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Inner Voices And Outer Influences In Building Inner Strength: A Brief Examination Of The Novels Of Anita Nair

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine the age-old human quest to achieve one's true freedom and the satisfaction of being at peace with oneself. Learning from others' life experiences and the ability to make the right choice through self-introspection and the courage to apply these learnings would enable one to achieve one's purpose in life. Anita Nair, in her novels, focused on these individual attributes in her protagonists who create space to listen to their inner voice clearer so as to see the path and direction in life. In doing so, Nair has vividly captured this quest to strike a balance between the inner voice and the outer influences in the attempt to build one's inner strength and to find the true purpose in life that are relevant to our current time and situations.

Keywords: voice, inner strength, outer strength, quest, purpose, Anita Nair, identity.

Listening to the inner voice which helps shape inner strength

To find true purpose and to reconnect with one's self, specifically for those who lack direction and are indecisive, one should listen to the inner voice and make the right decisions. In the real world, every individual often faces difficult situations, which one can face and learn to rise or ignore and risk failure. Several times it is just a matter of choice. The quest to find the best solution and to rediscover oneself depends on one's ability to make the right choices and learn from outer influences and experiences. Inner strength, overcome mental and emotional reactions, and help us to realise our full potential.

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Inner strength is the pursuit of inner peace. The real change lies in experiencing the joy, worry, love, and anxiety which take form in an individual's conscious awareness. It is said that the mind takes its shape from what it rests upon. If the mind is resting upon negativity like criticism, grumbling, stress, and anxiety without any control, then the brain functions on narrow thoughts, depressed mood, and guilt. Similarly, if the mind is resting on positive events and thinking, anything can be achieved pleasantly, and any pressures can be handled. Meanwhile, this positive energy builds strength, resilience, and an optimistic outlook. This positive mood leads us to know one's self-worth. To make it authentic, one needs to focus on nurturing inner strength.

The ability to possess the full potential is through inner strength. It is said in the Vedanta that the true nature of a man is considered to be divine and blissful. It is free of every bondage. Swamy Vivekananda says it is the weakness in humans that pulls down the potential. Attraction and aversion cause weakness in humans. Ironically, humans in a fit to overcome weakness, try to make the weakness look like strength. The strong and the weak are characterised by the way they react when the external forces plunge. While human sentiments are given less importance, infinite sources of strength are drawn within. Some of us fit between the two extremes, exhibiting the abilities as inner strength and are confused with the weakness to be their strength. The foundation of strength lies in being true to self not confined to what others think. Shifting our attention to what others think makes us conscious about attracting and pleasing others which makes us less about "self". Others drag our attention and therefore, weakness breeds, leading to further deterioration. To achieve strength, faith acts as a catalyst between the thoughts and the inner self. A slight shadow of doubt leads to fear and fear destroys the strength. Positive thoughts when nourished double the strength. Fearlessness is the only trait associated with strength. The weak exist for themselves with fear, whereas the strong live for themselves and for others, the world easily recognises such beings. The state of one's mind helps one understand his/her morality. Consciousness is being with a sense of right and wrong or the moral sense of an action or thought or inclination through an inner voice – a voice within.

Sri Aurobindo's expression of a sublime spiritual conscience is found to be akin to, and may conceptually be extended to, its mundane counterpart in the world of gender oppression for the sake of clarity (Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, page 751). When the seeker's soul presses on with the challenge of the quest, the spirit feels as if it were being surrounded and crushed from all sides, the titanic forces of the temporal world are arrayed him in a war-like action:

All around me now the Titan forces press;
This world is theirs; they hold its days in fee;
I am full of wounds and the fight merciless;
Is it not yet thy hour of victory?

The conflict between 'who one is' and 'who one wants to be' are many a time the factors causing repressions in a being. In fact, the existentialist Jean P Sartre condemns conventional consciousness as a total of the bourgeoisie to control the masses. Often one finds that he/she is unable to think or move away from the circle that draws around an individual's mind, a restricting circle that shows what seems to the world as real is unreal to the consciousness of the person.

The Inner Voices of Mukundan in The Better Man

The Better Man focuses exactly on the capacity of one's willpower to overcome inner fears and human weakness and establish the right approach to life as the foremost duty of a man or woman. Through her implied author and "artist narrator" Bhasi, the painter of walls, Anita Nair brings about a nearly cathartic revelation of repairing and rearranging of metaphoric tainted walls in society. Referring to the "neglected

walls” of Mukundan’s house Bhasi says, “It was as if you and your walls have become one” (Nair, *The Better Man*, page 11). Bhasi’s advice helps Mukundan to listen to the voice of his inner self [consciousness], which in turn makes him express himself without inner fears. Nair’s alteration in Mukundan, the one who was pitied by his lived ones and this discomfort filled him with angst and self-denial. His interminable trauma on his delicate psyche was an assault on his inner strength. He continued to be in the same phase through his adulthood. The traumatic mauling subjected him to shame, leading to the denial of his own identity. The one-screw-loose Bhasi’s constant guidance, Mukundan remembers what Bhasi said, “in you is the strength to stand up to anything and anyone. You can choose how to live your life” (Nair, *The Better Man*, page 201). Introspection helps Mukundan to get out of his fears and become normal and to face everything that comes his way, from his gruelling father-dominated past. By achieving the ultimate consciousness Mukundan becomes a ‘better man’. He turns into a more sensible man who is sensible enough to choose the correct life for himself.

The Inner Voice of Akhila and her Coupe Mates in Ladies Coupe

The sensational and sensual opening of the Ladies Coupe captures this element of opposing forces in a woman’s consciousness individually in the protagonist Akhila’s “escape” to Kanyakumari and collectively in her fellow passengers’ ice-breaking interaction with each other. The voice within her helped unravel the turmoil of guilt and the tantalizing feeling of freedom in Akhila, the novel’s opening pages underscores the still unexplored but covertly felt female views of each of the passengers and shows promise of unraveling more of their inner selves later. Answering the nearly sixty-year-old Janaki’s question posed to Akhila “What does your husband do” and Akhila’s confessional answer “As far as I am concerned (speaking for herself and not society at large), marriage is unimportant. Companionship, yes, I would like that. The problem is, I wish to live alone. What do you think “can a woman live alone?” marks the beginning of expositing and interlinking each of their personal lives and enables Akhila to gauge and guarantee her inner strength (Nair, *Ladies Coupe*, page 21). Her initial self-check made in answering the probing questions posed in “why not bare oneself to a stranger whom you are never to meet again” reflects on the decision she makes at the end of the novel; if the “comfort” of the coupe offers a sense of freedom to be productive and caring in confessional sharing, the comfort of a distant and strange land Kanyakumari offers her the choice of connecting to disconnect, choose to reject, empower in order to revoke. Akhila through Maragaret’s life will learn how to manhandle the situations, Margaret Shanti’s subjugation can be called one of the sexual stereotyping because her life portrays a life of a model wife. Earlier she used to be controlled by her husband later she controlled him by feeding him food to an extent that he becomes lazy (Nair, *Ladies Coupe*, page 20). Everyone in the coupe empathises with Mariakolanthu, who suffered brutally in the hands of her owner where she worked, her son Muthu – a child born out of rape by Murugesan. In the end, her endurance and walking out of bondage made her a strong woman and a mother to a child unaccepted by society. Prabha Devi is fortunate to lead a life of comfort, a pampered woman hailing from a wealthy family, married to an equally rich man, she is more beauty conscious than anything around her, and even to bear a child she is more conscious of her beauty. Meanwhile, her husband’s friend, Pramod, flirts with her and she obviously loves to receive compliments, which flattered her to have sex with him. Pramod after going home assumes her to be a materialistic woman. This instance brings change to her obsession with beauty and charm and starts enjoying life with Jagadeesh. Women face many obstacles at any age. Akhila in these stories found answers to her problematic prolonged question. Akhila was aware of what she wanted and she made her journey worthwhile when she was sure of what and where the voice in her head is leading her. She conquers every obstacle she faced, her family, the religious obstacles,

controlling societal norms, and sets herself as an achiever, a person of identity from Akhila to Akhilandeshwari.

Inner Voice of Radha in Mistress

Radha is portrayed as a true representation of the modern Indian woman, who is well aware of all the possibilities, living in a city, having luxuries, a job, and later even a lover. She perceives herself as an independent woman, who can decide about her life. Her marriage had hit the rock bottom, and so was her later relationship with Chris. As Radha is self-contained and is always willing to listen to her inner voice and effortlessly taking decisions, she is used to violating the rules that limit her life to find freedom. At the beginning of her marriage, the impact of patriarchy was high, and she was not able to conceive even after eight years of her marriage. So, she was called “Barren” by society. Radha faced much ridicule and was blamed as Shyam was impotent. On the other hand, Shyam’s dominant nature has put an end to all her plans. So, Radha retaliates with:

“I hope that is not going to undermine your standing in society. Is there anything I can do that won’t? I wanted to teach in one of the primary schools and you said it was too much work for too little money. When I wanted to start a tuition class, you said the same. Then I wanted to start a crèche and you said you didn’t want the house filled with bawling babies. So, I thought I would find something else to do which didn’t involve making money, but even that isn’t right. Don’t I have to an opinion? I am your wife. Your wife, do you hear me? But you treat me as if I am a kept woman. A bloody mistress to fulfill your sexual needs and with no rights” (Nair A, *Mistress*, p.73).

As a traveller, Christopher on his visit to India, writes the story of a Kathakali dancer, Koman, the uncle of Radha. Upon meeting Christopher, Radha had an instant connection, which over time led to mutual attraction. Radha, though was in love and got married to Shyam, was unhappy. It is her failed marriage that led her to be attracted to Christopher. As the days passed by, the relationship between Christopher and Radha strained due to misunderstandings. For instance, when Christopher talks of Saddam Hussain as “evil”, Radha responds by comparing Hussain to Bush. This comparison leads to arguments for which Christopher is angry and rebukes Radha by saying that he finds her attitude unacceptable. She has come to realise that he too was self-opinionated and adamant like her husband Shyam. Consequently, this impacted Radha’s attitude, and she maintained distance with men in her life. She then comes to understand that all men, Indian and western are alike. Therefore, she chose to listen to her own voice which was also influenced by the experienced voice of her uncle Koman. She is on a quest for freedom of self-expression without the boundaries of patriarchal forced impositions.

The Voice within Idris that led him to Understand the Measure of the Earth and Man

Idris, an ‘eternal traveller’, seems to need nothing, not even sleep, he took his journey on quest, and he originates himself as someone who couldn’t be tempted, corrupted, or convinced easily. He was on a mission finding his ways to meet the end for the sake of means. All he needed or wanted was ‘himself’. Idris indeed wanted to seek something, he never wanted to own though, whatever comes his way he handled with diligence and made it a remarkable one; of the places, of the food, of the trade, of people, of relationships. The jeweled-eyed Idris induced a sense of wonder and incredulity in every place of his visit. He experienced an unexpected twist when he meets his nine-year-old son Kandavar, born out of a mysterious night. On his first meet, Idris is anxious about staying close to him. Fortune favoured Idris. He was given charge of his son by the child’s maternal uncle, to distract him from a fatal practice of

Mamangam, whose ambition is to assassinate Zomorian, as Kandavar is determined to become a Chaver. In an attempt to avert the inevitable, Idris embarks on a voyage with Kandavar that takes them from Malabar to Ceylon, and from Thoothukudi to the diamond mines of Golkonda, where he meets the queenly Thilothamma, who is as desolate as he. After a few adventures in the business and becoming personal with the woman he met, he returns with his son to the land where his son's mother is looking for, and Idris continues his journey of adventures with an uncertain future (Nair A, Idris).

Nair's approach to feministic characterization and the societal interactions

Among the contemporary women writers in India, Anita Nair stands as a writer who, interestingly, is applauded and derided for her bold themes and characterization, admirable narrative skills, her creative ability to capture the essence of a south Indian socio-political and cultural life and the concern and impartial outlook she directs upon human relationships; but, is also equally criticized for her derision against established socio-cultural patriarchal norms and her defiance of a subversive and subjugating social order in her "outrageous" presentation of the Showalterian "female" in women and more so for her shocking open endings in her novels. The seemingly straight and law-abiding formal, traditionalist, and self-appreciative government clerk Mukundan in *The Better Man* ends up jilting the woman (Anjana) who divorces her drunkard husband to go all out for him and also bombing his village post office. Akhila, the freedom-seeking loyal daughter, and sister in *The Ladies Coupe* does the unimaginable in "exploiting" the weak youthful passions of a strange youth, and the rebellious Radha in *Mistress* decides to "go her lonely way" with a 'bastard' child in her womb. All shocking if not revolting to the traditional indoctrinated senses of the average man. It is not an exaggeration if one considers Anita Nair to be one writer who has challenged the hesitant stances that many women writers, who safely wish to call themselves "feminist critiques" and not "feminists", have taken. Interestingly, Nair herself never has attested to being both; but, can only be adjudged as a writer with a difference. Nair's *The Better Man* and *Idris* though having a male protagonist, are taken for scrutiny solely from the perspective of showing how a woman writer is capable of entering the workings of a male mind. This unique and unbiased narration of her protagonist and their interaction, in their quest for redemption, had to navigate through several life situations in order to realise their inner strengths and attain purposes in life, which was vividly brought out in all her four novels.

Conclusion

Indian philosopher, Jiddu Krishna Murthy quotes, "life is a battle of ideas, a battle of influences, and your mind is the field of the battle" (Krishnamurthy J. *The Collected Works of J. Krishnamurthy*. Crisis in Consciousness, p42). All the characters in the novels experience an inner thirst for a quest in facing outer reality. The psychological exploration of the inner mind helps the outer realities and gradually proceeds to the quest for self-actualization which can be won either by being 'liberated through self' or at times being 'liberated through others'. The protagonists in all these novels are on an adventure, which is the only way that lets to the potential of the quester. There are many psychological challenges especially a woman goes through being pressurized and moulded into someone she/he never wanted to be leaving unhandkered for life. Many a time, there are subconscious biases playing in the minds, which reminds women to take control of their own destiny. It takes special focus to notice the things around and to pay attention, so one is not lost but knows the voice within. The journey they embark on, hoping for the best but at the same time prepares them for the worst consequences. In the end, the individual is successful because they cross the threshold of an avalanche of distress, pain, and rack up the time required to master the skill of quest.

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