



TORN BETWEEN THE DUAL IDENTITIES: A STUDY OF ANITA NAIR'S *MISTRESS*

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ABSTRACT

Post colonialism refers to an academic discipline which analyses, describes and responds to the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Postcolonial reading of a text delves into the identity of a person as a colonizer as well as the colonized. This emphasis on identity as doubled or unstable one is a major characteristic of the postcolonial approach. Another major aspect of postcolonial studies is its representation of the 'subalterns'. Though the term broadly implies peasants, working classes, tribal, and women, Gayatri Spivak suggests that subaltern is not just a classy word for "oppressed", for the Other, but for everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism. This paper seeks to analyse these two aspects of postcolonial reading in the character of Shyam from Anita Nair's *Mistress*. Shyam is a victim of the doubled identity as he is a success in his social life who hails from a poor family and raises himself to be a great businessman envied by many and at the same time a failure in his marital life where his wife despises him and falls in love with Chris, a foreigner. His poor background gives him an inferiority which makes him unable to control his wife or scuffle with Chris. Though Shyam tries to subjugate Radha with love, he fails in it due to his subaltern identity. He is again traumatized by the so-called 'subaltern' identity when he had to witness Radha falling in love with Christopher Stewart, a traveler writer who comes to meet Koman, Radha's uncle. His masculinity is questioned when his wife conceives from Christopher after eight long years of their marriage in vain. Though Shyam attempts to exercise his supremacy over his wife, he is ruled out by Christopher. It can be seen that Radha, whom Shyam regards as his own Syamantakam is preempted by Chris and Shyam is dismissed from his own life. Shyam's identity is reduced to that of a subaltern status when his wife is surmounted by Christopher.

Keywords: Post colonialism, dual identity, colonizer-colonised experience, identity crisis.

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Post colonialism refers to an academic discipline which analyses, describes and responds to the cultural heritages of colonialism and imperialism. Post colonialism encourages its reader

to investigate and elucidate the after effects that colonization and imperialism have on nations and its natives. The term 'post colonialism' is also applied to signify the Mother Country's continuing influence

over the decolonised country, caused by the legalistic extension of the economic, cultural, and linguistic power relationships that restricted the colonial power of knowledge about the colonised peoples of the non-Western world. It is a critical destabilization of the theories that sustain the ways of Western thought- the means of colonialists' "perception", "understanding", and "knowledge" of the world. Postcolonial analysis deals with characters who are confused with their identities at the beginning of colonization, or the development of colonies in another nation.

Postcolonial reading of a text delves into the identity of a person as a colonizer as well as the colonized. This emphasis on identity as doubled or unstable one is a major characteristic of the postcolonial approach. Another major feature of postcolonial studies is the representation of 'subalterns'. In the words of Spivak ". . . subaltern is not just a classy word for "oppressed", for the Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. . . . In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern. . . . Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus; they don't need the word 'subaltern' . . . They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse, wanting a piece of the pie, and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern."

India has a legacy of postcolonial writings and the major writers of this genre are Salman Rushdie, Chitra Bannerji Divakaruni, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and Anita Nair.

Anita Nair is an Indian novelist, travel writer, essayist, poet and a short story writer. She also writes stories for children. She has authored two bestselling novels "The Better Man" and Ladies coupe" , a poetry collection "Malabar Mind" , a collection of short stories " Satyr of Subway' and eleven other stories and has written two children's

books –The Puffin Book of world Myths' and Legends. She has also edited a collection of writings about Kerala titled "Where the Rain is Born." She excels in the art of storytelling and her writings delve into the psychological depths of the human mind. She carries the reader to enjoy a brilliant journey by presenting fascinating stories that have colourful and exceptional characters. She induces experiences that are picked from day-to-day life and her treatment of the subject often facilitates the readers to understand the character to be one among their neighbours or a friend.

Mistress is a colourful vibrant novel set in Kerala with Kathakali as a background. The novel is set in the backdrop of Nila and an institution which teaches performing arts, possibly Kerala Kalamandalam. Two stories unfurl in this book. The first is the story of Radha, and Shyam, and of a travel writer Chris, who comes to Kerala to meet Radha's uncle, Koman, a famous kathakali dancer. While Koman and Radha discover themselves strangely drawn to Chris, Shyam turns out to be a helpless observer as Radha grips Chris with a passion and wildness he cannot figure out. The second story is what Koman tells Radha and Chris, the story of his own complicated past and his parents, a mesmerizing account by all standards. This paper seeks to analyse two aspects - the duality of identity and being the other - of postcolonial reading in the character of Shyam from Anita Nair's Mistress.

Shyam is a hardworking man who hails from a poor family. His father died when he was young and his childhood was engulfed in poverty. Shyam and his mother became dependents at his uncle's house. For his higher education he had to borrow money from his aunt and was made to work to repay the debt. Through his hard work, he became a successful businessman of the town and was an expert in marketing techniques. By his middle age he owned many businesses like a resort, match factories, and was respected by his employers. He was a lover of poetry and was an admirer of Browning and Yeats.

A deeper analysis into the character of Shyam reveals that he is constantly torn between his two identities- one of a coloniser and the other of a colonised. The identity of a colonised - the feeling of

being the one who is marginalised is well etched in him by the poverty and mistreatment he suffered in his childhood. When Shyam lives in Radha's house after their marriage, he loves being in the sitting room where once he was deprived admission. "When I was a child, I was never allowed to step into this room. Often, I would sneak a look from the doorway. Now it is here I sit when I am at home." (Mistress: 71) He compares himself to the little boy in M.T. Vasudevan Nair's story 'Karkitakam' who had to suffer a lot during his childhood. (157) Shyam remembers how he remained perennially hungry in his childhood. He always wanted stomach full of food and his mother could never provide him that. He was also very proud to get food from others and remained hungry. But when he spoke of his hunger or pride to his mother, she got angry and asked him to get rid of it.

Shyam was an object of humiliation for his neighbours too. His mother had a quarrel with their neighbours regarding their property and she made a comment. Getting furious with the comment, they started humiliating Shyam. Whenever he took milk to the tea shop, they will comment on him. "He was asked by his mother to take milk to the tea shop. There people from his neighbourhood used to make fun of him "The Maharaja of Cochin. His highness Shyam. And what is this in his hand? A sceptre.... oh no, it is a milk can." (155)

He found it frustrating and wants to escape such treatments. "Every day they had a new comment to toss my way and injure my self-esteem..... maharaja. What was I king of, except my hunger and pride?" (155) These words always filled him with a sense of deprivation, a marginalisation.

Shyam was never addressed by his name till his marriage to Radha. His uncle used to call him Chekka and Shyam always got irritated with this. "Your cousin's chekkan is here" 'I flinched. Chekkan. Boy. I am a grown up now, I wanted to tell him". (35) He knew that this mistreatment was because he was a dependant of their family. But he saw things being reversed when Radha came home after her abortion. Radha's father came to meet Shyam and he offered Radha in marriage to Shyam. Shyam was astonished to see the ease with which Radha's father uttered his name and talked to him in a

respectful manner. "He looked at me as he was seeing me for the first time. I wasn't any more the chekkan he could dismiss.... Shyam he said. How easily he spoke my name now." (120) However this respect and love shown by Radha's father was a tactics to use Shyam as an instrument to cover up the ill reputation brought in by Radha. He offers money and all his property to Shyam as a bribe for marrying Radha.

Shyam loved Radha and married her knowing that she was pregnant from another man before their marriage. He was even aware that he was used as an instrument to cover up the ill reputation Radha's family was to suffer. His love for Radha was exploited and with that Shyam was made to marry Radha. But Radha was never ready to accept this marriage. She could never love Shyam and enjoy her life with him. "But I knew I didn't tie myself to Shyam, I would in a weak moment go back to my lover. I agreed. I had saved my pride and kept my integrity." (114) On the first day itself, she lashed on Shyam and asked him whether he married her for money. She tried to persuade him to go out of that marriage and shattered all the marital dreams of Shyam. He was constantly mistreated by Radha in the years of their marriage. She treated him as an uncouth boor. "But Shyam, Sham as Chris calls him, broke that moment of grace with a carelessness that is so typical of him". "He wasn't just a sham, he was an uncouth boor, this husband of mine". (9)

Radha feels that Shyam is nothing in front of those who knew their past. "Everyone in Shornur knows everything about us. It is only with strangers that Shyam knows the measure of his triumph". (13) In the course of the novel Radha confesses that she never loves Shyam. "Suddenly I know what it is I feel for Shyam. Neither pity nor even affection. Just responsible". (15) Radha always treated Shyam in such a way that he is uneducated and unaware of the ways of the society. "Shyam" she said in that tone that makes me want to slap her. As if I were a little child who had to be made to see sense" (15) Shyam always felt that it was a pity for him that his wife is not supporting him in his deeds. "When other businessmen of the town ask him how he manages to find labourers for his companies, he would tell them 'Get the woman of the family to support you

and she will ensure that her menfolk do'. Then I would feel a wrench within, for I hadn't been able to get the woman in my house to support me in anything I did".(69)

Shyam always called Chris 'Sahiv', a corruption of the word Sahib, which is Hindi for master. These terms Sahiv and Madaama exists in the minds of Indians from the days the white men reigned rather than visited. Still they call the white men masters a reminiscence from the days of colonisation.(21)

When Shyam discovers that Radha is pregnant, he is all the more confused. He knew that he couldn't father a child and afraid of his self esteem being collapsed, he hid it from Radha. Radha tries to convince him that it is his child though she feels that Chris can be the father of the child. At this point he had to confess about his impotency and break up his identity as a masculine hero. Radha always comments on Shyam's masculine features which attracts other women of their circle but below all this adoration Shyam is impotent to father a child. And once he confesses the truth, Radha finds him a broken man who cannot go further in his life. Still to console him or to humiliate him, she says that she will leave him and instead he can keep all her possessions, the house, the business and all of it. Here Shyam gets insulted and says how her father tried to buy him with money and she also doing the same. Shyam emotionally admits how he yearned for love and nobody cared for it. They all treated him as a man who had no voice or ambitions and one who could be bought with money. Another aspect of his subjugation is that though he wants to control Radha, he cannot do that because of his fear of losing her. Again he is tied to Radha and her possessions.

In Shyam's resort he has a reception clerk named Unni who descends from a royal family. Shyam is always happy and proud to see Unni working for him; he shares the mentality of a coloniser who exerts his power on the local kings. He always introduces Unni to the foreigners as "Unni is a prince; a descendant of a branch of the royal family that lived in this region.....He's smart and efficient and in the course of a conversation with my guests, I let it drop that he is a prince. They

like the thought, too. Of having a prince call them a taxi and arrange shopping expeditions and sell them postcards." thereby trying to share the mentality of a colonizer. (20) Again when he finds some of his workers reluctant to hard work he gives them the example of Unni who is ready to work though he is a prince. 'Look at Unni' I tell them. "He is a prince, but he doesn't mind being reception clerk, postcard vendor and travel agent."(24) Shyam goes on referring to Unni as a prince thereby giving out the impression to his guests that he has royal descendants to work for him.

Another character of Shyam that contributes to his coloniser attitude is his treatment of Radha. Through Radha's words we can understand that he always treated her as a possession go be proud of.(53) He never gave her an equal place in his life. She was a mistress to him. "I think that for Shyam, I am a possession. A much cherished possession. That is my role in his life. He doesn't want an equal; what he wants is a mistress. Someone to indulge and someone to indulge him with feminine wiles." (53) She compares herself to the butterfly she used to pin on the biology board when it was still alive. Radha was an educated woman with her own ambitions. She wanted to be a teacher but Shyam was against her wishes. He wanted her to be at home taking care of him and his house. Radha's words represent her dissatisfaction in such a life as a house wife. "He never allowed her to work in a private school, start a tuition class or a crèche. She says "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." (73) This behaviour or attitude of Shyam towards Radha can also be read as a reply to his subordinated life at Radha's house during his childhood. In his poverty days, when he was living at Radha's house, everyone treated him as a meek boy. He was not all noticed and nobody cared to remember his name or talk to him. He was not allowed to enter the drawing room of Radha's house. So after marrying Radha, by controlling her, he enjoys a power which arises from avenging his past insults.

The insults of his childhood really pained Shyam. Radha's father addressing him as Chekka

made him always angry and when Radha's proposal came; he made it sure that he was properly respected. He wanted the staff in his business concerns also to pay him due respect. When Pradeep intrudes into him he gets angry. He acted in such a way that his workers respected him and he got maximum profit from them. He was authoritative in nature, wanted his employees to be neat, punctual and well behaved.

With his marriage with Radha, he got every property owned by Radha's family. But they were all barren lands, which Shyam with his hard work made into fruitful concerns. Though the property was owned by Radha's family, he had a feeling of possessiveness towards them. He decided its minute details and was not ready to compromise any of his ideas for Radha's wish. The only thing he inherited from his family was a lamp which he hung on the outer verandah. He always took pride in all these things and boasted about them to his guests.

Shyam was very much concerned about amassing wealth. He wanted to be richer and everyone to respect him on account of his wealth. This is well represented in the conversation between Shyam and Radha. "Shyam is ambitious, and I find his unwillingness to his ambition repulsive. Once, early in our marriage, I told him as much." Shyam's reply to this statement makes clear his attitude towards wealth and power. 'What's wrong with wanting to make money? You don't know what it is like to be poor. How would you anyway? You've always had money.....Not so for me. I know what it is to want something and not be able to have it because it is "beyond us" business. My mother had a whole stock of sayings to explain this "beyond us" business. No point in crying for the moon! And all because I asked for a toy or a pen or some such trivial thing that had caught my eye' Shyam's face was contorted in a grimace. Then, He said in a cold but even voice, 'i am yet to understand the meaning of the word enough. When I do, I promise I'll stop this frantic chasing to amass wealth as you call it.'" (62) He never felt content in his possessions and wanted to possess more- a well clear trait of a coloniser.

The analysis of Shyam's character as revealed in the novel shows that he is a subject to

dual identity. He is constantly tormented between his identity as a colonised who suffers and is marginalised and humiliated and his identity as a coloniser who exerts his power on his wife and employees. He is all powerful among his employees and treats Radha as merely a mistress at certain occasions. A deeper analysis shows that his bitter experiences during his childhood fashioned the subjugated identity in him and his ambition overcome this made him exert his power on everything that came under his control.

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