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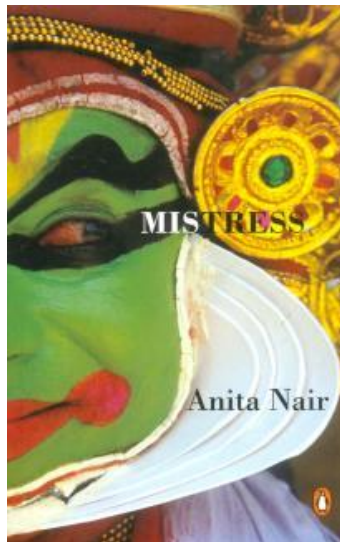
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Multifaceted Women in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014

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Depiction of Real Life

Anita Nair is a bold and straightforward writer. Her novels depict the real life of her characters. Her novels reveal the effect of social conditioning on women. Society uses many different means to propagate beliefs. We have literature as one of the means to carry these ideas further, surrounded by such messages. They break the chains of social norms and do not confine themselves to the boundaries which limit women. So we can say that Anita breaks the chains of society in portraying her women characters, which usually leads to its fragmentation. She never hesitates to tell the truth, however bitter it is and simultaneously, she forces us to think of the importance of curbing adultery to save family life.

The Focus of This Paper

The aim of this paper is to explore and evaluate the position of women in Anita Nair's *Mistress* (2005). As Indian society still relies on many conventional norms and values and women have to deal with the tradition, the focus will be on the expectations the predominantly male-oriented society has, and also on the approaches the women in the novel adopt to either conform to them or revolt against them, taking into account the codes of their religion, caste and social status. The female characters in the novels come from different geographical regions, have different social and caste background, and profess different religions, reflecting thus the diversity of Indian culture, which would be difficult - or rather, impossible to generalize.

Bound to Marriage – Be a Good Wife

While reading Indian novels with prominent female characters, one can be surprised how much expectations are placed upon them. Almost all of them are bound to marriage. Not much else is expected from a woman than to get married in the best possible way. Although in recent years women are allowed more freedom and more rights, the main, and often the only thing that is expected from them is to enter a favorable marriage that would strengthen their family's prestige. Most of the expectations expressed in the novels are in one way or another connected to

marriage, either to what women are expected to do in order to be suitable and desirable brides, or to what they are expected to do to be good wives to their husbands.

Being a good wife is, as it will be shown, a responsibility not only to the man one is married to, or even to his family, but to the society as a whole. Marriage is a matter that concerns the society as a whole, not just the two persons that are directly involved. Ascribing such an importance to marriage, it is not of much surprise that it plays an extremely important role in the lives of women, the wedding being perhaps the most important event in one's life. Every important decision a person takes, is therefore examined in the light of what consequences it will have for their marriage. A convenient marriage is the ultimate goal in a woman's life and the main responsibility of her parents, as it is seen to appear in the novels.

Woman as an Object

Here again the notion of woman as an object who has no say in the decision of her future emerges and is confirmed by the tradition of arranged marriage. Even when Sethu asks the bank owner to find him a suitable girl that he could marry, her good reputation was the only ground on which he was making his decision. He does not find it important to meet her, as though not only the girl, but also her family as a whole were only supposed to accept his proposal:

"Don't be so hasty. Shouldn't you see the girl first?"
the owner of the bank said. Sethu may be given to
making snap decisions, but this was a little too rushed,
he thought.. "Should I?" Sethu asked. "Yes, you must.
They'll want to see you as well." (Nair 235).

Earning Good Reputation

As mentioned, good reputation was one of the crucial characteristics of a suitable bride. Chastity was such a basic requirement that it usually is only implied and hardly ever stated. This is by no way a surprising finding, reflected in the way the worlds of men and women were separated. Here, however, we can find differences between individual groups.

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In Saadiya's case, the unmarried girls were kept at home and were supposed to be guarded at all times. The only time Saadiya breaks the rules and wanders into the common alley, though supposedly clad in her burkha and unseen by anyone, she is severely punished. Her subsequent relationship to Sethu is not only a reason for her to be excluded from the community, but also for her father to be punished as his daughter's infringement is considered his failure. In spite of marriage being the main goal, a young woman has to face new expectations she is supposed to fulfill.

Transfer of Proprietorship

Through marriage, women cease to be their fathers' property and become the property of their husbands. No longer do they need to worry about meeting the requirements for brides. Now they have to face expectations held by their husbands and their families. They are supposed to take care of their new homes and of their husbands and - above all, give them children as soon as possible.

Giving Birth to Children

A marriage only becomes completely adequate when the wife gives birth to a baby, preferably a son, thus increasing her husband's respectability in the society. In some cases, giving birth to a son can be the only expectation the wife has to face. Once she fulfills it, her marital duties are over. That it is only after the son's and not the daughter's birth, moreover, is a typical trait for all the novels - the expectation of a son is always intimated by the context, though never explicit. On the contrary, when mentioning the duties a wife has, she is usually assured that the sex of the child is not an important issue, as long as there is a child in the marriage.

Having a child is such an automatic premise that anybody, it seems, is entitled to inquire about it. "Isn't it time you had a child?" demands Rani Oppol when Radha and Shyam are still childless in their second year of marriage (Nair 114). There are many prejudices a woman

without a child must face. Radha is discouraged to visit a social event on the grounds of being childless, in spite of her being married as long as two years:

"You know how people are; they think a married woman who hasn't had children for so long is a macchi. They wouldn't like it. It is inauspicious to have a barren woman at such functions... the evil eye, etc." (Nair 114).

Proof of Loyalty

In the wife-husband relationship, a child is also a proof of the wife's loyalty. A child is, it may seem, the husband's rightful claim. By giving a child to the man, the wife proves her devotion to the husband, or even her affection to him. This holds true not only in arranged marriages, but also in love marriages. There is, however, a number of other requirements besides giving the husband a baby, that a woman has to meet in order to be considered a good wife. Most of them similar to those she had to meet as a daughter.

Appearances

A good wife should in addition cultivate her good qualities, while disposing of her vices. As for her appearance, she is expected to keep her good looks for her husband, possibly also to impress his friends. It is expected that she will be loyal and obedient to her husband, always at his disposal. Furthermore, even now as a married woman she has to ensure that her reputation, as well as that of her husband and family, remains intact. To meet this requirement she has to manage the household so well, that it is a true home for the husband and act properly in society, keeping in mind that any possible small lapse on her side can affect his prestige.

The description of Sethu's second wife Devayani, may give us an idea of what a desirable traditional wife is like. Being regarded as a good wife, she is portrayed as "loving and considerate, and not given to emotional excesses. She smiled easily and seldom lost her temper. She ate well, slept well and loved well" (Nair 238).

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Women Need to be Looked After

In return for playing well the role of the wives, the women are promised to be looked after. The looking after is fitted to the male point of view, as is described in *Mistress* in Uncle's conversation with his guests about why he keeps Malini, his bird, in a cage. How different is it [keeping a bird in a cage] different from keeping your wife and daughters at home? Isn't that a cage, too? And he, for it is always a man, would laugh in disbelief. "How can you compare the two? Birds are meant to be free." "And women are not?" "Women need to be looked after," he would tell me, and his eyes would demand: What do you know about it? You don't have a wife or children to worry about. (Nair 74)

Hardly ever are there any higher expectations mentioned that women are supposed to meet in the relationship to their husbands, be it emotional or intellectual. Being a wife is being an object owned by her man more than anything else. She's supposed to do as he likes and be prepared that he does the same. This is what Radha upbraids Shyam for in one of their arguments: "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).

Characters in Traditional Roles

In *Mistress* there are several female characters who adopt the traditional role, however, most of them are broad-brush characters without individual traits. Their appearances are scarce and always very short. The only one who appears repeatedly throughout the novel and has a somewhat more important role in the novel is Rani Oppol, Shyam's older sister. Actually, what is known about Rani Oppol's life is usually an information that emerges from her conversation with Radha and Shyam.

There is not much information on Rani's life before she got married. It is mentioned, however, that her marriage was, in compliance with tradition, an arranged one and cost all the

family's fortune. Having her married to a suitable husband though preserved the family's good reputation and the money was therefore, considered well spent. In spite of her marrying a man of lower social status than Radha, she feels superior to her not only on the grounds of being her husband's sister, but also being a married woman who has had children.

Unlike Radha she is verifiably fertile and therefore, an undepreciated woman. Besides, she is a woman who honours traditions, something that Radha does not seem to care about. These two facts are the reason why she feels the need to tell her what to do and criticise her improper behavior. Radha's behaviour is considered improper for various reasons; what they have in common is that it on one hand, she, hardly ever conforms the traditional female role that Rani expects her to play, yet on the other hand denies even the role of a modern woman that Radha would like to be. Radha's disregard for both is in her eyes a tantamount to a violation of the rules. "This is how girls ought to be. Smart and intelligent," a remark commenting on Radha's staying at home instead of finding herself a job (Nair 60), can be thus seen as a variation of "Maybe there is something wrong with her. You must go to a specialist and get it verified" which Rani says to Shyam when discussing with him her problems (Nair 202). This is considered Radha's greatest flaw and a reason to denounce anything in her behaviour, her clothes, and even her cooking. Rani Oppol, herself sticking to the traditional image of women, expects others to act in the same way. Rani may resemble a modern woman and even maybe try to be one, yet her demeanor as well as remarks shows that she values most the traditional way of life. After all, even though implying that Radha should find herself a real job as a modern young woman, Rani still expects her to dress modestly in saris and have children. Unless Radha fulfils such expectations, Rani is not willing to consider her her equal. To her, Radha's reluctance to fulfill the traditional roles is of greater significance than her higher social status. Until she gives birth to an offspring, Radha's life is to be dominated by Shyam and Rani who know her responsibilities and want to make her meet them. As mentioned earlier, Rani Oppol is not a particularly big one. It is interesting to find out, that their opinion on a suitable wife is not completely a traditional one. She permits women to be independent to a certain degree - Rani Oppol - by allowing Radha the possibility to go to work - as long as it does not affect their performance as housewife.

Rani Oppol sees a woman's position as an object, a man's property, more important than her becoming a subject, i.e. someone who takes an active part in the decision making of their lives. They are women Loomba calls "disappearing women," in the sense that they have no say in the discussions on their position: "From colonial as well as nationalist records, we learn little about how they felt or responded, and until recently, there was little attempt to locate them as subjects within the colonial struggle" (Loomba 185). That is also what their traditional role entailed: not being considered subjects in any context, neither sought after as such.

Breaking Social Codes

By portraying women that find themselves in extraordinary situations at various points of their lives, Nair whose novel does not focus primarily on women - challenges the traditional roles Indian women are ascribed. Most of the women they depict in their novels are particularly strong women who are determined to fight for themselves no matter what. Doing so, they often break the codes that society has imposed on them, either deliberately or as a side effect. Crossing the lines of what is and what is not allowed in human relationships is what Nair's novel examines, as well as the consequences that it brings for all who are involved, either directly or indirectly.

Following Dreams

In *Mistress* there are a number of women who decide to follow their dreams and thus cross the line of what an appropriate behavior for a woman is. Nonetheless, the novel focuses rather on the introspective side of the characters than on the reactions they set in motion in their social environment. Some characters do not put up with their traditional roles and the expectations of the society. It will focus especially on what their motivation to fight for their decisions is, what their attitudes to the social norms are and what their limits are. Maya, from *Mistress* crosses the lines in order to meet her goals, not all of them do so systematically. Some of them cross them constantly in their pursuit of their rights, but some of them only break the rules once or twice, defending them against transgressors on other occasions.

Interest in Multiplicity

The different instances of breaking the codes, as well as the consequences that they bring, contribute to an extensive image of women's life experiences in their diversity. This is, as Boehmer reminds us, a main feature of post-colonial writings; the "more general postcolonial interest in multiplicity," expressed in "the concept of women's many-centred, constellated power, the stress being at once on the importance of diversity and on having the power to articulate selfhood" (Boehmer 227-228).

Resistance – An Alternative Way of Conceiving Human History

Boehmer's statement is not the only indicator that acts of resistance against society's traditional norms and expectations that discriminate and victimize women, the main theme of Nair's novel, is not a unique one, as far as post-colonial literature is concerned. Edward S. Said points out resistance as having an immense importance for the process of decolonisation, identifying as one of the "three great topics [that] emerge in decolonizing cultural resistance, [here] separated for analytical purposes, but all related" (Said 215). The "idea that resistance, far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history. It is particularly important to see how much this alternative preconception is based on breaking down the barriers between cultures." (Said 216)

"Breaking down the barriers between cultures" is what is happening in many cases in the novels. It seems to be unsustainable to stick to traditional values that disregard woman as a human being equal to man in the world, to where one can see what possibilities women have in other parts of the world. Questioning the reasons for why it is so, leads consequently to resisting the social code and even revolting against them.

Increased Expectations –Saadiya's Life

Just as it will be shown in the case of most of the other women characters, Saadiya breaks the laws set out for her because of her dreams. Born into a Muslim community with rules as to

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P. Saravanakumar, Ph.D. Research Scholar and Dr. D. Shanmugam

Multifaceted Women in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

what women's position in the society is, she has to face even more expectations than others. The core of the expectations is that she remain passive and obey the laws no matter what her own wishes are, being content with anything that comes her way. The disparity between her dreams and the reality is in fact the reason why, when she crosses the line, she does so with an unexpected determination.

Saadiya's first disobedience consists in a mere walk outside the back alley intended solely for women and wandering into the common alley. In spite of the severe punishment that follows the first case of her defiance, she goes on crossing one taboo of her community after another. From looking at a man at the very beginning to having a child with him, a man who is everything that her community despises. A man with no proper education, no proper job and no means to support his family, without a family of his own and, most importantly without the right faith.

Saadiya's motivation is not difficult to trace, as it is mentioned quite explicitly several times; whatever she does, is motivated by the longing for freedom and the "familiar sense of despair" she feels every time she contemplates her life within the walls. How important her need to follow her decision is, is apparent from how far she goes when pursuing it. The need to experience true freedom is a stimulus that makes her take one step after another until she meets her limits. Saadiya's faith that becomes more and more important to her. Crossing the limits of the external laws helps her to find her internal limits that, at the end, lead her to yet another infringement of the rules. Realizing that her faith brings her more freedom than she could possibly ever experience on her own merit, while her life limits the experiences of her faith, she takes a decision that is supposed to free her from both the freedom that limits her soul and the limits of faith that bring freedom to it. To reconcile the two longings she experiences, she aims at the freedom that death brings. This is, however not a mere search for the ultimate freedom; at the same time it is a new violation of another set of rules, a whole set as in order to do so, she has to abandon her son and her man. Saadiya's violation of the rules is motivated by the longing for freedom, which eventually brings her back to following the rules, although her reputation has been damaged and the limits will consequently be harsher. In this respect, her breaking the rules

can be understood as a bi-product of her search for freedom, thus being a limit in itself. Finding the freedom she was actively seeking, she paradoxically abandons everything that it offers.

Maya's Life

Maya is not a major character in *Mistress*, yet still, her story is in a way parallel to those of both Radha and Saadiya in that it is, too, a story of a woman who has to choose between conventions and her love. In the same way that Saadiya is torn between her love for Sethu and her loyalty to her father - and, more generally, her community's traditions and faith, Radha is unable to decide between the duty to her husband and the frivolous affair with Christopher, Maya stands between Koman (Uncle) and her husband. To her, however, there is no dilemma whom to choose over whom. Her relationship to the two men is complementary. To one she is a wife loyal at all times, except a couple of minutes twice a month when she calls Koman and, eventually, a couple of days when she visits him. Then, as though she changed her role completely, she is nothing but a lover. Her breaking of rules is, in contrast to Radha's and Saadiya's, a long-term one, and nowhere as dramatic. She is not motivated by a sudden outburst of affection or love or lust, her decision to cross the lines that conventions set out for her is a well-considered one. The motivation is difficult to trace, as she is portrayed as rather one-sided, that is from Koman's point of view. However, she clearly does not feel the need to choose between one or the other. She is married to her husband, who as the only one of the three has no idea of what is happening, and wishes to remain so, but when asked she accepts also Koman's proposal. This might be understood as an illustration of what her attitude to marriage is, a bond between two people, although there are still other people in one's life. Her marriage also demonstrates her attitude to crossing boundaries: instead of crossing and then repenting, she rather gets married twice. From now on, in spite of crossing the conventions, she is de facto not violating the law, being married to two men. Her crossing of boundaries, done on a whim, means in a way the end of the law of violation; one violation annihilating the others. Maya's character is a controversial one, as she is crossing the lines she herself acknowledges, yet does not impose on others. It has neither any importance for her life, nor an impact on it. Nor does it affect the lives of anybody else, her husband being ignorant of it, her lover not objecting.

Conclusion

Mistress portrays exceptional women in unexpected life situations and describe how they cope with the challenges they have to face. The social expectations prove to be coincident in the novel, indicating no difference in respect to the character's religion or regional background. Marriage is, however, primarily a bond between two families that is supposed to strengthen their prestige and respect. A bride is therefore considered a gift that affirms the bond and as such must possess the best qualities possible and is expected to retain and cultivate them further as a bride and a wife. Her role as a wife involves first of all giving her husband children, preferably sons. Women who do not succeed in meeting such requirements, as well as women who are not fit enough for marriage for any reason possible, be it a flaw in her character, physical deformity or a lack of dowry, are never considered equal to those who do. Being a mother is the ultimate goal in women's lives. Rani Oppol is the most distinctive character. She internalizes the laws that rule their lives and expects others to follow them themselves.

Such is also the case of Saadiya, who in pursuit of her love broke the social codes of her society and religion, yet kept to them in all other areas of her life. Saadiya's motivation to violate the limits is another feature that the two examples have in common. The only invariable aspect of the individual acts of resistance exercised by the characters is the punishment that follows the revolt. Any violation, with the exception of Maya who seems to stand beyond both the violation and the punishment principle, of the rules the society imposes on women, is punished. The punishment varies from case to case, yet no violation remains unpunished. In her novels, Anita Nair has depicted husband-wife relationship. Her female characters are bold enough to fulfill their desires by negating family bonds and go up to the extent of establishing physical gratification with other men. The faithfulness in husband-wife relationships is lost.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014

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