



**EXISTENTIALISM: TRACING THE PLIGHT  
OF WOMEN IN ANITA NAIR'S *MISTRESS***

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**Abstract:**

Feminist existentialism traces out the pathetic situation, where a woman is forced to be a hindrance to her own development due to her acceptance of 'the other' status. In Anita Nair's works, many of the women folk in general exist aimlessly, because of their family and social set up and so, she insists them to have patience along with their own aims to fulfill and thereby should have the authenticity over their lives. The theme of the novel is stated in the very beginning of the novel as: "Don't let someone else decide for you what is within your reach or what is beyond you" (MIS 1). This research paper tends to bring out the female existential crisis in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

**Keywords:** Authenticity, Crisis, Existentialism, Pathetic, Status.

Identity adds meaning to the life of a person. It is for this identity that the entire human folk struggle a lot throughout their lives. If one is not sure of one's identity then life becomes meaningless. Then automatically it will question the very existence. So every human being in order to discover one's identity should undergo many conflicts both internal and external. Nair's protagonists do this. Though the level to which they take risk may vary, it is towards the end of the novel, almost all the characters of Nair will shine marvelously without losing their so called morality. As Feminist Existentialism stresses women's authenticity over their lives, Nair achieves that through her protagonist Radha.

Women play an efficient and effective role in family and society. Women can be taken as the right agent to be the subject matter for Existentialism. For centuries together, she has been unconsciously committing herself to bounded duty without quarrel or revenge, but in this modern era she is committing the same thing but consciously. Women should possess the power to think and act freely. They should be given full rights to exercise their choice using all their potentials. Women should be considered and treated at par with men. It is true that Radha, being an active feminist tries her level best to change her fate. She struggles a lot undergoing all existential

struggles but ends up as a victim to the cruelties of life. Even in the midst of everything she has proved who she is and becomes authentic to all her decisions.

The words such as 'Fate' and 'Moral' take their new dimensions in existentialism. They should not be viewed in religious connotation. 'Fate' implies universal fate, that is, a system in which human beings are tied up and from which they try their level best to escape, but is not possible. Similarly, 'Moral' represents the set of rules and regulations they ought to attach their selves for their survival in the society. In the process of asserting her rights and individuality, Radha crosses many hurdles, and faces the consequences by her assertiveness boldly no matter how bitter that may be. The novel highlights the theme called Feminist Existentialism at the end of the novel.

Radha's positive zeal is her real strength throughout her struggle. She is sure that in order to assert her rights she has to face many obstacles, but she never gives up. None can stamp Radha's behaviour as something foolish or immoral. Many human beings are living for society and not for them. They all crush their inner contradictions without giving room for individuality and truth. But Radha stands unique and proves the fact of her impossibility to go on living in a state of inner dilemmas. She decides and does what she finds good to her. She never expects someone else to decide for her no matter how silly or wise her decisions may appear. It is no doubt that a continuous war between her mind and heart confuses her in between her travel towards self-identity. The steps that she takes to know about her past, brings a change in present and a decision for the future towards the end of the novel.

The beginning of *Mistress* states that love alone lives in present, and makes a human being to continue his/her life. Neither past nor future has anything to do with the life of a person. Past can be used in relaxation and future in dream. Feminist Existentialism celebrates this notion that every feminist should be authentic to her own life and should live in present and should have a fine holding on to her past no matter that gives pain or pleasure. Radha who is conscious enough and is aware that she is married, appreciates the handsome Christopher Stewart, and her mind says again and again that he is such an attractive man. Shyam is presented as an unattractive man by Radha from the very beginning of the novel. When Uncle Koman and Chris exchange their secret words with each other, Shyam interferes them with his plain and blunt questions. According to Radha, it is the carelessness that is so typical of Shyam. To Radha, "He wasn't just a sham, he was an uncouth boor, this husband of mine" (MIS 9). She dislikes Shyam and feels that she has been chained up in the name of marriage.

Feminist Existentialism makes an individual to understand her role in her choices. Radha, being a pro-active person wishes to live outside the protected world where he likes to keep her in. A strong hatred continues in between Radha and Shyam, but they proceed trying to give meaning to their marriage by satisfying duties and the roles that they ought to perform. As Beauvoir correctly says, "for the women there is, from the start, a conflict between her autonomous existence and her 'being other' " (305).

Feminist Existentialism gives a new perspective in judging a woman- woman can live life as she knows to assert her identity. So, one cannot label Radha as a whore or a woman of evil nature. She feels bad for what she does. But she couldn't resist. Her situation makes her to become a prey to certain things. Had she been very worst or cruel, the following words would not have come in her mouth even after showing her interest for Chris. "I lie here in my bed in my husband's arms and think of another man. What kind of woman am I? I feel contempt for myself" (MIS 59). She strikes Shyam's hair and whispers, "Shyam, Wake up. Shyam, wake up and love me. Shyam, you must" (MIS 59) in the beginning days of her liking for Chris.

It is no doubt that Feminist Existentialism can and does contribute support to millions of women to know who they are, how they are and how they should be. One can find Radha as an energetic feminist who could view and analyse things efficiently. Shyam will allow her to go to beauty parlour and he believes that she is prettying herself for him. But Radha hates women who are so meek and do things to satisfy the tastes of their husbands. She admits, "I smile. Shyam likes to think of me prettying myself for him. He prefers a glossy, silly wife to a homely, practical one. Glossy, silly wives are malleable" (MIS 61).

Feminist Existentialism brings to limelight the way how woman is constructed by men as the other and how "the other" status along with her situations prohibits her from taking any constant decisions. This is how a woman's life is picturized. Even though his wife is sure the fault is with him, she will not prefer justice and her mind is moulded in such a way that she should adjust with the situations howsoever cruel that may be. It is only now Radha realizes all her faults and feels bad for how she is betrayed and used foolishly by the senior manager. Even in the midst of her feminine weaknesses, she decides to come out from the clutches of her stupidity. This is how she proves herself as an active feminist. She fears that the level to which she has yielded her to him may make her excuse his lies and continue to be his playmate, so she decides to quit the place and their relationship permanently.

Fear is one of the important tenants of Existentialism. The behaviour of Radha creates fear in the hearts of people near and dear to her. Shyam who knows everything even from the beginning hesitates to take any brave decision to put an end to it. His possessiveness for Radha threatens him that something or someone may take his place in Radha's life. What he wishes is that Radha's world should have only Shyam. So he is jealous of her childhood friends, Uncle, her favourite music, books she read and even her memories which exclude him. According to him, Which is why, each time you said you are planning to do something with your time, I found reasons for you to not do it. I don't like sharing you with anyone. I don't like anything that draws you away from me (242).

Existentialism aims at analyzing the problems of human existence and in a way forces the individual to know himself. The central character Radha does the same. One cannot deny that Radha has faced problem after problem throughout her life but towards the end of the novel, she comes to know herself. Her existential dilemmas pave ways to identify her 'self' and about the

world she lives in. In her journey towards her self-discovery, Radha feels pain, anger, hopelessness, restlessness, and at one stage life becomes meaningless to her. But she is sure that whatever happens, life has to continue. This is where the positivity of existentialism stands. Radha, even after becoming a stranger to her own world, never gives up her quest for authenticity till the end.

Existentialism always gives priority to subjective truth rather than the objective truth. In that sense, what Radha does cannot be judged as mere outcome of her sexual desires. If viewed with empathy, Radha's thirst for a perfect partner can be judged as her search for a meaningful life. Though she proves herself as an active feminist throughout her life, she undergoes all the existential dilemmas that she ought to face as a punishment for moving away from the general run. In all the three levels, she is honest in her dealings, but her relationship with the senior manager, Shyam and Chris ends up in a failure. More than her failure, what kills her so much is the cheatings she received from these three men. Almost all these three men view her as an object of sex and property and they fail to consider her as a human being with a heart to expect and desire. They all use her as a medium to satisfy their desires and they fail totally to satisfy hers.

Existentialism talks about the absurdity of life and the uncertainties of life as such in which there is no specific place or room for moral, man in order to earn his living should be committed to the society he lives in. He should contribute positively to the morality, it is not the religious morality rather a set norms of rules and regulations (bounded duty) which bring all human beings under a system. Sartre strongly believes that man is morally committed to the society. He says, "And when we say that man is responsible for himself, we don't mean that he is responsible only for his own personality; but that he is responsible for all men" (29). It gets clear towards the end of the novel, where Nair makes her protagonist Radha to cling on to her marriage knots without giving room for any revolutionary decisions. Here, society and its priorities are given importance. By attaching herself as the wife of Shyam, she continues to attach herself to the society and all its norms.

Feminist Existentialism concept makes women aware of their problems and provides ways to reach salvation. Radha's journey in search of meaning and purpose of her life without marring her individual existence is the crux of this novel. If individual existence is there, automatically there is room for plus and minus. One cannot expect a human being free of all wishes and faults. If viewed with empathy, Radha's behaviour will be correctly judged as feminine problems and its crisis. "Yet, when I think of Chris, What I see is the shadow of Shyam. And when I think of Shyam, what I see is the possibility of escape with Chris" (MIS 398).

Anita Nair's *Mistress* is that sort of novel aiming at social upliftment. Through the character of Radha, the writer makes the entire society to arise many questions such as when a husband can hold the life of his wife in his hands in marriage why cannot a wife try to live her

own life as she wishes. When a wife tolerates her husband going to a concubine why a husband can't be on his wife's deed. When no objections are raised by society on the brutal behaviour of a husband (man) why the society does accuse a wife (woman) with its arrows of questions. Thus, Anita Nair's *Mistress* with its new perspectives makes the society to implement equal moral code for both man and woman.

#### **WORK CITED**

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