

An Appraisal of the Regional Traits in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*

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Abstract

Anita Nair is a prominent Indian English novelist and she has effectively brought out the regional features of Malabar region. This study aims at an analysis of the novel *The Better Man* so as to bring out her treatment of regional characteristics such as the impeccable beauty of the mountains and streams of Kerala, the serene nature of Kaikurussi village, its paddy fields and elegant landscapes, the intermittent monsoon rains and the folk tale of Gandharvas as well as Naxalism. All these elements have made Anita Nair as a popular novelist of the Malabar region and she has carved a niche for Kaikurussi as an unforgettable village like Kanthapura of Raja Rao and Malgudi of R.K. Narayan.

Key Words: Regional Traits, Nature, Beauty, Location, Folk Tale, Landscape and Naxalism.

Anita Nair is a renowned Indian English writer. Her works treat Indian themes, plots and settings. She was born at Shoranur, a typical village in Kerala. *The Better Man* is Anita Nair's second novel which was translated into twenty-one languages and it was acclaimed worldwide. Her unique and unparallel style of writing has won her several awards and recognitions. Her first book, a collection of short stories called *Satyr of the Subway and Eleven other Stories* (1997), won her a fellowship from the Virginia Center for Creative Arts. Anita Nair's second work was *The Better Man* (1999). Her third work *Ladies Coupe* (2002) rated as one of 2002's top five books of the year.

This study aims at an analysis of Anita Nair's novel *The Better Man* so as to bring out her treatment of the regional traits of Malabar. The term "region" refers to manifold meanings. It refers to broad variety of concepts. Some critics explain it essentially as a geographical category. The word "region" has gained much popularity in British Literature; it is applied to set of writings that come up in Scottish dialect which expresses the sentiments of the rural population. Later it has come to be applied into Thomas Hardy's writings. *The Better Man* is set in a little fictitious village called Kaikurussi in the northern part of Kerala. This village is in a little hollow surrounded by several hills. Kaikurussi is a self-contained and complete universe in Malabar. It has the full gamut of human virtue and vice. Anita Nair loves the village very much. Hence her description about the soil is very candid. She describes it with much charm and brilliance.

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An Appraisal of the Regional Traits in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*

During the British regime this region was called Malabar. At present, Malabar has no geographical boundaries and no presence on the map of India. The region is called Kerala now.

The Better Man sets out to explore the themes of loyalty, betrayal and self-fulfilment against the backdrop of the village, Kaikurussi in Malabar. Mukundan is the protagonist of this novel who is a recently retired government employee who forced to return to Kaikurussi, the village he was born in. He left the place when he was eighteen years old. His father's domination and violence made him to go away from his father's sight. Now and then, he was haunted by the sense of failure because he abandoned his mother and also he was not happy with his father. Mukundan's father, Achuthan Nair has illicit relationship with another woman. Hence he abandoned Mukundan and his mother. She died in mysterious circumstances, falling down the steep stairs of the "Tharavad." In Kaikurussi, Mukundan has bitter experience and it haunts his psyche. Bhasi is the good friend of Mukundan in the village. He does not have any dream or goal in his life. He is a house painter. He is a self-appointed emotional healer of the village. He has served as a college lecturer once and he has come to Kaikurussi after his love failure.

Mukundan likes to become a writer to overcome from his sorrow. He does not like his domineering father who curtails his freedom. Wherever he turns, he finds his father as a barrier on his way. Anita Nair presents the preoccupation of Mukundan about his dominant father:

"Mukundan moved away from the rest of men and went to sit on a cashew tree bough. And as he sat there, he watched the magnificence of the landscape grow. There was a world beyond the valley he lived in. A world he would someday escape to. Far away from his father. Far away from the village" [52]. He seeks solace from the natural beauty of the region such as mountains and forests. The image of his father has occupied his mind completely.

Anita Nair's description about the paddy fields, mango trees and pepper is quiet natural. The readers can enjoy it with the words of Mukundan. The village has rich vegetation and greenery. Here her sharp and intense style creates new world for her reader:

The fields were everywhere. Endless shades of green that stretched into the horizon on one side and the foot of the Pulmoath Mountain on the other. Speckled only with the bright blouses of the women as they stood ankle-deep in water logged mud and pulled out the young paddy plants. When a breeze blew, the tops of the paddy rippled and turned the sheets of sedate jade into gleaming splashes of emerald. He knew that soon the sun would disappear behind thick grey clouds that would frown down unrelentingly. Then it would be time to seek the dry confines of the house. Until then he would stay here and look at the view he had banished from his memories for many years now. [50]

Anita Nair realistically depicts the abundance of the natural world at Malabar region. Especially, the water resource, paddy fields and grey clouds are adeptly described by the novelist. This passage stands as a testimony to the traits of the Malabar region. Mukundan meets other characters in the novel such as one-screw loose Bhasi, Power House Ramakrishnan, Chekkutty, the Marxist toddy shop owner, Phillipose the aggressive Postmaster and Anjana, the thirty years old school teacher and also the victim of a failed marriage with whom he soon starts a relationship.

Anita Nair portrays the rural Kerala which seems to be the latest phenomenon in the Indian English Fiction. The Booker Prize won by Arundhati Roy for her *God of Small Things* and the "National Geographic Magazine" highlight the regional features of Kerala. Kerala has

caught the global attention by the Indian English fiction writers. These writers have portrayed Kerala, as the “Gods own country.” Instant Ayurvedic massages “Capsule,” “Kathakali,” visual performance like “Theyyam” “Thira,” “Padayani” are paraded as tourist packages in the cities for the visitor’s benefit. They are the salient features of the region and properly handled by the fiction writers. Kaikurussi is a self contained village like Raja Rao’s Kanthapura but unlike Kanthapura it is considered as a politically insignificant place. Bhasi says:

There is nothing here that would make anyone come looking for it. It is the birthplace of neither a Mahatma nor a movement. There are no craft forms originating from here to fill Government cottage Emporia shelves. No miracles have ever happened here. In fact, nothing of significance ever happens here to anyone. (7)

Kaikurussi is unique in its own way, though no significant political development occurred there like in Kanthapura. Bhasi seeks Kaikurussi as it is a place where he could live without proving a point to any one. He could act on own instinct and need not have to look around for the approval of the society. He seeks respite from his inadequacies. The scenic beauty of the place provides comfort to him.

Pulmoorth Mountain remains in Mukundan’s heart all through the year. It is a great example for Anita Nair’s involvement towards nature. Her description about the mountain is so realistic and authentic. The readers cannot forget it easily. According to her, nature is the best medicine for human sorrow. Kodakkad is called the forest of Umbrellas. It helps both Bhasi and Mukundan to become better men. The capricious name of the Malabar monsoon is also mentioned appropriately. Anita Nair portrays the Pulmoorth Mountain as a world of hope and happiness. Simply, she brings the falling shower before the readers. Bhasi’s words are evident for that:

A flat hammering rain that drummed on the roof of the car in an urgent, monotonous beat... of rain that waited for clothes to be hung out on lines to dry, for children to set out to school and for people to leave their homes without an umbrella before it came hurtling down from nowhere. Persisting vigorously till everything was wet and sodden before it stopped with the same abruptness with which it had began. (23)

Mukundan enjoys the monsoon rains on his return to Kaikurussi. Mukundan has become a child when he enjoys the monsoon rains of Malabar. Every year, the Southwest monsoon arrives at the first week of June to Kerala and it is inseparable part of the region. The nature of the monsoon rain is skillfully presented by the novelist here.

Anita Nair has effectively used the folk tale of Gandharvas which is popular in the Malabar region. Kerala’s folk tales are studded with innumerable stories of the Gandharvas. They lure men to the pala trees and kill them. They seduce women and spoil their lives. Here, Valsala, the old school master’s wife is fed up with her boring life. She is dissatisfied wife and she is not happy about her old husband. The fragrance of the pala flowers arouses her senses. She likes to live her life once again. She has heard of the pala trees’ association with Gandharvas and remembers the warning of her mother:

Tie up your hair and stay inside when the pala tree’s fragrance fills the night skies, the Gandharvas come prowling, looking for virgins to seduce. Once a Gandharva has spotted you, there is no escape. He will make you his slave with his soft voice, gentle caresses, and sensual magic. No mortal man will ever be able to satisfy you then. (128)

An Appraisal of the Regional Traits in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*

Valsala hears the soft voice in her ears. She waits for the gentle care and sensual magic from the Gandharvas. Anita Nair has adeptly employed the tale of Gandharvas and blossoming of pala tree here.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Kerala witnessed a sporadic eruption of violence from a group of extremist communist revolutionaries who called themselves naxalities. Many young men and women in several parts of Kerala took the plunge into this movement. Most of them were idealists who revolted against the existing social evils, exploitation of the landless poor by the landlords, unemployment, and a host of other social maladies. At last, the state police crushed the movement with an iron hand, by executing the leaders and put them behind the bars. Anita Nair has brought out obviously the naxalite movement which was thrived once in the Malabar region in the novel.

The waves of naxalism have reached Kaikurussi also. Meenakshi, Mukundan's childhood friend and host of other young men in the village have joined together to propagate naxalism. Now and then, they have held secret meetings in the Pulmoorth Mountain. It helps them to save people from the major loss of their lands. However, Kerala's natural beauty has been exploited to the maximum by the ruling and rich class of people. Naxalities wage war against the state and the rich people. They are cruel to the core. Anita Nair presents the brutalities unleashed by them:

Pulmoorth Mountain was where they held their secret meetings. Meenakshi went up the mountain late in the evenings and huddled with the rest of them around the flickering flames of the fire. She thought she had finally found companions who would help her escape. Elsewhere Naxalities were sending out ripples of fear. Policemen were butchered, landlords killed in broad daylight; grain-laden barns went up in flames, and sons of rich merchants were kidnapped. [56]

Here Anita Nair highlights the cruelties committed by the militants who fight against the highhandedness of the ruling class people. At the same time, Anita Nair brings out the perspective of the naxalities. She makes Achuthan Nair to reveal this. Anita Nair writes: "Achuthan Nair really had nothing to fear. Meenakshi's group, though driven by ideals, was not bloodthirsty. None of them had witnessed an atrocity, let alone suffered any kind of injustice" [57]. Anita Nair has presented a balanced view about the state and militants here. She neither supports them nor opposes them. She presents realistically the problem of naxalism and exploitation of the ruling class.

From the analysis of the novel, the reader can understand that Anita Nair has effectively brought out the regional features of Malabar such as the scenic beauty of mountains and rivers, the serenity of the remote village Kaikurussi and its magnificent landscape, paddy fields, the monsoon rains, the folk tale of the Gandharvas who seduce the virgins under the blooming pala tree and naxalism in the village. All these regional traits of Malabar are elaborately presented by the novelist and this novel has made her as a popular writer of South Indian landscape. In fact, her treatment of the village is as effective as the portrayal of Kanthapura in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Malgudi of R.K.Narayan's many works.

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