

Multiculturalism in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

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ABSTRACT

Anita Nair is one of the prominent novelists in Indian English Literature. Her third novel is *Mistress*. Here Nair portrays about a woman character and her struggle in her life. Saadiya is one of the characters in the novel *Mistress*. She is a Muslim girl and she married a Hindu boy. The love affair of Sethu and Saadiya is depicted in the novel. The sufferings of Saadiya as a Muslim woman are also presented.

Saadiya does not obey the words of her father and the other members of her family. Saadiya's father advises her to marry a Muslim man. But Saadiya does not listen to her father's advice. So he is worried about his daughter's love affair with a Hindu boy. Saadiya turn a deaf ear to her family members' advice, rules and regulations.

The relationship between a man and woman is mentioned in *Mistress*. Saadiya suffers due to the difference of culture and religion. She leads an alienated life after marrying Sethu. She gives birth to a son named as Omar Masood. At last she commits suicide.

Keywords : man woman relationship, multiculturalism, sufferings, alienation, religious changes

Culture includes all forms of artistic values, customs, religions, languages and beliefs of a particular people or society.

According to Gurveen Kaur:

The word 'culture' is used in two different ways. One could be called the 'thin' notion of culture and the other the 'thick' notion of culture. The 'thin' notion refers to the style of dressing, cuisine, music, arts, dances and languages. The 'thick' notion is more comprehensive. It connotes a whole way of living – the integrated web of ideas, values, traditions, customs and habits that give a society/community its distinctive life-style. (5)

Community identity is also one of the major factors in society. Surinder Jodhka explains the problems of different communities and also caste differences:

Multiculturalism came to be viewed as a possible way of dealing with the problem of equality among groups and communities. As a framework of state policy it recognized cultural differences and community identities as politically significant realities and advocated for their participation in the functioning of political processes as collective agents. (296)

Saadiya is the daughter of Haji Najib Msdoof. She lives in Arabipatnam. She is a Muslim girl. Her parents are very strict with her. She follows some rules and regulations in her orthodox Muslim family. In Islam, women should not communicate freely with the opposite sex. They must speak only to their parents, brothers and husband. She has a secret love affair with Sethu. She does not wish to obey her family members. She elopes with her Hindu boy friend Sethu and marries him.

Sethu works under a doctor named Samuel. Sethu is a Hindu orphan and he works as a Health Inspector. Sethu accompanies the doctor on visits, and he has some experience as a trained Health Inspector. Saadiya is a pure Muslim by birth and she knows about the rules and regulations of her father. She gets involved in her religious activities. Before her marriage her father had told Saadiya about the life history of their ancestors, so that she could put an end to her love affair with a Hindu boy.

Chris Weedon states that

Social relations, which are always relations of power and powerlessness between different subject positions, will determine the range of forms of subjectivity immediately open to any individual on the basis of gender, race, class, age and cultural background. Where other positions exist but are exclusive to a particular class, race or gender, the excluded individual will have to fight for access by transforming existing power relations. (79)

The above observation is relevant to the story of Saadiya and Sethu. Saadiya's father is one of the important members and also the leader of Arabipatnam. He has some power in that area. He is considered as a respectable person in Arabipatnam. According to him, everyone should follow the path of Islam. Saadiya does not want to follow in her religion. She wants to marry a man of another religion. She dreams about Sethu and marries him.

The novelist mentions Saadiya's father who talks about the history of Islam :

In Vaapa's recounting of history, he spoke of the Marakars- the navigators who had sailed the blue seas and found their way here. It is their blood that runs in our veins... Isn't fair that you men get to go wherever you want, see

and do whatever you like, and I am expected to be content with this patch of blue and this maze of alleys (Mistress 99).

Saadiya selects a Hindu boy without thinking about the consequences. The neighbours inform her father about how she roams the streets with Sethu. Her father punishes her. Still Saadiya goes horse riding with Sethu. She wants to marry Sethu, the assistant to a surgeon. Saadiya's father is worried to hear about his daughter's behaviour. He is also worried about his daughter's future. Saadiya's father says to his daughter:

For as long as I can remember, I have sought to keep intact the purity of our bloodline. Our ancestors came only second to our faith, but it was a close second. So when you chose to make me your leader, I knew I was vested with a great responsibility. For as long as I was your leader, I would have to be the custodian of all the values of our ancestors deemed fit to uphold. I would be the one to ensure none was violated, and if it did happen, that the violator was suitably punished. But now, within my own home, in my own bosom, I have without knowing nurtured an evil. A creature who seeks to transgress the tenets of our law, destroy all that we hold precious. (Mistress 146)

Sethu was born in a Hindu family and he has some faith in the Christian religion. So he does not have any identity in the Hindu religion from the beginning. He is not worried about his religion and culture. The doctor gives some thought provoking ideas about religion and culture to Sethu:

You talk of marrying her. But who will marry you? You are of one faith and she of another. In the eyes of your God and hers, this will never be a marriage. Of bodies, perhaps. But never of souls. And what of your children? Which

faith will you follow in your home? Hers? Yours? As for your children, they will grow godless (Mistress 183).

Saadiya and Sethu are ready to marry and their marriage is considered as an inter-caste marriage, and moreover there are differences in their religion and culture:

The doctor shuddered at the thought of young minds that could seek no comfort in the thought of a benevolent, all-forgiving father. Every day you will discover differences. You will find that you have no meeting ground. How can there be one? Thorns, sweat, dust, that will be the sum total of your life. Every day, you will regret what you have done, and the sorrow that it will cause will leave no place for happiness. (Mistress 183-84)

There are so many differences in their castes, religions and cultures. So Dr. Samuel is right when he tells Sethu that they will face problems because of their different religions. After their marriage she thinks about her traditional religion Islam and about her orthodox family. She does not like to mingle with her sisters, brother, father and her mother. She lives alone with her husband. She becomes depressed.

In the beginning Sethu and Saadiya love each other deeply. They marry and begin to live a happy life. She gives birth to a boy baby. She worries about the religion of her child and wonders how the child will grow without any religion. Already she is not satisfied with her religion and her social identity. She names her son Omar Masood. Saadiya and Sethu's inter-caste, inter-religious marriage is not an easy one. Whenever they face difficulties the doctor advises Sethu and Saadiya, that there are misunderstandings in every family. He advises that the relationship between the husband and wife is very important in society. If

they don't having mutual understanding between them, then there would not be happiness in their life.

The cultural and religious beliefs of Saadiya's life change. This is one of the reasons for her mental depression. She suddenly thinks about the cultural alienation in her married life. So she tries to overcome her sorrows by reading, the Koran. She thinks about her neighbours' ridiculous comments and also about the religious identity of her child. Omar Masood is the Muslim name given by Saadiya. So she is satisfied with the Muslim name given to her child.

Saadiya thinks about the words spoken by her husband, and the conversation between Sethu and Saadiya shows the conflict between the expectant mother and her husband:

If this baby is born, it has to be brought up as a true Muslim, I hear myself say. Sethu stares at me. He is shocked. "Is that what it's about? Religion?" I feel a contraction begin. I mutter through clenched teeth, 'Isn't that what everything about? Faith. How can I allow a life to be born if I don't know what that life has to look forward to? Don't you see, I want my child to know God, my god. I want my child to belong.' Sethu puts his hand on mine and says gently, 'Whatever you wish. Only let this child, our child, be born.' (Mistress 197)

Saadiya is worried about the religion and also the traditional life led by her family members. But now there is no relatives for her son, and he is all alone. She now feels that she has made a mistake by marrying a Hindu man. She is not happy with Sethu's religion and this is known to Sethu. So he is disturbed by Saadiya's words about their son's identity crisis. Saadiya suffers because she and her son are caught between two religions, and the present life is so pathetic. She is confused with the different cultures and religions.

Saadiya forgets all her family members. She has no person she can rely on. She commits suicide. Sethu worries about his son. After the demise of his wife Saadiya, Sethu is very sad and feels lonely. So he comes back to his native village and begins to live a new life with another woman Devayani. Sethu changes his son's name to Koman. But Koman does not live with his father Sethu. He stays in another place, and he lives under the custody of the doctor.

Koman is the main character and also the protagonist of the novel *Mistress*. He is a Kathakali artist. He feels lonely, and becomes in Kathakali dance. He studies under the master Aashaan and becomes an experienced Kathakali dancer. He meets a white girl Angela studying Kathakali dance under the same master. Koman and Angela become conversers, Koman talks about his past life to Christopher, an American.

Christopher is eager to know more about Koman. Koman tells him about the story of his father and mother. Koman was brought up by a nurse. The nurse was a Christian woman, and that was how Koman had some faith in the Christian religion.

Thus the culture and religion are inter-related. Multiculturalism is found in the novel *Mistress*.

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