

Self-Realization of Women: A Study of Anita Nair's Novel *The Better Man*

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Abstract : Anita Nair is a bestselling author of fiction and poetry. She always has an affinity towards writing and the courage to pursue it under all the situations. Nair relates to the many roles of women play in their lives and it is reflected in her works too. She writes with great energy and creates amazing works. Anita Nair being a woman penetrates deep into the inner mind of the depressed women by virtue of her feminine sensibility and psychological insight and brings to light their issues which are the outcome of Indian women's psychological and emotional imbalances in a male dominated society. This article focuses on women's capacity to assert their own rights and individuality in marriage and develop into fully fledged women prospective as a human being.

Keywords : Self-realization, suppression, male-domination, exploitation and self-identity.

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Anita Nair is an Indian English writer and the living writer of this century. She is a creative artist bestowed with immense proficiency and scholarly panorama. She is regarded as one of the leading novelists in Indian English Literature. In her works, she mainly focuses on the real human condition on the earth. At the same time, she is artful in interweaving her stories in the Indian scenario, unique in presenting her conceptions and innovative in sharing the experience of language, exhibiting an individualistic flair in her writing style.

Anita Nair reveals that her concern is with the exploration of human psyche. She explores the emotional ecology of her protagonists and the perceptive explorer of women's world especially that of Indian women. She has tried to explore the psychological aspect of her protagonist in context to the prevailing day to day conflicts in men and women relationship. Nair's novels represent the contemporary modern women's struggle to define and attain an autonomous 'selfhood'. Her female protagonists are at great pains to free themselves from stultifying traditional constraints. The landmark of Nair's fiction is to focus on the inner experience of life.

Anita Nair's novel *The Better Man* was published in the year 2000. It was translated into twenty one languages. In this novel, Nair has skillfully and effectively presented predicaments which are imposed on women and while fighting against these predicaments, they come out of their traditional roles as a mother, daughter, sister and above all as a wife or a home maker and acquire many unimagined roles like teacher, social worker, social activist, businesswoman or corporate personality and many more.

Nair places major emphasis on examining women's lives and their psyche within the context of South Indian family, representing women in their traditional roles as mothers, wives and daughters. She has an intense emotional understanding of human motivations and a sharp flexible intelligence. *The Better Man* describes every individual's attempt to find a degree of inner peace and manner. Throughout the story there is an assurance to achieve on one's dreams and strives hard to fulfill the same.

Anita Nair's *The Better Man* is a novel which is set in the fictional village called Kaikurissi in the north Kerala, known as Malabar in olden days. The village Kaikurissi is surrounded by hilly area. Though the story is woven around Mukundan, an elderly bachelor and a retired government servant, about fifty years old, there are other significant characters such as Bhasi who is a painter by profession also practicing a kind of medicinal practice, Meenakshi, Mukundan's childhood friend, Anjana who was married but estranged from her husband and she is in love with Mukundan, Valsala, the young woman married to an aged man which makes her to become a criminal.

Anita Nair presents her characters showing the psychological crisis they undergo in their family life. Their dependence and mental subjugation deeply affects them from their childhood. In case of Mukundan, he is affected by the domineering personality of his father, Achuthan Nair. Mukundan is a fifty year old working as a clerk in the explosive factory in Trichy. Mukundan's colleague and friend, Narendran, had a plan to set a type-writing institute after their retirement. But unfortunately, Narendran died of brain tumor. At home, Mukundan experiences hallucinations of his mother entreating him to come back, and not to go away. He remembers that his mother had fallen from the stairs holding the lamb on her hand. His mother's ghost takes him upstairs to show how his father pushed her to death with a smashed head.

When Mukundan wakes up in the morning, he feels how he has survived in the night with horrible experience. He feels guilty because he could not help his mother by taking her with him to the town. This gives him a mental agony even in his adulthood. Mukundan cures his psychological problems. He feels happy to be in friendship with Bhasi and in love with Anjana. Mukundan finds his weakness appears to triumph when he comes under the spell of Power House Ramakrishnan, and estranges both Bhasi and Anjana. Later, he realizes his mistake how they changed him into a white man. He leaves from Ramakrishnan's coterie and rehabilitates with Bhasi and Anjana in his life. Now only, Mukundan is bold enough to take decision on his own which brings a change in his life.

The Better Man relates not only to Mukundan but to the female characters in the novel as well. There are female characters such as Anjana, Meenakshi, Parukutti and Valsala who also attain their selfhood through the trails and sufferings in their life. They are the protagonists of their own stories interwoven in this novel. This novel unveils the reality of Indian women who are still deprived of their rights in love and marriage and how they try to liberate themselves from the clutches of men.

Valsala is one of the female characters married to the ageing schoolmaster Prabhakaran. He is always entangled in his daily household tasks, the maintenance of the compound and watching television every evening. She is the lonely person in her house and there is no astonishment in her life. Even the coconut, cashew and pepper which grow in her garden cease to fill her with wonder. Like her, they also plainly go behind the track of nature and yield revenue in quantity to their numbers.

Valsala's marriage does not appear to be the realization of a well-cherished dream, but it seems to have been resorted to because of lack of pleasures in her marital life. She had never known in her awakening senses. Not once in her life had an odd and exotic flower bloomed in her yard, filled the air with its overwhelming fragrance. Her existence gets suddenly blossomed due to the fragrance of the flowers

of the pala tree. She thought of her mother's words which uttered when she was young. The pala flower is the beloved for the Gandharvas who always look for virgins to seduce. They will make the virgins slave for them and no mortal can satisfy their sexual desires.

All night, for the first time in many years, Valsala tossed and turned in her bed, breathing in the cent of pala flowers. Strange sensations coursed through her. Her nostrils flared, her lips parted, her eyes became a little less murky, every pore in her body opened, greedily seeking to fill their depths with this unique fragrance. (129)

Thus the world of her desires tempts her initially after the blooming aroma of pala flowers to taste the pleasures in her life. She attains a near-exemplary level of female autonomy. For the first time after many years of her married life, she believes that she needs a perfect man to satisfy her sensual pleasures. She falls in love with Sridharan, who first appears in her life as her neighbor and then becomes her lover. Soon after the realization of her inner self, she decides to free herself from her husband. She enters into a sexual relationship with Sridharan as a natural pinnacle to her emotional involvement; she decides to be the mistress of him.

Since Prabhakaran master went to school, they enjoyed open-handed freedom emotionally and physically. She sets her heart on enjoying her life with Sridharan, as her Gandharva. Sridharan admires her and flatters her beauty by his words as female, Valsala completely for that reason she starts to take care of her attracted body.

This narrative presents the feminist attitude of Valsala in the light of new morality. Of course this brings into the focus her soul and psyche, for she expects the human attitude from the male. As a matter of fact, she is aware of the fact that every woman needs the energized love, freedom, equality and sex. But she is also certain, that it is quite impossible from hostile men. Accordingly she is willing to trap the new Indian womanhood.

She stirs the entire society with her liberal views and attitude, and puts forth the new issues of woman's sexuality and gender. She justifies herself as I am just forty years old. I don't want to be pushed into old age before it is time. I want to live. I want passion. I want to know ecstasy, she told herself, night after night. (130)

As a consequence, Valsala's quest emerges as a battle, the battle of female psyche. Generally, life is mixed of pleasant and unpleasant moments. When a woman

feels dissatisfaction in her life, she rebels against the existing system and wants to get divorced from the relationship. Her rebels start from cooking as a sign. She rejuvenated all the traditional cooking and tries to find out the modern type of cooking like instead of using oil it is replaced with ghee.

When Prabhakaran asks her about his indigestion, she does not care and concern about his health. It is because she has a relationship with Sridharan which gives her confident to do so. She has frustration with her spouse but she remains with him. Because there is the land and the house which will go to his mistress. Not only that there are the retirement benefits after he retires from the Lower Primary School in Pannamanna. There is LIC policy. After thirty three years of marriage, she deserves of having all these things in her life. So, she does not want to give it up just like that. All of a sudden, Prabhakaran missed is found dead. Police Inspector enquires about the death of Prabhakaran to Valsala but she remains silent. There is a great sympathy for her as she becomes a widow among the people. But later, it is revealed that Valsala and Sridharan are the cause for the death of Prabhakaran Master.

In this novel, it seems that Valsala does not feel guilty of killing him or woe for her activity as she wants to escape from the male domination and wants to live as she dreamt. The people in the village speak ghastly about her behavior. But Valsala wants to break traditional Indian consciousness built under the name of society and violated the rules in the patriarchal society.

The Indian people are sealed up according to the traditional philosophy and are bewildered with the world they live in and they do not have any courage to go comprehend the reality. Anita Nair puts forth emotional display and the painful feelings along with sensitive emotions of women in a bold manner. She sets out the twenty first century woman, for whom sex is a new sort of religion. She casts light on female psyche, where she openly states that women should be treated as a human being and they should not be ignored or suppressed.

Women are now portrayed as more self-confident, more liberated in their view and more expressive in their expression than women were in the past. In this novel, Valsala is not able to voice her emotions directly and associate herself with her routine life which ends in frustration. As far as she is concerned, it is not a life but it is a place to live. In order to lead her life peacefully, she utilized her loneliness and spends her time with Sridharan to fulfill her desires. Valsala is an example of self-deceived woman who resorts to crime for her self-fulfillment. It is clear that self-fulfillment of any men or women should not be achieved by committing a crime or taking the life of another human being.

Meenakshi is another woman character, a spirited woman. She is educated in the village which is situated in Kerala where young men and women are naturally in contact with the Marxist elements and their activities. Her story is mingled with social and political activism. She is a loving, caring mother and dutiful wife. She is influenced by the book of Stalin and Lenin and wants to rebel against the capitalist bourgeois class. Nair presented Meenakshi as a new woman who is not only educated but is also aware of sociopolitical aspects of life. She goes beyond the domestic sphere. She remains as a dutiful wife, loyal to her husband. As a mother, she brings up her son on her own and she bears up all her worries and she gives the solution if any woman comes to her for sharing their sorrows.

Meenakshi is so supportive to her disloyal husband when he returns to her with TB. She does not shy away from responsibility. She takes care of her husband in his last days. But he dies. She brings up her son and plans for her future. She has been a militant young woman who is aware of social and political cause. Meenakshi could have married Mukundan who is her childhood friend which will give the solution for all her problems. But she does not like to do that because she has the responsibility for her son and wants to be as a dutiful wife to her unfaithful husband. Thus, Meenakshi is a typical Indian woman who remains loyal in any circumstances.

Anjana wants to get healthy relationship which will allow her to be herself as an educated woman, she knows what she deserves. One day she realizes that she lives her life with no symbols of marriage and decides to live as a spinster. She is very clear in the concept of patriarchy and decides to be a teacher. She dispenses the perception of womanhood, maternity and marriage which is the final goal of woman's survival. The novel moves from total silence to strong enunciation at the end.

Anjana gives away colorful saris and uses to wear starched cotton in shades as insipid dull as her life. She does not use her jewellery and keeps it in the bank in a safe deposit. Education gives her the privilege to know about herself and her rights. Even in oriental countries, women are confined to the four walls of the houses. But now they are raising their voices to protest against the suppression of any kind because they are given the knowledge of education and greater independence. The women who are educated demand their equality, freedom and justice which would bring a radical change in their lives.

In this novel, Anjana wants to break the traditional Indian consciousness and creates the world of her own. She gives up her unsuccessful marriage and wants to live as a free individual which would give her personal freedom. She meets Mukundan and falls in love with him. She finds in Mukundan which she had been searching for

in Ravindran. Mukundan helps her to be free herself and get the freedom with her own identity. She feels free from her unhappy marriage life. When Anjana proposes her love towards Mukundan, he says:

Anjana, you must listen to me. I know you think I am a good man. A gentle man. Someone you can depend on completely. I don't know if I am that man you make me out to be. My mother begged me to rescue her and take her away. But I didn't. I was afraid of my father, and so I made excuses. If I had done as she asked me, perhaps she might be still alive. That is the kind of man I am ... (244)

Anjana assures him saying: "All of us have our weakness, but we seldom have the courage to accept them, or even declare it as you have done now. To me, that makes you, braver than anyone else" (245).

Anjana wants to be traditional and modern. Anita Nair is concerned with women's freedom as Anjana likes to live on her own wishes. She wants to live her life on her own. So she decides to divorce Ravindran which will make the way to live with Mukundan. Finally Anjana's positive attitude towards life, work, financial independence, and self-identity help her to go forward in her life with hope and optimism. Anjana proves that women can achieve autonomy. She herself finds a significant way of life with Mukundan.

It seems that the novel does not end in pessimism but in a note of optimism. In this novel, Anita Nair has given the internal and external identity of all the female characters in a psychological way. In fact, she voices not only for the emancipation but also attempts to make the real process by which women are womanized.

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