

# International Journal of Humanities and Education Research

ISSN Print: 2664-9799  
ISSN Online: 2664-9802  
IJHER 2024; 6(1): 100-103  
[www.humanitiesjournal.net](http://www.humanitiesjournal.net)  
Received: 17-02-2024  
Accepted: 22-03-2024

**Dr. Anil Kumar**  
Department of English  
Sheodeni Sao College, Kaler  
(Arwal) Magadh University,  
Bodh-Gaya, Bihar, India

## Expectations of women in the novel *The Better Man* by Anita Nair

**Dr. Anil Kumar**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26649799.2024.v6.i1b.79>

### Abstract

Anita Nair, a celebrated Indian author, has made significant contributions to Indian literature, especially with her acclaimed novels *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupé*. She was born in Kerala and raised in the metropolitan city of Chennai. Nair has always kept a deep passion for writing and has courageously pursued her literary dreams despite various challenges. Her works consistently delve into the theme of women's quest for freedom and self-realization.

In Nair's novels, her characters often emerge from their struggles, embarking on a journey of self-discovery. She intricately explores the concept of freedom for women, emphasizing their aspirations as human beings, independent of traditional roles such as daughter, wife, and mother. Her narratives address the complexities of these roles, shedding light on the conflicts and challenges women face in their pursuit of self-identity and freedom.

This article specifically examines the theme of women's expectations as depicted in Nair's debut novel, *The Better Man*. In this work, Nair vividly portrays both the external and internal identities of her female characters, offering a profound exploration of their lives and experiences. Her characters navigate societal expectations and personal desires, striving to establish their own identities in a world that often seeks to confine them within restrictive norms.

Nair's writing is celebrated for its deep empathy and nuanced understanding of women's lives, making her a significant voice in contemporary Indian literature. Through her storytelling, she not only highlights the struggles of women but also celebrates their resilience and strength. By addressing themes of freedom, identity, and self-realization, Nair's novels resonate with readers and contribute to a broader understanding of women's experiences in modern society. Her work underscores the importance of recognising and supporting women's journeys towards self-fulfilment and autonomy, marking her as a pivotal figure in the landscape of Indian fiction.

**Keywords:** Passion, traditional, expectation, exploration, resilience, self-realisation

### Introduction

This paper explores the character of Anjana in Anita Nair's novel *The Better Man*, showcasing Nair's ability to portray women who reflect real entities in society. The narrative not only delves into Anjana's life but also highlights Mukundan's journey through numerous hardships towards self-discovery, ultimately finding hope amidst darkness.

Women in India carry the dual responsibility of preserving tradition while advancing with modernity, a complex and demanding challenge. Nair's female characters are depicted as authentic, flesh-and-blood protagonists, remarkable in their relationships with their surroundings, societies, families, mental makeup, and themselves. For women writers like Nair, narrative fiction becomes a platform to challenge the hegemonic practices of a gender-biased society.

In *The Better Man*, a suitable marriage is often portrayed as the ultimate goal in a woman's life and the primary responsibility of her parents. Expectations of woman in the novel, whether by their family, future husband, or other people is the main focus of writing.

The portrayal of Anjana, an educated woman, in *The Better Man* highlights the moral double standards applied to women of different social classes. The societal expectations for a middle-class woman like Anjana are significantly different from those for women of lower social classes. This disparity reveals the entrenched social norms and biases that women must navigate. Nair's depiction of women is both poignant and powerful.

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dr. Anil Kumar**  
Department of English  
Sheodeni Sao College, Kaler  
(Arwal) Magadh University,  
Bodh-Gaya, Bihar, India

Her characters are not mere symbols but real individuals grappling with the challenges posed by a patriarchal society. They strive for autonomy and self-realisation, seeking to break free from the confines of traditional roles. Anjana's character, in particular, is a testament to the strength and resilience of women who face societal pressures while pursuing their own paths.

The novel also portrays the societal expectation that women should uphold family honor and adhere to prescribed roles. Anjana, despite her education and aspirations, is subjected to these pressures. Nair uses her narrative to critique these societal norms and highlight the inner strength of women who challenge and transcend these expectations.

Furthermore, Mukundan's character arc complements Anjana's story. His journey through personal turmoil towards self-discovery underscores the theme of resilience and transformation. Nair's portrayal of Mukundan's struggles and eventual enlightenment mirrors the broader societal changes and the evolving roles of individuals within it.

The *Better Man* serves as a microcosm of Indian society, reflecting its complexities and contradictions. Through her vivid characters and compelling narrative, Nair addresses issues of gender, class, and societal expectations. Her work is a powerful commentary on the need for self-discovery and the importance of challenging and redefining traditional norms.

### **Anjana's search of freedom**

Anjana in the novel, is brought up in a liberal environment by her parents, enjoying a sense of freedom and self-fulfilment that shapes her identity. However, when she turns twenty-seven and gets married, this freedom is abruptly curtailed. In her marriage, she endures numerous injustices from her husband, Ravindran. Despite her significant efforts to impress him and give her best, he remains indifferent.

Anjana, both consciously and unconsciously, tries to embody the ideal woman due to her traditional upbringing. From a young age, girls like her are conditioned to be content in their marriages regardless of circumstances, internalizing these values deeply. When Anjana attempts casual conversations, Ravindran becomes irritated and leaves. Despite his dismissive behaviour, she continues to fulfil her duties, eager to understand his preferences and hoping for some form of reciprocation.

Her husband's home becomes a place of worthlessness, where she feels like a stranger even in her own bed. Anjana dreams of a healthy, loving relationship with Ravindran, but this remains elusive. Instead of joy and companionship, her marriage brings pain, misery, and fury. Her unfulfilled longing for freedom and love within her marriage leads to a deep-seated hatred for everything around her, including herself. She feels victimized by the customs and practices that have trapped her in this unhappy life.

In Anjana's experience, marriage traditionally brings a man and woman together under one roof, but it often neglects the importance of a genuine emotional connection. Communication, which is crucial for any relationship, is severely lacking in her marriage. The absence of meaningful exchange between Anjana and Ravindran exacerbates her sense of loneliness and alienation, as their relationship lacks the emotional intimacy essential for a fulfilling sexual relationship.

Her marital relationship is marked by profound loneliness and poor communication, reflecting broader societal expectations placed on women in Indian culture. Anjana's struggles highlight the oppressive nature of these traditional roles, where women are expected to conform and endure without complaint. Her story poignantly explores the emotional and psychological toll these expectations take on women, emphasizing the need for genuine emotional connection and communication in marriage.

Anjana's journey underscores themes of self-discovery and the quest for identity amidst societal pressures. Her character illustrates the resilience needed to navigate the complexities of traditional and modern expectations, ultimately seeking personal fulfilment and autonomy despite the constraints imposed by her environment. Anjana's story, *The Better Man* sheds light on the struggles of women trapped in oppressive societal norms, advocating for a more empathetic and understanding approach to women's roles and identities.

Anjana returns to her parents' home to care for her ill mother, seizing this chance to escape from her loveless marriage. This decision marks a significant shift in her life, allowing her to distance herself from the emotional neglect and hardships inflicted by her husband, Ravindran. After four months of silence, Ravindran finally initiates an extended discussion about his plans to abandon their current home and start a new factory. This rare instance of communication provides Anjana with a fleeting sense of happiness and a momentary connection with her husband. Anjana tries to understand and support Ravindran, embodying the role of the traditional Indian wife who feels compelled to uphold her cultural and familial duties. Despite her efforts, Ravindran's selfish nature becomes increasingly evident as his business fails and he becomes entirely focused on his own ambitions, neglecting Anjana. His visits become less frequent, and their relationship deteriorates due to a lack of communication and mutual understanding. This growing silence creates an unstable and bleak marriage, worsening their emotional disconnect. Ravindran's frustration and insecurity manifest in violent behavior towards Anjana. When her father witnesses this abuse, he confronts Ravindran with a stern warning, asserting his protective role: "When I gave you my daughter's hand in marriage, it was with the hope that you would love her, cherish and protect her for the rest of her life. If all you intend to do is hurt her and make her unhappy, then there is no need for such a relationship.

My daughter can manage very well without a husband like you. If you ever hurt my daughter again, I'll throw you out of this house. Do you understand?" (*The Better Man*, 232).

This intervention by her father underscores his deep concern for Anjana's well-being, causing additional tension and worry for her parents. Despite the warning, Ravindran continues to mistreat her in various ways, demonstrating the ongoing threat he poses. To protect their daughter from her husband's cruelty, Anjana's father secures her a teaching job, offering her a chance to rebuild her life. Anjana thrives in her new role, making friends and finding solace in reading magazines and books. She often carries a transistor radio, symbolizing her newfound independence and personal joy. Through her job and new friendships, Anjana begins to emerge from the shadow of her disastrous marriage, seeking personal fulfilment and self-discovery. Her journey reflects the struggle many women face when trapped in oppressive

relationships, emphasizing the resilience required to break free from societal and marital constraints. Nair's portrayal of Anjana's experience highlights the importance of emotional and psychological well-being, advocating for a life beyond traditional expectations and abusive relationships. Anjana's move to her parent's home represents a pivotal moment in her quest for self-fulfilment and autonomy. Her father's protective actions, combined with her newfound independence through her teaching job, enable Anjana to gradually reclaim her life. *The Better Man* vividly captures the intricate dynamics of marriage, tradition, and personal growth, offering a profound commentary on the resilience needed to navigate and overcome deeply entrenched societal expectations.

### **Anjana's self-realization**

Anjana undergoes a profound transformation from subjugation to self-realization. Initially, her marriage is depicted as a pair of bullocks yoked together, symbolizing a loveless and burdensome relationship. However, as she matures, Anjana rejects this fate, realizing that life offers the potential for change and fulfilment. The impulsive Anjana evolves into a mature woman who, through self-awareness, begins to dissolve the shadow of oppression hanging over her marriage. Anjana, like many women, initially finds herself a victim of a patriarchal system, subdued within her own home. However, she does not remain a passive sufferer. Despite her constrained circumstances, she does not openly challenge her husband, her oppressor. Instead, she focuses on finding a meaningful existence and moving forward with her life. She is acutely aware of her husband's thoughts and actions but opts for self-improvement and self-assertion rather than confrontation.

The novel demonstrates that the oppressive conditions faced by women in Indian society are not solely the result of a patriarchal setup. Women themselves bear responsibility for refusing subjugation, raising their voices, and striving toward their goals. Anjana's growth from weakness and a sense of failure to strength and relaxation is marked by self-assessment and self-criticism. While the older generation remains silent and colonized by patriarchal power, the younger generation, represented by Anjana, seeks drastic and revolutionary changes. Anjana aspires to form healthy relationships that respect her individuality and allow her to exert control over her life. As an educated woman, she recognizes her worth and the life she deserves. Over the years, she gradually realizes that she has lived without embracing the traditional symbols of marriage. This leads her to decide to live as a spinster, rejecting societal expectations of wifehood, maternity, and marriage as the ultimate goals for women.

This transition is marked by significant actions and lifestyle changes. Anjana abandons the colourful saris that once defined her married life, opting for starched cotton in dull shades, reflecting the insipidness of her past life. She locks away her jewellery and discards her fripperies, symbolically shedding the remnants of her constrained existence. Embracing her new identity, Anjana's story moves from silence to a strong declaration of independence and self-worth.

Anjana's transformation reflects the broader theme of women's empowerment. By rejecting traditional roles and asserting her independence, she embodies the strength and resilience needed to overcome the limitations imposed by a

patriarchal society. Her journey from victim to self-assured individual highlights the importance of self-discovery and the pursuit of personal fulfilment, regardless of societal constraints.

Education has empowered women to become aware of themselves and their rights. Historically, women in oriental countries have been confined to the domestic sphere. However, with the spread of knowledge and increased independence, even these women have begun to raise their voices against any form of oppression. Educated women now demand equality, freedom, and justice to bring about significant changes in their lives. Anjana, in particular, breaks away from traditional Indian norms and creates a life of her own. Her departure from an unsuccessful marriage, with a determination to live as a free individual, represents her assertion of personal freedom. Anjana meets Mukundan and falls in love with him, finding in him everything she had sought in Ravindran. Mukundan acknowledges her presence and values her thoughts, helping her reclaim her identity and freedom as an individual. In Mukundan's company, Anjana realizes the necessity of liberating herself from her unhappy marriage. When she expresses her wishes to Mukundan, he responds honestly: "Anjana," Mukundan said. "You must listen to me. I know you think I am a good man, a gentleman, someone you can depend on completely. I do not know if I am the man, you believe me to be. My mother begged me to rescue her and take her away, but I did not. I was afraid of my father and made excuses. If I had done as she asked, perhaps she might still be alive. That is the kind of man I am - a weak and undependable creature. Do you want to be part of such a man's life?"

Anjana responds, "All of us have our weaknesses, but we seldom dare to accept them or even declare them as you have done now. To me, that makes you braver than anyone else. I love you. My love tells me that this is right; you are right for me" (*The Better Man*, 244-245).

In this exchange, Mukundan's admission of his flaws and Anjana's acceptance of them highlight the authenticity and mutual respect in their relationship, contrasting sharply with her previous marriage. This new relationship allows Anjana to embrace her autonomy and live a life that aligns with her values and aspirations.

Anjana epitomizes a unique fusion of traditional values and modern aspirations, driven by a quest for autonomy and the acknowledgement of her individuality. Discontented with the lack of recognition from Ravindran, she charts a new course in her life, fuelled by a desire for fulfilment and inner peace that ultimately leads her to seek a divorce. Anita Nair's depiction of Anjana resonates deeply with concerns for women's freedom, illustrating her journey towards self-assertion and independence.

Through prolonged adversity, Anjana emerges as a woman empowered to make her own choices and shape her own destiny. She embarks on a fresh start with Mukundan, seeking from him the love, care, affection, and understanding that had eluded her in her previous marriage. Mukundan becomes her sanctuary, a confidant who provides solace amidst her turmoil. She candidly expresses her frustrations about Ravindran to Mukundan, highlighting the stark disparity in their marital relationship: "Just because we are legally married, he feels entitled to treat me as he pleases. In his eyes, 'I'm nothing more than a servant who also happens to be a whore'" (243).

With Mukundan, Anjana discovers a sense of marital unity and emotional fulfilment, confessing, "I feel married when I'm with you" (244).

Anjana takes a decisive step towards formalizing her bond with Mukundan by initiating divorce proceedings. However, Mukundan, more concerned with his standing in the community hall committee than with committing to marriage, withdraws from their relationship. Disappointed by his lack of courage and dedication, Anjana confronts him, branding him a coward (323). Undeterred by this setback, she confronts the world on her terms, embodying resilience and unwavering determination.

Anjana's optimistic outlook on life, combined with her pursuit of financial independence and self-actualization, propels her forward with hope and determination. Her journey exemplifies how women can achieve autonomy and define their own identities beyond societal expectations. Through her trials, Anjana discovers her voice and establishes her rightful place in the world, forging a meaningful existence alongside Mukundan.

### Conclusion

The novel concludes not in despondency but on a hopeful note, underscoring Anjana's strength and capacity to carve out a path that aligns with her values and aspirations. Her story stands as a testament to the resilience of women in overcoming personal challenges and attaining self-fulfilment in a world where their voices and choices are increasingly recognized and valued.

Anita Nair's novels are notable for their profound exploration of the external and internal identities of her female characters, approached through a psychological lens. She skilfully unravels the complexities of women's psyches across different life stages, a distinctive feature of her literary style. In *The Better Man*, Nair adeptly captures Anjana's internal struggles, authentically portraying the emotions of a woman navigating the challenges of marriage amidst societal pressures, parental expectations, and her fears of abandonment.

Anjana in Nair's narrative emerges not just as a character seeking liberation within the confines of marriage, but as a protagonist who confronts and navigates the intricate processes that confine women within societal norms. Nair meticulously exposes both the overt and subtle mechanisms of women's subjugation, highlighting how principles, stereotypes, and limited choices shape their identities.

### References

1. Kumar S. Dalit and female voices in Bama's and Sivakami's select novels. *International Journal of Creative Research Thought* [Internet]. 2024 Jun;12(6):01-10. Available from: <http://DOI.one/10.1729/Journal.39841>
2. Kumar S. The gripe of change: Casteist-oppression & men-subjugation. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)* [Internet]. 2024 Jun;11(6):11-15. Available from: <http://DOI.one/10.1729/Journal.39841>
3. Nair A. *The Better Man*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India; c1999. p. 288.
4. Sinha S. *Post-colonial women writers: new perspectives*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors; c2008. p. 320.