

Battle of Relations and Refinement in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*

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Abstract

Mukundan was unable to free himself from his father's influence but all his acts are a mere duplication of what he detested in his father. Unconsciously, he tried being as ambitious and powerful as his father but failed to get rid of the fear and angst he had within him. Mukundan's dealings with his mother Parukutty, beloved Anjana and dear friend Bhasi clearly exhibit his egocentricity. His desire for recognition and acceptance, importance and adulation blinded him to everything else. He realized that a survivor is someone who is selfish and there is no point in surviving when there is no one to share one's happiness or grief with. His insistence on not being just his father's son and his struggle to carve out his own identity in the village forced him to make some contribution to the betterment of his village. In his quest for identity, he betrayed Bhasi and joined the side of the all-powerful Ramakrishnan - the richest man in Kaikurrussi.

Keywords: Influence, Fear and angst, Survivor, Betrayal, Betterment, Identity

The greatest happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved; loved for ourselves, or rather, loved in spite of ourselves. (Victor Hugo, from *Les Misérables*)

Anita Nair's *The Better Man* (2000) is a psychological novel of formation and is in fact an assemblage of different kinds of emotional anxieties and disturbances. It is a battle of relations and self-doubts faced by a son, Mukundan Nair, a man in his fifties, against his domineering father Achuthan Nair. It is a journey of a guilty but honest soul of a son towards refinement who returns to Kerala after serving in a government office. Notable here is Malabar, the northern Kerala, Bhasi, the painter and the lady, Anjana along with the deceased mother who is the source of Mukundan Nair's remorse and repentance. Each character is plagued with emotional problems, especially the main character Mukundan Nair who is tortured by his mother's death even after many years. Bhasi has gone through a sad love story but he has managed to recover from that, has started a family and has become a healer.

The Better Man is no other than Mukundan and the novel is about his upward mobility, whereas Mukundan's friend

Bhasi has been able to dissolve his connections with the past, Mukundan is absolutely unable to desist from his past. Mukundan's transformation can be seen by analysing the conflict with his trauma and anxiety. However, there is also a time in which Mukundan behaves very selfishly. That selfishness is the factor which ultimately contributes to Mukundan's emotional recovery and regaining joy in his life.

It is a good news that at the end Mukundan starts a deep friendly relationship and for the first time in his life he is deeply in love with a woman- a sort of spiritual love. It is not an affair involving trifle and sensuous association. It shows how even a small period of troubled self-importance can serve as a reason for an emotional treatment. Finally, a woman proves to be an antidote to his troubled mind. Mukundan experiences the most significant transformations evident in the novel. Thus, one can say that due to a great mental change, Mukundan adds to the fact that this novel is a psychological novel of formation.

Facing his trauma Mukundan identifies that he has been suffering from his mother's death for years. He is haunted by a sense of failure for having abandoned his mother and is even tortured by nightmares concerning his mother's death. Achuthan Nair, Mukundan's father, confirms several times that the mother's death was not Mukundan's fault. The 58-year-old still accepts that he has made a great mistake by not helping his mother and that she consequently hates him. Mukundan says to his father that he might have prevented her death. His father argues:

Your mother could have prevented what was happening to her. The heartbreak. The humiliation. But she chose to remain a victim. So don't go about feeling guilty for what happened to her. (*The Better Man* P. 76)

Mukundan has never tried to avoid that trauma and he is almost sixty years old when he eventually takes great pains in the furtherance of his psychological composition. Achuthan Nair could say the same to Mukundan, as Mukundan deliberates himself as a victim of his father's insensitivity, as well. At that point, though, Achuthan

Nair does not seem to sense the severances of Mukundan's trauma. Soon, Krishnan plays the past down by saying to Mukundan: 'You were young. Just a boy pretending to be a grown-up. Your father is a formidable man.' (BM 123)

Achuthan Nair wants to point out to Mukundan that everything depends upon the point of view and that Mukundan mostly tends to perceive what he wants to perceive. Bhasi is eventually the one who sets Mukundan thinking about his past and his trauma. In addition to that, Bhasi is the one who finally influences Mukundan to transform. Mukundan has to walk a long path in order to recover from his traumatic past. Even if Bhasi helps him to overcome his trauma, it takes Mukundan several months until he is finally healed. Bhasi functions as a catalyst, for he is the one who gets Mukundan finally making the best of his past and changing his frame of mind. Mukundan has never added a good access to his own feelings for his depression and feeling of emptiness. Mukundan's father is very strict and hardly empathetic but he is right when he says to Mukundan:

[Mukundan's father] was callous, brutal and tyrant. But he also had the courage of his convictions. When he believed in something, he let nothing come between him and his purpose. (BM 145)

Achuthan Nair stands by his statements and his deeds. For example, Achuthan betrays his wife, Parukutti and he does not feel ashamed of that and takes full responsibility for it. He even accepts being hated by Mukundan and being despised by his own daughter. Furthermore, Achuthan even shatters his son's dreams and hopes to become a famous writer. He, sort of, warns Mukundan: 'No son of mine is going to waste his life trying to be a writer. Do you understand?' (The Better Man, P. 67) That experience was such shattering to Mukundan that he has never been writing anything but letters and official reports. We can say that his father's prohibition not to become a writer, is an upsetting discomfort to Mukundan.

All the way through Nair's writing the repetitive themes of the irony of human relationship, the importance of place and mythological influences help her shape the theme and character. The relation between father-son and that of mother-daughter emphasized in Nair's *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe* represent the complex human relationship. One of the peculiar characteristics of a novel is that it gives its celebrities a local habitation and a name. Localization is a practical matter of placing the characters in an environment within which they perform their roles.

For Nair, the place plays a significant role in her novels. It

is the significance of place in a fiction that Nair has stressed on in her thickly populated first novel, *The Better Man*. This novel aims at proper characterization like that of Achuthan Nair, *One-screw Bhasi*, his love Anjana, Power-house Ramakrishna, Meenakshi the Naxalite etc. For Nair it is also the rigidity between the characters that allows the drive of the narrative to move at a sharp pace. Characterization constitutes the real essence of all of Nair's novels.

The story is set in a sleepy village called Kaikurissi in the Northern part of Kerala. This village conditions the novelist's mode of characterization. The novel begins with a monologue by Bhasi, who introduces a host of characters: Vishnu, the priest, Shankar, the tea seller. These characters correspond to the essence of Kerala because temples, toddy-shops and tea-stalls form the life of Kerala. The names assigned to the characters and the towns are typical of Kerala. The characteristics of Kerala and the issues close to this state are highlighted in this novel.

Kerala is depicted as a land of lottery, toddy shop and women, both loyalists and rebels, continually struggling against the patriarchal male dominance. Thus, the author attempts to recreate the setting aptly. Nair shifts the novel from Bhasi's monologue into the third person narrative to introduce the Protagonist Mukundan followed by the females, both living and non-living. Some are happily married while most of them shown as suffering at the hands of their spouses.

The impact of an unbearable and dictating father is quite visible in Mukundan. When he turned 18, Mukundan secured a clerical job in an explosive factory in Trichy. His later plan of settling in Kerala with his friend Narendran was also foiled by the latter's sudden death, eight months prior to their retirement. Thus, left with no option Mukundan returns to his village, which he had tried to stay away from, all his adult life. At the age of fifty-two, Mukundan has no hopes of getting a bride, young enough, who could give him a progeny. When he found hope in twenty-seven-year-old village school teacher, Anjana, he was unwilling to stake his reputation in the eyes of the villagers. The influence of his dominant father follows him as a shadow all his life. Moreover, his father constantly reminded and drummed into his ear day after day: 'If you wish to survive, you need to think of yourself first' (TBM 71).

Mukundan could not mourn his father's death as he always wished him dead and held him responsible for his crippled spirit. He hated his father for being a tyrant, who tormented him throughout his life. It was only his

father's death that made him realize that despite his father's faults, callousness, and brutality he was a man who had the courage for his conviction. Mukundan discovered that he was merely an extension of his father bereft of the much-needed bravery. Mukundan hid his insufficiencies by using his father's domineering methods as an excuse to explain his own weakness of character. Mukundan is portrayed as a timid man, who used his integrity as a facade to deflect attention from the fact that he was a failed man in his life. He was as selfish, insensitive, brutal, and incapable of loyalty or love as his father Achuthan Nair.

Nair also uses such nicknames as Powerhouse Ramakrishnan, BarberNanu and Village Crier, Pavitran. The characters in *The BetterMan* have a lesson for everyone. Mukundan learns that happiness cannot be had by being the cause of someone else's unhappiness. Bhasi learns that man cannot control and change another man's destiny. Man cannot play God. When the committee members of the community hall along with Mukundan's support, demand Bhasi's land, Bhasi feels cheated and experiences the pangs of an outsider. Then only he realizes the sorrow inflicted on women by the authoritarian males. When Mukundan refuses to stand by him, Bhasi feels helpless and pained-

How could you be so oblivious to my anguish? Could you really not see that you were building your dreams on the dust of my hopes? (TBM 328).

The above lines reflect the philosophy of life. Small doses of philosophy and insights delivered by Bhasi and Mukundan suggest the limitations of Man. The Realization dawns upon Bhasi that he does not possess extraordinary power as he had believed. He could not

control or heal Mukundan as he had thought. No matter how authoritative man becomes, he cannot dream to be at par with God. The powerlessness and futility of mankind is revealed through these lines.

The fundamental truth that he had learnt over the years was that affection openly given is never valued. Unlike other men of his age, he had thought he should never fall in love. He didn't want to experience hurt, anger, betrayal, anguish, sleepless nights, long empty hours -as an aftermath of the tumultuous emotion called love. Destiny had other designs for Bhasi, the parallel college lecturer who falls for Omana, a student. It was a one-sided adulation which he thought she enjoyed. On the contrary, she was already engaged to be married to her cousin, Sudhir settled in Dubai. The pain of losing her to someone else would have been bearable if she had left him his self-respect and not robbed him of his dignity, which she did by mocking him: I don't have to make a fool of you. You do it all by yourself. (TBM P. 102).

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