"Never forget what you are, for surely the world will not. Make it your strength. Then it can never be your weakness. Armour yourself in it, and it will never be used to hurt you."

—George R.R. Martin
CHAPTER-II

THE BETTER MAN : QUEST FOR IDENTITY

*The Better Man* (1999) is the debut novel of Anita Nair. In this warm and imaginative novel all the characters have the story of their past and they are in quest of establishing a refined identity. As far as the term 'quest for identity' is concerned, a quest is a long and difficult search for something and identity is something that shifts and grows throughout life as we confront new challenges and tackle different experiences. In our quest for existential meaning, we contemplate our life's crucial decisions, including career, values or vocational roles. According to Developmental psychologist *Eric Erikson* the formation of identity is one of the most important parts of a person's life.

*The Better Man* is set in contemporary India in a little fictitious village called Kaikurussi in the northern part of Kerala. Mukundan is the chief protagonist of this novel. He is an elderly bachelor and retired government employee. He had fled away at the age of eighteen and became a clerk in an explosive factory in Trichy. After retirement he had a plan to set-up a type writing institute in collaboration with his colleague Narendran. But, unfortunately Narendran died of brain-tumor and the circumstances forced Mukundan to return to Kaikurussi. Death plays a pivotal role in changing one's destiny and destination as well. In Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* the chief protagonist Sindi Oberoi born of a Kenyan-Indian father and English mother travels one country to another in quest of his identity. Sindi moves from Nairobi where he is born, to London where he studies, to Saho where he works as a dishwasher and barman, to Scotland where he works at a small village library and
discusses religion, God and mysticism with a Catholic priest, to Boston where he studies for six years and meets June and Babu. A relationship develops between Sindi and June. He loves June deeply but does not get attached to her and the death of June compels him to move to Delhi where he settles down, but fails to establish a sense of meaningful relatedness with the world. Even in Delhi, he feels that he is an outsider. He states "I was considered quite a misfit. My foreign background stood against me". Similarly the death of Mukundan's friend Narendran forces him to return to his native village where he feels lonely and outsider. While returning to Kaikurussi he observes many changes in the village from where he had tried to stay away for all his adult life. He prepared himself to defend from all questions of returning to his native place. He associates his identity with this place and states "why wouldn't I come back here? This is where I was born, after all. This is where I belong". (The Better Man 23)

At the ancestral house Mukundan is haunted by a sense of failure for having abandoned his mother. He finds himself unable to cope with hallucinations and horrible dreams. He meets up with a wayward genius Bhasi who is a house painter and a practitioner of a mongrel system of medicine which he has evolved by combining a several kinds of healing process. Both befriends in a short time. Bhasi wants to know the cause of psychological trauma and tries to fathom Mukundan. He says "In you I saw a friend and customer. A patient someone who's healing had to be aided" (The Better Man 11). Bhasi insists Mukundan to reveal the cause of hallucinations and uneasiness and compares fear as the plasma of life. To peel the scabs off Mukundan's fastering soul and to seep out the fear he needs to know what it is that binds Mukundan in such terror. He asks:
Tell me Mukundan. Tell me that it is that haunts you so. Tell me of the darkness that clouds your life. Tell me why you fold your handkerchief in eight precise squares... Tell me why you have about you the smell of a haunted animal. Tell me. For therein lies your escape. Your hope and someday your happiness may be (The Better Man 12).

The author uses the flashback technique to delineate the story of the past of the chief protagonist. Since childhood his identity has been restricted because of his domineering father. In childhood he was very influenced by Charles Dicken's David Copperfield and wanted to be a writer, he wanted to rule kingdoms through words but his desire has been oppressed by his father. Achuthan Nair father of chief protagonist is a man of principle and wants every work to be done according to his wishes. He rules his son and warns "No son of mine is going to waste his life trying to be a writer" (The Better Man 16). Krishnan Nair is the caretaker of the house. He is the witness of all the ups and downs happening in the family and society as well. He becomes nostalgic and shares his experience to Mukundan. "The only things left in my life are memories. When I am in this house, they cascade into my mind one after the other. When I'm here, it seems like I am back in time when your mother was alive and this house was what I thought paradise would be like" (The Better Man 40). Mukundan's mother Paru Kutty was a lady of traditional thoughts and beliefs for whom husband is everything and god for the family. She was a victim of Achuthan Nair's tyranny. Mukundan feels guilty for his mother's miserable life and thinks that he is solely responsible for her death. He is reminded of his mother's final words "Take me with you son. I am so unhappy here. Where were you when I needed you? You could have rescued me, but you chose not to" (The Better Man 31). Paru Kutty
represents the Indian woman who follows all the traditional rules and customs. She suffers a lot but doesn't raise voice against her husband. She is tortured by her domineering husband Achuthan Nair who left her for his concubine. The caretaker Nair says to Mukundan "Your mother could have prevented what was happening to her, the heartbreak and the humiliation. But she chose to remain a victim. So don't go about feeling guilty for what happened to her" (The Better Man 52). Giving expression to this kind of attitude, a veteran feminist Somone de Beauvoir remarks in connection "capabilities are clearly manifested only when they have been realized".

The caretaker agrees with Mukundan about the callousness of his father and how he is a formidable man. The caretaker consoles Mukundan not to blame himself for that and now he becomes philosophical about the life circle and its concept on the earth. He states "when it is time for a soul to leave, it goes and nothing can hold it back" (The Better Man 45).

Mukundan visits Pulmooth Mountain where he observes the paddy fields, trees and the mountain which is different from other mountains as it is flat as a football field rather than steep and narrow. He has the instinct of love and knows the importance of the family culture in society. The caretaker Nair is dedicated to his family and gives importance to Mukundan's family rather than his own family. Krishnan Nair strengthens Mukundan's horizon of psychology and says that everything depends upon the minds and thoughts how they perceive. He states "It is all in your mind. If you want to look around you and see mountains, forests and oceans, you will. Or else you will see little moulds of earth, sparse bushes and piddling steams" (The Better Man 52). This place reminds him about the childhood friendship with Meenakshi. He has spent good time with her by sitting under a tree on
the mountain. But the social structure and parents didn't allow them to carry the relationship. In Indian culture, to establish a relationship, permission of society is needed. Family upbringing plays an important role in building of one's personality. Mukundan's father who knows only, how to rule always wants answers according to his wishes. Since childhood he used to teach Mukundan to be a self-centred man. He says to Mukundan "If you wish to survive, you need to think of yourself first" (*The Better Man* 71).

Achuthan Nair doesn't only influence his son but also the people of the society. He thinks himself as a progressive soul of the society. When he brings his mistress, in the beginning Paru Kutty opposes boldly and states "I said 'no'. 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" (*The Better Man* 74).

Friendship with Bhasi becomes fruitful to Mukundan. At first Bhasi tries to make him understand that he should believe in himself and develop self identity. Bhasi tells Mukundan that he has right to know about his mother's death. After getting a boost up by Bhasi first time Mukundan raise voice against his father dominance and asks "Do you think about your dead wife, my dead mother, and gloat with pride that you killed her and got away scot-free? Do you, Father, do you?" (*The Better Man* 82). When Achuthan Nair asks him to get marry and wants to know the obstacle behind it Mukundan says sarcastically pointing to his domineering nature "I was waiting for you to let me become a man" (*The Better Man* 82). Bhasi asks Mukundan to explain
everything, the cause of haunting and tormenting that he could prepare a remedy for him. He states:

   It was your mind that I had to fathom. For only when I understood what drove you to such unrest, to such distress, could I begin to prepare the remedy that when administered would cause the healing powers to respond. A remedy that would probably at first cause a brief and mild worsening of your state before it was assimilated into your system. Releasing an energy that would cure and heal your spirit (The Better Man 106).

   Bhasi narrates the healing process and urges to follow all the instructions. At first to heal the wounded mind Bhasi suggests that he would have to make a journey to the forest where the source of remedy is found. Basi assures Mukundan about the process of healing and its result to transformation. Bhasi remarks "Mukundan, you will be the man you were meant to be. A man capable to love and happiness" (The Better Man 187). Both reach to the meadow and Bhasi starts the treatment. He guides Mukundan and tells him that, this is the place where he could step out from the past. Bhasi states "Think of that dark gloomy forest as your past. What your life was still this moment... gather the dew from the grass in your palms, cleanse your eyes, open them wide. Look around you now. This is how your life will be henceforth" (The Better Man 193). Since the time of creation, nature has all kinds of remedies. Whenever problems arise, nature paves way for the solution. Now Bhasi uses the womb of Jar for the next healing process. The womb of Jar symbolises metaphorically the womb of a pregnant woman. Bhasi instructs Mukundan to follow the process and step into the attic Jar and now it will be the rebirth for him. Bhasi remarks:
I know it sounds preposterous. But all you have to do is think of it as another form of meditation. As exercise to strengthen your mind and exorcise your past. Look at the shape of this jar. It could be a woman's womb, your mother's womb. To rewrite your destiny, we have to start with the beginning of your existence (The Better Man 198).

After the completion of this healing process Mukundan turns into a new man. In the modern society all solutions are generalised based on scientific experiment but this episode of healing reflects how even in the twenty-first century human minds are guided by the traditional theology. Now Mukundan is free from the past by releasing his mother's soul. The narrator remarks "He could separate himself endlessly so that he could be anything he wanted to be. A new man, a new life. Afraid no longer capable of so much more than he had even dreaded of" (The Better Man 199). The chapter 'A Few Battles' reflects the contradiction of thoughts rather than battles. The word battles doesn't symbolise the war or attacks where the army of one side fight against the other side. The narrator narrates the confrontation between a father and son, the irregularities of system and the dimension of relationships. Being a changed man, first time Mukundan counters his father's questions. Bhasi's medication started to work now as he boosts up Mukundan to face the challenges and makes him realize of self actualisation and individuality. To increase self confidence Mukundan reminds Basi's words in his mind "In you is the strength to stand up to anything and anyone you can choose how to live your life. You don't have to cower and run away any more. You can do what you want" (The Better Man 201). These lines help Mukundan physically and psychologically to face the ups and downs happening in his life. He expresses his grief how his life has been influenced by his father and deprived of
freedom. In a conversation with his father he reacts "My life has always been shadowed by your tyranny" (The Better Man 203). In Indian culture father is considered as an institution and in this male dominated society every decisions are taken in the light of father's instructions. But in the modern context it demands a change. Now Mukundan doesn't want intervention of his father in his remaining life. He reacts against his rude behaviour and questioning habit. The novelist remarks:

Mukundan stared back at his father. For the first time in his life, he realized he was at least a head taller than his father. For the first time, he saw his father for who he was. An aged bully. A has-been despot. An old man clinging to the ghost of his past glory (The Better Man 203).

Mukundan realizes a little leap of joy that he is no longer afraid of his domineering father. His father could no longer rule him. He could be anyone he wanted to be. Mukundan and Bhasi have become intimate friends. Both share their problems and help each other to find solutions. Mukundan meets K.M. Nair's niece, Anjana and feels attraction to her. Anjana is a well educated lady and a teacher in school. She is lonely after the departure of her husband Ravindran. In a very short time both get very close to each other. Mukundan never felt the sensation like this. He wants to marry her but he is much older than her. He states "I love you. I want to spend every moment of my life with you. But you are a married woman... I am so much older than you" (The Better Man 244). Anjana tells him that age doesn't matter for a healthy relationship and to get rid of Ravindran she has filed a divorce suit.

Now the time comes to prove himself better than his father. Bhasi is the man who transforms Mukundan into a capable individual by the healing process but when
the turns come to Mukundan, he finds himself in dilemma whether he should help Bhasi or let it be done for the sake of his reputation. Ramkrishnan is an upstart in this village. He has tremendous influence on the people of this village. Mukundan thinks that what should have been rightful place for him in this village had been usurped by the Power House Ramkrishnan. Ramkrishnan wants to build a community hall and for that purpose he forces Bhasi to sell his land. Bhasi narrates Ramkrishnan's order to sell his land willingly or unwillingly to Mukundan and seeks his help to tackle the problems. Bhasi doesn't want to leave the piece of land as it is associated with his identity. He requests Mukundan "Talk to him. Talk to the rest of the village bigwigs. They'll listen to you. For them, you and he are equals. Your words carry as much weight as his" (The Better Man 298). Mukundan consoles Bhasi and assures him that he will talk to Ramkrishnan. But when he goes to Ramkrishnan's house to settle the dispute he is greeted warmly and honoured with the position by appointing him one of the members of the community hall. Right from the arrival to the village it was his core desire that he should be given importance as he is one of the most educated person and a retired gazetted officer. After getting a post in the committee of notables he feels that this is the time to gain reputations. The narrator remarks:

Mukundan surveyed the room with a growing sense of ease. Soon they would be his friends too, these men of distinction and power. Father, I am as much a personage in this village as you are. Father, you might not think so, but they value my presence like they did yours. Mukundan felt warm and protected (The Better Man 308).

All the members of the committee insist Mukundan to talk to Bhasi to sell the piece of land for the welfare of society. He feels himself flush with pride that he had never realized how highly the people of Kaikurrusi thought of him and his influence
on others. When Bhasi meets Mukundan and wants to know about the talk, he is shocked at Mukundan's changed temperament. Mukundan expresses his helplessness due to the obligation given to him. He persuades Bhasi to sacrifice the land for the sake of his reputation rather than helping him. He remarks "This is everything, I have always wanted. The village has finally recognized me as a worthy man. I'm no longer just Achuthan Nair's son. I'm seen as a man who can make a contribution to the betterment of this village. My opinion counts" (The Better Man 312). Community Hall is the symbol of betrayal. It builds the gap between the have's and have not's. This is the irony of circumstances that Bhasi is the man Mukundan who rescues from 'the morass of the past' which enabled Mukundan decides to spend the rest of his life cocooned in that magical happiness. But when his greatest desire to take his father's place in Kaikurussi is threatened, he betrays Bhasi. It is his continuous urge to prove his father and the villagers that he is a 'better man' in every sense.

The term 'Verdigris on love' characterises the human changing desire and expectations in the modern society. Mukundan wants reputation and importance in the society on the one hand by following the instructions and ethics of the community hall committee. On the other hand he also wants Anjana. He tries to persuade her and requests her to postpone their plans for the future for a while by pointing out that she is still married in the eyes of law and it is against the ethics of the committee. Anjana confronts with the notion and asks whether this committee is so important than her. Mukundan states "It has always been my greatest desire to take my father's place in Kaikurussi. An ambition that I thought was going to remain unfulfilled till this opportunity came up" (The Better Man 322). Time is a great healer and the circumstances have the great power to mould a person. Very soon Mukundan realises
his mistake and introspects about himself. He thinks about his father's transforming
journey from a tyrant to helpless old man, who always used to rule on him and the
family as well. He whispers 'He was the worst father anyone could have had'.
Mukundan surveys his past and is of the view that he has performed all the duty
honestly in his life. He remarks "I was a good son. I did everything he expected of me
and more. I didn't even marry because I wanted my wife to be someone that he would
approve of. I spent my whole life trying to please my father" (The Better Man 342).
After the death of his father, now he has to move forward but his mind seeks some
answers from the society. The caretaker Nair tries his best to console Mukundan and
approves his father faults on the one hand and on the other he urges Mukundan to
prove himself better than his father. Mukundan contemplates and measures his life
and asserts that he should to do something to establish an identity which would be
examined by his deeds. The novelist remarks:

He no longer knew who he was. It was time he confronted the
truth about himself. He could no longer hide behind the layers of
self-deceit that had been the costume he had worn to fit the role he
thought he had been given. Who was he? A better man than his
father or merely an extension of who his father had been? That
was what he had to discover (The Better Man 344).

After the departure of all the people who came to attend the last rite of his
father he felt completely alone and insignificant. He examines himself in the mirror
and finds, 'the nakedness of his self challenged him unabashedly'. He saw for himself
who he really was. A creature who had hidden his inadequacies by using his father's
domineering methods as an excuse to explain his own weakness of character.
Mukundan asks himself whether he can stand taller than his father and create a new
life of vision for himself. The thoughts start to hover in his mind, how he had betrayed Bhasi and Anjana who had loved him. He is haunted by the sense that how he had used them and discarded because it suited him to do so. Finally his greed for recognition and acceptance, importance and adulation, had blinded him to everything else. After making introspection what has been done and what has to be done. He determines from now on he would do only what his conscience would approve right. He differentiates his choice between the individual and society. Mukundan calls a document writer and asks him to prepare a document as he wants to gift a quarter of an acre of land to Bhasi. He visits Bhasi to offer the land and pleads him to return. He urges to forgive him and once again resume his life in the village, on the land he loved. When Bhasi asks 'why had he waited so long for that', Mukundan says "I was so foolish. I let my own lack of self-esteem rule me. I was so besotted by the idea of being someone important that I didn't realize how important you are to me. This is the only way I know to make amends" (The Better Man 353). When Bhasi questions, "Does he realize what the committee of notables will do to him once they know that I have been brought back to Kaikurussi by you. You will no longer be one of them". Mukundan states "All my life I wanted to be my father's equal. But now I want more. I want to be better than him. I want to know what it is to love and to give. And, in turn, be loved" (The Better Man 354). The next morning Mukundan visits Anjana. He asks and pleads to her to forgive his trespasses and accept him again. It is a surprise for her and she looks at him in disbelief. When she asks that the villagers won't approve of it and you will be kicked out of the committee. They will criticise and ostracize you. You won't be invited to anyone's wedding or housewarming or be included in any of the villages' activities. Mukundan replies "As long as you are with
me, I don't care if I'm not invited to a single housewarming or even if the villagers never talk to me again” (The Better Man 356).

Bhasi is another distinguished character in the novel. In the chapter ‘The landscape of perpetual succor’ the novelist presents Bhasi's aspirations and his quest for identity. He is a well educated person and has a college degree in Botany and postgraduate degree in English language and literature. He joins private college as a lecturer and determines himself to provide best teaching and to establish a landmark in the realm of education. After the first year exam, he finds progress in the result and gets excited to do better. During the teaching period he feels attraction for a beautiful girl and shows much affection to her. He proposes her but he comes to know that her marriage has been fixed. He gets hurt and decides to leave the campus immediately with a lesson that affection openly given is never valued. It is treated with little respect and is seldom reciprocated. He starts a journey in indefinite direction to get rid of his past and reaches Kaikurussi. In this village he finds possibility to start a new life by leaving the identity as a lecturer Bhaskaran Chandran. He states:

Here is where I would live. Here where time stood still on the back of a boulder. Here where I need never know the anguish of life passing me by. Here where all roads ended and rivers dared not run through. Here I could be the man I had become. No past. No future. Simply a man of the present. Painter Bhasi. (The Better Man 105).

Now Bhaskaran Chandran turns into a painter Bhasi. He is the first person narrator in this novel. He meets Mukundan, the chief protagonist of the novel. Mukundan is a retired government employee who is forced by circumstances to return to Kaikurussi, the village he was born in. Here he is haunted by a sense of failure for
having abandoned his mother. Bhasi is a healer too and assures Mukundan to help him. When Mukundan urges to know about him as, no one knows much about Bhasi in this village. Bhasi states:

They have a name for me in this village. They call me painter Bhasi. This refer to me as one screw-loose Bhasi. They look at the tools of my trade and think they have fathomed my mind. My advice is never solicited. My opinions are mostly ignored. All I am considered fit for just dipping a brush into a can of paint and slapping it on this way and that (The Better Man 6-7).

Bhasi has studied deeply about plants and it's used and characterist. This study helps him to evolve many kinds of healing process. His profession as a painter and a healer of human soul makes him a mysterious man in the village. He has grown verities of medicinal plants in his garden, which he uses to cure the diseases of people. Bhasi asks Mukundan to explain the causes of fear and distress. He wants to know what drove him to such unrest. He compares fear as the plasma of life. He states "If fluidity is the plasma of paint then fear is the plasma of your life" (The Better Man 12). All the villagers are curious to know about Bhasi's past and how plain Bhasi became one-screw loos Bhasi. He remarks "The common consensus is that a fickle woman is the reason why plain Bhasi became One-screw loose Bhasi. And, that it was a broken heart that brought me to Kaikrussi" (The Better Man 7). With the passage of time the relationship between Mukundan and Bhasi deepens. When Mukundan confronts with the story of supernatural element and its impact on the people of Kaikurussi in the chapter "Sleeping Dogs Bite Twice as Hard" Bhasi becomes very philosophical to deal with the problem. Modern society represents the age of science and technology where everything is analysed logically. But this episode is a satire for
the society existing in twenty-first century. Mukundan comes to know Philipose's haunting night spent in the room provided by him. Philipose tells him that it is not a safe place. It has a strange and dark secret, only those who can fathom it can survive here. Mukundan is reminded of the story of Odiayans which he had heard in childhood. How people of Kaikurussi used to practice a ritual to checkmate the powers of Odiyans "Young women wore gold talismans around their hips so that even if an Odiyan tried to enchant them, they could resist the pull of his magic. Pregnant women wore black amulets so that they were not lured out of their houses at midnight by the Odiyans who need the fetus to propitiate the evil forces they worshiped" (The Better Man 168). Mukndan is so much frightened as he experiences an unusual creature in his dream. He thinks that her mother's soul is wandering in the house and wanted to kill him. He explains the illusions to Bhasi. Bhasi tries his best to fathom Mukundan's tormenting soul he tried to read the secrets that veined Mukunda's face. He has experience of human's changing behaviour and he categorises human in two groups. He remarks:

All men are born with two faces. In his growing years, every man lets his environment and temperament determine which one he should wear by day. And it is this face that serves the purpose of a mere scab that is very often categorized so effortlessly as handsome pleasant none descript, or even ugly (The Better Man 170).

But with the passage of time men grow and are adapted to their surroundings. They experience the ups and downs of daily life and start to behave according to the circumstances and society in which they live in. Bhasi remarks about second face of men:
Beneath the thin layer of skin, the everyday mask, there exist yet another face that only the pale slivery light of the moon can coax out. From among the shadows, there emerges one single feature that describes the anatomy of the inner man. One distinct note that reveals the machinations of the soul (*The Better Man* 171).

The chapter 'A Handful of Water' deals with Bhasi's quest for identity in world of medicine and his developing relationship as a healer to Mukundan. To fathom the tormenting situation of Mukundan he narrates his own journey to this village and how he has given up all the past for better present. He compares his journey to the Budha's, journey to know the truth of life. Bhasi states:

In Kaikurussi I thought I had found the landscape that matched my mindscape. In Kaikurussi I structured a world of my own. A world where nothing about life could even surprise me. I found complete peace. For her I know who I was. And there never rose the need for me to plumb the depths of my own should as I went about life painting walls and dispensing health (*The Better Man* 179-180).

Bhasi narrates further how his medication and Ayurvedic medicine is effective and functions well. Bhasi tells the story of a patient Suga a twenty eight years old tailor who came to him for the treatment of headache. Sugu is medicated by Bhasi and gets relief. Basi is happy with his marital life and advocates the importance of having a family. He is of the view that family members are needed in life at the time of distress and in the middle of adverse. He is content with his wife and child. Bhasi states "I lean over and look at my wife Damayanti and our child sleeping in the crook of her arm. Once the two of them were my universe. The Sumtotal of my existence" (*The Better Man* 182). Bhasi also shares his experience of healing and how he has made a successful experiment to his wife Damyanti. Bhasi struggles a lot to establish
himself in the society but unfortunately his identity in the village is threatened by an upstart Power House Ramkrishnan. A ticket of lottery changes Ramkrishnan into Power House Ramkrishnan and right now he is one of the richest persons of Kaikurussi. Ramkrishnan wants to build a Community Hall and for that a piece of land has to be acquired. He asks Bhasi to sell his plot and offers double amount compare to the amount Bhasi had paid. Bhasi has attached so much with the place that it is very hard to give up. He refuses to sell it and wants to know why Ramkrishnan forces him to vacate this particular plot as there are many barren piece of land where the hall can be built. Ramkrishnan threatens him to face the consequences if he refuses to carry his order. Now Bhasi comes to understand the air and power of the upstart in the village. No one is here to support him because he is an outsider in Kaikurussi. He states "In the final reckoning they were all natives of this village, bonded by birth and banded together while I was the outsider" (The Better Man 289). Now the time has come where he needs Mukundan's help to settle the dispute. Bhasi approaches Mukundan and narrates the whole incidents happens between him and Ramkrishnan and seeks his intervention. It is the irony of the cultured society that even at present one's identity is certified by one's birth place although the Constitution of India provides all the citizens right to live and to earn throughout the country without any discrimination.

Bhasi tells Mukndan the importance of this plot and this village in his life. How both are associated to his identity. He states "When I decided to make my home in Kaikurussi, I said to myself, this is my land. This is my home. This is the life I choose to live" (The Better Man 93). Bhasi seeks Mukundan's help and Mukunda assures him to look into the matter. Bhasi is haunted by Ramkrishnan's order to sell
the piece of land willingly or unwillingly and threat to face the consequences. Bhasi requests Mukundan "Talk to him. Talk to the rest of the village bigwigs. They'll listen to you. For them, you and he are equals. Your words carry as much weight as his" (The Better Man 298). Mukundan visits Ramkrishnan to save Bhasi's home but he is completely swayed by Power House Ramkrishnan who offers a post in the committee of notables. The novelist portrays Bhasi's dilemma and grievances of uprootness from Kaikurussi in the chapter 'Fireflies Are Not Stars'. This chapter has metaphorical meaning. Bhasi values Mukundan a star but when he seeks his help, he finds that he was just like fireflies, who could emit light for a while but could not be a star. Bhasi introspects and finds that what he has sacrificed for the village proves to be nothing. Even his best friend Mukundan turned away when the time came to protect him. Bhasi asks Mukundan "How could you be so oblivious to my anguish? Could you really not see that you were building your dreams on the dust of my hopes"? (The Better Man 328).

Community Hall is the symbol of betrayal. It builds the gap between the haves and the have not's. The irony is that Bhasi who rescues him from the morass of the past which enabled Mukundan to decide to spend the rest of his life cocooned in that magical happiness. But when his greatest desire to take his father's place in Kaikurussi is threatened, he betrays him.

Meenakshi is one of the rebellious characters in the novel. She is Mukundan's childhood friend. Both used to spend time in each other company but with the passage of time they grow old and asked to maintain distance. In our society since childhood a parent starts to make gender difference and prohibits their children to not go against
the set-up rules for boys and girls respectively. They don't like mixing-up boys and girls since childhood. Meenakshi's mother also wants to separate both of them and warns her about the consequences. She states "It didn't matter whether the leaf fell on the thorn or the thorn fell on the leaf. It was the leaf that was hurt for life" (The Better Man 54). Here, leaf symbolises the female section of the society who always suffers and thorn symbolises the male section that is always characterised as victimiser. Mukundan wants to know about Meenakshi to whom he hadn't met for a long time. She has become a Naxalite armed with books on revolutions and is driven by the mythical powers of Stalin and Lenin. Meenakshi had pledged to cleanse the earth of bourgeois vermin. Her parents are against her decision and express the grief and humiliation facing in the society. Her father states "I want no mention of that brazen hurry in this house. She's caused more troubled than ten elephants on a rampage as for the humiliation" (The Better Man 56). In the meantime Meenakshi falls in love with Balan, a Kathakali dancer. Once Balan goes to Europe to perform and after returning from there he settled in Delhi and joined a famous dance school. He never contacts Meenakshi and it brings her to face a lot of problems to meet the daily needs. She lives with her son and the communication gap made a huge distance between them. She states "There were no letters, no guilt money, and no attempts to keep up the pretense that they were still married" (The Better Man 58). She is a spirited woman and doesn't lose hope. She starts to run a crèche in the village and gets some money which helps her as a supplement income. After sometime she gives up and becomes a shopkeeper. Now she is capable of fulfil the requirements of the family and moves forward and is independent is financially.
After a long time Meenakshi receives a letter from Kotakkal which Balan had written to her pleading for forgiveness, beseeching her to at least visit him? When Meenakshi went to Kotakkal, she saw a decrepit old man, a T.B. patient struggling to survive. For the first time her husband surrendered and realized he is nothing without his ability to dance. She brings Balan at home with her and makes arrangement for better treatment. In the second phase of life she becomes a loving, caring mother and a dutiful wife. In Meenakshi the novelist presents a new woman, who is not only educated but who is also aware of socio-political aspects of life, going beyond her domestic sphere. As a wife, she remains loyal and dutiful to her husband. As a mother, she on her own brings up her son and she is repository of the worries and sorrows of other women who confide their worries to her. She becomes the support of her disloyal husband by forgetting all the past. Through Meenakshi the novelist portrays a transformation of a militant young woman into a loyal and dedicated wife and mother. Meenakshi is aware of social and political status of woman. She could have married Mukundan and sort out all the problems financially and socially. But she sacrifices her desire to prove her obligation towards her disloyal husband and son. Meenakshi, in this respect is a typical Indian Hindu woman, who remains loyal to her husband in my circumstances.

Valsala is a tragic and pathetic character in the novel. Mukundan doesn't know Valsala individually, but by some freak mistakes of telephone department, all the incoming calls go to Valsala's house. When Mukundan comes to know the fault he enquires about her and visits her to clear out the problem. Valsala is married to a middle-aged schoolmaster namely Prabhakaran who is many years older than her. She is dissatisfied with her husband and faces suppression, physically, mentally and
emotionally as well. And this kind of suppression leads her to go against the defined codes of relationship for a woman in the Indian society. She is a woman of modern society. She wants liberty at all levels. She is reminded of the story told by her mother, how Gandharvas come prowling, looking for virgins to seduce them when the Pala tree burst into flower and its fragrance fills the night sky. This story raised the inner desire of Valsala. The novelist remarks

All night, for the first time in many years, Valsala tossed and turned in her bed, breathing in the scent of the Pala flowers. Strange sensations coursed through her. Her nostrils flared, her lips parted, her eyes became a little less murky, every pore in her body opened, greedily seeking to fill their depths with this unique fragrance... She went to stand beneath the Pala tree spreading her hair out to dry... She stood there rubbing sandalwood paste into her skin, her bare breasts and thighs' come to me, Gandharva, she beseeched. Can't you smell the fragrance of want in me... Seduce me with your soft voice and caresses. Make me your lover, your slave (The Better Man 129).

Prabhakaran's indifferent behaviour and negligence of Valsala's physical and emotional desires gives space for extra-marital relationship. Sridharan, her neighbour is attracted towards her and extra-marital relationship develops between them with the passage of time. This step of Valsala reflects the female autonomy and changing lifestyle of contemporary woman. Sridharan expresses his keen interest in her and praises her works, her body, her gardens and cooking for which she has been longing for many years. The novelist remarks "He praised her cooking and told her that her husband must be the most envied man in this village. He told her silly jokes that sent
her into helpless peals of laughter. He had said he loved to hear her laugh. Most of all he made her feel like a woman. A desirable woman (The Better Man 130).

Valsala is not happy with Prabhakaran and complains that he never cares about her desire and needs. According to woman psychology, it is the core desire of a woman to hear the word of appreciation and praise from male partner. Valsala states "He never looked into her face or tried to fathom her desires. He never felt the curve of her hip or cupped the fullness of her breasts. He never whispered in her ears how beautiful she was or tried to show her with caresses how desirable she was. He couldn't even fill her womb with a child (The Better Man 131). She is fed up with this marriage and seeks freedom. The temper and physical fitness of her husband is not suited to her longings. Prabhakaran is twelve years older than Valsala and he had already lost most of his hair and some of his teeth. He looks like a feeble man. Valsala thinks that due to the traditional bound of marriage she has been facing suppression of her desire. She is of the view that she has right to enjoy life and to lead it according to her wishes. She states "I am just forty years old. I don't want to be pushed into old age before it is time to know ecstasy, she told herself, night after night" (The Better Man 131). In this connection Simone de Beauvoir remarks

"All oppression creates a state of war.
And this is no exception" (Beauvoir 261).

Valsala presents the two faces of contemporary woman. On the one hand she rebels against the traditional patriarchal existing set-up of the society. She wants to carry the extra-marital relationship and spends time with Sridharan to fulfil her physical desire and emotional intimacy as well. On the other hand she doesn't want to
give up her husband Prabhakaran. Despite having dissatisfaction relationship she wants to remain with her husband. She is in dilemma, and wants both Prabhakaran to maintain the status of marital life and attain mateletic pleasure in the eyes of society and Sridharan to fulfil her physical desire as the novelist remarks:

There was the land she had slaved over and the house she was mistress of–both of which were her husband's. Then there were the retirement benefits he would get when he retired from the Lower Primary School in Pannamanna three years from now. And then there was the sizeable LIC policy... After twenty-three years of marriage, she thought she deserved to have it all. She didn't want to give it up just like that. Nor did she want to give up Sridharan (The Better Man 133).

In the chapter entitled A Harvest of Discount the novelist portrays discontented life of all the people of Kaikurussi along with Valsala and Sridharan. Police come to the village to investigate a case associated with Prabhakaran's disappearance. This is unusual because only a dire emergency marks the presence of police in this village. A gossip is going on at Shankar's Tea Club where people express their views on the present miserable condition of the village. The word 'Harvest' is a metaphor for the segmented body of Prabhakaran which has been buried under the coconut saplings. Valsala's lover Sridharan wants to clear his path to carry an illicit relationship with her. Both of them plan and murder Prabhakaran and overlap all the evidences. Her stony silence reflects her inner desire to get rid of Prabhakaran because having all the informations she doesn't complain against Sridharan. She doesn't have grimace on her face while sapling was digging up for further investigation. The novelist remarks "All through the digging Valsala maintained a
stony silence that was mistaken for shock" (*The Better Man* 140). In the beginning of the investigation of the case she gets sympathy from the readers "There was a great deal of sympathy for the widow. She was childless, and if the rumours were right, she didn't have much of a family to fall back on. Not that she needed financial help, but at times like these a woman needed to support of her family" (*The Better Man* 140). But when the investigation reaches at conclusion and finds Valsala as an accomplice with Sridharan in the crime, the views of readers change. As the report was "...brutally killed the school teacher in his bed on the night of 14th July at Kaikurussi village. The body was then dismembered and buried in individual pits in a coconut grove owned by Sridharan. The accused had been on the run ever since 8 August when the gruesome murder of Prabhakaran murder came to light" (*The Better Man* 143).

Portrayal of Valsala in the novel presents the unquenchable thirst of contemporary women for metalistic pleasure and physical desire. It is quite true that Valsala is the victim of the unjust marriage. It would be the better way to divorce Prabhakaran and marry Sridharan and this is a right given to woman in modern law but murdering of a husband to fulfil her desire is a crime and formidable. Valsala is represented as a misguided and self-deceived woman who resorts to crime for her self-fulfilment. The chief protagonist, Mukundan wants to help Valsala as he associates her problems with his mother until the truth is revealed. But when he comes to know the truth, he states "Valsala is a cold-blooded murderess. She deserves to be punished. A clever and evil creature" (*The Better Man* 144).

Anajana is one of the most significant characters in this novel. The novelist presented Anjana as a bold and spirited woman who can survive in any circumstances.
Her conscience leads her to take decision independently. It is an irony that even in modern cultured society women have been facing a lot of problems regarding the issues of self identity. Our stereotype society does not want give freedom to women to take decision by themselves. When the matter comes for career advancement, time to time women are reminded of their age and the traditional set-up rules for a happy married life. Anjana is a well-educated girl and knows the importance of education. She has become twenty seven years old but is still unmarried which puts her parents in anxiety. The novelist remarks:

On the day Anjana turned twenty seven, she resigned herself to a state eternal spinsterhood. She had become, she thought, with a little bitter smile, one of those old maids destined to remain at home. Unloved, unwanted, unfulfiled. Long in the tooth, with sunken cheeks and vacant eyes (The Better Man 223).

In Indian culture marriage is a sanctified relationship and one of the most important Sanskar put of sixteen, preached in Hindu Shastras. In Indian culture there are sixteen sanskaras described in one of the most important and earliest metrical work of the Dharmashastra textual tradition of Hinduism, Manusmriti. The sixteen sanskaras are:

1. *Garbhadhana (Conception)* : This samskara is performed by parents and consists of fervent prayer for a child in order to fulfil the obligation to continue the human race.

2. *Punsavana (Foetus Protection)* : This samskara is performed during the third or fourth month of pregnancy. A priest recites Vedic hymns to invoke divine qualities in the child.
3. *Simantonnayana (Satisfying the Cravings of the Pregnant mother)*: This samskara is similar to a baby shower, and is performed during the seventh month of pregnancy when prayers are offered to God for the healthy, physical and mental growth of the child.

4. *Jatakarma (Child birth)*: This samskara is performed at child's birth. Mantras are recited for a healthy and long life of the child at his birth.

5. *Namakaran (Naming the child)*: This samskara is performed to select the name of newly born child. The name for the baby is selected such that its meaning can inspire the child to follow the path of righteousness.

6. *Nishkramana (Taking the child outdoors for the first time)*: This samskara is performed in the fourth month after the birth when the child is moved outside the house.

7. *Annaprasana (Giving solid food)*: This important samskara is associated with the first feeding. In the sixth, seventh or eighth month child is given solid food.

8. *Chudakarma (Shaving of head)*: This samskara involves shaving the head of the child in the first, second, third or fifth year.

9. *Upanayana (Sacred thread ceremony)*: This samskara is performed to introduce the male child to a teacher in order to receive education and marking the entry of the child to Brahmacharya.

10. *Vidyarambh (Learning the alphabet)*: This samskara is also known as Aksharambha. It is performed at the age of five and is necessary before commencing Vedic study–vedarambh.
11. **Keshant (shaving the beard)**: This samskara involves the first shaving of the beard by the man at the age of sixteen.

12. **Samavartana (Returning home after completion of education)**: This samskara is performed at the age of about 25 years. It is performed at the end of the brahmacharya phase, the end of studentship. Sama Vartan means returning home from the house of the acharya.

13. **Vivaha (Marriage)**: This the most important of all the Hindu samskaras. By marriage an individual is able to achieve the four prusharths (Endeavours) of life: Dhrama (Righteousness), Artha (Wealth), Kama (Desire) and Moksha (Salvation). He is also able to pay off ancestral debt by having children.

14. **Vanaprastha (Preparation for renunciation)**: This samskara is performed at the age of fifty to celebrate the departure from the householder stage to the venaprastha stage when the person beings to engage in spiritual activities.

15. **Sanyasa (Renunciation)**: This samskara is performed after vanaprastha. People give up domestic life and spend their rest life as a sanyasi.

16. **Antyesthi (Cremation)**: This is the final samskara performed after death by his or her descendents.

In Indian society spinsterhood is considered as a sin of previous life. So when Anjana comes to know that her marriage has been fixed with Ravindran who is a medical representative in a Pharmaceutical company, she feels relief as the novelist remarks "Only then did Anjana let her mask slip and reveal how relieved she was. She smiled. She laughed. Her shoulders straightened, her breast stood proud and erect, her hips swung. Her eyes danced. Anjana let herself be a desirable woman once again" (*The Better Man* 224). In Indian philosophy marriage is considered as the last
destination of a woman. She is taught right from her childhood that husband is just
next to God and it is the duty of every woman to follow instructions and carry out the
orders of the husband. After marriage Anjana is desirous to share her feelings and
wants to know the likes and dislikes of Ravindran but she is shocked at his indifferent
attitude towards her. She cooks a variety of food but Ravindran criticises the taste and
her method of cooking rather than encouraging and appreciating her efforts. The
novelist remarks "She wished there was some way she could discover his likes and
dislikes. All she wanted to do was please him" (The Better Man 227). Even after three
months she is a stranger in this house, she demands equality, seeks companionship,
love and respect as well but her husband never cares about her needs and desires. The
novelist remarks:

Three months later he was still a stranger to her. A man she
cooked and kept house for. A man who used her body when the
impulse took him. There was little conversation between them and
hardly any companionship. When she tried to talk to him about his
job, he dismissed her queries with a careless wave and said 'you
won't understand what I'm talking about' (The Better Man 228).

Anjana is victimized by Ravindran. One day Anjana goes to her parents' home
in order to look after her mother. This gap becomes an escape from her conjugal life.
Ravindran's business failed and he decided to start a new-one. Ravindran's
indifference towards Anjana creates a gap and this silence makes their marital life
grow unsteady and dismal. It is the benefit of an arranged marriage that parents
support and try to mitigate the problem as Anjana's parents raise voice against
Ravindran's brutality. Her father states:
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. (*The Better Man* 232)

After Anjana's father's intervention in that matter to protect his daughter from domestic violence, Ravindran finds another way to torture her. Now Anjana faces sexual assault by her own husband and this is a dark side of male egotism. A healthy relationship demands caring and sharing but here Ravindran imposed all the causes of his failure on Anjana. Anjana is very shocked at his irritating behaviour. The novelist remarks "Ravindran was never again violent, but he found a new vent to express his anger. Anjana, who had graduated from numbness to rapture now, discovered torment. He used her body with a brutality that scared her. Pushing, punching, pummeling, some nights when he had finished with her. She wondered what heinous sin she was paying for" (*The Better Man* 232). In order to save Anjana from the brutality of her husband, her father finds a suitable teaching job for her. Now she is happy with the routine and the duty which she has been performing. A new contentment filled her life as she has friends to talk and an income that makes her feels no longer like a destitute. Economic independence plays a significant role in improving one's life and it is the demand of time for women to become economically independent. Economic dependence is seen as one of the remarkable factors of domestic violence in patriarchal society.

Ravindran's indifferent attitude and ruling nature create a space for extra-marital relationship for Anjana. Vatsyayana remarks "If a woman is forced to submit
to rough handling from a man whom she scarcely knows she may come to hate sexual intercourse, and even to hate the whole male sex... or she may grow to detest her husband in particular, and will then turn to another man" (*Kamasutra-III* 2). It happens same with Anjana.

One day Mukundan meets Anjana and fell in love. Anjana too was in search of a desirable man with whom she can share her feelings and emotions. And Mukundan becomes the suitable bachelor to her. Their relationship deepens day by day under the shadow of uncertainty. After eight months Ravindran returns and treats Anjana as his possession. Anjana doesn't approve it and she is quite unhappy with her position in Ravindran's life and the traditional bond of marriage. She states "Just because we are man and wife in the eyes of law, he thinks he can treat me as he pleases. As far as he is concerned, I am merely a servant who doubles as a whore" (*The Better Man* 243). Being a self-independent and educated woman she knows the rights and role of woman in the society. She demands equality in relationship which she feels, is against her husband's attitude. She remarks "I think a prostitute has more rights than I have in this marriage. At least she gets paid for her services, and she can say no if she wants to. I have no such choice in this matter" (*The Better Man* 243). As far as the relationship with Mukundan is concerned she likes his company and feels relief. Mukundan also loves and cares very much but the age difference becomes as an impediment between them. He is also afraid of the society as the moral code of conduct of the society doesn't allow a relationship with a married woman. He states "I love you. I want to spend every moment of my life with you. But you are a married woman... I am so much older you" (*The Better Man* 244). It is a matter of fact that relationships are not bounded by time, age and social norms. Mukundan is in dilemma.
how he should persuade Anjana. Both discuss the dogmas of society regarding the defined age of male and female in a relationship. In Indian society now this set of rules is weakening day by day. Anjana counters the situation boldly and remarks "I don't care about how old you are or what the world thinks. If you will have me, that is all the happiness I need" (The Better Man 244).

An extra-marital relationship deepens day by day between an aged bachelor Mukundan and Anjana. Both are happy in each other company and enjoy the life as they wish. Anjana has decided to spend rest of her life with Mukundan with whom she is satisfied and feels complete. Anjana remarks "I have never ever felt like a married woman in all these years. I feel married when I am with you" (The Better Man 244). Mukundan is an ambitious man and he wants to prove himself better than his father. He is in search of position and status with reputation in Kaikurussi. When he is appointed a member of the Community Hall Committee, he thinks it to be the best opportunity to establish his identity. The moral code of committee becomes an obstacle as it doesn't allow him to bring Anjana at home. Mukundan expresses his dilemma to Anjana and tries to persuade her to postpone the plan until she gets a divorce certificate. Anjana is a mature woman and she finds that Mukundan is playing trick. She reacts against Mukundan's decision. She remarks:

When you told me that you were a weak and unrealiable person, I told myself that I was fortunate that the man I loved was someone mature enough to know his own limitations. Someone who wasn't afraid to admit it. I was wrong. You are a coward. A smug and completely self-absorbed coward who puts himself before anyone else and then uses his own feebleness of character to excuse it. What a great trick that is! To admit to your frailty so no one will
condemn you later on. You disgust me. Please leave" (The Better Man 323).

Anjana represents the woman of modern society who is educated and self-independent and bold to face the challenges of the world. The novelist portrays Anjana to draw the attention of society towards gender issues and identity crisis and the capabilities of woman who can make choices, take decisions and lead life according to her own wishes. Through Anjana, the novelist delineates the real woman who faces all the suppressions of patriarchal society and then after a lot of suffering in her marriage, she finds a suitable man but unfortunately she is betrayed but all the adverse situations mould her into a positive and bold woman.

Krishnan Nair plays a significant role in shaping Mukundan's life. He is not only the caretaker of the house but also a witness of all the ups and downs that happen in the family and society as well. His dedication and sacrifice for the Achuthan Nair's family puts him at the top of appreciation. He consoles Mukundan whenever he finds him in dilemma and distress. When Mukundan was on Pulmooth Mountain observing the scenario and gets hurt from his past life. Krishnan Nair states "It is all in your mind. If you want to look around you and see mountains, forests, and oceans, you will or else you will see little mounds of earth, sparse bushes on piddling streams" (The Better Man 52). He also used to mediate between Mukundan and his father. It is the irony of his life that on the one hand he has sacrificed all the happiness and his family for this family, on the other hand his owner Achuthan Nair teaches his son to be a selfish man in front of him. He states "If you wish to survive, you need to think of yourself first" (The Better Man 71). The caretaker is shocked at his owner's teaching
to Mukundan and making him understand that time has changed and everyone has become self centered. He suggests a key to success in his life. He states:

The moment you starts thinking of others, there is no way you will ever reach anywhere. In this world no one can be responsible for anyone else. Protect yourself first. Then, if it doesn't involve risking your life, you can help someone else. A survivor is someone who is selfish (The Better Man 72).

Krishnan Nair also makes Mukundan realize the harsh reality of the present life. He differentiates between his father's attitude and behaviour and his achievements. He makes clear to Mukundan that if he wants to become a man of honour, he has to do better than his father. Krishnan Nair narrates his father's faults and also the determination to fulfil the purpose.

I'm not saying he was perfect. He had his faults. Several of them, in fact. He was callous, brutal, and a tyrant. But he also had the courage of his convictions. When he believed in something, he let nothing come between him and his purpose. Do you have that courage, Mukundan? Do you have the strength to pursue happiness? (The Better Man 343)

Krishnan Nair asks Mukundan to introspect himself and his achievement. He encourages him to move on with his life and make something best of it. Krishnan Nair left the house to spend his rest life with his family and once again he reminds Mukundan to admit reality and correct his faults. He states "If you think you are a better man than him, let us see it. You can't use him as an excuse for your ineptitude any more" (The Better Man 343).
In the chapter 'A Matter of Hair and a Tug of War' the novelist delineates the issues of caste which is an impediment for a progressive society. Mukundan invites Kamban for a cup of tea which is a staff in the post-office situated on his piece of land. Kamban belongs to a lower caste so the caretaker Nair opposes Mukundan's decision. Mukundan explains, now-a-days caste of a man doesn't matter and all are equal and moreover he has to settle the problems of rent and other issues related to post-office with the help of Kamban. Mukundan remarks "What code of etiquette had he broken with a harmless invitation?" (*The Better Man* 147). Krishnan Nair expresses his conservative ideas and behaviour as well, how he used to keep distance from the people of lower section. Even he urges to not serve tea and biscuits to Kamban if he comes to the house. The caretaker Nair remarks "His father used to come here every morning to empty bucket of shit your father spewed out from his bowels with great regularity. And now you expect me to serve his son biscuits and tea" (*The Better Man* 147-148).

Mukundan shares his experience of explosive factory where he was posted as a clerk. There were no discrimination on the basis of caste, creed and religion in the factory. All were behaved equally. Mukundan points out his experience with Shri Ramappa, the section manager, with whom he once refused to share cigarette. For that behaviour Shri Ramappa scolded him as he remarks "I am sick and tired of men like you who think that being born in an upper caste gives you the divine right to treat the rest of us like animals" (*The Better Man* 148). Mukundan is a man of progressive thought and he doesn't want to carry the conventional etiquette and traditional customs which cause disintegration of society. He believes in equality and fraternity
and treats everyone equally in the society. When Krishnan Nair disapproves of Kamban's coming to the house, Mukundan reacts against his views. He remarks:

Has not Kamban eyes? Has not Kamban hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter the summer as we are? (*The Better Man* 149).

Through the portrayal of Kamban episode the author points out the practice of untouchability which is still prevalent in the society. Before independence such type of practice was at its zenith and many of the writers of that period raised voice against it in their works. Mulk Raj Anand's first novel *Untouchable* is an interesting example of early writing which deals with the problems of untouchable in India. This novel examines and interrogates this relentless process by which a majority community systematically alienates certain groups of people apparently 'within' its fold, all in the name of religion and tradition. At the same time, the novel exposes the searing effects of such segregation so far as the very act of imagining a new and united nation is considered. Bakha, the chief protagonist is the 'alien' within the nation, whose very touch is considered hateful and defiling. The novel explores this movement of its protagonist Bakha from a state of acute and searing alienation to a position of partial and tentative integration as well as an understanding of the imagined nation.

After independence, the relevance of caste system in Indian society has certainly reduced but not diminished. The Indian constitution provides the right to equality which clarifies that each and every citizen is equal before the law. For the eradication of untouchability, the untouchability offences act was passed by the
government of India in 1950 in which there is a provision of punishment for such type of practice.

The whole story revolves around Mukundan's metamorphosis into a better man than his father, social factors and the surroundings of his friends and relatives play a significant role in the transformation. In the words of Nadine Richters

Social factors play an important role within the novel, for Mukundan is very dependent upon what the people of his village think about him, his behaviour and his future wife. He even is about to part with Anjana, merely because she is still married with another man and because of that the villagers would ostracize him. Mukundan is ruled by the temptation of general acceptance, which also goes together with a political factor. He wants to gain power and become an opportunist in the village. However Mukundan manages to learn to get unaffected by these factors (Richters 15)

This novel is vivid a portrayal of the contemporary society and issues related to human psychology and sociology. Right in the word's of Abraham Verghese, author of My Own Country. The Better Man is an astonishing book. It is tender, lyrical, humors and insightful. In Anita Nair's capable hands the exotic setting comes alive and becomes familiar and we see our struggle and triumphs reflected in these marvelous characters. Quest for identity, not a rare theme in the world of fiction, but Anita Nair dealt it in a totally different way that made the novel stand a step ahead in its genre. Here, Mukundan, a retired government servant, who is in his late fifties searching for the identity in his native place. The irony of the situation is that despite being the son of one of the eminent personalities of the town Kaikurussi, he is struggling hard to establish a refined self identity.
As far as the narrative techniques of this novel is concerned. It would not be an exaggeration to say that *The Better Man* is a picturesque novel. Anita Nair took the readers to a small town in Kerala names Kaikurussi. The word picturesque, meaning literally in the manner of a picture, fit to be made into a picture. Picturesque is defined as "a term expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture". The term picturesque needs to be understood in relationship to two aesthetic ideals: the beautiful and the sublime. The narrator delineates the beauty of the village, Kaikurussi as "Kaikurussi was a little hollow surrounded by several hills. The road we had travelled upon ended abruptly a hundred feet away from where the bus stood. There was stillness in the air. There is not even a river running this way. Just fields, wells, a mountain and distant hills" (*The Better Man* 105). Nair describes how the pulmooth mountain is different in structures and appearance from other mountain she describes the scenery:

The fields were everywhere. Endless shades of green that stretched into the horizon on one side and the foot of the pulmooth mountain on the other. When a breeze blew, the tops of the paddy rippled and turned the sheets of sedate jade into gleaming splashes of emerald. The Pulmooth mountain was no longer that mountain that reached into the sky insurmountably. It was as flat as a football field (*The Better Man* 50-51).

Her writing is simple. Her description of landscape and presentation is elegant. The first fictional village to be made literally famous was R.K. Narayan's Malgudi but in the contemporary writing, Anita Nair has created another popular fictional village, Kaikurussi to narrate the story vividly. The talkative language of this novel attracts
the reader and provides aesthetic pleasure. This novel is beautifully divided into five parts and subdivided into twenty-nine chapters.

In a deeper insight into the novel unfolds various themes such as search for identity, exploration of domestic life, gender discrimination and the disintegration in the society, cultural differences, man-woman relationships, and the power of land in the lives of the people and so on.
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