

The Better Man

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1. Introduction

Anita Nair is a celebrated Indian English author. With her famous novels, *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe*, she is regarded as one of the finest writers in Indian Writing in English. She was born at Shoranpur in Kerala. She was brought up in a suburb in Chennai. Her grandparents lived in Kerala. So, she made her visits to Kerala and that enabled her to know the heart of rural Kerala.

Nair's novels depict the real life of her characters without hiding anything from her readers. The other point that her novels reveal is the effect of social conditioning on women. *The Better Man*, a debut novel, was set in contemporary India in a little fictitious village called Kaikurussi in the northern part of Kerala. This region was once known as Malabar during the British regime. It is a novel written by a woman with a man's sensibility, and a man's perspective. It is a realistic description of the violence and conflict lying underneath the deceptively calm surface of village life. It is a straight forward tale set in Kerala. It is a psychological novel which discusses the emotional strains and traumas undergone by the characters. Nair's fiction conveys her vision of life, change is always possible; hope never dies; and can be found. *The Better Man* describes every individual's attempt to better themselves.

2. Description

Nigam writing for *India Today* declares,

"*The Better Man* is the journey of the soul, the story of a retired Government Officer Mukundan Nair, who returns to his Kerala Village. But this means coming face to face with his dead past, millions of grey shadows and ghosts of his dead mother and ancestors haunting and tormenting him."¹(Nigam 2000)

Nair has proved herself as a writer by describing the deepest recesses of man's psyche and depicting it realistically. The novel is a fascinating exploration of the under currents that run beneath a seemingly idyllic rural existence. Mukundan, the central character who is a retired government employee has been forced to return his village which he fled when he was eighteen. It is his ancestral house where he is tormented by the memory of his dead mother, Parukutty. Parukutty is a symbol of Indian woman in a typical Indian society. She was tortured by her husband, Achuthan Nair. She could have escaped from the clutches of her husband but indeed remained a puppet of fate. Memory plays a predominant role in a personal narrative by this victim of depression, Mukundan. He every now and then meditates on his past and his bitter memories pull him out of his comfort zone into an illusionary world where everything scared him even the very sight of her mother's portrait. He remained in the guilt that he ignored his mother and left her in the clutches of his father that caused her death. He felt he was

responsible for his mother's death. Her words surfaced his thoughts and he is often reminded of her final words;

"Take me with you, son. I am so unhappy here."²(Nair 31)

Four years old Mukundan, who has seen his father only in the photograph, is scared, when his father turns up all of a sudden from Burma. His father dressed in black, appears tall and when he starts talking to him, Mukundan gets more afraid and starts calling his mother. Even when Mukundan is eight years old, the relationship between father and son does not improve, it becomes worse. Achuthan Nair chooses to settle in Kaikurussi after resigning his job. Achuthan Nair always ends his talk with a question and Mukundan is expected to answer not in his own words but merely to repeat his father's last words,

"Mukundan is tortured by hatred of his father, Achuthan Nair, who bullied him and humiliated him since his childhood."³(Sengupta, 21)

Achuthan Nair is the epitome of male chauvinism and he slashes his ever reticent wife every now and then with his bitter tongue. With an overbearing father and docile mother, Mukundan was forced to live a lonely life. Her mother Parukutty is a symbol of Indian woman in a typical Indian society. It is in her character that writer paints the image of Indian wives who are ever patient, submissive to their omnipotent husbands. Mukundan was obsessed with the notion that he failed to rise up to the expectations of his father. His hatred towards his father reached its climax when he bursts out with anger,

"Mukundan often wished that instead they had taken a sickle and slaughtered his father."⁴(56)

Thus, Mukundan decides to escape from his house by acquiring the job of a clerk in Trichy. He does not take his mother with him though she pleads with him to do so. He even conveniently forgets Meenakshi, his cousin, who had always entertained a desire of marrying him.

These factors go to prove Mukundan is basically an escapist who fails to undertake responsibilities. Mukundan's mother is said to have fallen down from the steps and died but there is a hint she was killed, probably by her own husband, who forsook her for his concubine Ammini. Mukundan often visits his ancestral house and brings gifts for his father. This shows he still is trying to find a means to enter his father's heart.

Another character who is also very important in this novel is Bhasi, the narrator character. He left his village and came to Kaikurussi to create for himself a new persona. He had buried his past and started a new life in Kaikurussi. Bhasi, the one-screw-loose Bhasi, as he is known in the village Kaikurussi, is an eccentric, a genius and a painter. Bhasi was once a college lecturer.

Mukundan, after few weeks of exile, meets Bhasi. Bhasi came to Mukundan's house for painting. The situation of the house and brief talk with Mukundan made him realize the

unrest and distress in the heart of Mukundan. Bhasi enthusiastically came forward to solve the problem faced by Mukundan,

"Tell me, Mukundan. Tell me what it is that haunts you so.... Tell me how it is that you have chained yourself to the clock. Tell me why you have about you the smell of a haunted animal."⁵(12)

Bhasi tried to analyse the malaise of Mukundan-

"I tried to read the workings of your mind. Your fears, your likes, your dislikes. But you were like a snail. Refusing to be coaxed out of your shell of solitude. You ignored all the overtures I made, resisted every attempt of mine to make you reveal the hoard of deep rooted anxieties that lied buried in you."⁶(106)

Anita Nair states the universal human condition through Mukundan, that many human beings become the victims of situation and act pleasantly where their inner soul were doleful and cheerless. They become mere pretentious in the world of uncertainty and suffer inwardly confining their feeling in depth. Mukundan openly confessed his situation and expressed his desire to go back to Bangalore. He felt that he was happy with that orderly and systematic life but in Kaikurussi he was filled with a strange bewilderment; a queer dread.

"Have you ever known what it is too afraid? Mukundan whispered. 'over and over again, I find myself wishing I were back in Bangalore, living my orderly life. This place fills with a strange bewilderment; a queer dread'"⁷(172)

Mukundan had no place to have a happy life in his own village. He had no belief in his father too. He was totally in a state of depression. Whatever his father did should be accepted by him whether he liked or not. He feared about his mother's ghost in his ancestral home and Odiyans. He said that everyone in the village drew a veil over the Odiyans. Mukundan's condition was very pathetic and his guilt torments him, even though he was not responsible for his mother's death. But Bhasi's entry into the life of Mukundan rejuvenates him. Bhasi decides to help Mukundan to realize his worth. He promotes in Mukundan the desire to live a life of quest. He was determined to weave the past experiences of Mukundan Nair and give them a pattern and help him to live life at least in the future. He would teach him how to escape from his past and how to bury his guilt, sorrow and fear.

Mukundan felt Bhasi as a blazing star and started to believe him which gave him a ray of hope. He felt that Bhasi would guide him through the maze of life and he is only lifeline that Mukundan could trust to escape from his bitter past.

Bhasi requested Mukundan to give six weeks to heal him. Bhasi gave an effective treatment to Mukundan. He started to feel the process of transgression in his heart. Bhasi wanted to perform the ritual for the transgression because he felt that the mind would be perceptive until the body was ready to participate in the treatment. . Mukundan feels that he was transforming himself from an embryo into a new man. He was no longer afraid of anything and he became a new man that he ever dreamed of. Bhasi asked him to erase the thought of his guilt about his mother's death and by doing so Mukundan's mind was completely relaxed.

"He reverted to his original form-a single cell. Bit by bit the embryo of this new man developed... A new man, a new life. Afraid no longer... capable of so much more than he had ever dreamed of."⁸(199)

Mukundan became very normal without any fear and torment. He feels happy in the company of Bhasi. He felt that he renewed a life once again and felt the village as a familiar one.

"I don't know if it is the rum or your company, but I feel like I am back in Bangalore again. With my friends and a familiar world."⁹(209)

A few days later, Mukundan returns to his normal life. He realizes his rightful place in the village and so he melts Powerhouse Ramakrishnan, a very influential and very rich man in the village.

"Powerhouse Ramakrishnan is utterly un-real and superfluous."¹⁰(Thomas, 31)

Ramakrishnan decided to construct a new community hall in the village. So, he choose Bhasi piece of land but Bhasi is not in a mood to sell his land. When he refuses , Powerhouse Ramakrishnan threatens to throw him out of the village. Mukundan sets out to save Bhasi's land but is completely won over by Powerhouse Ramakrishnan who makes Mukundan a member of community hall committee and makes him feel important. Mukundan betrays Bhasi, his friend and could not help him and also withdraws himself from Anjana, a married woman and a school teacher with whom he is in love.

She desperately needs someone to share her agony, to console her. Finally, Anjana gets over the traditional Indian consciousness and creates a world of her own. She meets Mukundan and falls in love with him. In Mukundan's company, she realizes that she has to free herself from her unhappy married life. She feels happy in his company,

"I feel married when I am with you."¹¹(244)

She files a divorce suit in order to marry Mukundan. When she discloses her love to him he said,

"Anjana, Mukundan said, 'you must listen to me. 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. A weak and undependable creature. Do you want to be part of such a man's life?"¹²(244)

"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. I love you. My love tells me that is right for me?"¹³(245)

But Mukundan, who values his reputation as a member of the community hall committee rather than his commitment to marry Anjana, withdraws from her..

"You are a coward."¹⁴(323)

Anjana calls him a coward and moves on to face the world all by herself. The novel depicts the real woman in the form of Anjana who faces all the matters of patriarchal society and then after a lot of sufferings in her marriage then she found love when she met Mukundan. Again she got disappointment when Mukundan denied to accept her before society but this time she becomes very positive and finds her own way to live her life. But after the death of Mukundan's father, Achuthan Nair, he realizes his mistakes and decides to mend his ways.

"The portrayal of Achuthan Nair's character is so life-like and convincing, one feels almost sorry that it is wasted in the failed totality."¹⁵(Thomas,31)

Mukundan feels,

“He had betrayed the only two people who had loved him and given all of them to him. Bhasi and Anjana. He had used them and discarded them because it suited him to do so.”¹⁶(344) and realizes,

“He was no better man than his father had been. Perhaps, he was the lesser man.”¹⁷(344)

He now remembers his father's dictum that if one has to be successful in life, he has to be selfish that is what meant by the survival of the fittest. Only such men thrive in society. Realization dawns on Mukundan that though notorious for his licentious ways, his father was never afraid of society and followed only his own mind. Mukundan decides to become a 'better man' than he is at present.

Mukundan gets into the jar in the attic, exorcises the remaining ghost haunting him and comes out, but now breaks the jar, for he knows his journey of self-discovery is now complete and he no longer will need the jar in future. As a compensation for what he has done to Bhasi, Mukundan gives him his land, for he realizes the part played by Bhasi in his self-discovery. The only thing that remains to be done now is the destruction of the Community Hall, which stands for the failure of Mukundan as a man, as an individual and whose construction is under progress. Mukundan decides to light fire using gun powder to destroy the building. Once it is destroyed, Mukundan's journey of self-discovery will be complete and then he will not simply be the 'better man', but the 'perfect man'.

The Better Man is a journey of a man's transformation from better to perfect. From fastidious and colourless man lacking in courage to take even the slightest risks in life, Mukundan makes himself a man capable of finding love and happiness, a man who discovers the varied vibrant hues of life, a man who emerges from the shadow of his father's personality to become a better man.

Knowing one's own self is an essential part of Indian philosophical and theological systems. This aspect constitutes

the fabric of *The Better Man*. Anita Nair has tried successfully to put this patriarchy and establish self-identity as the central theme for the novel, *The Better Man*

Abraham Verghese, author of *My Own Country*, comments:

“*The Better Man* is an astonishing book: it is tender, lyrical, humors and insightful. In Anita Nair's capable hands the exotic setting comes alive and becomes familiar and we see our struggle and triumphs reflected in these marvelous characters.”¹⁸

The Better Man is a picturesque novel. Anita Nair takes the readers to a small town in Kerala named Kaikurussi. Her writing is simple. Her description of landscape and its presentation is elegant. She performs the role of a cinematographer who pictures the minute details of the place giving the effect of watching a Malayalam movie.

“The first fictional village to be made literally famous was R.K.Narayan's Malgudi but in Kaikurussi, Anita Nair has created another homestead that could become just as well known.”¹⁹

Anita Nair is a prominent contemporary Indian writer in English, who is chiefly concerned with human relationship and the evolution of Indian society. She is a well-known novelist from Kerala and one of the finest writers in Indian writings in English with international reputation. She is gifted with the language of technical efficiency, curiosity, intensity of feeling and attitude of commitment. Her first novel *The Better Man* is highly specific in portraying regional hues.

“*The Better Man* is a novel of loyalty, betrayal and self-fulfillment against the backdrop of a contemporary village in Kerala. Kaikurussi is like all fictional villages, a self-contained and complete universe. It has the full gamut of human virtue and vice. The story has all the elements of what should make a good novel, the complete world, the universal themes of doubt, despair and redemption and the character of Mukundan, flawed and damaged, yet basically well intentioned.”²⁰(Rachana Sengupta)

Work Cited

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