

An Analysis of Self-Identity in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

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Abstract

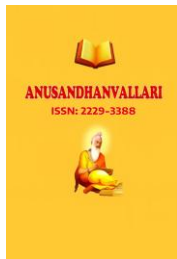
Indian women novelists have contributed significantly to giving a new dimension to Indian literature. The literary tradition has been enriched by several talented female writers who portray Indian realities with a sense of dignity and cultural refinement. Anita Nair, a contemporary postmodern Indian writer in English, is one of the most notable among them. Her writings mainly focus on themes such as social conditions, human relationships—particularly between men and women—as well as loneliness and the lack of communication. In *Mistress*, Anita Nair explores the changing dynamics of marital relationships in society. Her idea of a “free woman” goes beyond economic and social independence, emphasizing instead her mental and emotional strength and well-being. The female characters in her works undergo continuous struggles, striving to sustain themselves as self-defined individuals within society. The aim of this paper is to examine the theme of self-identity in Nair's *Mistress*.

Keywords: self-identity, individuality, identity crisis, oppression, self-definition.

Mistress is a remarkable blend of imaginative storytelling and profound exploration of the search for meaning in both art and life. The novel is structured around the nine emotions—love, contempt, sorrow, fury, valour, fear, disgust, wonder, and detachment—which reflect the complexity of human experience. It also introduces readers to the traditional dance form Kathakali through the character of Koman. Anita Nair skillfully incorporates elements of mythology into the narrative. Her characters, though ordinary men and women, are portrayed with realistic human strengths and flaws drawn from contemporary society.

In *Mistress*, Anita Nair examines the evolving relationship between husband and wife in modern society. Her concept of a “free woman” goes beyond economic or social independence and is closely linked to her mental and emotional well-being. The female characters in the novel undergo prolonged struggles, striving to sustain themselves as self-defined individuals within societal constraints. The purpose of this study is to analyze the identity crisis experienced by women.

Radha emerges as a progressive Indian woman who symbolizes emancipated womanhood. She refuses to remain submissive or dependent on men and gradually becomes fearless, overcoming her sense of guilt to realize her true identity. Radha ultimately chooses to become a single mother, deciding not to rely on either her husband or her lover. She even transfers her entire property to her husband, Shyam. Through this journey of self-discovery, she gains confidence and believes she can lead a fulfilling life without material wealth. She comes to understand that her earlier life was dull and unfulfilling due to her weak marital relationship.



On one occasion, Radha attends a Kathakali performance with her uncle Koman and Chris, returning home late at night. Her husband reacts angrily, accusing her of disrespect and inappropriate behavior. Radha becomes a victim of Shyam's verbal and physical abuse. Rather than feeling remorse, Shyam justifies his actions by asserting that women prefer to be dominated. Despite living together for years, there is no emotional intimacy or genuine affection between them.

During this period of emotional emptiness, Radha finds herself drawn to Chris after their first meeting at a railway station. Gradually, a mutual attraction develops between them. Koman, recognizing Radha's happiness in Chris's presence, indirectly supports their relationship. Meanwhile, Shyam consistently attempts to assert his superiority over Radha in all aspects of life, including business, social interactions, and household matters. To him, Radha is merely an object of beauty who must obey his authority without question, which prevents any genuine emotional connection between them.

Shyam's domineering nature further reflects his patriarchal mindset. He excludes Radha from his business ventures and discourages her involvement in any professional matters. He believes that a wife should remain subordinate to her husband and confine herself to domestic responsibilities. However, Radha, being well-educated and culturally aware, internally resists this notion. Shyam's insistence on control and his refusal to treat her as an equal ultimately deepen the divide in their relationship.

Radha expresses her discontent to Shyam thus:

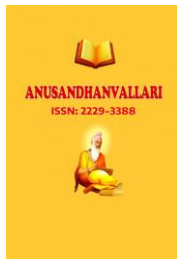
I wanted to teach in one of the primary schools and you said it was too much work for little money. When I wanted to start a tuition class, you said the same. Then I wanted to start a crèche and you said you didn't want the house filled with bawling babies. Si I thought I would find something else to do which didn't involve making money, but even that isn't right" (M 73).

Radha is protesting against typical patriarchal domination of her husband, who decides what a wife should or should not do. Regarding men's domination over women, Kate Millet, in her book *Sexual Politics* observes:

Under patriarchy, the female did not herself develop symbols by which she is described. As both the primitive and the civilized worlds are male worlds, the ideas which shaped culture in regard to the female were also of male design. The image of woman as we know is an image created by man and fashioned to suit their needs. These needs spring from the fear of otherness's of woman. Yet this notion itself presupposes that patriarchy has already been established and the male has already set himself as the human norm, the subject and referent to which female is 'other' or alien (M 46-47).

When Radha expresses her desire to start a business on her own, he shouts at her that he has a status in the society; she should behave as a wife to him and not to spoil his name in the society. She does not like his domineering attitude. Shyam, in fact, does not like Radha to show her talent and her intellectual ability. He is aware of his own inferiority in this respect. So, he opposes every proposal where she can show her intelligence and potentiality. He is quite aware of her social and intellectual superiority, though he loves her very much; he feels a kind of insecurity in allowing her to exercise her talent.

Anita Nair's minor characters also leave a deep impression on the readers as her woman character Devayani does. She is Koman's step mother and behaves with him as kindly as with her other two sons. When she tells her cousin Paru Kutty about Sethu's past, she consoles her by saying, "Better a past wife than a mistress in the present" (M 263). Devayani is a typical Indian mother full of pity and love for her children. An Indian mother's identity is unique and she likes this identity whole of her life. She represents love, care, pity, affection, sacrifice, tolerance, hard work and knowledge. At times difficulties, she emerges as powerful, sincere, capable of searching the solution, and taking right decisions and many more expectations she fulfils. A mother cares for her child even if he is busy in his own world and ignores her.



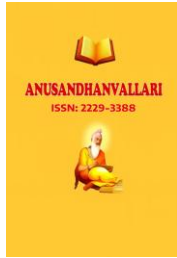
Saadiya is another important character who struggles to establish her 'self'. When she falls in love with Sethu, she is tired of her Muslim community's old customs. She hates the strict rules made for women. She loves to see the sky, the nature and wants to wander freely to see the whole world. She strongly craves for autonomy and individual freedom in her life. She often thinks that why she is bound to sit within the four walls of the house and why she does not have right to take decisions of her own life. Like other girls of her community, she also cannot take decisions for herself whether she wants to be a homemaker or to do something else. They do not have any freedom. They are born to be married. She has brutally been burnt by her father on her leg, because a man has seen her face as she is enjoying the beauty of the sky. She is the dearest child to her father; for the sake of the rules of their Muslim community, he punishes her and worries that he has inflicted pain on his loving daughter. Saadiya, in despair, says, "Would she, like her sisters and every other woman born here, live and die hidden by these walls? Was there never to be a way out from here?" (M 99).

When she comes to live near a sea beach with Sethu she feels herself like a free bird; she finds her life happy. After some months, she starts remembering her sisters, brother and father. She realizes that her real identity is Muslim and she is quite different from Sethu. When Sethu selects a Hindu name for their child, she rejects that and chooses a Muslim name. Sethu accepts all her demands for he wants to see her happy but she does not stop with that. She, further, says that the boy has to be circumcised; Sethu does not accept; he denies her demand. Saadiya is upset about his adamancy. She feels herself like a broken leaf from its tree. She thinks that she has done the blunder of leaving her family, for she has no identity without them. She has become increasingly depressed and commits suicide.

Thus, Anita Nair's characters are conscious of their existence as an individual who have their own rights and wishes. They create a new place for themselves in the society. These characters want to find new horizons of self-esteem and liberation by coming out of their own emotional perplexities and disturbances. Nair's portrayal of Anjana and Margaret is similar to that of Saadiya. In the patriarchal society, they are oppressed and dominated by men in all spheres of life. The writer brings out the absurdities of some of the rituals and customs imposed exclusively on women and shows how such practices support the myth of male superiority. In the traditional Indian society, women have to struggle hard to free themselves from male domination in order to assert their individuality and to emerge with a new identity.

Identity adds meaning to the life of a person. It is for this identity that the entire human folk struggle a lot throughout their lives. If one is not sure of one's identity then life becomes meaningless. Then automatically it will question his very existence. So, every human being, in order to discover one's identity, should undergo many trials and tribulations both internally and externally. Nair's protagonists do this. Though the level to which they take risk may vary, it is towards the end of the novel, almost all the characters of Nair will shine marvelously without losing their so-called morality.

The novel ends with positive hope about Radha. She is sure that in order to assert her rights she has to face many obstacles, but she never gives up. None can stamp Radha's behavior as something foolish or immoral. As many human beings are living for the society and she is also doing the same. They all crush their inner contradictions without giving room for individuality and truth. But Radha stands unique and proves the fact of her impossibility to go on living in a state of inner dilemmas. She decides and does what she finds good to her. She never expects someone else to decide for her no matter how silly or wise her decisions may appear to be. It is no doubt that a continuous war between her mind and heart confuses her in between her travel towards realizing her self-identity. The steps that she takes to know about her past, bring a change in the present and she radically decides for the future towards the end of the novel.



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