

Theme of Alienation in Anita Nair's the Better Man

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Abstract:

Anitha Nair is one of India's popular female authors. Story telling is an art and she does it exceptionally well. She develops delves deep into the human psyche and allows the reader to enjoy a wonderful journey by presenting absorbing stories that have colourful and unique characters. Anita Nair's debut novel *The Better Man* explore the themes of alienation through the emotional and psychological experiences of its main character, Mukundan, who returns to his native village Kaikursi after his retirement. The novel examines Mukundan's inner conflicts, strained parental relationship, and a lifelong struggle to resolve individual desires with social expressions. Nair graphically portrays the sense of isolation felt by Mukundan as he grapples with feelings of inadequacy, displacement, and the need for self-acceptance. The narrative captures the nuances of rural-urban divide, generational gaps, and personal insecurities, reflecting how alienation is not merely physical separation but a deep-rooted emotional disconnection. Through Mukundan's journey of self-discovery and healing, the novel ultimately affirms the possibility of reconnection—with oneself, with others, and with one's roots.

Keywords: alienation, self-discovery, psychological conflict, isolation and reconnection

Anita Nair's novel *The Better Man* is a distinctive work in her literary career. While most of Nair's novels focus on female characters, their inner psyche, and their struggles in everyday life, *The Better Man*—her debut novel—takes a different path. It is set in the fictional village of Kaikursi in Kerala, reminiscent of Thomas Hardy's Wessex or R.K. Narayan's Malgudi. Nair concentrates on ordinary village lives rather than the cosmopolitan or pan-Indian settings found in some of her later works. Unlike novels such as *Ladies Coupé*, which center primarily on women's experiences, *The Better Man* follows the life of Mukundan Nair, delving into themes of male vulnerability, identity, and alienation. The narrative engages readers through its exploration of a psychological return to one's roots and reconciliation with personal history—a theme less prominent in her other works. Additionally, it subtly blends local myths, beliefs, and superstitions into a realistic storyline, giving the novel a unique and compelling tone.

Here Mukundan finds himself an alien, faces the crises of alienation and rootlessness, and loss of self-identity. His quest for identity forces him to analyse the present, in the light of comments made by Krishnan nair. The revelation, that principles or beliefs, are the foundation for relationships and that he should revive his relationship with Bhasi and Anjana.

The novel, *The Better Man*, deals with the story of Musudan's lifelong struggle through the crises of loneliness and rootlessness and his desperate search for self-discovery and self-fulfillment against the backdrop of contemporary village life in Kerala. These themes are recorded through the character of

Mukundan, the protagonist. A retired government employee, beset with bitterness and self-doubt is forced by circumstances to return to his ancestral Taravad in the village of kaikursi. He finds himself unable to cope with the present. He is haunted by a sense of failure, for not having gone through life without actually living it.

Mukundan Shows interest in reading literature books when he is at school. For a while he is an inveterable scribbler. He finds himself confronting the masters of literature. He tries to rewriting Bronte, and Dickens, Goldsmith and Chesterton, in his own words. Achutan Nair does not like Mukundan reading these English classics. It takes a lot of courage to do the right thing. A single betrayal leads to loss of trust. Whenever he finds his son reading books and recites any lines from these classics, he frowns at him and says:

Let me tell you, boy, banish that thought from your mind.

No son of mine is going to waste his life trying to be a writer.

Do you understand? (The Better Man p-16)

Instead of encouraging Mukundan in his effort to become a writer, Achutan Nair wants his son to do some writing for him. Mukundan's father is a stubborn man who never takes kindly to anyone questioning his authority. He just wants his son to be like him. Every evening he dictates letters to his son. He wants his son to know how to write powerful letters. Even though writing letters is not Mukundan's cup of interest, he has to do that for his father's sake. Achutan Nair does not understand that his son's interest lie elsewhere. This happens with many boys now-a-days. Many parents do not think in which field their sons or daughters are actually interested, and accordingly encourage them in their endeavour.

The root of all human problems has been traced to the ego (Ahankara). It is necessary to understand that "I" is the basis of even the day-to day problems one encounters in worldly situation. The most common grievance that a person has is that no one appreciates him. In every human interaction, each one likes to establish that he is right and this results in conflict. The problem of Achutan Nair is his ego. He never respects his wife's ideas. She is intimidated by her husband. When a problem is addressed, it compounds itself. If one is not part of the solution, then one is the problem. Taking the path of least resistance makes both men and rivers crooked. Here we find Mukundan taking the path of least resistance.

Mukundan is unable to face the tyranny of his father. He wants to escape from his father. In search of his roots and meaningful of life, he applies for a job and gets the position of a clerk in the ordinance factory. There he meets Narendran. They are both appointed as lower divisional clerks in the explosives factory. Gradually they become friends. They have many plans in their lives. But all of a sudden Narendran becomes sick. When he comes to know about the illness of his friend, he is devastated. He does not have the strength or courage to make any more plans. This incidence forces him to return to his ancestral house in kaikarussi.

Here we get to know about the past of Mukundan. After reaching his native village, he reminisces of the past. With an overbearing father and a docile mother, he was forced to lead an uneventful life during his childhood. When he returns to his ancestral house, Neeli, a servant maid and a companion of his mother, during his absence, hands over the house keys to Mukundan. His father is living with his concubine and is enjoying life. Mukundan is unable to sleep well. He feels as if he had committed a sin by not taking his mother along with him, to the place he was working. Whenever he visited her, she pleaded with him to take her away from the village. She finds her alienated because her husband is staying with another woman, called Ammini and her son staying at his place of work, with no one at home to share her company and know her feelings and thoughts. There is a cost of action and there is a cost of inaction, the cost of inaction, is more expensive. 'Take me with you, son. I am unhappy here' (the Better Man P-31)

This shows that Mukundan's mother cannot bear the humility and torture any more. She does not even hide how terrified she is of her husband's cruelty. She has tried to make him believe that tyranny is simply another form of expression of love and concern. Now when she speaks of her husband, it is with bitterness that makes Mukundan cringe. Just because one cannot see the situation, it does not mean that it does not exist. Mukundan is not in a position to think and arrive at a solution that could solve the problem.

Mukundan in a drunken state remembers the words of his mother. Mukundan's mother is said to have fallen from the steps and died but there is a suspicion that she was killed by her own husband, who, forsook her, for his concubine, Ammini. Mukundan often visited his ancestral house even while at his place of work and brought gifts for his father. This shows that he was still trying to find a way means to enter his father's heart. Achutan Nair never thinks of his son's welfare or marriage.

Mukundan has to confront feelings of a lifetime of inadequacy. Need for his father approval, which was never given, prevented him from marrying. Before he escapes from his tyrant father and from the village, he has some thrilling moments and affair with his cousin, Meenakshi. They spent plenty of time in each other's company, during the childhood days. When they become grownups, they are not allowed to meet each other. So springs a distance between them. His need to be with her is more than need to be with him. Greatest ignorance is not to be aware of one's ignorance. Ignorance cannot be equated with innocence.

When Mukundan leaves Kaikurssi, Meenakshi dwindles into a memory. He prefers not to dwell upon it. Thinking of her arouses many emotions. When he comes home for the first time, he comes to know that she has become a Naxalite. Her first target is Achutan Nair, Mukundan's father, her uncle, who is a landlord, tyrant and master of oppression. To them Achuthan Nair is the system. Mukundan often wishes that instead they should have taken a sickle and slaughtered his father. Probably his father is the hurdle for them to get married. Mukundan gradually forgets Meenakshi. These factors go to prove Mukundan is an escapist who fails to take responsibility or is afraid of his domineering father whose approval he always needs for taking any action. Poor eyes limit one's sight but poor vision limits one's deeds. No wonder, Mukundan was not in a position to achieve anything, because of his poor vision. Anita Nair introduces an interesting character named Bhasi who may either try and adjust to "others", in society, or to the system, abdicating his true self, or he may strive to keep and develop his individuality and thus alienate himself from society.¹

In the *Better Man*, Bhasi is introduced not merely as a supporting character but as the moral and spiritual centre of the novel. Anita Nair uses Bhasi to guide the protagonist, Mukundan Nair, from fear, guilt, and emotional isolation towards self-awareness and inner healing. Bhasi who may either try and adjust to "others", in society, or to the system, abdicating his true self, or he may strive to keep and develop his individuality and thus alienate himself from society.¹ One time college lecturer had come to Kaikurshi after a failed love affair. He is emotionally shattered and disturbed. Then he met with an accident in which he was one of the few survivors. These two incidents have made him reinvent himself. He begins his quest for a new life. He becomes a house painter and marries a beautiful local widow and has a son by her. He developed his healing prowess first by cultivating medical herbs and then addressing the distress of others. He is called a local doctor. He settles in Kaikurusi. Bhasi is more interested in repairing souls than decorating houses. Damaged lives, he says till my world as much as flaking paint. Mukundan hands over the work of repainting the house to Bhasi.

Mukundan has spent uneasy nights after his return to his ancestral house, haunted by the past. He imagines the ghost of his mother questioning him whether he was right in leaving her alone in the house to face the

wrath of Acthutan Nair. “ where were you when I needed you? You will have rescued me, but you chose not to” (The Better Man p-31)

A brave man, inability to act appropriately cost the life of his mother. Had he acted upon her request, she might well be alive now. Mukundan is horrified to hear the voice of her mother’s ghost. Her voice rings through the room. Her voice seems to him to be rather cold and grainy. He cannot believe her existence. How can she? She died thirty years ago. Why has she come now? Beads of sweat run down his face because of fear of his mother’s ghost.

Mukundan feels lucky to survive the incident. Unable to bear these lonely, horrifying nights he accepts the treatment proposed by Bhasi. Bhasi recognizes Mukundan’s despair. Bhasi, a painter and a native doctor, takes him to the attic in the house, where Bhasi asks him to get into an old jar. The jar here becomes a metaphorical womb inside which Mukundan crouches, suggesting the fatal position. Bhasi then asks him, how long will run away from himself and says, it is time he exorcised the ghosts of the past from the mind. He has a new biryh as he emerges from the jar. His journey towards self-discovery is initiated by Bhasi.

Mukundan’s recovery is aided by his relationship with Anjana, a thirty seven- year old schoolteacher, married to a man who rarely visits her and treats her brutally, when he does visit. Mukundan meets Anjama at the house of his former boss K.M. Nair. Anjana is his niece. This relationship with Anjana is the turning point in the life of Mukundan. Despite turbulent relationship, many married couples like to continue their relationship either for the sake of children or for society. Fortunately Anjana does not have any children. Mukundan does not mind that she has been married once. What worries him is her age. She is twenty-two years younger than he is. In spite of their age difference, Mukundan wants to marry her.

Yet Mukundan does not have courage to inform his father about his desire to marry Anjana. Mukundan did not take time to reflect on what he is doing and why he is doing it. He has to find solutions to the problems through deep contemplation. Nobody else can find solutions for him. Even when the solutions are found by other well-wisher, he will have to implement them. Bhasi, the painter, manages to restore Mukundan’s self-confidence. Powerhouse Ramakrishnan, a millionaire of the village, decides to build a community hall in the village. He chooses Bhasi’s piece of land as the site to build the community hall. Bhasi refuses to sell the land and requests Mukundan to intervene on his behalf.

Mukundan is hungry for recognition. He intends to make a mark on the world. It appears that Mukundan loves flattery and is filled with visions of outdoing his father’s position in the village. He sides with powerhouse Ramakrishnan rather than give a helping hand to his friend and healer of mental agony, Bhasi, in the land dispute between Bhasi and Powerhouse Ramakrishnan. Mukundan tells Anjana about community hall project and now he has been asked to be on the committee to over see the construction. He also speaks to her about how the committee members are expected to guard their reputations and how he has been depicted as an example. Because she is still married in the eyes of the law, he plans to take her to his house only after the divorce is granted. Mukundan wants to postpone his marriage till Anjana gets the divorce. Anjana becomes silent and lies back against the pillows and closes her eyes.

Anjana would like to know the mind of Mukundan before committing herself . Mukundan had feared this confrontation more than the one with Bhasi, the reason being his heart is attached here and his reputation attached with the village elders.

Mukundan will visit again and they will reconcile their differences. There is nothing in the world that cannot be accomplished if one sets one’s mind to. That much Bhasi has shown him. It shows that

Mukundan is very optimistic even in the difficult period. He is not giving up getting Anjana to his line of thinking.

A woman with true charm is one who can make a youth feel mature, an old man youthful and a middle aged man completely sure of himself. Anjana makes Mukundan sure of himself.

It is a well-known fact that the man makes little or no sacrifice where as the woman is expected to change herself of the union called marriage.

Mukundan now remembered his father's dictum that "if one has to be successful in life, one has to be selfish." That is what meant by the survival of the fittest. Only such man thrive in society. Realization dawns on Mukundan that though famous for his licentious ways, his father was never afraid of society and followed only his own mind and thoughts. Mukundan decides to become a 'better man' than he is at present and a better man than his father has been.

It takes the death of Achutan Nair, his father to make him realize how empty his life was and would continue to be without either Bhasi or Anjana. He is stricken by both remorse and guilt. Mukundan, finally realizes him that he was no better than his father, whom he had despised all his life, was a great shock to him. With this comes realization.

Mukundan decides to make amends. How he goes about it is an indicator of much Mukundan has changed. From a fastidious and colourless man lacking in courage to take even the slightest risk, Mukundan becomes a man capable of finding love and happiness. A man who discovers the varied and vibrant hues of life, a man who emerges from the shadow of his father's personality to become a better man.

Mukundan knows that another important ritual is left to complete his self-discovery. He gets into the jar once again in attic, exorcises the remaining ghosts hunting him and comes out, breaks the jar for he knows his journey of self-discovery is now complete and he will no longer need the jar in the future. To compensate for what he has done to Bhasi, Mukundan gives him his land for he realizes the part played by Bhasi in his self discovery. At the end, shedding off her fear of society, Mukundan now tells Anjana of their marriage. He knows here he will be compared with his father, but knows he too, will face the obstacles as and when they come.

The only thing that remains to be done now is the destruction of the community Hall, which stands for the failure of Mukundan as a man, as an individual. The novel ends with Mukundan using gunpowder to destroy the building. Once it is destroyed, Mukundan's journey of self-discovery will be complete and then he will not simply be the better man, but the perfect man.

Thus, Anita Nair uses the failed relationship between Mukundan and Anjana to demonstrate that love alone cannot sustain a relationship without emotional maturity, self-awareness, and mutual commitment.

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