

## **Subverting The Hegemonic Masculinity: A Study on Anita**

**Nair's *The Better Man***

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Anita Nair is the most prominent writer in the present scenario. Her first novel *The Better Man* has given her immense recognition. *The Better Man* by Anita Nair is the story of Mukundan, a retired government employee who returns to his homeland unwillingly and ends up being a better man. In gender studies, hegemonic masculinity is a concept popularized by sociologist R.W. Connell of proposed practices that promote the dominant social position of men, and the subordinate social position of women. Conceptually, hegemonic masculinity proposes to explain how and why men maintain dominant social roles over women, and other gender identities, which are perceived as "feminine" in a given society. As a sociologic concept, the *hegemonic* nature of "hegemonic masculinity" derives from the theory of cultural hegemony, by Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, which analyzes the power relations among the social classes of a society. Hence, in the term "hegemonic masculinity", the adjective *hegemonic* refers to the cultural dynamics by means of which a social group claims, and sustains, a leading and dominant position in a social hierarchy; nonetheless, hegemonic masculinity embodies a form of social organization that has been sociologically challenged and changed. Anita Nair in her maiden novel, try to normalize the gender equations and with her characterization, is successful at "creating a de-gendered world where all configurations of practices are set transparent." (Howson, 5)

The story begins when Mukundan returns back to his homeland. He has many blurred and haunting pictures of his childhood and family. He was always being tortured by his father and image of his helpless mother and his unwillingness to take her along with him. His

mother's face always haunt him. At the first day in his mansion he feels he is laughed at by Balamman, Amamma, three Cheriymas and his mother who passed away 37 years ago. In Kaikurishi, then appears Krishnan Nair, the one who was there as the caretaker of his bungalow during his father's rule. Krishnan Nair sows seeds of the fable of Machilamma in Mukundan's terrified psyche. He says Machilamma resides on the top of the house on a particular arena of her own. She gets angry easily when someone of not-so-noble birth enters the home and once she gets angry, any of the family members is sure to die. Mukundan befriends Bhasi, a village painter, who seems to be an interesting character. Mukundan then gets slowly into the village people's heart through his visits to Shankar's tea club. He has been a successful government employee in the past and he wishes to be approved by his villagers now. He soon gains recognition through the apt suggestion he gave to Mad Moidu. The villagers started to respect him.

He encounters Meenakshi, who was very much close to him in childhood days. They added much to each other's life during childhood. Mukundan got fooled by situations that he mistakes when Meenakshi asks to meet him personally. Meenakshi is a woman dumped by her husband. She makes the two ends meet and managed her kids well. He mentally gets a realization about how much he's not deeply wanted at least by a human being. In between an incident of cross-connection of phone calls by Mukundan and of village lady Valsala is mentioned. Mukundan unknowingly becomes the sole cause to prove the murder of Valsala's husband which was done by Valsala herself. Though he must take credit of the case and must be proud of it, he regrets for the act. He shares to Bhasi the ambiguities and chaos in his mind as he is still being haunted by his mother's death. Mukundan asks him the very sincere question why every woman on earth reminds him of his mother. In the work there are references made to 'Odiyans', who are the community of people who can disguise themselves as a cat and can take revenge upon someone. These stories frighten Mukundan's lost psyche again. He had a strong feeling that his mother was prey to such 'Odiyans'.

Mukundan under the effect of drinks opens up to his confidant Bhasi. Bhasi tries his best to heal Mukundan's wounded mind and shape his life by employing a revitalizing method. He, along with Mukundan seeks for Asoka tree in fringes as its medicinal bark can keep Mukundan away from all the odds and can therefore, vitalize him. Once this exercise is over, he takes Mukundan to the attic and tells him to get into a big womb like jar. This particular act was to make Mukundan's heart as a pure one, which only a new born baby

possesses. This act gives an intertextual reference to *The God of Small Things* of Arundhati Roy, where Rahel imagines herself cuddling with her twin inside the dish antenna which she visualizes as a womb. Seeking solace in the foetal position can also be seen in Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot*, where Estragon resumes to the foetal position to sleep. This undertaking was essential in order to unwrap the various anxieties which strangled Mukundan's real self. Thus the text frequently reflects on the identity crisis which Mukundan and Bhasi suffers.

Bhasi was once a promising English teacher who decided to flee to Kaikurishi due to his jilted love affair with his own student. Bhasi proves to be a significant person in Mukundan's life as he teaches latter, the lessons in his presence as well as absence. Appears then, Anjana, a school teacher, to Mukundan's life. Anjana has suffered enough from her marriage and is now a divorcee. As the story proceeds, love towards Anjana awakens the urge in Mukundan to be a better man. Here, readers are enthralled by a dilemma where the character had to lose his dear friend Bhasi in order to keep up his pride. His struggle for identity appears again when he had to choose between his guardian role towards his father and the would be husband role towards Anjana. In this situation he, falls in utter despair. He feels the urge to get back into the womb jar to feel rejuvenated. But he reminds Bhasi telling him that a man can only be reborn once. Death of his father embeds him into more obligations. However, he tries to be a better man than his father by making everything around him better. He risks his pride for the ones who trust him and to whom he owed back respect.

The prevalent themes in *The Better Man* is ageing, urge for power and quest for identity. Ageing is seen as the factor haunting both Achutan Nair and his son Mukundan. Achutan Nair finds it as a disgrace. He comprehends of the pleasure of dying after falling down from the steps, and finds it highly unmanly to meet death after having a 'withering body' and being spoon-fed by nurses. Mukundan's concern over ageing is his lady love Anjana who is 17 years younger than him which brings terror to him. The urge for power is personified in the text as Achutan Nair tries to exert all of his power on Mukundan and wife. He was never exhibited fatherly tenderness towards Mukundan. The next person with this attribute of urge for power is Power House Ramakrishnan. Being a rich and well equipped man, he tries and acquire Bhasi's land to construct an auditorium for village functions, naming it upon himself.

The quest for identity and justifying oneself are the crisis experienced by Mukundan and Bhasi. Mukundan once fled from the village fearing his father and mother. The better half portion of his life was left unoccupied and appears Anjana who fills this gap. Bhasi punishes himself with a poetic justice and flees from all the responsibilities and designation to reach Kaikurissi village, where he establishes himself as a painter with immense knowledge about diseases and cures.

The text also give references to various beliefs of the villagers and Mukundan. Mukundan, though educated and established, carry fear for the spirits and possess certain belief in order to find reasons for all the unanswered questions of his life, which his logical mind could not apprehend.

The text also hints at the matrilineal system which was prevalent in Nair ancestral homes of Kerala earlier. In *The Better Man*, Anita Nair picturizes the household as a Nair family. Here the properties are controlled by the protagonist Mukundan. Mukundan returns home after a long time and the ancestral home is showed to him by manager Krishnan Nair. Though there isn't a direct mention about the property ownership, we understand from the context that the house was Mukundan's mother's property even though she was a very feeble lady in nature. When she comes to know about Achutan Nair's mistress, she didn't allow Achutan Nair to be in the house any more. After his parents' death, Mukundan Nair inherits the houses and property.

On analyzing *The Better Man* we see how the leading male character have evolved over the time. It develops in the falling action of the plot. Here the patriarchal institution is questioned and the characters choose humanity over patriarchy. Though definition of the title *A Better Man* has inclinations as, "Are they better men according to female perspective?" or "Are they the ones who have chosen to put others first?" or "Have they bettered as a justification towards their own psyche?", Anita Nair keeps silences herself and lets the reader guess. *The Better Man* opens up by describing the protagonist Mukundan as the reluctant native. Towards the end, however Mukundan undergoes the most important metamorphosis in the novel. The questions mentioned above applies rather to Mukundan, who has been evolving into a better man than his father.

Expanding one's emotional and psychological potential and learning how to stand by oneself plays an important role in the whole novel. Furthermore, with regard to Mukundan and Bhasi, the novel underlines that it is important to take the responsibility for oneself and

others. Almost until the end of the storyline, Mukundan is neither able to feel responsible for oneself nor for the ones he love (Bhasi and Anjana). Mukundan does not even realize that he has betrayed both his beloved and his friend. He has made severe mistakes. In order to be better man, though, one has to be capable enough to admit one's mistakes, have the courage apologize and have the will power to correct the mistakes. Honesty is also an important trait in the protagonist, as it took a long time for Mukundan to be eventually honest to himself and to others. In order to become a better man, it is important that one gets an access to one's own feeling. Being anti-authorial is also important to be a better man. The chapter of the novel, "A Better Man than His Father" lists some ways of his behavioral traits a 'the better man' should possess. Firstly the 'better' man realizes his faults, he succeeds to transform his psyche, i.e. overcomes traumatic experiences and moreover, is able to apologize for his faults in the past.

Mukundan's betterment can be evident by tracing how he faced his trauma. Mukundan knows that he has been suffering from his mother's death for years. He was forever haunted by a sense of failure after having abandoned his mother. He is even pricked by nightmares regarding his mother's death. Even though Krishnan Nair tries to call his attention to that fact that mother's death was not Mukundan's fault and there was little he could do, the 58-year-old still assumes that he has made a huge mistake by not helping his mother when he was a child and he constantly believes that she consequently hates him for that reason. Mukundan says to Krishnan Nair that in the past he should have prevented her from heartbreak and humiliation.

Mukundan has never tried to overcome that trauma and he is almost 60 years old when he eventually takes great pain in the betterment of his psychological self. Krishnan Nair reiterates the past by saying to Mukundan: "You were young, just a boy pretending to be a grown up. Your father is a formidable man."(126)

Krishnan Nair sets Mukundan on thought about the callousness he was acting. He says that: "It's all in your mind. If you want to look around you and see mountains, forests, and oceans, you will. Or else, you will see little mounds of earth, sparse bushes and piddling streams" (*The Better Man*, 148)

Krishnan wants to point out to Mukundan that everything depends upon the point of view and that Mukundan mostly tends to perceive what he wants to perceive. The title of that chapter "The Mountain That Was as Flat as a Field on Top" is in itself a metaphor for Mukundan does not see the peak of a mountain to which he could climbs, i.e., he has no aims.

Achutan Nair's behaviour towards him after he returns home travelling places was initially so indifferent, "...Amma,' Mukundan asked in a troubled voice, "why is he never satisfied with anything I do? Why is he so angry with me all the time?" To which his mother's reply which stands for the proof of how hegemonic masculinities are made. She says that: "He just wants you to grow up to be like him. Strong and capable. When you have a son of your own, you too will find that you want him to be like you."(17)

But this advice has put Mukundan in rather great trauma as he tried and failed to be such a hegemonic male:

For many months now there had been no woman in Mukundan's life. Partly because he had built yet another line of defence against love-his fear of hurt. He created it out of fear as he watched Narendran die. He couldn't bear to lay himself open to such anguish once again..." (*The Better Man*, 68)

Achutan Nair was aptly described as the one whose arrival is learnt by the echo of wooden clogs. This terror is the reason why Mukundan leaves the land. He returns home after 37 years. But all the years haven't changed Mukundan's mindset and his fear of father. Back in the house, the thought of leaving his mother in the hands of destiny and father haunts him. He assumes that he could have saved her from death:

She moved her face so that it emerged from the shadows. Her eyes glittered; but there was no warmth there, only remoteness. When she spoke, her voice was cold and grainy. "Where were you when I needed you?" You could have rescued me, but you chose not to (*The Better Man*, 31).

Later Achutan Nair moved to his mistress' home leaving his traces in the house. Even then Mukundan seemed to be worried of him: "Had those hands wound round his mother's neck with the same effortless ease, secure in the knowledge that he was king even if he had been ousted from this kingdom. He was withering, but even now no one dared meet his eyes or hold his gaze..."(80).

He slowly tried coming out of his shell and villagers were much impressed by the way he tackled issues, which earned him self-respect. He paralleled himself with his father, "For a moment he thought of his father with admiration. He had lorded it over the village for so

many years and even now they sought his advice on all major issues...” (*The Better Man*, 121).

As his mother haunted him, Bhasi advises him to follow his instructions:

Mukundan, it is time you released your mother’s soul. To cling to the dead is to curse them to 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. Crouched in the womb, Mukundan called forth his genes. He reverted to his original form- a single cell. Bit by bit the embryo of this new man developed. Eyes. Nose. Ears. The three sensory organs. Two hearts fused into one. Budding limbs. Bones. Genitals. Lulled by the warmth of jar, fed by the soothing drone that washed over him, Mukundan felt himself dissipate. He closed his eyes to shut out the light. Surrounded by blackness, he felt himself split into several selves. All of whom had no claim to the one that had stepped into the urn. Disembodied, he was no longer anything that he had been before. He could separate himself endlessly so that he could be anything he wanted to be. A new man, a new life. Afraid no longer. Capable of so much more than he had ever dreamed of (*The Better Man*, 198).

This action becomes symbolic of Mukundan’s rejuvenation. He feels changed and seems no more worrying about it. Then ‘serenading Anjana’ made her entry into his life. He started becoming passionate about her, who was a school teacher and is leading her divorced life: “My mother begged me rescue her and take her away. But I didn’t. I was afraid of my father, and so I made excuses. If I had done as she asked me, perhaps she might still be alive. That is the kind of man I am. A weak and undependable creature” (244). Mukundan gradually started realizing the purposelessness of his life:

As a man grows older, there comes a certain point when he begins to solicit the attention of others being around him. As a young man he may scoff at society and shun it. But with age he seeks out the world and invites it to step over his threshold into his home. For with age he remembers that he needs a show of strength for the two most important occasions left in his life: A child's wedding, and his own funeral. He wants attendance. He wants crowds. He wants it to be known that he was respected, adored and liked. His happiness is the world's happiness. His death is the world's sorrow. So he will revive old friendships, attend every betrothal, wedding and house-warming he is invited to, call on the ill and rush to condole when he hears of a death. His single most important preoccupation becomes wooing of the world he live in. (*The Better Man*, 247)

Mukundan had internal conflicts on his inevitable love and he wished to be reborn again. Mukundan neither could be a savior of his mother nor towards Anjana:

A strange image floated into Mukundan's mind. That of Karna, the valiant hero of Mahabharata. He had sat thus, suffering excruciating pain in stoic silence as a vicious insect feasted on his blood. Only so that his teacher, the short-tempered Kshatriya annihilator Parasurama, could sleep undisturbed. Yet when Parasurama woke up and discovered the extent of his pupil's dedication to him, he chose to close Karna. He remembered only how he had been deceived. For Karna had claimed to be a poor Brahmin boy. And no Brahmin, Parasurama ranted, Could endure such pain. My pain is no less, Karna, Mukundan said to himself. My father is as unappreciative of my devotion as Parasurama was of yours. They only see what they want to see, and when it doesn't match their expectations, they are as unforgiving in their disappointment as they are in their anger. What is it that you expected of me father? What deeds of valor did you require me to perform? What lines of duty did you expect me to toe? What

battles did you demand I fight? What hopes did you expect me to fulfill? What kind of man did you want me to be? (*The Better Man*, 291)

But time and destiny teaches him more lessons. His father's death proved a turning point where he makes conclusions about his life:

I think your father was more than successful with your upbringing that either he or you realized. Do you remember what he told you day after day when you were a child? If you wish to survive, you need to think of yourself first. The moment you start thinking of others, there's no way you will ever reach anywhere. In this world, no one can be responsible for anyone else. Protect yourself first. Then if it doesn't involve risking your life, you can help someone else. A survivor is someone who is selfish. It isn't true Mukundan. What is the point in surviving if you have no one to share your happiness or grief with? Don't make the mistake I did. Don't throw away your life (347).

What do I do next? Mukundan asked himself despondently. How can a man evolve into what he desires to be? How can he stand taller than his father and create a new line of vision for himself? How can he set himself free of his father's presence? He was no better than his father had been. Perhaps he was the lesser man (*The Better Man*, 344)

When he realized his true self, he feels that:

All my life I wanted to be my father's equal. But now I want more. I want to be better than him. I want to know what it is love and to give. And in turn, 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 (*The Better Man*, 354).

The closer we study about the idea of masculinity, the more we understand that masculinity is in itself a lot of contradiction. Lynne Segal puts it as:

The closer we come to uncovering some form of exemplary masculinity, a masculinity which is solid and sure of itself, the clearer it becomes that masculinity is structured through contradiction: the more it asserts itself, the more it calls itself into question. (Segal 1990, 123)

Betterment of Mukundan illustrates how well how hegemonic masculinity has evolved over time and with odds in life, thereby reflecting in literature. The novel, thus presents before us a character who has underwent a metamorphosis from his rigid earlier stereotypes of what it means to be a man to what it takes to be a 'man'.

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