



Book Review on Anitha Nair's The Better Man

Saraswathy.S.

Asst. Prof. (Jr.), SSL, VIT University, Vellore

Dr. R. L. N Raju.

Associate Professor, SSL, VIT University, Vellore

KEYWORDS

Introduction

The *Better Man* is a well-recognised work from the author of *Ladies Coupe*, Anita Nair. She is one of the most distinguished writers from Kerala. She was working as the creative director of an advertising agency in Bangalore when she wrote her first book, a collection of short stories called *Satyr of the Subway*, which she sold to Har-Anand Press. The book won her a fellowship from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Her other well-known fictions include, *Mistress*, *Lessons In Forgetting*, *Cut Like Wound*, *Idris Keeper Of The Light*. A bestselling author of fiction and poetry, Nair's novels *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe* have been translated into 21 languages. Nair's second book was published by Penguin India, and was the first book by an Indian author to be published by Picador USA.

Plot

Anita's first published novel, *The Better Man* was set in contemporary India in a little fictitious village called Kaikurussi in the northern part of Kerala. This region was once known as Malabar during the British regime. Kaikurussi, the sleepy village is in a little hollow surrounded by several hills. It has nothing there that would make any one come looking for it. It is neither the birthplace of any great personality nor a movement. No miracles have ever happened there. In fact, nothing of significance ever happens there to anyone. There is not even a road running through Kaikurussi or a river flowing alongside it. But the writer made Kaikurussi to be remembered by all her readers and her characters are not just characters to be read and forgotten but real life people who remained forever in the minds of the readers. The novel is a fascinating exploration of the under currents that run beneath a seemingly idyllic rural existence. Mukundan, the central character who is a retired government employee, has been forced to return to his village which he fled when he was eighteen. Back in his ancestral home, he is tormented by the memories of his dead mother, Paru Kutty. The story moves around Mukundan and his friend, Bhasi. It is through their friendship Mukundan revived him and came out as a better man in all sense.

If the novel is looked deeper inside it is understood that Mukundan made use of all his opportunities to portray him as a recognised man in the town. To attain this he even despises his friendship with Bhasi and his love, Anchana.

Paru Kutty, a symbol of Indian woman in a typical Indian society. She was tortured by his domineering father Achuthan Nair who left her for his concubine. "With humour, wisdom, and a keen understanding of human frailty, Anita Nair has written a playful and moving account of the redemptive power of friendship." (http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/109730.The_Better_Man) The characterization is another element worth mentioning, considering this book, unlike a lot of Nair's works, has male lead characters.

Themes

the characters in the novel live in their memories. Ironically no one has any cherish able memory; in contrast, all are haunted by it. Memory plays a predominant note in a personal narrative by this victim of depression, Mukundan. He, every now and then meditates his past and his bitter memories pull him out of his comfort zone into an illusionary world where everything scared him, even the very sight of her mother's portrait.

He remained in the guilt of his abandonment that caused her mother's death. He was tormented by the memories of his dead mother. He felt he was the sole responsible for his mother's death. Her words surfaced his thoughts and he often reminded her final words:

"Take me with you, son. I am so unhappy here."(Nair, 31) Mukundan felt desperate while her mother uttered, "where were you when I needed you? You could have rescued me, but you chose not to."(31)

Paru Kutty, a victim of Achuthan Nair's Tyranny. She could have escaped from the clutches of her husband; but indeed remained a puppet of fate. As Krishnan Nair said to Mukundan to make him realise that he is no more responsible for her mother's fate:

"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." (52)

Community Hall is the symbol of betrayal. It builds the gap between the haves and the have not's. The irony is it is Bhasi who rescue him from "the morass of the past". Mukundan decides to spend the rest of his life cocooned in that magical happiness. But when his greatest desire to take his father's place in Kaikurussi is threatened, he betrays them. It is his continuous urge to prove his father and the villagers that he is a 'better man' in every sense.

Krishnan Nair was the caretaker of the *tharavadu*, (term taken from Malayalam, meaning ancestral home) when Parukutty was left alone while her husband decides to stay with her concubine, Ammini. He left the mansion after her death and returns once again to take the in-charge of the house once again when Mukundan was left alone without a family of his own. Krishnan Nair lives in the memories of the family leaving his family and finally realises the intensity while observing the Mukundan's who was left alone in that huge house of just walls. Krishnan Nair whispered,

"The only thing left in my life are memories. When I am in this house, they cascade into my mind, one after the other. When I am here, it seems like I am back in time when your mother was alive and in this house was what I thought paradise would be like." (40)

In another instance he pointed, "This house has been asleep

far too long. The last time there was so much light and life in here was when your mother was alive.”(41)

Achuthan Nair is the epitome of male chauvinism and he slices his never uttering wife every now and then, with his verbal sword. She represents a typical Indian woman. It is in her character the writer painted the image of Indian wives who are ever patient, submissive to their omnipotent husbands. Mukundan was obsessed with the notion that he failed to rise up to the expectations of his father. His hatred towards his father reached its epitome when he outbursts with anger:

“Mukundan often wished that instead they had taken a sickle and slaughtered his father.”(56)

The whole story revolves around his thrive to reach to it and he makes use of every opportunity to make himself a better man. He meets a man who was an outsider, but more than the natives of Kaikurussi. He is a painter by profession and a healer by vacation. People lovingly called him One-Screw Bhasi and a healer of the natives. He wins the trust of Mukundan and enables him to break the shackles of memories that burns from inside.

Right in the words of Abraham Verghese, author of *My Own Country*.

The Better man is an astonishing book: it is tender, lyrical, humors, and insightful. In Anita Nair's capable hands the exotic setting comes alive and becomes familiar and we see our struggle and triumphs reflected in these marvelous characters'

In a deeper insight into the novels unfolds the various themes of search for identity, exploitation, gender discrimination, and the disintegration in the society, cultural differences, man-woman relationships, and the power of land in the lives of the people and so on.

Quest for identity, not a rare theme in the world of fiction, but Anita Nair dealt it in a totally different way that made the novel stand a step ahead in its genre. Here, Mukundan, a retired government servant, who is in his late fifties searching for the identity in his native place. The irony of the situation is he is the son of one of the eminent personalities of the town, Kaikurussi.

It is through Bhasi the theme of suppression brought out. It reaches its culmination when he was sent out from his home by Power House Ramakrishnan with the consent of his so called trusted friend Mukundan. Mukundan was made a silent observer in the discussion planned by the dignitaries of the town regarding the construction of the Community Hall.

Narrative Style

It is not exaggerated to say *The Better Man* is a picturesque novel. Anita Nair took the readers to a small town in Kerala named Kaikurussi. Her writing is simple. Her description of landscape and presentation is elegant. She performed the role of a cinematographer who pictured the minute details of the place giving the effect of watching a Malayalam movie. “The first fictional village to be made literally famous was R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi* but in Kaikurussi, Anita Nair has created another homestead that could become just as well known.” (*Business Standard*) Shankar's tea shop, Mukundan's '*tharavadu*'; Power House Ramakrishnan's Community Hall, Bhasi's home, everything is meticulously penned down by the writer and thus readers left with no much effort to imagine.

The Better Man takes one's memories back to such African classics in English as *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe....A quiverful of characters who refuse to leave your memory even after finishing the novel. In fact, you cannot ask a better mix of everything. (*The Deccan Herald*)

Anita Nair showed a great deal of perfection by titling her last chapter as "*A Better Man Than His Father*" and thus the novel covered an whole life of a man who finally achieved what he thrived for his entire being.

Critics' Observations

The publication of *The Better Man* was much acclaimed and recognized by many renowned Newspapers. It is stated in *India Today* as follows:

Imposing debut: Nair's got a style and a future...Rich in local color...exploring in fluid prose. Anita Nair has proved her mettle by fathoming the deepest recesses of man's psyche...'

The Times of India commented it as, "Sharp characterization and a fiercely intense style.'

The Hindustan Times recognized it as "A mistress of minutiae."

The New Indian Express expressed it as follows:

The author takes the reader through the remaking of a man in a quiet manner, which, far from being dissatisfying, is truly the reason of its success.

The Hindu Literary Review applauded as "...finely balanced debut... [that] successfully explores undercurrents that beneath relationships even in an idyll rural setting."

REFERENCES

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