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I. Antony Rajasree, Reg. no: 10200,  
Research Scholar,  
Supervisor: Dr.K.Thanikasalam, Head & Director, Dept. Of English,  
Research centre: Aditanar College of Arts & Science, Tiruchendur,  
Affiliation to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,  
Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli - 627 012, Tamil Nadu, India.  
rajasreejeeva24@gmail.com

### Female Autonomy in Anita Nair's *The Better Man* and *Cut-Like Wound*

#### Abstract

In any social set-up, women constitute the marginalised group. Women writers present themselves as an authoritative representative of woman's consciousness. Anita Nair, the living woman writer of this century is a feminist with a difference. Few women characters of Anita Nair's novels commit adultery and sacrilege to fulfil their desires as depicted in *The Better Man* and *Cut Like Wound*. As long as Anita Nair's female characters confine to the leash of social norms and boundaries of women, they experience submission and slavery in their family and in the society. They go against the society to break this bondage.

**Key words:** Sacrilege, autonomy, adultery, emancipation

In any social set-up, women constitute the marginalised group. In the middle ages, autonomy and self-fulfilment for women were denied. Many men and women writers have portrayed the problem of women's inequality in society. Women writers present themselves as an authoritative representative of woman's consciousness.

The feminist books like Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* expose the oppression, anxieties and suppressed feelings of women in the society. Gayatri Spivak's challenging essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" clearly proves this statement. She asks "How can we touch the consciousness of the people? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?" (80). According to her "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (82).

Anita Nair, the living woman writer of this century is regarded as one of the leading novelists in Indian English Literature. She is a feminist with a difference. As V.Latha says,

Anita Nair describes how “the patriarchal partiality and societal inhibitions impose restrictions on the freedom of women” (140).

In Indian society, even if a wife assumes that there are no emotional ties to bind her to her husband she cannot fulfil any of her marital obligations either. Even if the husband continues sexual alliances with multiple women, our culture chooses to be silent on the aspect of the wife’s life, focussing on loyalty to her husband. Hinduism too emphasis on the woman’s fidelity as opposed to the man’s.

In a country like India, tradition binds the lives of individuals. In such a country, it is imperative for a woman to assert herself without disrupting the tradition and moral values cherished in society. Unfortunately few women characters of Anita Nair’s novels commit adultery and sacrilege to fulfil their desires as depicted in *The Better Man* and *Cut Like Wound*.

Anita Nair’s first novel *The Better Man*, published in 2000 is reflective of the moral fibre of society. The main storyline features Mugundan Nair, who returns to his northern Kerala village Kaikurussi after years of government service. In this novel the two prominent women characters Anjana and Valsala prove that women can achieve autonomy.

A suitable marriage is the ultimate goal in a woman's life. Both Anjana and Valsala are married. But both of them are not satisfied in their marital life. They are unable to lead a peaceful life with their worthless husbands. Unlike other married women in a traditional society, they boldly decide to come out of the marriage barricade. Anjana, a married woman and a school teacher, is the niece of Mukundan’s friend K.M. Nair. She remains unmarried till she is twenty seven. She feels herself as “one of those old maids destined to remain at home. Unloved, unwanted, unfulfilled. Long in the tooth, with sunken cheeks and vacant eyes” (223). So she agrees to marry thirty five years old Ravindran. After marriage Anjana realises that she is simply a whore for him. Ravindran remains “a man who used her body when impulse took him. There was little conversation between them and hardly any companionship” (228).

Anjana rummages around to pour her agony and suffering. She finds Mukundan to be the right person to console her. She feels happy in the company of Mukundan and says to him that “I feel married when I am with you” (244). Anjana boldly files a divorce suit so that she would be separated formally from her husband. Later she decides to marry Mukundan. But Mukundan is lured away by the local rich man, Power House Ramakrishnan, who includes Mukundan in a committee involved in the building of a Community Hall in Kaikurussi. Mukundan is afraid of losing his reputation and so rejects Anjana. Anjana tells him quietly

“You disgust me. Please leave” (323). Anjana’s positive attitude towards life, work, financial independence, and self-identity helps her to go ahead in her life with hope and optimism. By the end of the novel Mukundan comes back and pleads “with her to forgive his trespasses and accept him again” (355).

Valsala is the wife of the ageing schoolmaster Prabhakaran. She is entangled in her daily household tasks. She feels lonely at home and there are no astonishments in her life. Valsala lacks pleasures in her marital life. She has never known an awakening of her senses. 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. She sets her heart on enjoying her life with Sridharan. Sridharan admires her and flatters her beauty.

This narrative presents the feminist attitude of Valsala in the light of new morality. She expects human attitude from the male. 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. She 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.*” (130).

Valsala rebels against the existing system. Her quest emerges as a conflict towards the tradition. 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 were 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 (133).

Later she with Sridharan assassinates Prabhakaran Master. She 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. Valsala as an emerging “New Woman” breaks the traditional Indian consciousness built under the name of society and violates the rules in the patriarchal society.

Women have certainly begun their emancipation. Valsala tries to achieve it by murdering her husband. 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 Valsala will not find a position in a well-defined environment of living.

Anita Nair’s latest novel *Cut Like Wound* is a story about Inspector Borei Gowda, the investigating officer. He is a splendidly grumpy, hard-drinking, deeply flawed character. His chaotic home life includes an absent wife, an estranged son and an enigmatic mistress. Here too Nair introduces a female character called Urmila, who commits adultery and sacrilege to fulfil her desire.

Urmila is the ex-girlfriend of Gowda. She meets Gowda after twenty-seven years. Urmila brings an emotional upheaval in the life of Gowda. Urmila’s marital life is unsatisfactory. Her husband is a philander. Urmila is unable to bear, when he takes up a woman in the neighbourhood. He leaves her some years ago and she is waiting for getting legally divorced. The unsuccessful marriage of Urmila makes her to search for a man to fulfil her passion.

Urmila seeks Gowda for physical fulfilment and never bothers about both of their lives. Gowda’s wife Mamtha, a doctor has a long distant relationship with her husband. Gowda’s son Roshan, a medical student lives with Mamtha in Hassan. Gowda feels alienated and want of love and care. But at the same time he is cautious about his marital life and his son’s career.

Both Gowda and Urmila meet in a cafe. Gowda worries about the circumstances and his dignity whereas Urmila wants to have relationship with Gowda. Everytime it is Urmila who calls and messages Gowda . Gowda’s stagnating marriage makes his life dull and irksome. Urmila shows her love and passion in abundance. Gowda is puzzled instead of feeling glad. Urmila, a married woman, speaks freely about her love for Gowda.”You would be the Borei I once knew. And fell in love with” (109). . Inspector Gowda, a 49 year old man is embarrassed on hearing the ‘L-word’ from a married woman.

Urmila calls Gowda for the second time to the cafe and tempts him to have a ‘living together’ relationship. She throws the veils of customs and tradition and comes out as a free woman. Her marital life is a total failure. She doesn’t have any children to share her agony. She rummages around to pour her sufferings. She finds Gowda, her former lover to be the

right person to console her. She pours all her emotions and feelings to him. She feels Gowda to be her best companion in life.

The illegal relationship between Gowda and his old flame, Urmila does not bring any change in the life of Gowda. He retains his family life as usual. He does not throw away his wife or son for Urmila. He struggles with his relationships with his wife, son and his former college lover. He asks himself “My career is going nowhere, my wife is a stranger, my son is probably a drug addict, and here I am falling in love again. Do I really need this in my life now?” (126-27) But for Urmila, Gowda is everything. She submits her whole life in the hands of him. Till Urmila gets legally divorced she is Lady Deviah.

Being in love with a married man is one of the hardest things in the world to deal with, especially if he is returning the affection and feelings, but still with his wife. Urmila boldly decides to come out of the marriage barricade. She is too innocent to know that her affair with Gowda will be short-term. It is not ever going to be a true relationship because he already has a family.

As long as Anita Nair’s female characters confine to the leash of social norms and boundaries of women, they experience submission and slavery in their family and in the society. They go against the society to break this bondage.

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