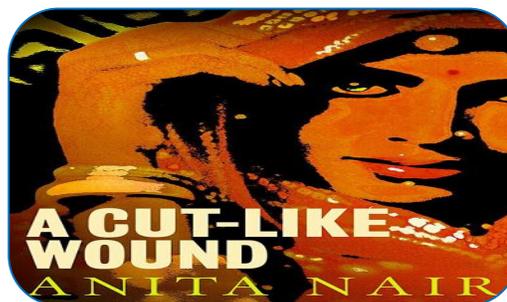




MALE CRISIS IN ANITA NAIR'S *THE BETTER MAN*

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ABSTRACT :

As women and historically subjugated communities have started to gain a toehold into the mainstream through positive active and political representation, the male crisis is further aggravated. Faced with escalated competition on all sides, the male identity is harshly threatened. Violence perpetrated by men against women and the rape culture are all part of a backlash against perceived threats to male supremacy. Anita Nair's *The Better Man* can be considered a perfect tool to study the male crisis in Indian men. In her effort to define the women in their subordinate position, she brings out the male crisis that deplorably exhibits itself in the process.

Anita Nair (1966-), born at Mundakottakurissi, near Shoranur in Kerala State, is a prolific writer. Some of her remarkable novels are *The Better Man*, *Ladies Coupe*, *Mistress*, *Lessons in Forgetting* and *The Lilac House*. This article attempts to expose the male crisis in Mukundan in *The Better Man*.

KEYWORDS : Man, Woman, Heterosexual & Male Crisis.

INTRODUCTION

The image of heterosexual men has never been as negative, de-glamorized and implicitly harmful as it is in the present scenario. And men are aware of it.

Betty Friedan, an American writer, activist and feminist, defines women's unhappiness as, "the problem that has no name" in 'Psychoanalysis'. Similar to this, the modern man is unhappy and doesn't know the reason for his unhappiness.

Michael Kimmel, a sociologist and author of *Manhood in America*, writes about today's youngmen,

These preternatural Peter Pans simply won't grow up, no matter what happens to them.... They can't go back to Neanderthal masculinity; they can't move forward to embrace some new age guydom. They're stuck where they are; in eternal boyhood. They cannot commit - to their girlfriends, their jobs, or even to a purposeful life.

Anita Nair (born 26 January 1966 -), known for her *Ladies Coupe*, *Mistress*, *Lessons in Forgetting*, *The Better Man* etc, is an Indian English-language writer. Her men come as samples of male crisis. This article attempts to identify the male crisis in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*.

The Better Man, set in the fictitious village called Kaikurussi, is the story of an elderly bachelor, Mukundan, as witnessed by Bhasi, a postgraduate who works as a painter and healer. Anita Nair presents Mukundan and Bhasi as representatives of male crisis. And here, Ranjana Sengupta's observation warrants mention. She writes,

Anita Nair's first novel sets out to explore the themes of loyalty, betrayal and self-fulfilment against the backdrop of a contemporary village in Kerala.

These themes are assessed through the character of Mukundan... beset by bitterness and self doubt, who returns - reluctantly to his tyrannical father and his ancestral *taravad* in the village of Kaikurussi. Here he meets Bhasi... house painter and self appointed emotional healer of the village. It is this relationship that forms the main strand of the narrative. (21)

Bhasi, "One-screw-loose Bhasi" (*The Better Man* 6), once called as "Bhaskaran Chandran" (7), fifteen years back, at twenty-three, a lecturer in Ideal College, finds one answer paper fill his mind with a strange excitement. He reads her name from the test paper, "Omana. Omana... feeling it pervade my senses" (97). Bhasi, who has never been in love, starts courting her with words.

Omana laps up his glorification though she has no intentions of being his beloved - "May be it made her feel powerful" (100). Finally, one day she tells him to stop making a fool of himself. Bhasi feels a mixture of "Hurt. Betrayal. Anger. Humiliation" (101). As Pankaj Mishra, an Indian author and writer of literary and political essays, writes in *The Crisis in Modern Masculinity*, "Luridly retro ideas of what it means to be a man have caused a dangerous rush of testosterone around the world - from Modi's Hindu supremacism to Trump's nuclear brinkmanship".

Unable to bear the thought of his male dignity being robbed, Bhasi starts violating Omana, as evidenced in the following passage.

In rage, in hurt, in recklessness, I retaliated the only way I could think of then. I wanted her to feel how I felt. If not in love, in hurt we would be companions... Then I ground my lips against hers. 'Take this,' I bit into her lips, holding her tightly to stop her from escaping my embrace... And when I had had my fill of violating her pride, I let her go. (*The Better Man* 102)

Just as Osama bin Laden believed that Muslims "have been deprived of their manhood" (quoted in Judd) and could recover it only by beheading and raping innocent captives, Bhasi tries to recover his battered manhood by victimising the feminine.

Later, Bhasi buys the land in Kaikurissi and starts his life as an immigrant there. He contemplates, "In Kaikurissi...I know who I was...I went about life painting walls and dispensing health" (*The Better Man* 179-180). Here, Bhasi meets Damayanti, a patient of trauma due to the sudden death of her husband and child in an accident. Two years later, he marries her. As Bhasi feels, "Once, and only with her, I transgressed the line... But I swore to myself that I would never allow another person, another patient, entry into my life" (182-183). He attempts to recuperate his lost manhood of self through Damayanti.

Anita Nair, next presents Mukundan. As Ranjana Sengupta points out, The story has all the elements of what should make a good novel: the complete world, the universal themes of doubt, despair and redemption, the character of Mukundan, flawed and damaged, yet basically well intentioned. (21)

Anita Nair presents Mukundan as a child who is frightened at the sight of his father. His father, Achuthan Nair, leaves for Burma when his mother Paru Kutty is three months pregnant. And when Achuthan Nair returns after several years, Mukundan is scared of his physical presence - "a tall man swathed in black. His moustache twirled upward like angry question marks, and his eyes echoed the same fierceness of thought" (*The Better Man* 68). Mukundan's male crisis is further intensified by the death of Paru Kutty. It has been thirty-seven years since his mother's death, but he feels the agony of her final moments every night, "Of how she had smashed her forehead against the banister as she fell, splattering the wall with her blood and filling the house with her anguish" (30). He remembers how she had pleaded clutching his arms, "'Take me with you son. I am so unhappy here'" (31). The crisis in him is evidenced through the apparitions of his mother he sees every night.

The rage and venom etched on it made it as hideous as a monster's. 'See this,' it moaned. 'See what you and your father did to me.'... Then the creature began to drag him up the staircase. 'No Amma, let me go,' he begged... it said in a hollow voice, 'I want you to know the fear I felt

when a hand smashed into my back, pushing me down. I want you to know what I saw when the floor reached out to slam my life away. I want you to feel the anguish I felt as I realized I was going to die before my time.' (32)

Paru Kutty is a victim of the masculine crises as seen in her tormented state in the hands of her husband and then her son.

Anita Nair wilfully presents the male world as punctuated by inhibitions and ill-will with Mukundan and Bhasi as the backdrop. As Marie Claire writes,

Have you stopped to think about the non-stop pressure on him to be a success at work... and home... When a man can't be a man, he lacks purpose and it has big consequences for all of us : far-right movements feed off this frustration, male crime and mental disorders rocket, and, closer to home, men are too depressed to be supportive fathers and partners they'd like to be.

Almost four months after settling down in Kaikurrissi, Mukundan meets Anjana, a victim of marriage. She lives an empty, meaningless life and wishes to "erase all traces of her husband. Banish him from her life once and for all" (*The Better Man* 237). Ravindran, her husband, remains a stranger to her, "A man she cooked and kept house for. A man who used her body when the impulse took him" (228). One morning, Anjana's parents find a palm imprint on her cheek and warn Ravindran not to hurt her in future.

Ravindran was never again violent, but he found a new vent to express his anger. Anjana, who had graduated from numbness to rapture now, discovered torment. He used her body with a brutality that scared her. Pushing, punching, pummeling. Some nights when he had finished with her, she wondered what heinous sin she was paying for. (232)

Mukundan offers her his love and Anjana is taken by "Quite, gentle Mukundan, with his caring ways and love...." (236). But when the conversation turns to marriage, the masculine crisis emerges. While her husband's crisis fails her physically, Mukundan's crisis forces her out of a new marital bond.

Anita Nair's *The Better Man* is comprehended in this context. She inscribes the male body as the sight of power, sterility and snobbery. This is one signifying spectrum through which various phases of masculinity have been identified. Yet, all these phases eventually a sense of crisis.

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