



Tradition, Guilt, and Transformation in the Better Man

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Abstract: *This research article explores the intricate interplay of tradition, guilt, and personal transformation in *The Better Man* by Anita Nair. Set in the culturally rich landscape of Kerala, the novel presents a profound psychological and social study of its protagonist, Mukundan, whose journey reflects the tension between inherited cultural values and the quest for self-redemption. Through a critical examination of narrative structure, characterization, and thematic development, this paper argues that Mukundan's transformation is deeply rooted in his confrontation with guilt and his negotiation with traditional norms. The study situates the novel within broader discourses of postcolonial identity, masculinity, and moral reconstruction in contemporary Indian literature.*

Keywords: *Tradition, Guilt, Transformation, Masculinity, Identity, Anita Nair, Indian English Fiction, Psychological Conflict, Cultural Dynamics, Self-Realization.*

Introduction: Indian English fiction has long engaged with themes of identity, tradition, and personal crisis, often portraying characters caught between the past and the present. Among contemporary writers, Anita Nair stands out for her nuanced portrayal of human emotions and socio-cultural realities. Her novel *The Better Man* offers a compelling narrative centered on Mukundan, a middle-aged man who returns to his ancestral village in Kerala after years of urban life.

The novel is not merely a story of return but a psychological exploration of unresolved trauma, moral conflict, and the possibility of renewal. Mukundan's journey becomes a metaphor for the struggle between tradition and modernity, where guilt serves as a catalyst for transformation. This article seeks to analyze how tradition shapes Mukundan's consciousness, how guilt operates as a psychological force, and how transformation emerges as both a personal and cultural process.

Socio-Cultural Context and the Role of Tradition: In *The Better Man*, Anita Nair presents tradition not as a rigid or monolithic construct but as a dynamic and pervasive force that shapes the everyday life of Kaikurussi, a typical Kerala village. The socio-cultural fabric of the village is deeply embedded in ritualistic practices, inherited customs, and hierarchical social relations, all of which collectively regulate individual behavior and identity formation. Tradition operates here as a living continuum, transmitted across generations and internalized by individuals as an unquestioned norm (Nair, 2000).

Mukundan's return to Kaikurussi signifies more than a geographical relocation; it represents a symbolic re-entry into a culturally coded space governed by deeply entrenched values. Within this framework, familial expectations exert a powerful influence, dictating roles, responsibilities, and behavioral norms. The

patriarchal structure further reinforces these expectations, privileging authority, discipline, and obedience, often at the cost of emotional expression and individual freedom. Community surveillance functions as an additional mechanism of control, where social conformity is ensured through collective scrutiny and moral judgment. Ritualistic practices, meanwhile, sustain cultural continuity but also bind individuals to repetitive patterns that limit personal agency (Menon, 2012).

Tradition, therefore, emerges as both enabling and restrictive. On one hand, it provides a sense of belonging, continuity, and moral grounding; on the other, it imposes constraints that suppress individuality and emotional authenticity. This dual nature of tradition is particularly evident in the characterization of Achuthan Nair, Mukundan's father. As a figure embodying patriarchal authority, Achuthan Nair adheres strictly to conventional norms of discipline and control. His authoritarian demeanor reflects a broader cultural expectation of masculine dominance, where emotional restraint is valorized and vulnerability is discouraged (Chatterjee, 1993).

Mukundan's childhood experiences under such rigid authority leave a lasting psychological imprint. The absence of emotional warmth and the prevalence of fear-based discipline contribute to his internal conflicts and sense of inadequacy in adulthood. His inability to reconcile personal desires with inherited expectations results in a fractured identity, illustrating how tradition can function as a source of psychological tension (Nair, 2000).

In this context, tradition in *The Better Man* operates on multiple levels. It serves as a moral framework that defines acceptable conduct and ethical values within the community. Simultaneously, it becomes a source of psychological conflict, as individuals like Mukundan struggle to negotiate between personal aspirations and societal demands. Furthermore, tradition acts as a determinant of social identity, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others within the community.

Ultimately, the novel underscores the complexity of tradition as a socio-cultural force. Rather than rejecting it outright, Anita Nair portrays it as something that must be critically engaged with and reinterpreted. Mukundan's journey reflects this negotiation, highlighting the need to balance cultural inheritance with personal autonomy in the pursuit of self-realization.

The Burden of Guilt: Psychological Dimensions: In *The Better Man*, Anita Nair constructs guilt as the central psychological force that shapes Mukundan's inner life and drives the narrative forward. This guilt is not tied to a single घटना or moral lapse; rather, it assumes an existential dimension, emerging from deeply internalized experiences of fear, repression, and unresolved emotional conflict. Mukundan's consciousness is marked by a pervasive sense of inadequacy and moral failure, which reflects what psychoanalytic theorists identify as the lingering effect of repressed trauma and authoritarian conditioning (Freud, 1923; Erikson, 1968). His troubled relationship with his father, Achuthan Nair, becomes the primary site where this guilt is produced and sustained (Nair, 2000).

The origins of Mukundan's guilt lie in his inability to confront paternal authority and assert his emotional needs. Raised in an environment dominated by rigid discipline, he learns to suppress resentment rather than articulate it. This suppression leads to emotional withdrawal, both from his family and from his own sense of self. Additionally, Mukundan internalizes a persistent sense of failure, believing that he has not fulfilled the roles expected of him as a son and as a man. The authoritarian presence of Achuthan Nair instills fear rather than respect, thereby disrupting healthy emotional development and creating a fractured selfhood. Mukundan's failure to reconcile these conflicting emotions results in a continuous state of internal tension, illustrating how guilt can be structurally embedded within familial and cultural systems (Chodorow, 1978).

This deeply ingrained guilt manifests in multiple psychological forms throughout the novel. Mukundan experiences chronic anxiety and restlessness, indicating an unsettled mind unable to find resolution. His

emotional detachment reflects a defense mechanism, a way of distancing himself from painful memories and unresolved conflicts. Indecisiveness further characterizes his personality, as he struggles to make choices that align with either personal desires or societal expectations. Most significantly, his persistent search for meaning underscores an existential crisis, suggesting that his guilt is not merely personal but philosophical in nature (Frankl, 1959). His return to Kaikurussi can thus be interpreted as an unconscious attempt to confront and process this guilt. The physical journey back to his roots mirrors a deeper psychological movement toward self-awareness and reconciliation (Nair, 2000).

Importantly, guilt in the novel is not portrayed as entirely destructive. Instead, it assumes a catalytic function, pushing Mukundan toward introspection and eventual transformation. As contemporary psychological theories suggest, guilt can act as a moral emotion that encourages self-reflection and ethical growth (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). In Mukundan's case, guilt becomes the very force that compels him to revisit his past, reassess his identity, and seek a more authentic mode of existence. Thus, the novel reconfigures guilt as a necessary, albeit painful, step toward self-realization.

Masculinity and Emotional Suppression: A significant thematic concern in *The Better Man* is its critical examination of traditional masculinity. Through Mukundan's character, Anita Nair challenges the dominant cultural model of the strong, authoritative, and emotionally restrained male figure. Mukundan represents a departure from this ideal, embodying instead a form of masculinity marked by vulnerability, uncertainty, and emotional dependence.

Mukundan's crisis of masculinity is evident in his lack of assertiveness and his reliance on external validation. Unlike his father, who exemplifies patriarchal authority and control, Mukundan struggles to assert his identity within the same cultural framework. This contrast highlights the tension between inherited models of masculinity and emerging, more fluid conceptions of male identity. Scholars of gender studies argue that such crises are symptomatic of broader social transitions, where traditional gender roles are increasingly questioned and redefined (Connell, 1995).

Emotional repression plays a crucial role in shaping Mukundan's psychological state. Cultural expectations discourage men from expressing vulnerability, equating emotional openness with weakness. As a result, Mukundan internalizes his feelings, leading to a profound sense of isolation and suffering. His inability to articulate his emotions prevents him from forming meaningful connections and resolving his inner conflicts. The novel suggests that true transformation requires a rejection of these restrictive norms and an embrace of emotional honesty. Mukundan's journey toward self-awareness involves not only confronting his past but also redefining what it means to be a man in a changing socio-cultural context (Nair, 2000).

The Process of Transformation: Transformation in *The Better Man* is depicted as a gradual and introspective process rather than a sudden or dramatic shift. Mukundan's journey is characterized by subtle changes in perception, emotional awareness, and self-understanding. This slow progression underscores the complexity of psychological healing and the effort required to reconcile past and present.

Secondary characters, particularly Bhasi, play a pivotal role in facilitating Mukundan's transformation. Bhasi, a village barber endowed with intuitive healing abilities, functions as a guide figure who introduces Mukundan to alternative ways of understanding himself. His unconventional methods challenge rational, modern frameworks and open up possibilities for emotional and spiritual healing. Bhasi represents a form of indigenous wisdom that bridges the gap between tradition and change, suggesting that transformation often emerges from unexpected sources (Nair, 2000).

A crucial aspect of Mukundan's transformation is his confrontation with the past. He is compelled to revisit his childhood experiences and acknowledge the unresolved conflicts that have shaped his identity. This process of remembering becomes therapeutic, allowing him to reinterpret past घटनाएँ and release long-

suppressed emotions. By engaging with his memories, Mukundan develops a sense of self-compassion, recognizing that his failures are not solely personal but also shaped by structural and cultural forces (Caruth, 1996).

The final stage of transformation involves acceptance and renewal. Mukundan does not entirely reject the traditions that have influenced his life; instead, he learns to engage with them critically. This balanced approach enables him to construct a new identity that integrates cultural heritage with personal autonomy. His transformation thus reflects a movement toward inner reconciliation, where acceptance of the past becomes the foundation for a more authentic and self-aware existence.

Tradition vs. Modernity: A Critical Perspective: In *The Better Man*, Anita Nair resists framing tradition and modernity as mutually exclusive or antagonistic categories. Instead, the novel presents them as interdependent and often overlapping forces that shape individual consciousness and social reality. Tradition in the narrative provides a sense of rootedness, continuity, and identity, anchoring individuals within a shared cultural framework. However, it also imposes constraints through rigid norms, hierarchical structures, and expectations that limit personal freedom and emotional expression (Nair, 2000).

Modernity, on the other hand, is associated with mobility, autonomy, and the possibility of self-definition beyond inherited roles. Mukundan's life in the city represents this modern impulse, offering him distance from the oppressive structures of his past. Yet, this freedom is not without its costs. The novel subtly portrays modernity as a space of alienation, where detachment from cultural roots leads to a fragmented sense of self and a lack of belonging. This duality reflects broader sociological arguments that modernity, while liberating, often produces existential uncertainty and dislocation (Giddens, 1991).

Mukundan's journey illustrates that transformation does not emerge from rejecting one system in favor of the other. Instead, it lies in negotiating between tradition and modernity, critically engaging with both. His return to Kaikurussi signifies not a regression but a conscious attempt to reconcile these forces. By confronting his past and re-evaluating inherited values, Mukundan begins to forge a balanced identity that incorporates the stability of tradition and the reflexivity of modernity. This synthesis aligns with postcolonial notions of hybridity, where cultural identity is seen as fluid and constructed through interaction rather than fixed opposition (Bhabha, 1994).

Thus, the novel suggests that true self-realization depends on the ability to navigate the tensions between continuity and change. Tradition and modernity are not endpoints but dynamic processes that must be continually negotiated in the formation of an authentic self.

Postcolonial and Cultural Implications: From a postcolonial perspective, *The Better Man* reflects the broader cultural and psychological transitions of Indian society in the aftermath of colonial rule. Anita Nair situates Mukundan's personal crisis within a larger historical context, where questions of identity, cultural continuity, and self-definition become central to both individual and collective experience.

One of the key concerns in the novel is identity formation. Mukundan's fragmented sense of self mirrors the postcolonial subject's struggle to reconcile indigenous cultural values with the influences of colonial modernity. His internal conflicts highlight the difficulty of constructing a stable identity in a context marked by competing ideologies and inherited contradictions (Fanon, 1967). The tension between his village roots and urban experiences reflects a broader societal dilemma, where individuals must negotiate multiple cultural affiliations.

Cultural continuity is another significant theme. While colonialism disrupted traditional structures, the novel emphasizes the persistence of cultural practices and values in shaping contemporary life. However, this continuity is not unproblematic; it often carries forward oppressive elements such as patriarchy and rigid social hierarchies. Mukundan's journey underscores the need to critically engage with tradition, preserving

what is meaningful while challenging what is restrictive. This reflects postcolonial efforts to reclaim cultural identity without uncritically reproducing its limitations (Chatterjee, 1993).

The notion of psychological decolonization is also central to the novel's thematic framework. Mukundan's transformation can be read as a process of freeing himself from internalized forms of authority and repression, many of which are rooted in both traditional and colonial legacies. His gradual movement toward self-awareness and emotional autonomy parallels what postcolonial theorists describe as the decolonization of the mind—a process of dismantling imposed identities and recovering a sense of agency (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Ultimately, Mukundan's personal journey becomes emblematic of a larger cultural transition. His struggle to reconcile past and present, tradition and modernity, reflects the ongoing negotiation within Indian society as it seeks to redefine itself in a postcolonial world. Anita Nair thus transforms an individual narrative into a broader commentary on cultural change, highlighting the complexities of identity and the possibilities of renewal in a rapidly evolving socio-cultural landscape.

Conclusion: *The Better Man* by Anita Nair is a deeply introspective novel that examines the intricate relationship between tradition, guilt, and transformation. Through the character of Mukundan, the novel highlights the psychological impact of cultural expectations and the possibility of renewal through self-awareness. Tradition, while often oppressive, is not entirely rejected; instead, it is reinterpreted. Guilt, rather than being purely debilitating, becomes a driving force for change. Transformation emerges as a complex, ongoing process that involves confronting the past, embracing vulnerability, and redefining identity. Ultimately, the novel suggests that becoming a “better man” is not about conforming to societal ideals but about achieving inner reconciliation and authenticity.

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