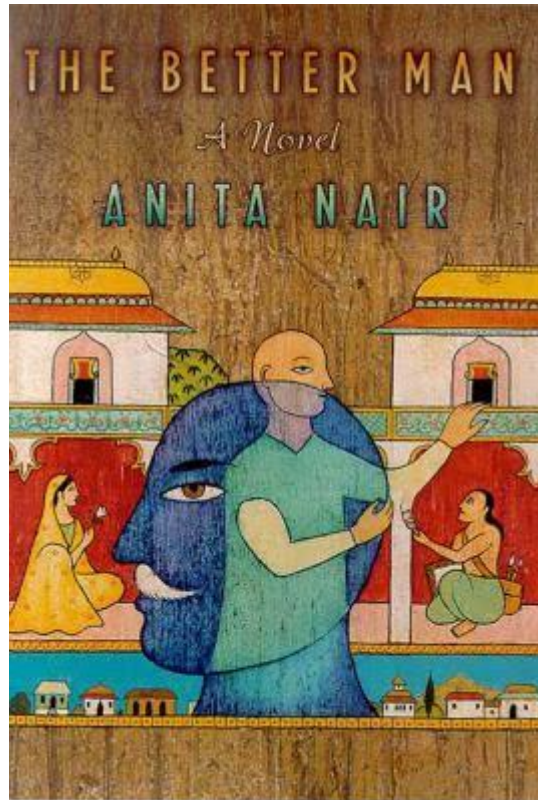


Anita Nair's *The Better Man* -
A Symbol of Weakness, Cowardice and Lack of Integrity

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Abstract

Anita Nair's *The Better Man* represents the theme of self discovery. The protagonist of the novel, Mukundan, seems to be an escapist, who runs away from responsibilities and is afraid of the society. But he dominates his disposition is his deep rooted fear of his father imbibed by him right from his childhood. He is governed by societal pressures, does not live for himself but for others. *The Better Man* unveils the reality of Indian women who are still deprived of their rights in love and marriage. Marriage is still a social necessary, where women seek security and men respectability. Domination is the significant in an analysis of the man-woman relationship where the male characteristics are ones coupled with mental thought and positive activity, at the same time as the woman is regarded as basically submissive, her role to be the respectable of male sexual drive for the subsequent

reproduction of the species. *The Better Man* asserts their individuality and tries to liberate themselves from the clutches of man.

Key words: Man Women Relationship, Betrayal, Individuality.

Mukundan – An Escapist

Four years old, Mukundan, who has seen his father only in the photograph, is scared, when his father turns up all of sudden from Burma. Dressed in black, he appears tall and when he starts talking to him, Mukundan gets more afraid and starts calling his mother. When Mukundan is eight years old, the relationship between father and son does not improve. It has become worse, for 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 on his own, but merely repeats his father's last words. "Mukundan is tortured by hatred of his father, Achuthan Nair, who bullied him and intimidated him since his childhood" (Sengupta, 21).

With an overbearing father and a docile mother, he was forced to lead an uneventful life. 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. 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. "Mukundan, a recently retired government employee, beset by bitterness and self doubt, who returns reluctantly to his tyrannical father and his ancestral taravad in the village of Kaikurussi" (Sengupta, 21) from where he had fled when he was eighteen, abandoning his suffering mother.

Valsala – Eye on Enjoying Life

Valsala, wife of the ageing schoolmaster Prabhakaran Nair, is engaged in her daily household tasks, the maintenance of the compound wall and watching television every evening. She is the lonely person in her house and there were no surprises in her life. She falls in love with Sridharan, who first appears in her life as a neighbour 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 partner to her emotional involvement. She decides to be his mistress. Since Prabhakaran master went to school they enjoyed freedom emotionally and physically. She sets her hearts on enjoying her life with Sridharan, as her gandharva. As a matter of fact, she is aware of the fact that every woman needs the energizer of love, freedom, equality and sex. But she is also certain, that is quite impossible to get from hostile men. Accordingly, she is willing to trap the new system against the backdrop of traditional concept of 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, of course, the battle of the female psyche.

All of a sudden, Prabhakaran was missing and later found dead. Circle Inspector Devasiya, who dropped in Mukundan when the case was filed, explained what he had pieced together as the grand plan. Six weeks later, when Prabhakaran Master had still not returned, Valsala would have filed a complaint. Bhasi told to Mukundan, the murder suspects Sridharan, accused in the Prabhakaran Master Murder case, was finally captured by the police.

Power House Ramakrishnan

Mukundan discovers that what should have been his rightful place in the village had been usurped by an upstart, Power House Ramakrishnan. "Power House Ramakrishnan is utterly un-real and superfluous" (Thomas, 31). In the first few weeks of his return home, "he meets Bhasi, 'One-screw-loose-Bhasi', house painter and self appointed emotional healer of the village" (Sengupta, 21). Despite Bhasi's compassion for him, Mukundan betrays him when he seeks his intervention in fighting against Power House Ramakrishnan's attempt to

build a community hall in the village on Bhasi's piece of land. When Bhasi refuses to sell his land, Power House Ramakrishnan threatens to throw him out of the village. Mukundan sets out to save Bhasi's land but is completely won over by Power House Ramakrishnan who makes Mukundan a member of the community hall committee and makes him feel important. Mukundan also withdraws himself from Anjana, a married woman and a school teacher with whom he is in love.

Anjana

Anjana is the niece of Mukundan's friend K. M. Nair who remains unmarried till she is twenty seven. Just when she considers herself as "one of those old maids destined to remain at home. Unloved, unwanted, unfulfilled. Long in the tooth, sunken cheeks and vacant eyes" (223), her marriage with thirty five years old Ravindran is fixed. After marriage, Anjana is shocked at her husband's indifference. "She wishes there was some way she could discover his likes and dislikes. All what she wanted to do was to please him" (227).

Even after three months he remains "a man who used her body when impulse took him. There was little conversation between them and hardly companionship" (228). She desperately needs someone to share her agony, to console her, and she thinks of Mukundan. She expresses her anger against Ravindran to Mukundan:" Just because we are man and wife in the eyes of law, he thinks he can treat me as he pleases. As far as he is concerned, "I am merely a servant who doubles as a whore" (243). She feels happy in the company of Mukundan: "I feel married when I am with you" (244). She files a divorce suit so that she would formally marry Mukundan. 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" (323), Anjana tells him and moves on to face the world all by herself.

Mukundan's Realization

But after his father's death Mukundan 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" (Thomas, 31). He understands, "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" (344) and realizes, "He was no

better man than his father had been. Perhaps, he was the lesser 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 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.

Conclusion

Mukundan 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. 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. Mukundan decision is to light 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’.

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