

Navarasas Unveiled: An Exploration of Emotions in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

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Abstract

*This paper explores the portrayal of Navarasas, the nine fundamental human emotions in Indian aesthetics, in Anita Nair's novel *Mistress*. The novel, set against the vibrant backdrop of southern India, also dives deep into the complexities of human relationships, desires, and emotions. Through the experiences of the protagonists, Radha, Shyam, Chris, Uncle, and other characters, Nair artfully uses a variety of Navarasas, including love, anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise, peace, and courage. Nair depicts each emotion with depth and authenticity, reflecting the complexities of the human psyche. Using the nine fundamental human emotions (Navarasas), Nair explores the human condition and the countless ways in which emotions shape our lives and contemplates the universal truths inherent in human emotion. The paper's objective is to analyze Navarasas as depicted in Anita Nair's *Mistress*.*

Keywords: Navarasas, *Mistress*, Anita Nair, Human emotions,

The novel *Mistress* was written by Anita Nair in 2005. The novel is divided into three sections, including a prologue and an epilogue. The novel is a remarkable exploration of human emotions, cultural intricacies, and the complexities of identity, set against the Kathakali art form, which is a famous dance in Kerala. Nair employs Navarasas for each chapter, such as Sringaaram (beauty), Haasyam (laughter), Karunam (sorrow), Raudram (anger), Veeram (courage), Bhayaanakam (fear), Beebhalam (disgust), Adhbhutam (wonder), and Shantam (calmness). Each chapter begins by describing one of these 'rasas'. The novel features three main narrators: Radha, Shyam, and Uncle (Koman), and it unfolds through the perspectives of these characters. Nair skillfully explores love, loss, desire, and self-discovery.

The novel *Mistress* revolves around the Kathakali dancer Koman, his niece Radha, and a travel writer named Christopher Stewart, who comes to India to write about Koman. Radha, the protagonist, experiences dissatisfaction in her marriage and discovers a new romantic relationship with Chris. This newfound love creates significant tension in her personal life, leading her to a traumatic juncture where she feels compelled to sever ties with all her relationships. Ultimately, Radha takes control of her own life by reclaiming the keys to her independence and choosing to live individually.

Sringaaram

Sringaaram, which translates to love or romantic passion in Indian aesthetics, The narrator starts by asking if there are other words to describe love, indicating that people often express it through physical gestures and emotional responses like widening eyes, raising eyebrows, softening lips, and taking deep breaths. The narrator talks about all the different names people use for 'Sringaaram', "**Pleasure, longing, lust**" (*Mistress* 7)—and reflects on the human tendency to classify and categorize experiences. According to the narrator, 'Sringaaram' is an intense yearning for something, which makes every moment feel special and full of longing.

The narrator talks about August as a time when flowers are everywhere and everything looks green and wild. Also, it describes how it's rainy one minute and sunny the next. The narrator says, "**Love lives in the present. All else is memory and hope.**" (*Mistress* 7) The narrator describes the absence of fruits like mangoes and jackfruits and the presence of ripe paddy kernels symbolizing the fullness and sweetness of love. The moon illuminates the night sky, accompanied by a symphony of sounds—the chirping of crickets, the croaking of frogs, "**he hooting of owls, and the rustle of palm leaves**" (*Mistress* 8)—all contributing to the atmosphere of Sringaaram.

The narrator describes how the crested lark, also known as the vanampaadi, sings during the day, adding to the atmosphere of mystery and excitement. According to the narrator, the beautiful melody makes people feel deep emotions and a strong desire for the unknown and magical parts of love. Nair vividly portrays 'Sringaaram' as a complex emotion, intricately linked to the beauty of nature, the cycles of the seasons, and the enigmas of the world.

Haasyam

The second emotion in the Navarasas is laughter, or 'Haasyam' in Indian aesthetics. The narrator provides detailed instructions on how to perform haasyam, emphasizing the nuances of facial expressions, like **"the eyelids slightly closed and the lips drawn down on each side. Indent the upper lip muscles. This is haasyam."** (Mistress 52)

The narrator explains different forms of 'haasyam', such as mirth, quiet smiles, derision, and contempt. According to the narrator, Mirth is described as being like the lively breeze before a festival, especially the Thiruvadhira festival, with leaves rustling and the promise of summer. Quiet smiles bring to mind the abundance of nature, like ripe tamarind and blossoming mango trees. The narrator describes derision as being like winds that blow away heat without caring, showing a lack of respect for rules or what society thinks. Finally, the narrator compares contempt to the actions of the Indian tree pie bird, called olangali, which casually hangs upside down from palm fronds and mocks with its calls, showing a disregard for normal behavior and a mocking attitude. Nair explores how human feelings are similar to things in nature, like the way we laugh at being connected to the world around us. It uses detailed descriptions and beautiful pictures to make readers think about how laughter is connected to different parts of life and nature.

Karunam

The narrator's reflection on the universal human experience of sorrow, known in Sanskrit as 'karunam'. The narrator says that people express sorrow through facial expressions, body language, and changes in breathing patterns. **"When my eyebrows slant down at the ends, my eyes crinkle at the corners and my mouth droops. My breath moves from the cavity of the chest to the base of the spine. Do you see how my belly sinks and my shoulders droop? Karunam."** (Mistress 105) Nair provided an excellent Buddhist story to depict Karunam. The story is about a woman who seeks to bring her dead son back to life through the Buddha. Buddha asks a woman to bring a handful of mustard from the house where no death happened. The woman does not get mustard. Later, she learns that death is an unavoidable part of existence. Throughout the story, Nair teaches us that sorrow is a part of life, and we cannot ignore this fact.

The narrator talks about how sorrow exists in nature, especially during July, which marks the transition from the relief of summer to the start of the monsoon season. The narrator says that during that time, everything is wet, dark, and still, which symbolizes sadness. The narrator also talks about what the song of the koelbird might mean, saying that even animals can show feelings like sadness or regret. According to the narrator, the koel is a bird known for its carefree and irresponsible behavior, such as laying its eggs in other birds' nests and neglecting its children. Despite its careless nature, the narrator says that the koel's song may be filled with remorse. The koel may feel regret for its actions, perhaps feeling sorry for the harm it has caused. The narrator portrays this remorse as a form of "karunam," or sorrow.

Nair contemplates the pervasive nature of sorrow, both in human experience and in the natural world, and she says that it is an inevitable aspect of existence that must be accepted and understood.

Raudram

According to the narrator, 'raudram,' which is described as more than just anger, though it often appears similar, Physical expressions of Raudram include widening the eyes until they are fully open, tilting the head back, flaring the nostrils, setting the mouth, and clenching the jaws. The narrator also suggests trying to exhale through the eyes with intensity. This physical description indicates that raudram is not just about the emotion itself, but also about its outward expression and intensity.

According to the narrator, there are two distinct forms of fury: the fury of a raging storm and the fury of fiery spice. The first form it depicts is through the metaphor of a thunderous rainstorm, characterized by dark clouds, booming thunder, and jagged lightning. This portrayal shows how powerful and wild nature's anger can be, especially during the thulaavarsham season. The second form is the sensation of fury experienced when consuming spicy chillies. This experience evokes sensations of intense heat, sweating, salivation, and a rapid heartbeat, illustrating how fury can manifest physically even in the absence of anger or wrath. The narrator concludes by comparing the sound of a woodpecker tapping on wood to the hidden intensity of passion. It says that just like the woodpecker's drumming, passion can be quietly intense, not showing on the outside but deeply felt inside someone's heart.

Veeram

The narrator says, 'Veeram,' or courage, might not be as scary as it sounds when we first think about it. The narrator begins by likening veeram to valour or bravery and emphasizes that it will focus on perfecting its expression. The narrator then provides detailed physical instructions on how to embody veeram: widening the eyes without glaring, flaring the nostrils as if sensing victory, setting the mouth and clenching the jaw, and trying to exhale through the eyes. The narrator concludes by saying, imagine yourself as a conqueror. The narrator again

attempts to better explain navarasa by using nature as an analogy. The narrator explains the drongo bird, which bravely protects its territory from bigger birds, even when it's not nesting. It shows us how to find courage in our beliefs.

Anita Nair talks about courage by comparing nature's strength with human endurance. She starts by describing scary storms in October during the thulaavarsham season. But she also talks about how nature bounces back after the storm. The morning after, the sky is clear, the air is cool, and the sun shines bright. Fields look green and refreshed, and dragonflies fly over water, showing how things can get better after tough times. Nair explains that veeram is not just about physical strength but also about the courage to endure and persevere, drawing inspiration from nature's lessons of resilience and determination.

Bhayaanakam

The sixth emotion is fear, referred to as 'bhayaanakam'. The narrator explains the physical manifestations of fear, illustrating how the face contorts with widened eyes, a wrinkled forehead, flared nostrils, a drooping mouth, and a retreated neck. The narrator talks about why people feel afraid. It could be from facing dangerous animals or bad people, or from things like storms or being in the dark. She also mentions a quieter fear that comes from not knowing what might happen, like when you're unsure about approaching a wild pineapple. The narrator describes the process of picking and eating a wild pineapple. It describes feeling scared and worried about potential dangers like cuts, bruises, or hidden snakes while reaching for the pineapple. Even after slicing it open and tasting its sweetness, there's still fear about possible allergic reactions or harmful effects. Overall, Nair shows how fear can be present even in everyday activities; it just might be like picking fruit in the wild.

The narrator talks about feeling scared when hearing a spooky bird's cry at twilight. People mistake the bird, named Kaalan Kozhi, for a devil's bird, believing its cry to portend impending death. People do things like tie knots in their clothes and put a ladle in the stove ashes to stop it. But even with these tricks, the scary cries keep making people nervous.

The narrator gives further explanations for 'Bhayanakam'. In April, which is hot and dry, people feel scared because they're not sure if the intense heat and lack of rain will ever stop. They worry about what might happen next if things don't improve, illustrating how fear can be present everywhere when people face threats. Nair concludes by stating that fear is an emotion that is inherently present in individuals, regardless of their efforts to conceal it.

Beebhasyam

The narrator talks about the feeling of disgust, especially when you come across something gross. She explains how to show disgust on your face by scrunching up your eyes, flaring your nostrils, and tightening your facial muscles. The narrator also says to breathe deeply from the bottom of your spine and then blow out forcefully through your nose, as if you don't even want to breathe in the slightest bit of the yucky smell.

The narrator shows different levels of disgust: Mild Dislike: Like when you don't like something, such as the smell of dampness after it rains. Detached Revulsion: This is when you feel grossed out by unattractive creatures, like vultures or thoti kazhukan. The narrator also talks about feeling intense disgust, like when you smell something awful, such as a dead rat. The smell is so bad that you try to hold your breath, but you can't escape it. Eventually, you find the source: an elephant yam plant, whose flowers emit a smell like rotting flesh to attract insects. Unable to stand it, you cut down the plant to get rid of the smell. According to Nair, disgust isn't just about the gross things you see—it can also come from bad smells or feelings inside you.

Adhbutam

The narrator discusses the emotion of 'adhbutam,' which translates to wonder or astonishment. Adhbutam stands out from other emotions such as love, laughter, sadness, anger, courage, fear, or disgust, as it lacks identifiable triggers and allows for gradual expression. It doesn't follow a set pattern of thought, breath, and facial expression like the other emotions mentioned.

The narrator says that Adhbutam doesn't give you a specific timeframe to process and express it. It seems to happen suddenly and without warning, leaving you in a state of awe or amazement. Unlike other emotions that build up gradually, adhbutam seems to emphasize the sudden and unexpected nature of wonder or astonishment. To express wonder, the narrator advises widening the eyes without any hint of anger or bravery. The eyebrows and facial muscles should also emphasize the sense of wonder, while the nostrils flare as if absorbing the essence of what's causing wonder, and the mouth naturally forms a slight smile.

To understand wonder better, the narrator suggests thinking about things that could inspire fascination, like a rainbow. However, the narrator uses a cold December night with clear, luminous stars as an example, as adults typically react to rainbows with childlike innocence. The narrator specifically mentions Sirius, the Dog

Star, as a bright star that evokes wonder. According to the narrator, when looking at it, one might wonder if it's just a star or something more, like a heavenly chariot, and marvel at its brightness.

The narrator says one can find wonder in simple things, like jackfruits, which might seem ordinary, but when you bite into one and taste its sweet nectar, you feel amazed by its deliciousness. It reminds us that even everyday things can be wondrous if we look at them with fresh eyes. The narrator also says that sometimes wonder comes from seeing something rare or unusual, like the paradise flycatcher bird that visits gardens between September and May. It's a beautiful bird with a long tail and unique colors, making you wonder about its name, where it comes from, and what it eats. This curiosity and longing to know more are what define wonder.

Shaantam

The narrator describes the concept of 'Shaantam,' which represents the ultimate expression of peace or tranquility. The author emphasizes that Shaantam is not about having a blank or expressionless face, nor is it about being completely motionless, like a catatonic state. Instead, Shaantam is a state of inner stillness and tranquility, where one learns to rein in their thoughts and calm their mind.

To understand 'Shaantam,' or stillness, think of it as the quiet and calm feeling you get in certain moments. For example, it's like the peacefulness just before dawn on a summer morning. Everything is quiet; the birds are still sleeping, and even the breeze is gentle. You can feel this calmness inside yourself by calming your thoughts and mind. It's not like the stillness of sleep, though. That's why the narrator suggests watching the charamundi, a type of gray heron that stands very still in the water, waiting for its prey. These birds are an example of stillness because they remain calm and quiet while waiting. So, stillness isn't just about being quiet—it's also about feeling calm and focused, like the charamundi waiting patiently in the river.

The author compares 'Shaantam,' or stillness, to a Palmyra fruit. She says the fruit's hard shell is like our mind, which should be strong and not easily disturbed by outside things. Inside the shell, the fruit is soft and tender, representing our thoughts. These thoughts should be gentle and not attached to desires or wants. In essence, Shaantam embodies detachment, freedom from desires, and acceptance of life as it is. Nair depicts Shaantam as a state of being fully present and engaged with the world, all while maintaining inner peace and tranquility.

Conclusion

In *Mistress*, Anita Nair beautifully combines human emotions with nature and the traditional art form of Kathakali. Through the use of the Navarasas—Sringaaram, Haasyam, Karunam, Raudram, Veeram, Bhayaanakam, Beebhasyam, Adhbutam, and Shaantam—the novel presents different emotional stages of human life. Each rasa is connected with nature, seasons, birds, sounds, and daily experiences, showing that emotions are a natural part of existence.

The characters Radha, Shyam, and Koman experience love, pain, fear, anger, courage, wonder, and finally peace in different ways. Radha's journey especially reflects the struggle for identity, freedom, and self-realization. Her decision to live independently at the end of the novel shows her strength and desire for self-respect.

Anita Nair successfully shows that emotions are not separate from life or nature but deeply connected to them. The novel also highlights the richness of Kerala's culture and the spiritual depth of Kathakali. Overall, *Mistress* is not only a story about relationships but also a philosophical exploration of human emotions, self-discovery, and inner peace.

References

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