
Facets of Power Centeredness in '*The Better Man*' by Anita Nair

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Abstract

Lord Acton had always called power as the means of corruption. He had warned people of being or becoming power mongers because, it would lead to their self -destruction. There is always a human need to be powerful because, a man wants to feel that, he is important. When an individual does not feel the need to be important, he decides to seek attention or exercise control over the others so that he can attain importance or power centeredness. The paper is an attempt to uncover the nature of power, hidden in the characters of the novel with special reference to the hero, Mukundhan. He is portrayed as a meek and a very submissive man who tries his best to please his father. He is also guilt ridden because he blames his own self for the death of his mother. Despite being soft and submissive he still has the verve to betray Bhasi when he is promised to positions which help him evoke power.

Keywords: Power, Corruption, centre of Attraction, Greed

The Better Man is considered the debut novel of Anita Nair where she wants to drive home the most important idea of accepting one's own weaknesses and change to betterment. Human mind is framed in a such a way socially as well as emotionally that it can never accept facts and therefore thinks of various ways to escape or escalate the blame on to others or situations. Nair wants her readers to change themselves and accept one's faults and frailties because life is a ground where learning is ceaseless. Another important idea which she has tried to convey in the novel is that death is one important facet which helps change anyone. Many scholars and critics have called death as the great unknown because no one can exactly decipher as to what happens after one dies and moreover when one realizes the ephemeral nature of life, he tends to change out of fear and uncertainty which life offers through the image of death.

A man is mostly bound by the tunnel vision where he looks at a problem only from his perspective and fails to understand the problems of others through his eyes. The novel, *The Better Man* wishes to offer the most important idea that reality is like an ice berg and what one understands of it is merely the tip of an iceberg. At the end of the novel, Mukundhan, the protagonist of the novel understands the true sense of reality and

the entire journey of Mukundhan is portrayed in the structure of bildungsroman. The novel is written at the perspective of Mukundhan but at the same time does have sectional episodes which explore the lives of women who are victimized by patriarchy. The geographical locale of the novel is a fictional village by name Kaikurusi set across the coasts of Malabar, a place nestled across the northern frontiers of Kerala. The plot of the novel is retrospective in nature where the central character comes back to his native village and looks at life from the days he had been a child, a teen and then an old man. Thus the novel traces the various experiences of a man and finally goes on to look at the way the hero had tried to better himself through ages. The novel begins with the image of a ladder which reminds one of an object of ignorance. A ladder is always kept glued on the wall and there are chances for one to dismiss it as a trifle but when one carefully observes it, one can be reminded of the rungs which help take someone to an elevated state. The human mind is much akin to a ladder. Although one always tries to neglect its presence, one has to come out of the shell, work towards moving up in the context of self betterment so that one can overcome the frailties with ease. The quote below gives an overview of the opening lines of the novel.

Perhaps you have seen me. Perhaps you have not. On most days, you find me glued to the side of some sun-speckled, age spotted wall. A human lizard with brushes for

claws and a can for tail, Do you see this ladder Mukundhan? Do not dismiss it as a ramshackle contraption that will someday break my back. Step on it and you will find that that these bamboo poles and splints have some sort of life in them. (1)

Mukundhan, the hero of the novel, never did try to get on to the ladder of growth and betterment even after his retirement. He is eaten by two intense feelings, the first is the mysterious death of his mother under unknown circumstances and the other is the endless fear of his domineering father who always wanted to control him and the entire family so that they might not question his wayward ways. Be it Mukundhan or any other woman character in the novel, they all have one common feature, they live under the stringent patriarchal control which becomes the subject of abject as well as victimization which forms the bedrock of the novel. After he retires, Mukundhan had no choice but to come back to his own hometown and live the rest of his life there. He is all the time haunted by the feelings of his father who is all the time intimidating and domineering. Although his father is known to be living with his mistress he has garnered a lot of social reputation in the village. It has been years since Mukundhan visited either his father or the village but still he thinks of his father as a man who had a great social stature. Ironically the power of controlling the village was transferred to a man called Power House Ramakrishnan who became

rich overnight. The rest of the novel explores in sections and episodes the arduous journey of not only Mukundhan but also the other women characters who have been under constant threat and subjugation. Dacher Keltner in his work, *The Power Paradox* reflects on the reversal of human nature when power corrupts human beings in general. One finds that all the characters in the novel are either wielders of power or become victims of power. Anita Nair wishes to educate her readers on the dangers of corrosive power which would make man succumb to evil ways. The title *The Better Man* is a reminder of becoming better by not being a part of power or become subservient to power politics.

The power paradox is this, we rise in power and make a difference in the world due to what is best about human nature, but we fall from power due to what is worst. We gain capacity to make a difference in the world by enhancing the lives of others but the very experience of having power and the privilege leads us to behave in our worst moments, like impulsive, out of control, sociopaths. (23)

Mukundhan plays a dual role in terms of being chicken hearted. On the one hand, he is ridden by guilt that he had somehow become responsible and accountable for the untimely death of his mother. When she pleaded to take her with him to Trichy, he was too afraid of his father that he left her in lurch. On the contrary, he is also intimidated by the

thought of his father who had all the time kept him under his nose thereby making him petrified of anything and everything that comes his way in life. His baseless fear for his father had continued to live with him until he retired. The moment he came back to his village in Kerala, the fear had grown leaps and bounds. At was during then that Bhasi, decided to give him a herbal mix up of treatment that could psychologically cure him of the fear. The attempts of Bhasi bore fruit and he did recover. Ironically, he turned hostile when Power house Ramakrishna used Mukundhan to take the plot of Bhasi in exchange of a position at the village committee. Although he turns a new leaf at the end of the novel, one finds that Mukundhan had always betrayed the ones whom he was too close to. When the novel closes, one could find him offering his own piece of land as atonement for his sins committed against Bhasi.

Nair gives a dual perspective to the personality of Mukundhan. To begin with he is shown running away from his fears when he decides to escape the village and get himself rid of his father's ceaseless domination. On the other hand, he is shown as a thankless soul who had betrayed the one who had helped him come out of the fear of his father. On the whole, Mukundhan is seen escaping his fears and at the same time, facing his fears. One of the prominent ideas which the author has tried to drive home through the novel is the fact that no one can literally become happy when they can also be the cause of someone's sadness. Achuthan Nair was

happy exercising his power but his wife was unhappy due to his ways of power centeredness. The same is the case of Mukundhan who was happy at his inclusion of the village decision committee but Bhasi, who had helped him at the time of need was not. In a nutshell, the entire novel brings out the message of humanism by understanding the needs of every individual and that every deed of ours should bear the repercussions it could cause on the others. Dr. Hithendra Dhote in his article titled, "Critical Reading of Anita Nair's The Better Man" opines on the well knit characters in the novel who all succumb to one form of weakness or the other. Although the happenings of the novel picture the landscape of Kerala and the mindset of the people are typically the ones who belong to Kerala, there is still a tinge of Indian appeal in the novel where men tend to use women to satisfy their own ends and the most important of all, the weakness of every individual in a country like India makes the novel attain a sense of solidarity.

Characterization constitutes the real essence of the novels of Anita Nair. The novel is populated with myriad characters with sharp features, like Achuthan Nair, One Screw loose Bhasi,, who introduces a host of other characters, Vishnu, the priest, Che Kutty, the toddy seller, Shankar, the tea-wallah. The names assigned to names and towns of the novel are typical Kerala. Keeping Mukundhan as the centre she

explores the big ones who surrender to their weaknesses. (3)

All the aforesaid characters are introduced in the novel through a monologue given by Bhasi. One finds that all the people in the village live a mundane life with not much ambitions or aspirations. The men are the breadwinners of the family while the women consider it appropriate to listen to the dictates of a man so that they can lead a secured and a peaceful life post marriage. One of the questions which the novel raises by introducing all the characters who are mere simpletons is the fact pertaining to their happiness. The novel does have impetus given to Mukundhan but there are also other characters of women like Anjana, PariKuty or Meenakshi which all come to the basic premise that question the entity of marriage.

Even after reaching seven decades of Indian independence, the society in general and the nation in particular come to a common platform on the opinion of marriage. They insist that a society has its foundations in a marriage and hence it is right for a woman to surrender herself to her husband because it is he who could give her safety and protection. Children become the next important facet of every marriage and hence the question of the virility of this cycle is established through the novel. Nair presents the extremities of patriarchy where a man tends to control not only his wife but also his son because the man does not want his son to question the nature of him overpowering his wife. All through the novel, Mukundhan never looks

at his father as his role model but as someone who tortures and intimidates him to the core. The novelist has tried her best to bring out the betterment of Mukundhan through the novel but on all the characters, there is still a very strong sense of similarity, they are either cowed down by power or become the power centre.

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