

Cultural Change in the Novels of Anita Nair with Reference to *The Better Man and Lessons in Forgetting*

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Abstract

Anita Nair's *The Better Man* (1999) and *Lesson in Forgetting* (2010) are the novels which mark the mode of twenty first century. Patriarchy, norms of marriage, parents, child and child-parent relationship, love and sex, and such are changing very speedily. These changes cause changes in the norms of our social structure. Nair's male and female characters, by revolting against the social, cultural and economic aspects of traditional society, challenge the traditional way life. So these characters project the cultural changes and these cultural changes marks the mode of contemporary society. These changes project the picture of society where the old social and moral order is on the wane and the new trends of society are emerging.

Key words: Anita Nair, The Better Man, Lessons in Forgetting, oppression of women

Social Criticism and Social Relevance as Part of Literature and Literary History

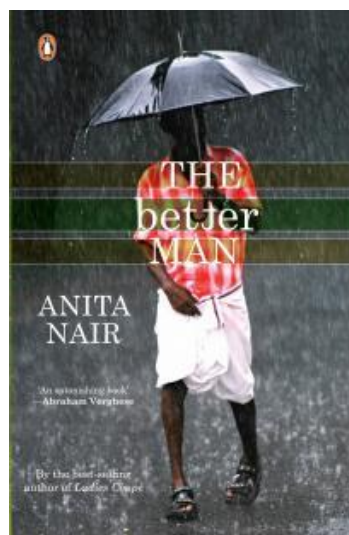
Social criticism has been a part and parcel of literature. Man as a social being, lives in society. Being a part of it, all his activities, directly or indirectly, are related to society. Literature is created by man and cannot exist without society. Society is the environment in which literature breathes. Literary history is divided into different ages because the literature of every age has some special characteristics that belong to that age alone. So, by studying the literature of different ages, some common characteristics of the concerned age can be found and by interpreting those characteristics, a fairly complete picture of the concerned age can be drawn. Literature shows both the good and bad sides of society, criticizes and appreciates them and this pattern may be termed as social criticism. As it stands, this social criticism is the critique of society.

Literature always seems to bear a certain social relevance. It is a vehicle of presenting the highest ideals and aspirations of mankind. Feminism as a literary theory entered the academic circle in the late 1960's with the advent of Post-structuralism. Patriarchy is the traditional social set up in many societies, in which man enjoys power and freedom while woman is denied such freedom and powers. The woman has not been given due importance since ages past. As Simone de Beauvoir remarks: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine"(Beauvoir 295).

Anita Nair's Focus on Cultural, Social and Economic Aspects

Anita Nair is one of the most important writers of the present era. She is the novelist of twenty-first century when values, traditions and belief are changing very fast. She takes up the cultural, social and economic aspects which mark the mode of contemporary society and provide a perfect example of victimized women in a patriarchal set up. Her novels are the social document of the twenty-first century.

The Better Man and Lessons in Forgetting



The Better Man (1999) unveils the reality of Indian women who are still deprived of their rights in love and marriage. Marriage is still a social need, where women seek security and men respect. The novel challenges the patriarchal set up of contemporary society.

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Lessons in forgetting (2010) projects the revolt against the traditional set up of society. The protagonist does not challenge cultural aspects only, but social and economic aspects of society also. The story is an attempt to show how, in life, suppression and oppression do not always come in recognizable forms, but often under the guise of love, protection and the assurance of security. Female characters in her novels rebel against the patriarchal set up in order to explore their own potential or to live on their own terms, regardless of the consequences that such a rebellion may have on other lives. By portraying her emancipated woman, Nair projects the changing picture of contemporary society.

Women's Oppression through Patriarchy – Issue on Hand in *The Better Man*

Patriarchy and its outlook towards the female have been the root cause of their oppression and suppression. Anita Nair, through her female characters like Meenaksi, Valsala and Ajanta, projects marriage as a tyrannical institution for woman. Her female characters like Meenaksi, Valsala, Ajanta, and others in *The Better Man* try to liberate themselves from the trap of man - domination. As the novel begins, it is said that Valsala is the wife of a middle - aged schoolmaster namely Prabhakaran. She is immersed in her daily household chores and watches television every evening. She lives a monotonous life. The coconut, cashew and pepper trees which grow in her garden do not fill her with charm and joy. She is inclined to follow the living style of the glamour world outside the four walls.

Valsala feels that her marital life has not been fruitful for her. She has never tasted the pleasure of her desired fruit during her marital life. So she remains dissatisfied on this level. Now she, to avoid her alienation, starts to associate her suppressed feelings with the natural objects such as pala flowers. Here she is reminded of the words of her mother that the scent of the pala flower is liked by the Gandharvas very much. They always look for virgins to seduce them. They make them captive only for this evil motive. This hope fills her with some optimism. This development causes change in her way of thinking. As the novelist remarks:

“All night, for the first time in many years, Valsala tossed and turned in her bed, breathing in the scent of the 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...she went to stand beneath the pala tree,

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spreading her hair out to dry...she stood there rubbing sandalwood paste into her skin, her bare breasts, and thighs. 'Come to me, Gandharva,' she beseeched. Can't you smell the fragrance of want in me... seduce me with your soft voice and caresses. Make me your lover, your slave" (*BM 129*).

Female Autonomy

Her unfulfilled desires compel her to yearn for extra-marital relationship. This step indicates female autonomy and projects the mood of contemporary women. She, after many years of married life, feels that she needs a perfect man to satisfy her physical desire. This desire is mainly responsible for leading her to the path of extra-marital relationship and she falls in love with Sridharan. He, in the beginning, appears to her as a neighbour and becomes her lover later on. Soon after, following the guideline of her own conscience, she decides to free herself from the traditional bond of marriage. After releasing herself from this conjugal bond, she develops the extra-marital relationship. When Prabakaran goes to school, they enjoy freedom unhindered. Now Sridharan admires her and gives her the desired fruit. In this way, he makes her captive physically and emotionally. Due to this, she surrenders herself to Sridharan completely and starts to take care of her body in order to be attractive to him.

Portrayal of a New Morality

This narrative presents, through Valasla, a new morality. This new morality brings focus on the soul and psyche of the female of a new generation and indicates what she expects from the male. She is aware that love, sex, freedom, justice, equality, and so on are her birth right, but these things can't be expected from a man of hostile nature. In spite of it being so, she willingly follows this trap of the new system that is completely against the traditional concept of Indian Womanhood. Passion and desire for pleasure play an important part in making her do so. By doing so, she undermines the sanctity of the sacred institution, marriage. Her wrong steps compel the feminist writers to consider things from a different point of view. She does not challenge the patriarchal set up of society only with her liberal views and attitude, but also raises the new issues of woman's sexuality and gender that points toward a radical change of society. As she remarks "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" (*BM 131*).

Life Partnership at the Superficial Level

Whenever a woman is dissatisfied on a personal or public level, she rebels against the existing set up of society. The same happens with Valsala. The quest for freedom takes her to this path, where she seeks divorce from this conjugal bond of marriage. This development marks the reflection of the contemporary female psyche. Generally, life is an affair of sorrow and joy. She initiates this rebellion on a personal level which affects her husband also. When Prabhakaran complains of his indigestion, she does not seem to care about his health. Now when her revolt comes to the surface, it is revealed that Sridharan and Valsala are life partners on the superficial level only. In spite of her dissatisfaction with her spouse, she decides to remain with him for the sake material gain. We read:

“There was the land she had slaved over and the house she was mistress of - both of which her husband’s. Then there were the retirement benefits he would get when he retired from the Lower Primary School in Pannamanna three years from now. And then there was the sizeable LIC policy ... after twenty- three years of marriage, she thought she deserved to have it all. She didn’t want to give it up just like that. Nor did she want to give up Sridharan” (*BM* 133).

Now Prabhakaran’s missing is reported and later he is found dead. Now the police question Valsala about the death of her husband, but she keeps the secret. Now she sheds crocodile tears over his death and bangs her head against the wooden pillar. By creating a high - profile drama, she gets a great deal of sympathy from the readers. But everything is changed, when her involvement is reported in the murder of her husband Prabhakaran master. It is reported as follows: “brutally killed the schoolteacher in his bed on the night of 14 July at Kaikurusssi village. The body was then dismembered and buried in individual pits in a coconut grove owned by Sridharan. The accused had been on the run ever since 8 August when the gruesome murder of Parbhakaran Master came to light” (*BM* 143).

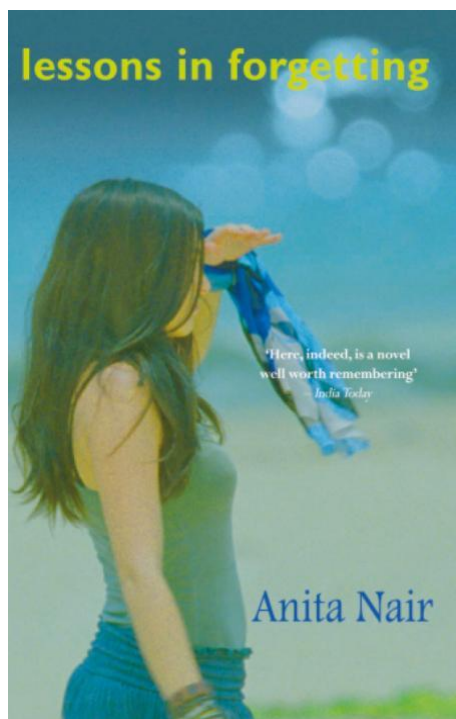
Revolt

By murdering her own husband, she commits a heinous crime. Here Valsala does not have any feeling of regret for this shameful, criminal deed. She takes this step because she wants to escape from the male domination and desires to lead a life of her own. Everyone in

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the village says that her behaviour was ghastly. Here Valsala is the image of a “New Woman” who breaks the traditional Indian consciousness and declares the revolt against the patriarchal set up of society. In this fast changing world immorality is on the rise. Love and sex play a vital role in the novels of Anita Nair. Old social and moral values are declining. Anita Nair displays emotional and the painful feelings of the contemporary women in a bold manner. The novelist, through Valsala, projects the woman of the twenty-first century, for whom sex is a new sort of religion. She casts light on the female psyche and conveys the message a woman should be treated as a complete human being. A study of the man-woman relationship as depicted in the modern literature of the East and the West shows that time is changing, so the expectations, psyche and behaviour of the female are under change. Women are now projected as more self-confident, more liberated in their view, more expressive in their behaviour and more intelligent as compared to the woman of the past.

Lessons in Forgetting – Meera’s Story



Anita Nair’s fourth novel *Lessons in Forgetting* came out in 2010. Meera is the protagonist of the novel who lives a happy life. She is an M. A. in English literature. But the story takes a turn when her husband fails to come home. She finds herself in a big problem. As she remarks: “how is it that my life has never risen above a series of clichés... man rises in

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career, wife trails him, happy to be his helpmate; the crisis of middle - age; man abandons wife; family divides” (LF 76). This seems to show clearly, the pathetic condition of a household female. But she does not want to remain traditional life like woman of the previous centuries who used to face oppression and suppression without raising any protest. She knows her own potential, and would like to undermine the traditional view regarding this. And we hear: “we are brought up to believe that our husband is our god. His wishes are ours, and without him we are nothing...whether he is hard as a rock or as worthless as a weed, a husband is a husband. Can you make life without your husbands?” (LF 178) By taking the whole responsibility of the entire family on her young shoulders, she undermines the myth of patriarchal society regarding woman and bails out the family out of economic crisis. By doing so, she challenges cultural, economic and social aspects of traditional society. In this way the novelist projects the problem of betrayal and women’s suffering and highlights how the traditional set up of society is getting transformed into the new one.

Voice against Social Evils

Smriti is the second most important character who raises her voice against the social evils such as dowry system, female foeticide, etc. As the novelist writes “Despite the laws and regulations, women still find a way of discovering the sex of their unborn babies. If not the women, their families. They abort the foetus if it’s a girl. Soon there may come a day when there are no women left” (LF 285). She, due to this, is murdered. In this way, she lays her life down for the noble cause. The novelist, through Smiriti, presents the image of a new woman who is educated, bold, capable and courageous and knows very well how to make her own path in this fast-changing world and side by side the novelist warns that gone are the days of their suppression and exploitation.

Suppression and Oppression of Women

Just as the poor are exploited by the rich, likewise women are oppressed and suppressed by the male-dominated society. The women in the past have been completely traditional, uneducated, superstitious and were puppets of the male- dominated society. Due to this, she could not think of a world outside the house, but remained languishing within the four walls of her house. So she could not comprehend that she has more roles to play in the world. She could not keep her pace with the passage of time and remained cut off from the mainstream of the dynamic world. All this happened to her due to the patriarchal set up of

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society. The women living in such an orthodox and complex set up of society became habituated to this tyrannical way of life. From very the beginning of their birth, they are taught that they are bound to follow the orders of the male and the marriage is their destiny to which they have to follow willingly or unwillingly. Their duty is to bear and rear children, for maintaining the traditions of this patriarchal society.

Psychological and Sociological Exploration of Women's Psyche

The feminist writers primarily make a psychological exploration of the women's psyche. They penetrate deep into the inner mind of the depressed and suppressed women. By doing so, they bring to light their core issues. Complex patriarchal set up of society and its attitude towards woman are solely responsible for their oppression and suppression. So the writers raise the issues of contemporary woman like dilution of relationships, pre-marital and extra-marital affairs, and sterility of life, man-woman relationship, their inner fears, oppression and suppression faced by them inside and outside the home. The writers try to depict the picture of contemporary women who keep performing their duty despite their exploitation and victimisation. So it is clear that women in the past have been completely traditional, uneducated and superstitious, confined and were the followers of the rules of the male dominated society. It is so because the men of the traditional society want to keep them in such a position. Generally the females are fixed by gender stereotypes and are questioned when they try to transcend their position in this complex patriarchal set up of society. Due to this, female characters are forced to keep silent about their exploitation and victimisation under a strong patriarchal system. It is a hard fact that women have not only been denied existence as complete human beings, physically, socially, psychologically and mentally, but also set up not to perform on an egalitarian footing with men, and kept away from the opportunity to express their emotions and feelings freely.

Legal versus Loving Relationship

The two sexes are necessary to each other in marriage. It is a legal relationship between a husband and wife. It is a social necessity where woman seeks security and man respect. It is a socially acknowledged and approved relationship. There are many forms of marriage prevalent, such as love marriage, court marriage, inter-caste marriage, live-in-relationship, barter marriage and paid wife. Presently, India is passing through a crucial mode as never before. Meera in *Lessons in Forgetting* displays the same mode of contemporary

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society. But marriage in the novels of Nair is the root cause of their suffering and victimisation. It is the hurdle which checks their freedom and puts them into an illusionary world. She defines the true meaning of marriage: “I think it is the circle of security that has us enchanted. Not the house or the money, the sex or kids. Not even companionship” (LF 185). But this bond of marriage has been the cause of all their suffering. They, under this guise, have been sufferers and victims. Woman has always been man’s dependant. If an assessment is made of the last three decades, it can be seen that industrialization, demographic changes, social mobility, modernization, advancement of information technology, globalization, capitalist production, consumerism, extent of urbanization, and so on are the factors which mark the mode of social criticism. So the boys and girls themselves are coming forward in selecting or rejecting their life-partners. Marriage in the novels of Anita Nair plays a key role in revealing the trends of contemporary society. In this way, we can see how the norms of this institution - marriage - are under change.

Persistence of Conventional Norms

Indian society still relies on many conventional norms and values which women have to follow. In present times, caste and religion are not as rigid as in earlier centuries. They are losing their ground rapidly because of modernity and globalization. The impact of these factors is clearly discernible in the novels of Anita Nair. Being the part of the new generation, mostly all her major characters are not away from its influence. If they are located in the light of caste and religion, a true picture of social change comes out. This marks the mode of the twenty-first century where norms of the major institutions are under change. These changes bring out a new kind of culture which suit the taste of the new generation. These are the result of westernization, privatization, advancement in the field of Information and technology, increased level of education, and such.

Meenakshi and Her Parents

Meenakshi, when she is deserted by her husband, works as L I C agent though her parents want to take help from their kith and kin. But she does not want to depend on others. She is the woman of the twenty-first century who is well-educated and fully aware of her own potential. She knows very well how to make her own way in the world. This step of Meenakshi projects the clash between traditional ideology and the ideology of the new generation. Smiriti is the second most important female character who falls in the same

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category as Meenakshi. Her father is a university professor in the USA. But she, by leaving her own family, comes to India and raises her voice against the social evils such as dowry system, female foeticide, etc. Though her father is not happy over her doings, she, by ignoring the wishes of her father, keeps moving forward on this fatal track. At last, she sacrifices her life for this noble cause. This development also projects the changing picture of child-parents and parents-child relationship, which marks the mode of contemporary society and warns that the old social and moral values are losing their ground. The parents want to put their offspring on the trodden path, but the children do not want to follow that trodden path and they know very well how to make their own way. So the parents-child relationship plays an important role in the novels of Anita Nair. These developments project difference between two different ideologies - the ideology of traditional society and of the new generation. Parents want to push their daughters on the traditional path, while the girls don't want to follow the trodden path. These factors constitute the level of social criticism. In this manner, parent's child and child parent's relationship portray clash between two ideologies - the ideology of the old generation and the ideology of a new generation.

Desire for Independence

Meenakshi in *The Better Man* is a well-educated woman who is the wife Balan. When her husband leaves her, she lives with her mother. By rejecting the sympathy of her aunt, cousins and neighbours, she conveys a message that she does not want to be a burden on others. Now she runs a crèche to avoid economic crisis for the family. After some times, she becomes an LIC agent and forces everyone in the village to take a policy. She spares no one in the village. By doing so, she saves her family from economic crisis. In this way, she copes with the bad situation very well. Smriti in *Lessons in Forgetting* also falls in the same category of working women. She does her job voluntarily, but she does not feel any kind of fear from the adverse circumstances. She keeps moving on this fatal path because she believes that without uprooting the social evils from our society, a civilized and better society cannot be constituted. She is a modern lady who knows that women can play a decisive role in the development of the country. So she becomes a social servant and unfolds the wrongdoings of the doctors who run a business of pre-natal tests, which is completely banned in India. Later on, she sacrifices her life for this noble cause.

Akhila and Meenakshi

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Thus, Akhila and Meenakshi are the women who fall in this category of working women. Their doings depict that traditional set up of society is losing its ground in the fast changing world and a new world in which women seek equal right, justice and are ready to compete with men in each and every field is emerging. With the help of the above mentioned characters, a complete picture of contemporary changing society can be drawn, that constitutes the substance of social criticism.

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