

## Woman Flouting the Constraints in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*

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**Abstract:** *This article effort is going to make a study of the changing roles of women in Indian society by taking into consideration Anita Nair's The Better Man, the novelist of the Post independent era who have very skillfully and effectively presented the predicaments which are imposed upon them and while fighting against these predicaments, how they come out of their traditional roles as a mother, daughter, sister and above all as a wife or a home maker and acquire many unimagined and novel roles like teacher, social worker, social activist, businesswoman or corporate personality and many more. Most often female characters are fixed by gender stereotypes so that their attempts to transcend this position are often questioned. In general, female characters are silenced in the face of their oppression under a patriarchal system. It is an undeniable fact that women have not only been denied existence as complete human beings, physically and mentally set to perform on a egalitarianism with men, but also destitute of the opportunity to give expression to their feelings, their fears and their distress.*

**Key Words:** *Changing roles, Quest, Sex, Identity*

Literature by women presents an “imaginative gamut”. In women novelists, a commonality of motifs is observed. They deal with gender issues and roles, female subjectivity, exploitation and oppression, the concept of being “other” in a patriarchal society, the theme of subjugation right from the birth till death and the clash between tradition and modernity. This paper tries to highlight the sexual predicament in Anita Nair's novels. She focuses primarily on the psychological exploration of inner mind of Indian women in Indian novels in English. The writer being woman permeate deep into the inner mind of the depressed women by virtue of their feminine sensibility and psychological insight and bring to light their issues, which are the outcome of Indian women's psychological and emotional inequalities in a male dominated society.

Gradually the transfer is expressed by the quest for identity. This quest for identity leads to self-discovery which pervades in the selected novel of Anita Nair. This quest enables a woman to be away from the mythological and constraining stereotypes. Since novelist is woman, her women protagonists occupying centre-stage in her novel, her feminist outlook is bounce to surface. As their roles are traditionally associated with women, the thoughts of these women characters are sure to crop up in their struggle for their identity.

Among the emerging writers Anita Nair is the most promising and a writer to reckon with. Her maiden novel *The Better Man* has placed her among the most self-conscious Indian novelists and her second novel, “Ladies Coupe” is in some ways even better than her first, though it is

impossible to draw a parallel between the two since they are largely different. In *Ladies Coupe* Anita Nair deals with the concept of patriarchy and signifies a relationship of inequality. The story is an attempt to show how, in life, suppression and oppression do not always come in recognizable forms, but often under the guise of love, protection and the assurance of security. Though Patriarchy is a common concept in every woman's life, Anita Nair depicts carefully the diversity within each woman, as she did not want to put the lives of women to one ideal.

Women's suppression is rooted in the very basis of Indian society – in traditions, in religious doctrine and practices, within the education and legal systems, and within families. Traditionally, women bear primary responsibility for the well being of their families. Yet they are discriminated systematically and deprived of access to resources such as education, health care services, job, training and etc".<sup>10</sup> Anita Nair's novels shows how carefully she expresses the frustration and disappointments of women who experience in the social and cultural oppression in the male-dominated society. *Ladies Coupe* is an individual's journey in search of one's true self who confronts the gender oriented tradition. It depicts the plight of a spinster who suffers silently in the name of family.

Anita Nair provides perfect examples of victimized women in a patriarchal system. In *Ladies Coupe* the novelist tries to depict the picture of an Indian woman who stands along with her family despite of all their tortures. *The Better Man* unveils the reality of Indian women who are still deprived of their rights in love and marriage. Marriage is still a social necessary, where women seek security and men respectability. Domination is the significant in an analysis of the man-woman relationship where the male characteristics are ones coupled with mental thought and positive activity, at the same time as the woman is regarded as basically submissive, her role to be the respectable of male sexual drive for the subsequent reproduction of the species.

The woman in the past was completely traditional, uneducated, superstitious and confined. Being lived in such atmosphere women had become narrow and controlled. They could never think that there can be a different world outside the four walls of their house, there can be some more roles for her to play. She was completely cut off from such dynamic world. It was so because the men of the traditional society wanted them to be so. They too were ruled by the age old philosophy which was anti-woman and which taught that woman's place is within the house. The women living in such an orthodox society became so habitual to their surrounding and age old philosophy that they too were thinking that the marriage is their destiny and their husbands are their master. Their duty is to obey him and serve him and his family.

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Male dominated society and its anti-woman ideology is the root cause of women's backwardness and their suffering and victimization. Anita Nair in her novels depicts marriage as a tyrannical institution for woman. Her characters in the novel *The Better Man* assert their individuality and

try to liberate themselves from the clutches of man. Valsala wife of the ageing schoolmaster Prabhakaran is entangled in her daily household tasks, the maintenance of the compound and watching television every evening. She is the lonely person in her house and there are no astonishments in her life. Even the coconut, cashew and pepper which grow in her garden cease to fill her with wonder. Like her they also plainly go behind the track of nature and yield revenue in quantity to their numbers.

Valasla's marriage does not appear to be the realization of a well-cherished dream, but seems to have been resorted to because of lack of pleasures in her marital life. She had never known an awakening of her senses. Not once in her life had an odd and exotic flower bloomed in her yard, filled the air with its overwhelming fragrance. Her existence and her senses suddenly blossomed due to the fragrance of the flowers of the pala tree. She thought about the words uttered by her mother when she was young. The scent of the pala flower is the beloved fragrance for the Gandharvas who always looks for virgins to seduce. They will make the virgins slave for them and no mortal can satisfy her sexual desires.

*All night, for the first time in many years, Valsala tossed and turned in her bed, breathing in the scent of the pala flowers. Strange sensations coursed through her. Her nostrils flared, her lips parted, her eyes became a little less murky, every pore in her body opened, greedily seeking to fill their depths with this unique fragrance. (Nair BM: 129)*

Thus the world of her desires tempts her initially after the blooming aroma of pala flowers to taste the pleasures in her life. 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. She falls in love with Sridharan, who first appears in her life as a neighbour and then becomes her lover. Soon after the realization of her inner self she decides to free herself from her husband. She enters into a sexual relationship with Sridharan as a natural pinnacle to her emotional involvement; she decides to be the mistress of him. Since Prabhakaran master went to school they enjoyed openhanded freedom emotionally and physically. She sets her heart on enjoying her life with Sridharan, as her gandharva. Sridharan admires her and flatters her beauty by his words as a female Valsala completely for that reason she starts to take care of her attractive body.

This narrative presents the feminist attitude of Valsala in the light of new morality. Of course this brings into the focus her soul and psyche, for she expects human attitude from the male. As a matter of fact, she is aware of the fact that every woman needs the energizer of love, freedom, equality and sex. But she is also certain, that is quite impossible from hostile men. Accordingly she is willing to trap the new system against the backdrop of traditional concept of Indian Womanhood. She stirs the entire society with her liberal views and attitude, and puts forth the new issues of woman's sexuality and gender. She justifies herself as

*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 BM: 130)*

As a consequence, Valsala's quest emerges as a battle, of course, the battle of female psyche. In general, life is an affair of the pleasant and unpleasant moments. When a woman gets to be dissatisfied, the result is that she rebels against the existing system. And seeks to divorce from the relationship. As a rebel her first sign of change is her cooking. She rejuvenated all the old system of cooking and experimented with the modern type of cooking like instead oil it is replaced as ghee. As a consequence, Valsala's quest emerges as a conflict towards the tradition. When Prabhakaran master questions and says regarding his indigestion she never concerned about his health. It was projected that Sridharan and Valsala became partners under the concealed nuptial knot. In spite of her frustration with her spouse, she sustained to remain along with him because of the reasons,

*There was the land she had slaved over the house she was mistress of- both of which 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. (Nair BM: 133)*

All of a sudden Prabhakaran was missing and later found dead. Police Inspector enquires Valsala about the death of her husband at the core she preserves silence. Valsala wails and bangs her forehead against the wooden pillar. There was a great deal of sympathy for her as a widow. But everything changes when it is revealed that she with Sridharan had assassinated Prabhakaran master and his body has been abridged into twelve fragments.

In this novel, we come across Valsala, who does not feel guilt or woe for her activity since she wants to escape from the male domination and lead her life as she dreamt. Everyone in the village spoke ghastly about her behaviour. Valsala as an emerging "New Woman" breaks the traditional Indian consciousness built under the name of society and violated the rules in the patriarchal society. The Indian people, sealed up in the traditional philosophy have bewildered the world they live in and do not gather courage to comprehend reality. Anita Nair puts forth emotional display and the painful feelings along with sensitive emotions of women in a bold manner. She sets out the twenty first century woman, for whom sex is a new sort of religion. She casts light on female psyche, where she brings into open that a woman should be treated as human and should not be ignored or suppressed. A study of the man-woman relationship as depicted in the modern literature of the East and the West shows an interruption of and collapse in the conservative expectations of female behaviour. Women are now portrayed as more self-confident, more liberated in their view, and more expressive in their expression than the woman of the past.

The male prejudiced outlook usually disregards the passions and aspirations of womenfolk and labels them as unnatural. Women are trained to gratify the needs and demands of the males. When she demands she is treated as a wicked woman and ultimately the male-invented ideology chastity is also under question. In this novel Valsala is unable to voice her emotions directly, for her unwillingness to associate herself from the routine chores ended in frustration. According to her it was not a life it is just a place to live. In order to lead her life blissfully she utilized her loneliness and spends it with Sridharan to persuade her desires.

What woman was in the past is not the not the same. Indian feminist movement has given birth to a new woman with multiple roles to play. Today we see women encroaching into the most prohibited territory of men i.e. field and acquiring many prestigious positions in the different spheres of life. Kiran Bedi, Kalpana Chawala, Sheela Dixit are some of examples of the women with the changed roles. The shift from the “Pativrata” image to that of the sexually – emancipated woman certainly marks the emergency of a new clans Indian woman who are coming out of their conservative shells and are ready to accept the sexual psychological realities of human life. It is really a sign of radical change occurring in the Indian sexual landscape.

The character Valsala resorts to freedom not only psychologically but sexually too. For her sexual starvation she is anxious to seek out to extra-marital sex. Here, Freud’s lexis of the sexual craving as “motor force of life;” could help to understand the situation better. Since her sexual hunger is provoked or repressed, Valsala’s strive for expression through sexual affiliation or affair with men other than her husband. Valsala’s affair with sridharan seems to be temporary substitute for her discontented marital life. Valsala represents the “new woman” who is on her way to an erotic sexual utopia, where informed mutually consenting individuals could fully realize themselves sexually without public opprobrium or private guilt. (*The New Sexuality; 1989*)

So, she is sexually satisfied with her affair with her neighbor, Sridharan and does not feel guilty of it. The novelist belief is to take shelter in the self which means that the “self” is not metaphysical but psychological. In other words, Anita Nair means that her characters in future, assert themselves; they will no longer allow their “she” to get departed. By this assertion of the self Nair certainly takes her heroines to the pole of feminism, though she may not have aimed at propounding any such “ism”. And the women have certainly begun their protest as indicated by their sexual emancipation. Valsala tries to achieve synchronization in life but against the traditional manner, by her own new way. Her new sense of self-awareness empowers her with an understanding of her feminine quality. When she resolves her inner conflicts, she is able to conquer self-identity.

Is this sexual prolificacy an indication of a fast spreading “new morality?” Or is it a sign of the approaching sexual exclusion or promiscuity? It is true that while men have enjoyed sexual freedom from time immemorial, women have been hedged around by unbreakable taboos. The character Valsala has broken them, yet, they do not represent the typical western woman who holds the sexual autonomy in her hands. And hesitation lingers over the question of whether these Indian heroines will find a position in a well-defined environment of living. The solution to this sexual dilemma too remains at crossroads and depends only on the individuals solving problems on her own.

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