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Among the various Indian writers writing in English, Anita Nair is easily accepted as an efficient practitioner of the genre of fiction. Her popular works include *The Better Man* (1999), *Ladies Coupé* (2001), and *Mistress* (2005). She mesmerizes the reader with her evocative language and descriptions with which her novels abound.

### **Anita on Her Novels**

There is none better than Anita herself to talk about her own writing. Raising a question, “**What makes your writing different from other Indians writing in English?**” Anita writes,

First of all, my books are set in the everyday world of India.

Secondly, the characters who speak English in my book do so without making a farce out of it. To me, what a person says is more important than how they speak their words. And, this belief has found its way into all my writing. The other aspect is that in a book such as *The Better Man* that is set in a village, English is seldom spoken. But that does not mean that the average Keralite is illiterate or unaware of the world. He has probably read Omar Khayyam and Marx, Russell and Tolstoy in translation so that degree of education is perceived in the way he uses his words. So, if some of my characters sound erudite, they are, in the language they grew up speaking. In such a context, Hybrid-English or the lack of it makes no difference to the atmosphere or plot or characterization.

Thirdly, I do not concentrate on the cerebral [and sometimes the inaccessible] world. I aim at sharp characterization and it is this tension between characters that allows the movement of the narrative to progress at a brisk pace. While my ideas are very identifiable, relating to common sensibilities, I never make a conscious attempt to 'universalize' my story. <http://www.anitanair.net/faq.htm#4>

### *Ladies Coupé* and *The Better Man*



Anita Nair's novels *Ladies Coupé* and *The Better Man* have characters and themes of different nature, while at the same time these also have in common the idea of self-discovery.

The central characters of both the novels, as the stories progress, discover that they have never been living for themselves, but for others, governed by societal pressures. Thus, both the novels deal with how the lead characters shed off their masks, discover their selves, and start living for themselves. Thus, in this aspect, the lead character of *Ladies Coupé*, Akhilandeswari, and of *The Better Man*, Mukundan, indeed, have similarities that lend them to comparison.

## *Ladies Coupé*

Akhilandeswari, or Akhila as she is called in the novel *Ladies Coupé*, is seen at the railway station, as the novel opens, preparing to go to Kanyakumari. The novel begins on a note of Feminism as she is irritated by the way women and the handicapped have to stand together while men stand separately at the ticket counter. It is indeed humiliating for her that women have been categorized along with the handicapped.

### **Akhila as the Father and Protector of the Family**

As the novel unfolds, we come to know of Akhila's past. She was born into a Tamil Brahmin family, with her father, a government servant, as the only breadwinner of the family, and who had to support his wife and four children. However, Akhila is forced to take up the responsibility of her household after her father's death. She toils hard for her family, but no one seems to understand the fact that she too needs to have a life of her own, married with children. Her mother is more worried of Akhila's younger sister Padma's marriage and seems to have the notion that Akhila is a *man*, the head of the family, who has replaced her husband, Akhila's father. All of them seem to have accepted the idea that Akhila is to lead her whole life as a spinster. After her mother's death, Akhila is fed up with her routine life and decides to set on her journey to Kanyakumari.



## Early Love



Through constant flashbacks, we come to know of Akhila's love affair in the past with Hari. Though much about him is not revealed, he is younger than Akhila and this fact constantly disturbs her though he proclaims his deep love for her. She is disturbed when people stare at both of them wandering together and pass indecent comments. She decides to end the relationship, though Hari is unwilling to. We find she is afraid of society and is not able to overcome this fear. Thus she lives not for herself, but for her family and the society, though it means sacrificing her own individual interests.

## Eternal Virgin Waiting for Her Lover

Akhila begins her symbolic journey to Kanyakumari. That the Goddess of Kanyakumari, like Akhila, is unmarried and eternally waiting for her groom to arrive is to be remembered. Is Akhila going to wait for her lover there? Akhila is, in fact, going away from all her responsibilities in life and this is necessary, as she has to be alone now, away from all societal pressures. Up to an extent, she can be termed as escaping from her responsibilities and duties for the time being, but she has already fulfilled her duties towards her family, and now it is time for her to be alone.



## Self-Discovery Through the Fellow Travellers

As her journey progresses, Akhila meets her co-passengers, all women. All of them can be termed her own alter egos, as they, in one way or the other, present her own need for independence and self-discovery.

First among them is Janaki, whose husband is over protective, thus depriving her of any independence, as she does not know what to do in critical situations in life. Sheela, a young girl, is imaginative enough to understand her grand mother's wish to remain beautiful even in death, while Prabha Devi, though married happily to Jagdeesh, a rich man, finds her life empty, and for her, learning to swim, which she does without anybody's help is actually a means to establish her individuality, a way of discovering herself.

The last story is that of Marikolanthu who was brutally raped and has a son by that union, but she manages to survive by sheer will power.

All these women, in one way or another, advise Akhila to go against societal pressures and to discover herself. All of them are mates not only in her physical journey in the ladies' compartment of the train, ladies' *coupé*, but also in her spiritual and psychological journeys.



Akhila reaches Kanyakumari, where she has a brief relationship with a young man called Vinod. It is, in fact, Akhila who initiates the relationship, which has no emotional involvement on the part of both. She is now not bothered about what others would say. She has overcome her fear of the society. After Vinod's departure, Akhila calls her old

lover Hari and we understand that a man replies at the other end, who, probably, is Hari. Whether their relationship will continue or not is left to our imagination. But it is clear Akhila's journey of self-discovery is complete, her identity crisis overcome.

### **Release From the Confined Space and Marked Out Duties**

The word *coupé* has two varying pronunciations: one with the rising stress on the last vowel, which is a common pronunciation, and another with no pronunciation of the last letter *é*, similar to the pronunciation of *coop*, meaning a confined area such as that used for poultry. Anita's choice of the locale for the major part of the story, especially relating to self-discovery, and the word *coupe* to describe the locale, seems to be a deliberate choice. In whatever way we look at the meaning of the word, there is a suggestion of confined or restricted or closed space. Akhila's world, indeed, had been a confined space and the story of self-discovery breaks out in yet another confined place, the ladies' compartment as usually called in India, taking her to a wider world outside of it.

### ***The Better Man***

*The Better Man*, another of Anita Nair's novels, presents the same theme of self-discovery. The hero of the novel, Mukundan, seems to be an escapist, who runs away from responsibilities and is afraid of the society. But, above all this, what dominates his disposition is his deep rooted fear of his father imbibed by him right from his childhood. Like Akhila of *Ladies Coupé*, he too is governed by societal pressures, does not live for himself but for others. Like Akhila going away from her place of work, Mukundan too comes to Kaikurissi, his native place, which forms the apt setting for his self-discovery. He too is unmarried like Akhila, and we understand, like the latter, he believes his father is responsible for it while Akhila's firm conviction is that her family is to be blamed for her unmarried status. Mukundan unwillingly returns to his ancestral house in Kaikarussi after the death of his friend and colleague Narendran and their relationship reminds us of Akhila's friendship with her colleague and friend, Katherine Webber, in *Ladies Coupé*.

### **Flashbacks**

Like Akhila's story, here too through constant flashbacks we get to know about the past of Mukundan. With an overbearing father and a docile mother, he was forced to lead an uneventful life during his childhood. So he 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 or is afraid of his dominating father whose approval he always wants for any action of his.

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 even while at his place of work and

brings gifts for his father. This shows he still is trying to find a means to enter his father's heart.

### **Bhasi the Exorcist**

Mukundan's relationship with Bhasi, the local painter, who is also a self proclaimed healer, is significant. In part I, chapter 1, Bhasi, who is the narrator in this chapter and who seems to understand Mukundan, asks, "Tell me, Mukundan. Tell me what it is that haunts you so ... Tell me why you have about you the smell of a hunted animal" (Nair, The Better Man 12). Mukundan has spent uneasy nights after his return to his ancestral house, haunted by his past. He imagines the ghost of his mother questioning him whether he was right in his leaving her alone there.

Unable to bear these lonely, horrifying nights he accepts the treatment of Bhasi who knows, more than medicines, something else is to be done to cure Mukundan of his fear, to make him discover his potential, to make him a 'better man'. It is then that Bhasi takes him to the attic in Mukundan's house, where the former asks Mukundan to get inside an old, huge, jar. The jar here becomes a metaphorical womb, inside which Mukundan crouches, suggesting the prenatal position. Bhasi then asks Mukundan how long he will run away from himself and says it is high time he exorcised the ghosts of the past from his mind. Thus Mukundan has a new birth as he emerges out of the jar. We find that his journey towards self-discovery has been initiated by Bhasi just like Akhila, who was led forward by her fellow passengers. That Mukundan has at least partly overcome his fear for his father is evident very soon as he starts rebelling against his father.





Mukundan's relationship with Anjana is a turning point in the novel and can be compared to the love affair of Akhila and Hari in *Ladies coupé*. Anjana is already married, but Mukundan is ready for marrying her as her husband is a good-for-nothing fellow and she does not like her husband. But Mukundan is lured away by the local rich man, Power House Ramakrishnan, who includes Mukundan in a committee involved in the building of a Community Hall in Kaikurussi. Mukundan does not even help Bhasi when the latter is forced to sell his land to Power House Ramakrishnan. But after his father's death Mukundan decides to mend his ways. He understands, "He had betrayed the only two people who had loved him and given all of themselves to him - Bhasi and Anjana. He had used them and discarded them because it suited him to do so" (Nair, *The Better Man* 344) and realizes, "He was no better man than his father had been. Perhaps he was the lesser man" (Nair, *The Better Man* 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 is meant by the survival of the fittest. Only such men thrive in society. Realization dawns on Mukundan that though famous 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 knows that another important ritual is left to complete his self-discovery. He gets into the jar in the attic, exorcises the remaining ghosts 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. Like Akhila calling Hari at the end, shedding off her fears of society, Mukundan now tells Anjana of their marriage. He knows here he will be compared with his father, but knows he too, like his father, will oppose all obstacles.

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. The novel ends with Mukundan on to light the fire using gunpowder 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'.

### ***Ladies coupé and The Better Man***

The lead characters of the *Ladies coupé* and *The Better Man* are similar in many ways. We find that they have many traits in common. Both, though economically independent in life, wait for their parents to choose spouses for them and are afraid of the society. We find Mukundan is more of an escapist than Akhila for he leaves his mother with his tyrannical father while Akhila takes care of her family. Again, both Akhila and Mukundan are bothered about their lovers' age and what people will say if they marry them against the norm. Both go away from their place of work, Akhila to Kanyakumari and Mukundan to Kaikurussi where their self-discovery gets completed. In this Akhila is influenced by her co-passengers in train while Mukundan by Bhasi. Finally both shed off their masks, turn against societal pressures and initiate their union with their lovers.

## To Conclude

Anita Nair, like many other writers of novels of mainstream literature, has chosen self-discovery as the central theme for her novels *Ladies Coupé* and *The Better Man*. The idea of self-realization is a fundamental part of Indian philosophical and theological systems, be these Vedic, Buddhist, Jaina or Sikh religions. Self-discovery, as adumbrated in Anita Nair's novels, however, is different from the religious self-realization. Self-discovery here is more a guidance for assertion and realization of one's own interests, certainly not selfish in the narrow sense. The language, theme, characterization, narration and the stories reveal Anita to be an excellent writer.

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