

Radha's Revenge: Feminist Agency, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Desire in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

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Anita Nair's postcolonial novel *Mistress* (2005) narrates the fascinating tale of a woman's desire. Unfolding along the fault lines of tradition and modernity in contemporary India, the novel weaves for us a triangle of desire that plays out through Radha's lack of desire for her businessman-husband Shyam and her growing desire for Chris, a travel writer and cello player from America in search of his own stories.

Reading *Mistress* as a feminist reworking of myth, I argue that Nair's deployment of the Radha-Krishna story from Hindu mythology allows the novel to address key questions surrounding female agency and desire in feminist and postcolonial theory. To this end, the first part of the paper draws from a range of classical and contemporary texts on the lore of Krishna in order to read *Mistress* as a feminist reclamation of the mythical Radha's agency through a nuanced reworking of desire. Thereafter, the second part of the paper goes on to suggest that the notion of desire deployed in *Mistress* can usefully engage postcolonial feminist concerns; I argue that by dislocating centre-periphery and global-local binaries, and by locating female desire within a hybrid, "third space" of agency, *Mistress* envisions a powerful postcolonial feminist politics of an alternative, open futurity.

At this point, some clarification is in order. The paper focuses on *sexual* desire but eschews biologically reductive understandings of desire, instead taking into consideration a range of factors, including respect, compassion, mutuality, and pleasure. Thus I locate female desire more holistically within women's emotional universe; shaped by hegemonic discourses of culture and the gendered politics of the everyday, this understanding of desire holds within it at once the possibilities of patriarchal collusion and critical-feminist resistance.

At its core, *Mistress* is the story of a woman, Radha, who is married to one man but desires another. Radha's husband is aptly named Shyam, another name for the Hindu God Krishna, while Radha's love interest is named Chris, arguably a westernized reworking of the name Krishna. The novel's invocation of the Radha-Krishna love story from Hindu mythology is, in other words, quite apparent. Hence I submit that, in order to understand

the novel's nuanced treatment of female agency and desire, we must first examine the culturally omnipotent myth it attempts to rework.

In Hindu mythology, Krishna is an incarnation or *avatar* of Vishnu; unlike other incarnations, however, Krishna is regarded as the *purna avatar* or complete incarnation because he embodies all the attributes of the ideal, well-rounded personality. As Pavan K. Varma notes, a very important aspect of this ideal personality is that of the accomplished lover; Krishna is the lover-God, capable of both feeling and invoking sexual desire. This seemingly "profane" attribute of a sacred god-figure begins to be comprehensible when seen in the larger context of Hinduism's Four Cardinal Principles or *Purushartha Chatushtham*: *dharmā*, *artha*, *kaama*, and *moksha*. The role of *Kaama* or desire is thus enshrined within the socio-religious order itself, and is not seen as extrinsic to it. However, it is certainly the case that desire, although very much validated, is certainly also regulated. Therefore, where the myth of Krishna scores over and above other similar Hindu myths—and here I use "myth" as a generic term to refer to lore, folktale, epic and legend, both written and oral—is, as Varma says, in sanctifying sexual desire even outside the boundaries of conventional morality. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Krishna's relationship with Radha.

Radha occupies a very interesting place in Hindu mythology. Many authors have pointed out that her name finds no mention in the earlier authoritative texts on Krishna, such as the Mahabharata, the *Harivamsa* (second century CE), the *Vishnu Purana* (circa CE 300 to 600), and the *Bhagvata Purana* (circa CE 600 to 900), and though there are scattered references to her in folklore and poetry from the sixth century CE onwards, only in the thirteenth century does Puranic literature accord her a well-formed identity (Varma 42-43; Rao 44-45). Finally, it is in the Sanskrit classic *Gitagovinda*, written by Jayadeva in the twelfth century CE, that Radha is presented as Krishna's ultimate foil: "If Krishna was the God of Love, Radha had to be Rati, passion personified . . . together with his consort, Krishna was complete" (Varma 44).

Texts in Hindu "high" culture, as well as the more diffuse oral traditions, make amply clear that Radha was not Krishna's wife, but rather, an older woman married to another man. Radha's position as Krishna's lover is clearly in defiance of society's norms, a fact that becomes all the more apparent when one considers the sexually explicit nature of tracts such as those in the *Gita-Govinda* (1969) that describe in erotic detail the powerful manifestation of Radha's sexual desire in the arms of Krishna the God-incarnate. In comparison to other key Hindu goddesses such as Sita, whose devotion to their men is very much in keeping with societal mores, Radha therefore seems to stand out as an anomaly, an improbable "feminist" icon within mainstream mythology who challenges the very bedrock of patriarchy through her provocative agency.

The dangers of reading the past through the lens of the present notwithstanding, I submit that a closer reading of the myth, both in terms

of its high cultural content as well as its popular cultural representations, demonstrates that the mythological Radha's narrative of desire is ultimately absorbed into culture's androcentric metanarrative through at least three narrative commissions and omissions. It is also on the same three counts that I read the novel *Mistress* as an attempt to reclaim Radha's mythological agency through a feminist centring of desire.

Firstly, while conceding that her status as Krishna's passionate, adulterous lover does position her rather differently within culture, I wish to direct our attention to how the mythological Radha's role, namely that of completing Krishna's masculinity, continues, in many ways, to be instrumental. Thus it is pertinent to note that unlike other incarnations, such as Rama, Krishna had sexual alliances with multiple women; these included his dalliance with the *gopis* or cow herders of Brindavan even during the course of his relationship with Radha. For instance, the *Harivamsa* depicts how

With his bright arm-bands and wild flower garlands, Krishna's glowing presence made all Vraja glow. Entranced by his graceful ways, the girl herders greeted him joyously as he strolled about. They pressed their full, swelling breasts against him [...] Their limbs were soon covered with dust and dung as they struggled to satisfy Krishna, like excited female elephants topped by an aroused bull elephant. With eyes beaming with love, the deer eyed girls thirstily drank in their dark lover's form. Then others had their chance to find pleasure in his arms. (qtd. in Varma 31-2)

Similarly, Jayadeva, in the *Gita-Govinda*, speaks of how Krishna

[e]mbraces one woman, [...] kisses another, and fondles another beautiful one,
He looks at one lovely with smiles, and starts in pursuit of another woman
Hari here disports himself with charming women given to love! (28)

In stark contrast, there is no other man apart from Krishna in Radha's life; while we know Radha was a married woman, we do not know too many details of her relationship even with her husband. Even if one assumes that there were no emotional ties to bind her to her husband, it would be difficult to assume that she did not have to fulfil any of her marital obligations either. Under the circumstances, could she have remained completely, absolutely detached from the lived truth of her marriage? But culture chooses to be silent on this aspect of her life, focusing instead on her loyalty to Krishna and Krishna alone, even in the face of his continued dalliance with the *gopis* of Vraj, thus staying true to canonical Hinduism's far greater emphasis on the woman's fidelity as opposed to the man's—a point to which I shall return later. Thus, despite taunting and tormenting Krishna each time she comes to learn of his sexual exploits, the *Gita-Govinda* demonstrates how Radha ultimately always relents:

Desire even now in my foolish mind for Krishna,
For Krishna—without me—lusting still for the herd-girls!
Seeing only the good in his nature, what shall I do?
Agitated, I feel no anger! Pleased without cause, I acquit him! (35)

What we see here is less a woman's agency and more her helpless inability to be angry for long with the only man she feels desire for, in a situation where he desires many others too. Mythology disengages from Radha's life situation, her relationship with her husband, and the larger context within which she chooses to become involved in an adulterous relationship; rather than a simplistic silencing, there is instead a more subtle flattening of the woman's perspective and agency.

Of course, agency is a complex concept. According to a contemporary definition proposed by Laura M. Ahearn, agency is the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act. One of the strongest merits of Ahearn's formulation is that it eschews a liberal understanding of agency as free will exercised by autonomous individuals. Instead, Ahearn draws from the work of a range of scholars such as Abu-Lughod, who cautions against the "romance of resistance," and Ortner, who rejects any notion of "pure resistance," in order to assert that the capacity to act is always mediated by place, space, and time. At the same time, Ahearn herself admits that this definition does leave some questions unanswered, such as, for instance, whether all agency must necessarily be individual or whether it can be subindividual (i.e. the property of what several scholars have termed "dividuals," as when someone feels torn within herself or himself).

This question is perhaps answered most effectively by a poststructuralist conception of the (gendered) subject. Thus Henrietta Moore proposes a distinction between the individual and the subject; according to her, each individual takes up multiple subject positions within a range of discourses and social practices such that a single subject cannot be said to be the same as a single individual. According to Moore, there are dominant and subdominant discourses that are both reproduced as well as resisted by an individual's multiple subjectivities. In other words, a nuanced understanding of agency recognizes that oppositional agency is only one form of agency; that agency includes within it aspects of both contestation and collusion; and that collusion can benefit the gendered subject who may find some limited power even within the dominant patriarchal framework.

Thus, I would argue that the flattening of the mythological Radha's perspective that I earlier alluded to has, in some ways, augmented rather than diminished Radha's cultural power. Here we need only note how Krishna and Radha are prayed to as twin idols by believers, and how many later traditions within Hinduism even consider Radha as more central to their beliefs than Krishna. As Vidya Rao points out, many Vaishnavas greet each other not with an invocation to Krishna but instead with the words "Radhe Radhe" (45). However, such "power" cannot ultimately negate the fact that the Radha-Krishna myth is, in the first and last instance, a part of the larger story of Krishna and his conquests. Even while Radha's relationship with Krishna sanctifies the role of female desire outside the conventions of morality, she is ultimately not a designated goddess but an escort of Krishna, resulting in a double-edged power that may be at once potently subversive and curiously subordinated.

In contrast, *Mistress* is a story about Radha. While the novel does offer us multiple male points of view, including those of Shyam, Chris, and Radha's uncle the Kathakali dancer Koman, it powerfully challenges mythology's flattening of the woman's perspective. As with most other Indian classical dance forms, the structure and stylization of Kathakali too is informed by the *Rasa* theory of Indian aesthetics. In the novel, the nine *rasas* of Bharata's *Natyashastra* become more than just aesthetic emotions to be performed by the Kathakali dancer on stage. Through a clever use of the nine *rasas*, the novel depicts not just the context within which Radha's adultery begins to take shape, but also ultimately foregrounds her point of view.

Thus, through the lens of *sringaaram* or love, we see how Radha's absence of desire for her older husband Shyam has left vacant an emotional space within which her desire for the American travel writer and cello player Chris is born. Through Radha's eyes, we see Shyam as a materialistic businessman who understands neither art nor aesthetics, who constantly embarrasses Radha by exhibiting "a carelessness that is so typical of him," and who in her words "wasn't just a sham, he was an uncouth boor, this husband of mine" (Nair 9). And so, when Chris arrives at the resort owned by the couple, we see the differences between the two men from Radha's perspective:

I look at him. With every moment, the thought hinges itself deeper into my mind: what an attractive man. It isn't that his hair is the colour of rosewood – deep brown with hints of red – or that his eyes are as green as the enclosed pond at the resort. It isn't the pale gold of his skin, either... It is the strength of his body and the length of his fingers that belies what seems to be a natural indolence. It is the crinkling of his eyes and his unhurried smile that throws his face into asymmetrical lines. It is the softness of his mouth framed by a brutish two-day stubble. It is how he appears to let order and chaos exist together without trying to separate one from the other. (8-9)

Chris understands Radha's yearnings for music and poetry, her oblique references to Yeats. Under his attentive gaze, Radha's discontent begins to seep away, and Chris becomes "Krishna to her Radha" (34). Radha's uncle Koman says in despair:

Her face is radiant. Her eyes throw him a sidelong glance. Chris turns to her. His smile gathers her in his arms. I think of Nala and Damayanti. Of lovers in Kathakali who embrace without actually doing so . . . Chris, I see, desires Radha. And she, him. (29)

Haasyam or contempt, the next *rasa*, traces Radha's desire for Chris back to the contempt she feels for Shyam. Ironically, she feels that it is Shyam who holds her in contempt and treats her, his wife of eight years, as a valued but lifeless object: "a kept woman, a bloody mistress to fulfil your sexual needs and with no rights" (73). As she puts it,

Shyam is asleep. His arms pin me to the bed. His bed. I think that for Shyam, I am a possession. A much cherished possession. That is my role in his life. He doesn't want an equal; what he wants is a mistress. (53)

As Radha's desire for Chris grows, her contempt turns inwards, making her abhor herself. *Haasyam* then turns to *karunam*, sorrow or remorse, at her failed marriage and her subsequent adulterous desire for Chris. Yet, despite her remorse, she is drawn to him irresistibly: "The completeness of desire. Chris and Radha" (128).

The next *rasa* is *raudram* or fury; here one sees Radha's silent fury when her husband Shyam, on being refused sex, rapes her. Though she slips on the garb of an artificial gaiety in order to deprive him of the pleasure of having broken her spirit, the humiliation of rape becomes the final justification she needs in order to step out of the bounds of conventional morality and indulge her adulterous desire for Chris. The fury of her rage at Shyam gives way to the fury of her passion for Chris, as "I tremble. I ache. I reach for him again, unafraid to show how much I desire him" (172). This desire gives her *veeram*, courage to believe that nothing can come between them. "Shyam, the parallel worlds we inhabit, guilt. Nothing matters. What feels so right can't be wrong" (216).

Radha's lack of desire for her husband Shyam and the ambivalence she feels towards her marriage are thus sensitively portrayed as being the reasons for her subsequent attraction towards the good-looking, intelligent, and sensitive Chris. In the process, *Mistress* emerges as a powerful narrative of female agency that plays out not just through the idiom and space of desire but also by way of foregrounding the woman's point of view and oppositional agency. *Mistress* is a story about Radha, for it is Radha who consciously decides to fill the void in her life created by one man through indulging her desire for another.

Secondly, to the extent that the purpose of this paper is to analyse rather than to moralize, I want to argue that a woman's adulterous desire would indicate feminist, oppositional agency the more that desire and its bodily expression are clear acts of defiance against androcentric social norms. Here I must concede that the flattening of her life-situation and perspective notwithstanding, mythology does accord Radha's defiant bodily desire a lot of space. The *Gita-Govinda*, one of the primary theological texts that comprise the lore of Krishna, not only describes Radha as enjoying sex, but also depicts her as experimenting with various positions and taking the dominant position in lovemaking:

She performed as never before throughout the course of the conflict of love,
To win, lying over his beautiful body, to triumph over her lover;
And so through taking the active part her thighs grew lifeless,
And languid her vine-like arms, and her heart beat fast,
and her eyes grew heavy and closed;
For how many women prevail in the male performance! (118)

In the *Gita-Govinda*, Radha's power continues beyond lovemaking; after the consummation of desire, she "commands" Krishna to do as she orders. He willingly complies:

She said:

Adorn my breasts with leaf designs of musk
Put colour on my cheeks
Fasten the girdle around my hips
Twine my heavy braid with flowers
Fix rows of bangles on my hands
And jewelled anklets on my feet.
And thus requested by Radha
Krishna who wears the yellow garment
Did as she has asked him to, with pleasure. (qtd. in Varma 51-2)

Again, we see how early authoritative texts on the lore of Krishna establish “kaama” or desire as one of the pillars of the Hindu socio-religious order; Krishna the God-incarnate treats women as his sexual equals and considers the bodily expression of their desire as valid as his own. Mythology amply underscores Radha’s social defiance, which plays out through the space of desire, albeit with much more constraints than Krishna’s. Thus Radha’s depiction as “a strikingly compelling woman: beautiful, aloof, proud, sensitive, brooding, wilful and passionate” goes alongside a provocative description of her sexual agency, with “Radha, the furtive rebel, determined to clandestinely break the stranglehold of social norms and customs” through her “uninhibited pursuit of physical fulfilment” (Varma 45, 59).

Interestingly however, this sharply defiant sexual agency of high culture’s Radha is co-opted by the prescriptive nature of *desire as devotion rather than defiance* by popular culture as well as subsequent theological trends in high culture. Both of these read Radha’s desire for Krishna not as a woman’s desire for a man, but as the human soul’s desire for divine union, or even as the devotion of a wife for her husband.

Speaking of popular culture, for instance, Heidi Pauwels demonstrates how, in the televised serial *Sri Krishna*, there is absolutely no blatant depiction of Radha’s or the *gopis*’ sexual desire. Instead, the director creates the impression that the *gopis* are unmarried young girls praying for a good husband, thereby transforming Radha and the *gopis* from adulteresses into “good girls” and thus transform the sexually charged context into a devotional one. As Pauwels points out, this devotional context upholds, rather than challenges, *stri dharma* (women’s duty), thus surrounding the *rasa lila* with an aura of social respectability and *maryada* (conventional morality).

This trend in popular culture parallels similar trends in theological interpretation. For instance, in later works such as Chandida’s *Srikrishnakirtan*, Radha becomes an incarnation of Vishnu’s wife/consort Lakshmi and assumes the mantle of a goddess, and in many Puranic works, Radha comes to represent the feminine cosmic symbol (Rao 44-45). As Jan Knappert explains in the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Mythology*, Krishna comes to represent a million men, Radha a million women; Krishna as the man loved by many fickle women, will always come back to the pure love of Radha, who, by worshipping him, makes him God

(203). Interestingly, Knappert takes great pains to establish the difference between this pure divine love and its (for Knappert, clearly more profane) counterpart: sexual desire. Hence he concludes in his reading of the Radha-Krishna myth that Radha is not a wanton adulteress but a devout worshipper; indeed, she is the human soul herself, yearning to unite with God. This trend is also seen in contemporary treatments of the Radha-Krishna lore, such as in Varma's falling upon Upanishadic philosophy to demonstrate how "the *rasa leela* affirmed the sexual as a window to the divine" (Varma 40-41).

Their philosophical merit notwithstanding, what emerges in these readings is an emphasis on symbolic rather than bodily union between the human and the divine. By emphasizing the female heart's spiritual devotion (seen as an admirable feminine trait within cross-cultural phallogocentric discourse) rather than the female body's defiant desire (seen as deviant and dangerous on account of its sexually subversive overtones), this interpretive trend ultimately dulls the sharpness of the mythical Radha's agency.

In comparison, *Mistress'* treatment of Radha's desire and agency once again shifts our focus from disembodied devotion to bodily defiance. Much along the same lines as Gayatri Spivak's argument about Mahasweta Devi's fictional reworking of the mythical character Draupadi in her essay "Draupadi," I argue that it would be a mistake to see the modern Radha as an absolute refutation of the mythic Radha. However, like Devi's feminist rewriting of the Draupadi *vastraharan* or disrobing episode from the *Mahabharata*, *Mistress* as a feminist re-writing of the Radha-Krishna love story also allows the modern woman to be what her mythic counterpart could not be, insofar as the latter was "written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power" (Spivak, "Draupadi" 252).

At this point, it may be useful to draw attention to the fact that, unlike the mythical Krishna's dalliance with multiple women who are all powerless in his presence, the men in *Mistress* desire only Radha. Through the novel's distinct (re)emphasis on the potently sexual nature of Radha's desire through, for instance, frank descriptions of "their reckless couplings in bed, the heaving and panting, the moans and sounds that emerged from his throat and mine, the beads of sweat, bodily fluids, skin against skin" (Nair 399), Nair's Radha powerfully emerges, like Devi's Draupadi, as at once "a palimpsest and a contradiction" (Spivak, "Draupadi" 252).

This is not to say that Nair's Radha sees her relationship with Chris as bodily desire and sexual defiance all along. On the contrary, she initially sees it as a beautiful love that rises above common understandings of sex and adultery. As she puts it,

My love was neither murky nor rank. My love rose above the sludge of conventional adultery. My love was born in a perfumed garden where fireflies and stars stood vigil. My love lived in a room where curtains billowed and the breeze blew. My love grew amidst music and words, and a thousand buds. (Nair 398)

But as the *bhayaanakam* or fear that grips Radha when she begins to be afraid that Chris does not reciprocate her love slowly turns to *Beebhalsam* or disgust, Radha feels abhorrence and revulsion at her actions, her cheating, her lying, her pretence and, more interestingly, her disgust at her body's unbridled desires:

What is this passion that carries all sense of propriety away? I glance at him. His pupils seem dilated. Can sex do that? What about me then? Do I too show the branding of an injudicious moment, of adulterous desires that have swept aside all that is decent and moral about me? [...] I am not listening to Chris. All I can hear is the beating of my own heart and an inner voice that berates me. How can you let lust rule you? There is nothing more stupid than careless lust. There is nothing more disgusting than your inability to control your wantonness. Do you want to undo all that you have been trying to build? Chris might want you like this, reeking of abandonment and sex, but in his heart he probably thinks you are a slut! Disgusting, disgusting, disgusting, it snickers. (291)

The irony here, of course, is that on the one hand we see very little of the celebration of sexuality that undergirded the classical texts; on the other hand, we also do not see an attempt to subsume desire within a larger androcentric narrative of female spirituality and devotion. Instead, what we have here is an emphasis on Radha's sexual agency, an agency with both subversive and collusive aspects as demonstrated first through Radha's feeling of being "torn between two men, feeling like a slut whether she was with one man or the other" (347) and afterwards, through her understanding that her feelings for Chris were actually nothing more than "an act of defiance for me; and interesting encounter for him. Loneliness and a funnelling need that had exploded into unbridled passion. That was all it was. And as is the nature of such things, it dies as it was born. Abruptly" (399-400). In other words, *Mistress* uses the sexual desire of the subversive female body to very clearly shift the focus from women's devotion back to women's defiance.

And finally, Radha's lack of agency within mythology is most painfully apparent when Krishna ultimately leaves Brindavan to assume the mantle of ruler at Mathura. It is his decision to leave, and he does so without any explanation. Legend has it that in Mathura he acquires many wives—Rukmini, Jambavati, Satyabhama, and Kalindi, to name a few—and we never again hear of Radha and what became of her. Instead, we are left with the image of Radha's absolute fidelity and enduring spiritual love for Krishna; in fact, this spiritual love is worshipped much more in India than the defiance and desire which were an integral part of the lore. Radha's embodied agency is obliterated in the face of social mores, in a situation where the ultimate choice lies with a man who chooses to walk away.

It is with respect to this final theme that *Mistress* as a feminist reworking of myth is at its most powerful, with the modern Radha's agency speaking loudest in the ultimate choice she makes. As the affair progresses, the reader is likely to assume that Radha will be hurt when Chris leaves. The narrative disjuncture comes when Radha begins to

worry that no matter what *she* decides—and so she clearly sees the decision as being hers rather than Chris’—“Someone will be hurt. Shyam or Chris. How do I choose?” (253) Thus, unlike mythology’s Krishna, who leaves Vrindavan and therefore Radha, *Mistress* gives contemporary Radha the power to choose.

Interestingly, *Mistress* makes explicit its own reworking of myth not so much in the words of Radha as in the words of her husband Shyam, who, in a troubled moment, is shown invoking the myth of Radha-Krishna. Shyam interprets mythology in an entirely unique way, not from the culturally dominant perspective of the lover-God Krishna or even from the perspective of Radha, but from the perspective of Radha’s silent mythological husband. As Shyam says,

I think of the other Radha. The cowherd husband herded his cows while Radha sneaked off to her trysts with Krishna. He seduced her with music and charm. But do you know what happened? Krishna went away. He had so much to do, so many things to accomplish, so many demons to vanquish, and sixteen thousand and more wives to tend to; time had staked its claim on him. But the husband remained. The cowherd husband tending his cows and waiting for Radha to come to her senses, to go back to him. Am I to be that husband? (247)

But the narrative resolves the dilemma in an entirely novel way, with Radha realizing the flaws of—and in a sense, also the similarity between—Chris and Shyam. As she puts it, “[w]hen 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. I know for certain that I cannot live with one or the other” (398).

Toward the end of the novel, Radha therefore chooses to give up *both* men, exercising a powerful feminist agency by entirely rejecting the mythological Krishna figure in the form of both the traditional Shyam and his westernized counterpart Chris. In doing so, she realises the transient nature of *adbhutam*, or wonder, which is nothing but a yearning to possess the unfamiliar; with possession, wonder ceases, and so the wonder of the desire that Radha felt for Chris also fades away. And that is when she is able to experience *shaantam*, or peace: “Detachment. Freedom. An absence of desire. A coming to terms with life” (397).

Thus, it is on the above three counts—the foregrounding of the woman’s point of view and the context of her desire; a (re)emphasis on desire as female bodily defiance rather than disembodied devotion; and the woman’s ultimate choice—that I have read *Mistress* as a feminist reworking of myth. By addressing the androcentric omissions that have undergirded both “high” and popular cultural understandings of the mythology of Radha-Krishna, I have demonstrated how *Mistress* reworks the gendered politics of desire to give Radha a more powerful voice.

Yet the politics of desire is not just defined by the hegemonies of gender; it is also defined by the hegemonies of race and the global inequalities between the east and the west. These hegemonies of race and location, and

the manner in which they have shaped feminist intellectual production, were, in fact, the primary reason behind the emergence of postcolonial feminism. I will now suggest that the notion of desire deployed in *Mistress* can usefully engage the key conceptual categories of postcolonial feminist theory; by going beyond the gendered politics of desire in order to critique the larger political hegemonies of our times, the novel's nuanced treatment of desire can help us envision an innovative and hybrid feminist politics.

To establish this argument, it may be useful to first delineate the broad contours of postcolonial feminism, its agendas, and its ambitions. Postcolonial feminist theory subsumes under its rubric a dazzling array of works. While revisiting all of them is beyond the scope of this paper, we might use as a starting point the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who argues that postcolonial feminism has two interlinked aims, namely: the critique of hegemonic western feminism and the formulation of an autonomous, socio-historically and geographically grounded feminist strategy. In her trenchant essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Mohanty demonstrates how, in an act she terms "discursive colonization," third-world women are homogenized, systematized, and produced as a singular monolithic subject in some feminist texts such that this subject is implicitly reduced to an object for the west's easy consumption. As a postcolonial feminist, Mohanty's purpose, then, is to unpack western women's assumed referential status in mainstream feminism through a nuanced reading of third-world women, their pluralities, and their lived experiences.

These questions of representation, location, identity and voice are also central to the work of postcolonial feminist theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, Sara Suleri, Ania Loomba, Rey Chow, Deepika Bahri, Lata Mani, and Uma Narayan, who critique the idea of the "universal" (i.e. western) woman as well as the monolithic "Third-World woman." For instance, Spivak argues famously against the problematic history of ethnocentric intervention by western women on behalf of indigenous women, defined predominantly by generalizations about third-world women and their subsequent mislabelling as generically subaltern, while Suleri argues against the formulation of any "authentic" womanly self by demonstrating how the categories "woman" and "third-world woman" are constructed in discourse. By introducing a nuanced reading of third-world women's lives, postcolonial feminism, in the words of Rajan and Park, thus repudiates third-world otherness, tokenism and stereotyping by western feminists, instead embracing hybridity and in-betweenness. The ethics, aesthetics, and politics of postcolonial feminist intellectual production rule out simplistic binary oppositions, which, as Spivak puts it, only create discursive conditions for centralization and marginalization. Instead, they seek to establish Rajan's "hybridity of matter (history, issues, themes) and method (theory, language)" (7).

At an epistemological level, postcolonial feminist praxis thus comprises Spivak's formulation of "politics as such," not merely reversing but actually displacing the distinction between margin and center. This

epistemic intervention is all the more true for postcolonial feminist *literary* production which, at least in its most idealized conception, strives to challenge established literary canons by crafting a more heterogeneous, multicultural, and counter-canonical archive. Through its emphasis on mediating cultures while simultaneously depriving culture of an “authentic,” autonomous identity, a postcolonial feminist framework uncovers hitherto unmapped complexities within, and relationships among, discursive systems of the “local” and the “global.” In the process, it blurs the dividing line between not just the local and the global but, as John Marx says, between literature, politics, and history.

It is against this theoretical backdrop that I read *Mistress* as a postcolonial feminist text in its consistent dislocation of hegemonic centre-margin binaries, its explication of the continuities and complexities inherent in the categories of the global and the local, and its rhetoric of hybrid forms.

To begin with, Nair uses a syncretic style of storytelling that combines dance and narrative, a clever politico-aesthetic mixing in which the narrative form of the novel—a form that has often been traced back to its western colonial roots—is woven together with the Kathakali dance that depicts classical Indian tradition. However, both dance and narrative as used in *Mistress* are, from their inception, revealed to be “impure” categories in themselves, thus revealing the tensions between the east and the west, the global and the local, and tradition and modernity.

Thus the “western” form of the novel (western only insofar as its historical antecedents are concerned) is culturally localized through its setting, its use of the *rasas* to establish narrative arc, and its many references to the larger history of the Indian subcontinent. To further establish a syncretic narrative style, the plot of *Mistress* is, as I have demonstrated, entirely shaped by the Radha-Krishna story from Hindu mythology whose androcentric omissions it attempts to rework.

At the same time, Kathakali too loses its “pure” status as local tradition and gets globalized, with the narrative demonstrating how traditional dance is implicated in global economies of exchange. Nair skilfully narrates this side of the story through Radha’s uncle Koman’s journey in dance, a journey that sees him rise and fall in love and in life. And so he falls in love with his British student Angela and accompanies her to London in the hope that the world would be his stage. His subsequent loss of identity, his awareness of the assumed inferiority of his race in a whiter world, and his eventual return to his roots then allows Nair to demonstrate how other Kathakali artists who trivialize and truncate “local” art in order to be comprehensible to a “global” audience go on to achieve worldwide success.

I would therefore suggest that Nair’s form of story-telling closely approximates what Robert Fraser terms the final stage in postcolonial narration—that of the transcultural narrative, a narrative that traces its own “retrospective becoming,” constantly “travelling” through “inauthentic” cultural forms even while staying attentive to its own politics (8-9). I

would argue that this political aesthetic of postcolonial theorizing applies not only to *Mistress*'s hybrid narrative, but ultimately to the novel's treatment of Radha's desire.

To this end, we must consider the well-established feminist argument that women's bodies are framed through the lens of a gendered history and discursively deployed in the construction of androcentric cultural and national identities (Kandiyoti; Boehmer; Yuval-Davis). Obviously, the meanings attributed to female bodily desire are also an integral part of this regulatory framing. So, for instance, a nuanced reading of Indian high culture reveals the contradiction inherent in codified Hinduism's treatment of adulterous desire and its patriarchal resolution. Thus while the *Dharmasastras* explicitly forbid extramarital sex for both men and women, and Sanskrit romances such as the *Kathasaritasagara* and the *Kamasutra* even develop the woman's point of view, far greater morality and penalty, as Wendy Doniger points out, is attached to a woman's adultery, which is constituted as *adharma*, or pollution. A tracing of the nation's politico-cultural history shows how the discourse of desire is further flattened in the colonial era. Thus the empire's imperialist reading of Indian women's bodies as victims is matched by nationalist readings of the same bodies as virtuous, such that "our" women are culturally posited against "theirs" (see, for instance, Narayan). The terms of this debate remain unchanged in postcolonial India, where female bodies are (re)constructed in response to the tussle between the ideological imperatives of tradition and the cultural anxieties of modernity. This once again gives rise to an unnecessary and problematic binary formulation between what Sunder Rajan calls real and imagined women, with the idealized attributes of the latter being inscribed onto the lived bodies of the former such that the normative Indian woman emerges as impossibly chaste, pure, and self-sacrificing.

These politico-cultural trends also explain why Radha's powerful sexual agency as depicted in classical texts was, as I have demonstrated, subsumed by later trends in high as well as popular culture, all of which strove to recast Radha's desire within an androcentric framework of social acceptability. A postcolonial reading of female desire would therefore need to locate desire within this complex cultural history of female embodiment. I would argue that *Mistress*, with its complexity of characters and hybrid narrative logic, does manage to do this.

This complexity is evident, for instance, in the fragmented subjectivities of Shyam, Chris, and Radha, the three characters in the novel's triangle of desire. Thus Shyam, the traditional man and husband, is a curious mix of rationality and superstition, of softness and strength. While Radha finds it impossible to desire and to love him, he is loved and admired by all his employees. What to Radha is his cloistering possessiveness is to Shyam his pride in his wife, a feeling that is adequately captured when he says, "I like looking at Radha when she is with a group of women. My Radha shines" (Nair 115). The reader begins to empathize with this man whose economically deprived childhood made

him determined to make something of himself in life, and who, despite his material success, continues to suffer insult and humiliation in Radha's intellectually insulated world.

That Shyam is inherently and unacceptably patriarchal is beyond question; not only does he rape his wife when he is unable to come to terms with her apparent liking of Chris, but he even thinks killing an adulterous wife is justified. He asks himself: "What is the husband of an adulteress allowed to do? Am I permitted to vent my fury at being betrayed? Will I be able to defend my honour? Will any court of law, human or divine, hold it against me?" (350). Elsewhere he contemplates getting Chris killed but decides against it only because he does not want Radha to turn her adulterous love "into a temple" and sever her ties with Shyam (297). And yet, despite all his anger and pain, Shyam knows he loves Radha deeply. So he ultimately decides not only to accept her back but to also accept the outcome of her adulterous desire—Chris' illegitimate child, whom she is now carrying—in the hope that she will finally learn to love her husband.

And then there is Chris, who to Radha seems at first to be all that her husband is not: modern, liberated, intellectual, sensitive, and accepting of a woman's equality and opinion. As they "swap memories and quotes," Radha feels "their worlds nestled into each other. We belonged, he and I" (215). But as their relationship progresses, she realises that Chris is dogmatic in his own way, and that his "modernity" is completely circumscribed by his own location and identity. For instance, in their insular world of soft caresses, their first major argument occurs during a discussion on contemporary politics and war. When Chris talks of Saddam Hussein as "evil," Radha retorts by comparing Hussain to Bush and pointing out the latter's dubious political motives behind invading Iraq. Chris is angry and rebukes Radha, saying that he finds her attitude of tolerance unacceptable. Radha is dismayed to realise that their sense of history, of politics, and even of ethics is different and runs deep; she hits back by saying that he will never understand what tolerance is about, since it is beyond westerners. Interestingly, after this discord, Radha then begins to liken her situation to that of the ravaged country, whose ravaging was purported to be for its own good:

What do I have now? . . . I am a country that has to rebuild itself from nothing. I am a country that has to face recriminations and challenges and I don't know where to begin. Worst of all, I don't even know if you will be there to hold my hand through the rebuilding process. So wouldn't it have been best to leave me alone? (292-293)

So this is Radha, a curious mix of Indian and western sensibilities. She enjoys not only classical Indian dance and music, but also Yeats and American shows like *Friends* (124). She wears the Indian sari as well as jeans and "little blouses" (202). And while a part of her seeks freedom from Shyam's traditional "husbandly" behaviour, the other part of her is unsure and afraid of the uncertainties that her freer and more equal relationship with Chris brings. For instance, after Radha reminds Chris

that they should use protection during intercourse, he carelessly asks her to “pick up a few;” Radha’s reaction is very interesting for a woman vociferously seeking social and sexual equality: “No doubt in his country women think nothing of buying condoms. There are even vending machines, I hear. But this is India. And small-town India. How could he even ask me to do it? The horror of it makes me cringe” (209). These and countless other instances show Radha’s unease at Chris’ westernized approach to desire, an approach she finds unacceptable after Shyam’s possessive and traditional love. This unease in her experience of desire with Chris is not necessarily any lesser than the unease and unhappiness she feels with Shyam, though for clearly different reasons. The nature of Radha’s desire thus reveals the same hybrid in-betweenness that informs the novel’s overall narrative logic. It is a desire that yearns for release even while questioning the morality of its own yearnings, a desire that is both pleasurable affirmation and painful lack, a desire that seeks to break through the constraints of culture but is unable to find meaning wholly outside of it. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the paradox in Radha’s desire is ultimately resolved through her rejection of both men—the “traditional Indian” Shyam as well as the “modern American” Chris.

In Radha’s rejection of the two men and, by extension, their respective patriarchal cultures, I read two simultaneous and powerful postcolonial feminist critiques. In her rejection of Shyam, I read an implicit critique of the normative Indian woman’s desire and its implication in the discursive construction of (hegemonic versions of) Indian culture and the nation. Thus Radha rejects the historical burden of being the chaste, virtuous Indian woman who must remain devoted to her man while also serving as a spiritual bulwark against the onslaught of cultural outsiders.

On the other hand, in Radha’s rejection of Chris I read a postcolonial feminist critique of liberal western feminism and the latter’s discursive colonization of third-world women. As discussed earlier, postcolonial feminist theorists have long critiqued hegemonic western feminism for its paternalistic framing of third-world women. As Mohanty argues, this frame sees third-world women as backward compared to western women, with the latter being read as “educated, modern, having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions” (5). This is not to deny that a strong link does exist between women’s agency and the free expression of women’s sexual desire. At the same time, one must remember that men have traditionally been privileged over women in experiencing and acting on sexual desire *across* cultures. Hence the problem with this flattened liberal western reading of the link between women’s agency and sexual desire is not just that it treats “Indian women” as an ahistorical monolith in order to rank them below western women, but also that it overlooks how the bodily expression of female sexual desire can, in this neo-liberal moment, also act as a technology of patriarchal discipline and regulation (see, for instance, Gill).

In rejecting both men, Radha therefore enacts the postcolonial feminist theoretical injunction to expose both the “east” and the “west” as problematic and inauthentic formulations in themselves, and the need to look beyond. Perhaps aptly, the novel therefore ends with a reference to the unborn child in Radha’s womb.

The child in Radha grows. A child who fills every step and hour of hers with wonder. She loves it already, and it is this love she wears as a talisman. She leans back in her rocking chair. She has time enough to think of what she wants to do with her life. She has time to count her joys and blessings. She has time. She rests her hands in her lap. And she rocks herself ever so gently. (426)

Interestingly, *Mistress* does not reveal what Radha’s next step will be. Will she continue to live with Shyam and rework the rules of their marriage? Will she eventually go to Chris while holding on to her own cultural identity? Will she strike out alone, with or without another man? While an accurate (re)presentation of the complexities of Radha’s desire rules out any easy solution—and for this reason, *Mistress*, as an exercise in postcolonial feminism, rightly ends on an inconclusive note—we might conjecture that the child born of Radha’s desire and “fathered” in different ways by both Chris and Shyam depicts creative space and a new politics of an open futurity. Fiction, in this sense, is uniquely positioned to transcend the crisis of politics by allowing for the envisioning of critical-utopian alternatives. The narrative resolves Radha’s dilemma by locating desire within a hybrid, third space of agency that is, at least as of now, unnamed; neither the property of its ‘self’ or its ‘other,’ this desire might, with time, bring to fruition more nuanced journeys of freedom.

This, then, is a contextual reading of desire in all its nuances—the emotional, the material, the political and the discursive—a reading that moves away from depoliticised biological reductionism, choosing instead to view desire as being shaped by multiple modes of subjectivity and gendered identity. Further, it is constructed by specific geo-political histories and cultural frames even as it positions itself to contest these frames, and it finds expression through the body even as it continually transcends its own embodiment. In symbolically rejecting both the “global” and “local” versions of the desire-invoking lover-God Krishna, and thereby posing a challenge to the weighty cultural histories and counter-histories that frame women’s bodies in this postcolonial moment, Radha breaks out of her frozen mythological frame to enact a powerful feminist agency, thus taking her revenge in desire, through desire.

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