



## A Feministic Insight into *The Better Man* and *Mistress* of Anita Nair

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### ABSTRACT

The main objective of this article is to analyze Nair's works, *The Better Man* and *Mistress*, through the insights of feminist theory by examining the struggle of women in the socio-cultural environment. The study examines the position of women in Indian society, in the home, rebellion against traditional stereotypes and change in women, especially in the Indian context where the family is considered a sacred institution. The author has often raised her voice against socio-cultural practices that limits women's freedom. Mostly, writing acts and their production of social documents because the author lives in a society in which he is both a victim and an agent of social cataclysm.

**KEYWORDS:** Women, Discrimination, Repression, Feminism, Freedom and Women Insight, etc.

### INTRODUCTION

Anita Nair is a contemporary Indo-Englian woman novelist. She was born in Mundakottakurissi, Kerala. From aspiring to be a psychotherapist to becoming a journalist and an author, Anita Nair has come a long way. Anita Nair's novels effectively weave the fabric of feminist perspective, human nature and values. She is the best-selling author of novels and poetry in India. Common themes of her fiction focus on fear, repression, despair, sexuality, freedom, identity crisis, caste discrimination, crime, mother's infidelity, and social, psychological and emotional insecurity. Anita Nair is deeply interested in the inner strength and desires of a woman. She describes the position of women in families and society in his novel. Anita Nair, through her famous novel, *Ladies Coup*, elegantly presents the trials and tribulations of the protagonist with five female characters. According to him women should maintain their dignity and fulfill their desires. She has written several works of fiction including *The Better Man and Mistress* and others. Her candor, her fierceness and her subtle strength suggest that the characters in her novels are inspired by people she sees in her daily life. Her well-known essays collection *Good Night and God Bless* about her happy experiences, a recommendation for good books to read, etc.

## WHAT IS FEMINISM

The term feminism has been used to refer to a political, cultural and economic movement whose main objective is to establish equal rights and legal protection and equality for women as men. The term gained popularity in the early 20th century when women started fighting for their right to freedom from all kinds of suppression, physical, psychological, intellectual, as well as financial. Broadly defined feminism is an active desire to change the status or status of women, to be treated and understood as respected human beings, and to receive equal functions with men, independently of women in human society. Feminism developed politically due to the influence of Marxism, which forced feminists to think in new ways. Men are viewed as the superior sex, while women are viewed as the "lesser sex" or "weaker sex".

### Feminist Insight in Anita Nair's Novels

Nair's novels question the chastity traditionally associated with Indian female identity, corroborating the approach of other Indian women writers who express their repressed desires in Indian society through their writings. But the emancipation of women in society, whether legal, economic, or familial and narrow gender roles, is not easy for women. Anita Nair presents the problems of women in society through her novels. The dignity and freedom of women can be known through her writings.

**Shari Daya says that** *“Anita Nair's novels as a psychological investigation of modern Indian women's inner minds which she aims to explore for reconstructing the traditional meaning of sexuality. In many of her novels, the protagonist-heroines are involved in the act of transgression. The act of sexual liberation is identified with the journey towards self-realization which is sanctified by the Hindu religion itself.”*

### ANALYSING

Anita Nair is a well-known writer in the field of Indian English and he has written about various issues such as freedom, identity crisis, despair, sexuality caste discrimination, crime and women's position. Therefore, her works are briefly introduced here.

*The Better Man* is the most popular novel in Indian English literature by Anita Nair that focuses on a male protagonist, but it also deals with many female characters such as Anjana, Meenakshi, and Valsala. These female characters are instrumental in reforming Mukundan and making him a better man. His life in a village in Kerala where his personal life is influenced by the social environment. All these people are a part of the socio-cultural and political milieu where everybody knows everybody. The influence of patriarchal ideology is felt more strongly in villages and small hamlets than in cities. The lives of women in villages and small settlements are naturally controlled by the family head and social institutions.

Nair shows mainly two types of women in the novel, one who respects the bond of marriage and faithfully play her role as wife or mother and the other who tries to break those bonds of marriage which have become oppressive bond for them.

Paru-kutty, Mukundan's mother, has been in fear of her domineering and violent husband Achuthan all her life. When Achuthan was going to Burma, Paru-kutty also wanted to go with him. Achuthan says if she will come with him then she will have to pass every moment with responsibility. Because she often felt tired and vomited due to being pregnant. That is why Achuthan Nair said:

*I can't be saddled with an invalid for whom*

*I'll have to be responsible every minute of the day (68).*

Paru-kutty is a straightforward woman who is afraid of her husband. Her husband keeps his wife in fear like a despotic king ruling the kingdom and does not love his wife and son. Achuthan is a symbol of patriarchy in Indian society.

Achuthan Nair entered into an extramarital affair with Ammini, who used to go to the fields to sell buttermilk and finally, Achuthan told Paru-kutti clearly:

*"I'm tired of having to visit Ammini in her house. The whole village knows about Ammini. So I might as well bring her here" (74).*

When Achuthan comes home with his concubine, Paru-kutty opposes him by saying "no" and prevents her husband from coming inside the house with Ammini. She asks her husband to treat her with dignity. She sternly says:

*"I'm willing to live with the shame of your taking a mistress. But I'm not going to let you flaunt how little I mean to you. I am your wife and I insist you treat me with the respect due to me" (74).*

Paru-Kutty persuades her husband to enter the house with Ammini but she threatens to kill herself. She calls herself the rightful property owner as she is Achuthan's first wife whom Achuthan has almost forgotten. But now Achuthan has no choice but to live in a separate house with his mistress Ammini.

Paru-kutty loves her son very much and is concerned that her son Mukundan should do what he likes. Mukundan likes to read writers like Dicken and imitate their way of writing stories. Seeing him copying a passage from Dickens, his father accused him of being a vagabond and told him not to make any show of artistic ability.

*"No one in my family has ever had any pretensions of artistic ability. And let me tell you how glad I am about that. We are a family of capable hardworking men. Not namby-pamby creatures rattling away lines of useless poetry or drawing pretty pictures or strutting around towns and villages bleating" (16).*

Although Paru-kutty keeps encouraging Mukundan Mukundan knows that she is deeply afraid of her husband and was always a victim of his anger and violence. Thus, his mother is the victim of a brutal patriarchal tyranny.

The story of his second novel *Mistress* (2005) revolves around several characters including Radha and her uncle Koman. But the first part of the novel tells about the love affair of the teenage girl Saadiya and the tragic end of her suicide. The novel begins with Saadiya, the teenage daughter of a Muslim family. His father, Haji Najib Masood Ahmad, was one of the six chiefs of the Muslim city and was a purebred Arab.

Anita Nair's novel *Mistress* has five main female characters who want to live life on their terms. Their personality is very strong and independent and they can follow their heart. Among them, Saadiya, a teenager from a Muslim conservative family, lives her life on her terms and is ready to make sacrifices for the decisions she makes. Anita has given a strong personality to these female characters to show the status and desires of women that they are ready to face the consequences of the decisions taken them.

Saadiya looks at the sky above her head in a blue square of twenty feet by thirty feet; this was the size of her sky as Muslim women are confined to their homes. Saadiya the youngest daughter of the family wants to live her life independently. She also wants to see and do and know a lot. He is displeased that only men are allowed to do whatever they want. But the women are content to stay in their rooms and to see the maze of streets. A tutor is appointed to teach him Arabic. She is about to marry Akbar Shah's son Saleem, who lives in Hong Kong. Saadiya is not satisfied with the stories of the sailors. She wants to see and experience reality. She is fond of roaming in beautiful places, green hills and unwalled gardens.

*“The life demand, of us that we have a Plank of Avidity. How can we have more if we don't raise our expectations? How can we be content with just what we have and know?” (100).*

The four walls of her house have become her world but Saadiya longs to see and know the world beyond these four walls.

*“Saadiya stared at the square of blue over her head. Twenty feet by thirty feet. That was the measure of her sky, the peripheries of her life. She touched the grey walls of the terrace roof. Even if it stood a solid six feet and two inches high making sure she would never feel what was not meant for her eyes, ensuring that she was not visible to anyone. Saadiya felt what was by now a familiar sense of despair. Would she like her sisters and every other woman born here, to live and die hidden by these walls? Was there never to be a way out from here?” (99).*

Saadiya is not satisfied with seeing pictures of peculiar places, hills, and valleys as well as people in a book at the house of Nadira. Her desire to experience and learn about things drives her to move out of the house. According to him, it is not fair that men should go wherever they want, see and do whatever they want but women cannot do all this. She wants to complain to her father about this injustice being done to women. And says:

*“It isn't fair that you men get to go wherever you want, see and do whatever you like and we are expected to be content with this patch of blue and this maze of alleys” (99).*

Saadiya is not satisfied with mere fiction or stories. For him, the reality is important:

*“Reality to be able to see, to touch, to hear, to feel, to sense, to know, to experience” (101)*

Saadiya walks forward with her face uncovered and at this moment she sees Sethu and Sethu sees her. Which created a feeling and passion in his mind. Saadiya gets lost in Setu's dreams. Due to this event, Saadiya's life turns into a tragedy. She names Setu as Malik.

*“My bodice feels thighs. My insides quiver with queer churning, my breath quickens, I do not understand me any if this Vaapa, you ought to have branded me so that I could never dream again” (131).*

When Saadiya's father arranges Saadiya's marriage with Akbar's son Salim, Saadiya does not want to marry and opposes the marriage proposal. Her father tries to ignore her wishes, but she is not ready to marry the man chosen by her father. It states that:

*“Vaapa, you can pretend that you don't hear me. But I will tell the Kazi that I am not willing to marry the man you have chosen for me” (144).*

Saadiya is punished for this crime by her father with a hot iron rod, yet Saadiya refuses to marry Salim.

In the novel *Mistress*, Anita Nair highlights many issues of women such as gender discrimination, the status of women, and the suppression of women in the name of religion. In Arabpatnam, women are not considered good to get out of the house, walk on the streets or go out to study. Though Saadiya's father loves his daughter and appoints a tutor at the house to tutor her. But he punishes her severely for her crime.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, Anita Nair's novels primarily deal with the experiences of traumatic situations in the lives of Indian female characters. In India mainly in the middle-class society, patriarchy, the status of women in family life, female feticide, prostitution and rape are the issues she presents in her novel. His novel primarily presents the ethos of middle-class Indian life. The woman in her novel is unable to free herself from the orthodox shackles of the traditional way of life and social customs.

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