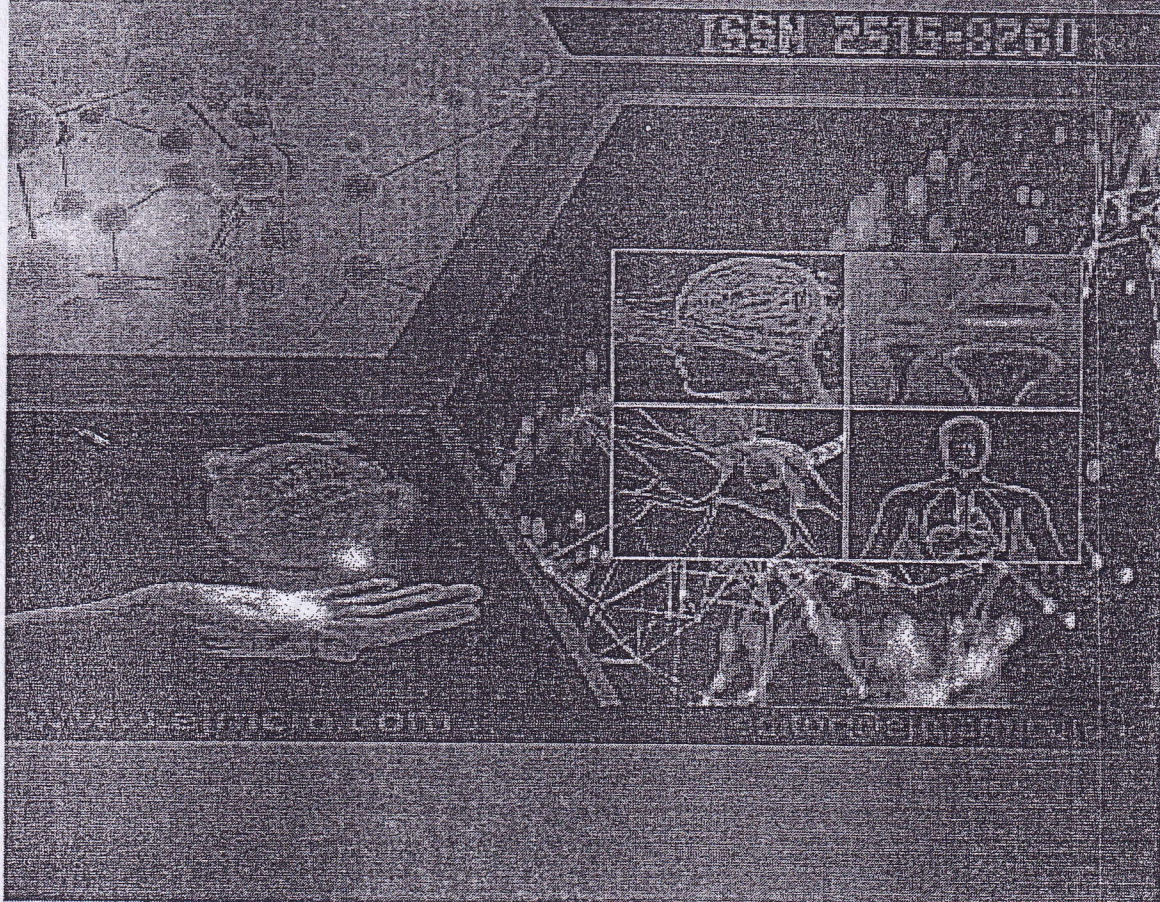




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CRITICAL READING OF ANITA NAIR'S 'THE BETTER MAN'

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Abstract - Man is not only made of flesh and bones but also of thoughts and feelings. These features constitute his both inner and outer personality. His life on earth is a continuous struggle for existence against all odd circumstances. In this struggle for survival, he has to fight not only with outer forces but with his own internal turbulent world of weaknesses which overpower his sense and action. Mythologies of all religions as well as factual histories are loaded with the stories of men who let the weaknesses of their individual character(s) rule them down. There are also stories of those who defeated their weaknesses with strong will and determination and emerged triumphant. Keeping this concern at centre Anita Nair has highlighted the characteristics of Kerala and the issues close to this state in her debut novel, 'The Better Man' (2000).

Keywords: Passionate, Introspective, Redemption.

'The Better Man' (2000), Anita Nair's debut novel not only established her as a writer of marvelous skills but secured for her a permanent place in the galaxy of modern Indian writers. The novel, published in ten countries, has been most appropriately hailed as "...finely balanced debut...[that] successfully explores undercurrents that run beneath relationships even in an idyll rural setting"¹. The novel has been variously described as compilation of stories reflecting the moral fibre of society, a statement of courage. It has also been estimated as 'an account of a man's growth, how he develops from being a man with selfish concern into a man with a wider concern which extends beyond himself.'²


The present paper is an attempt to critically evaluate thematic as well as stylistic features of Anita Nair's debut novel 'The Better Man'. The novel, set in contemporary India in a little fictitious village called Kaikurussi in the northern part of Kerala, is the passionate and introspective story of an elderly bachelor and retired government employee, Mukundan Nair. 'Anita Nair's imposing debut novel leads our agitated soul back to the primitive wisdom enshrined in love, the essence of one's being. The Better man is the journey of the soul, the story of a retired government officer, Mukundan Nair.'³ Through Mukundan, the protagonist, she explores how even the big ones surrender to their weaknesses. However, weakness can be defeated by strong will and determination. It has been successfully worked out through Mukundan's evolution from a timid creature into bold, courageous, befriended and beloved better man.

Characterization constitutes the real essence of all the novels of Anita Desai. This novel is thickly populated with myriad characters with sharp features, like Achutan Nair, 'One-screw Bhasi', Anjana, Power-house RamaKrishna, Meenakshi the Naxalite, etc. The novel begins with the monologue of Bhasi, one-screw-loose-Bhasi, who introduces a host of characters: Vishnu, the priest, Che Kutty the toddy seller, Shankar, the tea-wallah. The names assigned by Nair to the characters and the towns are typical of Kerala. Almost all the characters in the novel represent the essence of Kerala as temples, toddy-shops and tea-stalls form the life of Kerala. Keeping Mukundan at the centre the novelist unfolds the struggle in the lives of these characters in a lucid and refreshingly fresh style. 'Anita Nair is a mistress of Minutiae. She details every plant and pedestrian footprint, every urn and uruli in Kaikurussi, all the banter at the village tea shop. The blood of her characters course through the reader's vein, the heat and dust of their milieu is palpable, her plot has the reassuring rhythm of real life.'⁴

The main narrative moves round Mukundan, exploring his redemption from a timid creature to a better man. Mukundan, forced by circumstances to return to Kaikurussi, the village he was born in, had fled the village when he was a boy of eighteen to escape the tyranny of his domineering father, Achutam Nair.

5260




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Mukundan's return journey to his ancestral home, however, turns out nothing than coming face to face with his dead past, millions of grey shadows and ghosts of his dead ancestors, mostly his mother's ghost, haunting and tormenting him. Mukundan is a bad fit in the village. Soon he realizes that he has no role to play in the village. In fact, he discovers that what should have been his rightful place had been usurped by an upstart Power House Ramakrishnan. To make things worse, he is still afraid of his father. With Bhasi's help, Mukundan is able to overcome his latent fears and is a changed man, no longer afraid of his father. He regains his former state of mind. Mukundan falls in love with the married woman, Anjana. While Bhasi and Anjana rescue him from "the morass of the past", Mukundan decides to spend the rest of his life cocooned in that magical happiness. The change, however, turns out to be superficial. Mukundan is not satisfied with the happiness that he enjoys through his friendship with Bhasi and love with Anjana. He wants social acceptability in Kaikurissi. His greatest desire is to take his father's place in the village. He has been put on test when the richest and most powerful man of the village, Power House Ramakrishnan, decides to build a community hall in the village on Bhasi's piece of land. Any grateful man would have tried his best to save the man who had given him new life, at least for the sake of friendship. But when Bhasi turns to Mukundan to intervene on his behalf, Mukundan does nothing besides feeble objections and promises.

Mukundan is not only ungrateful but also hungry of recognition. He is completely swayed by Power House Ramakrishnan. Powerhouse Ramakrishnan represents Capitalist society. He is "a social climber, a status seeker, a snob and opportunist" (TBM 206). Mukundan easily succumbs to flattery agreeing to become a part of the community hall committee that Power House Ramakrishnan uses as his weapon to sweep over Mukundan. The man who once suffered of pain and anguish has become blind to the pain and suffering of Bhasi who had rescued him of lifetime fear and guilt. He leaves Bhasi almost heart broken. Mukundan decides to do nothing that would jeopardize his new standing in the village. He gives Bhasi final blow by bringing a cheque for his land and house and thus shares the responsibility to compel Bhasi to leave the village by supporting Power House Ramakrishnan in his plot to buy Bhasi's land to build a community hall.

Through Bhasi, another prominent character in the novel, Nair has exposed two contemporary aspects of Kerala state, unemployed masses of the hundred percent literate Kerala and exploitation of the working class people. Bhasi has a college degree in botany and a post-graduate degree in English language and literature. Despite his degrees he is a house-painter by profession. Bhasi, represents the working class who is exploited by the cultural elite of the village. He is shown subjected to wrongs by the powerful men and he is repeatedly exploited and defeated by the pressures of the economic system in which he lives. Nair also presents Bhasi as the healer and confidante to Mukundan. He plays a pivotal role in shaping the character of Mukundan in the novel. It is again Bhasi who plays the catalyst in making Mukundan evolve as a better man.

The characters in *The Better Man* have a lesson for everyone. Through Mukundan the novelist brings home the message that happiness cannot be had by being the cause of someone else's unhappiness. Bhasi has another message, that man cannot control and change another man's destiny. Man cannot play God.

Nair's female characters in the novel represent conventional and unconventional type of women. Anjana represents the unconventional type as she stakes her reputation and reconciles with Mukundan. Mukundan's well-being seems to be her primary concern. Para Kutty, mother of Mukundan, lived a lonely life till her death. She has been shown demonstrating various means of protest when the novel begins.

Valsala, wife of a schoolteacher, is materialistic by nature. She represents the womenfolk who indulge in frivolous expenses and displays of ostentation. Her extra-marital relation with Sridharan to satiate her carnal desires depicts sexual emancipation of women and the changing image of woman in a conservative middle-class family. Meenakshi, another female character, is shown driven by Marxist ideals. However, she and her group were not blood-thirsty. She preaches hate and anger but it means love and charity for all they cared. Through her attack on capitalism and Meenakshi's path Nair's depicts contradictory conditions of revolutionary peasantry. The other minor characters in *The Better Man* comprise of a Communist party



worker comrade Jayan, Haji Suleiman from the Masjid Committee, Abu Seth - neo gulf-returned native of Kaikurrassi.


Nair's *The Better Man* is autobiographical to a great extent. Kaikurrussi, an imaginary village in rural Kerala, is nothing but her town Mundakotukurussi and the characters that she has created are based on her observations.

To conclude various characters represent a particular section of people that reflect the social fabric of Kerala of contemporary times. Through the characters and the themes Nair has attempted to chronicle a village and the happenings of the small town in Kerala, the lifestyle, the beliefs, customs, and culture. With her wonder caliber as a writer she has really succeeded in her attempts. It has been justified by positive comments by critics after critics to the book.

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