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QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN ANITA NAIR'S *THE BETTER MAN*

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Quest for Identity in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*. Search for identity, is the most prolifically dealt theme in Anita Nair's works. Identity crisis is the most important conflict human beings encounter when they go through different stages in life. Erik Erikson suggested that people experience an identity crisis when they lose "a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity". Many characters, both major and minor, in the works of Anita Nair exhibit this trait of indifference and contempt for convention when on a path of discovering their identity. "*The Better Man*" is a novel of loyalty, betrayal, self-fulfilment and individuality. Mukundan Nair the protagonist, who in search of his identity set himself by resetting his priorities.

Key Words: Identity, Crisis, Individuality, Character, Recognition, Establish

INTRODUCTION

Identity is one of the most frequently debated topics in literary theory, sociological and cultural studies. Identity is not just something that is socially constructed but has real epistemic and political, economical, psychological consequences; identity depends on day to day life experiences of an individual and on how one experiences the world right from day one of one's life. Though identity is very much subjective it is also an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image.

Considering identity subjectively, it is basically how we define ourselves. And the question of identity crisis arises when one is confused about what one wants and when one wants, or what one feels about one self and what others feel about one, or what role one fits into and what role others expect one to fit into, or whether one would be successful in what one does, or whether one should lead or be lead in a given situation, or what outlook one has towards life and its innumerable questions and challenges.

Mukundan Nair is a bachelor and retired government employee, who, when still young, fled from his native village 'Kaikurussi'. He fled from Kaikurussi more because of his tyrant father than anything else but due to circumstances beyond his control he is compelled to return. There are still many things awaiting Mukundan that are displeasing to him in Kaikurussi. A father, advanced in years, who still dictate, commands, and questions when supposed to be under his care. Memories of his dead mother, pleading him to take her along with him away from her tyrant husband, haunt him day and night. There is Power House Ramakrishnan, who turns rich overnight and who, as Mukundan feels, usurped the place in the village that rightfully belongs

to him. Besides, there is this strong feeling of failure, of not having achieved anything, of not living up to his father's expectations, of not freeing his mother, of not having a place in the village, of not having an identity of his own that eats into the core and mind of Mukundan.

His efforts to get used to the environment of his own village, where he was born and brought up, his difficulty in putting up with his own household routine, present him an eccentric personality. This is seen in the words he chooses when mentally drafting a letter to his friend, "As for me I'm pulling on in this place. I'm slowly getting used to village life". (121) He wishes and seeks recognition but being called a native gives him a jolt. This is clear in the way he responds to what Shankar says at the tea shop:

"... .. Now he is as much a native of this village as you and me'.

Mukundan choked on his mouthful. No matter what anyone said,

he was not a native of the village in its true sense. He might have  
been born here. But that was all. He didn't belong here. And he  
didn't want to". (115)

His friendship with Bhasi, the so-called screw loose Bhasi, in spite of being forbidden repeatedly by Krishnan Nair and indirect references of Shankar, of the tea shop, leave the others puzzled.

He presents himself as one weak character when he remains tongue tied, hoping a place among the notables, falling prey to the cunning plans of Power House Ramakrishnan. After all the ups and downs he faces in trying to place himself among the notables of the village, and with the parting words of Krishnan Nair, he realizes what he actually needs and what he is actually craving for. After this realization, Mukundan decides to make amends. And the way he goes about reorganizing his life is an indicator as to how much he has changed. He in his own characteristic way pays back for the havoc Power House Ramakrishnan created in his life. He does not let him go free but prepares to pull down the edifice erected by him. By pulling the edifice down he raises himself over and above the old Mukundan and presents himself as "*The Better Man*". From a choosy and colourless man lacking in courage to take even the slightest of risks, Mukundan moulds himself into a man capable of finding love and happiness and into a man who discovers the richness of life. From a man who seeks to replace his father's personality to become a better man. And thus, Ranjana Sengupta states:

"The character of Mukundan is flawed and damaged yet  
basically, well intentioned".

Bhasi, a painter by profession is a self-proclaimed healer in disguise. Answering Mukundan's question of his identity, Bhasi reveals his true identity. His life as Bhaskaran Chandran, a lecturer, inspiring his students towards understanding literature and love for learning, takes a 'U' turn when he falls in love with a girl student of his named 'Omana, already engaged to Sudhir, who is in Dubai, never responds to Bhaskaran's repeated overtures and advances. Hurting Omana's pride he flees and finds himself in "Kaikurussi", a sleepy remote village. Here starts his struggle to establish his identity, for which he invests everything he has and purchases a land.

Bhasi takes it upon himself to heal the bruised self of Mukundan. For all what he does, Bhasi expects nothing from Mukundan Nair all along. But when the time comes when Bhasi's identity in 'Kaikurussi' is given an outsider's status,

"why does he have to live in Kaikurussi? It isn't as if he  
is a native of this village. ... .." (309)

Bhasi expects Mukundan Nair's support or just a word on his behalf, he is abandoned and disowned. Though initially, he wins nothing, not even words of consolation from Mukundan Nair, towards the end we see Bhasi being accepted by Mukundan Nair and their relationship acknowledged by way of Mukundan Nair gifting him a

part of his own inherited property. Thus, we see Bhasi winning what he desires, an identity and recognition as someone in Kaikurussi.

Achuthan Nair, the father of Mukundan Nair, wants no equals beside him. He refuses any intimacy or relationship with Devayani, a cousin of Parikutty, and Sethu, her husband, all because Sethu too is considered a man of the world. Achuthan Nair who has been to Burma and is looked upon with awe as a man who saw the world and is never interested to share that recognition with anyone. (19) Achuthan Nair asserts his authority and thus his identity by way of questioning the listener after each statement of his. This is a conversation when Mukundan is still in school and when he tried to attempt creative writing, his father's reactions are very evident here:

"No son of mine is going to waste his life trying to be a writer.

Do You understand? He barked.

'Yes', Mukundan said in a voice hollow with despair.

'What do you understand?'

'That I shouldn't waste time trying to be a writer". (16)

This feature of Achuthan Nair is carried indifferent to Mukundan's age, as seen in a conversation between them after Mukundan retires and comes back home.

"So how is it that you type with the speed of a clerk who does nothing else all day long? Who does what all day long?'

'Type all day long. I 've always ... ..', Mukundan tried to explain, wondering why he did so". (200-201)

Parukutty, mother of Mukundan Nair, a minor character is shown as a weak character initially, cuts an exact figure of a docile wife and a loving mother according to the norms of the society she lives in. She on the bidding of her husband very obediently leaves behind all her relatives and relations. "Parukutty had never dared to provoke him, though she knew that Achuthan Nair resented Devyani's husband only because he was successful". (76) As a loving mother, she always supports Mukundan Nair, takes care of his childhood needs, and at times defies her husband's words only to feed her son or fulfil his small needs. And when he grows up to be a man and stands on his own feet, she seeks his help to flee from her tyrant husband.

At the age of 49 when Achuthan Nair, her husband, takes a mistress which becomes public, she too makes her resentment public by not allowing anything that belongs to Achuthan Nair into her household, not even paddy that is not from her own inherited land (75-76) and thus proves her grit and identifies herself as a strong woman.

Parukutty's success is clear not just in her being a docile wife or a loving mother, but also in every step she took to secure her rightful place in her family and household. When faced with the crisis she proves her grit to stand against by not allowing a mistress to share her position as the matriarch of the family.

It is shocking to Achuthan Nair and surprising to see how Parukutty, who never even freely spoke to her husband, raise her voice and express her resentment. In response to Achuthan Nair's proposal to bring Ammini, his mistress, home Parukutty says:

"I'm willing to live with the shame of your taking a mistress. But I'm not going to let you flaunt how little I mean to you. I am your wife and I insist you treat me with the respect due to me". ... .. "Then it'll be over my dead body. For as long as I'm alive, I will decide who lives in this house and who doesn't." (74)

She could leave behind such an impact that Ammini, mistress of Achuthan Nair, stays away from the house even after the death of Parukutty. (78)

Ramakrishnan, the man who turned rich overnight and thus metamorphosed into 'Power House Ramakrishnan' is more prudent than many who are lavish with the money that comes in an easy way. In all what he does, he only multiplies his investments but his egoistic self-prompts him to perpetuate his name in the shape of a community hall for the people of 'Kaikurussi'. It is this idea that turns and twists the whole plot when Power House Ramakrishnan eyes the small piece of land partially owned by Bhasi with part of its debt pending.

"Look here, Bhasi" Power House Ramakrishnan was no longer pretending to be polite. His face wore a menacing expression.

"Don't try to pit your strength against mine. I normally get what I want. It would be in your best interest to sell me your land". (287)

On the go Powerhouse Ramakrishnan proves himself indifferent to the feelings of the others especially of those from amidst whom he rose to become 'Power House Ramakrishnan'.

Mukundan Nair, who finally gives up on establishing his own identity in exchange for a life he seeks with Anjana and Bhasi, builds up the edifice of his identity by bringing down the edifice that is supposed to stand as a mark of identity of Power House Ramakrishnan. In doing so he turns into a man he sought all his life. "A better man than he ever had been" (361)

There are a few other minor characters who in their own way try to establish an identity of their own, Krishnan Nair, his servant and caretaker, through his complete loyalty to his master, Achuthan Nair, till the latter's death. It is only after the death of Achuthan Nair does he turn to Mukundan Nair, but only to give him his parting words that would change the latter's life, once and for all.

Meenakshi, Mukundan's cousin, is a brave heart since childhood and looks towards Mukundan to free her from the traditional society and escape into a free world that exists only in her dreams. She later turns a Naxalite, opposing landlords and capitalists, because of which she is disliked by Achuthan Nair. Meenakshi's life as a Naxal, a short lived married life, her refusing others support in life, her life on her feet at first running a creche, later managing a small shop, accepting back sick Balan into her life, everything shows Meenakshi's individuality and her sincere attempt to live her own life and have her own identity.

Valsala, Prabhakaran master's wife, in her affair with Sridharan, shows that her needs are not met with. She, though not for good, shows her individuality in taking recourse to an illicit relationship to satisfy herself and assert herself, even if it is not accepted by the society, she lives in. Kamban, the postmaster, Philipose, one in a post superior to a postmaster, Shri Ramappa, section manager in the factory where Mukundan worked, all show their individuality in their own way and all this in an attempt to prove their identity and assert themselves. All of them reset their priorities, all in an attempt to have an identity of their own.

## Conclusion

Thus, Anita Nair successfully presents the quest for identity in all the major and minor characters of *The Better Man*. All the characters of the novel try to establish an identity of their own, in their own circles, in their own positions, in their own cadres and in their own ways.

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