

# A Quest for Selfhood –The Dynamics of Gender Identity in the Mango Colored Fish

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**Abstract**—A new line of Indian writers have made a distinct mark of their own on the contemporary literary scene. One such name is of Kaveri Nambisan, who has, quite surreptitiously though, made a mark in the world of literature. She was born in the beautiful coffee and spice district of Karnataka, Coorg. Kaveri set foot in the writing business through a magazine for women. Kaveri Nambisan handles with deep insight, the anguish of Shari and countless Shari's in post-independent modern India in her novel *The Mango Colored Fish*. It exerts an essentially feminine argument on marriage; that every girl should be married within that marriageable age and to a highly suitable boy, approved by family and society. Nambisan dissects, analyzes and highlights the kind of freedom young women enjoy and yearn for, before and after marriage in the character of Shari. She focuses on the question of female identity within the domestic circle of family. It ponders on the question- why can't a woman be sufficient unto herself, without being tied to the relational self of a mother, daughter and wife? Why not she be regarded as an individual with independent ideas than as an extension of a man? When this acceptance does not happen, fulfillment in marriage becomes a chimera for both men and women. Nambisan underscores the evolution of thought within educated women in India, especially of the middle-class and the upper middle-class, westernized and modern but standing at cross-roads, as they face the day to day dilemmas between the traditional organized lives filled with role-playing and the western influenced modern life full of excitement and adventure. Interestingly, Nambisan depicts the suffering and conflict of the modern educated woman caught between tradition and modernity.

**Keywords:** *Quest for identity, Patriarchy, Marriage, Woman.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism originates in the perception that there is something wrong with society's treatment of women. It attempts to analyze the reasons for and dimensions of women's oppression, and to achieve women's liberation. To some liberation is defined as social equality with men, while others feel that this narrow definition reflects the class bias of what is described variously as bourgeois feminism, career feminism, and mainstream feminism or liberal feminism. Individual women may liberate themselves long before their status is

attained by others; the concept also involves liberation for men, since they are not only removed from a privileged position but are also comparatively free of the responsibility for such things as the support of their families and the defense of their country. As carefully observed of human psyche and behavior, with a fine eye for details, Kavery Nambisan brings in her narratives and characters to life, illustrating her themes, without making moral judgments about her women who are neither saints nor villains, just ordinary people leading the best lives they can, using whatever resources are available. Kavery's characters, both the major and the minor ones, are very real and compelling. Her novels are full of wisdom and subtle parallels; they are funny and bitterly sad, but generally optimistic and never preach and predict. The author displays sympathy towards her characters and does empathize with the living conditions of her female protagonists. As her characters are silent, it signifies that they are in a state of oppression, which in turn is a characteristic of the subaltern condition, while speech signifies self-expression and liberation. The women novelist intends to show the rights of women and which must be preserved. Women novelists assert the rights of women to live their life in their own way. Kavery Nambisan is a writer whose heroines succeed in maintaining a complete balance in life by asserting their individualism within the boundaries of social bondages. Her desires, efforts and failures in the traditional Indian society are the main highlights of her novels. Her women are modern, self-sustained, yet they are bound by the traditional norms of the society. Nambisan being in India has witnessed in her writings the typical tradition and the modern feminine sensibility. She makes it clear that conscience is not the strident and militant kind of feminism which sees man as the cause of all troubles. According to her an Indian woman is different from her counterpart in the western countries. Women in India suffer and adjust themselves. Woman is the Centre of her fictional world. Her novels delve into the expectations of Indian women and relate their search for strength and independence, they detail with complex characters that are caught in a net of relationships

partly of their own making and partly made by the precepts of society. Her depiction of women world is authentic, realistic and credible. Nambisan wants people to relate themselves to her characters so that they can feel their joy and pain, since it will be harder to be prejudiced when they meet them in real life. The pivotal concern of all her writings is women. Each story is a microscopic representation of familial relations, redefining new cultural spaces. She portrays modern, educated and career-oriented middle class married women who are sensitive to the changing times and situations. Revealing a remarkable insight into the nature of a woman's mind, she depicts woman in myriad roles – wife, mother, daughter and an individual in her own right. She always concerns herself with a woman's search for her identity. She endeavors to establish woman as an individual who breaks loose from the traditional constraints and redefines her identity in tune with the changed social ambience of the modern times.

Women novelists have incorporated the recurring female experiences in their writings and it affected the cultural and language patterns of Indian literature. They have brought a stylized pattern in the whole context of Indian writing. Nowadays, people enjoy reading the anglicized novels presented by the new age women writer. A number of women novelists have made their debut in the nineties their first novels are quite effective in revealing the true state of Indian society when it comes to the treatment of women. All these writers were born after Independence, and English does not have any colonial associations for them. Their work is marked by an impressive feel for the language, and a completely authentic presentation of contemporary India, with all its regional variations. They generally write about the urban middle class, the stratum of society they know best. Traditions, patriarchy, culture make them confine totally to the cruel submissions in the hands of their men which in return does not allow them to search for their individuality and identity. They confront the opposite and it compels them to renew themselves in order to evolve to a higher degree of consciousness. The common concern running through these novels is the problem of identity. The inability, sometimes situational and sometimes imposed, to fit oneself in the right slot in the scheme of things; the individual and society, the individual in society; form the persistent concerns in the novels. The novels of Kavery Nambisan projected the policy of female predicament, women and their search for bliss and excitement of life which are always deprived of. Not all her women characters are deprived of life but women like Nalli and Evita are conquerors. In the novels *The Hills of Angheri* and *On Wings of Butterflies* the novelist has successfully weaved a pattern – a pattern with a strong message of hope through change and the ending is revealed as another beginning. The novels, have presented carefully the different phases of transition of women from being tied to nativity to being rooted in another country. Women like Nalli and Evita battled with the ties of the past and acquired a new sensitivity towards life. Life, like cyclone, triggered despair and

uncertainty but Nambisan's women characters emerged as survivors. The author looks at the predicament of women and visualizes life for a woman as a series of obligations and commitments. In addition to existentialistic reality of life they evoke the sentiment and sensibility of women for their role and respect in society.

An analysis of the women characters of Kavery Nambisan reveals the presence of a definite quest for a true self identity. Kavery Nambisan's woman-centered novels and short stories give us a psychological insight into the working of a woman's mind; especially one belonging to a typical Indian background. The years of societal and cultural conditioning teaches the Indian woman to be self-effacing, submissive and subordinate to man, suffering of a patriarchal society in silence. Kavery Nambisan, by making her heroines undergo stages of self-introspection and self-reflection, makes them evolve themselves into more liberated individuals than what their biological nature or culture have sanctioned. Nambisan closely examines the emotional world of womankind. They set themselves to voice the voiceless miseries and helplessness of millions of married women, tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments. Nambisan's focus is on how her heroines are bravely struggling against or helplessly submitting to the relentless forces of absurd life in their relationships. The great relationship for humanity will always be the relationship between man and woman. The relation between man and woman, woman and woman, parent and child will always be subsidiary. The strength of these women lies not in accepting the devastation of life but in renewing themselves from the shackles of burden and bars. The novelists try to show that life is not an encumbrance of affliction and anxiety but it prepares us to face the twists and turns of life with courage and strength. Many contemporary Indian novelists concentrated on depicting the external aspects of life basically in rural India. Nambisan tries to examine the dialectical relationship between the internal and external aspects of life. The novels of Nambisan subtly capture the spirit of rural India, also struggling to break away from traditional Indian cultures and establish a distinct identity. Through her writings, the doctor cum novelist Nambisan forever had planned out to alter the map of post-colonial Indian English Literature. The writings of Nambisan successfully meet the challenges of other thematic depictions by creating a new idiom for creative expression and portraying reality in terms of contemporary society. The fiction of Kavery Nambisan is relevant to all times because she writes about the predicament of modern man. She swims in to woman's inner psych and beautifully projects her emotions. Literature for her is not a means of escaping reality but an exploration and an inquiry. She prefers the private to the public world and avoid from the traditional grooves of external reality and physical world. In fact, her real concern is the exploration of human psyche, inner climate, and she unravels the mystery of the inner life of her characters. Woman is born free and her rights are the same as those of a

man ... The law must be an expression of the general will; all citizens, men and women alike, must participate in making it ... it must be the same for all ... All citizens ... must be equally eligible for all public offices, positions and jobs, according to their capacity and without any other criteria than those of their virtues and talents...

Hence, quest for identity and the quest for self is a phenomenon which is important in the contemporary India. Quest for identity is the crisis which focuses basically on the self-realization which is the emphasis which is the basis for the realization of the self and the self-conscious. The realization of the self is the basic aspect which plays a vital role in the development of the nation in general and the development of the self of women in particular. Kavery Nambisan's novel, *Mango-Colored Fish* is chosen for this paper in order to explore the protagonist's pre-marriage dilemma and incessant burdens loaded on her by the patriarchal forces. She also wants to define and trace out her self-identity, as well as self-discovery and while achieving it she has confronted loneliness, alienation status in her life. The present novel which is richly textured and boldly perceptive is the heartwarming story of a young woman's attempt to strike out her own. The story of the novel deals with the close knit, Tamil family Chettiars from Madras, staying in Delhi. The family consists of father, mother Bimmy, as the father addresses her by this nick name, but her real name was Ahalya and they have a son named Krishna, and two daughters, Chitra and the protagonist, Shari as 'Shari' of the age twenty two. Young Shari always believes that hers and Krishna's identity in the family was merely at the periphery of things. She observes her status as: "Krishna and I hover at the periphery of things. We are the stitches that slipped out of a cozy pattern" (4). Shari's father was the Managing Director of a garment export firm and has a privilege of two office cars, a Secretary and subordinates to follow his orders. He was very vigorous and assertive in his office transactions but his status in the family was apart from it and he was putty in his wife's hands. The export business for which Shari's father worked opened a branch in Madras, so he was transferred there. It was since fourteen years the family was there, when the protagonist was eight years. Her father was an avid reader of periodicals and his wife refers to it as his 'intellectual pursuit'. He enjoys reading of *The Economics Express*, *The Financial Express*, *Business India*, *India Today*, *Frontline*, and *Business Line*. Similarly he eagerly and curiously listens news bulletins on AIR, on DD, BBC and CNN. To Shari her father appears as an encyclopedia of superficial knowledge. Shari's mother was different type of creature who has extravagant pride of superiority of Delhi culture and ashamed of being a Tamilian. She has immensely converted her father's identity of Tamilian into Delhian. Nambisan described this typical change as: Father gave up the dhotis he wore at home for Kurta-Pyjamas, and rubber chappals for Kolhapuris; ate rotis instead of rice, drank tea instead of coffee and listened to Begum Akhtar and Bade Ghulam Ali instead of Mali or Chembai. Father is not a

committed convert but an apostate who defected to please his wife (12). It clearly indicates that Bimmy as a wife, too dominant to her husband and always wanted to overpower each member of the family. Krishna has excelled his job as an assistant to the

Professor of Surgery at Stanley Medical and married Tejaswini, an anesthetist. Shari's eldersister, Chitra married a person, having M.B.A. degree, who was working in Lucknow. In most of the novel, female protagonist is presented as a young character and yearning for marriage, aspiration, hopes and planning's for the future life and the marital bliss beckons her to the celestial world. But, Nambisan's present protagonist appears totally different from them. While presenting this teenage young protagonist, the author has chosen less trodden path. No doubt, she likes other protagonists, has faced predicaments, ordeals but her determination led her on the right track of life and mould her as a vigorous character. She wants to redefine herself identity and desires to visualize self-discovery by visiting remote places to her dearest ones and tried to perceive herself the concept of marriage institution before entering into it. Like every young girl's mother, Shari's mother too is anxious for her future, her marriage and career. "She is afraid of losing her grip on her worthless younger daughter" (6). Mother Bimmy is disappointed with her for all sorts of reasons. One of them was that Shari was not blessed with single feminine appearance at the same time her decision to be a KG teacher was also a jolt to her imagination. To some extent, Shari resembles Anita Desai's Uma of *Fasting Feasting*, only difference is that Shari is not too submissive like Uma, but both have marriage predicaments. Shari herself reviews her personality in her own words as: And physically, I'm a fizzle. I am not blessed with a single pleasing feminine trait. Not a bosom, a hip, a curl or smile to make me desirable. My nose is bulbous, my very black eyes are bit too large for my face, I need to wear glasses, and my cheeks have stayed a shiny, girlish pink. I have a proclivity to plumpness (11). Bimmy was incessantly worried about Shari's future, because Shari was of marriageable age and yet there were no any prospects of her marriage. Hence, restless Bimmy consulted her guru Swami, and expressed her concern over Shari's age and not being able to find a suitable match for her. Shari's slipshod attire was one of the many things, which provokes her mother's anger and despair. Kurta with trousers or a midi and T-shirt was comfortable and favorite attire for her. But her mother strives hard to buy salwar-kameez sets and fancy jewellery and tries her best to convert her daughter. But these things lie unused in Shari's wardrobe. From psychological point of view, most of the teenage youth spent their lot of time for the best appearance, mostly they concentrate on their luxurious and gorgeous dress, ornaments, and perfumes but for all these things Shari has no any interest. Even she never blushed and overwhelmed with the word marriage. On it Chitra was also in favor of mother and her verdict for Shari was that as a lazy, obstinate and lacking aesthetic judgment. But Shari herself thought that the reason

for her dowdiness was her ego. On it Shari ponders and expresses her view: "How can I let anyone know, so blatantly, that I want to impress? My appearance, I like to think, is low on my list of priorities" (30). Shari has an incessant feeling that life had been controlled by others – a domineering mother, Chitra – a too perfect elder sister, kind but passive father. Shari also believes that she has two sets of parents – one was Bimmy and father, another was Parvati aunty and uncle but she was more affectionate to Paru aunty and uncle, than to her parents. Aunt Paru and uncle with their pensive innocence and simplicity always impressed to Shari. On one occasion at Shari's childhood days, while the family was travelling to Mahabs for picnic, Shari puked over her purple taffeta dress and she felt sick of it. On this occasion, Mother sprang away as if she had been struck and screamed father to stop the car. She got out and instead of washing Shari's dress; she inspected the folds of her crisp blue chikan sari for stains. On the contrary, aunt Paru extricated Shari from the purple taffeta mess and washed her even uncle poured the water to clean her. And later aunty took her on her lap but her Mother's role to Shari was neutral.

Shari also reminiscences another dreadful event of her early young age when it was a beginning of menstrual period in her life. But she was so confused and bothered by it and went to Chitra in the middle of a game of hopscotch. After scrutinizing Shari, Chitra informed about it to mother who was lost in watching the serial Hum log, it appears as an interruption to her and only she turned to look at Shari across the room. She hurriedly went inside and brought a packet of carefree and suggested Chitra to show it to Shari and asked through Chitra to stay clean. Thus Bimmy's relationship to her daughter, Shari not as a mother but also like a step mother. Beginning of menstrual period in the puberty phase of any girl is like a transitional period. It is a delicate, tender occasion of every girl's life and on this anarchical phase the mother should have to play the key role not merely as a mother but she should have played the role like a friend, supporter, and inspirer. But unfortunately such things were never reflected by the mother. Hence most of the time their relationship appears as too strained. Sometimes Mother Bimmy also reiterates that aunt Paru as a childless woman, on it Shari strongly and proudly defends aunt Paru by declaring herself as their daughter: "But they have me!?" (223). Shari even in her school days was too innocent and ignorant to the worldly things that all the time she appears clumsy and embarrassed character. On her menstrual period, if it was delayed, she had constant fear which she expresses in the following words: It was awful. From whispered conversations that I overheard in school, I knew that if the period didn't come for over a month, you were pregnant. Six weeks passed and I realized that I hadn't bled after the first time. I WAS PREGNANT! But how? One had to get very close to boys, take one's clothes off most likely, and the closet I had been those horrors was at PT when the boys joined us (8). However, Shari's marriage was finally fixed with young Gautama, a computer Engineer, to whom

Chitra and Mother favored from the point of views as, money gifted, intelligent, and sense of humor. But Shari became overwhelmed by exaggerated fears of awkwardness to this relationship. Now Bimmy has got a temporary relief of Shari's marriage but her next important task was to train Shari for kitchen duties, so that she could be a good housewife. On the other hand, Shari was never enthusiastic and eager to get married that it appears no thrills and spills for it. She was neither excited by the marriages of Krishna and Chitra nor exhilarated by Gautam's feelings for her. Gautam reveals to Shari about his cherished dreams of going to the U.S. good jobs, excellent money and after six years he will be last word in systems. But Shari was not content with Gautam's decision to be in U.S. for six years and she was somewhat dismay with it. Gautam repeatedly realizes to Shari that she must have purpose in life and further told her: "you must learn to be less of a prude" (34). As a young girl of the modern generation, Shari has her own ideals and principles in the life and adhered to them, one day she expresses her opinion that she did not believe in the idea of premarital sex. On it, Gautam laughed casually and stupendously exclaimed to her: "For heaven's sake, Shari, in this day and age!" (34). His casual reaction on it made Shari to ponder seriously that whether he was sexually experienced and it settled in her heart as an ache. Gautam also desires that Shari should have to do something like MBA, which would be useful when he sets his company. But on the contrary, Shari does not have such an interest because she wants to be a teacher. While Gautam was in his office he appears like an autocrat and too disciplined person. Shari used to visit his office only on Tuesdays and Fridays when he finished his work early. But Shari went to him on one Thursday to surprise him but Shari's arrival on an irregular day did not please him but also put him into an awkward position. Instead of welcoming her, he asserts: "You mustn't embarrass me when I'm with my colleagues" (71). But in his next day's meeting he clarified things to her. He used to say her that he worked hard to create a positive impression, and even he did not hurt people or spoke ill of colleagues. In his life, he planned to do so many things, one of them was he wanted to endow a chair at his IIT or at least an award for something in computers. He revealed his noble dream to Shari by saying: Success without wealth is worthless. My father – I haven't told you much about him – is successful, highly so; but I feel no envy for a man who in spite of being a University Professor, can only afford a two-wheeler, and lives in a rented house. Success coupled with wealth gives respectability and that's unbeatable. I want, Shari, to be the most envied person in the world (72). Though, Gautam on most of the occasion displayed his ambitions, aims and determination in the life, yet Shari's state of mind appears totally muddleheaded. And in this bewildered state she asked him like a catalytic converter: "Why do you want to marry me?" (73). On it Gautam explained her, he liked her because she could be 'molded' and further he asserts her that: "You mustn't ever think that the money your parents offered me is in any way important" (73). So there was sincerity in Gautama's assertion because he

wanted a good marriage. At the sametime in the mind of Shari cravings arise that their house will be classy, with splendid and expensive real-leather sofas and rich soft curtains, learned books displaying on shelves, antiques of solid brass, vivid show birds in a cage, and the visiting guests will be computer people and clients and so on. Thus, when Shari was in the company of Gautam, she had a rare but unusual urge, which dreaded sweet yearning to change herself physically into the most pleasing woman.

First time, she has sensation the way she sits, the way she talks and the way she tenderly touches her hair, all of it appears noteworthy to her. Hence, she really wants to be soft, yielding and desirable. The mother of Shari always tries to engrave in her the realization that Gautam will bring order, stability and security in her life. And Shari also felt there is no doubt about it, because he reiterates her several times: “You must have a purpose in life” (74). And she has been seriously trying to find it since. On an occasion of one Saturday, as Gautam drove her in his Maruti 1000, to visit his office, she was too much impressed for his status and position commanded with respect and awe there. But next moment all of a sudden, she decided to visit Krishna and Teji, her brother and sister-in-law in Vrindaban, near Mathura to take the view of this proposal. Even, Gautam was shocked about her visit to her brother, of whom he too had a dark opinion. In the family, Shari was only on right track of communication with Krishna only, so it was essential for her to take his opinion on this relationship. Inevitably, as there was no other alternative, she consented for the proposal of Gautam. But tormented by the ghosts of the past and increasingly uncertain about her decision to marry Gautam, she arrived to her brother Krishna in Vrindaban, a few weeks prior to wedding. This visit was a great shock and dismayed to her mother. This trip was her symbolic travel into the nooks and corners of herself with the aim of self-discovery. Even as she got down into busy and entirely unpredictable lives of Krishna and sister-in-law, Teji, both doctors, the visit offered her rare opportunity at first hand as a model to observe their married life thoroughly. Nambisan narrates the odyssey of self-discovery of Shari in the following words: I carry a stool in and sit next to him, determined to talk. About marriage. I’m anxious that mine be perfect. I want to find out more about theirs, study it, learn; and be so well-prepared that confusion in me will quieten and cease (45). Shari also remembers at the time of his marriage Krishna too had faced the hurdles. The parents of Teji were hesitant their doctor daughter’s marriage with Krishna, not because he was Chettiar and she was a Deshpande from Maharashtra but because of the problems of Krishna. So they tried to dissuade her like any caring parents do. Even they threatened to take her out of Medical College and back to Pune. But Teji was stubborn and firm with decision and got married. Shari ponders: “It was Teji who resurrected my brother, and almost ended up becoming a wreck herself” Women are considered as inferior to men in the patriarchal society and they use violence to repress the autonomy of women, whereas

consciousness brings a change in Shari and motivates her to transform as an independent woman. The plight of women characters in the novel symbolizes their struggle for redemption. The deceptive role played by Yash to her loyal husband Satyu and the sign of —Marriage is a mirage at Teji’s house forces Shari to understand the reality in marriage behind the illusions of hers. Saroja’s wild goose search for a suitor to her daughter Ruku makes Shari know the value of money in marriage. Her aunty’s widowhood teaches her about the failures in life. Shari experiences the hard truth from the life of her friend and relatives behind their superficial image. The haunting of her childhood memories makes her as a self-dependent woman. The journey of Shari ends with her transformation from an absent minded, quirky woman to an independent woman. This paper focuses on the multiple roles of woman as wife, mother and daughter in the family and her oppression in the patriarchal society. The novel *Mango-colored Fish* by Kavery Nambisan portrays the plight of many voiceless Indian women who bear the troubles of men and suffer in silence for their survival. The complicated life of the protagonist Shari and the people around her display the domestic violence against women. This novel begins with the journey of Shari to Vrindaban to meet her brother Krishna and his wife Teji before her marriage with Gautam. Shari peeps in to the troubles of her surrogate parent Paru aunty, her childhood friend Yash, and her sister-in-law Teji, her maid servant Ruku and gets transformed in to a woman of determination.

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