

Narrative of the Feminine in the Better Man

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Abstract

Anita Nair's novels are a combination of liberal voices of Indian women and the domineering voices of myths in day-to-day life. The present paper analyses the role of narrative techniques of memory, flashback and stream of consciousness in *The Better Man*. The paper further analyses the functions of narrative in drawing contrasts and parallels between women of the past and present. The women characters subsequently evolve and mould themselves into individuals with free thought and identity. Nair's novels overthrow her repeated assertion that she is not a feminist. Her women characters prove themselves to be strong and assertive. The narrative techniques throw light on their struggles to free themselves from the mythological, social and familial shackles.

Keywords: memory, flash back, stream of consciousness, identity

INTRODUCTION

Anita Nair is a renowned Indian English writer whose words embrace Indian themes, plot and setting. Born in Shoranur, a typical village in Kerala, she writes with unadulterated originality about the characters and setting. *The Better Man* was translated into twenty-one languages and was accepted worldwide. Her unique and unparalleled style of writing has won her several awards and recognitions. Nair uses symbols, memories, flashbacks and stream of consciousness as narrative techniques in her novel *The Better Man*. She delineates the struggles, alienation, and quest for the self of the women characters Paru Kutty and Anjana through archetypal symbols and myths. Different thinkers give different connotations to symbols.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Sigmund Freud, symbol is "unconscious ideation" (Freud, 1953)

.According to Charles Chadwick symbols are used to "describe any mode of expression which, instead of referring to something directly, refers to it indirectly through the medium of something else" (Chadwick, 1971) Carl Jung theorized that the human mind contains archetypes and these archetypes are expressed as symbols and metaphors. They may either be applied or experienced consciously or may be developed unconsciously and spontaneously (Jung, 1921, 1940) In *Man and His Symbols*, Jung writes that,

The history of symbolism shows that everything can assume symbolic significance: natural objects (like stones, plants, animals, men, mountains and valleys, sun and moon, wind, water, and fire), or man-made things (like numbers, or the triangle, the square, and the circle). In fact, the whole cosmos is a potential symbol. (257)

Jung further says that man's 'symbol-making propensity' is done unconsciously and he transforms objects and forms into symbols (ibid, 257). Jung, while elaborating the concept writes:

What we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us. (ibid,3)

Thus, symbols represent abstract ideas and emotions. Anita Nair has used symbols and myths to reinforce deeper meanings to superficial narration of characters. They are rich in emotional significance. Symbol cannot be precisely defined or fully explained as it means more than it denotes or expresses. The mind produces symbols both consciously and unconsciously. The elemental symbols or primordial images are archetypes according to Jung:

The primordial image, or archetype, is a figure- be it a daemon, a human being, or a process – that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed. Essentially, therefore, it is a mythological figure. When we examine these figures more closely, we find that they give form to countless typical experiences of our ancestors. They are, so to speak, the psychic residues of innumerable experiences of the same type. They present a picture of psychic life in the average, divide up and projected into the manifold figures of the mythological pantheon. (Jung, 1966)

Nair uses both Jungian archetypes and literary archetypes in her novels. Philip Wheelwright writes that literary archetypes are:

Those which carry the same or similar meanings for a large portion if not all, of mankind. It is a discoverable fact that certain symbols, such as the sky father and earth mother, light, blood, up-down, the axis of a wheel, and others, recur again and again in cultures so remote from one another in space and time that there is no likelihood of any historical influence and casual connecting them. (Wheelwright, 1962)

Nair reflects on the rootlessness and insecurity of her women characters in the modern world. She dramatizes how her women undertake a journey to their inner world, The universal mythic structure of her novels are based on a quest for self-identity. Nair's women characters speak about their subconscious realities. She uses myth to express women's social and familial apprehensions both symbolically and metaphorically. Her women characters become the spokesperson, symbol and myth.

SYMBOLS IN *THE BETTER MAN*

The novel *The Better Man* is set in an imaginary village named Kaikurissi in Kerala. The picturesque village unfolds with the myriad images of nature, people, the prevailing Casteism, their beliefs of religion and politics. Memory plays an indispensable role in personal narration of the characters of the novel. The characters are soaked in memories of the past that frequently haunt them at the present. Memories play a pivotal role in the novel. Memories interconnect the past and the present, adulthood and childhood. Mukundan's mother ParuKutty stands as a symbol of silenced, alienated, subjugated, obedient Indian woman. ParuKutty was a victim of her husband Achuthan Nair's tyranny. She never ever dreamed of escape from his clutches. He considered her as "an encumbrance he could do without..." (TBM- 68) Achuthan Nair is considered as a symbol of male chauvinism. The wooden clogs he wore stood as a symbol of authority. He silenced his already muted wife and deceived her with his extra marital affair with a woman named Ammini who worked in his field. ParuKutty symbolizes the woman of the past who was "too proud to show her agony and too frightened to stand up to him and demand to know what was going on" (TBM- 74) When Achuthan Nair decides to bring his mistress into his house, Paru Kutty resists and demands that he treated her with due respect. Despite the physical abuse he causes to her, she emerges as a bold woman who resists him. She does not allow her husband to bring his mistress to live in the thravad (family house). She dies as a failed woman as she "didn't have a strategy, a battle plan. And she suffered for it." (TBM:76)

Nair compares the life of a woman to a battle. Irony, sarcasm and dark humor fills her narrative space.

Krishnan Nair, the caretaker of the Tharavad also lives in the memories of the family. He says: The only thing left in my life are memories. When I am in this house, they cascade into my mind, one after the other. When I am here, it seems like I am back in time when your mother was alive and in this house was what I thought paradise would be like. (40)

GROTESQUE MEMORIES OF PAST AND PRESENT

Memories reign the lives of Mukundan and Anjana too. Memories of a shattered past soaks Mukundan in guilt. His ruthless father caused in him an indelible scar. His abandonment of his mother haunts him after her death as he thinks that he was the reason for her death. The words of his mother, “Take me with you son. I am so unhappy here” (31) often resurges from his depths.

Gothic style narration is included with the presence of the ghost of dead people in the house. Nair achieves this by interspersing the scenes and settings with light and dark. She creates an eerie atmosphere as projected through her words:

Lightning darted from behind a cloud shaped like a buffalo’s head. There was no thunder. Just zigzags of light that tattered the sky. A bird screamed, flapping its wings, slashing the air with a few thwacks. The bamboo copse at the bottom of the garden begin its strange music... All around him was darkness, murky and intimidating. And yet it was the inside of the house that filled him with greater dread. (26)

The sudden appearance of the dead people in the house “sitting there watching him, immobile, silent, but with accusing eyes” (29), denote a ghostly presence in the house. When Mukundan’s mother speaks to him in her cold and grainy voice, he tries to dismiss it as just a creature of his imagination. But the creature that claimed to be his mother bursts into a harsh laughter and tells him to touch and know for himself. He touches it and his experience a creepy sensation:

His skin collided with its, he felt a stillness swamp him. A sensation that had more to do with death than life. Suddenly its hands clasped around his wrist and pulled him forward... The rage and venom etched on it made it as hideous as a monster’s. (32)

The archetypal mother emerges as a terrifying mother who is destructive and ready to devour her own son. Mukundan wanted to put an end to the “memories that were tearing him apart” (33) He wanted to dismiss the incident as a dream but when he takes off his clothes, he finds “purple bruises on his calves.” (34) Nair takes the readers from the real world to the supernatural, from the known to the unknown and from the conscious mind to the unconscious mind. Nair paints the eeriness of the haunted house through the play of darkness, shadow and light. She chooses night as the suitable time when the ghosts from the past masquerade. The realm of the supernatural becomes believable with the sounds and images of the dark. The age-old house with creaky doors, long, dark corridors, the wailing wind, the moaning wooden planks and the lingering smell of tobacco all conjure a mysterious, threatening world.

Nair reiterates that the belief in mythic gods and goddesses lay deeper in the unconscious of every human. Mukundan finds the presence of destructive mother in his unconscious psyche. He relates his dead mother to the images fierce gods and goddesses of Hindu mythology. Anita Nair verbally creates a dark scene in faint light showing images of Gods and goddesses: “When he lit the candle, portraits of fierce-faced beings stared down at him grimly. Chottanikkara Bhagawati, Kadampuzha Bhagawati, Narasimhan, Hanuman, and Mukundan’s dead

ancestors.”(29) The readers oscillate between the world of the supernatural and the normal, quite effortlessly. The readers free themselves from the clutches of the unnatural when Mukundan, “... caught sight of an old calendar of Mahatma, framed by his father in a fit of patriotic fervour, and felt comforted by its ordinariness. There was no reason to feel fear in here unless he was going to let the work of an artist with a macabre imagination scare him out of his mind. (29)

The shift from the living world to the dead happens very often. The novel perambulates between the present and the past. Nair uses the technique of flashback effectively shading the past with darker shades and present with candlelight, torchlight and broad daylight. Memory is the vehicle of transportation between the past and the present, the dead and the alive. Nair’s narrative establishes the presence of mythic beliefs, rituals and practices among people of the modern world. These beliefs instill fear of punishment and they are passed on from generation to generation. Krishnan Nair, the caretaker of the house warns Mukundan of the wrath of the goddess who resides in the attic of the house. He says:

How could you forget the existence of the Macchilamma? Don’t you know that when the mother goddess chose to make the macch inside this house, her home, she laid down certain conditions? A lamp in the granary all day and an offering of fowl’s blood once a year. She is a fierce goddess and is offended easily. She has to be treated with respect and caution. If you anger her, she will not rest till the blood of someone in the family flows. (38)

Nair paints the subtle shades of caste through religious beliefs. Krishnan Nair warns Mukundan about incurring the wrath of the goddess if he lets in the lower caste woman.

Anjana too dwells in the horrid past. Nair portrays her as an emerging modern woman who dares to fight the injustices meted out to her. She is not a replica of ParuKutty. Anjana does not dwell within the walls of her house and clutches of her husband. Instead, she goes for a job and gains economic independence. Anjana is the symbol of emerging voice of womanhood. While Paru Kutty failed to brace herself up for a battle, Anjana nurtured within her the necessary evil to combat her husband. Nair portrays Anjana’s emergence into a bold, new woman in the lines:

Anjana held the shrimp in her left hand and twisted its head off with her right hand. She peeled the shell and then pulled the legs away from the body of the crustacean, tugging at the tail to release it from the rose-tinged flesh within. When the shrimp was cold and naked in her hands, she ran the nail of her thumb down its back as if it were a blade. The flesh parted, revealing the thin black vein nestling within. She edged her nail under the vein and deftly inched it out so that it didn’t snap. (222)

Nair maps her journey from a docile, innocent, obedient wife to an individual with her own identity. Metaphorically, shrimps represent men like Achuthan Nair and Anjana’s husband Raveendran. Anita Nair effectively uses stream of consciousness technique to reveal the inner thoughts of Anjana. The thoughts give Anjana a chance to think about herself and her chaotic life. She wonders, “Evil veins more mephitic than a whole ocean of shrimps roamed and thrived all over his body in the guise of hair. Who was this man? This stranger she allowed entry into her house, her life, her body? (223) Anjana symbolizes the fierce goddesses before who lay the fiendish masculine strength, Deprived of their powers to curdle the human intestines, loosen the bowels, cause the skin to rise in a million bumps, and ring the eyes with little pink pouches, they lay there, shorn of their weaponry, defenseless and dead. (222)

Anjana is portrayed as a victim of domestic violence. Her husband bruised her body and soul and sucked her youth and self- respect. The pain inflicted to her transforms her into a new

woman. Nair gives her extraordinary strength to fight against the brutality. The power comes naturally and effortlessly as Nair describes:

Anjana pushed back a strand of hair with the curve of her elbow and took a deep breath. The aluminum vessel was heaped with an army of shrimps replete with their full suits of shelled armour, long lance like tentacles, and thin streaks of evil within. (222)

Anjana frees herself from the shackles of servitude and starts a life of her own. Her character Anjana contradicts with Mukundan's mother Paru Kutty who does not find the courage to oppose her husband. Anjana holds on to her self-esteem even at the verge of losing Mukundan.

Anita Nair succeeds in bringing out the lives of two women born during two different times facing similar problems in life. She weaves together the past and the present and effectively explicates the differences.

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