



# Anita Nair's 'The Better Man': Female Characters in the Novel

**Dr. Richa Dewani**

Professor

Department of English Lit.

Government Arts College

Sikar Rajasthan India

## ABSTRACT

The Better Man is the journey of a soul, the story of a retired government officer - Mukundan Nair, who returns to his Kerala village. But this means coming face to face with his dead past, millions of grey shadows and ghosts of his dead mother and ancestors haunting and tormenting him. Anita Nair, as a feminist novelist and humanist, throws light on the unknown and unique facets of women's life and world and thereby offers a new perspective through her works. In her novel, The Better Man, Anita Nair has explicated a quest for identity self realization and portrays women's aspiration for freedom in marital life, freedom in establishing healthy husband wife relationship. Anjana in The Better Man enjoys independence and self satisfaction till she gets married to Ravindran. She wants to love and give the best to her husband but, he avoids her. She longs for freedom in most marriages prove to be unions of incompatibility. Men are apt to be rational and matter of fact while women are sentimental and emotional. Their interests, their attitudes are different. Naturally they look at things in different way and react to the same situations differently. Anita Desai portrays females' desire of liberty from social and traditional bondages in the patriarchal society in her novels. She denies a narrow feminist approach. She herself asserts that she writes about women for she knows and understands them best.

**Key Words :** Backdrop, Review Literature and Better Man Novel

## Backdrop

The Anita Nair (born 26 January 1966) is an Indian novelist who writes her books in English. She is best known for her novels *A Better Man*, *Mistress*, and *Lessons in Forgetting*. She has also written poetry, essays, short stories, crime fiction, historical fiction, romance, and children's literature, including *Muezza* and *Baby Jaan: Stories from the Quran*. Nair 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 .[citation needed] Nair's second book was published by Penguin India, and was the first book by an Indian author to be published by Picador.

Anita Nair was born at Mundakottakurissi, near Shormur in Kerala. She pursued her B.A in English language and Literature in Chennai before returning back to her native place. She was working in the position of the creative director of an advertising agency in Bangalore. Currently she resides in Bangalore. Anita Nair's novels and other writings have been immensely popular and widely accepted by her readers which marks her position as an established writer of the contemporary period. Anita Nair's first book is titled *Satyr of the Subway*, a collection of short stories.

Her second book, *Ladies Coupe* (2001) turned out to be the first book to be published by Picador USA and has been translated in several languages around the globe. Some other popular novels of Nair's are *The Better Man* (2000), *Where the Rain is Born- Writings about Kerala* (2003), *Mistress* (2003), *Magical Indian Myths* (2008), *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010). As a playwright, she has written a play titled 'Nine Faces of Being' whose story is adapted from the novel *Mistress*. Anita has written books for young readers also such as *Adventures of Nonu*, *the Skating Squirrel* (2007) and *Living Next Door to Alise* (2006). Her collections of poetry include *Malabar Mind* (1997). She has also written essays which are published as a collection as *Goodnight and God Bless* (2008).

Among Nair's early commercial works were pieces she penned in the late 1990s for *The Bangalore Monthly* magazine (now called *Explocity Bangalore*), published by *Explocity* in a column titled 'The Economical Epicurean'. Anita Nair's fiction explores the quest for identity of the woman to fulfill herself essentially as a human being, self-governing of her various traditional roles as daughter, wife, mother and so on. The self considering, suffering and unselfish woman, with her gender characteristic qualities has begun to aggravate the compulsions of supporting patriarchal gender philosophy. The woman who has moved to the center and become an important individual in the social setup is intense to discover new path for improvement and logical satisfaction and establish her independence in marriage. The creative women writers re-define the husband-wife relationship in their novels. Anita Nair in most of her novels reveals woman's capacity to assert her own rights and eccentricity in marriage and develop into a fully fledged woman of potential as a human being.

*The Better Man* (1999) is apparently a male-oriented novel because his protagonist, Mukundan, is regenerated by his dominant father from his psychological state. But there are episodes dealing with the life and experiences of women protagonists such as Anjana,

Mandakini, etc. Mukundan is an elderly bachelor and a retired servant of the government who comes back to his native place, Kaikurusi, an imaginary village in northern Kerala. Mukundan left his village at the age of eighteen to escape his father's tyranny, Achutan Nair. Mukundan had lived in his boyhood under his father's fear and domination, which he feels at the age of fifty even now. He is also profoundly affected by the feeling

of guilt in leaving his mother when she pitifully asked him to take her to the city with him to escape his father's harsh treatment. Although *The Better Man* is mainly Mukundan's story and his regeneration, the novel portrays very significant female characters. Their lives are very much part of the village's social and cultural ethos in Kerala, where everyone knows everyone else, and personal affected by the social environment in one way or another. In the village and small townships, the impact of patriarchal notions is felt rather strongly than in the city. Women's lives in Kaikurusi are naturally controlled by the family's patriarch.

### Review Literature

Ramen Goswami (2022) in the article "Women's Marginalization in Manju Kapur and Anita Nair's Selected Novels: A Comparative Study" had spoken about the Marginalization of women as portrayed in the novels of Anita Nair. It shows the feeling of weakness and planned exclusion felt by a group of women as a result of patriarchal influence over women. The researcher claims that women are marginalized due to the patriarchal framework of the Indian society. When a woman is alienated, and pushed into the margins disparity occurs in their lives. It is a kind of conspiracy with the fundamental traits of dominance, driving the woman into submission by all means. All the walks of life makes women marginalized.

Maya Menon (2020) in the research paper "Negotiating into the Third Space: Art and Cultural Hybridity in Anita Nair's *Mistress*" has probed in the novel *Mistress* as delineating the dynamics that manifest to an artwork character in its path of acculturation. In the novel, from a postcolonial part of view opens up the Third Space (Homi K Bhabha) of Hybridity, to which an artwork character like Kathakali is uncovered to, in its due path of popularisation and survival. The look at explores the dynamics of dance drama Kathakali, and the decontextualization that occurred to it, even as appropriated into more "understandable", "intelligible" character. The journey of Kathakali into the "Third Space" is frequently questioned, criticized and mocked by the characters like Koman. Yet, one couldn't forget about the appropriations that it had gone through as part of acculturation. As Bhabha says, the hybrid Kathakali of Sundaran is something new, that incorporates with it a type of novelty, an in-betweenness, that makes its transcultural and agreeable to everyone. Kathakali in its conventional shape along the hybridized range and each reigning the inventive global with all of the forte make a ambitious look in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

Hitendra Dhote (2020) in the research paper "Critical Reading of Anita Nair's *The Better Man*" has crammed on the lifestyle, the beliefs, customs, and culture elements in the novel 'The Better Man' with regard to the Man isn't always handiest product of flesh and bones however as well of mind and feelings. These aptitudes represent his each internal and outer personality. His existence on this planet is a non-stop battle for life towards all peculiar circumstances. In this battle for survival, he has to combat now no longer handiest with outer forces however together along with his very own inner turbulent global of weaknesses which overpower his experience and action. Mythologies of all religions in addition to authentic

histories are loaded with the testimonies of guys who permit the weaknesses in their man or woman individual(s) rule them down. There also are testimonies of folks that defeated their weaknesses with robust will and backbone and emerged victorious. Various characters constitute a specific phase of humans that mirror the social cloth of Kerala of contemporary times. Through the characters and the topics Nair has tried to chronicle a village and the happenings of the small city in Kerala, the lifestyle, the beliefs, customs, and subculture.

Nisha Nambiar (2020) in the research paper entitled "A Passage to Redemption in Anita Nair's The Better Man" has traced the journey of a disturbed individual in the novel The Better Man by exploring the emotional boundaries confronting him. The trauma of having to negotiate among one's fractured internal self in addition to the want to camouflage the non-life of this sort of self will become terribly noticeable. In the procedure it delineates the diffused sun sunglasses of a man or woman's internal being and his existential anguish. It tries to study the quantity and shape of subordination conditioned with the aid of using the

social and cultural surroundings where the protagonist has been placed. The trauma of having to barter among one's split inner self in addition to the want to camouflage the non-life of this sort of self will become terribly apparent. It heralds the start of a brand new being or the growing of a higher guy from the stays of his cloistered self.

Anita Nair has depicted women character realistically. In the novel 'The Better Man'. She has represented the bad condition of woman. Achuthan Nair in The Better Man treats his wife Paru Kutty just a slave. He shows his authority on her as a husband. He considers her as a slave or servant. He suppresses her femininity and her human demands. A perfect marriage is expected by everyone and the main responsibility of the parents is to find out a suitable match for their son or daughter. Anjana, in the novel, The Better Man is brought up in the frank and free atmosphere in her family. But the atmosphere, she gets after marriages is haphazard. Her In-laws' home is a place of meaninglessness where her husband is stronger beside her. She wants to live a healthy meaningful life with her husband. She wants freedom and to be loved by her husband but it remains a dream for her to come into reality. She leads a painful life under the authority of her husband. She hates all the things around her and even herself. In Indian culture marriage brings two person, man and woman together under one roof but she skins over the sexual relationship. According to her, sexual relationship is incomplete without emotional relationship. Her marital relationship with her husband has not a fine tone and marked by loneliness, and loveless life. Her relationship with her husband is adversely unable to understand each other. An account of escape from her loveless married life she moves to her parent's house. Here she longs for true love who takes care of her.

In her novel, The Better Man, Anita Nair has explicated a quest for identity self realization and portrays women's aspiration for freedom in marital life, freedom in establishing healthy husband wife relationship. Anjana in The Better Man enjoys independence and self satisfaction till she gets married to Ravindran. She wants to love and give the best to her husband but, he avoids her. She longs for freedom in married life. When she doesn't get the same she hates everybody including herself. She endures pain, suffering and misery. She suffers the devoidness of healthy sexual life and conjugal bliss. She feels that she has been victimized by her traditional upbringing. She had to return to her parental home only to ignore her husband's attitude. Lack of understanding, between husband and wife egoist attitude each other and incompatibility between them, have made their life complex. Anjana feels that marriage is not a happy world. It has no meaning in her life. She wants silence and gives up everything as

'She gave away her colourful saris and took to wearing starched.

Cottons in shade as inspid, dull as her life. She locked up all her.

Jewellery in a safe deposit box at the bank and swept all her.

Flipperies away into the waste basket. (P. 234).

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* presents the life of six different women, traveling together in a Ladies Coupe, narrating stories and experiences about their life. With flashback, these women recall their experiences and narrate their life stories, their typical experiences in contemporary

Indian society as women. Each one is the protagonist in her story. Each of these six women faces different problems in their family. Accidentally, they are together in the train in a Ladies Coupe and like Chaucer's pilgrims, narrate the stories of their own life. Akhila, the protagonist of her story, is not a married woman, but she comes to know from the other married fellow travelers the variety of experiences of these married women, the problems they face and they try to find their way out of their tight situations. The protagonist, Akhila, and five other women share their most private moments with each other, and the reader is exposed to the realities of the lives of these women, all these women become representatives of the average contemporary Indian women.

Anita Nair, in her novel, *Lessons in Forgetting*. Presents a variety of issues such as women seeking their self in Indian society, their dependence on other, man-woman relationship, mother-daughter relationship, redemption and forgiveness. In the novel, the Protagonist Meera is a loving housewife who is a mother of two cute children and a comfortable as a corporate wife of Giri, queen of her house and also a successful writer of cookbooks. Meera is not able to think of her "self" what is her individuation, till Giridhar, her husband leaves her one night suddenly. Then she is able to think of herself. Meera never dreamt big dreams. She had no desires to live a luxury life, no designer clothes, Gold, diamonds, expansive things and worldly pleasure. In those hard years after her father's death, she learnt how to worship at the altar of enough. Though Giri is a big guy and earns quite handsomely. But he has a greedy nature. And keeps an eye on her wife, Meera's property as she is only daughter of her parents with huge property. That is why he marries her he wants to buy two flats to sell Meera's property. But it is on ninety nine years lease and cannot be sold. Giri was not interested to live in this house all that he wanted the disposal of the house. Here he says- then there is the house I ask you, begged and pleaded with you to sell the house with the money, I would never have had to work for someone else. I could have pursued my dream, my chance at happiness...

but you wouldn't listen. You kept brushing

Anita Nair gives ideal instances of misled ladies in a male centric framework. In *Ladies Coupe* the writer attempts to delineate the image of an Indian lady who remains alongside her family regardless of every one of their torments. The *Better Man* divulges the truth of Indian ladies who are as yet denied of their rights in affection and marriage. Marriage is as yet a social important, where ladies look for security and men decency. Control is the critical in an investigation of the man-lady relationship where the male attributes are ones combined with mental idea and positive action, in the meantime as the lady is viewed as essentially accommodating, her job to be the good of male sexual drive for the consequent proliferation of the species. The lady in the past was totally conventional, uneducated, superstitious and bound. Being lived in such environment ladies had turned out to be limited and controlled. They would never feel that there can be an alternate world outside the four dividers of their home, there can be some more jobs for her to play. She was totally cut off from such powerful world. It was so in light of the fact that the men of the conventional society needed them to be so.



Anita Nair in her books delineates marriage as an overbearing establishment for lady. Her characters in the novel *The Better Man* declare their singularity and attempt to free themselves from the grip of man. Valsala spouse of the maturing schoolmaster Prabhakaran is ensnared in her day by day family unit undertakings, the upkeep of the compound and staring at the TV each night. She is the desolate individual in her home and there is no amazement in her life. Indeed, even the coconut, cashew and pepper which develop in her garden stop to fill her with ponder. Like her they likewise obviously go behind the track of nature and yield income in amount to their numbers.

Anita Nair's *The Better Man* is a novel set in the fictional village north of Kerala called Kaikurussi, known in the olden days as Malabar. Kaikurussi village is surrounded by hills. This is, of course, Anita Nair's fictional creation, where most of the novel's action takes place. In the novel there are men and women, who try to discover their self and achieve happiness. Anjana, truly portrayed by Nair, just need to look around to see one of them among us. The thesis further explores that despite many sufferings, ups and downs in Mukundan's life, through self discovery he finally finds a silver line in the darkness of his life. Nair's women are true protagonists of flesh and blood who are awesome about their relationships with their society, their families, and themselves. A narrative fiction becomes a platform for women writers to challenge a gender biased society's hegemonic practices. A suitable marriage is the main goal in the life of a woman and her parents main obligation, as it tends to appear in the novels. This study will examine the expectations placed on a woman by her family, her future husband, and other people, especially women, in the novel *The Better Man*.

Women have been quite suppressed, quite oppressed, and in *The Better Man* Anita Nair is trying to explore issues such as rape, male domination and betrayal in marriage to the story of Anjana. *The Better Man* is a male oriented novel, there are very important female characters whose sufferings are depicted effectively by the writer. In the novel *The Better Man*, almost all the women characters indulge in relationships outside the sacredness of marriage. As Dr. Kajal Thakur has stated, "Man-woman relationship outside marriage does not find a social consent especially in Indian Society" (Thakur 31). Self discovery, as presented in Anita Nair's novels, is, however, different from religious self-realization. Self-discovery here is more a guide to asserting and realizing one's own interests, certainly not self centered in the narrow sense. Even the suppressed woman like Parukutty, when she finds her position as an individual and as a wife in danger, gets the courage to speak out in front of her tyrannical husband. They are all looking for happiness which is essential to live life.

Anita Nair has employed a style evocative of Chaucer's mixed crowd of pilgrims travelling to Canterbury telling tales to each other. Her characters are singularly life affirming. Once locked in together, it is a question of age no bar, caste no bar, sex no bar, and the intimacy with which the ladies discuss their sexual adventures seems to underline the message that having sex is destiny.

Another interesting thing Nair tries to do is to explain the many issues they face to their women. She believes that if issues occur, alternatives can be far behind. Her women are also real protagonist of values and principles, believing in traditional values. They don't want to ruin social conventions and institutions. They are women who are individuals legitimate passions and expect an independent, autonomous existence. Their circumstances lead to their becoming mentally mature and they finally consider marital relationship as worthy of preservation.

Anita Nair's latest novel *Cut Like Wound* introduced a female character called Urmila, who commits sacrilege and adultery to fulfill her desire. Urmila is the ex-girlfriend of Gowda. They meet after twenty- seven years. Urmila brings an emotional chaos in the life of Gowda. Urmila's husband is a Philander. Her marital life is uncontented. Her husband takes up a woman in the neighbour-hood. This is unbearable for her and she wants to divorce from her husband now this disappointed married life makes her to search for a man to fulfill her position.

Anita Nair gives an answer to the question of whether a woman can survive alone by presenting an insight into the ways of women living in India. There is an aspect of sympathy in all women. The author has taken on many controversial and sensitive subjects but all with extreme elegance and caliber. The lives of Nair's women characters in her novels are profoundly affected by caste, class, and age. These fictional women Akhilandeswari, Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Sheela, Marikolanthu can be seen as the real Indian women's mirror images.

“Anita Nair is a powerful writer, who through this tender story shows great understanding and compassion for all women and for the choices and regrets they cannot avoid. She portrays women as not totally cut off from familial social ties but women who remains with those orbits and protest against injustice and humiliation” (Kalamani143).

To Anita Nair, feminism recognizes the importance of the female self and the ability to nurture it. She learns that there was a time when a woman needed a man to protect herself, but now she needs man for a companion, a partner who would share her ups and downs. This realization makes Akhila get back in touch with the guy she fell in love with, someone she could not accept because of the fear of society. She learns from everyone's experience, and as a journey and an end, Akhila is ready to act, according to her wish. The characters of *Ladies Coupe* show gender discrimination and show how women are asked to turn their will away from the will of their husband. The novelist wisely portrays the shades of pain, love, anger, frustration and discrimination in *Ladies Coupe*. This novel is about modern Indian society, about the awareness of the struggles between one's ambitions, visions in life, the threads of intolerance, anger, violence, and the survival of one's traditional values and ideas still in present conditions. She comes back to her place with renewed energy, with the courage to organize her life.

Anita Nair is probably the only Indian woman novelist who has made a bold effort to give voice to the suppressed women and to work for the welfare of women in the patriarchal world. Anita Nair also deals with the concept of patriarchy and signifies inequality in relationships in her novel *Ladies Coupe*. It is a novel that incites readers to think and move them deeply and quietly. The dilemma that she goes through at every point of her life comes to an end. No doubt, Anita Nair presents a woman's moral dilemmas trapped in social and emotional circumstances, struggling against the oppression and the hostile fate. In different circumstances, she presents the psychological trauma experienced by women. In truth, Nair's novels reveal the effects of women's social conditioning. There is a lesson for everyone in this novel.

## Conclusion

The Anita Nair's novels represent the contemporary Indian middle class struggle to achieve an autonomous self hood. Her meditative and psychosomatic settings make her par excellence in revealing her women's characters subconscious and unconscious world of the psyche. She is a twenty first century master artist who is much more vociferous in sharing her fears and concerns. The women presented here is quite different from the others. Anjana, in the novel *The Better Man* 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. When her age turned twenty seven her independence is lost in the name of marriage. In her married life she endures several injustices perpetrated by her husband. Anjana consciously or unintentionally imitates the perfect woman because of her conventional upbringing. The characters in *The Better Man* have a lesson for everyone. Through Mukundan the novelist brings home the message that happiness cannot be had by being the cause of someone else's unhappiness. Bhasi has another message, that man cannot control and change another man's destiny.

## References

- Ambika. „Feministic Perspective in Anita Nair“s Ladies Coupé’. *Language in India*, ISSN 1930-2940, Vol. 21:2 February 2021.
- Agrawal, M.M., *Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism in N.E. India*. New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1996.
- Ahuja, R. *Social Problems in India*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1997.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005.
- Doniger, Wendy. “Betting on Margin: Adultery and Surrogate Pseudo-marriage in Hinduism.” *From the Margins of Hindu*
- Fraser, Robert. *Lifting the Sentence: A Poetics of Postcolonial Fiction*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000.
- Hitendra B. Dhote. „Critical Reading of Anita Nair“s *The Better Man*’. *European Journal of Molecular & Clinical Medicine*, ISSN 2515-8260, Volume 7, Issue 8, 2020
- Kurane, A., *Ethnic Identity and Social Mobility* . Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1999.
- Knappert, Jan. *Indian Mythology: An Encyclopaedia of Myth and Legend*. London: Aquarian, 1991.
- Manohar, D.Murali. *Indian Fiction women’s Fiction: A Study of Marriage, Career and Divorce*. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1994.
- Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion, and Culture*. Eds. Lindsay Harlan and Paul B. Courtright. New York: Oxford UP, 1995. 160-83.
- Nair, Anita. *The Better Man*. New Delhi: Penguin Books: 2000.
- Nair , Anita . *Ladies Coupe* , Penguin Books , New Delhi ,2001
- Nair, Anita. *Mistress*. Peguin Books , New Delhi ,2005



Reader. Eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Essex: Pearson Education, 1993. 376-89.

Studies. Ed. Neil Lazarus. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 83-97.

Menasha Bharat, *Desert in Bloom*, and *Contemporary Indian Women's Fiction in English*. Delhi: Pen craft International, 2004.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Feminisms*. Eds. Sandra

Kemp and Judith Squires. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997. 91-96.

Moore, Henrietta. *A Passion for Difference*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.

Narayan, Uma. "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism." *Hypatia* 13.2 (1998): 86-106.

Ortner, Sherry B. "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37.1 (1995): 173-93.

Priya, Rashmi. „Mapping Knowledge, Power and Space in Anita Nair's *Living Next Door to Alise*' Research Review ISSN: 2321- 4708, Oct. 2020, Year - 7 (90).

Pauwels, Heidi. "Is Love Still Stronger than Dharma?: Whatever happened to Sita's Choice and the Gopis' Voice." *Playing for*

Real: *Hindu Role Models, Religion and Gender*. Eds. Jacqueline Suthren

Hirst and Lynn Thomas. Delhi: Oxford UP, 2004. 117-40.

Rao, Vidya. "Seeing Radha, Being Radha: Singing Ashta Chap Poetry and Thumri." *Re-researching Indian Women*. Ed. Vijaya Ramaswamy. Delhi: Manohar, 2003.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Draupadi." In *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1988. 187-96.

Yadav, Suman, *Changing Role of Women in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe'*. "International Journal of English and Studies IJOES0, Volume-2, Issue-9, 2020, ISSN: 2581-8333.

<https://www.literaryjournal.in/index.php/clri/article/view/174/643>

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anita\\_Nair](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anita_Nair)

<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.indiaonline.in/about/amp/personalities/writersandpoets/anita-nair>