an evocative prose, which goes like "In Chris's arms, Radha felt a reawakening of her body, a surge of desire that had long been dormant. It was as if she had been denied the right to her own sensuality for years, and now, she was reclaiming it" (Nair 256). This quote vividly illustrates how Radha's affair allows her to break free from the stifling expectations placed upon her as a wife and mother. It portrays her journey as a reawakening, emphasizing her newfound control over her own desires and her willingness to embrace her sexuality.

Additionally, the novel also portrays the societal stigma and judgement that women face when they assert their sexual agency outside of traditional norms. Radha's affair challenges societal expectations of female fidelity and the consequences that may follow when women take control of their own sexual lives. This theme is reflected in the novel through the reactions of those around Radha, including her husband and friends. In fact, Radha's initial differentiation between the two men brilliantly captures her curiosity and imagination, one that transcends what her world in the household. "It is the strength of his body and the length of his fingers that belies what seems to be a natural indolence. It is the crinkling of his eyes and his unhurried smile that throws his face into asymmetrical lines. It is the softness of his mouth framed by a brutish two-day stubble. It is how he appears to let order and chaos exist together without trying to separate one from the other. He looks as if he doesn't give a damn what anyone thinks of him" (Nair 9). The author is also keen about portraying her protagonist with adamant ideologies. Radha's extra-marital venture was not a result of lust or superficial discontentment. It is rather profound and encapsulates a barrage of humane emotions, including ones of satisfaction and disappointment. Radha doesn't entirely give in to Chris and still displays her sense of individuality, when she realised that Chris is not the right person on whom she rely then she argues with Chris boldly without any fear. She said "Yes, I want to tell him. Our opinions even when they are about a world that has no direct bearing on our lives; are us. And yes, I do think that you have taken away something that is mine. You invaded my mind, my body and while I had to suppress my desires and dreams and even forfeit my freedom to live the way I wanted to, under the previous regime, at least that existence has a pattern, a method" (Nair 293). Such instances display how it isn't about sexual desire or other factors that demean the struggle against patriarchy. The depth unveils several emotions that women have gone through, simply to become accepted in society without setbacks, judgements or eviction.

5. CONCLUSION

Anita Nair's *Mistress* serves as a powerful literary exploration of rebellion against patriarchy. Through the experiences of its female characters, the novel challenges traditional gender roles, questions societal expectations, and empowers women to assert their agency and desires. By

portraying women who defy patriarchy in various ways, Nair underscores the resilience and strength of women in the face of oppressive norms. Radha's feeling of fulfilment and satisfaction of having lived on her own terms can be seen expressed through the following lines. "My love was none of this, I had thought.... My love lived in a room where curtains billowed and the breeze blew. My love grew amidst music and words and a thousand buds. How could such a love be dismissed as squalid or vile, I told myself" (Nair 398). *Mistress* enhance the fact about achieving gender equality frequently necessitates instances of defiance, ranging from minor acts of resistance to major ones, all aimed at confronting established norms and forging a path toward a fairer society. In essence, *Mistress* is a captivating novel that

delves deeply into the theme of challenging conventional expectations and norms within marriage. Through the character of Radha, Nair prompts readers to reconsider traditional ideals of matrimony and individual contentment. With its eloquent prose and nuanced character depictions, *Mistress* is a compelling narrative that prompts readers to reflect on the decisions they make in their quest for happiness and fulfilment.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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