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## Depiction of the Dispossessed Women Characters in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*

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### **Abstract:**

My article focuses on various themes like women's issues, patriarchal pressures, suppressions, frustrations and even violations against the norms of the society with reference to the characters of Anita Nair's *The Better Man*. In *The Better Man* Nair depicts the inner characters of woman with all its conflicts and contradictions. Her novels portray the miserable plight of the contemporary middle-class Indian woman and also analyzes how their lot has not even changed much in the today's world. *The Better Man* unveils the reality of Indian women who are still deprived of their rights in love and marriage. Anita Nair provides perfect examples of victimized women in a patriarchal system. Throughout the story there is an underlying message about how to have assurance on one's own dreams and strive hard to fulfill the same.

**Keywords:** Self alienation and depression, frustration and search for identity.

### **Introduction:**

Anita Nair's debut novel *The Better Man* is regarded as a novel of great promise and that established Nair as "a fine writer with a great sense of character, vivid knowledge of South Indian culture and an eye for telling detail." In *The Better Man* Nair depicts the inner characters of woman with all its conflicts and contradictions, with authenticity and truthfulness. Through these characters Anita Nair shows how women struggle for their existence and realizes that the time has come that they should stop suffering in silence. Her novels portray the miserable plight of the contemporary middle-class Indian woman and also analyzes how their lot has not even changed much in the today's world. Anita Nair has made a bold attempt at giving a voice to the

disappointments and frustrations of women despite her vehement denial of being a feminist. As Sheela Rani Khare says:

*Feminism emerged as a worldwide movement to secure women's rights on the one hand and love, respect, sympathy and understanding from males on the other. It focused on women's struggle for recognition and survival and made them realize that the time has come when they should stop suffering silently in helplessness (177).*

It is an undeniable fact that women have not only been denied existence as complete human beings, physically and mentally but also they are not provided with an opportunity to express their feelings, their fears and their distress. Nair primarily focuses on the psychological exploration of inner mind of Indian women in Indian novels in English. *The Better Man* unveils the reality of Indian women who are still deprived of their rights in love and marriage.

Among the women characters of the novel the fainthearted one is Parukutty, mother of Mukundan. Mukundan's mother is said to have fallen down from the steps and died but there is also an indication that was probably done by her own husband, who strangled her for his concubine, Ammini. Parukutty is described as a "*cowering, weak, lifeless creature*" (TBM 78) by her dominating husband Achuthan Nair. She was afraid of her husband.

She always supports and tries to protect Mukundan even though she never has the strength to protect her son from the harsh treatment of her husband. Yet the grown up Mukundan hardly understands the plight of his mother and always finds some excuses to dissuade her from accompanying to his work place. In fact unlike Parukutty he cannot free himself from the trepidation he feels for Achuthan Nair, and so he is afraid to wound him by acting against his will. Thus the bleakness of Parukutty's life is further vitiated by her son's negligence. She pleads her son: "*Take me with you, son. I am so unhappy here*" (TBM 31). Even when she has a family which consists of a dominating husband and a cringing son, she feels loneliness.

To add to her woes, her husband takes on a mistress. She vehemently protests and refuses to allow the mistress to enter her house. She says: "*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*" (TBM 74). However Achuthan Nair adds insult to injury by building a house for his mistress near his house.

She lives in the house with the ageing *cheriyammas* (aunts) for company. Thereafter she openly expresses her disgust for Achuthan Nair which she has been suppressing for years. She begins to

assert her identity by provoking her husband's fury by dumping outside the house the entire paddy which is not her part, outside his house. She even dares to invite her cousin Devayani, with whom Achuthan Nair had forbidden her to have any contact. She replaces the almond tree that her husband had planted with a champakam sapling. As the novelist says: "*But it blooms only after her death. And in an ironic twist of fate, it was into Ammini's house that the fragrance of flowers wafted every time the breeze blew*" (TBM 77). She leaves the few remaining things of her husband in the house untouched. By demonstrating various means of protests she lived a lonely life till her death. As Sasibala states:

*Indian Literature of the earlier era had depicted woman as one who is docile, self sacrificing, the embodiment of selfless love and a veritable monument of patience, ever willing to suffer. Such virtues are highlighted as the virtues of womanhood, the virtues of pathivratha (122).*

Parukutty lived as a voiceless creature contrast to her husband's dominating voice. Through the character of Parukutty, Anita Nair portrays the picture of a woman who has been victimized by the male dominated society.

After Parukutty, Anita Nair presents more victims in order to intensify the victim position. She brings in the episode of Meenakshi. She is Mukundan's childhood friend. In the beginning both Meenakshi and Mukundan were close friends, they know each other's bodies and minds as well as they know their own. Later when Meenakshi becomes a woman, she was not allowed to ramble along with him. Then the lives changed. Mukundan got a job in Trichy and when he visited for the first time after he secured a job he could nowhere else find Meenakshi. When he inquired about Meenakshi to his mother, Achuthan Nair replies that she had troubled him a lot more than ten elephants can harm him.

*Meenakshi had become a Naxalite. Armed with books on revolutions and driven by the mythical powers of Stalin and Lenin, Meenakshi had pledged to cleanse the earth of bourgeois vermin. And her first target of attack was Achuthan Nair – Mukundan's father, her uncle. Feudal landlord. Tyrant. Master of oppression. She and her group incited the labourers to rebel. When that didn't work, haystacks were set ablaze; cows let loose in ready-to-be harvested paddy fields and irrigation ditches gutted with mud. To them Achutan was the system, and these were some ways of upsetting what he represented (TBM 56).*

Meenakshi falls in love with a kathakali dancer, Balan. She marries him. She considers this marriage as a means to escape from the sleepy village, Kaikurussi. After some days of their married life, Balan goes to Europe with his troupe. But he never comes back. As a result of their passionate nights she gives birth to a child. Out of her loneliness, she emerges as a stronger woman. She declines the compassion of her relatives and neighbours.

*Meenakshi stonily rejected the sympathy of aunts, cousins and neighbours because she realized that it was self-congratulatory. When people spoke to her about how best to deal with an errant husband, she knew they did so with a gladness of knowledge that no such trauma would visit their own lives*(TBM 58).

Being more educated than any other women in kaikurussi, she takes care of her child by running a crèche herself. She runs the crèche until her son, Mani is old enough to go to school. Then she gives it up and becomes a shopkeeper and starts a new life. She withstands the shock, humiliation and the pain of desertion. Education gave her the courage to mount above the frustrations and humiliations.

There is a streak of steel within her when she takes the toughest decision to pardon her husband and look after him. As Meenakshi says: "He fell ill with Tuberculosis of the spine. He cannot dance anymore and when they abandoned him, he remembered that I existed" (TBM 61). Her reaction to his request shows her attitude:

*A part of her wanted to rush to his side. 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* (TBM 62).

Meenakshi discovered the meaning of life in her journey. Through her life she exemplifies that, victory is not in the subjection and destruction of male, rather in bringing him to see the indispensability of each other's space in their lives.

The next character in this novel is Valsala. She is a bored housewife: "*Just another housewife enmeshed in her daily chores, the up keep of the compound, and watching television every evening. There were no surprises in her life*"(TBM 128). Valasala is the wife of Prabhakaran master who is twelve years older to her and has lost most of his hair and teeth. She is a beautiful women with a good complexion. As Anita Nair remarks:

*A lusciously pump woman with a blooming complexion and a head of jet-black curly hair, she attracted attention wherever she went. Men craned their necks to take a second look at her and women eyed her surreptitiously, wondering what secret beauty treatment she used to keep her hair so black and her skin so radiant....Each syllable bore the hollowness of emptiness, a blackness that matched her opaque eyes until he began to wonder if she is under some special spell and was what people referred to as ' the living dead'. A creature whose soul had been*

*destroyed by the Odiyan's powerful magic and yet continued to go through the motions of life till one day some trivial illness caused her to drop head.*(TBM 126)

Valsala is unhappy with her ageing school master, Prabhakaran who prefers “*Kanji to a proper meal of rice, curry and fish. Belching, fasting, and forever complaining about the vagaries of his digestive system*”(TBM 130). There were no wonderments in her life. She leads a colourless life. Even the coconut, cashew and pepper grow in her garden has ceased to fill her with marvel. Like her, they also plainly followed the routine nature by just going behind the track of nature and yielded revenue in quantity to their numbers. Valsala feels like a caged bird and she sees her house like a prison, “*the house that had held her captive for the last 23 years*”(TBM 130). Marriage is the patriarchal weapon that finalizes the complete subversion and social obliteration of woman.

She had never known an awakening of her senses. She wants to enjoy life. She demands passion but her husband does not pay any attention to her desires. So: “*It was inevitable that Sridharan and Valsala become lovers*” (TBM 132). She falls in love with Sridharan, who first appears in her life as a neighbour and then becomes her lover. Soon after, guided by her own conscience, she decides to free herself from the traditional bond of marriage and she develops the clandestine affair with Sridharan. Since Prabhakaran master went to school they enjoyed open-handed freedom emotionally and physically. She sets her hearts on enjoying her life with Sridharan, as her *gandharva*. In spite of her dissatisfaction with her spouse, she decides to remain with him for the sake of material gain because of the following reasons:

*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 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* (TBM 133). She is discontented with her married life and like every woman she needs the tonic of freedom, equality and sex. But she is also certain, that it is quite unacceptable from the hostile men. As she says:

*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.*(TBM 130)

When a woman gets to be dissatisfied, the result is that she rebels against the existing system. She was not bothered about her husband's complaints regarding his indigestion. “*She revived old recipes and experimented with new ones she found in the women's magazines. She speckled her cooking with spices... The house was scented with the richness of excess. Of craving being satiated. Of forgotten desires blossoming*” (TBM 132).

All of a sudden Prabhakaran master's missing was reported and later found dead. Now the police questions Valsala about the death of her husband. 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 everyone. But everything turned upside down, when her involvement is revealed in the murder of her husband, Prabhakaran master. It is reported as follows: "*brutally killed the school teacher in his bed on the night of 14 July at Kaikurussi village. The body was then dismembered and buried 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 Prabhakaran Master came to light*"(TBM 143).The police discovered the crime and suddenly Valsala "*was no longer the poor widow but an evil creature who had killed her husband mercilessly*" (TBM 140).

As Keith May says, "*A New woman was dissatisfied with ordinary society and was reluctant to become or to remain a mere wife*" (105).Valsala practices her own feminism by the new morality. Valsala tries to achieve synchronization in her life but against the traditional manner, by her own way.When she resolves her inner conflicts, she is able to conquer her self-identity. Through the character of Valsala, Anita Nair sets forth the 21<sup>st</sup> century woman, for whom sets a new kind of religion. She throws light on female soul and psyche. Novelist unfolds the fact that a woman should be treated as a human, on and all agrees that equality is our birthright. So a woman also looks forward to the same.

The next character is Anjana, an unhappy woman married to a monster who attacks her physically and mentally. She feels *Unloved, unwanted, unfulfilled. Long in the tooth, with sunken cheeks and vacant eyes*"(TBM 223).She is not able to find a reciprocal involvement in her marriage. She is shocked at her husband's indifference.

Even after three months he remains as "*a man who used her body when impulse took him. There was little conversation between them and hardly companionship*"(TBM 228). Whenever Anjana is ready for a conversation, Ravindran feels exasperated and leaves the place. She longs for love and freedom, but it ends in failure. This "Silence" makes their marital life grows disastrous. The couples live together under the same roof but they are separated by emptiness.

Ravindran is an unsuccessful businessman and this makes him violent. For his lack of confidence he violently attacked anjana. Ravindran's cruel activity to his wife proves that cruelty to a woman is an eternal manifestation in man's life.On watching this terrifying behavior, Anjana's father raised his voice against him,

*"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 made her unhappy, then there is no need for such a relationship. My daughter can manage very well without a husband like you"*(TBM 232).

Her father finds a suitable teacher job to save his daughter from the brutality of her husband. She enjoyed her job and comes out of her married life which she considers it as a disaster. she comes to realize that life can always be made possible. Now, Anjana becomes a mature woman. The novel traces the growth of the character from weakness to maturity.

The relationship between Anjana and her husband exposes the vicious face of patriarchal society where a women face sufferings and harassment. Anjana's teaching job relocate her life on a different plane. She decides to come out of the nest. Education gives her the courage. She evolves herself from all the bitterness linked up with invisible chains of patriarchal pressure. Education gives her the privilege to become herself and her rights. She shapes out a new lane for herself when her identity was, crushed by her husband.

After the death of Anjana's parents: *"She gave away her colorful sarees and took to wearing starched cottons in shades as insipid and dull as her life. She locked up all her jewellery in a safe deposit box in the bank and swept all her fripperies away into the waste basket"*(TBM 234).

Anjana's emerges from her unsuccessful marriage, with the determination to live as a free individual. She meets mukundan and falls in love with him. In mukundan's company, she realizes that she has to free herself from her unhappy married life. When Anjana tells her love to mukundan, he said,

*"Anjana", Mukundan said, 'you must listen to me. It knows you think I am a good man a gentle man. Someone you can depend on completely. I don't know if I am that man you make me out to be. My mother begged me to rescue her and take her away. But I didn't. It was afraid of my father, and so I made excuses. If I had done as she asked me, perhaps she might be still alive. That is the kind of man I am. A weak and undependable creature. Do you want to be part of such a man's life?' But she loved Mukundan and replied "All of us have our weakness, but we seldom have the courage to accept them. Or even declare it as you have done now. To me, that makes you braver than anyone else. I love you. My love tells me that this right for me?"* (TBM 244,245)

Meeting Mukundan does bring a ray of hope which proves to be short lived, as he is more concerned about his reputation and position in the village affairs. She again got disappointed when Mukundan denied to accept her before the society but this time she becomes so positive and find her own way to live her life.

Nevertheless, when Mukundan comes back realizing his mistake, she accepts him. . Towards the end of the novel, we find Mukundan visits Anjana and pleaded him to forgive his trespasses and accept him again. Anjana warns him of the consequences, *"The Villagers won't approve of it. Or me. You will be kicked out of the committee. They will ostracize you. You won't be invited to anyone's wedding or housewarming or be included in any of the village's activities"*(TBM 355).

Generally, there are two types of roles played by women characters in Indian fiction: conventional and unconventional. Both the types become the objects of sufferings. According to BalaKoothandaraman, *"The unconventional are seen to suffer for their violation of accepted norms of society, or for questioning them..."*. Anjana plays the role of the unconventional where she stakes her fame and reconciles with Mukundan.



## Conclusion

Anita Nair provides perfect examples of victimized women in a patriarchal system. Throughout the story there is an underlying message about how to have assurance on one's own dreams and strive hard to fulfill the same. All these women characters struggle under suppression and they try to overcome from their problems. The characters in this novel are oppressed on the grounds of gender by the patriarchal system which is prevalent in the society.

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