

MARITAL BONDS AND FEMALE SELFHOOD IN ANITA NAIR'S THE BETTER MAN

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ABSTRACT

Human relationships form the emotional and social foundation of family life. The relationship between men and women, especially within marriage, gains special significance in Indian society because it connects personal life with family honour, social values, and cultural expectations. Anita Nair deals with many dimensions of human relationships in her fiction. She reveals the suffering of married women, their emotional isolation, and their attempts to overcome a life of dependence and silence. Her novels examine the lack of understanding and communication in marriage, extramarital relationships, and the authority exercised by men within the domestic sphere. Nair's fictional world presents the disturbed female psyche and the fragile nature of human relationships under the pressure of patriarchy. Her women are often pushed into frustration and loneliness. They are denied the freedom to shape their own lives. Yet Nair also gives them inner strength and the will to face the hurdles placed before them. Her women refuse to remain defeated by patriarchal norms. Their minds are torn between the desire to live freely and the restrictions imposed by a society ruled by masculine authority. The present study analyses marital bonds, emotional estrangement, and female selfhood in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*.

KEYWORDS: Human relationships, marriage, female psyche, patriarchy, selfhood.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Family is the foundation of society. Men and women share equal responsibility in maintaining family life. A family can function well when there is understanding, affection, trust, and proper communication among its members. Men and women are complementary to each other. Any relationship becomes meaningful when it allows people to share joy, pain, delight, distress, success, and failure. A person feels less isolated in the world when he or she has a strong relationship with others.

Human life is surrounded by many kinds of relationships. There are marital relationships, parental relationships, sibling bonds, friendships, and social connections. The important qualities of a good relationship are trust, commitment, adjustment, love, and sacrifice. Every person is connected with other human beings. The individual, family, and society are linked with one another. A person's individuality and treatment of human relationships are shaped by the family, the society in which one lives, and the inner self that seeks support and safety.

Among all human relationships, the man-woman relationship holds a significant place. In different forms of man-woman relationships, the husband-wife relationship receives special importance. A happy married life depends on the sharing of feelings. A couple may have a desirable life when they work together with tolerance and flexibility. Physical and mental well-being are necessary for a harmonious married life. Difference in temperament, taste, and interest may create problems even in otherwise happy situations. A spiritual and emotional rapport between the couple helps them remain united.

In India, the family structure has undergone changes in the modern era. This change has affected the man-woman relationship. The transformation has touched the structure of the family and has brought changes in the nature of different relationships within the family unit. There is also a visible change in roles and values. Indian novelists have given great importance to family relationships because Indian tradition gives deep significance to the family bond.

In India, marriage is understood as the union of two families rather than the union of two individuals. Families often try to strengthen existing relations or create new relations through matrimonial alliances. This reflects the restrictive control of sexual and marital norms in Indian society. In many Indian marriages, parents give importance to the social and financial position of the partners. The bride and bridegroom themselves often have a limited role in the decision.

A woman has to perform many roles in family life. She is expected to possess qualities such as service, sacrifice, and adjustment. The family cannot be guided by masculine authority alone. It needs both masculine and feminine qualities, as one cannot exist meaningfully without the other. Even when a woman is educated, assertive, and self-reliant, a man may still try to extend his authority in marriage. According to Indian tradition, a good wife is expected to be faithful, obedient, and virtuous. She is also expected to submit to the dictates of her husband.

Anita Nair approaches human relationships with a realistic attitude. She does not present her characters according to an archetypal model. She expects people to examine their relationships and circumstances and to develop a positive approach towards life. Her fiction clearly shows how male chauvinistic attitudes and social beliefs affect the relationship between men and women. She has carefully presented different facets of the husband-wife relationship in her novels.

Once a woman gets married, her existence is often determined, recorded, and understood in relation to her husband's family. She is expected to perform her roles according to their expectations. Nair also depicts women's relationships with men outside marriage. In a patriarchal society, women's superiority in the domestic sphere, education, and economy is often considered a violation of custom. The true self of both genders can grow only when there is a harmonious relationship between them. The marital bond should free women from domineering male authority. Such a bond is rare in the Indian marital system, and Nair presents this absence with compassion.

In the present era, the new woman has become conscious of her position in the family and society. This awareness gives strength to women writers to redefine the husband-wife relationship. They make their protagonists assert their individuality and reject servile attitudes towards their husbands. This change forms part of the larger transformation of husband-wife relationships in a male-dominated society. Anita Nair gives importance to human relationships and presents man-woman relationships both within and outside marriage.

Anita Nair's *The Better Man* portrays women of the present time as strong and self-aware. They are neither weak nor dependent beings. They are capable of standing in the mainstream and living as equals to men. Nair is a realist in her treatment of women's lives. Her characters attain stature according to the roles they perform and the choices they make. She gives voice to the fears, wishes, predicaments, thoughts, and actions of women. She also traces women's journeys from girlhood to adolescence, marriage, and motherhood.

Achuthan Nair in *The Better Man* treats his wife Paru Kutty like a slave. Whenever he speaks to her, he displays his authority as a husband. He keeps his wife in the position of a servant while maintaining a mistress in private. Achuthan Nair becomes angry with Paru Kutty when his position turns sympathetic. Anita Nair writes, "Achuthan stood there furious, his lip curling in disgust at the mass of anger" (69). This relationship shows the cruelty that can exist within marriage when authority replaces affection.

Marriage is usually expected to bring stability, companionship, and emotional support. Parents consider it their primary responsibility to find a suitable partner for their son or daughter. Yet the success of marriage depends on more than suitability arranged by family or society. It depends on affection, understanding, and companionship between the couple.

Anjana, in the novel, is brought up in a liberal family atmosphere. In her married life, however, the relationship between her and her husband becomes disturbed and empty. Her husband's house becomes a place of meaninglessness. She looks at him as a stranger beside her. She wants to lead a healthy and meaningful life with her husband, but this desire remains only a dream. She longs for freedom and love in marriage, but her marital life gives her pain. She begins to hate the things around her and even herself. Her husband never takes her out or offers companionship. He only scolds her. Anita Nair writes, "Three months later he was still a stranger to her. A man she cooked and kept house for. Man who used her body when the impulse took him. There was little conversation between them and hardly any companionship" (228).

According to Indian tradition, marriage brings man and woman together under one roof. Yet Nair shows that a sexual relationship without an emotional relationship is incomplete. Anjana's marriage is marked by loneliness and lack of communication. She moves to her parents' house as a form of escape from her loveless married life. Her relationship with her husband suffers because they are unable to understand each other.

After the death of her parents, Anjana longs for true love from someone who will care for her. She is unable to receive this love from her husband. She tells herself, "I am still the woman I was. Unloved, unwanted. And then she felt a great desire to be held. A chest she could lay her head upon and cry. A pair of arms that would wrap her around with caring. A voice that would whisper, 'Please don't cry'" (237). This passage reveals the emotional emptiness of her marital life. She does not merely seek physical presence. She longs for tenderness, care, and recognition.

Meenakshi, on the other hand, represents the traditional good wife. She accepts her husband Balan when he returns to her after many years. The distance between Balan and Meenakshi gives him time to rethink his troubles and his relationship with her. He relies on Meenakshi emotionally and economically. Meenakshi remains a dutiful wife and accepts him. Through her attitude and behaviour, she teaches him the value of family bonds.

Through Meenakshi, Anita Nair shows that man and woman are complementary. After observing the relationship between Meenakshi and Balan, Mukundan realizes that a genuine marital relationship goes beyond beauty, intelligence, eloquent conversation, charm, and grace. It is based on patience, acceptance, and emotional endurance.

The relationship between husband and wife is expected to be cordial and intimate. It is painful for a woman to live with a husband who does not love her. Even educated women face this condition in contemporary society. Indian women often consider marriage and motherhood as the fulfilment of their lives. One of the main signs of gender discrimination is the authority of a man over his wife, and women are expected to accept this order in their relationships with men.

Paru Kutty represents the unequal status of women in society. Even when her husband dominates her, she tries to be a suitable wife. She struggles to express her emotions in a male-dominated and chauvinistic society. Her silence becomes a sign of suppressed pain. Her role as wife gives her no dignity because her husband sees her only as a dependent being.

When a woman fails to receive affection from her partner, her love often moves towards her children. She expects her children to love her with the intensity denied to her in marriage. Paru Kutty receives love neither from her husband nor from her son. There is no harmony among the family members in her house. This absence of emotional warmth brings darkness into the family. Her loneliness and disappointment in conjugal life finally push her towards death.

Anita Nair depicts the true nature of the husband-wife relationship, which society often presents as a unified social unit. The wife's relationship with her husband is expected to serve as the ladder of her social existence. Yet society often refuses to recognize women as equal to men. The image of the devoted housewife hides the actual image of soft, silent, and pitiable women who want their families to acknowledge their existence as human beings equal to their male counterparts.

The character Valsala represents the psychological and emotional needs of women in society. Her husband Prabhakaran is weak and sick. Valsala loses her liveliness and becomes unhappy because of her husband's illness and weakness. He is unable to satisfy her in conjugal love and also fails to give her a child. Love and sex are important in the relationship between husband and wife. When either of these is denied, the person may seek it outside marriage.

Gandharva appears in the form of Sridharan. Valsala expects a demon lover who would take her roughly and make passionate love to her. Her secret desire is understood by her neighbour Sridharan. She falls in love with him, and they become partners under a secret nuptial bond. Valsala does not feel guilty about her extramarital relationship with Sridharan. She violates the rules laid down for women in a patriarchal society and breaks the traditional norms of marital faith. Through Valsala, Nair presents a woman who refuses to remain within the stereotype of the silent and suffering wife.

In a family, sons often enjoy freedom in many aspects of life, while daughters remain under constant supervision and control. Social conditioning plays a major role in the deprived state of women. Women are assigned a subordinate position. Indian women are often brought up to follow socially accepted codes of feminine behaviour. The ultimate goal of an Indian woman is often made to appear as the imitation of the feminine archetype in married life. Women's lives are bound by factors that define their limits. Society makes a woman understand that she is inferior to a man. She is expected to accept that independence and control belong to men, while dependence and inferiority belong to women.

By nature, man and woman are complementary. The man is usually associated with the public sphere, while the woman is associated with the domestic sphere. They are seen as two halves of one being, like Arthanaareeshwarar. Yet the position of a woman in society is often determined only by her marital status. A woman is respected when she lives with her husband, irrespective of his number of wives or mistresses, his incompatibility with her, his cruel treatment, or his long silence within the marriage. Society considers it sufficient if husband and wife live together under the same roof. This belief

comes from the idea that a woman is incomplete without her husband and that the absence of a husband makes her miserable. Such an outlook restricts the freedom and individuality of women and leads to estrangement in the relationship between husband and wife. This creates imbalance in married life.

Anita Nair shows the pain of people who fail to have meaningful relationships with their spouses. Her fiction reveals many dimensions of human relationships, especially premarital and marital relationships. Her novels present the complex web of relationships within the family. She introduces a new understanding of man-woman relationships in modern times. Her fictional world contains many characters who are bound by relationships. Some of them experience happy and healthy relationships, while others move beyond tradition.

Nair also depicts how relationships inside and outside the family affect the female psyche. When loyalty in the husband-wife relationship is lost, the question of extramarital relationship arises. For a man-woman relationship to be harmonious, it should be based on mutual respect, equality, and emotional balance. A relationship becomes meaningful only when both partners recognize each other as human beings with desires, fears, and rights.

A complete woman is assertive and bold. She may even break patriarchal tradition in order to create a place for herself in the domestic and public spheres. Such women assert their individuality and establish an identity of their own. They learn to face and resolve the conflicts in their lives. They add richness to life when they live with dignity, whether inside marriage or outside it. This movement becomes part of the evolution of the feminine self.

Joan Riviere, in *Womanliness as a Masquerade*, comments on women who “seem to fulfil every criterion of complete feminine development. They are excellent wives and mothers, capable housewives, they maintain social life and assist culture; and when called upon they can still find time to play the part of devoted and disinterested mother substitutes among a wide circle of relatives and friends” (36). This observation helps us understand the social expectation placed upon women. They are expected to perform several roles with perfection while their own inner needs remain unrecognized.

Anita Nair's works offer a critical examination of the psychic self. Psychological chaos creates psychic imbalance and prevents women from forming harmonious and rewarding interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. Nair brings out the causes of marital discord and presents the conditions required for a fulfilling marital life. In her fictional world, the conflict between the love impulse of women and the power impulse of men becomes clear. Nair reveals that a man's failure to recognize the woman as a complete human being is one of the main causes of disharmony in the relationship between man and woman.

2. CONCLUSION

Anita Nair's *The Better Man* presents human relationships as fragile, complex, and deeply connected with social values. The novel shows that marriage alone cannot guarantee companionship, dignity, or emotional fulfilment. Achuthan Nair and Paru Kutty's relationship reveals the cruelty of patriarchal authority. Anjana's marriage shows the pain of emotional neglect and lack of communication. Meenakshi and Balan's relationship presents the possibility of endurance, acceptance, and renewed understanding. Valsala's life reveals the suppressed desires of women and the consequences of emotional and sexual denial within marriage.

Through these characters, Anita Nair examines the many shades of the husband-wife relationship. She presents women as individuals with emotional needs, physical desires, and a longing for recognition. Her women suffer under social restrictions, but they also reveal strength, self-awareness, and the desire to live with dignity. Nair's treatment of marriage is realistic because she shows both harmony and disharmony. She neither glorifies marriage nor rejects it completely. Instead, she studies the human beings trapped within it.

The Better Man finally shows that a healthy relationship requires respect, communication, emotional sharing, and equality. A woman cannot be reduced to the role of wife, mother, or servant. She has an inner life that seeks love, freedom, and selfhood. Anita Nair's fiction gives voice to this inner life and exposes the structures that silence it. Her portrayal of marital bonds reveals that the true relationship between man and woman can grow only when both recognize each other as equal human beings.

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