International Journal of Education and Science Research Review
Volume-1, Issue-1 Feburary-2014 ISSN: 2348- 6457

Feminist Agency and the Politics of Desire in Anita Nair's Mistress

Mrs.Usha Bhatt **Dr.Mihir Dave**
J.J.T. University,
Jhunjhunu Rajasthan.

Abstract:
Gender equality and women empowerment are the issues which picked up momentum in India in the last three decades. There has been a shift, not only in the policy approaches but also in the ideology of women themselves. This 'New Woman' is self–reliant, emancipated and happy individual, who is sexually uninhibited, intelligent, confident and assertive. She lives with a heightened sense of dignity. This 'new being' has been projected in the context of contemporary world as an individual with freedom of choices in the fictional works of many post-modern Indian writers. Through their fiction, they have successfully projected the urges, dreams and desire of a woman, in particular -- the middle class housewife, who refuses to be bounded and suffocated by her surroundings. Indian writers like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Namita Gokhale, Anita Nair, through their fiction, have successfully and skillfully brought to the surface, these new women issues like dilution in relationships, pre-marital and extra-marital affairs, sterility of life, man–woman relationship, their inner fears, oppression and suppression faced in and outside home.

Key words: emancipated, successfully.

Introduction:

The novel explores the depth of relationship between Shyam and Radha. In their relationship we find that Radha's role as a wife blocks her freedom. Beauvoir believed that the institution of marriage has marred the spontaneity of feelings, between the husband and wife by "transforming freely given feelings into mandatory duties and shrilly asserted rights"3. A woman is more than her body. She is not only a Being-in-itself but also a Being-for-itself. Radha's alienation under the rubrics of sexuality is on account of Shyam's cold intellectuality. The entire pulsating and throbbing world around Shyam serves to deepen her love for Chris. Radha's contact with Shyam never went deeper than skin. She is unable to satiate her sexual urge because of Shyam's aloofness, and this leads her into Chris arms. Nair, who is a sensitive writer, can delve deep into people's personalities and take the reader on a wonderful journey of relationship. Radha rejects her husband's oppressive environment and she rebels against the false materialism and vulgarity of society. She even virtually rejects her marriage. She distrusts love as a form of male possessiveness and does not want love to be an aspect of male domination. Radha who had a pre-marital affair with a married man, had an abortion, Later her post-affair with Christopher, she grapples for the true sense of love, completely divorced from the sense of guilt. As she travels back to her uncle life she confronts many harsh truths of her own past. To the agitated self of Radha who is fed up with ugly life, she has a strong desire to find out an order. She tries to explore the past of her uncle, as well as, Chrostopher who are so closely connect with her mysterious past. She wants to understand the secret behind Christopher's visit and her uncle's procrastination to narrate his own life storty.She plunges to the past and many realizations occur to her. The shocking revelation that Christopher, with whom she had extramarital affair is her cousin leaves her devastated. In the process of knowing her past, she is transformed into a new being. This transformation gives her the inner strength to submit to Shaym's wish to take her back to home. Mysteries are an indictment against men who believe in holding their women in their grip. It is a statement against women who take pride in their servility; it's again an indictment against men who

trade in marriages as a means of increasing money and power. It is a strong statement male-chauvinism, female apathy and reluctance and it is a woman's voice for freedom and emancipation. In cultural firmament of India which is undergoing vast change, now one finds that there are good, bad, monstrous and erratic specimens of women ranging from film actresses, models, house-wives to the fallen sisters of Gandhi. In this background, women like Radha in Mistress, Janaki, Prabha and Margaret in Ladies Coupe occupy a unique place. Being sensitive and having spent their childhood in comfortable conditions of parental care, it was expected that their marital life should be wholesome and happy. But, it could not come about, mainly on account of their sensitiveness and an inner urge to carve their own identity. It is very inteteresting to watch how an individual is an ever a captive of his attitude and intentions. Radha's search for physical interaction and gratification or that of Koman-her uncle for recognition is no different from Akhila's search for meaning in life. They want an alternative definition of this world, its inhabitants and their own life. The crisis that Nair presents is that of the whole, "women" race. It is the difference between 'is' and 'ought'. We may supposedly define 'is' but the 'ought to' part always evades clarification. Radha's and Akhila's character she depicts the compromise between what 'is' and 'what ought to be' the struggle before us and the efforts which we should harness to sermount the struggle. This approach to her novels truly point out Anita Nair's place as a forerunner to fight for the cause of women's liberation movement in India and abroad. 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: dharma, 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 howWith 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) 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. 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) 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) 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. 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.

References:

1. Abu-Lughod, Lila. "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women." American Ethnologist 17.1 (1990): 41–55. Print.
2. Ahearn, Laura M. "Language and Agency." Annual Review of Anthropology 30 (2001): 109-37. Print.
3. Boehmer, Elleke. Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005. Print.
4. Doniger, Wendy. "Betting on Margin: Adultery and Surrogate Pseudomarriage in Hinduism." From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion, and Culture. Eds. Lindsay
5. Harlan and Paul B. Courtright. New York: Oxford UP, 1995. 160-83. Print.
6. Fraser, Robert. Lifting the Sentence: A Poetics of Postcolonial Fiction.
7. Gill, Rosalind. "Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising." Feminism & Psychology 18.1 (2008): 35-60. Print.
8. Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader. Eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Essex: Pearson Education, 1993. 376-89. Print.
9. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." Feminisms. Eds. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997. 91-96. Print.
10. Narayan, Uma. "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism." Hypatia 13.2 (1998): 86-106. Print.
11. Rao, Vidya. "Seeing Radha, Being Radha: Singing Ashta Chap Poetry and Thumri." Re-searching Indian Women. Ed. Vijaya Ramaswamy. Delhi: Manohar, 2003. Print.