Chapter Four

Kaikurussi: Exploring Mindscapes

The first and second chapters have addressed the problematics of regionalism in India and its emergence in Indian English fiction using the exegetical tools of modernism, postmodernism and postcolonialism. This chapter will focus on Anita Nair’s novel, *The Better Man* (1999) which presents a remarkable contrast to Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) in terms of its geo-cultural factors. As argued earlier, *Nectar* fails to render the specificity of a locale with its regional peculiarities and could be located anywhere in south India. The individuals’ plight is profoundly related to the social issues, the trials and tribulations of the transitory period in India. Any village in India would have gone through the problems brought out in *Nectar*. The transition from the feudal agrarian economy to the emergent industrial capitalism puts forth many core issues that affect the individuals and the society at large. *The Better Man* delineates the subtle shades of the individuals’ inner being and their existential trauma. In this respect, the protagonists of the novel transcend the traits of all regions and share the concerns of the characters of modernist novels. However, the locale of the novel is very specific and it cannot be anywhere in India. Written nearly four decades later, *The Better Man* manifests a remarkable change in its delineation of characters and treatment of language. The main characters of the novel wage a struggle not to emerge out of any social marginalisation, but to break free from the problems related to
existence and reach a metaphysical plane free from all contradictions and conflicts.

Anita Nair’s urge to become a writer surfaced while she was working as the creative director of an advertising agency in Bangalore and she wrote her first book, a collection of short stories, *Satyr of the Subway & Eleven other stories* (1997) which had won her a fellowship from the Virginia Center for Creative Arts. Her debut novel *The Better Man* (1999) was followed by *Ladies Coupé* in 2001. Her novels impart an intimacy having been written from her first hand experience of the locale and events. *The Better Man* set in the fictitious village of Kaikurussi is moulded on the lines of her ancestral village of Mundakottukurussi near Shornur in Kerala and reflects the minutiae of day-to-day social activities there. Critics like M.K. Naik and Shyamala consider the novel as a welcome change from the hackneyed East-West encounter theme and claim that it is perhaps the only novel written by a woman which is not about an Indian woman (98). It is a train journey Nair undertook from Bangalore to Madras that inspired the creation of *Ladies Coupé* (2001). The confined space of a ladies coupé provides a group of middle aged women to confide in each other (all strangers) about their lives and the bitter experiences undergone. *Mistress* (2005) opens up the rich world of a vibrant dance-form of Kerala, kathakali in Indian English fiction. Nair’s love for kathakali and her intense study and research of the art form at Kala Mandalam has gone into the building of the story along with the probing of man-woman relationships which she does with equal felicity. She adapted *Mistress* into a play titled *Nine Faces of Being*
which premiered in Bengaluru in January 2011 and her novel *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) (titled *Lilac House* in the American edition) is based in Bengaluru where Nair herself has settled down with her husband and son. Nair’s recent novel *Cut Like Wound* (2012) is a psychological thriller. Her novels have been translated into nearly thirty languages across the world. Though fiction is her forte, she has also numerous non-fictional writings and travelogues to her credit. Writing about Kerala, Nair says in an interview:

I wish I could tell you why Kerala inspires me as it does. All I do know is, it does. And, again and again. . .It is maddening to know that whatever it is defies description. . .perhaps it is the sum total of the colours, the scents, the landscape, the people, their cussedness and humour, the petty politics and the larger-than-life ideals. Just when you think you have understood some facet of Kerala, it contradicts itself. Perhaps that is what is so exciting for me as a writer. . . (“A New Chapter”)

This intense love and attachment for her native place is brought out in her anthology of poems titled, *Malabar Mind* (2011), which beautifully exhibits the everyday casual moments of existence. *Goodnight and God Bless: On Life, Literature and a Few Other Things with Footnotes, Quotes and Other Such Literary Diversions* (2008) is a collection of essays on books, writers, hotels, mice and personal anecdotes about the author and her family. Her writings for children include fiction like *Adventures of Nonu, the Skating Squirrel* (2005) and *Living Next Door to Alise* (2007); *The Puffin

Though Anita Nair states in an interview that she considers R.K. Narayan an icon, her Kaikurussi is a far cry from Narayan’s Malgudi (“Valluvanattil” 1). Kaikurussi addresses the pluralistic vision of India unlike Malgudi which rings hollow as a “site that represents quintessential Indianness” (Thieme 2). Nair presents Kaikurussi as an ordinary village in Palavara Taluk of the Malabar region which has nothing idyllic about it:

There is nothing here that would make anyone come looking for it. It is the birthplace of neither a Mahatma nor a movement. There are no craft forms originating from here to fill Government Cottage Emporia shelves. No miracles have ever happened here. In fact, nothing of significance ever happens here to anyone. (7-8)

Kaikurussi presents no claim to any fame or importance, but the sleepy village has its own unique flavour that trickles mellifluously through the narrative. In his foreword to Kanthapura, Raja Rao had stated: “There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich sthala-purana, or a legendary history, of its own”(vii). A similar observation is made by the noted Malayalam writer, O.V.
Vijayan, in his critical work *Vargamasaram, Svathvam* (1988) wherein he observes that every region has its own legends to be unearthed (73). In this context, Vijayan notes that even a tiny country like Iceland with its small fishing population has successfully glorified its sagas in its literature. In order to tap it, one should have contact with the legends and micro-histories that prevail in the region, both in its recorded and unrecorded form. Nair creatively uses the myths and legends of the region and demonstrates their role in forming the *svathvam* or selfhood of the individual. *Svathvam* may be defined as the fundamental and private archaeology of the individual (translation mine; Vijayan 65). The *svathvam* of the individual is often hidden by the sweeping changes and upheavals of history. People who undergo a change are just as important as the changed and changing social formations. *The Better Man* succeeds in depicting individuals who exist above or transcend the changing social formations.

Though Malabar has no presence on the map of India, the geopolitical and regional elements still exist as a state of mind. All Kaikurussi has to define its topography are fields, wells, a mountain and distant hills with not even a river running through it. Nair effortlessly transports the reader to a contemporary village in Kerala. The nucleus of the village is Shankar’s Tea club where “strangers were noticed, illnesses remembered, births and deaths recorded, and the comings and goings of each resident noted” (135). When night falls, the focus shifts to Che-Kutty’s Toddy Shop which announces itself by the presence of a full bottle of toddy on the shop veranda crowned with a red shoe flower. Other prominent
places include a post office with its own timings, a primary health centre which has two kinds of medicines—one which is free and provided by the government and the other which costs money and is recommended by the doctor, a Balawadi—a crèche for children where “the milk powder was a gift from the government of some milk-rich nation for the malnourished, milk-hungry children of India” (59). Apart from these there is a shop selling dried fish, an all-purpose store, a rice mill, a tailor shop and a barber shop, the last three being lodged in a building Hassan had built when he came back from Kuwait during the Gulf War. This motley collection of shops came to be called “the Kaikurussi city” and people often said “‘I’m off to the city for a tea and a beedi’” (49).

Nair aims at sharp characterisation and is quite successful in creating powerful characters who evolve to reach a stage where they become passion spent and free. No attempts have been made to universalise her story or cast her characters into stereotypical moulds. They may be quirks or misfits but are men of flesh and blood salvaging their roots in Kaikurussi. In Malabar, all that Chekutty (Shivan Kutty, a great admirer of Che Guevara became Che Kutty) could do was to continue with the family business of running a toddy shop selling the common man’s drink. Shankar, the tea club owner is “privy to what really happens behind closed doors” (4) in the village. The others include postmaster Kamban, postman Unni, barber Nanu, village crier Pavithran, Prabhakaran Master and Moidu known as Mad Moidu ever since his first wife ran away. Nothing of significance ever happens here and when it does the person is revered to the point of worship by the villagers as in
the case of Power House Ramakrishnan who became a “land mark” (4) in the village after he won a lottery. Finally there is the outsider, Bhasi, addressed as One-screw-loose Bhasi, who is a house-painter by profession and a healer by vocation.

The narrative unfolds with the protagonist, Mukundan Nair, a retired government employee and a bachelor returning to his native village Kaikurussi. On his forced return to his gargantuan house (tharavad), he is haunted by the ghosts of his mother and his ancestors and a sense of failure. He constantly reproaches himself for abandoning his mother to the mercy of his father and finds himself unable to measure up to his still alive and domineering eighty-nine year old father, Achuthan Nair. As the novelist grooms her assemblage of vivid characters in Kaikurussi, she proceeds to narrate the struggle of the protagonist, Mukundan Nair through the political and social reality of his time to become a better man. His existential problems are treated taking into consideration the pluralistic nature of the village of Kaikurussi.

Kaikurussi comprises of these very ordinary people with their laid back and leisurely attitude trapped in their everyday lives. There is a palpable discontent among the people concerning their lot and about everything in general. In his *Kerala: a Portrait of the Malabar Coast*, George Woodcock remarks:

> To vote Communist, in the context of Keralan[sic] politics, is... a way of making a radical protest against an existence lived always on the edge of hunger in a world where others prosper. But even Keralans [sic]
who are not poor have a share of this restlessness which makes all governments unstable and which induces in all men a delight at the thought of being king-makers or king-breakers. (36)

He describes the people of Malabar as “emotional anarchists” who have the anarchists’ mixture of conservatism and rebellion “with all his double yearnings for the golden age of the past and the libertarian paradise of the future, with all his flaming discontent with what is present” (36).

Most of the rural characters in the novel (like Kamban and Che Kutty) have not been developed by the novelist and their presence in the region has been used only to enrich the main characters of Mukundan and Bhasi. The paddy fields and agricultural labourers have no role except that of providing a colourful backdrop to the canvas that the author conjures up:

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. Speckled only with the bright blouses of the women as they stood ankle-deep in water-logged mud and pulled out the young paddy plants. When a breeze blew, the tops of the paddy rippled and turned the sheets of sedate jade into gleaming splashes of emerald. (50)

Nevertheless, the novelist cannot be blamed for her manner of portraying Kaikurussi and its characters. It is neither exhaustive
nor impartial and must be acknowledged as one version of the many possible versions.

Myths of villages as idyllic have been shattered as Nair goes on to expose the intrigue lurking beneath the posed innocence of villages. In an interview, the novelist comments on her village: “It's not at all what people think a village is—a place of placid contentment. It is real, it is very dark. But topographically it is beautiful” (“Imaginary Keralas”). A closed village community has its own parameters for gaining access. Hoping to easily establish himself in the village, Mukundan makes a visit to Shankar’s Tea club:

He had been certain that the villagers would be grateful to have someone like him with his city manners and knowledge of the outside world in their midst. He had seen himself discoursing on the ways of life outside the village. On American presidents. Battle tanks and sophisticated missiles. Amitabh Bachchan. Drug addiction. . . . He had conjured up in his mind an audience enthralled by the magic of his words; seeking his counsel, his opinion. He had thought he could take his father’s place. Instead no one even noticed him sitting there. (116-17)

To get a toehold in the Kaikurussi village one has to be part of the temple pooram committee: “‘Once the pooram committee accepts you, you will discover that things will happen much more smoothly here for you’” (125). The caretaker, Krishnan Nair warns him:
“‘Here in Kaikurussi we are all bumpkins with neither your education nor sophistication to be swayed by passionate waving around of the hands. And if you want to live here and fit in, you have to behave like the rest of us do!’” (149). Though belonging to the upper caste entitled a person respect and power in the old Kaikurussi, Mukundan finds that in the new Kaikurussi, the parameters of dignity and respectability have undergone a change. The position his father had enjoyed is now occupied by Ramakrishnan, who had been an insignificant fellow running a petty shop during Mukundan’s childhood days. When Ramakrishnan won a lottery, he decided to buy the land which belonged to Mukundan’s family for generations. In one stroke he gains power and prestige and further reinforces his stature by naming his new house as “Power House.” Mukundan loathes the village community that had let an upstart usurp the position of the most honourable and influential man in the village. His vexation aggravates when he realizes that even Mad Moidu has become one of the dignitaries in the village by virtue of the money his son sends from Kuwait and is respectfully called “Hajiyar.” Mukundan perceives the changes in Kaikurussi:

In this new Kaikurussi that Mukundan barely recognised, every single person possessed the power of the written word, and rights were claimed vociferously. Artisans, labourers, and all daily wage earners had a routine like that of an office employee. Beginning work at nine in the morning and finishing at
five in the evening, with two fifteen-minute tea breaks and a whole hour for lunch. (254-55)

The “revolutionaries” who clamour for equality for the common man have no qualms in supporting the fancies of the rich. Nair reflects on the irony of such prevalent situations. Che Kutty finally refuses to support Bhasi in retaining his land for fear of ill-will among the villagers and in particular Power House. Comrade Jayan longs to be part of the community hall committee and joins in their propaganda to oust the poor Bhasi. He justifies his stand: “The party understands that certain projects need the backing of capitalistic enterprise. The party encourages us to support such ventures. At least then some of the bourgeois wealth will reach the needy masses” (307). As stated earlier, the novelist only focuses on one side of the reality. Chekutty(s) and Comrade Jayan(s) are found in all regions of Kerala. However, there are others who have paid a price for making the villagers conscious of their rights and “the power of the written word.” It is quite natural that a novelist who is largely concerned with individuals and their destiny (already decided) becomes faintly oblivious to the social reality and upheavals. Even though there are books and “the power of the written word”, the individuals achieve their svathvam (selfhood) in a phenomenological reality mixed with myths, sagas and “predestined” individuals. The narrative asserts that every man is guided by a force that is both “individual and unfathomable” and that “no man is the master of another’s destiny” (330).

Though Nair gives a detailed description of the village, its flora and fauna, what captivates the attention of an avid reader
and makes the region unique is the mystical touch she gives to it. The description, in a sense, imparts a foreboding feeling that there is something unpredictable in the region. Bhasi, the painter describes Kaikurussi village thus:

A little further down the road was a huge boulder. . . . There was moss growing on the boulder. I felt the fur of time beneath my palm. . . .

Here is where I would live. Here where time stood still on the back of a boulder. Here where I never need to 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. (105)

The place reminds us of O.V Vijayan’s Khasak where infinite time lies stagnant in twelve mosques in ruin. Like Ravi in The Legends of Khasak, painter Bhasi does not choose to arrive at Kaikurussi, he is drawn to the village.

Akin to a play in five acts, the novel has five parts depicting Mukundan’s gradual transformation. The story unfolds through two modes of narration— one as a monologue by Bhasi and the other as the third person narration. The historical references cited indicate that the events in the novel span the period between the early forties and mid-nineties. Though the novel refrains from overt descriptions of colonization and events related to the nationalist struggle for independence, there are pointers. Achuthan Nair had returned from Burma after the Japanese invasion during the
Second World War and he decided that “he had had enough of working for the white-skinned imperialists” (69). He took to wearing handspun dhotis and had the Mahatma’s photograph framed in his house. In Kaikurussi, the national issues have their own regional overtones. The Left wing extremist movement that began as a peasant uprising in the late 1960s in the Naxalbari village of West Bengal was mainly directed by the villagers at the landlords and feudal families. The atrocities of the Naxalites of the sixties are elucidated in the novel: “Policemen were butchered, landlords killed in broad daylight; grain-laden barns went up in flames, and sons of rich merchants were kidnapped” (56). The Naxalite movement found its echoes in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Communist-ruled Kerala and eventually into Kaikurussi. Mukundan’s cousin Meenakshi became a Naxalite and her first target of attack was her uncle, Achuthan Nair—“feudal landlord. Tyrant. Master of oppression” (56). Her group tried to incite labourers to rebel, haystacks were set ablaze and cows were let loose in paddy fields laden with corn. But the group that “had pledged to cleanse the earth of the bourgeois vermin” had none of the moral outrage of the Naxalbariates to fuel them. They remained a part of the system and waited till job opportunities came their way.

The Ramajanmabhumi-Babri Masjid dispute centred around a plot of land located in Faziabad district in Uttar Pradesh that turned out into a riot in December 1992 had its own repercussions in Kaikurussi. Outside Shankar’s tea club, RSS workers had taunted a few Muslim students on their way to the Madarasa which ended in
the Muslim league workers beating up the RSS men: “Suddenly Kaikurussi had become a hot spot of communal violence, needing a full-time battalion of police stationed there permanently, complete with tear gas shells and rifles”(134). Communal harmony was restored within a month and Kaikurussi with its population of only Hindus and Muslims limped back to normalcy.

The villagers constantly chant the mantra of a road that would transform the sleepy little village into a bustling metropolitan city. Years back, Mukundan recalls that the talk was about a bridge to be built across Bharathapuzha that would link Mayannur with Ottapalam. Local issues of the regions always remain on the periphery and do not form the concern of the grand nationalist plans. Nair here makes a dig at these plans of the centre which fails to materialise itself:

The bridge had found its way into the first Five-Year Plan. Nine Five-Year plans later, it still remained unbuilt . . . . A human chain across the half-kilometre breadth of the river. And yet the bridge remained a blueprint filed away is some dusty cabinet somewhere. (86)

The local governments too fail to address the actual grievances of its people and make false pretences of concern during festival times like Onam:”’There is no electricity in the state. There are no jobs for the educated. Rice and kerosene cost the earth. Who do they think we are? A colony of ants to be satisfied with a kilo of sugar?’” (135). A realistic description of the tragic train accident (in
1988) when a bridge collapsed near Kollam, plunging the train and its ill-fated occupants into the Ashtamudi Kayal further authenticates the time frame of the novel. Thus Nair makes it clear that the issues of any one region can never remain totally isolated from its relationship with issues pertaining to other regions of the country.

Nair brings to focus the issue of caste in Kerala as it looms around the inhabitants of Kaikurussi. Caste has been a millstone around the necks of the Dalits for generations. The Dalit postmaster Kamban, a native of the village stays aloof from the other villagers of Kaikurussi. The scourge of the caste system reduces his lot to demeaning levels: “When he had to deal with any of the villagers, he did so awkwardly, shrinking into himself as though afraid that they would think nothing of hurling a stone at him, simply for the pleasure of hearing him yelp” (147). Being a Dalit, he “had sampled social ostracism in many hues” (161). As a boy, his classmates never sat on the same bench with him or included him in their games and as an adult he had seen the office peon serve him tea in a separate glass set aside for him. These wounded and battered people though entitled to equal rights as per the Constitution, suffer and fail to enjoy the freedom of the upper castes and remain physically and socially segregated from the rest of the society. Reservations have made them the butt of ridicule of the upper castes. All the resentment Philipose had been harbouring against the department for promoting more “deserving” ones finds vent in Kamban. Philipose’s tirade against Kamban throws light on this:
You are lazy and irresponsible, you know, that’s what you are. This is what happens when you take useless people and give them responsibilities that they are not qualified to handle. But do the department heads realize this? No, year after year, they give you promotions, special benefits. While people like me are left lagging behind. (162)

It is clearly evident that the stigma associated with caste cannot easily be wiped off even though people like Mukundan claim, “We are all the same, you know. Human beings!” (148). Mukundan recollects another such incident in Bangalore, when his boss, a Dalit snarled: “’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. Look around you; the world has changed. You are not kings any longer” (148). The novel also lays bare the shift in the power balance in the rural areas with the secularisation of caste resulting in the shrinking role of the upper castes. The new “dominant” castes are drawn from other castes located just above the so-called pollution line. The new Kaikurussi perceived by Mukundan, as seen earlier, bears testimony to this fact.

The Better Man delineates the picture of a matrilineal joint family system of Kerala in its transition to a modern nuclear family structure. The patriarch of the former feudal family symbolised the evils of the system. In the novel, the death of the uncle, Balamaven and the cheriyammas indicate the disintegration of the old joint family system. However, vestiges of former practices linger. The uncle’s position (karnavar), vested with supreme
authority in the tharavad has been occupied by the father/husband, Achuthan Nair who wields authority on his wife and son. Krishnan Nair continues to play the role of a caretaker to serve the tharavad. Nair men were believed to enter into relationships with any number of women of his own or of lower Nair castes in the past (Gough 329). When Achuthan Nair realises he couldn’t bring his mistress to the tharavad, he builds a house across the road for her and moves over. Though changes began to appear in the Nair community, research conducted by scholars show that it is a myth that Nair women wielded power in their families owing to the matrilineal system (Renjini 98). This is made explicit through the character of Parukutty, Mukundan’s mother in The Better Man. Sociologists contend that it is the social and cultural conditioning that is responsible for establishing male and female gender roles which is pronounced in societies with traditional cultures and less economic development (Macionis and Plummer 347). Krishnan Nair consoles the remorseful Mukundan for not rescuing his mother from his domineering father: “Your mother could have prevented what was happening to her. . . . But she chose to remain a victim” (44). Here the novelist hints at the fact that women have conditioned themselves to suppress their feelings and compromise their needs, thereby making themselves solely responsible for their predicament. The family plays a prominent role in creating and enforcing this hierarchical order, thus passing on the sociological construction of patriarchy from generation to generation. The stereotypes of masculinity and femininity persisting in Malabar are ingrained into the minds of
children as seen in the case of the child Mukundan and Meenakshi in the novel.

Rather than resorting to construct a matrilineal *tharavad* in Malabar writhing under the agonies of a patriarch as in O. Chandu Menon’s *Indulekha* (1889) or M.T. Vasudevan Nair’s *Nalukettu* (1958), Nair’s narrative lays bare the psycho-social insecurities and instabilities that impinge the minds of the marginalised lot (the women, children, servants and men of the lower caste) due to patriarchal dominance. The gargantuan *tharavad* is not presented as a site of the former glory and resplendence of Mukundan’s family. Nor is there any of the sentimental attachment usually associated with one’s ancestral home. Nair’s trope of the *tharavad* and its dark rooms, long corridors lined with portraits of fierce faced gods and goddesses “Chottanikkara Bhagawati, Kadampuzha Bhagawati, Narasimhan, Hanuman and Mukundan’s dead ancestors” (29) and the steep teakwood staircase provides a metaphor for a mental state and the disturbing memories that have been coursing through the mind of Mukundan. The tyranny of the father from whom he wanted to escape lay hidden in every crook and crevice. The foreboding space of the *tharavad* emerges as Mukundan staggers around at night chased by the bellowing ghosts of his mother and other relatives. Metaphorically it signifies the protagonist’s groping through the dark alleys of his past and guilt ridden memories of abandoning his mother. The house could also symbolise the Indian society in general and the Kerala society in particular, shackled by the fetters of patriarchal dominance. Expressions of patriarchy are conveyed through striking
symbolisms. The sixth chapter of the novel appropriately titled “The Echo of the Clogs” marks the entry of the patriarch and the echo reverberates throughout The Better Man, establishing and constantly reaffirming the wrath and might of Achuthan Nair. In the text, the pair of wooden clogs brought by Achuthan Nair from Burma serves as a metonymic symbol: “In Kaikurussi he wore them as a testimony to who he was: Here is a man who has seen the world. Here is a man to be respected. Here is a man whose authority is not to be questioned. The wooden clogs seemed to echo these declarations with every step” (70). The “tap tap”(72) of the clogs communicated his presence and authority, his moods of impatience, annoyance; in short the very man himself. The patriarchal regime existing in the old Nair tharavads of Malabar is consolidated in the most ordinary of acts:

At night the clogs kicked aside anything that lay in their path as Achuthan Nair made his way to the pond for a bath. By the time the clogs strode back, snapping twigs underfoot and stamping on dried leaves, dinner had to be ready on the dining table. The rice had to have steam rising from it. The curry had to be piping hot, the pappadums crisp and glistening with oil, and the water in the glass moderately warm. Only when Achuthan Nair had dined was the rest of the family allowed to eat. (72-73)

As he moved over to his new house with his mistress, he left the clogs behind “as they had served their purpose.” Another strategy employed in asserting his position was the use of rhetorical
statements which the listener was meant to answer. This was for Achuthan Nair to be convinced that “the gospel truth of his words had been understood by the inferior intelligence of the person standing before him” (51). The following quote illustrates this:

‘You [Mukundan] will never make anything of your life. All you will be fit for is ploughing the fields!’ he [Achuthan Nair] would bellow, pausing only to question, ‘Tell me, what will you be fit for when you grow up?’

And Mukundan would reply, hurt and shame thickening his voice, ‘To plough the fields.’ (70)

The turmoil in Mukundan’s mind finds no solace in his home or the idyllic landscape of Kaikurussi. On his return, Mukundan cocoons himself to the new section of the tharavad where he is free from his tormenting memories of the past. His life in the government quarters in Bangalore “in no way resembled the hell he had been exiled to” (13). Away from his village, Mukundan interacted freely with his colleagues and was successful in building up his career. He ruled the Club Library as the librarian, a job which he took up with zest not owing to his love for books or reading (a desire wiped out by his father) but the library took the place of a family and Mukundan donned “the role of head of a household” (14). The *karnavar* in traditional Nair families of Malabar managed the daily affairs of the tharavad and was responsible for the well being of its members (Gough 339). Simulating the role of the *karnavar*, Mukundan showers his attention on the books as
“unlike human beings it demanded little from him and claimed no rights” (14). Mukundan’s dream of assuming the role of his father (which he was incapable of in Kaikurussi) finds release in the form of a librarian. Throughout his life he yearns for the approval of his father who is never satisfied with him.

The novel probes Mukundan’s psyche, bruised and battered by his childhood experiences and the tyranny of his father which forces him to shun the society as he is unable to emotionally identify with his own village and the people. The titles, “The Reluctant Native” and “Seeking to Escape”, given to the second and third chapters of the narrative are indicative of the mindset of the protagonist. In his study, *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (1978), the psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, offers an interesting explanation of the father-son relationship in the Hindu family and its consequences on identity formation. Kakar maintains that the boy in the Indian context, experiences two births. The first, after his biological birth he finds himself “enveloped in, and often overpowered by, his mother’s protective nurturing and love” (127). As his world of childhood widens, he is evicted from the “intimate cocoon of maternal protection” and plunged headlong into an unfamiliar masculine world (126). This second birth or ‘entry into society” takes place in the fourth or fifth year in a child’s life for which he is totally unprepared for. The abruptness of the separation from the mother and the virtual reversal of everything that is expected of him, according to Kakar, may lead to traumatic developmental consequences. His narcissistic vulnerability to be protected and
adored, soon seeks reinforcement by trying to identify with the father. The ambivalence of the mother-son bond further intensifies the need for the father’s touch, “the necessity of oedipal alliance often outweighing the hostility of Oedipal complex” (131). Instead of offering him emotional access, the father withdraws into “a plane of aloof perfection or preoccupied authority” thus leaving the son bewildered and disappointed when he perceives that his father can never be an ally in his boyish struggle to cope with his new-life circumstances. These traits are predominantly evident in the case of Mukundan. He sees his father for the first time on his return from Burma when he was four years old. At the very sight of the father, the boy cuddles close his mother thereby setting the tone of their relationship in the very first meeting. In the case of Achuthan Nair, he is not only the “aloof” father but the epitome of tyranny. The corporal punishments and abuses showered on him as a child leaves painful memories like scars on the mind of young Mukundan which he carries with him even as a fifty-eight year old man. In such a situation, the boy may turn to other men for models. For Mukundan, Krishnan Nair becomes the surrogate father, friend and confidant of his childhood. Even later in life it is the caretaker who boosts his low spirits. Throughout his life we find Mukundan striving to earn his father’s respect and approval: “He was always trying to measure up; trying to please” (79). He brings him gifts on every visit but Achuthan Nair fails to reciprocate his love and accepts them as “a god accepting homage to his greatness.” His childish longing for approval is obvious and it becomes the obsession that betters his life. When he is made a
member of the Community hall committee—“a chance to be at the helm of village affairs”—Mukundan feels his greatest desire of taking his father’s place come true (322). He wonders how his father could still claim respect and acceptability among the people of Kaikurussi. After his demise, Mukundan’s bitterness spills over: “‘He was the worst father anyone could have had’” (342).

Bhasi has a very crucial role in the novel in bringing about a metamorphosis in Mukundan “haunted and tormented by a million ghouls” (105). There is no artistically satisfying explanation for his role as a healer and counsellor from that of a teacher in a parallel college fifteen years ago. He left the college after the farcical end of a love affair with his student and served some months as an apprentice to a painter before his arrival in Kaikurussi quite unintentionally. Bhasi felt matured all of a sudden at the age of twenty five, when he was able to leave a cloth store without selecting any shirt: “I had learnt to put myself first. Not to bow and buckle to any pressure. To overcome a childish need for the world’s approval”(104). When he gets off the bus that shouted the stop names “‘Vellapadam’, ‘Mannur’, ‘Karthiayani’s Gate’, ‘Lenin’s Gate’”, he wonders, “What kind of a place would this be where Karthiayani and Lenin lived side by side?” This is a typical village in Malabar where Moscow, Peking and Marx are household names. But the pertinent question looming large is what is it in Kaikurussi that at its very first sight Bhasi forsakes all his past and exclaims, “This is my land. This is my home. This is the life I chose to live”(93). Bhasi’s arrival reminds us, as pointed out earlier, Ravi’s (protagonist of O.V. Vijayan’s The Legend) journey to Khasak.
When Ravi gets off the bus at Koomankavu, the place does not seem unfamiliar to him. He feels that the “‘large print’” depicting the tortures of hell, hanging behind the vendor’s perch is waiting for him, although he had never been there before (2).

To cure Mukundan, Bhasi steps in as “the impresario” of his destiny (106). When Bhasi is called upon to paint the tharavad, he realises that the neglect had gone deep within and takes upon himself to "peel the scabs off his festering soul and the let the fear seep out"(12). The neglected walls and the battered man had merged. Bhasi contemplates:

“I looked at the cracks, the degradation of strength, the silent creeping in of mouldy hopelessness, and wondered at what must be the condition of the inner walls, the inner man. And I knew as I caressed the sad walls that these could be repaired. You can be healed.” (11)

In his opening monologue he declares that he is a healer, more interested in repairing souls than painting houses. "Damaged lives", he explains, “fill my world as much as flaking paint does”(11). He embarks on the task of curing Mukundan’s battered psyche through his unique system of healing based on the tenets of Ayurveda:

“My learning is not based on slicing parts of the human anatomy or exploring the tenacity of life on a glass slide. I do not cap satellite healing with compounds and
equations packed into little pink and blue gelatine caps.

The human body has a natural in-built capacity to heal itself, to safeguard against trauma and disease. All I do is reinforce that natural vitality. (8-9)

The prerogative lies with the individual’s perception of health as a value in itself and voluntarily participating in the ongoing maintenance of good health. Referring to the traditional system of indigenous medicine and considered to be an extension of the *Atharva Veda*, David Frawley defines Ayurveda as “the five thousand year old Vedic ‘Science of Life’” (4). That it is at once a science, art and philosophy is explicitly elaborated through the novel. As a science of life, Ayurveda is intuited by ancient seers whose insights and visions are compiled in the ancient texts by Charaka, Susrutha and Vagabhatta. Mukundan visualises Bhasi as an enlightened soul “in the light of the flickering lamp poring over ancient Ayurvedic treatises written on palm leaves”(192). With the progress of industrialisation and modernisation, this holistic approach of treatment based on a patient has been replaced by the disease oriented treatment of western medicine based on a symptom. Ayurveda further recognises that the problems encountered by patients may have its roots in cultural and social values and issues beyond the scope of medicine. While modern medicine lays emphasis on the values of reason and science, Ayurveda in general gives more credence to knowledge acquired through intuitive and mystical sources. There is no empirical validity that can be substantiated from texts, as the treatment
varies from individual to individual. In his paper “Patterns of Encounter between Ayurveda and Modern Medicine” presented at the Indo-European seminar, Shrinivas Tilak states:

The primacy given to Western medicine transformed India’s plurality of knowledge systems into a hierarchy of knowledge systems. The horizontal ordering of diverse but equally valid and accessible medical and healing systems was converted into a vertical ordering of unequal systems with the Western medicine occupying the top rung. Western systems of knowledge were defined as the only scientific systems and the Indian systems of knowledge were dismissed as unscientific and inferior. (232)

Inspite of this, Ayurveda accepts competing branches of medicine as parallel truths which need not necessarily contradict each other thereby revealing its synergistic and pluralistic approach.

The novelist refrains from resorting to modern therapeutic practices for curing Mukundan’s personality and thus makes it clear that this branch of Indian medicine is not to be substituted as “alternative medicine.” In the novel, Bhasi says people come to him “when they have lost faith in everything else” (8). By incorporating this into the novel, Nair revalidates the curative powers of Ayurveda and attempts to bring man back to nature. Rapid scientific progress and the overt belief in man’s reasoning powers has led him to ignore the beneficial effects of naturally occurring plants and minerals and the close bonding he shares
with his natural world. Since every patient is regarded as unique in this system, it takes into consideration the numerous factors of which he is a product of, like geography, climate, familial background, body constitution and so forth (Tilak 238). Along with Bhasi, Mukundan embarks upon an inner adventure, a journey into the varied dimensions of the consciousness. As Mukundan hesitantly reveals the “secret malignant tumour” (186) of guilt gnawing his insides to Bhasi, the latter realises that for any healing to take place, Mukundan must probe into himself and conduct a journey into his own self. Bhasi takes up the role of a counsellor and provides the spiritual company which is essential for curing Mukundan’s psychological unrest. As Frawley observes: “Healing the mind involves healing how we relate to the world” (152). Bhasi employs step by step therapeutic devices like administering herbal medications, conducting a foray into the dark recesses of Kodakkad to pluck the madukaparni and meditation techniques to exorcise his past. Nair’s skill as a story teller is demonstrated in her interweaving of the myths of the region and the therapeutic practices employed by Bhasi to absolve him of his guilt-ridden memories. Bhasi takes him to the attic and as part of his treatment makes him crouch in a womb shaped urn: “To rewrite your destiny, we have to start with the beginning of your existence” (198). As a child Mukundan had heard stories of ancestors being taken up into the attic and coaxed into the earthern urns in which they remained there for long till they were reborn as tree frogs. Nair deviously employs this myth to the rejuvenation treatment employed by Bhasi. Probably here she could be alluding to the
rasayana regimen (a method of rejuvenation and an approach to positive health) mentioned in the Astanga Hrdaya. One of the methods of this regimen is the kutipraveshika rasayana wherein a special three-walled chamber (trigarbha kuti) is created and the person remains inside for a prescribed period of time without coming into contact with the heat, sun or dry wind (Frawley and Ranade 117). This combination of Ayurvedic treatment and the myth of Malabar concocted by the novelist leads to the rebirth of Mukundan. Herbs mentioned in The Better Man like the mandukaparni, brahmi, shankupushpi are those mentioned in the ancient scriptures of Ayurveda to enhance memory, cognition and the ability to cope with psychological disturbances. Through Bhasi’s healing system, the novel lays bare the rich bio-diversity of plants as sources of medicine. The mandukaparni ("muttil" in Malayalam), the celestial herb growing where “the dew rains by the night and the sun rages by the day” in the dense green meadows of Kodakkad serve to enhance the picturesque and mystical quality of the region (194).

Commercialisation of this branch of medicine has become a bane in the contemporary context. The demands of the growing market have led to the frightening reality of overharvesting (increased access to medicinal plants and insufficient time for regeneration). Nair also focuses on the transformation of a local and eco-friendly process of healing into commercial ventures comprising of massages and a range of therapies beyond the means of the common man. Meenakshi who finds it unable to meet the cost of Ayurvedic medicines and massages for her sick
husband and the stripping of asoka trees off their bark by Ayurvedic drug companies and quacks are cases in point in the novel. As Radhakamal Mukherjee rightly observes: “Man’s mastery of his region consists not in a one-sided exploitation but in a mutual give and take, which alone can keep alive the never-ending cycle of the region’s life processes” (23). The biomedical perspective which marginalises traditional systems of medicine to the fringes makes it necessary that they find their own ways of survival by creation of pharmaceuticals. This signifies a standardisation and homogenisation of both the form and procedure of manufacture, thereby necessitating “the transformation of the multiplicity of Ayurvedic texts and practice to resembling one single body of knowledge” (M.Banerjee 64).

Myths from Indian tradition have been constantly used by writers of Indian English fiction as in novels like Kanthapura or The Man-Eater of Malgudi. In recent Indian English fiction, a case in point is the all encompassing myth of the Mahabharatha in Shashi Tharoor’s The Great Indian Novel. Bhasha writers like O.V. Vijayan and Sarah Joseph use legends, fables and myths to build up their locales of Khasak and Kokkanjara village (Alahayude Penmakkal) respectively. Myths become a vital ingredient of human civilization “not as an intellectual explanation or artistic imagery”, but as “a narrative resurrection of primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements” (Malinowski 199). All these purposes underscore the use of myths in The Better Man. Anitha Nair’s fund of folklore and myths of Malabar weave their
way into the building up of her region. Krishnan Nair, the caretaker reminds Mukundan of the existence of Machilamma, a fierce goddess who had to be treated with respect and caution, “Don’t you know that when the mother goddess chose to make the macch inside this house, her home, she laid down certain conditions? A lamp in the granary all day and an offering of fowl’s blood once a year” (37-38). The goddess named differently in different lineages, was a species of the common Nair goddess, Bhagawati, who if not propitiated with offerings was capable of inflicting misfortune and sickness upon the family (Gough 330). Sighting of an oriole as a sign of good fortune (63) and stories of Gandharvas bewitching young girls (128) are some popular myths of Malabar mentioned in the narrative. Reference is also made to a form of sorcery of the Odiyans who wreak destruction in the guise of cats and snakes (168). The Odiyans practise the odi cult which is identical to black magic and they are considered to be the most dreadful of sorcerers possessing the power to destroy. The belief was that the Odiyans used pila thailam (extracted from the foetus of a young woman during six or seven months of her pregnancy) to transform themselves into the figure of any animal of their choice and after carrying out their evil mission, the animal would vanish into thin air (Menon 163-64). The death of Mukundan’s mother and the harassment of Philipose which forces him to leave the village are suspected to be the work of Odiyans in the novel. Mythical lore has become an integral part of the Indian psyche not through any conscious effort but as a natural inheritance. Hence every experience is evaluated on this basis. So even in adulthood,
Valsala awaits a Gandharva when the pala tree blooms and Mukundan expects to find a tree frog (an ancestor reborn as one) in the urn kept in the attic. When Mukundan enters Kodakkad as part of his treatment under Bhasi, he recollects the story of the yakshi who “would lure a man deep into the forest and sink her fangs into his throat, and when she was replete she would disappear, leaving behind a pale corpse drained of blood and soul” (191). It is hence only natural that minds fed on such lores should see such apparitions as Mukundan does. Myths centred on trees (asoka) help to establish the interconnectivity between man and nature. Apart from these local myths, pan-Indian myths from Buddhism, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as well have crept into the narrative.

Nair feels that the descriptions of food in a novel though not integral to the main plot of the narrative, “adds an extra element of everydayness” to it (Goodnight 153). Commenting on the detailed recipe of making chicken curry which was taught to her by her old family retainer, Krishnan Nair, the novelist says that it was included to serve as “both a metaphor and a literary tool necessary to describe a character’s state of mind”(153). The caretaker’s curry “would bubble with emotion” and every drop of it tasted of the joyous welcome, adulation and respect which he had for Achuthan Nair (The Better Man 263). Her use of the trope of cooking conveys the sense of warmth and security shared by Mukundan with the caretaker. Cooking has been used by Valsala (a house wife) to invigorate her waning youth and passion. Valsala, at the age of forty is bored and tired of life, especially of one with
her husband, Prabhakaran Master. In her longing to feel young, she redefines her cooking with a new vigour to add spice to her life. Inspite of her husband’s complaint of indigestion, Valsala cooked in a frenzy:

Throwing in chillies generously, grinding cloves, cinnamon bark, poppy seed and cashew nuts into her gravies. Ghee replaced oil. Pappadums were . . . deep-fried to a pleasing golden fullness. The house was scented with the richness of excess. Of cravings being satiated. Of forgotten desires blooming. (132)

Similarly Nair makes the character of Margaret Shanthi in her novel, Ladies Coupé assert herself by using the ploy of cooking against her chauvinistic husband. She did so by overfeeding him till he lost his athletic figure and with it his self esteem. In The Better Man, the novelist’s flair for the typical Malabar cuisine enhances the ambience of the region.

The oppressed stage their resistance in their own unique ways in the text. Kamban, robbed of his dignity publicly by Philipose decides that it was time to take stock and resorts to his “dark gods” (168) for help, for which he approaches his uncle Chathu to execute his powers as an Odiyan. Parukutty who had suffered the tyranny of Achuthan Nair retaliates when he plans to move into the tharavad with his mistress: “For as long as I am alive, I will decide who lives in this house and who doesn’t” (74). She left his paddy on the road in front of his mistress' house, invited her cousin who was detested by Achuthan Nair and gave away the clogs which her
husband had worn to ring his terror into them. This streak of steel that runs within every individual sparks forth on rare occasions in the novel. Nair refuses to forsake her characters as suffering and succumbing nor do they find solutions to opt out of patriarchy. Their “little acts of defiance” enables them “to retain a measure of imaginative autonomy and self-respect and ensure their survival with dignity in a world that offers them so little by way of either” (Geetha 163). However, in her second novel, Ladies Coupé, Nair shakes the ideological ground of the patriarchal society and suggests ways of resilience whereby her female characters discover their own inner strength.

In The Better Man, Nair presents the concept of the Self and the Other not to be exclusive spaces but with shifting boundaries. The binary opposition of the insider/outsider, the insider/Other and the native/settler interestingly raises the issue of the “legitimate” inhabitants of the region. As Shail Mayaram puts it: “There are also centres within the margin as it asserts hierarchy and masculinity with respect to caste and gender within its own regional social organisation”(16). The north and central Keralites treat the hardworking southerners with a disdain bordering on contempt. Philipose, a southern Keralite is scorned by the villagers all the more for being the lone Christian in Kaikurussi with its population of Hindus and Muslims. So being “twice removed” from the reality of Kaikurussi, it becomes certain that they will not break their caste taboos and rent Philipose a room. The situation is equally appalling for Kamban, the Dalit and native of the village as when he’s ridiculed by the outsider, Philipose, none speaks on his
behalf. The equations change when it comes to Bhasi, an outsider who settles in Kaikurussi and becomes more of a native of the village. When Power House Ramakrishnan who has the support of the VIPs of the village (the village officer along with others belonging to the temple board, the masjid committee, the political parties and the young men’s association) decides on a whim to build the community hall on his plot of land, Bhasi is forced to quit: “All I will say is there will be no more work for you in this village” (288). He further questions Bhasi’s alleged claims to attachment for the region: “Why do you want to live in Kaikurussi itself? It’s not as if you were born here or your family lived here. Why not a few kilometres away? You’ll probably get a bigger plot of land and house for the price I’m offering you,’ . . . ” (288).

In contrast, Mukundan is without doubt, the insider, very much a native of Kaikurussi, whose family goes back at least six generations in the village. But his failure to fit in makes him assert: “No matter what anyone said, he was not a native of the village in its true sense. He might have been born here. But that was all. He didn’t belong here. And he didn’t want to” (115). His failure to secure a position for himself in the village makes him “Achuthan Nair’s city son, reluctant native, misogynist, misfit “in the eyes of the villagers (83). So Mukundan is simultaneously the insider and outsider and at the same time fails to fit into either category.

Raymond Williams defines the term native as “innate, natural or of a place in which one is born” (Key Words 215).
Though on a general positive sense, native is taken to mean as above, the negative sense describes the term as inferior inhabitants of a place subjected to alien political power or even of a place visited and observed from a supposedly superior standpoint. It is this superior stance which initially Mukundan assumes that alienates him from the villagers. The major contention of who exactly is the “native” in the true sense is problematic – Bhasi who is “as much a native” (115) is ousted from it; Kamban, a “lesser native” who longed to be accepted in his village; or Mukundan, the “native” who wanted to flee from it. Nair here problematises the very concept of the term ‘native’ through the characters of Mukundan and Bhasi. Does merely being born into a region make one more of a native of the land than the settler who becomes intensely attached to it is a moot question Nair raises in her narrative. Mukundan who earlier detested the very thought of returning to his native land, now wallows in the new found respect the villagers give him on becoming a member of the community hall. He criticises Bhasi for not yielding to Ramakrishnan’s demands:’“There’s a difference,’ . . . ‘I was born here. I am a native of this village. My ties to this land exist in my blood. But you are just a settler’” (311). Bhasi clarifies his predicament:

‘So is that what it has been reduced to? That as a native you have certain rights, and as a settler I don’t. I love this village, this land, more than anyone else in this village does. I love it as if it were a living being. But because I am not a native, I’m
dispensable’. . . ‘How am I going to make you or any one else understand what Kaikurussi means to me? What can I say to you who sees this land merely as mud, grass and trees, of the bonding the land and I share?’ (311)

When the two enter the wilderness of Kodakkad, Mukundan is astonished at Bhasi’s intimacy with the forest and accedes to his nativity: “‘How is it you know all these places? I was born here, and yet you are more the native of this village than I can ever hope to be’” (191). Mukundan fails to sink roots in his land where as Bhasi imbibes its very essence. He is able to merge his limited self with the larger terrain. The true essence of nature can be comprehended only by those who maintain close ties with the land. Bhasi claims that the landscapes of his life in Kaikurussi “have been green valleys, green meadows, endless green fields lush with hope, blessed with peace” (328). On being forced to move out of Kaikurussi, Bhasi expresses his pain in being severed from the land:

The earth, damp and loose, cushioned my feet, inviting me to rest a while, and heal my bruised spirit. The leaves of the jamun tree whispered soft murmuring sounds. They knew me. They responded to my pain. The earth, wind, water, skies, and energy of this land. They saw in me someone who loved them unconditionally. And it was this land that has always been my haven and salvation that you [Mukundan], along with the others, forced me to sell. (329)
The annual pooram festival in the temple grounds of Kaikurussi and its preparations which has a lingering presence throughout the novel comes into prominence in the climactic stages of the novel. Nair mentions in one of her travelogues that “while the other festivals have to do with personal prosperity and family reunions, the pooram is about community and how deep your roots are sunk into the place of your birth” ("A Village Pooram"). Amid the fireworks and sound of drums when all would be assembled at the festivities, Mukundan plans to blow up the edifice that the community stood for so that “the edifice to the man he had been would no longer exist” (361). Ironically, the novelist chooses this community festival with all its camaraderie for the enactment of Mukundan’s diabolic plot to avenge the very community he had strived so hard to belong to.

The unfinished community hall is the symbol of the regional despotism that brings together an unusual crop of the “genteel” Kerala society. The community hall committee is a miniature form of the larger committees and governing authorities that emerge in the state. The community hall committee consists of Parameswaran Namboodiri from Plashi Mana who “clung to the vestments of the past” (305), Abu Seith, the rich Gulf returnee, Haji Sulaiman from the Masjid Committee, Professor Menon ("not a native of Kaikurussi, but his wife was"), the retired H.O.D of Economics of Pattambi College and Comrade Jayan who could tell anyone “on what points Lenin differed from Trotsky.” Comrade Jayan’s commitment to the communist ideology does not prevent him from seeking refuge at Mata Premanandamayi’s feet at every
opportunity. Mukundan’s longing to be a part of this committee had blinded him to forsake his friend and his lover in their hour of need. It is only after Achuthan Nair’s demise that realisation dawns on him that he was no better than his father. Mukundan decides to make amends by gifting a piece of his own land for Bhasi to build his house on and decides to bring Anjana home. He feels that the community hall would be a grim reminder of the weakling that he was as it entombed his failure as a friend, lover and eventually as a man. The unfinished community hall he plans to put to blaze was the image of his own greed “for recognition and acceptance, importance and adulation” (349). He realises that he had sacrificed his integrity and left unheeded the whispers of his conscience. The words of Anjana whom he loved passionately until he became the member of the community hall committee reverberates in the recesses of his mind: “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. . . . You disgust me” (323). Mukundan finally makes the choice between individual and society having been convinced that the individual’s conscience, free from the ugly craving for recognition and power is the chosen path to become a better man. It heralds the birth of a new being or the rising of a better man from the ashes of the community hall.

The narrative adopts a close interweaving of the past and the present whereby the past makes clear the present. A very notable feature in the novel is that it steers clear of even the slightest trace of nostalgia. The backward gaze of the region and its characters
holds no fond memories. The pain suffered in the earlier Nair tharavads prompts Mukundan and Meenakshi to look forward to escape from home and Kaikurussi. Mukundan’s past keeps haunting his present life. Parukutty, longs to escape the confines of the four walls of the gargantuan house and begs Mukundan to take her away to Bangalore. Kamban shuns his past traumatised by caste oppression. The past vividly creeps up in the memories of almost all the characters like Ramakrishnan, Moidu and Bhasi. But Nair adds a dollop of hope into her characters as with Mukundan who strives to be a better man and Krishnan Nair, the lifelong caretaker of a tharavad who decides to finally return to his family: “All these years, I was caught in some absurd slavish love. I squandered the best years of my life, but perhaps I can still make up for it. A lifetime is what I wasted” (347). Nair’s orientation is towards the future. The region looks forward to progress, of better tomorrows and better men.

The novelist’s approach in The Better Man is “to probe beyond the surface and tap into the seams of everyday. To shrug aside recycled nostalgia and to see Kerala for what it truly is” (Goodnight 218). Borrowing Nair’s own metaphor, her novel could be aptly compared to the buttermilk with a cheenamolagu as she describes in one of her essays. The novel has the surface calm of the buttermilk and deep “in its depths the internal conflagration of a subterranean ocean” (Goodnight 181). M.K. Naik and Shyamala Narayan opine that The Better Man is the kind of novel that could have been written in any one of India’s regional languages where the exploration of the postcolonial ramifications of using English is
not an issue (*Indian English Literature* 98). Linguistic creativity and resourcefulness are some of the predominant features of postcolonial writings. Nair claims that today English is as Indian as Hindi or Malayalam and writers have succeeded in walking “that tightrope between language and landscape” (“A Cup of Tea” 3). The language in this novel shares the cultural ambience and social milieu from which it springs from. Profusion of localisms strewn throughout the narrative lends the novel its intimate regional flavour as in terms of food (molugushyam[132], puttu and kadala curry[112], nellikka [331]), medicinal herbs (pitabhringi, lajjalu, shatavari [286] ), kinship terms (Ammuma, ammaven, cheriyamma [29]), rituals of vidyarambham (53) and others like mundu and veshti(30), urli(263) and kolambi(317) to name a few. The popular proverbs deftly embedded in the narrative (“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” [54] and “If you take a leech and put it alongside you on your bed, do you expect it to lie there quietly” [314]) are literal translations from the Malayalam language. The novel is also replete with homespun images reflecting the cultural matrix – “skin is the colour of tea with a few drops of milk added” (264) and “they treat us like curry leaves in a gravy- to be used and discarded” (284).

Skilful use of animal imagery is another salient feature of Nair’s novel. This has earlier been used in Indian English fiction by novelists like Anand (*Coolie*), Bhabhani Bhattacharya(*So Many Hungers*) and Malgonkar (*A Bend in the Ganges*). Markandaya too uses such imagery of the “water buffalo”, “bird”, “sparrow”, “wild
animal” in her *Nectar* which however does not attempt to convey symbolic levels of meaning. The use of animal imagery in *The Better Man* aids in projecting the psychological dimensions of Nair’s characters. So painter Bhasi is the lizard on the wall (3); the Dalit Kamban is referred to as a dog with a broken leg (152); Philipose is a wolf and a monster cat (158); Achuthan Nair, a vicious dog which needed a muzzle around its mouth(291); Anjana’s husband is the tentacled, evil-veined shrimp(222) and Mukundan the snail(106). The house which “would never feel like home”(26) to Mukundan, one notes, is constantly referred to as an insatiable female ghoul(40) and as a monstrous being with hooded eyelids holding him in its clutches(49). Even the objects associated with the house like the cot with its murals of evil faces (28) and the refrigerator likened to a giant beast (41) accentuates the sense of foreboding eeriness. Comparisons of the road to a slithering grey snake among the paddy fields (24), fleeting thoughts to an irritating mosquito (158) and nostalgia to spider eggs that hatch by the minute (93) are further pointers to the same effect. For a novel steeped in the folklore and myths of Malabar, the imagery forms an appropriate description to hint at the dark psychotic forces latent in man.

Nair’s language has the visual quality that is both appealing and resonates with the everyday life of the region (222, 331). Her description of Shankar’s Tea club, a typical teashop in a village of Kerala is a fine illustration:

He hung up the plantain bunches which the sun eyed lasciviously. He tuned the radio for the early morning
news broadcast. Minutes later the samovar began to hiss . . . .

Shankar rinsed out the glasses and arranged them in sentinel rows. The sun, tired of caressing the plump, inert contours of the plantains, turned its attention to the glasses. Born coquettes, the glasses sparkled when the sun flirted with them. A fickle admirer, however, the sun disappeared when the first bus from town ground to a halt outside Shankar’s tea shop. (47-48)

Nair has effortlessly reshaped the language to bring out the cultural, ethnic and linguistic particularities of the Malabar region:

The next morning Valsala steeped curry leaves in warm coconut oil and added a pinch of camphor dust. In the twilight, when the oil was green and cloudy, she rubbed it into her hair and then washed it with crushed hibiscus leaves. She lined her eyes with kohl she had made herself from lampblack, camphor and fine coconut oil. She took out her palakka modiram necklace . . . and clasped it around her neck. Wrapped in a thin mundu, the green and red stones of the necklace glowing, she went to stand beneath the pala tree, spreading her hair out to dry. (129)

Nair is adept in using humour to paint the dark reality of our everyday life. The power structures which accommodate strange bedfellows as seen in the community hall committee can breed
only a bureaucracy consisting of a motley crowd of men and women. The word picture serves the purpose of a caricature exposing the snobbery and shallowness of our society. Mukundan is waiting at the Electricity office to pay his bill:

Mukundan sat on the visitor’s chair. A lesser twin to the office chair, with a sagging seat and no armrests lest the visitor got too comfortable. He looked around him and then at the clerks.

Both women wore several gold chains around their necks and gold bangles on their wrists. The younger woman now perched on the in-charge’s table wore a sari that had a print of several tigers chasing several antelopes, round and round her legs and thighs, up her belly and over her breasts before running over her shoulder and down her back into a flowery grave. As for the older woman, she could have taught geometry by just standing up and pointing to the prints on her sari. (218)

Along with her rendering of the everyday life of Kaikurussi peppered with humorous anecdotes, Nair reveals her flair for crisp characterisation. Her description of Che Kutty exemplifies this:

In another country, in another time, he would have staged a revolution, probably even have been a highly paid guerrilla. But here in Malabar, all that Che Kutty could do was continue with the family business.
Perhaps he sought consolation in the fact that what he dealt in was the common man’s drink and by disbursing it, he was helping reduce the profits earned by the bourgeoisie who peddled Western imperialist spirits like whisky, brandy and rum. Now all that remains of his leftist leanings and militant youth is a beard that resembles the guerrilla leader’s mangy tufty one, and the single lock of hair that falls irreverently onto his forehead. (5)

It is apparent that the use of language in the novel demonstrates a marked difference from Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*. Quite unlike even her immediate predecessors, Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, there are no daring or innovative techniques employed in Nair’s language. Through her lucid prose and with the absence of any glossary, she imparts the regional flavour of Malabar to her writing. She has succeeded in giving a new impetus to the narrative by using simplicity as its core ingredient.

The key processes that identify the socio-political landscape of Kerala in the nineties occur in her narrative – left-agitational politics, flourishing trade unions, politically conscious workers and the corruption inherent in every sphere, the migration to the Gulf and the dominance of power and money. References to untouchability, casteism, cultural and religious bias, occult, adultery, patriarchy and even homosexuality feature in the novel. Nair’s portrayal of these issues by encapsulating them into the individual lives of the villagers of Kaikurussi is noteworthy. It is pertinent to say that *The Better Man* focuses on issues primarily
related to the menfolk of Kaikurussi viewed from a psychological perspective. The novel highlights how an individual’s response to his socio-cultural surroundings is directly dependent on his psychological environment. Such individuals hover on the fringes and fail to secure a legitimate space for themselves in the region. The role of the women in the novel has been deliberately downplayed by the novelist probably with the sole intention of asserting the role of patriarchy in Malabar. Fleeting moments of their defiance are allowed to surface only to die out tamely. So is the case of the Dalit who having been subjugated by the nation for ages, fails to find representation even in his own region. Nair strives to “know the heart of rural Kerala” (S.Banerjee 43) and realistically captures the polyphonic nature in the life of a people of a region.