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Cultural Landscape' in Anita Nair's - "Mistress"

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Abstract :

Anita Nair's *Mistress* skilfully examines Kerala, India's cultural background by depicting customs, social norms, and the surrounding environment in minute detail. The novel explores the importance of language and regional identity, the influence of societal conventions on relationships, the representation of religious activities, and the role of Kathakali as a symbol of cultural identity through its diverse characters and narratives. In addition, the individuals' emotional journeys and cultural experiences are powerfully mirrored by the lush Kerala countryside. *Mistress* provides remarkable insights into the intricacies of human experiences formed by tradition, modernity, and the persistent influence of cultural legacy on individual lives and collective identities through its examination of Kerala's cultural landscape. This research paper explores the significant discoveries regarding the cultural landscape in *Mistress* emphasizing wider implications for comprehending cultural dynamics and the universal themes of identity, belonging, and resiliency.

Keywords :

Cultural landscape, Kerala, Kathakali, Social norms, Human relationships

Introduction :

The novel *Mistress* by Anita Nair is a captivating examination of Kerala's cultural landscape, skilfully interwoven with a narrative that probes the complicated nature of human relationships and traditional practices. Born at Mundakottakurissi, near Shoranur, Kerala, Anita Nair's childhood in Chennai did not separate her

from her heritage; on the contrary, her many trips to Kerala for holidays and special events gave her a firsthand knowledge of the state's traditions, customs, and artistic expressions. Nair's wide literary collection, which includes well-known pieces like *Ladies Coupe* (2001) and *The Better Man* (2000), demonstrates her close connection to Kerala's cultural ethos.

Mistress involves readers in the complexities of the region's cultural fabric against the setting of Kerala, a southern state of India known for its vibrant traditions, lush landscapes, and rich heritage. Anita Nair acclaims Kerala as "God's Own Country" Nair (160) which is distinguished by its many artistic expressions, mouthwatering cuisine, and incredible natural beauty. The novel takes readers on a literary tour through the state's heartland with its rich depiction of Kerala's landscapes, customs, and cultural norms. *Mistress* explores Kerala's cultural landscape deeply, describing its topography, customs, and traditions vividly. This portrayal highlights the bond between identity and culture and prompts readers to consider tradition versus modernity, community dynamics, and universal human experiences in Kerala's unique setting. This allows Nair to shed light on human complexities within this cultural context, encouraging reflection on themes of identity, belonging, and the human condition.

The term "Cultural Landscape" was first used by Carl Ortwin Sauer in his influential work *The Morphology of Landscape* (1925). He highlights the dynamic interaction between humans and their surroundings in *Morphology*, emphasizing how



culture gradually changes the environment. It underscores the idea that landscapes are the results of continuous cultural activities rather than static entities. According to him, a landscape is - "an area made up of a distinct association of forms, both physical and cultural," while the cultural landscape was something "fashioned from a natural landscape by a culture group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape the result." (Longstreth et al.)

Anita Nair's *Mistress* transports readers to Kerala's lively cultural fabric, where Kathakali is a strong symbol of the region's artistic legacy. The traditional dance-drama style known as Kathakali, which is native to Kerala, is crucial in forming the novel's cultural landscape. Nair underlines the lasting effect of Kathakali on Kerala's cultural identity through the characters' encounters with the art form and its practitioners. The protagonist, Angela, an Anglo-German researcher, develops a strong fascination with Kathakali during her stay in Kerala, indicating the magnetism of Kerala's rich cultural legacy on visitors. As it is evident in Sundaran's comment on Angela that she was turning into a Malayali girl and Koman's statement of Angela's adoption of Kathakali dress and mannerism. Angela's exploration of Kathakali is not just fascinating; it turns into a life-changing experience that has a significant impact on her. Through the lens of this traditional art form, Kathakali becomes for Angela not just a means of artistic expression but also a means of self-discovery and reflection as she navigates her own emotional landscape.

The Kathakali performer in *Mistress* enacts nine rasas that illustrate the themes of love, anger, valour, and detachment. The intense training needed to become a master of Kathakali is a reflection of the characters' commitment and endurance in facing their inner demons. Aashaan, Koman's Kathakali teacher, is also there, representing the challenges faced by traditional artists who fight both internal demons and cultural expectations. As he declares, "My demons are dead now. They do not even

respond to drink anymore and when I leave this institute, my life will be over." Nair (334)

Anita Nair examines Kerala's customs and social norms, offering a detailed analysis of the ways in which these cultural practices influence the lives of the characters. The novel's complex depictions of gender roles, marriage, and family dynamics are a reflection of Kerala's traditional familial systems and patriarchal society. Nair's *Radha* is a perfect example of how women are expected by society to perform traditional roles in the home. *Radha*'s infertility causes her to be shunned as a "macchi," underscoring the stigma that Kerala's traditional society places on childless women. The widespread impact of cultural norms on social relationships is further demonstrated by *Oppo*'s hesitation to include *Radha* in a celebration because of her infertility. As Nair states - Rani *Oppo* said, "I don't think you should come with us. You know how people are; they think a married woman who hasn't had children for so long is a macchi. They won't like it. It is inauspicious to have a barren woman at such functions... the evil eye, etc." (Nair 114)

Nair's female characters, such as *Radha* and *Angela*, question social norms and assert their agency in various manners. *Radha*, for example, exhibits her resistance of cultural expectations and determination by refusing to accept her barrenness as a restriction. Her strength is demonstrated by her resolve to prove her value even before she is able to have children. Similarly, despite the limitations imposed by traditional gender norms, *Angela*, an outsider in Kerala, asserts her agency by following her academic and personal interests. *Angela*'s steadfast refusal to adhere to societal conventions showcases her firm dedication to shaping her own future and carving out a unique path, even in the face of adversity.

The novel acquires a unique regional identity through the use of Malayalam, the local language of Kerala, which reflects the linguistic diversity of the region. Words and phrases in Malayalam are



used to evoke the sights, sounds, and flavours of Kerala's cultural landscape, adding credibility to the story. The language used by the characters highlights the complex web of social relationships in Kerala society by reflecting their socioeconomic backgrounds and regional identities. Here are a few Malayalam words along with their meanings:

"ari poo" Nair (7) - a term used to describe a type of flower.

"manjas" (7) - appears to refer to wooden-walled homes or structures.

"Seemantham" (114) - refers to the traditional Hindu ritual celebrated during pregnancy.

"etta" (352) - a term of respect used to address an older brother, friend.

"Nalacharitham" (359) - refers to a famous work in Malayalam literature known as "Nalacharitham Attakkatha".

"Entha" (362) means - what.

"Karkitakam" and "Kanni" (363) - refer to months of the Malayalam calendar.

Nair gives an overview of Kerala's festivals, customs, and beliefs as well as emphasizing the relationship between religion and daily life. The characters' devotion to customs and beliefs is reflected in the depiction of religious rituals and festivals, such as "Thulabharam," through their reaction and reflection on the event as a criticism of conventional sense and social standards. Despite the eccentricity of the act, characters may still view the ritual of "Thulabharam" with respect and reverence, acknowledging its significance in Hindu tradition. The author mentions the incident of an eccentric individual who performed a "Thulabharam" with pencils as "...when an eccentric had done a thulabharam with pencils. He sat on one side of the huge iron weighing balance and the other side was heaped with boxes of pencils till both pans dangled at the same height." Nair (257)

Moreover, the complicated interpersonal dynamics in Kerala are shown by the tensions between religious communities, as demonstrated by the relationship between Saadiya and Sethu.

Saadiya's tragic fate serves as a stark reminder of the negative effects of religious dogma and the impact that religion has on individual experiences and choices. As Nair comments, "The body washed up three days later. A bloated Saadiya whose funeral was devoid of all religious rites. Sethu held the baby in his arms as he lit the pyre." Nair (228-229)

The rich Kerala landscapes are a major symbolic element in Anita Nair's *Mistress*, mirroring the feelings of the characters and the subjects explored in the novel. The tranquil beauty and abundant biodiversity of Kerala's natural surroundings reflect the inner struggles and changes of the characters. For instance, the characters' emotional journey and the fleeting nature of life are symbolized by the river Nila, popularly known as Bharathappuzha. The characters' sense of loss and disappointment in the face of societal changes and environmental degradation is reflected by the river, which was once bursting with life but has now been plundered and drained. As Nair talks - Beyond the railway lines is the riverbank. Or what is left of it. Most of the sand has been carted away to build homes. The river, when it is swollen with the monsoon rain, creeps into the houses that line the riverbank. Mostly, though, the Nila is a phantom river, existing only in the memories of those who have seen it when in full spate, swift and brown and sweeping into its waters all that dared stem its flow. (Nair 8)

Furthermore, the novel's depictions of the dense undergrowth and harvested fields arouse a sense of nostalgia and longing, capturing the characters' deep desire for connection and belonging in the midst of Kerala's swift modernization and urban growth.

Mistress by Anita Nair explores a wide range of human relationships. Each type of relationship is associated with cultural connotations that influence the relationships and interactions between the characters. Kerala's cultural norms and societal expectations serve as a framework for the novel's exploration of the complexity of these relationships.



Marriages in *Mistress* are frequently defined by social forces and conventional gender roles. For example, the marriage between Radha and Shyam demonstrates the traditional expectation that women to bear children, a duty that Radha is unable to fulfil because she is barren. Pre-marital relationships, like Angela's blooming romance with Koman, are subject to social pressure and cultural barriers. Angela's outsider status and rebellious lifestyle create a clash with Kerala's traditional beliefs, which complicates her relationship with Koman and highlights the cultural barriers that hinder cross-cultural connections. Radha's extramarital relationship with Chris also underscores the complexities of human relationships within Kerala's cultural landscape.

Conclusion :

In a nutshell, Anita Nair's *Mistress* deeply explores Kerala's cultural landscape through its portrayal of traditions, societal norms, and natural environment. The novel examines the role of Kathakali, social norms in relationships, language, religious practices, and the symbolism of Kerala's

lush countryside. Through rich characters and narratives, *Mistress* offers profound insights into cultural dynamics and human experiences, addressing universal themes of identity, belonging, and resilience. Ultimately, the novel serves as a poignant reflection of the human condition and the enduring influence of cultural heritage on individual lives.

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