

From Possession to Presence: Masculine Identity in Anitha Nair's Selected Novels-Mistress, Lessons in Forgetting, and Better Man

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Abstract- Anitha Nair's fiction consistently interrogates gender roles in contemporary Indian society, particularly the construction and transformation of masculine identity. This paper examines the evolution of masculinity in three of her significant novels: Mistress (2005), Lessons in Forgetting (2010), and Better Man (2013). Traditionally, male characters in Indian narratives are associated with authority, dominance, and possession. However, Nair destabilizes these conventions by tracing a gradual movement "from possession to presence." In Mistress, masculinity manifests through the urge to possess women and art. In Lessons in Forgetting, this model fractures under the weight of trauma, guilt, and emotional inadequacy. Finally, in Better Man, masculinity is reconstructed through empathy, vulnerability, and relational responsibility. Through close textual analysis, this paper argues that Nair dismantles hegemonic masculinity and proposes an alternative framework where the "better man" is defined not by control but by emotional presence and ethical accountability.

Keywords: Anitha Nair, Masculinity, Indian English Fiction, Gender Studies, Possession, Presence, Emotional Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Masculine identity in Indian English fiction has historically been constructed through notions of authority, lineage, and patriarchal control. Male characters often function as figures of dominance providers, decision-makers, and custodians of familial and social honour. This representation aligns closely with what R.W. Connell terms "hegemonic masculinity," a culturally exalted form of manhood that privileges power, emotional restraint, and control over others. Anitha Nair, a significant voice in

contemporary Indian literature, challenges these entrenched norms. Her fiction shifts the focus from external authority to internal conflict, presenting men not as unyielding figures of power but as individuals grappling with emotional inadequacy, failure, and transformation. Nair's narratives question the sustainability of traditional masculinity and explore the consequences of emotional repression.

This paper examines three of her novels Mistress, Lessons in Forgetting, and Better Man as a thematic continuum that maps the transformation of masculine identity. Each novel represents a stage in this evolution: possession, collapse, and presence. Together, they reveal Nair's larger project of redefining masculinity in contemporary Indian society.

Theoretical Framework: Rethinking Masculinity

To understand Nair's reconfiguration of masculinity, it is essential to situate her work within gender theory. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity highlights how dominant forms of masculinity marginalize alternative expressions, particularly those associated with vulnerability or emotional openness. Similarly, feminist critiques emphasize how patriarchal systems harm not only women but also men, by restricting their emotional lives. Nair's fiction aligns with these perspectives by exposing the fragility of hegemonic masculinity. Her male characters often fail to meet societal expectations of control and strength, revealing the inherent contradictions within these ideals. Instead of presenting masculinity as a fixed identity, Nair portrays it as a fluid construct one that can be dismantled and reimaged.

II. POSSESSION AND CONTROL IN MISTRESS

Mistress serves as the starting point of Nair's exploration of masculinity. Set in Goa, the novel intertwines multiple narratives, focusing on characters whose lives revolve around art, relationships, and desire. The male characters Christopher Stewart, Shyam, and the German painter Hertz embody different forms of possessive masculinity. Christopher's relationship with Radha exemplifies the male desire for ownership. His attraction to her is not merely emotional but deeply intertwined with control over her body and identity. Similarly, Shyam seeks to assert authority over his wife despite his own moral failings, revealing the hypocrisy embedded in patriarchal expectations. Hertz, on the other hand, attempts to possess art and history, using them as a means to escape his existential emptiness.

In all these cases, masculinity is defined by the act of "having." Women become objects of desire, and art becomes a commodity. This possessive impulse ultimately leads to alienation and dissatisfaction. Nair suggests that a masculinity rooted in ownership is inherently unstable, as it depends on external validation rather than internal fulfillment.

III. FRACTURE, TRAUMA, AND EMOTIONAL FAILURE IN LESSONS IN FORGETTING

If *Mistress* exposes the desire for possession, *Lessons in Forgetting* examines its consequences. The novel deals with themes of trauma, memory, and survival, particularly through the experiences of its female protagonist, Meera. However, it is equally significant for its portrayal of male characters who fail to provide emotional support. Dorai, Meera's husband, represents emotional absence. His inability to engage with his wife's suffering highlights the limitations of a masculinity that equates strength with silence. Other male figures in the novel, including law enforcement authorities, embody systemic violence and indifference, further reinforcing the idea of a fractured masculine identity.

Unlike traditional narratives that glorify male heroism, Nair presents men as deeply flawed individuals. Their failure is not merely personal but structural, rooted in a cultural framework that discourages emotional expression. The novel suggests that the refusal to acknowledge vulnerability leads to further harm, perpetuating cycles of violence and neglect. Through this portrayal, Nair critiques the emotional illiteracy of patriarchal masculinity. She demonstrates that the inability to be present for others particularly in moments of crisis renders traditional masculinity inadequate and destructive.

IV. REDEFINING MASCULINITY THROUGH PRESENCE IN BETTER MAN

Better Man marks a significant departure from the earlier novels, offering a more hopeful vision of masculinity. The protagonist, Mukundan, is a middle-aged man who returns to his hometown in search of meaning. Unlike the dominant male figures of traditional narratives, Mukundan is characterized by vulnerability, uncertainty, and self-doubt. Initially, Mukundan appears to embody failure; he is unemployed, emotionally fragile, and socially disconnected. However, his journey becomes one of self-discovery and transformation. Through his interactions with his niece Anjana and other characters, he learns to engage with others in meaningful ways.

Mukundan's growth lies in his willingness to change. He listens, apologizes, and takes responsibility for his actions. He performs acts of care that are traditionally associated with femininity, thereby challenging gender norms. In doing so, he redefines masculinity as a practice of presence rather than possession. Nair's portrayal of Mukundan suggests that masculinity is not an inherent trait but a learned behaviour. By choosing empathy over control, he becomes the "better man" not through dominance but through relational awareness and emotional authenticity.

V. FROM POSSESSION TO PRESENCE: A NARRATIVE ARC

When read together, the three novels form a coherent trajectory:

1. Possession (Mistress) – Masculinity is defined by control and ownership.
2. Collapse (Lessons in Forgetting) – This model breaks down, leading to emotional and social failure.
3. Presence (Better Man) – A new model emerges, grounded in empathy and responsibility.

This progression reflects a shift from external power to internal awareness. Nair does not suggest that this transformation is easy; rather, it is fraught with struggle and self-reflection. Her characters must confront their own limitations before they can evolve.

VI. CONCLUSION

Anitha Nair's novels offer a profound critique of traditional masculinity in Indian society. By tracing the movement from possession to presence, she exposes the limitations of patriarchal ideals and proposes an alternative framework rooted in empathy and emotional engagement. Her concept of the "better man" challenges conventional notions of strength and success. Instead of power and control, she emphasizes care, accountability, and the willingness to be present for others. This redefinition is particularly relevant in contemporary discussions of gender, as it opens up possibilities for more inclusive and humane expressions of masculinity. Ultimately, Nair's fiction serves as a space for reimagining identity. It invites readers to question established norms and to envision a form of masculinity that is not defined by domination but by connection.

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