



THE INDIAN REVIEW OF WORLD LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

A Peer-Reviewed And Indexed Bi-Annual Online Literary Journal

<http://worldlitolonline.net/>

ISSN: 0974 - 097X Vol 16. No. II July - December 2020



The Thematic Influence of Mahabharata in Anita Nair's novel "Mistress": An Intertextual Study

Dr. D.Sreejith
Assistant Professor of English
Christ (deemed to be) University
Bangalore, INDIA

Abstract

Anitha Nair's *Mistress* is a novel written in the background of Kerala's prestigious traditional art form Kathakali. The story revolves around the life of a Kathakali artist Koman and his kith and kin. But beyond the surface level of the narrative which deals with the personal life of Koman, the characterizations have the structural and thematic influence of various characters present in Kathakali, particularly characters from Mahabharata which Kathakali has largely indebted to. This paper tries to identify the various layers of influences the Mahabharata characters have upon the characters in this novel, especially Shyam and Radha. The paper compares these characters with the characters depicted in the Mahabharata based novel *Bhima: Lone Warrior* written by the famous Malayalam writer M T Vasudevan Nair.

Keywords: Kathakali, Performing Art, Mahabharata, Resort, Epic, Pandavas

Introduction

When a book is being written, it will naturally converse with the books previously written. To borrow Julia Kristeva's idea, every text is an inter text. Imagination is not essential in nature, but a convergence point of past and the present, may be future too. Kristeva says: "Any text, even the sacred texts are 'constructed of a mosaic of quotations' and is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva, *Word, Dialogue and Novel* 66) Hence, the reflections of plot, characters or the cultural and historical background in a modern text could be traced back to a previously written text.

Influence of Epic characters in the Novel

India has produced two magnificent epics; *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. These two epics have made a tremendous impact upon the books written in the Indian subcontinent till date. It is not a difficult task to find out the influence of these texts in a newly written fictional text. In this paper, I try to analyze the intertextuality between the epic *Mahabharata* and an Indo-Anglian novel *Mistress* written by Anita Nair. This paper will focus on two characters in the novel, Radha and Shyam and try to establish that the relationship between these two characters, husband and wife, has the reflections of *Mahabharata* characters Bhima and Draupadi. Moreover, the novel is written on the background of a traditional art form of Kerala, Kathakali, which has largely drawn its themes from the epic *Mahabharata*. The paper mainly focuses on the sense of affinity between Radha and Shyam and how it resembles the affinity between Bhima and Draupadi in Mahabharata. To draw the similarities from Mahabharata, I use 'Bhima: The Lone Warrior', translation of a famous Malayalam novel 'Randamoozham' written by M.T.Vasudevan Nair which is based on epic Mahabharata.

The story of 'Mistress' revolves around a renowned Kathakali artist, Koman. Novel starts with the arrival of Christopher, a foreign traveller to meet Koman. His accommodation is arranged in Shyam's resort.

D.Sreejith

Koman is so fascinated by the young, charming Christopher; so as Radha, Shyam's wife. Within a short period, Radha has intensely been drawn to Christopher, both mentally and physically. This makes Shyam's life terribly miserable. He could only remain as a mute spectator of this drama. Shyam's helpless predicament resembles the state of slackness in Bhīma's marital relationship with Draupadi.

Radha's marriage with Shyam has, in fact, accidentally happened. In order to avoid an opprobrious situation in the family, Shyam was compelled to marry Radha, though Shyam liked her very much right from her younger days. She is his uncle's daughter. She has got an illicit relationship with a man who has already been married and has got children in that relationship. Upon the request of his wife, Radha's father decided to arrange a man for Radha immediately in order to avoid further disgraceful moments in the family. Though Shyam was appropriated as a savior to keep the name and dignity of the family intact, he loved Radha always. But, on the other hand, does Radha have unconditional love for Shyam? Could she love Shyam like she loved the married man whom she had an affair with or Chris? You could see a similar fate in the life of Bhima in *Mahabharatha*. Arjuna married Draupadi after winning a tough competition held by Draupadi's father. But due to the decision taken by Kunti, Draupadi was forced to share wifedom with all the Pandavas in a regular turn of one year. But Draupadi loves Arjuna always. This disappoints Bhima. In 'Bhima: Lone Warrior', when Draupadi's turn arrives to be the wife of Bhima, Bhima enters the room with so much of love and passion. But Draupadi turns very cold towards Bhima's passionate approach. Bhima says, "I cleared my throat and was about to call her name when she murmured, without opening her eyes, "The killing of Kalakeya. Tell me the story fully....."

I pulled myself up.

No. I did not desire her cold body tonight, as she lay dreaming of Arjuna" (M.T.Vasudevan Nair, *Bhima: Lone Warrior* 334).

In Draupadi's dark corners of heart, she always craves for Arjuna who possessed her after winning the competition with his dexterity. Bhima is an accidental husband only. In 'Mistress', Shyam is, in fact, an accidental husband too. He is forced to marry Radha in order to save the name of the family though Shyam likes Radha as Bhima loves Draupadi.

'Amma', I said. 'I have to know why I, a nobody with not even a house of my own, am being asked to marry Radha who you said would make a brilliant marriage. We are not in their league, you said. So why is it different now? I am sure it is not because they have realized that I may not be their equal in status or wealth, but am still the best man for Radha'. (Anita Nair, *Mistress* 121)

Like Draupadi, Radha always respects the caliber of Shyam as a successful business man and an able individual, but never admires him as an affectionate partner. Shyam, on the other hand, loves Radha sincerely and admires her beauty.

I turn to glance at Shyam's face. Shyam is handsome. His skin is light and smooth; though he shaves every morning, by late noon, a bluish shadow appears, hinting at facial hair that he keeps ruthlessly under control. His features are even and chiseled; his body straight and supple; his hair jet black, abundant and neatly combed. He looks like a popular Malayalam film star. An action hero. Shyam knows that other women look at him. That he incites interest and perhaps even lust. I, however, feel nothing for him except perhaps a habitual annoyance. (Anita Nair, *Mistress* 12-13)

Draupadi is also attracted towards Bhima's valiant stories but not for a romantic relationship. On the first night of her turn with Bhima, Draupadi likes to listen to the story of how Bhima killed King Kalakeya than to have a romantic physical relationship with Bhima what Bhima has been so passionately waiting

for last one year. Draupadi's wifehood is only the fulfillment of mother's decision. Hence, her wifehood is merely an act of fulfilling a promise rather than affectionate embracing of marital life, similar to Radha's intimacy towards Shyam. "Suddenly I know what it is I feel for Shyam. Neither pity nor even affection. Just responsible." (Anita Nair, *Mistress* 13-14).

Radha's uncle Koman also sees Bhima in Shyam. Koman presumes that Bhima is sent to fetch 'Kalyanasowgandhikam' (white ginger lily) flower by Draupadi with a vicious intention. It is to keep Bhima away from her for some time. Koman sees Shyam as a personification of Bhima, the Mahabharatha character. "Sometimes I think Shyam is Bhima. A great, big, good hearted creature whose goodness Radha makes use of. Whose gaucherie she flees from." (Anita Nair, *Mistress* 29). Radha is longing for Chris's presence but she is in a dilemma and unable to fix her heart. She is unable to answer the question "Whom should I sincerely crave for, Shyam or Chris?" "When I crave for Chris, Do I hate Shyam?" In fact, she is precisely in the state of Draupadi who really likes to be the beloved wife of Arjuna, nevertheless she doesn't hate Bhima or any other Pandava brothers. "I can't say that I am unhappy with Shyam. If there are no heights, there are no lows, either. Some would call this content even" (Anita Nair, *Mistress* 53). This state of mind reflects the plight of a woman in Kerala who is subjugated under the patriarchy. On the other hand, Shyam is always kind, lovable and always thinks that he is a blessed individual because of the possession of a house, property and moreover, a beautiful wife Radha. "I am a blessed man, I think. I have a beautiful wife, home and a prosperous business. And I have Radha. My Radha." (Anita Nair, *Mistress* 66). This conflict between all the manifested privileges and losses is seen throughout in the life of the characters in the novel, especially Radha and Shyam. The same conflict can be seen in the life of Bhima. The most powerful among the Mahabharatha character, but never receive the deserving respect and consideration. His brother Yudhishtira considered him as a fool. Draupadi never considers him as a romantic and affectionate husband. Bhima cannot lead the life of a husband with the ladies who loved Bhima sincerely, Hidumbi and Balandhara. So privileges never become an asset for both these characters Shyam in *Mistress* and Bhima in *Lone Warrior*.

Radha's friendly relationship with Chris has gradually grown into adultery. The intensity of that relationship makes her feel that physical relationship with Shyam seems to be an act of marital rape for her.

There are no categories of rape. Rape is rape, even when sanctioned by marriage. And the rapist doesn't have to be a stranger emerging from the shadows. He could be your husband. What Shyam did was to rape me.

I close my eyes, willing myself to forget. But I cannot shut my mind to the expression in his eyes as his body bucked and heaved over mine. His eyes seared and burnt. They said: you are mine, you are mine. Shyam's eyes branded me more than his body did.

(Anita Nair, *Mistress* 164-5)

She has almost gone to the extent of assuming herself as Chris's beloved. "Shyam might think he owned me, but he didn't. I was never his. And I never will be. (Anita Nair, *Mistress* 165). But by the end of the novel, Radha realizes her mistake and regrets not to understand the love and affection of Shyam. She could see Shyam as a completely broken man. This makes her rethink about the infidelity on her part. Remorse makes her understand that she must be always for Shyam not for a wanderer like Chris. We can see a similar situation in the life of Draupadi. During the *Mahaprasthanam* (final journey of Pandavas to heaven), only Bhima comes back to rescue Draupadi when she falls down on the way. She realizes that Bhima always loved her; Arjuna, in fact, left her immediately after the marriage to do penance to acquire effective weapons. He was always a wanderer. Only Bhima was with her whenever there was a needy situation.

Works Cited

Kristeva, Julia. *Word, Dialogue and Novel* in Leon S. Rondiez (ed.) *Desire and Language*. Trans. Thomas Gora et.al. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

Nair, Anita. *Mistress*. Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2015. Print.

Pollock, Sheldon. *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian. Aesthetics* New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. Print.

Vasudevan Nair, M.T *Bhima: Lone Warrior*. Trans. Gita Krishnankutty. Noida: Harper Collins, 2015. Print

Zarrilli, Philip. B *Kathakali: Dance Drama*. London; Routledge, 2000.