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Transformation through Self-Introspection: An exposition of humanistic psychology in Anita  
Nair's *The Better Man*

Abstract

Anita Nair is an Indian English writer from South India from the district of Kerala. A bestselling author of Fiction and poetry Nair's debut novel 'The Better Man' has been translated into 21 languages and has been published in Europe and United States. This paper attempts to examine the process of making of a better man. The novel focuses on a well-known maxim 'It is better late than never'. Through this work Anita Nair has showed us how a common man who is very much dependent of his society and the people around him finally liberates his self from all the restrictions. His experiences in life have taught him how to deal with situations. He frees his soul

and transformed into a better man. Transformation means a total change, change in appearance, nature and attitude. For the protagonist his attitude towards life has changed. He is able to break his limitations and transformed from a common man to a better man.

Keywords: Common man, Better man, Restriction, Limits, Transformation

#### Article

Anita Nair's *The Better Man* deals with the undercurrents of consciousness and thus humanistic psychology could be taken as the basis for a deeper understanding of the characters and their respective actions. Humanistic psychology became popular in the mid twentieth century. It is a psychological perspective that comes as an answer to Freud's psycho analytic theory. This theory concentrates on a human realization and the expression of one's self. Humanistic psychology focuses on the positive aspects of human mind such as free will, creativity etc. This theory was popularized by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow.

They assess human nature from the point of view of a listener and also from the point of view of the person who is behaving. A person expresses his behavior through his feelings and that constitutes the self-image of the person. Humanistic theory believes that every human being have a set of needs that they want to fulfill and once it is fulfilled they becomes healthy personalities who are able to contribute something for creating a healthy society.

Maslow says that there are different levels of needs in human behavior. The basic level of needs include shelter; nourishment, warmth and the next level of needs include a feeling of being secure, affection etc. If all this needs are fulfilled human beings shows a better nature and can be seen as fully abled persons. In the case of Mukundan, when he feels that there are people to love him and take care of him, he is able to free himself from his haunting past.

Towards the end of the novel Mukundan has changed to a Better Man. The transformation in Mukundan happens only after the fulfillment of his needs. In the care of Anjana and Bhasi Mukundan is able to change and has transformed to a man who is capable of living his wishes and dreams.

The main theme of this novel is process of making of a better man through outward influences as well as through self-introspection. The novel is set in a village in northern Kerala, Kaikurussi. The name of the village and the characters in the novel are somewhat autobiographical in the sense that Anita Nair has portrayed characters from her observations in her own native land, Mundakotukurussi. The village Kaikurussi is a sleepy village which is not famous for anything or anyone: "There is nothing here that would make anyone come looking for it. It is the birthplace of neither a Mahatma nor a movement. There are no craft forms originating from here to fill Government Emporia shelves. No miracles have ever happened here. In fact, nothing of significance ever happens here to anyone." (The Better Man 8)

The protagonist in the novel is Mukundan, a retired government employee. When the novel opens, the story is narrated by Bhasi, another major character in the novel. Bhasi introduces other characters in the novel, Power House Ramakrishnan, Shankar and his tea club, Postman Unni, Barber Nanu, village crier Pavithran etc. The author is successful in portraying a typical village. Mukundan stays with his father and mother. But he is unable to live with his arrogant father. At the age of eighteen, he applied for a job and is selected as a lower division clerk in Trichy and leaves Kaikurussi for the job. When he retires from the job, there is no other place for him to spend the rest of his life except his native land. So he comes back to Kaikurussi. But Mukundan is unable to find a space for him in the village. He feels alienated from the entire

world. Mukundan comes back to his house; Krishnan Nair is still doing his responsibilities in the house. Krishnan Nair is the care taker of the house and the properties.

Mukundan is unable to free himself from his past. During the night he has seen horrifying dreams. Sometimes he feels that his ancestors who are died are still gazing at him. Mukundan begins to fear the night and the darkness: “When he turned, he saw them sitting there watching him, immobile, silent, but with accusing eyes. All five of them; Ballamaven, Ammumma, and the three Cheriyyammas. Their faces turned toward him, their arms resting on the table, Watching.” Leave me alone”, he screamed, and slumped to the floor.” (The Better Man 29)

The thoughts of all those people disturb Mukundan and also face disappointment on not helping his mother in her difficult situation. After some years of being an employee he visited his village. His mother is in a burdensome situation where his father has abandoned her for another woman. Parukutty, Mukundan’s mother pleads him to take her away with him because she feels alienated in the big house with no one to take care of her. Mukundan who is afraid of his father is unable to help his mother. He leaves her mother and moves back to his busy city life. His father is always a horrifying figure for him. He narrates the last day he meets his mother and still remembers her words:

When I came home, she asked me to take her away. She said she was unhappy, and she wanted to be someplace far away from where he was. But I didn’t. I was scared of my father. I didn’t have the courage to confront him. So I made excuses. I said I would have to wait till I was allotted a family quarter. I left her here all alone at his mercy. (The Better Man 45)

Mukundan meets Bhasi, the one screw loose Bhasi and it becomes a turning point in Mukundan’s life, who feels life as a failure and is always haunted by his dark past. His

neglect of his mother and the rejection that he shows to Meenakshi always disturbs him. Meenakshi is his childhood friend. They spent a lot of time together playing and chatting and they grow together. As they become aged there arises a barrier between both of them, an invisible barrier created by their age and their gender. Later when Mukundan is secured with a job he leaves Kaikurussi and rejects Meenakshi. He never has a thought about Meenakshi. But back in his own house in Kaikurussi, he becomes restless and is unable to continue living in the house.

Bhasi who becomes Mukundan's confidant helps him to change his attitude towards life. He advises Mukundan to stop thinking about his past and tells him to live in the present. Every evening they meet and spend time together narrating their life and their experiences. Mukundan talks to Bhasi about the haunting thoughts that disturb him. He narrates how darkness creates evil thoughts in his mind. Finally Bhasi who is a village healer decides to support Mukundan to escape from his problems. Bhasi knows many techniques of healing treatment. Bhasi says to Mukundan: "Mukundan how long will you continue to run away from yourself? Look at you, the pitiful creature that you are. Fifty-eight years old and still foundering in a swamp of uncertainty. Afraid of your father. Haunted by guilt. Shying away from relationships." (The Better Man 189)

Bhasi begins his healing techniques on Mukundan. He takes Mukundan to a forest and narrates the benefits of each and every herb which they have seen on their way. Bhasi tells Mukundan to enjoy the beauty and silence:

Think of that dark gloomy forest as your feet. What your life was still this moment. Guild clung to your feet. FERA brushed your cheeks. But with me at your side, you found your way to this clearing, towards escape, this purity of light. Kneel down and gather the dew from the grass in your palms. Cleanse your

eyes. Open them wide. Look around you now. This is how your life will be henceforth. This is how you will be as long as you live. (The Better Man 193)

Mukundan begins to walk to the forest early morning and find peace in that atmosphere. Later Bhasi meets Mukundan and asks him how he is feeling and Mukundan having a positive reply said he feels well. Bhasi's first phase of treatment is over and he begins the second phase. It is in Mukundan's own house, in the attic. Bhasi takes Mukundan to the attic. They have seen so many urns and other antique pieces. Bhasi tells Mukundan that he want him to step into one of the jars. Bhasi suggests that consider it as a kind of meditation or exercise for mind. For Bhasi, the shape of the jar looks like a mother's womb, so tells Mukundan to consider it as a mother's womb. "To rewrite your destiny, we have to start with the beginning of your existence."(The Better Man 198)

Bhasi convinces Mukundan that it is his mind that creates all the haunting thoughts and ghost is an illusion. So there is no use thinking about his mother or her ghost:

Mukundan, it is time you released your mother's soul. To cling to the dead is to curse them exist without a body. Let her go. Let her find the destination that every soul is headed towards, from the moment it is separated from the Greater soul. You don't need her anymore. Within you are the genes of your ancestors. Of men and women who let nothing trample them down. Let the genes of your ancestors talk to you now. (The Better Man198)

Finally Bhasi wins in all his experiments and he is able to make Mukundan a better man: "A new man, a new life, Afraid no longer. Capable of so much more than he had ever dreamed of" (The Better Man 199)

Again occurs another headache for Bhasi. Power House Ramakrishnan has decided to build a community hall in the village. He has chosen Bhasi's land for the purpose. Bhasi rejects Ramakrishnan's proposal. Power House Ramakarishnan, as the name itself suggests has money and power to control everything and everyone in the village, warns Bhasi of the consequences that he has to face if he rejects the proposal. He threatens Bhasi of spoiling his life and business with his power and influences. Bhasi becomes tensed and he tells Mukundan about this matter and requests him to talk to Power House Ramakrishnan. Mukundan visits Ramakrishnan to discuss the matter. But Ramakrishnan has already planned the situation. He very clearly knows that Mukundan will come to talk to him. So he invites some of the well-known personalities in the village which include Parameshwaran Namboothiri from Plasi Mana, Haji Suleiman from Masjid committee, Abu seth who is a rich man, Comrade Jayan etc. for a committee on the making of the community hall. Ramakrishnan has selected Mukundan as a member for the committee and he very well knows that he can impress Mukundan:

Power House Ramakrishnan operated on a simple theory: Every man has a price. In some cases it was a little more difficult to settle on. The currency was intangible, the exchange rate high, but he was yet to discover a human being who couldn't be bought. All you had to do was figure out at what price principles began to erode. Based on his theory, which had never failed him, he plotted his stratagem to buy Mukundan's complicity in the building of his dream. The Power House Ramakrishnan Community Hall. (The Better Man 306)

Mukundan, a power seeker forgets himself completely when he finds himself along with the important personalities in his village. But suddenly something from his head reminds him of Bhasi. Then he talks to others about the matter. "Well, does it have to be located here? I mean, it

doesn't seem right that we take away a man's land even if it is for a good cause", Mukundan said apologetically. (The Better Man 308)

But the others convince Mukundan that Bhasi is not a native of Kaikurussi, so he can leave Kaikurussi and buy land in some other place. Finally Mukundan agrees with the committee decision on buying land from Bhasi and to build the community hall. Mukundan realizes that there was nothing to do but explain the situation to Bhasi. He does it and advises Bhasi to buy some land in some other place. Mukundan explains his helplessness to Bhasi and tells him that the village has finally accepted him as a worthy man and that is why they have asked for his opinion:

Yes, I mean, I'm sorry that I couldn't do more to help. But aren't you happy for me? This is everything I have always wanted. The village has finally recognized me as a worthy man. I'm no longer just Achuthan Nair's son. I'm seen as a man who can make a contribution to the betterment of this village. My opinion counts, you see. (The Better Man 312)

Bhasi is very much annoyed and he asks, "When did the opinion of these people or your position in the village become so important to you?" (The Better Man 313)

Mukundan tells him that he is the one who made him like that. It is he who advised him to stay strong and live according to his will. Bhasi is the one who made him Mukundan:

You are the one who said that I have to emerge from my father's shadow. That I have to be my own man and make a place of my own in this world. And now, when I do so, you are telling me it isn't important. I don't understand you anymore. I suppose you would have liked me to remain a nervous wreck so that you could continue to exercise your power over me! (The Better Man 313)

Bhasi understands Mukundan has got blind because of power and money. When he gets recognition and power, he forgets the role played by Bhasi in shaping his character. Mukundan tells Bhasi that he has to repay the money which he has bought from Parameshwaran Namboothiri. Bhasi is totally troubled and he asks Mukundan whether he is able to stand as a guarantor for him to take a loan from the bank. But Mukundan says that he is a retired employee and he will not be considered as a guarantor. Bhasi very well knows that Mukundan is not in a position to help a person like him. Bhasi is surprised to see the sudden change in Mukundan by the influence of power and money.

Mukundan becomes very confident. He, who is not able to find a space for himself begins to enjoy his life. Mukundan visits Anjana, a school teacher whom he has already fell in love. They spend some time together at Anjana's house. Mukundan has gifted her jewellery which his mother has used to wear. Before parting with Anjana Mukundan tells her that she has to wait until the divorce has to be processed. "In the eyes of the world we are committing adultery." (The Better Man 322). Anjana is a married women but her married life is not a successful one. So she has applied for divorce. Mukundan visits Anjana frequently and they even have physical relation. At the beginning stage Mukundan does not think much about any consequence of visiting her or marrying her. But when he gets attention in the village, when Power House and his committee accepts him, he feels that it is not good to marry a women who is already married and since she is not legally divorced he will lose his importance among the people. So he tells Anjana that he will marry her only after she gets a divorce from her husband. So Mukundan decides to stop visiting her till she becomes legally divorced.

After some months Mukundan's father becomes ill and he dies. Mukundan and the whole village mourn for the death of Achuthan Nair. His distant relatives, Well-wishers, People who

looked up at him are there for the funeral. Achuthan Nair is not a perfect personality but people admire him for his knowledge and for his strong personality. Mukundan feels complete loneliness. He lives for his father and now he is no more. Mukundan is surrounded with a kind of sense of seclusion. Krishnan Nair moves near Mukundan and he calls him by his name in the voice he had used only before forty-seven years ago:

Take a good look at yourself. Do you have anyone to share your sorrow with? Anyone you can call your own? A wife? A friend? And yet you sit here on judgement on a man whose death is mourned by hundreds of people. I am not saying he was perfect. He had his faults. Several of them, in fact. He was callous, brutal and a tyrant. But he also had the courage of his convictions. When he believed in something, he let nothing come between him and his purpose. He stood by it no matter what the world thought of him. Do you have that courage, Mukundan? Do you have the strength to pursue happiness? You cling to your old grievances like someone adding up the same set of figures day after day, expecting a different answer each time. Get a grip on yourself, Mukundan. Grieve for your father, mourn his death. Then go on with your life and make something of it. If you think you are a better man than him, let us see it. You can't use him as an excuse for your ineptitude anymore. (The Better Man 343)

After some days Krishnan Nair leaves Mukundan and from all his responsibilities in the house. Mukundan becomes totally alienated from the whole world and even from his big house. He understands that there is no one who is there for him to share his life, not even a friend. He begins to think about his life and feels that he has wasted his life. He does nothing in his life. He decides that he should free himself from all the restrictions that he has imposed on him. He longs

for a support in life. He begins to think of the time he spends with Bhasi and Anjana. He feels a kind of warmth in him when he recollect those memorable time with them. He decides to meet Bhasi. One night Mukundan goes to Kiliad to see Bhasi. Finally he meets Bhasi. He has given a copy of some of the documents which he has signed. The document is for sharing his property with Bhasi. Mukundan is ready to share his land with Bhasi. He apologizes for what he has done to Bhasi: "I was foolish. I let my own lack of self-esteem rule me. I was so besotted by the idea of being someone important that I didn't realise how important you are to me. This is the only way to make amends."(The Better man 353)

Bhasi rejects Mukundan's idea of sharing the land. Bhasi tells Mukundan that if he accepts his proposal and comes back to Kaikurussi, the committee will take action against Mukundan, they might reject Mukundan from the committee. But Mukundan who is in a state of realization and transformation begins to speak and says that:

All my life I wanted to be my father's equal. But now I want more. I wanted to be better than him. I want to know what it is to love and to give. And, in turn, to be loved. I don't want to wake up one morning and discover that I have frittered away my life chasing after ephemeral dreams. I want my dreams alive and living beside me. I will leave it to you decide whether you wish to return or not. But the land is yours to do with as you please. But nothing would make me happier than to have you living alongside me. I will wait for you, Bhasi. (The Better Man 354)

Mukundan has transformed after realizing his mistakes. The path that he has travelled is a wrong one and is able to divert him to a way of reconciliation and transformation. He feels that he needs Anjana in his life. The next day Mukundan visits Anjana and agrees that he is able to accept her into his life without anyone else's concern. He promises that he will not reject her for

any reason. Finally she agrees to marry him. So Mukundan, a man who follows his father, his society and who takes concern from those who around him, is in a position to live according to his will. He is able to plan his life. Thus Mukundan becomes a man who is capable of living his wishes and his dreams. He has transformed to a better man who is able to understand his mistakes. He frees himself from a life of discontent. He has transformed to a better man.

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