
A STUDY OF WOMEN'S QUEST FOR LIBERATION AND EQUITY IN ANITA NAIR'S *THE BETTER MAN*

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Abstract: Anita Nair is a post-modern writer who describes how Indian women are exploited even in these modern days. Her female protagonists are aware of the injustice meted out to them in marriage. They boldly walk out of their homes when they find that the men they have chosen are not equal partners. Most of her female characters are liberated and break out of the bonds that make them unhappy. They are ready to take up a strong stance against human circumstances or human relationships that make them unhappy. They are able to find ultimate fulfilment in either marriage or in sexuality with men of their choice sometimes even tending to border on the permissive. In short, Nair projects the emerging trends prevailing among educated and urban women who are able to break away from societal norms that have a debilitating effect on their lives. This type of ideology is the mode in which Anita Nair attempts to sensitize society of the changes necessary to bring meaningful existence to the female gender. Her mode of gender sensitization ranges from overt to covert methods where women sometimes show an aggressive tendency to overthrow dominating patriarchal domination. This paper makes a study of the resilience displayed by the women characters in the novel *The Better Man*

Keywords: Patriarchal Domination, Gender Sensitization, Injustice, Meaningful Existence.

Introduction: Anita Nair's first novel *The Better Man* fictionalises the patriarchal structure of Indian families. Nair introduces key episodes into *Better Man* involving vital stories of female protagonists like Anjana, Meenakshi, Valsala and Paru Kutty. Anjana's story brings out the betrayal of trust in the institution of marriage by her husband and deals with how she finds self-worth and dignity by economical empowerment. These form the important themes of her story. Meenakshi's character is portrayed as one abandoned by her husband. Her attempts to get back on her feet after this traumatic experience while being saddled with the task of bringing up her child throws light upon the strength and resilience in these strong-willed women. On the other Paru Kutty belongs to the older generation of women who is forced to live with her husband who had a live-in relationship with another woman. How she discards him and throws him out of her home is the compelling action taken to shake the foundation of patriarchal domination. Valsala belongs to the younger generation of women forced into an unhappy marriage with a man very much older than her. How she attempts to get her bearing back in life forms an important part of the narrative. All these female characters assume centre stage as Nair attempts to portray women's voices loudly proclaiming against suffering and betrayal at the hands of men. Though men appear to be the chief characters, they are pushed to the margin and women are given predominance in each episode they feature in.

Anjana's character is portrayed as a woman brought up in a liberal atmosphere by her parents. Having lived in the bliss of independence and free will, Anjana is subjected to a rude shock in her life in the name of marriage. Her parents had taught her to be non-traditional and modern but her husband turns out to be a tyrant. Several injustices are meted out to her despite her attempts to remain patient and tolerant. In the early days her marriage she attempts to don the role of an obedient and eager wife ready to please her husband Ravindran. Anjana is forced to suffer all the cruelty borne out of his frustration and failures in spite of her loving care and caring attitude towards him. In the ends, she is abandoned by him. Despite her suffering, she takes up a job as a teacher and attempts to rise as a free and liberated individual attempting to assert her individual freedom. Anjana meets Mukundan and likes him for his honesty and simplicity. She maintains her self-respect and is ready to continue her relationship with

Mukundan only after she realizes that he is ready to change. When Mukundan tells her he is weak, she assures him that everyone has weaknesses.

All of us have our weaknesses, but we seldom have the courage to accept them or ever declare if as you have done now to me, that makes you, braver than anyone else. (*The Better Man* :245)

This shows the stress she lays on values and character in a person. While her first association with Ravindran had proved to be a failure owing to his lack of character, she wants to associate with a strong-minded man. As she has become financially secure, she is able to display a positive attitude towards her life. She wants Mukundan to be courageous enough to bring her home despite his fears of losing his repute in his village community. However, Anjana strongly disapproves of this attitude of Mukundan and makes him realize his fault. Thus, Anjana is a strong woman who struggles for self-realization and succeeds in attaining it. She also does not question norms as she is more interested in seeking a solution to her problem of getting on in life. Anita Nair seems to point that answers to the problem do not lie merely on the patriarchal set-up of society, but also within the victim to raise a voice against oppression. Anjana raises her voice not against the oppressor but also attempts to train herself to adapt to difficulty and find a way out of problems. The growth of her character from a state of weakness and failure to that of success can be traced to her ability to accomplish this through self-assessment and self-analysis. The older generation of women generally remains silent to the colonial power of patriarchy but it is the younger generation who are able to take drastic steps against it revolutionarily.

Parukutty, Mukundan's mother is another character who is submissive and docile in the beginning. She is very much awed by her domineering husband Achutan Nair. Achutan Nair abandons her as he undertakes a journey to Burma for a job when Achutan Nair brings home another woman the docile Paru Kutty transforms into a strong individual who flatly refuses to allow Ammini into the house.

I said 'no'. I'm willing to live with the shame of you taking a mistress. But I'm not going to let you flaunt how little I mean to you. I am your wife and insist your treat me with respect due to me (P: 74).

When she finds that her husband refuses to acknowledge her worth, she asserts her rightful ownership of her property and thereby comes across as a bold and forth right woman. She has the courage to live all alone in her house and continues to bear a grudge against her husband. She has been oppressed by his high handedness for the past years and wishes to take revenge. She even dumps her husband's store of paddy on the dirt road before his new house. This way she is able to assert her individuality as she cannot forget the injustice meted out to her when she was pregnant. Her husband had insulted her on her face when she asked to be taken with him. "I can't be saddled with an invalid for whom I'll have to be responsible every minute of the day "(68). This is his harshness that made her miserable and once he was gone, he stopped communicating with her and was not even interested in the birth of her offspring. After his return, he began to vent his ire on her for having produced a docile child, Mukundan. Paru-Kutty becomes the victim of his autocratic behaviour. When her son was upset at his father's behaviour, she tried to calm him down by telling him that his father wanted him to be strong and capable like himself. She remains in fear of her husband who lives like a despot and remaining like a symbol of patriarchy in the village.

Paru Kutty, represents the dependent woman typical in a middle class family where a woman has to carry the burden of tradition on her shoulders. Such woman mutely suffer the tyranny and unfaithfulness of their husbands without anyone coming to their rescue or support. Even the family stands as a helpless audience not interfering with the woman's problems. Parukutty represents those women who are the worst hit by patriarchy due to their lack of economic independence and lack of education. She herself is partially responsible for what she has to endure owing to the belief in men that women are worthless creatures and can be subdued with violence and a heavy hand. She fails to stop her husband's unjust action and fails to defend her son when her husband thinks she is too mild and

worthless. It is when her husband actually brings his paramour to her home that something snaps and she begins to violently oppose his actions. "It'll be over my dead body for as long as I'm alive, I will decide who will live in this house and who doesn't" (74). This outburst of Paru Kutty is an illustration of all her pent, up frustration and anger against her husband for all the torture that he has been subjecting her to. However, she meets a horrific death in the end. Parukutty is thus a victim of patriarchal subjugation and violation of her very right to live.

Meenakshi is another character who despite her husband's infidelity honours her wedding bond. She represents the typical sacrificial Indian housewife who put her family before her happiness. A strong woman who has a sound grounding in morality, Meenakshi represents those women who are ready to stand by their family in times of turmoil. Despite hurdles in their lives such women never give up hope, Nair attempts to type-cast Meenakshi as an example of an emancipated woman, who despite belonging to a traditional middle-class family of the post-independence era is able to prove her forwardness and modernity in her outlook of life.

Having had her share of an exciting youth, Meenakshi leads a colourful life as a Naxalite turned activist, living life for a cause, she is a centre of youthful appeal to the local people and helps the labourers retaliate against the oppression meted out by the high-class people represented by the likes of Achutan Nair. She is an activist who incites people to fight corruption and class differences by setting ablaze haystacks, attacking people and inciting others to follow her example. She takes up multiple occupations, when abandoned by her husband, to fend for herself and her child, displaying remarkable strength of character and mind. It is later on in her life that she comes to know that her vagrant husband who had abandoned her became bed-ridden owing to tuberculosis. She opts to take care of him and fend for him now that he could not earn his livelihood. She takes him for his daily Ayurvedic massages and other health-care faithfully and with loyalty. Such is the strength of her character. When Mukundan first meets her, he thinks that she would be easy prey to his lust but finds her to be tough and immovable with a business-like approach to him. "I have been faithful to my husband and I'm not going to change that, not even for you (66)". Her strong opinion leaves him shocked. He is brought back to his senses by her blunt forthrightness. He realizes that she must have suffered enough in her life to become so hard-hearted.

Valsala in this novel is another character who meets tragic circumstances. She is depicted as a persona in the road to self-discovery but is led astray towards crime. She is depicted as a complete contrast to Meenakshi as she aims at self-gratification by any means possible. She represents a woman set out to discovering a meaningful existence for herself despite earning the wrath of society. She is a very beautiful woman, 'lusciously plump' with a 'blooming complexion and a head of jet-black curly hair' (P.126). She was the cynosure of the eyes of every man in the neighbourhood but the tragedy was that she was thrust into an unhappy marriage with a man older than herself. Anita Nair wishes to throw light on this custom of parents marrying off their daughters to get rid of the burden caused by them. Valsala was tied down to an old man who was discontented and worthless. All the hopes for a happy life were dashed, however, her youthful derives could not be quelled. All her womanly emotion was fully awakened like the pala tree that bloomed in her yard. Her mother had equated the palm tree in full bloom to a woman with full-blowing desire waiting for a Gandharva to quench her thirst. This mythical comparison made by her mother stands true in Valsala life. Her mother's timely warnings go unheeded. It was then that Sridharan, a neighbour who had bought a plot of vacant land adjacent to theirs, entered into her life. She is willing to tap the new system against the backdrop of the traditional concept of Indian Womanhood. Her ideas on liberal sexual behaviour stirs society she lives in as they are not used to such blatant violation of societal norms.

Anita Nair experiments with a liberal-minded ideology that woman need to express themselves in ways they deem right. Valsala with her bold ideology becomes a respected figure in her society and Meenakshi with her resilience was able to face life's vagaries with confidence. From the feminist point of view, Nair, wishes to uphold women's needs to be considered as equals to men through the portrayal of these women who go against the patriarchal system that wants women to be victims.

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