



# Reimagining Male Identity and Masculinity in Anitha Nair's *Mistress*, *Lessons in Forgetting*, and *The Better Man*

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## Abstract

Anitha Nair's fiction foregrounds the interior lives of men at a moment of social and cultural transition in India. This paper examines the representation of male identity and masculinity in three selected novels: *Mistress* (2005), *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010), and *The Better Man* (2013). Through a gender-studies lens informed by R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and feminist ethics of care, the paper argues that Nair traces a critical trajectory: from masculinity defined by possession, authority, and emotional detachment, to a masculinity reconstructed through vulnerability, accountability, and relational presence. In *Mistress*, male characters seek to own women, narratives, and art. *Lessons in Forgetting* exposes the violence and ethical bankruptcy of that model in the context of trauma and institutional failure. *The Better Man* proposes an alternative masculinity grounded in care work and emotional labour. Nair thus contributes to postcolonial gender discourse by suggesting that masculinity is not innate but performed, and can be unlearned and re-performed.

**Keywords:** Anitha Nair, Masculinity, Male Identity, Indian English Fiction, Hegemonic Masculinity, Care Ethics, Gender

## Introduction

In contemporary Indian English fiction, women writers have often been associated primarily with narratives of female experience. Anitha Nair, however, extends this scope by making male subjectivity a central site of inquiry. Across *Mistress*, *Lessons in Forgetting*, and *The Better Man*, she does not merely "represent" men but interrogates the very foundations of masculinity in a rapidly transforming, post-liberalisation Indian society. Traditional constructions of Indian masculinity have long been tied to authority, control, and emotional restraint. Masculinity is often validated through power over women, over family structures, and over social and economic spaces. However, these models are increasingly destabilised in contemporary contexts marked by changing gender roles, economic uncertainty, and evolving ethical expectations.

Nair situates her male protagonists precisely at this point of rupture. Their identities are tested when traditional forms of control fail, exposing the fragility underlying hegemonic masculinity. This paper identifies a clear trajectory across the three novels—a movement “from control to care.” It argues that Nair deconstructs hegemonic masculinity and reconstructs male identity around relational presence, empathy, and ethical responsibility.

### *R.W. Connell's Hegemonic Masculinity*

R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant cultural ideal of manhood that legitimises patriarchy. It privileges dominance, heterosexuality, authority, and emotional suppression. This model not only subordinates women but also marginalises alternative masculinities that do not conform to its norms.

### *Ethics of Care (Carol Gilligan; Nel Noddings)*

The ethics of care challenges traditional moral frameworks based on autonomy and justice by foregrounding interdependence, empathy, and responsibility. It emphasises relationships and emotional engagement as central to ethical life. Nair's novels can be read as a movement from Connell's hegemonic masculinity toward a care-based ethical framework. Her male characters transition often painfully from dominance to relational accountability.

### *Masculinity as Possession and Control in Mistress*

*Mistress* presents masculinity in its most traditional and problematic form defined by possession and control. The novel's central male figures Christopher, Shyam, and the historical painter Hertz embody different dimensions of this paradigm. Christopher's love for Radha is deeply possessive. He equates intimacy with ownership and cannot accommodate her autonomy. His emotional attachment transforms into surveillance and manipulation when Radha resists his control. This reflects a broader cultural script where male desire is legitimised as authority over women.

Shyam, Radha's husband, represents institutional masculinity within marriage. While he demands fidelity from Radha, he himself engages in infidelity, highlighting the gendered double standard embedded in patriarchal systems. His authority is rooted not in emotional connection but in social entitlement. The historical narrative involving the Dutch painter Hertz extends this theme into the domain of art and history. Hertz attempts to “own” cultural memory by repainting the *Lady of the Spices*, turning artistic creation into an act of appropriation. Masculinity here is linked not only to personal relationships but also to cultural domination.

Nair reveals the consequences of such possessive masculinity: isolation, alienation, and emotional disconnection. Possession does not lead to intimacy; instead, it creates distance. By reducing others to objects of ownership, these men fail to engage with them as autonomous subjects.

### *Crisis and Collapse: Masculinity in Lessons in Forgetting*

If *Mistress* exposes the structure of hegemonic masculinity, *Lessons in Forgetting* reveals its collapse. The novel begins with a traumatic act the rape and murder of Meera's daughter and unfolds as a narrative of grief, justice, and institutional failure. Male characters in the novel represent different institutional forms of masculinity: domestic, legal, and state authority. Meera's husband, Giri (often referred to as Darai in interpretations), embodies the role of the provider. However, his masculinity is

defined by emotional absence. He is unable to confront grief or offer support, equating strength with silence.

The police and legal systems further illustrate the failures of patriarchal authority. Instead of delivering justice, they attempt to suppress and manipulate the narrative. This reflects a broader critique of state masculinity, where power is exercised without accountability. Nair exposes the ethical vacuum at the heart of hegemonic masculinity. When confronted with vulnerability, these men either withdraw or resort to control. The title *Lessons in Forgetting* is deeply ironic while women are forced to remember, testify, and endure, men “forget” their moral responsibilities. The novel thus demonstrates that masculinity built on authority alone cannot sustain ethical life. It collapses in the face of trauma, revealing its inability to engage with empathy and care.

#### Reconstruction: Masculinity as Care in *The Better Man*

*The Better Man* marks a significant shift in Nair’s exploration of masculinity. Unlike the earlier novels, which focus on critique, this work offers a constructive alternative. Mukundan, the protagonist, is a 49-year-old unmarried man who returns to his ancestral village after personal and professional failure. He lacks conventional markers of masculinity economic success, marital status, and social authority. However, this absence becomes the starting point for transformation.

Mukundan’s journey is characterised by his gradual engagement with care work. He learns to cook, manage domestic responsibilities, and, most importantly, provide emotional support to his niece Anjana. His role is not that of a saviour but of a companion. He does not impose solutions but remains present. This shift from agency to accompaniment is crucial. Masculinity is no longer defined by control but by the ability to sustain relationships. Mukundan’s realisation “Maybe a man is not someone who never falls. Maybe a man is someone who gets up and doesn’t run away” redefines strength as resilience and responsibility. Nair does not idealise this transformation. Mukundan remains imperfect uncertain, hesitant, and often inadequate. However, this imperfection is central to the redefinition of masculinity. It becomes a practice rather than a fixed identity, something that must be learned through experience and failure.

From Control to Care: A Comparative Perspective Across the three novels, Nair constructs a clear narrative arc:

- In *Mistress*, masculinity is rooted in possession and dominance.
- In *Lessons in Forgetting*, this model collapses under ethical and emotional pressure.
- In *The Better Man*, masculinity is reimagined through care, empathy, and relational presence.

This progression reflects broader socio-cultural shifts in post-liberalisation India, where traditional gender roles are increasingly questioned. Nair’s work suggests that masculinity is not a stable or inherent quality but a socially constructed and performative identity.

#### Conclusion

Anitha Nair’s *Mistress*, *Lessons in Forgetting*, and *The Better Man* make a significant contribution to contemporary Indian gender discourse. By tracing the movement from control to care, Nair dismantles the myth of the naturally dominant male and proposes an alternative model of masculinity. This alternative is not defined by power or possession but by relational engagement being present in moments of grief, participating in everyday acts of care, and making ethical choices. Nair’s reimagining of masculinity is not anti-male but anti-dominance. It opens up space for more inclusive and humane

forms of male identity. In a cultural context that continues to equate manhood with authority, Nair's work offers a powerful redefinition: masculinity as presence, responsibility, and care.

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