

Voicing the Unheard: Kavery Nambisan's Creative Expressions as a Platform for Women's Empowerment in Marginalized Communities

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Abstract: In the vast tapestry of Indian society, there exists countless voices that have been silenced, marginalized and erased. In this context Kavery Nambisan's creative expressions emerge as a powerful counter-narrative, amplifying the voices of marginalized women and challenging the dominant discourses that have sought to silence them. Through her novels, Nambisan has crafted a nuanced and unflinching portrayal of the lives of women in marginalized communities, rendering visible their struggles, triumphs and aspirations. By doing so, she creates a platform for women's empowerment that is radical, subversive and deeply humane. Like other contemporary women writers, Kavery Nambisan too is aware about the existential predicament of women in our society. The characteristic woman inhabiting her fictional world seeks to challenge her patronizing surroundings where she is taken as being ontologically subservient to man. This feature in Indian woman emerges as the fulcrum of the fiction written by women in post-independent India. Women characters are delineated in detail in her novels, though not from the straitjacketing feminist point of view.

Keywords: Empowerment, Marginalized, Subservient, Identity

Discussion: In the vast tapestry of Indian society, there exists countless voices that have been silenced, marginalized and erased. Among these voices are those of women from marginalized communities, who have been denied agency, autonomy and expression for centuries. In this context Kavery Nambisan's creative expressions emerge as a powerful counter-narrative, amplifying the voices of these women and challenging the dominant discourses that have sought to silence them. Through her novels, Nambisan has crafted a nuanced and unflinching portrayal of the lives of women in marginalized communities, rendering visible their struggles, triumphs and aspirations. By doing so, she creates a platform for women's empowerment that is radical, subversive and deeply humane.

Kavery Nambisan's novels are based on her personal as well as objective views on life around her. She insists upon women creating their own space, their own niche, alcove or roost. For women, sense of the self or being in perpetual communion with their personal selves is a prerequisite for bestowing meaning to their existence. Her novels represent a woman's suo moto struggle to define and accomplish an untrammelled selfhood. A peremptory wish to establish an identity is an amalgamation of being both oneself and realigning the quotidian role of being a good daughter, a good wife and a good mother. This multifaceted urge occurs frequently in her different novels and encompasses a wide range of experiences and perspectives. Her female characters represent various shades of lively personages exfoliating different hues of Indian life. They foster and persist with dreams that are assiduously personal in nature. All her female characters, with their own unique experiences, desires and struggles, collectively represent a vibrant tapestry of Indian womanhood.

Like other contemporary women writers, Kavery Nambisan too is aware about the existential predicament of women in our society. The characteristic woman inhabiting her fictional world seeks to challenge her patronizing surroundings where she is taken as being ontologically subservient to man. This feature in Indian woman emerges as the fulcrum of the fiction written by women in post-independent India. Women characters are delineated in detail in her novels, though not from the straitjacketing feminist point of view.

Nambisan's fictional plots read like spontaneous pleas for a new social order where women do not need to depend on men for their social, spiritual and material fulfilment, but find sources of satisfaction other than those of marriage and family. Their quiet, understated nature masks a fierce inner strength. They take up cudgels against such norms of society as seek to browbeat them into submission and this protest is an expression of a strong yearning for freedom to experience life. They grab available opportunities to live their dreams symbolizing the invincibility of the human spirit. Her female protagonists neither want equality vis-à-vis their male counterparts nor assume a confrontationist approach. Their resolute concern is to establish themselves in a way where they can exercise their free will and live their own dreams. Nanji in *The Scent of Pepper*, Shari in *Mango-Coloured Fish*, Evita in *On Wings of Butterflies* and Nalli in *The Hills of Angheri* are masters of their own free will. All these females believe in simplicity, be it Nanji, Nalli or Shari. All of them are devoted to work, plainness and naturalness.

All the novels written by Kavery Nambisan are truly Indian in regard to form and content. They are an amalgam of history, religion, legends, long poetic description of places, nature and mystical experiences. Her characters create a space for themselves in which the self of a woman is supreme and unsurpassed. These females find affinity with their native surroundings. Away from their own place they feel alienated, but the sweet memories of Nature are always there to partake of their lonesomeness.

In Nanji the author has created a person of substance in a comprehensive sense of the word. Seen from the perspective of Indian tradition, she represents that facet of woman who as wife and mother, is the fulcrum of the family. As fulcrum she takes it unto herself to be the main load bearer, as well as provide locomotion and forward thrust to the day to day affairs of the family, including its elderly and younger members. In this vital sense she epitomizes the classic concept of woman as *Shakti*.

Kavery Nambisan's third novel *Mango-Coloured Fish* is a simple story of a young girl Shari who is unsure about her marriage though she is already engaged. She is dead against a life of submission and hates the checks imposed on freedom of an individual. She insists upon achieving the things that carry significance for her. Even risks cannot deter her from procuring her desired goals. In order to arrive at a clear picture of her situation in her mind and a search for her inner self, she undertakes a journey. Hers is not simply a trip; it is rather a journey that symbolizes her search for identity. She uses her temporary sojourn to travel into the very nooks and corners of her inner self, question every aspect of her life and is finally able to change everything in her forever. Throughout the novel, we find her declining the traditional codes through protests and defiance. Her behaviour suggests her rejection of the set social patterns.

Gender discrimination is a common phenomenon in Indian society. Novel *The Hills of Angheri*, significantly projects the prevailing social condition through a South Indian village named Angheri near Mysore where a female has to face the harsh reality of oppression. Angheri is situated at the foot of the hills which gave the village its name. Mysore, the modern and once royal city, is only twenty miles away from Angheri, yet the village itself is untouched by winds of change. Protagonist Nalli's schoolmate Jai is allowed to aspire for medical profession. His decision to become a doctor is applauded while all that is expected from her is to marry at the right age. Every villager is ready to help Jai by expressing his views in the following way, while at the same time they criticize Nalli's decision:

Our Jayanth has brought honour to the village by deciding to become a doctor. He will come back to Angheri and start a hospital. We must help him with the land, the building and all those important things the news of Nalli's going to medical college, however, only puzzled the village. The Maestru was letting his daughter study in a college with boys? That meant problems, surely. It would not be easy to find her a husband afterwards. (37)

It is an acknowledged reality that education is the most crucial element in the process of a person's cultural enrichment, but girls' education is treated with social skepticism in Angheri. Orthodox males, who are the custodians of patriarchal values, think that education may defile a girl and hinder her from doing her various roles in society. Nalli develops a sense of rebellion against the patriarchal value system and wants an immediate respite from the oppressive system in the society. Adamantly resisting all the objections her family raises, she decides to go to Madras because getting married at a proper age like her sister Sujju is an impossible and undesirable dream for her.

The novel is a meticulous account of an individual who in the process of discovering her self-will; it explores Nalli's efforts who tries to shape her conservative family in her own way; it is an account of her orthodox village which heads towards modernity slowly and steadily; it is about rural folks' induction into city-life with an ability to usher a metamorphosis in them; about those who settle down with humane responsibilities after achieving their ambition and the few who are always on the march to achieve better and better but never have the desired end. Through the character of Nalli the author wants to send a strong message about the individual's need to follow one's dream.

She liberates herself from the demands of her family and tries to find a new life in her work beyond her home. She leads an adventurous life but always yearns for the sight of hills. Though her home was once her world, she steps out of the four walls into her dreamed realm. Caught between the demands of home, pulls and pressures of the profession, she finds herself forsaken. Her choice is both a source of satisfaction and suffering, of faith and freedom. She knows that without suffering there can be no knowledge and without struggle her potentialities can't be unfolded and realized. So she defies the set pattern of society and gets an opportunity to develop herself according to her own desires and act according to her free will. This is the dilemma of the modern woman, whose quest for professional life and her family's desire to see her settled in matrimony extract a big price from her.

Kavery Nambisan's next novel *On Wings of Butterflies* revolves round the theme of freedom of women in post-modern era as indicated on the back cover of the novel: "Imagine a world where women can do what they please, the way they please, and men be damned". When Sudha Umashanker asked her, "So is Kavery a feminist?" she replied:

Recently, people have been asking me this and I am having to ask myself this question. If caring about women and what happens to them is a feminist, I have no problem in saying that. . . . Women face exploitation of all sorts. We read about it so much that we have all become desensitised to it. As a doctor, I have seen women physically, mentally and psychologically mutilated by their experiences. I was thinking about what it would be like if all women got together to fight this oppression. I wanted to look at it in a quirky way. I created characters from different backgrounds and began questioning how they would react if pushed to a corner and how long they would take it and could do something? If the characters have a real-life thing, it is because I have taken all, but two, of them from real life. Though a lot of incidents are shocking, they are true as well. (Umashanker)

Evita, the protagonist of *On Wings of Butterflies*, is a twenty-two years old girl working as a receptionist at a posh hotel in Panjim. She is highly sensitive, introspective and evolutionary by nature who determines to acquire new values and ideologies related to liberty, equality and social justice. Her mother, Maria is a sex-worker and a waitress in a roadside cafe. She has always been timid and a loser in life. Maria seeks refuge in religious conformity and time and again goes to church for confession, but Evita reassures her mother and asks her to cast her doubts aside. Her main motive is to bring the peripheral and wretched to the center. Most women on the earth are living a peripheral life and the worst affected are those who cater to the sexual desires of men by engaging themselves in flesh trade.

Empowerment of women is the major theme of this novel but the theme of human degradation that poverty brings is also hinted. Maria, driven by poverty, is coerced to adopt dubious ways. Need of money compels her for immoral trafficking and moral debasement. Once when her daughter asked her to stop all this, she says, "Calm down, my pet. It's all right, really. If it weren't for these kind-hearted uncles, we would be on bread and water, make no mistake" (20). She sells her body in order to feed her children. There is a character, Irawaddy, in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* who uses her body to feed her ailing brother. These characters bear eloquent witness to the fact that prostitutes are made not born.

The novel appears to be mixed up with the theme of women's empowerment and the theme of poverty but the former theme is much more forceful and effective. The novel could not be effective if it were confined to only one aspect, so the novelist has provided it many dimensions. In the novel many social issues such as female education, tendency of suicide, atrocities on females, rape, use of females as commodity, life of sex workers, exploitation of orphans, limited job opportunities for women, politics dominated by males, adulteration etc. are raised. The locale also remains not confined to one place only, but it expands from Goa to the whole of North India. The applied theme is given only a peripheral treatment. There is a passing mention of other allied themes. The themes are not complicated but they have been incorporated in a single story. The novel exposes physical, mental and psychological

exploitation a woman has to face in the society, no matter what her financial state is. She is always put in a corner. The novel goes forward with this reality.

In this era every female wants to lead life in her own way by asserting her demands. A critic terms it, “. . . as a dynamic feminist demand for liberation from the maddening claustrophobia of patriarchy” (Bennet 156). Nambisan is acutely aware of this awakened feminine sensibility and a female’s desire for autonomy in a constantly changing traditional Indian society. Ravi Shankar Singh is right when he says:

Common images of women appear in various literatures of the world. A woman performs myriad roles—woman as mother and protector, woman as inspirer and cherisher, woman as the motivating primal force—Shakti protecting good and destroying evil, woman as the chaste, suffering wife, woman as charmer or lurer. (Agarwal 224)

Evita is a modern girl for whom the cult of independent individuality has the supreme value in life. She has harboured hatred against males since her inception in the womb. Whatever steps she is taking are only because she has watched the wretchedness of her mother’s life. Her bitter memories of childhood mould her into an anti-male person. She knows that women have to unite on a large level to oppose being exploited by men only then the male chauvinistic world can be shaken to its substratum. She wants to wage a war against male dominance. This indicates that the author has dealt with the issue of empowerment of women quite seriously.

The protagonist has masterminded a plan to start a country-wide movement to secure equality of women with men in the attainment of human rights—moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, economic, and so on. She is on the march to challenge the set pattern of society where man is supposed to rule and woman to serve; man is the God and woman the prayerful. Though the females in the world are almost equal in number as males still they have to satisfy themselves by living a marginalised life. She is on the run to change this set up of society by forming an organisation WOMEN OR WOMEN acronymed WOW so that they can undo the injustice done to female segment of society. Dr M Murigesan has rightly commented on the zeal shown by Evita and her group, “The agreement of establishing women rule confirms this victory. Pondering over the past traditions and experiences and breaking its hold on them women begin to reclaim a ‘new lineage’ and establish a geocentric heritage in the new age, in the new millennium” (Kalamani 82). The thought of catapulting females onto the equal footing of men gives birth to WOW. Till now progress of women in demanding their rights of equality is hampered by religious obscurantism. Indian females are left with no will power to pursue their goals.

In all the novels discussed in this paper there are characters from real life. *The Scent of Pepper* is a regional novel related to Coorg community to which the novelist belongs. So in this sense it is a little bit historic too. *The Hills of Angheri* is to some extent based on her own life. The characters who raise feminist issue are mostly real life characters. All the protagonists are common females with uncommon traits. Their life is a saga of satisfactions (a few) and dissatisfactions (many).

Conclusion: This expansive urge to explore the complexities of Indian life is a hallmark of Kavery Nambisan’s literary style and is evident in the diverse range of female characters that

populate her novels. From rebellious and free-spirited to traditional and conformist, Nambisan's female characters embody various shades of femininity, each with its own distinct voice and agency. Whether it is quiet determination of a rural woman fighting for her rights, or the bold aspirations of young girls chasing their dreams and will, Nambisan's characters are united by their unwavering commitment to their personal goals and desires. Through these characters, Nambisan masterfully excavates the intricate nuances of Indian life, laying bare the complex interplay of social, cultural and economic forces that shape the lives of women in India. By fostering and persisting with their dreams, female characters embody a powerful impulse, one that seeks to challenge and subvert the dominant patriarchal norms that have historically silenced and marginalized women's voices.

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