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## **Surpassing Feminine Anxiety: An analysis of Anita Nair's *The Better Man***

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### **Abstract:**

The present research paper states the challenging and perplexing life situations of the women characters in the novel 'The Better Man'. They have to embrace the role of traditional housewives. In the name of tradition and culture, men continue to rule over the lives of women. Women too continue to be dominated for the sake of family and children. But women like Valsala and Anjana in the novel 'The Better Man' are New Women who give more preference to their inner desire. They do not think much about the patriarchal society. The novel is an exploration of women's psyche and focuses on the priorities of women in the novel. The novel is a perfect specimen of Anita Nair as a feminist writer who reveals the passionate and reasonable feelings of women through her protagonists.

**Keywords: Patriarchal, New Women, Perplexing, Love, Oppression, Anxiety**

The life of a woman is often filled with chaos, angst and uncertainties because of the gender discrimination she has to undergo throughout her life. This issue of gender discrimination has occupied an important place in literature. The gender roles have been assigned by the society. Manliness is associated with boldness, intelligence, cleverness and dominance, whereas femininity is associated with meekness, submissiveness, humbleness and conservativeness. These social and tradition stereotypes have widened the biological differences between the sexes. These differences have created the feeling of fear and anxieties among women. The condition of women has attracted the attention of many social workers and writers. Therefore, the issue of gender discrimination and its adverse effects on women psyche has been greatly discussed in literature.

The novels of Anita Nair present the mental anxiety, misery and remedy in the life of her women characters. Her novels are the best example of fundamental social commitment. In order to search for their true selves and out of the social uncertainties, most of her characters break away from the traditional, spiritual and communal codes to salvage themselves. In *The Better Man*, *Ladies Coupe* and *Mistress*, Anita Nair has gone beyond their prescribed gender roles. She has depicted male and female sexes in *The Better Man* transcending their gender endorsed mannerisms. The present paper deals with the efforts put by the women characters in *The Better Man* to find their individuality as seen in the works of Anita Nair.

Anita Nair writes with great energy and creates amazing works. Like Deshpande, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, she has projected the inner topography of her female characters. She has used the stream of consciousness technique in her novels by presenting the nostalgic feelings of the characters. Anita Nair has presented women in her novels that belong to every strata of life. *The Better Man* is the life story of Mukundan, his friend Bhasi, his mother; Parukutty, his childhood friend; Meenakshi and his lover; Anjana. Though the protagonist of the novel is a male character Mukundan, and all other characters and their life stories revolves around Mukundan but in the present research paper the attention is on the female characters. Isolation and seclusion is the major theme of the novel. Women characters Valsala, Anjana and Parukutty are presented as New Women who tried their best to keep their traditional roles intact but their insecurities and anxieties help them to come out and speak up for their needs and hidden desires. In the beginning they all are dutiful housewives trapped in by the patriarchy. As Clara Nubile has put in her words:

All these women are deeply affected by their useless and unlucky married lives that had reduced them to creatures devoid of dreams and vitality. These heroines are entrapped in the inescapable cage of the “woman-wife-mother” model which still haunts contemporary Indian society. (Nubile 59)

The character of Valsala in *The Better Man* is depicted as a woman who follow her instincts and her inner desires rather than following the traditional role of a wife blindly. She is the wife of Prabhakaran, an elderly schoolmaster. Valsala doesn't find him suitable and is not happy with him. Following her instincts, she falls in love with another man Sridharan and develops her relationship with him which according to the society is an illicit relationship. According to S. Suganya, “She attains a near-exemplary level of female autonomy. For the first time after many years of her married life she believes that she needs a perfect man to satisfy her sensual pleasures.” (Suganya 231). She is presented as a bold woman by Nair who has her own ways to live life. She has changed the age old parameters and bounds and justifies her decision. “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”. (Nair 131). Valsala is satisfied both mentally and physically with her love affair. She doesn't have any pang of guilt in her mind and feels gratified. She breaks away all the mental and biological barriers in a woman's life. Her way to achieve freedom and identity may be criticized because she has adopted the

entirely wrong path and because of her extra marital affair, she and her boyfriend has murdered her husband. This shows she has broken the tradition patterns and goes to the extreme in order to achieve and fulfill the inner desire which otherwise is a taboo in our traditional society.

Another woman character that Nair has presented reasonably is Anjana, in the novel *The Better Man*. She has been brought up by her parents very lovingly. She got married to Ravindran at the age of twenty seven and her marriage puts an end to her cherished freedom. She doesn't get her rights as a wife. Though she tries to save her relationship by behaving like a conventional wife as expected in Indian society, but her husband treats her like trash and there is no conversation between them. As Prof. Sunita Verma states, "Anjana consciously or unintentionally imitates the perfect woman because of her conventional upbringing." (Verma and Rana 136). All her dreams and longings of a married life get smashed. The disturbed life makes her hate everything around her. The distances grow all the more when once Anjana goes to look after her mother. Neither has she tried to return in the disturbing relationship with her husband nor has any effort been made by Ravindran. Her fear and insecurity in her relationship with her husband, doesn't let her go back to him because of which she decides to live alone by surpassing all her anxieties. Therefore, the distances between them widen the gap between them and their married life becomes gloomier. Anjana's father unlike other traditional fathers shows his concern by saying:

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. (Nair 232)

Her father helps Anjana to find a good teaching job. Now she enjoys her newly found interests in teaching and reading books. Anjana gives her life a new start and realizes the potential a woman has in her. A woman doesn't necessarily need the support of a man for leading a happy life. Akhila too has achieved this serenity by the end in *Ladies Coupe*. But Anjana tries to be the part of someone's life again though by this time she is mature enough to take her decisions correctly and boldly. She falls in love with Mukundan. Mukundan accepts all his weaknesses a person is likely to have, in front of Anjana. She accepts him with his shortcomings and takes his confession as a mark of sheer boldness. She gives a new chance to her life by choosing Mukundan and feels optimistic and hopeful now. She doesn't fear the society and its marginalized taboos imposed upon women to seize their freedom. She chooses to be called as a mistress for her contentment rather than being called an impeccable wife devoid of any flaws. She chooses not to suppress her intrinsic needs and desires as a woman. By portraying the character of Anjana, Nair has represented the changing times which has brought change in the thinking of the women around the world. As k. Bhuvanewari has stated, "Anjana's positive attitude towards life, work financial independence, and self-identity helps her to go ahead in her life with hope and optimism." (Bhuvanewari 78). The world and the people around can keep the

deaf ear to the needs of women but the attitude of women is changing day by day. They are learning to fight and to challenge the world. They do not fear the consequences they have to face once they go astray the path. They have learnt to carve a niche for themselves and are able to find the untrodden roads. Similarly in *The Pakistani Bride* and *Ice-Candy Man*, Bapsi Sidhwa has presented women who can fight for themselves and don't follow the traditional submissive attitude of women. Nair has also presented the concept of 'New Woman' in her novels like *Ladies Coupe* and *Mistress*. Shashi Deshpande has also presented women like Urmi in *The Binding Vine* who has her own parameters to live life freely.

Nair has defined the concept of New Woman in her novel which proves that education and financial independence can never stop a woman to set her own rules to live life. But at the same time Nair, has focused on the decorum of the tradition values. Values and chances that one has to give to the relationships in order to save them are also cherished. The women in the past silently accepted their fate. The only destiny of their life was to get married and have children and then to live for them for the entire life. A woman's life revolves around her children as depicted by Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel *The Crow Eaters*. Sidhwa has portrayed Putli as a traditional wife and a mother with a mindset that she is happy and complete when she is surrounded by her relatives, children and the most importantly by her husband. The concept of Imperceptible Subordination and the confined consciousness is aptly justified by Sidhwa in *The Crow Eaters*. Similarly, Nair has presented the emotional and mental disparities of a woman's life in a patriarchal society. She is bound to be in a relation called marriage. "Indian woman's identity is usually connected to and defined by society and cultural norms of a patriarchal familial code. Her identity and space is defined within the parameters of her social relationship to men" (Vasanthakumari 114)

Another woman character that Nair has presented in *The Better Man* is the mother of Mukundan, Parukutty. She is the one who has been consumed by her own loneliness. Like all other typical mothers she loves and cares for her child very much and silently suffers the pain brutality inflicted upon her by her husband. In other words she is a silent sufferer. She and her son Mukundan whom she loves the most are treated badly by her husband and she doesn't have the courage to dissent his behaviour. She has her own family but still feels lonely. Her husband Achuthan Nair goes to Burma leaving her alone on the pretext of her frequent complaints about health. He doesn't give a second thought to his decision of leaving three months pregnant wife behind. Only once she gets the courage to retaliate when her husband decides to bring his mistress to live with them. She protests and 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." (Nair 74). She gets the courage to speak out of her terror to lose her position as a wife. Her anxieties and uncertain fear helps her to surpass every fear. Her husband made a new house for his mistress which is again an insult on her part. It shows her subordinate position as a wife. She feels helpless and lonely among the elderly women

of the house. She tries to face her husband and fights for her rights being a wife but she fails and dies at the end. It is ironic that out of protest the almond tree which she replaces with a flower sapling blooms after her death and its fragrance floats in Ammini's (mistress of Achuthan Nair) house when the breeze blows. (Nair 77). She is the woman with no desires, and the only desire she has is to get the love of her husband in which she fails miserably.

Meenakshi, Mukundan's cousin and friend, is another woman character that loses herself in the process of self-discovery like Radha in *Mistress* has lost herself under the same process. She feels her life is like a bird in a cage. She wants to free herself from the patriarchal bounds of the society. She becomes a Naxalite after which she falls in love with Balan, a Kathakali dancer. He once goes to Europe with his Kathakali troupe; comes back and settles in Delhi as a famous Kathakali teacher. He never looks back and Meenakshi keeps on waiting for him. She is left with nothing except for his memories and their child. She grows old with time. She spends a lonesome life with no one around to talk to. In old age, she receives a letter from Balan who wants her to see him at least once. A part of her conscience wants her to go to her husband whereas another side wants to punish him. But she decides to visit him once and startles to see a crumbling old man who suffers from tuberculosis of the spine. "He couldn't dance anymore and when they abandoned him, he remembered that I existed", Meenakshi tells Mukundan. (Nair 61) It's strange that Meenakshi takes him along with her and looks after him for his remaining life.

Anita Nair has proved her deep sensibility and understanding of the Indian doctrinal structure. She, as a profound observer of the society has discussed the intact ideology that controls the life of the women and works behind to change the perspective of women. Patriarchal society has contrived the lives of women. The biological and the cultural discrimination have given particular patterns to the lives of women that leads to imperceptible subordination. The psyche of the women is controlled soundly by the existing myths, culture and religion. They hardly ever feel the discrimination against them and accept everything as the natural processions in their lives. Simone de Beauvoir also agrees to the fact that her childhood had been nurtured by the fake myths commenced by men. Anita Nair's women characters in *The Better Man* are submissive. They are perfect housewives, especially Mukundan's mother. In the words of Clara Nubile, "In the better man women characters are marginal and they often resemble the obedient and passive Indian woman-wife, thus reiterating the literary prototype of the *pativrata* woman – the husband worshipper and self-sacrificing wife." (Nubile 58). Women are unable to realize the treachery of men and the suppression contrived against them. The patriarchal beliefs and their acceptance have made women ignorant about their individuality. The dogmatic thought process has given rise to such kind of ideology.

### **Conclusion:**

Almost all the women characters in the novel *The Better Man* indulge in relationship outside the sacredness of marriage. As stated by Dr. Kajal Thakur, "Man-woman relationship

outside marriage does not find a social consent especially in Indian Society.” (Thakur 31). But they find solace and security in their new relationships. They follow the desires of heart and do not give importance to the hollow norms of the society. Even the suppressed woman like Parukutty, gets the courage to speak out in front of her tyrannical husband when she finds her position as an individual and as a wife in danger. They all search for happiness which is essential to live life. Their uncertainties and fear for their position give them courage to triumph over patriarchy.

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