

A Review of *The Better Man* (by Anita Nair)

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The Better Man by Anita Nair is a well crafted story that exhibits and explores an absolute picturesque quality of local (regional) setting and cultural belt of the Malabar. The reader is able to ascertain landscape- geography, environment-ecology, history-time and culture-society of North Kerala through author's fine sense of understanding of the state. The plot is set in the imaginary village of Kaikurussi which is an amalgamation of author's childhood memories, experiences and imagination. Geo-physically, the village is surrounded by lowlands, fields, backwaters, distant hills and a mountain. The author also draws upon historical, cultural and social readiness of the area through her finely painted characters such as Mukundan, One-screw-loose (Nair 6) Bhasi, Power house (Nair 4) Ramakrishnan, Postman Uni, Che Kutty, Achuthan Nair, Kamban, Philipose, Meenakshi, Anjana, Valsala and Damayanti along with other minor characters. The focus is on every human attempt to find inner peace and bliss, desire to connect with one's own past, longing for true love and understanding of human relationships. On the other hand, the work correspondingly outlines social complexity, vigorous individuality, externalities-internalities and personal and social space in one's life by analyzing socio-spatial geography of the region.

The story revolves around an elderly bachelor and a retired government employee Mukundan Nair who is forced by circumstances to return to Kaikurussi, the village he was born in and which he had left at the age of 18. On his return, firstly, he is haunted by the sense of remorse for leaving behind his mother and secondly, for not living up to his father, Achuthan Nair's hopes and dreams. Even in his 90s, Achuthan Nair is a formidable man whom Mukundan still does not have the courage to oppose. Despite his troubled personal life, Mukundan is also observed to be constantly driven by societal pressures throughout. The second major character Bhasi or One-screw-loose-(Nair 6) Bhasi (as addressed by the villagers) is a well educated man who has migrated to Kaikurussi in order to find an escape from the expectations of the world. He came to this village because here nobody knows him or his past or his unpleasant memories. He is a house painter in this village and practitioner of mongrel system of medicine.

Bhasi is profoundly affected with Mukundan's affliction and decides to mend cracks in his much-battered psyche. The local big-wig Power House Ramakrishnan, on a cruel whim, determines to build a community hall in the village and chooses Bhasi's land for it. When Bhasi refuses to give away his land, Power House Ramakrishnan threatens him, destroys his business and throws him out of the village. Correspondingly, Mukundan ensures to save Bhasi's home but soon gets swayed by Power House Ramakrishnan's flattery. The latter, however, knowing what kind of a man Mukundan is and how easily he would cease to flattery, uses it as his weapon to skim Mukundan's objections and wins his trust. Mukundan betrays his friend Bhasi and alienates Anjana, the woman he is in love with. Anjana is still married to another man. Therefore, Mukundan assumes that his love for Anjana would not be considered suitable by the villagers. For the sake of maintaining his higher standing in the village, Mukundan fails to listen to his inner self and does injustice to his companions. It is only after his father's death that Mukundan realizes his mistake and decides to amend it. He offers his piece of land to Bhasi and finally asks Anjana for marriage. At the end it is observed that Mukundan is going towards community hall building with a pouch of gunpowder in his pocket. The novel "from the start has been bound up in the local, the "real," the present, the ordinary day-to-day of human experience" (Welty "Place in Fiction"). It evaluates time, history, space, sexuality and situation of the Malabar society.

"Place in fiction is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting...gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced, in the novel's progress" (Welty "Place in Fiction"). It is the bearer of imagination. The plot which adjoins author's perception to reader's illusion is built on the in-between situation of man's social inclusion and exclusion in which relationships, feelings and influences of both the author and the reader are immensely absorbed. Thus, landscape, place and space are inherently social processes. It is associated with man and his current approach towards life. What is at issue here is the indefinite connection between man, his history, actions and spatial-temporal aspects in real and fictional world. The past life and experiences of every individual directs his present action and behaviour. *The Better Man* comes alive with Nair's remarkable perception and her ability to envision the rich locale, flora and fauna and social lineage of ancient Malabar. The fictitious village of Kaikurussi is a dynamic space where relation between nature and

society, society and human being and the human built environment are examined comprehensively. The author exercises upon the geo-historical and cultural facets of the regional space. She describes the everyday struggle of people of Kaikurussi and the strategies they adopt in order to bargain their identity, dignity and crises in their daily lives. The prospect of material world and its working becomes the focus of attention. It illustrates the diversity and plurality of the region. The characters are heterogeneous in nature and carry their inhabited distinct origin and history as a part of their lives. The issues of caste discrimination, societal differences, race and ethnicity are being questioned. The matter of displacement, location and cross-identity are also subject to problem. The narrative moves back and forth in time. The characters are crumbled in their present and past. And the history unfolds within social geography of the region. The power of movement within time blends one moment with another hence creating a series of incidents and history.

The author provides a pleasing allusion of the age in which the reader lives and the age the reader has evolved from. The work is thus “reconciliation between formal abstractions about space, on the one hand, and the physical and social spaces within which we live, on the other” (Aitken 171). The refracted intentions of the author become direct intentions of the characters. It operates on the ideology of here and now or past made here and now. Nair observes that people and their family lineage, associations and beliefs are all consumed within their historical and spatial background. The peculiar geographical features of the village and location of the events investigates ‘where’ and ‘why there’ a distinctive system operates and how man becomes a landmark in that place.

The title of the story represents a journey of a man who struggles through his life for his existence. “Who was he? A better man...or merely an extension?...How can a man evolve into what he desires to be ? How can he stand tall...from his past” and create a new line of vision for himself? How can he set himself free? That was what he had to discover” (Nair 344). “Mukundan realizes that he was no better man. From now on he would do only what his conscience told him was right between the individual and society, he had made his choice” (Nair 351). On the other hand, Bhasi realized that “Everyman is guided by a force that is individual and unfathomable” (Nair 330). Man can heal, can make self-discoveries but he cannot fashion his future course. He has his limits and cannot change the advance of time and societal norms. The question

is not what it should be but what it is? Malabar is the place of myths, of stories, of spectacle and of representations. French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre argued that each society creates its own norms, caste and gender system. The way of categorizing masculinity and femininity and these categories keep on transforming with time. The imaginary village of Kaikurussi is showcased as a qualified and commodified entity. There are different committees comprising powerful natives of the village. These men come from all castes and professions and are referred to as “VIPs in the village” (Nair 288). Besides, the social culture of Kaikurussi, it is eminently indigenous in nature. The natives are considered to be more worthy as compared to those who have migrated from other places to this village. Though, Bhasi had a college degree in Botany and masters degree in English language and literature but he is a migrant for whom “smirks, secret winks and hushed laughter are the coinage that dominates” (Nair 9) his status in the village. He is just a house painter so he is “considered fit for is just dipping a brush into a can of paint and slipping it on, this way and that” (Nair 9). Women such as Meenakshi, Valsala, Anjana and Paru Kutty are constantly seeking an escape from the mythological and stereotypical constraints. Paru Kutty tried to make her son believe that tyranny of Mukundan’s father “was simply another expression of love and concern” (Nair 31). Anjana loved Mukundan truly but is densely seeded in the traditional and patriarchal values. She considers herself as “one of those old maids destined to remain at home. Unloved, unwanted, unfulfilled. Long in the tooth, sunken, cheeks and vacant eyes” (Nair 223). There are various illustrations in the story that highlights the rooted inequality, discrimination and social domination in Indian society.

What makes Kaikurussi meaningful is human experience. The characters are more physical and the place is more alive. For instance, Mukundan is struck between how he is expected to live his life and how actually he wants his life to be. He is always expected to take his father’s place in the village, “He had hoped to establish his presence in the village. He had been certain that the villagers would be grateful to have someone like him with the city manners and knowledge of the outside world in their midst” (Nair 117). Along with this, there is a need to identify the importance of the status of a man which is at the same time central and marginalized. Similarly:

In the course of thirty-eight years of living, Bhasi had chanced upon

Indraprasth

what he considered a universal truth: That all men are born with two faces. In his growing years, every man let his environment and temperament determine which one he should wear by day. Beneath the thin layer of skin, the everyday mask, there exists yet another face...that describes the anatomy of the inner man...the machination of the soul. (Nair 170, 171)

Metaphorically, for some this distant place is their personal space, their home. Such as for Bhasi, Power House Ramakrishnan and Babur Nanu Kaikurussi is a place where they choose to live their lives, respectively. On the contrary, there are others who do not belong here and never wanted to be. For Mukundan, Philipose, Meenakshi and Valsala, Kaikurussi is a difficult place. “Only those who can fathom it can survive here” (Nair 167). In fictional village of Kaikurussi, Nair has constructed a land that blends physical place, realistic elements and imagined scenes. It explores the shadowy sides of human psychology. Thus, Nair’s work has evolved into a distinctive style of writing in which reality-imagination, history-geography and visual-virtual has consciously been worked upon.

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Garima Goyal

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