

The environmental and situational tangles responsible for the psychological conflicts in an individual with reference to Anita Nair's *Mistress*

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Abstract

Anita Nair is a prominent Indian fiction Writer of the post-modern era. The novel *Mistress* revolves around the character Uncle Koman, a Kathakali dancer. Koman's father, Sethu, whose life is a link that brings wholeness to the warp and woof of the novel. Koman was born to Sethu's first wife, Saadiya, and Mani was the eldest, Babu was the youngest of Sethu Madavan, and Devayani was the second wife. Sethu's psychological conflicts become responsible for the other situations in his children's lives. All three children of Sethu, Koman, Mani, and Babu, were mischievous, grew up without strict restrictions, and are left clueless in a world of contradictions and make wrong choices. The characters' experiences prove they are not equipped to solve conflicts due to situations and lack of security in childhood.

Keywords: Kathakali art, environment, child upbringing, psychological conflicts, wrong choices.

Anita Nair holds a prominent place in Indian fiction in English of the post-modern era. Most of her protagonists in the novels move from ignorance to bliss. Most of her work focuses on the reality of the self. She has artistically portrayed individuals, understanding the inner feelings of a person. She knits together the language and her themes. Her flashback technique takes the reader to apprehend complex realities and hidden truths.

The novel *Mistress* by Anita Nair revolves around the character Uncle Koman, a Kathakali dancer, and his past and present life. Before going deep into the analysis of Koman's life, one needs to know more about his father, Sethu, whose life is a link that brings wholeness to the warp and woof of the novel. Sethu's quest for identity and the psychological conflicts he faces becomes responsible for the other situations in his children's lives. Sethu's quest to find the truth about his birth father makes him leave home, and his desires are fulfilled. Throughout his quest, he meets many people. Each of the encounters and relationships makes him gain more experiences.

Sethu's birth resulted from a chance love affair with his parents. Nothing was much known about his father except that he was from Northern Malabar. His depressed mother cared less for the child's upbringing, and she married again. As a child, Sethu was unhappy, and he was under the care of his maternal uncle, a simple and soft-natured farmer. These are evident from his uncle's words: " ' You heard what the headmaster said, 'didn't you? If you want to make something of yourself in life, you need an education. Or, if you'd rather be a farmer like me, you can quit school tomorrow. It is your decision.' "(40)

Sethu failed for the third time in the same class because he could not learn Mathematics. He felt bad and ran away from his home. His first encounter with reality and his decision became the crisis that altered his direction towards realizing his self-identity.

Sethu's first mistake was his running away from home at fourteen. The second was when he planned to board a train to Madras, an unknown place, with a plan to go in search of his unknown father, who did not care for him. The third was when he realized that he had boarded the wrong train. Instead of getting down, he went with a couple to Colombo whom he met in the compartment, having told a lie to them that he was an orphan. A fourth was when he tolerated the bitter struggle by Maash, his caretaker who misused his necessity and used him as his gay partner. He endured the ordeal to get a government job in Ceylon as a health inspector when he was eighteen. Sethu's words prove it:"Maash found me a place in the health department. I had to do a health inspector' course, then a year of training, and by the time I was eighteen, I was earning."(43).

Fifth is when he discovers that his dark secret was known to his roommate Balu whom he stabs with his pen knife and runs into the sea to escape. The below lines recollects the incident of the past.

There was a penknife Balu had left on the table. I grabbed it and
I remember screaming, "Stop it, stop it!" Then I stabbed him.
'Why? I don't know. Perhaps because he tore that last veil off. Then
I ran. I ran into the ocean and was about to leave, and I went with them.
There is sordidness in my association with Maash. There is Balu. (193)

The sixth was when he hid his identity when he was rescued by the rescue team at Rameswaram Camp hospital after drowning. Until then, Sethu, a Hindu boy, pretended to know nothing of his past. He became Seth, followed Christianity, and readily became an assistant to Dr.Samuel Sahayaraj, who had rescued and accommodated him. The seventh mistake was his affair with the girl Saadiya, the daughter of the Muslim leader of that place, when he went to work in Arabipattinam. Eighth was when he eloped and married her against her parents' wishes. Dr.Samuel Sahayaraj advised Seth that both he and the girl belonged to different faiths and the marriage would not work out, but Seth was adamant and refused to listen to him. With the help of another rich man James Raj in Nazareth, he got a job and accommodation and left Dr.Samuel Sahayaraj. This shows how selfish and ungrateful Seth was. He had no feelings of guilt.

The ninth was after he took up a job in Manapad; he was very flexible with everything, including the religious choice of Saadiya, and allowed her to name their son Omar Masood a Muslim name; he was against the conduct of Khitan (circumcision) (Wikipedia), a sunnah Muslim ritual to be conducted for the newborn. It brought a drift between the couple. The discussion slowly became a heated argument between them. When Saadiya insisted on the ritual and added that he had promised earlier not to interrupt her religious choices and in anger, she said that it was a great mistake and didn't want her son to repeat it; the tenth was when Saadiya's words infuriated Sethu, that out of frustration, he shouted, saying that she could get back to her family anytime, leaving the child with him. This shows how he was insensitive to the feelings of others. The consequences of his anger led to the suicide of Saadiya.

"Sethu began. Then he made a decision. With Saadiya, his promise too had died. ' I haven't thought of a name yet. For now, you can call him Koman.' It was my uncle's name." (229) informed Seth to Dr. Samuel Sahayaraj. The eleventh time he makes a dire mistake. He names the boy Koman and leaves the newborn child with Mary, the mother of three sisters who also rescued Seth in the rescue camp under the care of Dr. Samuel Sahayaraj. He promised to send money monthly for the child's welfare and disappeared to a distant land to forget the bitter memories. He makes the same repeated mistakes again and again without having the courage to face reality.

When the boy Koman was twelve years old, Samuel Sahayaraj took the boy to Seth. He was transformed into Sethu Madavan, a wealthy man of that place with his new family. Sethu married Devayani and had two more sons, Mani and Babu, of seven and five years, respectively. Until the boy reaches the place, Sethu appears to be a coward hiding his original identity every time for his survival. Still, his psychological conflicts do not allow him to ponder beyond that. So for the first time, he behaved like an adult and revealed the facts of his past life to his second wife, Devayani. Though they were shocked initially, the family was very generous to accept the boy Koman happily as their eldest son. This reveals that truth though bitter, helped people recognize their identities. Sethu Madavan did not restrict his children from interfering in their personal lives and gave them freedom. But that turned out to be a flaw. The rest is history.

As one of the significant protagonists when introduced to the audience, Koman was an innocent boy of twelve years born to Sethu's first wife, Saadiya. Saadiya commits suicide due to her controversies with Sethu. Her Unexpected dismissal affects Sethu; hence he leaves the child under the care of his well-wisher, sets on his business ventures, becomes rich, and marries again. Later, when Koman appears, at Sethu's request, his stepmother and step-brothers accept him warmly. Koman, who was almost like an orphan, suddenly got a family: "Koman with no tags, tails or suffixes, age twelve enrolled in a school and a new life. With a readily family with a father, mother and two younger brothers." (262)

Sethu, the father, wanted his son, Koman, to have formal education, but he chose to become a Kathakali dancer. Sethu, without any hesitation, allowed his son to pursue his left to his own choice and went to a boarding school. He came into contact with "Aashaan," which

means guru (Wikipedia), who was a drunkard. Though he could learn the art thoroughly, he was not led into a well-disciplined life. This became the root cause of all the psychological conflicts and flaws in his life when he encountered reality. The reclusive life he lived made him ignorant of the outside world.

Koman's love for his profession synchronized with the navarasa that made him become the character he impersonated which was a flaw. The second is that after his performance, his brothers Mani and Babu brought a girl Lalitha, a prostitute, to quench his thirst for inner desire. He succumbed to temptation. The third was when he joined as a senior Aashan in a dance school at Madras; he led a wild life; it was his first independent exposure to the world. Fourth was when every time a talk about marriage came up, some unknown fear haunted him. He rejected all the marriage proposals which came his way and lived a carefree life. Fifth was when he started teaching a former student of his Aashan, a foreign girl named Angela, who resumed her Kathakali lessons. He accepted her as his student. The teacher-student relationship slowly grew into an affair.

The sixth flaw was when Koman agreed to migrate to London, with Angela empathizing with her discomfort in an alien land. His decision against his father's wish, thinking he might receive international fame and recognition in a foreign land, was his seventh blunder. Eighth was when he understood London was not the right place to realize his dream; he procrastinated his stay without taking the next step. Ninth was during their financial struggle, he lacked formal education and could become an assistant to the chef. He was inwardly craving to continue his Kathakali art. The tenth blunder was that he suddenly made a haste decision, left London with a small note to Angela, and returned to India. He was ungrateful to Angela, who sacrificed her heart and soul for him.

The eleventh was when he kept aloof from everybody and lived a wasteful life with Lalitha, a prostitute who refused his marriage offer, and his stray dog Ekalavyan, thinking that his world was complete. Twelfth flaw was when he rejected all the suggestions which came his way, including the offer to be part of a teaching fellowship at a German university. Instead, he denied it and recommended it to one of his classmates, Sundaran. When Sundaran brought innovations in his dance for his western audience, Koman disliked it. This shows that he was rigid.

The thirteenth was when he decided to return to his Kathakali profession and started traveling to different places in India and abroad. During one of his visits and stay in Delhi, while returning from Europe, he attended the opening ceremony of a show where he first met Maya, an accountant living in Madras. A friendship bloomed between them, and soon they became lovers. His desire for the company of women pushed him again into a relationship with Maya. Maya, a voluptuous married woman who longed for companionship, resorted to Koman's friendship. They started living together, and their affair continued for a while, and later their relationship continued over phone communication.

After ten years, Maya visits Guruvayur to attend a Pooja and once again is happy to renew her friendship with Koman. Though she felt shy because she looked older, she was glad

to marry Koman straight away. She stayed there for some time with Koman and went back. Later in the novel, Koman calls Maya and requests her to stay with him as he needs a companion in his last days.

Koman proved to be unsteady throughout his life, leading to psychological entanglements. Like his father Sethu, Koman also had many failures in life as he was not molded and governed by elders. His life was survival and not meaningful.

Mani was the second and the eldest son of Sethu Madavan and Devayani, the second wife. When Koman came into his family, Mani was seven years old. Soon he accepted Koman as his elder brother. All three children of Sethu, Koman, Mani and Babu were mischievous and grew up without strict restrictions. Mani used to be a boy with less tolerance and used to get into fights and arguments by using foul language. In their teens, he was tall with a deep voice and a thick moustache. The boys used to be attracted to the opposite sex. Mani and his brother Babu were the ones who introduced Lalitha into Koman's life.

When he was twenty-seven years old, Koman was asked to return home for an emergency marriage fixed for Mani with Gowri, whom he made pregnant before the wedding. But three nights before the marriage, he absconded. Hence Babu, his younger brother, marries Gowri to keep up the family's reputation. After years, Mani suddenly appears on the scene, threatens Gowri, and questions whether the child is theirs, but Gowri maintains silence. " ' She is mine, isn't she? Tell me... I can see it... She looks nothing like you or that runt brother of mine." (339). Later it comes to light that a few days after their marriage, Gowri had had a miscarriage, and hence her daughter Radha was born to Babu and not Mani. After meeting days, they learned that Mani had died in a road accident.

Babu, the father of Radha, being the youngest, was affectionate towards his brothers Koman and Mani. As the boy Babu was thin and small in appearance, he was compassionate and became a scapegoat for his brother Mani's mistake. When he accumulates wealth, he becomes arrogant and starts ill-treating his sister-in-law, whose family is poor.

Babu's sister-in-law, a widow, had a son named Shyam and her daughter named Rani. Babu provides financial aid for their living and education and looks down upon them. They lived in their paternal grandmother's house, which is supposed to go to Gowri, the mother of Radha. Shyam completed his graduation and was interested in Radha, his cousin. But Shyam's mother objects to it, saying Babu, his uncle, will not approve it.

After graduating, Radha worked in a company in a reputed post, fell in love with the manager of the company, and got pregnant. She then learns that the man was married and had children. She secretly aborts her baby. Meanwhile, Babu learns that his daughter had an affair with a married man; he hurriedly rushes to Shyam and begs him, and convinces him to get married to Radha, saying, " 'You have to save my reputation, my standing in society,' he pleaded . 'Shyam, you are my lone hope.'" (121) Shyam cleverly makes a deal with Babu to provide with financial aid to run his business. Radha has no other choice than to marry Shyam. The man whom Babu disliked now becomes his priority to hide his disgrace. This shows Babu would go to any extent to protect his family for his selfish benefit.

Thus Anita Nair, in his novel *Mistress*, has brought characters that live not based on self-discipline and worldly wisdom, bring up children who are left clueless in a world of contradictions and make wrong choices. The characters' experiences prove they are not equipped to solve conflicts due to situations and lack of security in childhood.

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