

Constructing New Identity in the Select Novels of KaveryNambisan: A Critical Study

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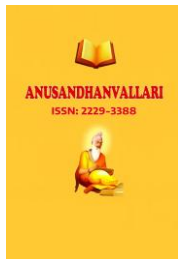
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Abstract

The writings of KaveryNambisan strongly advocate for the emancipation of Indian women and subvert the patriarchal stereotypes. The liberation of women in modern Indian literature does not take shape as a radical extended protest against patriarchy, but as a gradual process of unlearned gender based hierarchies and recovered self-identity. Based on the close textual interpretation and theoretical considerations of feminism, the article examines the ways in which the Nambisan heroines face the challenge of culturalization, institutionalized marital oppression, and marginalization of their professional practices in shaping identities that are formed by their awareness of themselves, as opposed to being socialized into it. The study shows that Nambisan intentionally avoids passive compliance and militant separatism, choosing rather the locus of liberation as a psychological and relational unlearning that the performative femininity is dissolved and companionship is built upon the plane of equality. Through the comparison of personal awakening and the mass organization, the novels develop a dream of gender solidarity by going beyond opposing forces of power and suggesting instead the interdependence of mutual understanding and human solidarity. Combining primary textual analysis and secondary feminist method, this article shows that the vision of identity as seen by Nambisan in her fiction is an introspective, ethically-relational, cross-gender agent, rather than an antagonistic figure as popularly understood. The narrative of Nambisan projects him as a critical intervention to postcolonial feminism discourse and presents a complex paradigm towards female identity that values psychological autonomy, structural equity and a common humanity.

Keywords: Feminism, Marginalization, patriarchal stereotypes, Emancipation, Self-identity



Introduction

The formation of female identity within the patriarchal societies has been a subject of long-standing binary negotiation which involves pointless submissiveness versus extreme defiance. However, in the recent days, Indian fiction is showing more and more that real liberation is not determined by the simple resistance to the dominance of male, as well as by the blind following of the power structure of the patriarchy. Rather, it involves a deep psychological and cultural undoing of internalised hierarchies, and an intentional writing of a self-understood subjectivity. This transformative path is marked in the novels of KavaryNambisan, *The Mango-ColouredFish*, *On Wings of Butterflies* and *The Hills of Angheri*. Instead of portraying women either as constant victims or militant separatists, Nambisan outlines a subtle set of actions in which her female protagonists challenge tradition, undermine performative compliance, and eventually project an image of a self-conscious and self-aware identity, non-hateful companionship, and self-humane solidarity.

The article proposes that the fiction of Nambisancontemplateson female emancipation as a zero-sum gender game; but made instead as a process of deliberate unlearning of patriarchal conditioning such that women can reclaim their agency, re-conceptualize the relationships and engage a society where identity is self-written instead of being assembled by society. By carefully characterizing her characters and introducing feminist theory in a very subtle way, Nambisan shows that the only way to egalitarianism is to not only not practice institutionalized subjugation but also to learn to recognize each other through one another.

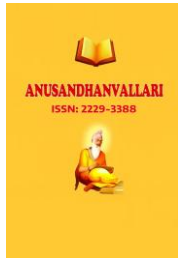
Female subordination as Nambisan shows, has a rarely biological foundation but it is structurally cultural. The societies just survive because they have to pass on the old cultures that have established the way of behaving, and since women are the ones who have to maintain home continuity, then they carry the greatest cost of the inherited scripts. The interiority of females that is psychologically mediated is created well prior to its open interrogation by the woman themselves through the process of ritual, anticipation, and the tacitly administered rules of an appropriately gendered decency. This conditioning of culture is the source text that clarifies that this scaffolding is an invisible concept and is in place before an individual comes to consciousness:

A society, for its survival depends, on the age-old traditions and cultures. Tradition as per Cambridge dictionary means a ‘belief, principle, or way of acting of people in a particular society or group continued to follow for a long time.’... More than the biological system, the traditional cult decides and dictates the outlook of man or woman. (76)

This alien force works by bringing the environment into which is produced the human act: the place of growing up, the institutions, a kind of backdrop and so each of us performs our own acts in relation to this backdrop, as Rajul Bhargava, speaking as Annis Pratt, puts it: “each of us carries around those growing up places, the institutions, a sort of backdrop and so we act out our lives against this backdrop” (9).

The feminine identity is therefore something that does not happen organically; but is created during centuries of gendered demand. Kali NathJha augments this continuity of historical events because until now the Indian women are in household matters, subject to historical and religious taboos, burdened with the duty to “to serve their father in the pre-marital period, the husband after marriage and the sons in the latter part of life” (1). This threefold servitude means that the value of a woman has always been known by the usefulness of the female member with the male family members and not by her true humanity.

Such cultural conditioning is most clearly observed in the domestic context where mothers usually end up being the unwilling patriarchal upholders. The proto-feminist critique of nineteenth century feminizing experienced by women as a girl continues to haunt Mary Wollstones work with Nambisan: “Women are advised since their early years, and trained by the example of their mothers, that... daily gentleness of temper, external obedience and a scrupulous sense of propriety will secure to them the protection of man” (21). *The Mango-*



Coloured Fish puts Ahalya at the heart of this paradox: on the one hand, she is perfectly modern, but on the other hand, she is buried in traditional requirements of feminine obedience. She disciplines her females not with outright brutal treatment, but with subtle demands of manners, looks, and social expediency. The childhood of Sharada turns into a school of enacted femininity, where genuineness is being systematically substituted by a fabrication.

It is evident that such domestic surveillance has a considerable handicap on the memory of Sharada: “with starched serviettes, knives, forks, spoons, the lot. No elbow-on-the-table, no chewing-with-mouth-open, no speech-with-mouth-food-in-mouth, no fingers, no burping or spitting. In short, pure hell” (MCF 124). The fact that Ahalya refuses to accept the natural temperament of Sharada shows how maternal love can be conditional on patriarchal conformity. Sharada complains:

She is disappointed with me for all sorts of reasons: I have never been impelled by a desire to excel. My decision to be a KG teacher was a cruel blow, she said. And physically, I am a fizzle. I am not blessed with a single feminine trait. (MCF 11)

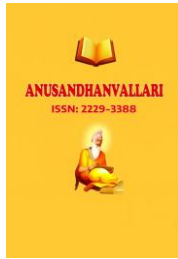
The tragedy of this conditioning is that it is tearing the self into pieces even before adult time. This psychological erosion is reflected in how Naren is related to his domineering mother, Stephanie, because he admits that he has no idea why his father failed to do anything. He was aware that Mother was eating me up. She devoured my mind, gnashed my thoughts and got them replaced with her own. She would say to me: “What are you thinking about? she would destroy my instincts until life became a reflex” (MCF 102). All these stories are proofs that the female identity in the patriarchal world is not only limited, it is reprogrammed. Liberation then, is the process of initially identifying this conditioning and being bold enough to destroy it internally.

Female subjugation is based on domestic conditioning as marriage renders it institutionalized. Traditionally marriage has been rather an arrangement rather than a marriage of equals, as it served economic and social production to ensure the possession of property, breed and manly power. The materialist critique of Friedrich Engels still sounds a very relevant one concerning the image of marital relations given by Nambisan because he notes that:

The traditional monogamy was not in any way the fruit of individual sex-love, with which it had nothing whatever to do; marriages remained as before marriages of convenience. It was the first form of the family to be based, not on natural, but on economic conditions – on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property. The Greeks themselves put the matter quite frankly: the sole exclusive aims of monogamous marriage were to make the man supreme in the family, and to propagate, as the future heirs to his wealth, children indisputably his own. (Engels34-35).

This economic foundation comes out strongly in the agreement of Sharada to Gautam whose marriage vision is transactional. Stephanie, his mother degrades marriage to a compensatory option and says straightforwardly, Marriage is a practical business. At least one person must be down-to-earth, realistic. Naren needs a wife who can compensate for his handicap” (MCF 156). Gautam perfectionism gives to Sharada an inferiority complex as she understands that he wants to mould her into a submissive image. She reflects upon his map of conforming the wife by wondering whether she is “Pulled, pushed, elongated, flattened, hammered, punched and gouged out until I was the right specimen, the perfect wife?” (MCF 73). This urge to delete female autonomy reflects the fact that Simone de Beauvoir’s observation that women are systematically confined to restrictive spheres, “shut up in a kitchen or in a boudoir” with their “wings... clipped” (844).

The marriage of Chitra to Anand is an illustration of the impasse of obedient marriages wherein there is a facade of blissful coexistence. The part when Krishna warns Sharada regarding the risk to get married without a real one is very important: “The dull mindless infatuation between Chitra and Anand isn’t love... to be bored



in marriage is the worst” (MCF 63-64). However, this obedience does not always go down in all women. The course of the Yash shows how destructive can be the result of unrecognized dissatisfaction in marriage. It is her extramarital affairs which are not only moral failures but also willed efforts to reestablish agency in a relationship which cannot fulfill her intellectually and emotionally. By admitting to Sharada, she means to show how deeply alienated women have become when they have to give up the individuality in the name of family security: I learned, with time, that more important than to be happy is to appear to be happy... (MCF 120).

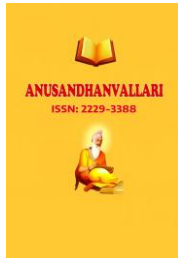
Yash lamenting reveals the emptiness of a marriage that lays more emphasis on social perception, rather than a caring union. The idea that she has reduced marriage to an institution, representing its bureaucracy, gives an idea of how the institution erased female identity. By these overlapping stories, Nambisan breaks the sanctification myth of marriage as a safe haven of the female gender. Instead, she is putting it out there as a place of negotiation, compromise, and, in the eyes of most people, a place of intense self-denial. The resignation that Sharada starts to see instead of rebellion is the way of courageous quest of a marriage of minds, of mutual respect and intellectual accords.

Personal crises described in *The Mango-Coloured Fish* have a political analogue in *On Wings of Butterflies*, where individual discoveries are pulled together into the collective action. The structuring of isolated grievances into a coherent structural change demand is brought about by the creation of the Women Or Women (WOW) organization by Evita. Nambisan carefully gathers a group of women of varying socioeconomic statuses who bear the scars of patriarchal violence, economic marginalization or emotional neglect. The personal drive of Evita is based on the childhood trauma, the experience of observing the exploitation of the mother, the system of undermining the work of women. The infant memory is filled with violation: “Evita’s infant memory was full of visions of men who pulled her mother’s skirt, put their hands into her mother’s blouse and forced her to sit on their laps. Men made more demands on her body than Evita ever did even as an infant” (WOB 19 & 41). It is this gut-level grounding that catapults Evita towards activism, but Nambisan is unwilling to mythify the cause. Rather, she makes it appear like a caotically needed, yet indispensable, procedure of unlearning internalized inferiority. A critique, such as that of UshaBande, places the context of patriarchal education in historical context as to why such mobilization has been so historically contaminated:

Questions of women’s education has always been linked to the question of power and fear that women may tilt power balance... For hegemonic system, any attempt at empowerment means erosion of power and any reference to gender and education points towards empowerment. (172)

The transmission of education under patriarchal anxiety turns it into a instrument of containment, and not liberation, hence the reason as to why the movement of Evita should go beyond gaining literacy to require structural parity.

The women that move to WOW have different philosophies of resistance: the militant separatism of Lividia King to the thoughtful humanism of Millar. The reaction of Lividia to the sexual predation by her husband and acquiescence of the institution is an illustration of the anger that arises in the name of a denied justice. When a nursing student is attacked viciously by Dr. King, his sorrow turns to vengeance that is militant in nature. She proclaims her mission to show women how to unlearn old-fashioned virtues such as being timid and submissive. To stare at men in the eye, forget about flattery, and laughter. The way she does it is clearly retaliatory: “she desires to have an Eye to the Eye, A Tooth to a Tooth, and to show the man the second sex how it feels to be the second sex” (WOB 93-99). The militaristic approach to female training through Lividia is an acceptable reaction to systemic impunity, but Nambisan channels the voice of the feminist figure, Aunt Foot, that extracts a warning against the need to repeat the dominance of the patriarch regime in the name of feminism. The event of the Delhi convention is confronted by the coming in of Aunt Foot, who is putting the movement to the test and



asking the movement to define what equality really entails rather than a reversal of roles. She asks the congregation to see the malleability of human characteristics between genders:

maleness in females and femaleness in males. Listen to Gangubai Hangal and tell me if her voice is anything but authoritatively masculine... Gandhi, that maddeningly enigmatic, near-perfect person, was a man-woman in equal proportions. A woman can be valiant, a man cowardly... What has breast or beard got to do with it? The scales are balanced. (WOB 225-226)

This philosophical shift is key to the argument by Nambisan. The real freedom, she postulates, will not have women build traditionally masculine qualities of aggression and superiority. Rather, it requires acknowledgement that gender binaries are outdone by human attributes.

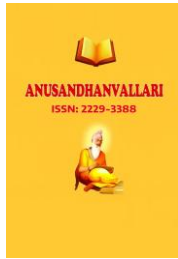
On Wings of Butterflies follows the pattern of collective mobilization, Whereas *The Hills of Angheri* addresses the single-mindedness needed to achieve the autonomy of professional and personal existence within intensely conservative realms. Nallinakshi (Nalli) lost her virginity, but still became a qualified surgeon, a characteristic of village life set against urban ideals, reflects the lack of harmony between personal and societal demands. The first opposition toward her in her family is not grounded in any ill intent, but in gender socialization privilege where being educated as a girl means being at a disadvantage to marry. Nalli notices the extreme hypocrisy of the attitude her people have towards ambition:

Five years earlier, it had been big news when Jai, the favourite son of Angheri, declared that he would be a doctor. No such enthusiasm greeted Nalli's decision... The Maestru was letting his daughter study in a college with boy? That meant problems, surely. It would not be easy to find her a husband afterwards. (HA 35-37)

The working success of Nalli does not protect her against interrogating society. By constantly diminishing her to a marital status and reproduction ability, the patients offer a reminder of the ongoing confusion of womanhood with housewifery. Her reaction to such questions shows how tiring it is always to prove that one is right. Her status as a doctor solidifies but the unsettling nature within her with success. In the midst of her accomplishments, she is dissatisfied by an inner weird voice of unexplained longing towards something more. This pang of desire is not to find fulfillment of romantic nature, but to be realized as a complete human being whose efforts are valued without reference to gender. When Nalli chose to go back to Angheri, she was rejected, but this is what is meant by her refusal to internalise doubt by society. She realizes that not only individual excellence is necessary, but courage to occupy the spheres, traditionally male.

The behaviour of the marital relationship between Kripa and her husband also shows the price paid by female independence in the society that dreads intellectual equality in *On Wings of Butterflies*. The political ambition of her husband Dinakar demands an obedient wife, and he directly attributes her reproductive decisions to male descent: "She did not bear him more children. No use denying it, he knew she had had her womb scraped of pregnancies... Your party prays of equality of religions. Razia was a brave woman" (WOB 170-171). The rejection of sons as a trophy of politics by Kripa turns out to be an insurrection by silence but this very act caters to the cost of the delusion of marital security. At the time, when Dinakar tells her she has to drop the women movement as a survival price in remaining in the marriage, Kripa understands that she will die spiritually. Her will has changed to that of reconciliation to liberation: "what she had sought was not actually a divorce but a widowhood" (WOB 170). It is this sharp statement which highlights the point made by Nambisan that patriarchal marriage can be a prison within which the intellectual soul of the woman is starved out in a systematic way.

The intersection of Sharada, Evita, and the path of Nalli demonstrates the overall thesis of Nambisan: female identity will never be free in a world when it attempts to copy the power model of men, and when it chooses to isolate itself in separatist ideological points of view. Rather, it requires deliberate undoing of



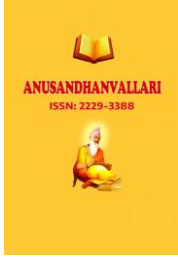
inherited scripts, development of self-generated purpose, and the development of relationships based on mutual acknowledgment instead of hierarchy and control. Nambisan directly opposes the idea of matriarchal domination as the way to fix what has been done historically. In case any of the genders no longer exists or performs worse, the text asserts, then the world would lose its beauty. Men and women should be reasonable and tolerant towards each other. Equally, as it was with Nalli, Sharada, Evita, Kripa, Jyotika and several other women, KavaryNambisan seeks to ensure that all Indian women would imagine their identity through unteaching gender experience. The world requires power and love. Millar in his philosophical reflection of the power and re-creation gives this picture of the complementary equality and not competition, instead of competition: “Man is the child of woman, is he? She should not despise him or inflict pain upon him when she can be the light to lead him. Female and male are one and the same, Eva. They should be together” (WOB 121). This simile breaks down the dichotomous oneness of gender relations where men and women are mutually dependent forces which should go hand in hand and not dominate.

Conclusion

The fiction of Nambisan is also a mirror and map in a sense as it traces how deep unease on the manifestations of patriarchal conditioning and it also provides a road map on how to reclaim oneself and coexist harmoniously with others. Turning the interiority of women into the center, recording their mobilizing togetherness, rebelling against HR feminism in favor of humanism, and unwriting gendered dominance in favor of awakened humanity, Nambisan paints the picture of a society where identity is not thrust upon, but revealed; where relationships are not contracts of convenience, but one of mutual growth; and where the future is not specified by tradition, but written by the awaken. Instead of overcoming men, the journeys of the protagonists end in overcoming inner limitation that has been internalized. Sharada breaks off her fiancé to maintain her independence; Evita leads a movement that both informs and does not divide people, but Nalli goes back to her village because she wants to serve people, without worrying about how society perceives her. Both the women represent what a modern-day education refers to as the spirit of the so called New Woman, one resolving to break free out of conservative ties in order to establish herself in the society in her own right. In a time of gender discourse where polarization and divisiveness no longer needs to be fought on, but needs to be unlearned, Nambisan and her fiction is an important wake-up call to people: that, in fact, equality is not seeking domination, but instead, it is the learning to reject hierarchy and embrace our shared humanity. Her writing is not an assurance of any utopian harmony, but it demands that fairness is a possibility when women are not ingrained to internalize their subordination, when societies understand that human dignity does not accept any gendered expectations.

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