

Undoing Gender in Anitha Nair's *The Better Man*

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Abstract

The article begins by giving a brief introduction to the novel *The Better Man* by Anita Nair. The article discusses how Vatsala defies the expected patriarchal norms by asserting control over Prabhakaran's property and remaining materialistic. A discussion is also carried out on how she shuns the traditional role of a woman as a nurturer and expresses resistance by being a nurturer to herself. The article further discusses how Vatsala deviates from expected heteronormative gender norms by having an extramarital affair with Sridhar and through her act of killing her husband for the sake of lust. The reason behind Vatsala's act is also discussed. The article also examines how Meenakshi reverses the expected role of a woman by asserting economic independence and by becoming the man of the house (i.e., the breadwinner of the family). The article evaluates how Anjana expresses resistance in her own way by choosing to live as a spinster. It also discusses how she transgresses societal norms by having an affair with a much older man. Further discussion is carried out on Parukutty's resistance through words and actions against her husband Achuthan Nair and highlights the consequences she faces. The article concludes by summing up how women characters undo gender norms and highlights how justice has been established.

Keywords: Patriarchy, gender norms, heteronormativity, resistance, role reversal, gender trouble, etc.

Introduction

The Better Man is the debut novel by Anita Nair, published in 1999. The novel is set in a fictional village called Kaikurussi in Northern Kerala. The narrative is presented from an omniscient point of view, except for the monologues of Bhasi. Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, under the chapter titled "Language, Power, and Strategies of Displacement," quotes Monique Wittig, who opines that society defines women only in connection with their reproductive ability, and the societal and political fields of power also construct the identity of a woman by associating them with either heterosexism or phallogocentrism (Butler 35). Butler is of the opinion that since gender is a process, it can be altered (Butler 43). With reference to the above statement, this article aims to throw light on how some of the women characters in the novel defy stereotypical roles expected of them.

Discussion

In the novel, Vatsala marries Prabhakaran Master, who works in a school. He is content with just gruel because of his ailment and considers controlling students in the classroom a great task. He neither appreciates her beauty nor satisfies her physical or emotional needs. Her attachment to him is primarily materialistic, and she chooses to stay with him for his land, house, and retirement benefits. Usually, patriarchy takes control over women's bodies and claims rights over their properties and assets.

In the novel, Vatsala debunks patriarchal norms and claims rights over his property. Vandana Shiva, in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, under the chapter "Women and Nature," states that women procreate not only biologically but also through their societal role in providing sustenance (Shiva 42). In the novel, instead of being a nurturer in the traditional sense, Vatsala uses food as a tool to express resistance. She cooks her favorite spicy food, eats it, and satiates her hunger without bothering about Prabhakaran's health. She can be compared to Margaret Shanti in the novel *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair. Margaret Shanti understands her husband's fondness for food and cooks his favorite dishes rich in oil and ghee. She uses this as a tool to make him obese and gain control over him (Nair, *Ladies Coupe* 133).

In *The Better Man*, the blossoming of the Pala tree inspires Vatsala to gain autonomy. She has an extramarital affair with Sridhar, who flatters her. She engages in this relationship after Prabhakaran Master leaves for school. Her act of having an affair with Sridhar can be seen as an act of defiance against her husband's inability to satisfy her desires. She can be paralleled to Radha, the protagonist in the novel *Mistress* by Anita Nair, who has an adulterous relationship with Chris as a response to the humiliation inflicted by her tyrannical husband Shyam (Nair, *Mistress* 162–163).

Dr. Kajal Thakur states that man-woman relationships outside marriage are not welcomed by society (Dewani 934). In the novel, since Vatsala wants to continue her relationship with Sridhar, which is unacceptable to society, she joins hands with him and kills her husband, Prabhakaran Master. She then pretends that nothing has happened. Through Vatsala, Nair highlights the sexual emancipation of women. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, discusses how women and men respond differently to sexuality. She opines that women may respond more intensely, while men are often positioned at the center of sexuality (Beauvoir 403). In the novel, Vatsala's intense desire drives her to extreme actions. She can be compared to Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* by Anita Desai, who, due to psychological distress, kills her husband (Sankararaman 31). Through Vatsala, Nair demonstrates that in contemporary society, women are no longer passive objects but active agents.

Similarly, Meenakshi is another woman character who deviates from expected stereotypes. She falls in love with a Kathakali dancer named Balu and marries him. Her husband promises to take her to Delhi but fails to do so. In his absence, instead of pining for him, she runs a crèche until the birth of her son Mani. Afterwards, she works as an LIC agent and runs a small shop selling groceries and fancy items such as ribbons, bangles, and buttons, thereby asserting her economic independence. Even after her husband's death, she leaves Kaikurussi and works as a matron in a hostel. Through her actions, she proves that women are not always dependent on their male counterparts. Instead of confining herself within the four walls of the house, she becomes the breadwinner of the family.

Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, under the chapter “Freud and the Melancholia of Gender,” states that the subject takes on the role of the lost beloved and identifies with them (Butler 73–74). Meenakshi’s act of becoming the “man of the house” reflects this idea.

Anjana marries Ravindran, who is eight years older than her. He proves to be unsuccessful in his career and fails as a husband both emotionally and physically. When her parents question him, he subjects her to abuse. She expresses resistance in two ways. First, she becomes economically independent by working as a school teacher. Second, though her husband is alive, she chooses to live like a spinster. She discards her colorful sarees, wears only plain cotton sarees, and keeps her jewelry locked away (Nair 233–234). Through this act, she challenges the belief that marriage is the ultimate goal for a woman (Beauvoir 456). She later falls in love with Mukundan, whom she imagines in place of her husband. This relationship shows that she does not fear societal judgment or age differences.

Parukutty, the mother of the protagonist Mukundan, serves food to her husband Achuthan Nair (Nair 73). She expresses resistance when he expresses his desire to take a concubine, Ammini, by asserting her dignity and demanding respect (Nair 74). She also takes control over agricultural decisions by storing paddy from her field and discarding his (Nair 75). She uproots an almond tree and plants a champak tree. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, discusses how boys are encouraged to be independent while girls are expected to be passive (Beauvoir 305). In contrast, Parukutty resists these expectations.

Judith Butler argues that women who deviate from societal norms are often punished (Butler 167). In the novel, Parukutty’s mysterious death can be interpreted as a consequence of her resistance, possibly inflicted by patriarchal forces.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the novel, it is evident that women characters break away from expected patriarchal and gender norms. Nair highlights that justice is delayed but not denied through the arrest of Vatsala and Sridhar, who killed Prabhakaran.

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