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## MYTHICAL AVATARS OF ANITA NAIR'S WOMEN AKHILA AND RADHA

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### M.PRAVEENA

Research Scholar (PT), Department of English  
Thiruvalluvar University, Serkkadu, Vellore

### Dr. S.THIRUNAVUKKARASU

Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English  
Muthurangam Government Arts College, Vellore

### Abstract

*Mythology is the oldest form of storytelling. It resonates with our deepest selves and helps the characters to get grounded with reality, thereby connecting it to the larger culture. Myths are the backbone of the Hindu religion and culture. Any Indian writer cannot overlook this rich heritage of the Indian tradition with its religious and ethical principles. Anita Nair themulti-faceted, contemporary, Indian woman writer has done justice in her novels, Ladies Coupe and the Mistress by connecting her pivotal characters with mythical figures.*

**Keywords:** Akhila as Sakti with ten entities and Chrisand Radha as Krishna and Radha.

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A myth is a traditional story consisting of stories that are historical and supernatural, but explicitly presents the origins of a cultural practice. The word "myth" is derived from the Greek word mythos which means "story". It could also mean a 'sacred story', 'traditional narrative' or 'tale of the gods'. The two oldest mythologies known to mankind is Greek and Indian mythologies. Anita Nair in her novels, Ladies Coupe and the Mistress has presented both the Indian and Greek mythical references.

In the novel the Ladies Coupe it narrates the tale of six women who meet by chance in a second class ladies compartment. Akhilandeswari is the protagonist of the novel extending an open ear to the co-passengers who are willing to bare their lives to her. This helps Akhila to decide the course of her life. What boggled the mind of Akhila is, can a woman stay single? Does she need a man to feel complete? When the train comes to her destined place she is in a position to figure out the subtle and explicit patriarchal hold of each woman; the defiance, the struggle or the submission in which, each one takes in their lives to meet with their needs. Sunita Sinha says, "Nair's India suffers from a patriarchal system which has tried in many ways to repress, humiliate and

debase women. The question she poses in the novel not only shakes the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in our traditional society but also imply the existence of an alternative reality" (1).

Akhila the forty five year old bread winner of the family had lived a starched life sacrificing herself for the sake of her own family. When her brother Narsi found a teaching job for himself and Narayan became a machinist in a tank factory: "Akhila felt the iron bands around the chest begin to loosen: Dare I breathe again? Dare I dream Again? Now that the Boys are men, can I start feeling like a woman again" (3). As the social structure would have it, both these guys got married one after the other, not bothering if Akhila ever wanted to settle down with the family of her own. The long train journey of Akhila ultimately leads her to the road of self discovery. She wants to get connected to her lover Hari, the North Indian man. The earlier strictures of society no more worried her, whether Hari would be loyal and committed to her or what the world would think of the illicit love of an older woman for a young man. In her stay at Kanyakumari she boldly makes advances with a stranger. As Nair rightly points out :

Akhila is lust. Akhila is Sakthi. Akhila is Akhilandeswari decimated into ten entities.

Kali. Ready to destroy all that comes between her and the flow of time.

Tara. With the golden embryo from which a new universe will evolve. She will be her own void and infinity.

Sodasi. Fullness at sixteen. Nurturing dreams and hopes. Even now at forty-five.

Bhuvaneshwari. The forces of the material world surge within.

Bhairavi. Seeking to find ways and means to fulfill her desires before all is null and void.

Chinnamasta. The naked one continuing the state of self-sustenance in the created world; making possible destruction and renewal in a cyclic order.

Dhumati. Misfortune personified. An old hag riding an ass with a broom in one hand and a crow on her banner.

Bagala. The cane headed one, the ugly side of all living creatures. Jealousy, hatred, cruelty, she is all this and more.

Matangi. Seeking to dominate.

And then there is Kamala. Pure consciousness of the self, bestowing boons and allaying fears. (LC 274-275)

At the close of the novel Anita Nair has beautifully portrayed the emerging new woman in Akhila breaking forth the chrysalis of society, patriarchal and familial hold. In the novel *Mistress*, the novelist presents the Radha-Krishna story from the Hindu Mythology. She infuses it with Kathakali the dance drama of Kerala. The protagonist Koman, Radha's uncle is a Kathakali artist of international acclaim. The characters Koman, Shyam, Radha and Chris express their emotions through the medium of Navarasas. They are *sringaaram* (love), *haasyam* (contempt), *karunam* (sorrow),

raudram (fury), veeram (valour), bhayaankam (fear), beebhalsam (disgust), adbhutam (wonder) and shaantam (detachment). *Mistress* is the novel which depicts about the confusion that prevails in the married life of the materialistic Shyam and the sensual Radha. As a young boy Shyam has been humiliated by his uncle, Radha's father because they were financially dependent on him but later when Radha gets pregnant from an affair with a married colleague it is Shyam who saves Radha by marrying her. He rises in the social status acquiring the wealth of his uncle, he becomes an entrepreneur. Sadly Radha feels she has been trapped in marriage with a man like Shyam with his low sperm count. With the arrival of Chris, a cello playing American journalist life appears meaningful for Radha.

In the Hindu myth, Krishna is the most widely worshipped god among Vishnu's incarnations. The god Krishna is handsome, youthful and dark-skinned who is known for his flamboyant and complex personality. His melodies on the flute invade the minds and souls of the milkmaids (gopis). More than the erotic connection it creates, it represents the ardent desire of the individual to be one with the Lord Krishna. Veronica Ions states in the book *Indian Mythology* how the Krishna myth has drawn more attention than any other for, "his amorous adventures with women, in particular the married cowgirls (gopis)" (61). Their love affair has constantly inspired poets and artists.

In this novel, Radha's Krishna is Chris, the Americanised version of the Indian Krishna, who with his cello invades the heart of Radha. The magic of Krishna's flute was such that, on hearing the melodious notes the milkmaids became aglow with passion leaving their husbands, children and houses and rushed to the trysting place in the forest. Similarly, Radha longs to be in the companionship of Chris. She sees Shyam as: "He wasn't just a sham, he was an uncouth boor, this husband of mine." (M 9). The materialistic Shyam is not able to satisfy the musical and poetic yearnings of Radha. When Koman sees Chris and Radha, he can just connect them with "Nala to her Damyanti. Arjuna to her Subhadra. Krishna to her Radha." (M 26). Her face becomes radiant when she sees Chris. She is defiant, passionate, willful and compelling who gets needs met with Chris. Just like the Lord Krishna who leaves the Brindavan to be the ruler of Mathura. Chris decides to leave and he does so without any explanation.

The helplessness of Radha is being viewed by Shyam in *Bhayaanakam* rasa. In this story the coward husband remains while Radha sneaks off with Krishna but in the end Krishna went missing but the husband stayed faithful. From the novelist's point of view Radha is not the adoring and devoted lover of Krishna. She is the mythical avatar of the modern woman who has the strength to reject both the men and take life in her own hands.

Thus Anita Nair has artistically made use of the myths in the novels *Ladies Coupe'* and *Mistress*. She has probed deep into the inner feelings of Akhila and Radha and sketched the story of the emerging modern woman. The novelist has placed the pivotal characters in the light of the postmodern context of how daringly they

challenge the social strictures of society, thereby making their lives meaningful, reliant and worth living.

### References

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