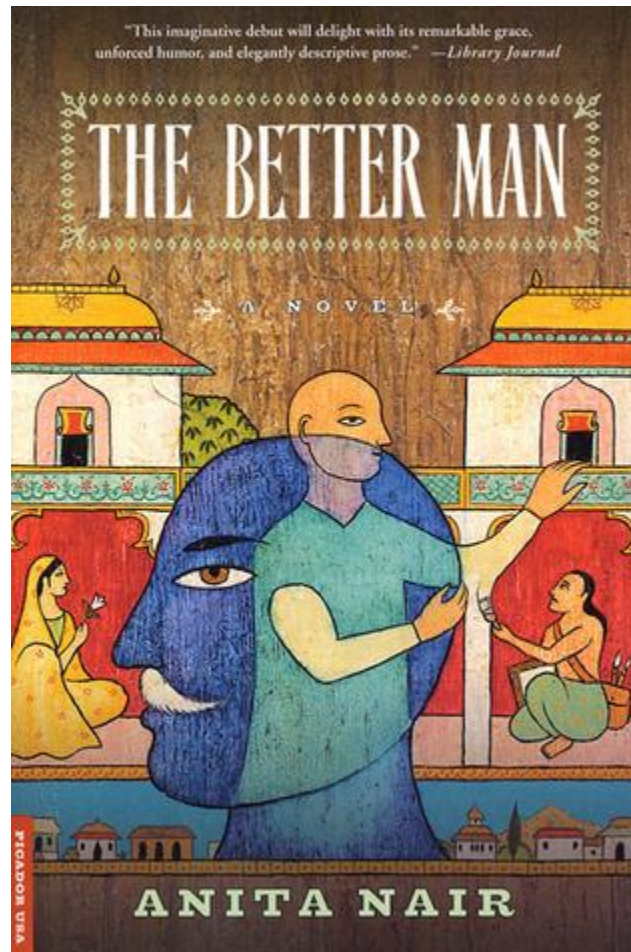


Bhasi as a Transformer in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*

A. Sharmila, Ph.D. Research Scholar



Abstract

Anita Nair's novels depict the real life of her characters without hiding anything from her readers. The other point that her novels reveals is the effect of social conditioning on women. *The Better Man* is Nair's debut novel which is an excellent effort. It is a novel written by a woman with a man's sensibility, 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

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undergone by the characters. Nair's fiction conveys her vision of life: change is always possible; hope never dies; and happiness can be found. *The Better Man* describes every individual's attempt to better himself.

Key words: Anita Nair, *The Better Man*, psychological novel, Kerala

Anita Nair

Anita Nair is the most promising writer to reckon with. She 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. Nair's novels depict the real life of her characters without hiding anything from her readers. The other point that her novels reveals is the effect of social conditioning on women. Society uses many different means to propagate beliefs. Literature is one of the means to carry these ideas further surrounded by such messages.

Nair delineates roles men and women play, and at the same time sends out the message that they can rise above their roles (like an artist can rise above himself and be a character) and be their natural self instead of toeing the line that society has drawn for them. Though her novels seem to lean towards women's role in society, she writes with both male and female perspective and transcends the boundaries of what is supposed as female fiction.

The Better Man

The Better Man is Nair's debut novel which is an excellent effort. It is a novel written by a woman with a man's sensibility, 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 perhaps the only novel written by a woman which is not about an Indian woman (Naik, 2001). Nigam writing for *India Today* declares, *The Better Man* is the journey of 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 (Nigam 2000). Anita Nair has

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proved her mettle by fathoming the deepest recesses of man's psyche and depicting it realistically. 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 happiness can be found. *The Better Man* describes every individual's attempt to better himself.

The Narrator-Character Bhasi

The narrator-character is Bhasi and not the protagonist of the novel Mukundan. Bhasi 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 while Mukundan had stayed away from the village and had now returned to know and experience his being, as an integral part of his home village. He returns to his native village but remains a reluctant native for quite sometime. It is a meandering tale where the protagonist Mukundan Nair who was traumatized in his childhood by the tyranny of his brutal father, is now traumatized by his very own way of life.

Bhasi, *the one-screw-loose Bhasi*, as he is known in the village Kaikurussi, is an eccentric genius and a painter. Bhasi was once a college lecturer. His goal was to impart knowledge to the students than merely guiding them in getting a degree. But he was deceived by a girl student Omana who impressed him with her artistic essays but not of her own. In order to punish her, he kissed her without thinking of the consequences.

He was ashamed of his misbehavior and he left his home town and moved to Kochi. He worked as an apprentice for several months under a painter. His father often insisted that he learn a trade and he remembered his father's words that a man who knew a trade would never starve. At that time he ignored his father's words but then he realized that his father had faced the world without any title and constantly worked for the upbringing of the family. He finally understood his father's wisdom and decided to learn a trade and become a painter.

I thought of my father... He had done it effortlessly. He had done it because he knew a trade that told the world who he was and what he was capable of, without having to constantly prove himself. I finally understood the wisdom

of his words, I decided I too would learn a trade (103).

The realization of Bhasi helped him to come out of his fear and transformed him into an eminent person.

Mukundan

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 a clock. Tell me why you have about you the smell of a haunted animal" (12). Bhasi recounted his view point that Mukundan was suffering like a snail, which could not come out of its own shell of solitude. He said Mukundan's problem was in his mind and his anxieties were deep rooted and buried under him. It indicates the bruises and dismay in Mukundan. Bhasi articulated the difference of Mukundan as:

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 lie buried in you (106).

Bhasi tried to change the mind of Mukundan and advised him to come out of his shell of fear, so that he could behold the world with courage.

Mukundan's Confession

When Bhasi came to Mukundan's house, he observed that he was in dire straits. Bhasi interpreted Mukundan's grim as how beneath the thin layer of skin, there exists another face and during the day Mukundan's demeanour appeared different, but the anatomy of inner soul was totally different and it was under depression. Anita Nair stated the universal human condition through Mukundan, that many human being became the victim of the situation and act pleasantly

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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 trepidation 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 strange confusion and queer dread.

Have you ever known what it is too afraid?
Mukundan whispered. 'over andover again, I
Find myself wishing I were back in Bangalore,
Living my orderly life. This place fills with a
Strange bewilderment; a queer dread' (172).

Guilt Tormenting

Mukundan's condition was very pathetic and his guilt torments him though he was not responsible for his mother's death. Bhasi's entry into the life of Mukundan rejuvenates him. He decides to help Mukundan to realize his worth. He promotes in Mukundan the desire to live a life of quest. Bhasi seemed to have stepped in and decided to take control of Mukundan's life. He was determined to weave the past experience of Mukundan Nair and give it a pattern and help him to live to live life at least in the future.

Mukundan often expressed his wish to settle in Bangalore. He had no place to have a happy life in his own village. He had no belief in his father too. His diatribe made him a coward and he was totally in a state of depression. Whatever his father did should be accepted by him whether he likes or not. In anticipation that his son would smoke, Achuthan Nair whipped him. But Mukundan started to smoke later whenever he felt the sting of the cane on his calves. 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*.

Bhasi's Teaching and Comforting: Making a Better Man

Bhasi understood the pusillanimous condition of Mukundan and swore that he would teach him how to escape from his past and how to bury his guilt, sorrow and fear. Bhasi promised:

‘Mukundan’, he whispered fiercely, listen to me,
I am going to teach you how to escape your past;
I am going to help you bury the guilt, the sorrow
the fear that has feasted on you like a leech for years.
Mukundan, are you listening? I am going to heal you (175).

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 the only lifeline that Mukundan could trust to escape from the morass of his past. Bhasi was well versed in the healing process, by cultivating medicinal herbs and then by addressing the distress of others. He recognized Mukundan’s despair and started to help him to lay his demons to rest. Unable to bear the lonely haunting nights, he accepts the treatment of Bhasi who knows that more than medicines, something else has to be done to cure Mukundan and to make him a ‘Better Man’.

Bhasi’s Wife - Overwhelming Emotional Attachment

Bhasi had several patients with strange ailments when compared to Mukundan. But he felt something different for Bhasi. An overwhelming emotional attachment is fabricated in Bhasi’s heart out of pity. Damayanti, the wife of Bhasi was once a patient to him. Her husband and her six month old child died in an accident. After hearing the news, she became lifeless and a body of suffering was trapped in a skin of stillness. Milk from her bosom tainted the fabric of her blouse. She refused to take medicinal aids and also to manually squeeze the milk from her breasts. The pain she underwent had reflected in her eyes in the form of fear and stillness.

Bhasi was requested by his family members to cure her. He observed the same kind of stillness in Damayanti like him when he first landed in Kaikurrusi. Beyond his unorthodox methods of healing, Bhasi determined to cure her and talked to her in private. He explained to her that she should not let herself drift into a state of nothingness and into an intentional indifference. Bhasi talked for an hour and changed her into a state of liveliness and he attained

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self-content when he married her after two years. She got a life of prominence by the spiritfoul soul of Bhasi.

Are you frightened when you think of how you are
going to endure every moment without your husband
and child? You understand, don't you, that it was written
in their destiny that they leave the world so early, so abruptly
But you are here. And you can't let yourself drift into a state
Of nothingness, into an intentional indifference (185).

Bhasi consoled Damayanti that she should not feel guilty and come out of her qualm and try to lead her life without her husband and child.

Bhasi moved closely towards Mukundan. He expected camaraderie from Mukundan. Bhasi decided to teach Mukundan like a child about everything and to make him understand the techniques of overcoming the vagaries of the world. Bhasi took it as challenge to prove Mukundan as a man who could enjoy and as one capable of having love and happiness in his life.

As if you are a child who has to be taught to walk, to walk,
to talk, to understand the vagaries of this world, I will
take it up on myself to show you who you can be.....
Mukundan, you will be the man you are meant to be.
A man capable of love and happiness (187).

Mukundan's Healing

Bhasi requested Mukundan to give six weeks to heal him. The trip to Kodakkad in the early morning was the first treatment for Mukundan. The villagers often threatened their young ones with the story of Yakshi, who was an ill omen and liked to feast only on the blood of virile men. The weather condition, dense foliage, darkness gave a thrilling and daring experience to Mukundan. His heart beat rose by the very description of Bhasi about the forest. Bhasi strode Mukundan to the meadow in the middle of the forest. He requested Mukundan to think of the dark gloomy forest as his past and asked him to leave his fear and guilt. He also asked him to

clear his eyes and to wide open them to look into the purity of light. Mukundan followed the words of Bhasi and felt a great peace which filled his heart.

Think of that dark gloomy forest as your past....
But with me at your side, you found way to this
clearing, toward escape, this purity of light (193).

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 receptive until the body was ready to participate in the treatment. So he took Mukundan to Kodakkad to have a walk from darkness to light. As a next phase of treatment Bhasi took Mukundan to the attic of the house. He made Mukundan to sit in an earthen jar and to imagine himself to be inside his mother's womb. Bhasi believed that everything will be perfect only if it was effective from the mere existence. So, Bhasi's voice flowed over him and mesmerized him to revert himself to his original form – a single cell. Mukundan feels that he was transforming himself from an embryo into a new man. He no longer was 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 his 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 (199).

Mukundan became very normal without any fear and torment. He feels happy in the companionship of Bhasi. Their evening get together discovered a new strength in Mukundan. 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 (209).

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