



Identity Crisis in Anita Nair's Novel 'The Better Man'

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Abstract

In the current world of interdisciplinary studies it is impossible to just adhere to literature and literary concepts. In the pursuit of knowledge it becomes necessary to cross boundaries. In this article the formation of subjectivity becomes the integral part. Traditionally, the Indian women writers did not receive the privilege given to the male bastion. The reason for this is that most women writers wrote about the closed domestic sphere and the experiences confined to it. Consequently, the thought arose in the minds of the readers that women were simply meek, subjugated and could not traverse their thought beyond the four walls of their homes compared to their male counterparts. Today women have become more conscious regarding their position and role in society and are trying to redefine the parameters. Contemporary women writers have portrayed women within the domestic sphere and beyond it.

Key words: male counterparts, subjectivity, women writers, society, self-discovery, redefine parameters

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Introduction:

Indian women writing after independence has seen an expansive change. Women writers like Meena Alexander, Anita Desai, Bharathi Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anita Nair have clearly depicted the lives of women plagued with troubles in a male dominated society and have succeeded in presenting the turbulent psyche of the characters. Kamala Markandaya is one of the women writers who has employed the quest for self-realization and autonomy in her works. Even Nayana Sahgal's novels present the man woman relationship where women try to rebel and fight for a life freed of restrictions.

The women writers have followed a pattern where the novels are introspective, open minded and questioning. Men are not viewed as enemies but it is the 'society' and its norms customs, traditions that continue to haunt the lives of the characters in their works. The search for self-fulfillment amidst turmoil and uncertainties lead to self-discovery. The quest for identity has been the theme of the Indian English novels like Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* in which the character Jaya is trapped in her marital life and seeks to free her from this bond. The same theme is shared in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, Kaveri Nambisan's *The Mango Coloured Fish* and in many novels of the contemporary women writers.

The theme of subjectivity has occupied the central position in the Indian literary scene in the present times due to the rapid development and changes in culture featured by globalization and the ever growing popularity of

communication technologies and media. Therefore, the rapid changes have led to identity crisis faced by people in the Indian society. Thus identity crisis can be effectively put forward in terms of subjectivity and its formation which is displayed in the modern Indian literature. The degeneration of values in society, increasing cases of divorce, relationships which are no longer built on truth and loyalty and live in relationships are the unintended consequences caused by the lack of understanding between the people leading to a fragile relationship. The quest to always dominate and acquire everything leads to such extremities.

Objectives

The paper is based on concept analysis identifying the pattern that the women novelists of Indian writing in English have followed in tracing the man and woman relationship, identity crisis, and quest for identity and self-fulfilment especially from the point of view of Anita Nair's *Better Man*. The study brings forth the unexplored aspects of the society in India, the intricate human relationships and actualization of self in the context of suppressed women reviewed logically to support the research proposition. Hence, it engages itself to:

- To identify the pattern followed by women writers to portray the Indian society
- To analyse the theme of subjectivity, portrayal of men and women characters in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*
- To illustrate the concept of alienation and self-realization in the context of psyche and society
- To apply the feminine, feminist and female phase in the self-actualization of women characters
- To explore the self-actualization theories as reflected in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*

Methodology:

The research problem is analysed, discussed and interpreted in the spirit of investigation. The discourse has collected and described the recent information in the related research area to establish the research problem. An adequate attempt of the descriptive research has been made to identify the nature of subjectivity, identity crisis, alienation, and analyse the western theories of self-actualization and the feminine, feminist and female phase in the self-actualization made with particular reference to Anita Nair's *Better Man* in the context of women characters of Indian society.

About the author Anita Nair:

Anita Nair a reputed writer has won accolade by readers all over the world. She has made a mark of her own in the world of Indian English fiction. Her contribution to fiction include, *Mistress* (2003), *Adventures of Nonu*, *the Skating Squirrel* (2006), *Living Next Door to Alise* (2007) and *Magical Indian Myth* (2008). Her collection of essays includes *Good Night and God Bless* (2008) that are based on bed time rumination. Anita Nair's works also include travelogues. Her play *Nine Faces of Being* made her a playwright. This is an adaptation of her book *Mistress*. Her sixth novel *Idris: Keeper of the Light* (2014) is a historical and geographical novel. Nair is the recipient of the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award, FCCCI Women Achievers award in 2008 for Literature, her book *Idris: Keeper of the Light* (2014) was shortlisted for The Hindu Literary Prize in 2014.

Subjectivity as the Notion of Self Identity:

Subjectivity is the notion of personal identity that an individual possesses about one's self which is distinct from other selves. The concepts of relationship between the self and the other and the discovery of relationships between individual and society and the world at large are intrinsic to the study of fiction. Subjectivity is constituted through our involvement in social relations and our understanding and perception of these relations. The psyche cannot exist without social relationships and cultural impact. Hence a social psychoanalytic theory is necessary to understand the individual subject formation. The social context becomes very necessary here to explain the formation of subjectivity or individuality.

The concept of alienation and self-realization cannot be considered in isolation since it operates amidst psyche and society. The difference between subjectivity and subject position is that one is the sense of oneself as a self among various factors that influence the self like one's historical position and social position in one's culture. Although it is logically clear that subjectivity is formed prior to the subject position, both these factors are interconnected. The social dimension that affects the psyche dimension is dealt while analyzing the work of Nair. The struggle between the subject and the social order is considered which involves the constitution of subjectivity. In general, the negative traits and flaws that are exhibited in an individual, is said to be due to the individual's faults rather than the social institutions, that is the trend followed in our culture. This leads to continuous self-interrogation and we are compelled to think about our own motifs and desires.

Portrayal of Men and Women Characters:

The criteria for selecting this novel of Anita Desai are twofold. One is that it discusses the characters of both men and women in the background of Indian ideologies. These characters come out of their traditionally represented roles and acquire a sense of triumph. The second is that this novel is written by a woman author who has emerged and evolved over the last decade and has included aspects of masculinity in her works. The novel is deeply concerned about the effects of patriarchal ideologies on women and girls and it explores the way culture constructed the masculinity of men and boys. It also highlights the perspective of feminists and pro feminist men who can bring about considerable changes in society. The construction of masculine subjectivity in novels authored by females is something natural. The male characters are not uniformly constructed and they sometimes act as agents for the subjectivity formation of the female characters. Apart from this the male characters also trigger a sort of emotional and ideological resistance. The way the characters are constructed by female authors is important in understanding the individual text as well as the formation of ideals of femininity and masculinity. The way in which the female authors imagine and construct the male characters in the form of husband, lover, father, son and friend is different but they often contribute to the construction of gender in relation to their female characters.

Anita Nair's novel portrays men and women as 'new men' and 'new women' whose lives are affected by problems related to sexuality and social roles in society. The lives of male characters are centered on problems arising in the journey from boyhood to fatherhood and women characters are also portrayed as a problematic opposition between motherhood and girlhood. The concept of 'new woman' as the cultural icon was thought of as wearing pants, smoking in public, travelling alone, challenging the traditional notions of femininity. There is not only a change in outwardly appearance but a complete transformation of the inner self or psyche. The concept of 'new woman' symbolizes a character that rejects male dominated traditional thoughts and becomes economically independent. The 'new woman' is conscious of her own strength and doesn't believe in blindly following the pattern set for her by the male dominated society. The 'new woman' represents the urban, middle class which has broken the shackles of sufferings. She paves a new path for herself and seeks her own identity. Though the assertion of subjectivity and identity posed several threats, the Indian women writers have addressed these issues in a stern manner. The quest for freedom of the women characters culminates in the delight of self-discovery.

Feminine, Feminist, Female:

Elaine Showalter has suggested three phases namely-feminine, feminist and female phase. The first phase 'feminine' emphasizes on females as epitome of sacrifice and endurance. In the 'feminist' phase equality of sexes was emphasized and the final phase, 'female' is of self-discovery.

Many feminist have pointed out that women more often are unsuccessful in asserting themselves and instead they allow themselves to be defined by their relation with others since their sense of self is delicate and fragile. Recently the idea of an authentic self is modified and replaced by the view that society and language play a key role in forming identities. It is in the context of culture and society that self-discovery takes place. There are

basically two types of identities namely personal and social. Our personal identity is our name that is given to us during the time of our birth.

The contemporary society comprises multiple social worlds like education, kinship, religion and so on and people who inhabit this world seem to lose their sense of self. There are also multiple identities a person possesses like employer, parent, and friend and so on. Identities help in the development of the self and self-realization especially cultural identities. Multiple identities are created when we interact with a person with whom we have more than one relationship in society. People are aware of how to choose their identity, alter and modify it in such a way that will provide them satisfaction within the socio-cultural context and identity in some way acts as a balance between the self and the other. The self and the other undergo reorganization. The self of the childhood stage must undergo change during adolescence and yet another self is derived. The others become significant in the recognition of the real self.

Self-Actualization: Theories Associated with Self

Abraham Maslow one of the renowned psychologists, in his depiction of the hierarchy of needs has placed self-actualization as the highest need in human beings. Self-actualization is an element by which one can realize one's own potentials and achieve something according to one's wishes and desires. The highest level of self-actualization is attained when one fulfills the lower level or basic needs. The basic needs consist of biological and physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness, esteem needs etc., There are various experiences that one may pass through in life like divorce, failure in maintaining relationships and so on. It is only a few people attain self-actualization despite such hurdles in life. It becomes important for a person to find the hidden meaning of life in a world where nothing is stable or static. For a self-actualized person social norms and obligations never seem to be a constraint as they have faith in their own capabilities. They even counteract the cultural forces that hinder their development. There are a lot of complications, frustrations and struggle in human life but it becomes essential for an individual to recognize his own potentials and bring about necessary transformation.

German philosopher Immanuel Kant defines the three distinctive uses of the term 'self'. First is 'I' in the logical sense, second 'phenomenal self' as the sense of self that appears to oneself and the third is the 'noumenal self', the thought that one is responsible for one's own actions as denoted in morality. We have another philosopher and idealist who got influenced by Kant's ideas of enlightenment that is George Friedrich Hegel. His idea was that the history of the world comprises the progression and the development of human to the realization of the Geist i.e. spirit. The individual according to Hegel is influenced by one's own thoughts or the psychological life i.e. the subjective spirit and also the customs and traditions of society i.e. the objective spirit. Hegel discusses about the organic community, in which the individuals desire to exist in accordance with reason as society is created by institutions which help the individuals to achieve their subjectivity. Hegel believes that subjectivity and freedom depend on the relationships of the subject with other people and hence subjectivity is inter subjective. But German philosopher and critic Friedrich Nietzsche rejected the idea put forward by Hegel and believed the 'self' as 'the living unity of urges.' Some of the desires are controlled by the self, whereas others are allowed to dominate the self.

Therefore, the theory of the self cannot be perceived in isolation. It is attached to the identities which in turn are connected to the social and cultural dimensions. The prime function of the self is to confer self-consciousness upon an identity. Every living being has the ability to distinguish its physical self from the surroundings but only being with a 'self' can intelligibly differentiate between themselves and other beings and think about the relation they share. If an individual has included other people into one's sense of self, then only the individual will be affected by the person's pain or pleasure. The degree of differentiation between others and oneself can lead to problems. If an individual is entangled in relationship with other group members they fail to take their own decisions and depend too much on other people. On the other hand, they may even turn out to be indifferent to other person's happiness and well-being.

The Protagonist of Nair's Novel *The Better Man* (2000):

The novel *The Better Man* portrays Mukundan as the protagonist whose identity or what can be termed as subjectivity undergoes a lot of changes as the novel unfolds. Mukundan belongs to the fictitious village of Kaikurussi in North Kerala. He is a bachelor and after retiring from his job as a clerk he returns home. He disliked returning to his ancestral house, because of his helplessness and his failure to take care of his mother. These thoughts always haunted him. It is through his friend Bhasi that Mukundan attains a sense of self awareness. In his revelation to Bhasi he discloses that his past was ruined by his dominating father Achutan Nair.

Childhood experiences can be a reason for a sense of alienation. If the child is brought up under an authoritative and strict person the child will not be able to identify with family or develop a feeling of belongingness. Such children are often found to be estranged or distanced from the family in the teenage or adult age. They find it difficult to establish any sort of emotional ties or closeness with others which is required for a good and successful life. This could be one of the reasons Mukundan remained unmarried till the age of fifty-nine. The words of his admonishing father echoed: "you don't have a scrap of discipline or responsibility in you. You will never make anything of your life. All you will be fit for is ploughing the fields" (*The Better Man* 70). Mukundan's father is unable to make distinction between childhood and adulthood and keeps lecturing his son about life despite his adult age. That's why the son suffered from low self-esteem at a very young age and lost self-regard as he grew up. When Mukundan was eight years old his father had settled in Kaikurussi and since then his home was a place of torture. Very often he was nagged and scolded by his father. The impact of scolding and nagging was so much even at the age of fifty he was afraid of his father, whenever he raised his walking stick. Mercilessly he was caned by his father. But the end of the novel, unfolds the change in Mukundan, Mukundan a better man.

The process of self-discovery involves our exploration into the inner self, as to who we are and a discovery of our potentials. We think about our purpose in life and the journey which starts with self-awareness, leading to self-knowledge that culminates into our personal growth. At the end of the novel Anita Nair describes Mukundan like this: "This was the moment that eluded him all his life. When he would become a man, a better man he ever had been" (*The Better Man* 361).

Mukundan wanted to become a writer but his father said that he should not write poems because poets are perverts. "No one in my family has ever had any pretensions of artistic ability.... We are family of capable and hardworking men. Not namby-pamby creatures rattling away lines of useless poetry or drawing pretty pictures or strutting around towns and villages bleating" (*The Better Man* 16). Parukutty, the mother is not an exemption to the torture of her husband, Achuthan Nair knows that her son loves to write. She senses the grief of her son and asks him to write when his father is away. When he is angry and does complain about his father, his mother comforts him saying, "You mustn't talk about your father in that manner. He is not really angry with you; he just wants you to grow up to be like him, strong and capable. When you have a son of your own, you will find that you want him to be like you" (*The Better Man* 17). "Not one act can she do towards or in relation to them, except by delegation from him" (47). Parukutty could not voice out her opinion in support of her son because she was hushed by her dominant husband. Female subjectivity was conventionally characterized by sexual submission and subordination. Parakutty never realizes her subjugated position and remains a victim of patriarchy till her death.

Women often go to any extent of risking their own self-esteem and peace of mind. The mothers who cared and nurtured their sons believed that it was their utmost responsibility to teach their sons to identify and share a healthy relationship with their fathers. "What have you done to him to turn him into a pathetic creature like this?" (*The Better Man* 69). It is often mothers who try to follow the social expectations of others. The image of mother being all powerful should be deconstructed because mothers also need to balance their selfhood and find time for their needs instead of being always involved with family and children.

Conclusion:

Human being is not only a biological entity but historical, cultural, social, political, and economic being. The experience one has is intersubjective in nature since it involves activities and interventions with others with whom we are linked. We are born into a world of unconcealed and blatant experience and our senses are moulded by the signs and symbols and interactions in our society. Our subjectivities try to restructure and reconstruct those symbols. People are often affected by matters in the social sphere like status or relationships and they strive to conserve and safeguard those things. Hence our subjectivities keep on shifting and are never stable and exposed to transformation

Nair's *The Better Man* unlike the other novels has portrayed the self-discovery of the male protagonist. It is not only female who finds herself trapped in the coils of identity crisis but sometimes men also fail to understand their real self. The aspects of masculinity and its crisis have scope to be examined. .

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