



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



---

**ISSN 2278-9529**

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## Probing Autonomy in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*

**Dr. Dimple Dubey**

Guest Lecturer

Department of English & OEL

Dr. Hari Singh Gour, Central University,

Sagar (M.P.)

**Article History:** Submitted-31/07/2019, Revised-29/08/2019, Accepted-10/09/2019, Published-10/09/2019.

### **Abstract:**

This paper makes an effort to study the changing roles of women in Indian society by taking into consideration Anita Nair's 'The Better Man'. Nair as a novelist of Post-independent era has skillfully and effectively presented the predicaments of her women characters and how their search for an autonomy makes them acquire unimagined roles that transgress them out of their stereotypical gender roles and provides an opportunity to transcend their position in this male-dominated society. Nair has artistically given expression to their fears, their feelings, and their distress and has provided access to them to evolve as a complete human being.

**Keywords:** Autonomy, identity, patriarchy, gender role, defiance.

Colonialism and the concept of patriarchy are inseparable in feminist discourse as they emphasize a relationship of inequality and injustice. Patriarchal setup in societies like ours has a colonizing impact and although colonial masters have vanished from the colonized countries, the fruit of independence has obviously feasted only men where as women are still subjected to oppression and domination in variable forms. Feminist writers deal with gender issues and roles, female subjectivity, exploitation and oppression, the concept of being an "other" in a patriarchal society, the theme of subjugation right from the birth till death and clash between tradition and modernity. Women write to celebrate their womanhood, they sing women's dream and speak their bodies. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Mad Woman in the Attic* analyze the development of women's writing as their emergence from the shadow created/interpreted by men. It's a coming of age experience for the writer as a woman. They write "A woman writer is engaged at another level with assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those images of women inherited from male literature, especially the paradigmatic polarities of angels and monsters"(1979:5). The new age writers

however no more present such traditional image of woman whose submissiveness is considered her virtue but instead create such women characters who are strong individuals yet deeply rooted in their culture, thereby completely erasing the picture of weak, docile shadow of men. These fictional women characters have shattered the myth of subalternity that has haunted the postcolonial women's psyche for a long time. Anita Nair in her debut novel reveals a woman's capacity to assert her own rights and individuality in marriage and develop into a full-fledged woman of prospective as a human being. She deals with the concept of patriarchy with major emphasis on examining women's psyche and their lives within the context of South Indian family, representing women in their traditional roles but with an underlying message of how to have an assurance on one's own dreams and strive hard to fulfill the same.

Indian society particularly positions women within a community and pays close attention to the multiple roles played by and expected of them. Our society customarily defines a woman in relation to other and most frequently, in relation to her man. She struggles hard to define herself and achieve greater degree of autonomy, while continuing to hold fast to family ties, traditional codes of ethics, and even to myths of womanhood. Simone de Beauvoir's articulation of how patriarchy has ascribed a position for women would be particularly pertinent to discuss here: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential. He is the subject, he is the absolute, she is the Other." (1997:16) In her novel *The Better Man*, Anita Nair presents Paru Kutty, the mother of Mukundan Nair, the protagonist, as one such woman who is regarded as a need-fulfiller of a man, a producer of his heir and nothing else. Achuthan Nair, the father, had worked for the British Government and had gone to Burma while his wife was pregnant and returned when his son Mukundan was four years old. The long absence had made the child fearful of his father who was frightened enough even to recognize him as his father; Achuthan Nair had held his wife responsible for this and had shot angry looks at her and growled, "What have you done to him to turn him into a pathetic creature like this?" (69). Later Achuthan Nair gave up his job and returned to Kaikurussi and lived as "a man whose authority was not to be questioned" (70). He was a tyrant father and husband, always growling on his son and his wife and demeaning them for all their acts and duties. At the age of forty-nine he "discovered lust" and started an illicit relationship with Ammini and made her his mistress as, "She offered him her body to do with it as he pleased. In return she expected him to hand over the keys of the big house and make her its chatelaine" (74). "Mukundan's mother Paru Kutty waited in the silence of the big house with the ageing

cheriyammas. Too proud to show her agony and too frightened to stand up to him and demand to know what was going on" (74). When in the course of time the cheriyammas had dropped dead one by one, Achuthan Nair declared, "I'm tired of having to visit Ammini in her house. The whole village knows about Ammini. So I might well bring her here" (74). It was then for the first time that Paru Kutty "shrugged aside years of cowardice, squared her shoulders and said, "No" (74). She said, "I'm willing to live with the shame of your taking a mistress but I'm not going to let you flaunt how little I mean to you. I am your wife and I insist you treat me with the respect due to me" (74). Achuthan Nair sneered as his fingers bit into her upper arms, "And what if I don't? . . . Paru Kutty swallowed the pain and murmured through clenched teeth, Then it'll be over my dead body. For as long as I'm alive, I will decide who lives in this house and who doesn't" (74). "In all the years that he had been married to her, Achuthan Nair had never heard her use that tone with him. Like Ammini, his mistress, the whole village was awed by his moustache ends that curled in the air and his voice that boomed with authority. In their eyes timid and shy Paru Kutty had long ceased to be the rightful owner of all the property. Achuthan Nair, basking in their adulation, had forgotten it too, until Paru Kutty reminded him. And so in a fit of pique, he bought his mistress a piece of land directly opposite Paru Kutty's house and built a house there" (74-75). "For six months Paru kutty lived alone in the house surrounded by memories, ghosts, and an all-consuming desire to get even. It was as if she wanted revenge for the years of tyranny Achuthan Nair had subjected her to" (75).

Paru kutty makes an attempt to challenge and change the norms of patriarchy that disadvantages her, voluntarily defending and adhering to the terms of patriarchy by protesting against her husband. "But Paru Kutty was no general, she didn't have a strategy, a battle plan, And she suffered for it" (76). In explaining the hierarchy of women. In the Hindu hierarchy, women are not credited as being autonomous beings, but have to be under the rule of men. Paru Kutty had not widowed but she was no less than one, left all alone unfairly by her charlatan, matter of fact husband and she pleaded her son Mukundan to save her, "Take me with you son. I am so unhappy here" (31). Mukundan worked in an explosive factory in Bangalore and shared a room with a friend. He, "hesitated before he replied. His mother no longer tried to hide how terrified she was of his father. When he was a boy she had tried to shield him from Achuthan Nair's cruelty. She has tried to make him believe that tyranny was simply another, expression of love and concern, not any more" (31). Paru Kutty continued to suffer at the hands of her unashamed, tyrant yet authorial husband as "he regaled her with the tales of how Ammini was a real woman, responsive to his needs and understanding his

demands, unlike the cowering, weak, lifeless creature, he was married to” (78). “Then one morning, Paru Kutty the distressed soul, fell down the staircase and lay on her face in a pool of blood” (78). That was the end of a defiant, humiliated and an enslaved woman who chose defiance but failed to gain liberty.

In the novel, Anita Nair attempts to show how, in life, suppression and oppression do not always come in recognizable forms, but often under the guise of love, protection and assurance of security. The patriarchal system which was the pivot of societal framework and was meant for laying the very foundation for healthy human relationship became with time the main cause for a woman's infinite sufferance. She has tried to depict the results of such a system in all its myriad forms. Meenakshi, Mukundan's cousin, accepts the burden of a failed and devalued relationship and continues to perform her womanly obligations. Meenakshi, along with her mother used to stay at Mukundan's house; as a child, they played together, “learned to swim together, recited multiplication table and long poems in one breath . . . And then suddenly one day they were considered to be too old to spend so much time in each other's company. . . He was asked to put aside his short pants and switch to a mundu . . . She was forbidden to go wandering around the fields and cashew groves as she once used to in Mukundan's company. Put aside your books and fancy talk. It is time you learned to cook, her mother nagged” (53-54). When Mukundan first comes home after he was appointed as a lower division clerk in an explosive factory, he inquires about her from his mother who tells him that she had turned into a rebel and had incited a group of labourers against Achuthan Nair, the feudal landlord, the tyrant, the master of oppression. But in due course of time this rebellion abated and Meenakshi fell in love with Balan, a Kathakali dancer. They got married and soon after he went away with his troupe on a performance tour. She confided, “He wants me to travel with him . . . Mukundan, I'm finally going to escape this prison” (57).

But Balan never came back. He went to Europe and after returning, stayed back in Delhi. “There were no letters, no guilt money, and no attempts to keep up the pretense that they were still married. All Meenakshi had were fleeting memories of the days they had spent together and a child that was the result of the few passionate nights” (57-58). She rejected the sympathy as it offended her and so carved out a place for herself. She opened a crèche that supplemented her income and once her son Mani, grew up, she became a shopkeeper. “Once a week she travelled to the town and stocked her shop . . . Women wandered in for a box of matches and stayed all afternoon talking . . . Meenakshi listened to it all. Very seldom did she offer any advice . . . She knew if she kept them talking about themselves, they would

forget to ask her the question she dreaded the most; “Any news from him? . . . In time people forgot that she had ever been married or that her husband had abandoned her” (60).

It’s been often considered that man and woman are complementary to each other. Neither of them can claim any superiority over the other. But in reality women are often allocated a secondary role and their identity is hidden behind the mask of sacrifice and reliance. Even though Meenakshi manages to do everything single handedly, whether coping with questionable eyes of the people around her, or bringing up a son, earning a livelihood or giving away her dreams and aspirations of a preferable life beyond the horizon, the zeal for life within her had died. Suddenly one day after receiving a letter from Balan, she starts to rethink. A part of her wanted to forgive and revive the dead marriage. "To know once again the protective feel of a husband's arm thrown around her. To wake up in the morning and see him sleeping by her side. To lavish love and tenderness so that he would never leave her again. But there was another part of her that wanted to ignore the letter and punish him for all the years of loneliness he had caused her" (61-62). When Meenakshi meets him, he is a decrepit old man, with a hurt ego, disabled due to tuberculosis of the spine. He cannot dance anymore and so has been abandoned by other troupe mates. It is then he remembers that he has a wife. He pleads her to take him with her, disregarding all the suffering, agony, loneliness, and struggle that she had gone through all alone just expecting to seal the cracks of her much-broken heart and contemplate once again with the curse that fell upon her in the name of love and matrimony. “She was the one who would always need to be strong . . . They paired well, the frail spirited, meager man and the ample hearted, comely woman” (63).

Anita Nair attempts to unveil the reality of Indian women living in an orthodox society becoming habitual to their surroundings, of age-old narrow customs and traditions, that marriage is their destiny and their husbands are their masters. Nair has depicted marriage as a tyrannical institution for woman in this novel. Her characters assert their individuality and try to liberate themselves from the clutches of age-old conservative norms that have led society to be male- dominated and women to suffer and be victimized. Valsala, wife of the ageing school master Prabhakaran is persistently entangled in her daily household tasks, maintenance of the compound and watching television every evening. Her marriage does not appear to be the realization of a well cherished dream, but seems to have been resorted to because of lack of pleasures in her marital life. "Valsala had never known an awakening of her senses. Not once in her life had a rare and exotic flower blossomed in her yard, filling the air with its overpowering fragrance. Then one night the pala tree at her doorstep at last burst into flowers" (128). Valsala thought of the words her mother had said once when she was

young, that the scent of the pala flowers is the beloved fragrance of the Gandharvas who always look for virgins to seduce. They make the virgins their slaves and then no mortal can satisfy their sexual desires.

Valsala could not resist the temptation of her strange sensations aroused by the scent of the pala flowers and rubs a few of them just to feel possessed. For the first time after many years of her married life she believes that she needs a perfect man to satisfy her sensual pleasures. She falls in love with Sridharan, who appears in her life as a neighbor and then becomes her lover. "She delighted in the attention he paid her. He complimented her on the lushness of her garden, and she smiled secretly, knowing he meant the lushness of her body. He praised her cooking and told her that her husband must be the most envied man in the village . . . Most of all he made her feel like a woman. A desirable woman, And every moment Sridharan spent with her made her feel even more discontented" (130).

Valsala who was an attractive woman who drew attention wherever she went. Men took a second look at her and women eyed her stealthily, wondering of her secret beauty treatment that kept her hair so black and her skin so radiant. But regrettably, she was married to a morose and boring man who had little interest in her. He was a hostile man. Valsala had no more dreams and expectations from life. Living with this man she had become "a creature whose soul had been destroyed" (127), and people referred her as the "living dead" (127). But when she meets Sridharan she gets emotionally and physically involved and decides to be his mistress. She sets her heart on enjoying her life with Sridharan, as her *gandharva*. She becomes aware of the fact that every woman needs love, freedom, equality and sexual fulfillment. She stirs the entire society with her liberal views and attitude and puts forth the new issues of women's sexuality and gender. She justifies herself as, "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" (131). Valsala had never had a voluptuous involvement with her husband and that drove her more into discontentment and emptiness and she began to justify her lust for Sridharan. "He (her husband) never looked into her face or tried to fathom her desires. He was preoccupied with his body, his illness, the strain of keeping forty unruly boys under control all day . . . sleep was his only escape..." (131).

But despite her frustration with Prabhakaran, "There were all sorts of reasons why Valsala couldn't just abandon her old life and elope with Sridharan. There was the land she had slaved over and the house she was mistress of ... both of which were her husband's. Then there were the retirement benefits he would get when he retired . . . 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" (132-33). Thereafter, suddenly Prabhakaran went missing and was later found dead. Everyone sympathized with Valsala, a childless widow and she continued to maintain a stony silence that was mistaken for shock, Sridharan fled Kaikurussi. "A warrant was issued for his arrest, and the axe, clothes, and dismembered corpse were sent to the lab" (140). But when "the axe handle came up with a set of twin prints, Sridharan's and her's . . . She was no longer the poor widow but an evil creature who had killed her husband mercilessly" (132). It was revealed that she with Sridharan had murdered Prabhakaran master and his body had been abridged into twelve fragments. Valsala, however, does not feel guilty or woe for her act, since she always wanted to escape from her old-fashioned, morose married life and lead her life as she had dreamt. Anita Nair seems to portray Valsala emerging as the 'New Woman', who breaks the traditional consciousness built within our society since the male prejudiced outlook usually disregards the passions and aspirations of women folk and labels them as unnatural. Valsala breaks that taboo. The shift from the '*Pativrata*' image to that of the sexually emancipated woman certainly marks the emergence of a new clan i.e. Indian women who are coming out of their conservative shells and are ready to accept the sexual psychological realities of human life.

The novel also describes every individual's attempt to find a degree of inner peace and contentment in marriage, paradoxically in a patriarchal setup. It plays an extremely important role in the lives of women. A suitable marriage is the ultimate goal in a woman's life and is the most important responsibility of her parents as she has to fulfill the expectations of her family, her husband, and society as a whole. Although she may be well educated, she is a woman and woman in all ages remain soundless, proving just a standpoint between the privileged and the prejudiced.

Anjana, as portrayed by Anita Nair, is a woman who was brought up in a liberal atmosphere by her parents. She is happy in her world of independence which gives her a profound sense of self- fulfillment. But as she turns twenty-seven, she decides to resign herself to eternal spinsterhood making her parents anxious, as no suitable marriage proposal was coming about. But soon the proposal of Ravindran came, who worked for a pharmaceutical company as a medical representative. After a few days, the proposal was resolved and Anjana was relieved. "Her eyes danced, She let herself be a desirable woman once again" (224). She gets married and moves to Kozhikode. In the earlier days of her marriage, she tries a lot to impress Ravindran but fails. "She wanted him to feel that he had

made the right decision in choosing to wed her” (225). Anjana unintentionally but consciously imitates the perfect woman. But whenever she desired for a casual conversation, Ravindran felt irritated. He even condemns her style of cooking and continues to remain unbothered and indifferent. “She wished there was some way she could discover his likes and dislikes. All she wanted to do was please him” (227). She is eager to lead a healthy, happy life with him but it is more a dream for her to achieve. “Eight days of marriage had passed and was still unconsummated... Does he find me unattractive? She worried. But why would he have married me then? She rationalized” (227). And one night, “She saw him collapse on her even as she lay there bruised in spirit and body, unsaturated, and feeling strangely empty. Was this the ecstasy poets and romantic novels promised?” (227-28).

Anjana's marital status with Ravindran was marked by loneliness and improper communication. “Three months later he was still a stranger to her. A man she cooked and kept house for. A man who used her body when the impulse took him. There was little conversation between them and hardly any companionship” (228). Incidentally, four months after her marriage, Anjana's mother gets injured and she had to rush to nurse her. Ravindran accompanied her to her parent's home and insisted on Anjana staying at her parent's home while he is away for business. His frequent visits reduced as his business failed and he became a self-obsessed man. His consecutive shift of businesses and associated failures turned him into a selfish man, concerned only about himself and rarely did he think of this wife. “He possessed all the necessary attributes for success, he thought. An ability to see beyond the needs of the time. He was a go-getter. But his wife would have said differently of him: where is the memory for names and faces? Can you talk about anything at length, let alone start a conversation with a stranger? Can you see people as human beings and not as pawns to be moved around and used?” (231). The lack of communication and the growing 'silence' between them made their marital life grow unsteady and dismal. In a fit of hatred, he even violently attacks Anjana. “One morning she walked into her mother's kitchen wearing a palm imprint on her cheek. Her father and mother exchanged looks” (231). This was the first time when her father intruded and raised a voice against this terrifying act committed by his son-in-law: “when I gave you my daughter's hand in marriage, it was with the hope that you would love her. Cherish and protect her for the rest of her life. If all you intend to do is hurt her, and make her unhappy, then there is no need for such a relationship. My daughter can manage very well without a husband like you. If you ever hurt my daughter again, I'll throw you out of this house. Do you understand?” (232).

Ravindran did not hit her again but found a new way to express his anger. “He used her body with a brutality that scared her. Pushing, punching, pummeling. Some nights when he had finished with her, she wondered what heinous sin she was paying for” (232). Her parents were worried about her and so in order to save their daughter from this brutality, her father decided to buy her a teaching job. She tried to come out of her disastrous, loveless married life and realized the possibilities that could be made out to transit her life once again. She is filled with contentment now and though she had been subjugated and victimized she was no more a passive, silent sufferer. She never questioned her oppressor but was more concerned with getting on with her life and in finding her meaningful existence. She starts seeking a healthy relationship that allows her to be herself and exercise the degree of control over her life as an educated woman and that which she deserves. Anita Nair seems to strengthen the fact here that education definitely provides women the privilege to be aware of themselves, especially of their rights. An educated woman demands equality, freedom, and justice and attempts to bring about a radical change in her life. Anjana's emergence from her unsuccessful marriage, with the determination to live as a free individual, is an assertion of her personal freedom.

Anjana meets Mukundan, a soft, gentle person. She finds in him everything that she had been searching for in Ravindran. Although there was a gap of twenty-two years between them, they shared a trusted relationship and wanted to commit their love and their yearning for each other. Initially, Mukundan hesitates, “But you are a married woman”, and “I'm so much older than you” (244). She confides, “I have never ever felt like a married woman in all these years. I feel married when I am with you. In these past few weeks, you have given me more affection, shown me more consideration than my husband has in the last nine years of marriage. I'm going to speak to a lawyer and start divorce proceedings” (244). But Mukundan, who was a retired clerk, and had spent his youthful years being a weak, coward, hesitant man, afraid of his father Achuthan Nair (as a child and even as a retired son) all through his life, could not gather the courage to make his relationship with Anjana culminate without the recognition of his ailing father and the conservative set-up of Kaikurussi. Only after a long struggle, Mukundan finally decides to choose Anjana for his life rather than the societal set-up that was preying upon him. He takes the decision and makes up his mind to start a new life with Anjana and share love, care, affection, and understanding.

Anita Nair has thereupon artistically woven her female characters in this novel and has given the external and internal identity to all the characters in a psychological way. She does so by establishing and arriving at the evident and hidden means of women's bondage en

route by age-old principles, stereotypes and limited choices. She also focuses on the approaches of re-adjustments her female characters commence in order to create an identity of their own. Although some characters fail to achieve their desired goal, yet their struggle can in no way be taken for granted. The customary experience for all the female characters discussed in this novel have felt disgust, loneliness, struggle, shame, humiliation and deep agony in their lives, but all the characters did not respond or retaliate in the same mode. Paru Kutty, was uneducated, submissive and passive and could not raise her voice or protest against the oppression and finally in distress ended her life. Meenakshi after bearing all the distress and humiliation in the name of marriage gathers up the courage to lead her life on her own. She finds herself a respectable job of a matron of a hostel for working women in Thrissur. She resolves to leave her handicapped husband. She says to Mukundan, "Haven't I given them the best years of my life? There is nothing left of me to give anymore. . . For so long now, I have been the one coping and managing... I am tired of being distilled" (249). When she bid farewell, Mukundan remembered the time when (in their early youth they had sought a change in their lives atop a mountain and Meenakshi had asked, "Do you think that life will be different elsewhere?" Mukundan had replied thoughtfully, "I don't know, But it must be infinitely preferable to this" (252). Meenakshi had replied in return, "I guess we will never know until we leave and find out for ourselves" . . . "She stood up. It was time to go" (252). Meenakshi had chosen to abandon the disgust and suffering she was put to by others but Valsala chose a novel and a rather ghastly and roguish mode of escaping from her unfulfilling and discomfiting married life. However, it is only with the character of Anjana, that Anita Nair has skillfully brought forth the justifying way of asserting one's identity by acquiring a positive attitude towards life, work, financial independence, and going ahead in life with hope and optimism, proving that women can achieve autonomy.

### **Works Cited:**

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997).

Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. *The Mad Woman in the Attic : The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth - Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven : Yale University Press, 1979.

Nair, Anita. *The Better Man*, Penguin Books: New Delhi, 1999.