

LAND AND LEGACY AS MEANS OF ECOFEMINIST EMPOWERMENT IN ANITA NAIR'S *THE BETTER MAN*

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Abstract

*Land and legacy are not only means of economic empowerment, but also they contribute to the socio-cultural, political and psychological empowerment through authorisation. In India, property transfer is patrilineal and women own negligible percentage of land. Due to dowry, unemployment, under employment, low decision making power and less access to resources, women remain less empowered in acquisition to land and legacy also. In our culture, we tend to equate women with nature biologically, spiritually and literally. Yet it is ironical that women have less access to land, natural resources and property rights. Ecofeminism is an ideology and a movement that finds considerable similarity and interconnection between the oppression of women and nature. Ecofeminist empowerment can be termed as the empowerment achieved through attaining ecofeminist goals like putting an end to the oppression of both women and nature, achieving environmental protection as well as female empowerment, gaining more female access to nature and natural resources etc. This paper tries to analyse how land and legacy are depicted as means of ecofeminist empowerment in Anita Nair's novel *The better man*. It is also significant that Kerala had matrilineal tradition of property transfer among the Nair caste. The paper also attempts to analyse the major female characters and their characterisation in the novel with the light of ecofeminism in a feminist perspective.*

Introduction

Ecriture feminine (Women's writing) in Indian English Literature is a promising, revolutionary phase in the post-colonial era. Anita Nair is one of the important literary figures in contemporary Indian English fiction. She is a prolific writer of novels, collection of short stories, poems and children's literature. A Keralite settled in Bangalore, she has written six

novels; most of them are narrated in the background of Kerala. For this paper, I have taken the first novel of Anita Nair, namely *The Better Man* (2000), which is written in the cultural context of Kerala.

‘Land and legacy’ are inevitable demarcators of gender, class and caste in the thematic pattern of this novel. They are not only means of economic empowerment, but they also contribute to the socio-cultural, political and psychological empowerment through authorisation. Especially in the socio-cultural background of India, legacy and ownership of land play key factors in determining even the identity of a person. Here, property transfer is patrilineal and women own a negligible percentage of land. In some cases, they do not own land at all. Due to dowry, unemployment, under employment, low or no decision making power, and less access to resources, women remain less empowered in acquisition of land and legacy.

In our culture, we tend to equate women with nature-- biologically, spiritually and literally, thus creating a binary by equating men with culture and alienating women from the mainstream. Yet, it is ironical that women have less access to land, natural resources and property rights. Patriarchy has its pivotal roots in simultaneous environmental destruction and female subjugation. Therefore, the idea of ecofeminism is critical in analysing novels depicting conventional and coercive male culture. Ecofeminism is both an ideology and a movement that finds considerable similarity and interconnection between the oppression of women and mindless exploitation of nature. The term ecofeminism was first coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *‘Le Féminisme ou la Mort’* (Feminism or death) in 1974 while explaining the inevitable part that feminism can have, in confronting environmental as well as gender issues. Noël Sturgeon, in her book *Ecofeminist Natures*, defined ecofeminism as “a movement that makes connections between environmentalism and feminism; more precisely, it articulates the theory that the ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment.” (Sturgeon, 23)

Ecofeminist empowerment can be termed as the empowerment achieved through attaining ecofeminist objectives, like putting an end to the exploitation of both women and nature, achieving environmental protection as well as female empowerment, gaining more female access to nature and natural resources etc. This paper tries to analyse how land and legacy are depicted as means of ecofeminist empowerment in the selected novel, *The Better Man*, of Anita Nair. It is also significant that Kerala had matrilineal tradition of property transfer among the Nair caste and the major female characters in this novel belong to the same caste. The novel is analysed by using the concept of ecofeminism with a feminist perspective in the post-colonial scenario. The paper also attempts to analyse the major female characters and their characterisation in the light of ecofeminism.

Land and legacy as means of empowerment

While discussing matrilineal practices in Kerala, the history, *modus operandi* and impacts of matrilineality have to be analysed deeply. Robin Jeffrey, who has conducted ample research on practices of Nair caste, explains in his paper captioned “Legacies of Matriliney: The Place of Women and the Kerala Model,” and emphasizes on two important points that, “... it was not

practised by all groups, and it was not matriarchy. Though families were based on mothers' homes and organized through the female line, the controllers and decision makers were men. Nor did matriliney in Kerala date from prehistoric time. It appears to have developed around the eleventh century of the Common Era (CE), possibly as a result of prolonged war between the Chera and Chola dynasties and their subordinates." (Jeffrey, 648)

Families were matrifocal too. Women remained in their native homes after marriage and the household heads were mostly their brothers or mothers. This practice was prevalent among Ezhavas and some Muslim families in Malabar. Matriliney legally ended on 1 December 1976, when the Kerala government put into effect the Kerala Joint Hindu Family System (Abolition) Act, 1975. Matriliney was more empowering than patriliney for women and that too, not only in its economic aspects but in other areas as well. KSaradamoni writes in her book *Matriliney Transformed: Family, Law, and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore* that "An identity with one's natal home which lasted throughout life was the main feature of matriliney" (Saradamoni, 23). This also implicates the sense of belongingness, security feeling and psychological empowerment a woman gets through being in her own home.

Praveena Kodoth's paper on gender and property rights in Kerala argues that "land reform strengthened the patriarchal conjugal framework of property relations in the state, compromising women's independent right to property." (Kodoth, 1911). She also emphasises the decline of property rights of women in Kerala after Land reform Act, 1970 and Kerala Joint Hindu Family System (Abolition) Act, 1975. She quotes: "There are broad indications that over the last quarter of the 20th century dowry is replacing inheritance rights as a mode of transfer of property to or on account of women. There is evidence that up to the mid-1970s women continued to inherit some property among the matrilineal groups, though distinctions were drawn among different kinds of property [Gough 1952; Fuller 1976]" (1917). She finally concludes that "Strong signals of a decline in their inheritance rights and the rising presence of dowry in the state suggest that women's property rights are getting tied precariously to marriage. The burden of women's homebound work on land and the increased leisure that some women enjoy are clearly at the cost of paid employment. In these contexts too, women's economic security is premised to a large extent on marriage. Hence, recent evidence of gender based disparity in landholdings could reflect a combination of the limited rights that women have to inherited and earned resources, as well as the pressure on women to remain 'invisible' under a marital framework of property." (1918)

Here, matriliney can be connected to ecofeminist empowerment. When a woman has authority over land and land-based resources, she is more prone to have access to natural resources. Even though patriarchy rules the whole scenario, matrilineal achievement could help women from being overruled. My paper's focus is on the connection between women and land (owned and not owned) in *The Better Man* of Anita Nair, both metaphorically and literally.

Greta Gaard elaborates the possibilities of ecofeminism in her book as "More than a theory about feminism and environmentalism, or women and nature, as the name might imply, ecofeminism approaches the problems of environmental degradation and social injustice from the premise that how we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked" (Gaard, 158). Therefore, ecofeminism can be summarised as an ideology and a

movement that speaks for women, nature, and the marginalised groups. There are three significant reasons for the need of ecofeminism different from environmentalism. One is that there are chances for women to get silenced and not given opportunities in environmental movements as they follow androcentric attitudes. The other reason is that studies have proved that the major victims of any kind of pollution and degradation of environment are women as it directly affects women's reproductive system and children. Therefore, women across the globe have to unite to end up environmental issues. The third reason is the possibility of decentralised or gynocentric (especially as an alternative to dissolve androcentrism) life practices which could save both women and nature from exploitation. When we talk about gyno-eco-friendly life practices, women's access to nature and natural resources are very significant. Especially in the developing countries in the post-colonial context, globalization and privatization are taking away most of the rights of all the marginalised classes including women. Here, my paper focuses on the empowerment/disempowerment experienced by the major female characters in *The Better Man* through land and legacy. This empowerment could be termed as ecofeminist empowerment.

The Better Man is the story of a middle aged, retired government servant Mukundan's hope and transition from the shadows of his father's personality to become a better man. The novel revolves around the village in Kerala called Kaikurussi (fictional) when Mukundan, the protagonist, comes back to his native village to live after retirement. His urge to relate and connect himself to the land, legacy and heritage, his escape from the unpleasant memories of his mother's death and teenage love, inferiority complex and fear towards his father Achuthan Nair, his love to a married school teacher Anjana and bonding with painter Bhasi, are pivotal in his growth to becoming a better man. The moment Mukundan decides to take risks and do what his heart wants, he finds happiness and peace. Even though the story revolves around Mukundan, it can be undoubtedly stated that all the major female characters in the novel are much more powerful and determinant than him. Anita Nair has skilfully crafted the characters of Anjana, Meenakshi, Parukutty Amma and Valsala.

Anjana is a victim of an unsuccessful, exploitative married life, but finds love in Mukundan, who is twenty two years older to her. Anjana's parents encouraged her to study when no suitable marriage alliance came for her. Finally, she got married to Ravindran, who has considered her as a mere object. He was sadist, lazy, and was never consistent in one job. He asked Anjana to stay back in her natal home. Seeing the plight of his unhappy and hurt daughter, her father sold some land and bought her a teaching job. Anjana felt better.

"When the schools reopened, Anjana had a new routine. There was no more of that endless waiting. Suddenly most of her time had a purpose, the hours of the day were accounted for." (Nair, 232)

"A new contentment filled her life. She had a job she enjoyed, she had friends she could talk to, and she had an income that made her feel no longer like a destitute." (233)

After her parents death, Ravindran used to visit her occasionally, adding up pain and depression to her. He fails in all his business ventures and loses substantial amount of money. He blames her for not being supportive by offering him her jewellery and land. Actually it was her ancestral properties, jewellery and salary that gave her the courage and

support to live alone. Otherwise, she would have been abandoned or treated cruelly. After some years, she loses all hopes and accepts her life as fruitless as it is. She lives practically the life of a spinster till she meets and falls in love with Mukundan. Anjana decides to divorce her unreliable husband. She was determinant in divorcing Ravindran and marrying Mukundan despite the big gap in their age. Mukundan was sincerely in love with her; yet, at a certain point, he fears social acceptance. But Anjana stays bold all the time. Finding Mukundan hesitant and wavering because of social stigma, she asks him to leave. Later when Mukundan realises that he wants her to be with him more than anything else, he asks for her forgiveness and invites her to his life. He was turning to be a better man.

Meenakshi, the cousin of Mukundan, in her teenage was suddenly forbidden from mingling with Mukundan and asked to do cooking and other 'feminine' works. At first, she submitted, but later on became a Naxalite and decided to run away from her family to lead a revolutionary life. She fell in love with a Kathakali artist Balan and soon became a tamed housewife. Balan left her for his artistic future when she delivered a child. She hated sympathy and pity and never depended on anyone. She set up a crèche using some fund granted to her from the village Panchayat and when her son started going to school, she turned it into a fancy store. Later, she became an LIC agent to take care of her mother, son and daughter-in-law. At the age of sixty, her husband sends her a letter saying that he is under medical treatment and in a worse condition—physically, mentally and economically. Meenakshi decides to take care of him. Finally, she decides to work as a hostel matron to pay back the debts and stay away from home, so that people who are dependent on her would learn to live without her physical presence. Thus, Meenakshi emerges out a more confident and empowered woman through the various vicissitudes of her life.

Parukutty Amma is Mukundan's mother, subjugated by a patriarch husband, even though all the properties belonged to her. She is an epitome of endurance. She even ignores her husband Achuthan Nair's extra marital affair out of fear and agony. Her first protest was while her husband decided to fulfill the wish of his illegitimate wife to be the mistress of the big house where Achuthan Nair and Parukutty Amma lived. Parukutty Amma has inherited the land and house from her mother through the custom of matriliney; but being the authority and beneficiary of the property Achuthan Nair has ceased to remember that. For the first time, Parukutty Amma talks to her husband in a firm tone:

"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 due to me."

'And what if I don't? he sneered as his fingers bit into her upper arms. She swallowed the pain and murmured through clenched teeth, '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)

When Achuthan Nair built a new house for his mistress and started living with her, Parukutty Amma lived alone in her house. She didn't allow Achuthan Nair to store his grain in her storeroom. She threw it outside her property both as a matter of revenge and to show her guts. She called her second cousin and husband to her house for a visit, whom Achuthan Nair didn't like. She even gifted Achuthan Nair's old wooden clogs to their cousin's son to play.

She was getting empowered to take revenge on her cruel husband. She decided to react only when her husband decided to insult her heritage and legacy, rather than while suffering all the pain and endurance. Achuthan Nair retaliated back by the tales of his love making with illegitimate wife, exclaiming how real a woman she is, and thus insulting Parukutty Amma further. Her death is a mystery as she had died falling from the stairs. But he could not take his mistress to the house as she feared Parukutty Amma's soul. The author uses the metaphor of a *Chempaka* tree that Parukutty Amma planted in her yard. It bloomed only after her death and the fragrance wafted into the mistress's house. Thus, in a symbolic way, the novelist shows the presence of Parukutty Amma even after her death.

There are hints that Parukutty Amma would have been killed by her husband. This somehow connects to Valsala's story. Valsala is a middle aged housewife, getting bored with daily household chores and her husband Prabhakaran Master's numbness and insensitivity towards her. When *Pala* tree bloomed in her yard with its exotic fragrance, her senses awakened and she started yearning for a life filled with love and change. She started cooking spicy food, took good care of her beauty, dreamt of *Gandharva* coming to life to satisfy her desires, and fell in love with neighbour Sridharan. He has asked her to elope with him, but she was reluctant to leave the house and land she served for many years of married life. "She looked around her. The house that had held her captive for the last twenty-three years-- the kitchen where she had cooked thousands of meals, the dingy blue walls, the old fashioned furniture— and felt a sob grow in her. When she stepped outside, the coconut, cashew and mango trees became prison walls she could never scale. The pepper vines handcuffed her to the land, and the melon vine bound her to the house. She felt the house and the land were sucking her dry of her youth. But it was her husband who made her want to flee." (130) "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." (133)

Finally, she secretly kills her husband with the help of Sridharan. It was partly out of greed and partly out of awareness towards her rights and dignity. Even though a woman works like a bull both inside and outside home, the benefits are solely to the owner of the house and land, which in most of the case, is her husband. When an unemployed, married woman, who has no assets in her name, decides to leave her husband, her only shelter is her native home, which mostly unwelcomes her. Her labours in the husband's house are unpaid and considered negligible and non-productive. This either disheartens her from leaving her husband or provokes her to do something really hard. Here, if Valsala had some properties of her own or was economically independent, she wouldn't have dared to kill her husband. Valsala is a negative character in the novel and is given very little space, but she raises certain questions related to female deprivations and desires. On the other hand, Achuthan Nair enjoys all the privileges and even receives respect and obedience from his elderly son. Society pelts stones only on women when they take immoral measures. Valsala goes to jail for killing her husband, while Achuthan Nair, as narrated in the novel, remains authoritative and respected till his death.

Conclusion

Ancestral land and legacy are always seen as matters of pride and attachment. They give an amount of empowerment to the owner, no matter even if they are not practically substantial. Krishnan Nair, the care taker of Mukundan's house, believes that selling one's own land is equal to selling one's heritage. He could not even tolerate the selling of the land in which he has worked for years. Moreover, land based properties can be used as a capital for any new venture. Since it is a solid asset, it is difficult for others to tactically or forcefully take it away from the owner. When a woman gets land through inheritance, it gives her a sort of dignity and decisive independence. Anjana, Meenakshi and Parukutty Amma, had their ancestral houses and land. It helped them to take stern decisions, no matter how long it would take for them to be decisive. Whether it is divorce, being independent, or not allowing husband to take his mistress home, these phases have completely changed the women's lives forever. Valsala had to commit a heinous crime since she did not own anything of her own. The female characters in Anita Nair's *The Better Man* reiterate the necessity of a woman being economically independent to choose her own life and live on her own decisions. Ecofeminist goals on female access to nature and natural resources must address the issues of female property rights and accessibility. As the predicament of nature and women are almost the same in a male-dominated world, so interrelationship and affection between them would help both of them. This will go a long way in the restoration of nature and in the rejuvenation and empowerment of women.

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