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SRI S. Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College, Sattur, Tamilnadu, India



Gender Differences In Emotion And Bigotry In Kavery Nambisan's *Mango-Coloured Fish*

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Abstract

Exposing the social structures of gender in novels, the writers condemn patriarchy and emphasize on women's rights. The prevailing gender inequality in the society leads to lot of discussions and ideologies demanding social integration. The novels of Kavery Nambisan, a South Asian Writer explores the feministic perspectives through her varied characterization and their bigotry. She exposes how men and women move on with the challenges and obstacles amidst the gender discriminated society. The author predominantly focuses on the suppression of the mind affected by external situations. The article also explores the gender differences in emotion with culture as its base. The male and the female emotions to a particular situation carry different perspectives predominated by the cultural values and conservative traits of a particular community. Mango-coloured Fish is a novel of sensitive emotions, prejudices, expectations, disappointments, confusions and problems. The characters are juggled by these varied emotions in their journey to seek their identity. The emotional expressions are biased and thus feminist psychology strives for an egalitarian society breaking the gender stereotypes. Nambisan depicts the stress and depression the characters go through when the masculine traits offend the feminine emotions.

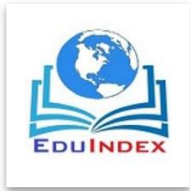
Keywords: Gender, emotions, bigotry, culture, psychology, women rights

Kavery Nambisan, a surgeon cum novelist hails from Kodagu, a place of prestigious culture. Nambisan's writing is greatly influenced by Thoreau and Gandhi as she found them uncomplicated and candid. Hailing from the land of aromatic coffee plantations, the writer says that her novels are induced by the sap sweet fragrance of her childhood memories. Her works posed her as a pragmatist and an idealist. Her authentic novels are the melange of realism and imagination. She discovered a writer within herself when she wanted to take a break from her routine work.

The gender attributes in a society differ according to its embedded cultural values. The social structure of any community includes the relationship of one group to another, the ratio of individual disposition to social behavioural patterns and the traditional setup of the society. The culture establishes the power between the masculine and feminine gender. "Empirical evidence suggests that girls are socialised to be emotional, non-aggressive, nurturing, and

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obedient, whereas boys are socialized to be unemotional, aggressive, achievement oriented and self-reliant"[1]. The social phenomenon determines the psychological changes the individuals go through due to the suppression and prejudices of the family, community and society on whole. Her novel *Mango-coloured Fish* (1998) is a scrutiny of societal traditions, identity and expectations before and after the phases of marriage. It construes the change in the perspectives of the marriage of Shari. The novel is studded with the concepts of love, matriarchy, philosophy, extramarital affair and self-introspection. The author elucidates the feminist ideologies with the psychological nuances. Considering the gender discrimination in the community, Shari, the protagonist-daughter represents her views against the patriarchal and matriarchal society.

Nambisan brings forth the significance of social factors assessing gender identity. Bigotry is stronger than prejudices which finds discrimination in a family or in the society. Nambisan's novels include several bigots who deliberately hurt the sentiments of weaker people. Their blatant intolerances end up in the unfair treatment. The victims of bigotry in Nambisan's novels are initially targeted with the preconceived opinions but later the victims take a stance to analyze the right perspective. The unflinching portrayal of these confrontations explains how one's opinions offend others leading them to stress disorder, depression and uncertainty. The affected individuals develop a doubt of their identity as they lack self esteem and fear of life. The three main characters discussed here Shari, Naren and Yash. Shari is forced to marry Gautam for the sake of social status in spite of being in love with Naren, the visually challenged teacher. Yash is not chaste but justifies herself.

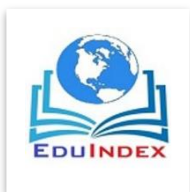
Nambisan's works are appreciated as they are the combination of drama and ethics, emotions and reason, imagination and reality, joy and sorrow. She consciously replicates the most influential ideas of the time. Usually, the world of the novel discovers the reality proportioned in pity, misery, pride, happiness, hopelessness adding ridicule, satire and wit. Following that way, her novels depict the ethical, psychological and social stimulus of the era. "There is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind" [2]. Having trapped by the misconceptions and dominating views, Shari, Naren and Yash of this novel falter initially but later choose the destiny with their own decisions. The decisions may be right or wrong from the society's perspective but the novel lingers on the independent attitudes when they groom themselves to face the repercussions.

The novel *Mango-coloured Fish* begins with a strong biblical verse from Proverbs – "Better a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred there with" [3]. It criticises the dominant values of traditionalism, complicated family relationships and prejudices. It reveals the life of Shari and her transformation. When Shari's marriage was fixed with Gautam, she was compelled to accept her destiny until she decided to stay with her brother Krishna's family in Vrindaban. Her family was conservative and the domineering mother combated all tricks to stop her journey of four weeks. Shari convinced herself that she was in love with Gowtham, which refers to the plight of many Indian women forced in to the marriage decided by the family rather than the wish of concerned bride.

Shari's life is always controlled by someone and her freedom of thought and expression definitely had its boundaries. This twenty-two year old happy kindergarten teacher had a tough time with her head of the school. All the opinions of the head were agreed with no dissent during the meetings on every Saturday. Once Shari questioned her and the end result was the twenty minute sermon and the book *Good Thoughts for the Day* was given to behave

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better. Though being an active managing director of a garment export firm, Shari's father was a puppet in her mother's hands at home. The elder sister Chitra and her mother Ahalya were intimate, where the other two children Shari and Krishna were never bothered. "We are the stitches that slipped out of cosy pattern", says Shari [4]. Nambisan brings out the fact of how pretentious the people act to balance some relationships. Though the mother and Teji, her daughter in law were different poles, they were gentle enough not to confront as it kept the problems solved.

Shari was always distressed with the repetitive advice of her mother. Shari recollected how Chitra was given an elaborate farewell after her marriage. There were emotional advices, cunning tips but Shari felt guilty as she could not shed even a single tear for her parting sister. Nambisan's narration throws a vivid picture when her mother repeated eighth time to keep the ticket safe, to give the pickle for Krishna and not to put on weight. Shari answered herself irritating that she will throw the ticket out of the aeroplane, will share the pickle with the passengers and to eat nails in Vrindaban. Her inner voices were never bold and said yes to all the dramatic speech of her mother. Shari ridiculed that her mother was performing her life and not living it.

Shari always felt happy being isolated from her mother and sister. The two unforgotten childhood experiences of Shari were her trip to Marundheeswarar temple and her first periods. When she vomited out of sickness inside the car on the way to the temple, it was only Parvati Auntie who cleaned her. Her mother backed out looking for the stains in her blue sari. Shari interpreted her mother's concerned look has another connotation to be away from her. Her first cries of menstruation had actually disturbed Chitra's Hopscotch game and her mother's favourite TV show Humlog. Shari found her refuge in Parvati Auntie clearing all her teenage doubts.

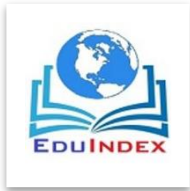
Shari considered Parvati Auntie and Paru Uncle as her mother and father. She tasted the sense of freedom in their home during her summer visit. The auntie cooked few and never bothered Shari and hence she ate contentedly. Her mother's variety of dishes and her constant fret made her lifeless and heavy. She often thought that her parents were never like these two. When Paru uncle called Shari's father generous, she wondered whether it meant his secret offering to beggar in the absence of mother. Her mother never allowed him to offer coins as she firmly believed helping beggars made them lazy.

Shari felt her parents lived an artificial life with no love but a family of three children. All their smiles and entertainment had the shades of pretension and emptiness. Shari ridiculed the bhajan meetings arranged by her mother. The only much thing discussed and learnt was about the menu of the day. Shari felt pity of the priest thinking that her mother had tricked him like many others. Her mother spent most of the time at telephone remembering special days and Shari felt numb at answering 'fine' to all the monotonous questions of the caller.

Once when mother was sick, Shari was exhausted repeating the mother's condition to all the telephone buffs. Shift to big hospital, visit to specialists, blood tests, x rays, scan, drips were the few suggestions for the minor problems of gastroenteritis. Out of these needless exaggerations, Shari ended the melodrama by cutting the telephone wires. The next thing mother struck herself was television and beauty care simultaneously. She groomed her beauty with cosmetics and facials with an eye on the never ending TV serials.

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Ruku, the maidservant wanted very much to send Shari off at the airport but her mother had never treated a maidservant with humanity. The mother would easily identify Shari's childhood visits to Ruku's house. She scorned at her visits because she always connected the poor to ugliness, filthy and smelling. Shari longed to play with Dhobi's Children and to be free like them. It is really ironic as Shari had hidden the murukkus of Ruku from her mother's eagle eyes. Shari would never forget her mother's unsympathetic nature when she denied ten rupees to help Sarasu's grand children visit the flowers. A scornful smile shut Shari's request of a bottle of eucalyptus oil for Ruku's mother the other day.

Shari's life had dual sides like being in love with Naren, the visually challenged teacher but consented to marry Gautam, his mother's choice. Shari was dumbstruck when her mother boasted that they were not crooked to force her but she made the choice of selecting Gautam. The conservative idea of an Indian family is to follow the set of traditional rules and cultural ties than the individual choices of freedom. Nambisan humorously reveals the cultural secrets of Shari's family. They were Chettiyars of Madras but her mother not only adopted the Delhi culture but also changed the mannerisms of her father like dhotis to pyjamas, rotis to rice and tea to coffee. They settled in Madras fourteen years ago from Delhi, but still the mother pretended unrevealing the true Tamil blood. She never spoke Tamil, avoided pongal, poriyal and made regular visits to North Indian friends in Anna Nagar. The mother was careful not to allow their children get mingled with Tamil teachers like Mrs Vaikunta and Miss Bhagyam.

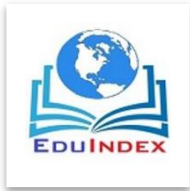
Shari's mother handled every act with disciplinary ideals. Nambisan pictures the anger and irritability of children when Ahalya trained them with eating ethics like no elbow on the table, no spitting and no fingers. Shari figured out those hellish hours and they were trained to slice a banana with a fork after her mother witnessing an Australian did that in Ashram. Her mother's circle of friends were also pompous and showy each upholding a superior ideal. All the children were well taught to refuse snacks politely in other homes and yet they spent most of the time together as a family. Pretending before the guests was another big problem. Shari's mind felt crazy things like to pull out the red tongue of Mrs. Sher Singh; to set fire to the wavy long curls of Sarita; to jump on the lap of Mrs. Pradhan and to scribble on the shirt of Mr. Aditya.

Shari's mother was multifaceted wearing 'I am woman' face in front of men, 'I am better than you look' perspective among women, 'behave well' attitude among children. She never looked in to the eyes of a servant as they were not worthy of it. She was cunning and clever to find out that Shari had a soft corner for Naren which she herself revealed by mistake. Her mother trapped her exhibiting her pity that no girl would marry Naren because of his blindness to which Shari involuntarily reacted she would. Her mother blackmailed her that she will die if she thought of marrying him. After mother's successful attempt of breaking Shari's love, Chitra dramatically convinced her by reading passages from *How to Cope with Grief*. Her father was a timid person agreeing every opinion of his wife with no refusals or second thoughts. Her mother's boasting of their thirty-two years successful married life was snapped by Shari yelling that their marriage was mere contract and her father had cruelly sold his soul to her.

Her elder sister Chitra fulfilled her mother's aspirations with the perfect mimic of the Delhi culture. Chitra was the second copy of her mother always ready with advices, but she loved to please others than be angry. Chitra never made Shari feel comfortable and had the

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monopoly of everything they shared in the room from table to chair. She kept threatening her that subjects like Algebra, Biology and Trigonometry will fail her. Shari's artistic skill was rebuffed as 'crazy drawing' by her. Her art created a tensed atmosphere at home as her ideas were revolutionary like mother dressed in turban and Krishna cooking alphabets. No one appreciated her effort except her brother Krishna. Her mother found them as menacing pictures; Chitra told those were black-hearted work; her father asked her to draw beautiful flowers. Thus her mother's objection put an end to her artistic revelry.

Ahalya, the mother was never happy with Shari's manners or choices. Whenever she shared about her to Parvati Aunty, it was more of chagrin than worry. She could not believe the words of Parvati Aunty, that Shari's floral arrangement was beautiful. She always compared Chitra's flowery patterns to Shari's unusual, gloomy combinations. The common marital discord arises in a family is when the qualification of the wife is higher than the husband. Teji had a diploma in anaesthesia and Krishna had nothing. This inequality was never a problem between the couple but to Krishna's mother. She even told him that husband should always have an upper hand on wife. His mother actually expected a timid girl obeying her whereas Teji was strong and clever to her disappointment. The mother even tried to change Krishna's mind saying he needed a girl of sweet nature but she failed.

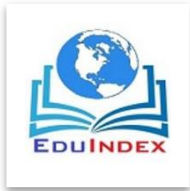
Shari was taken aback when she read the sign on the shelf 'Marriage is a Mirage' put up by Teji, who was moving around with the challenges of married life. She was little upset that Krishna had no ambition in life. Nambisan exposes the unique attitudes of wives complaining about their husbands. Shari listened to Teji knowing that women have lot of interest to talk about their weaknesses of husbands. Her mother scorned about father's generous attitude, Chitra about Anand's sullen mood, Aunty talking about Uncle's ailment and Sarasu about his late husband's love for films. Teji believed the fact that marriage is a mirage because it mostly brings two people with different opinions trying to sail in the same boat. Teji opened up the long gap and the failure of communication going between Krishna and her.

Krishna ridiculed the family life of two doctors being together as love was no more a connectivity but a dissociated feeling from the body. Krishna was the only person who judged that the fiancé Gautam was similar to his mother, who always strove hard to impress the world. He was transparent in his views asking Shari to think before marrying Gautam. People like Gautam, Ahalya, Chitra wore double faces and were glad of their intellect but never lived a true life. Krishna criticised that the relationship between his parents or Chitra and her husband was more a peaceful harmony and not love. One will be hurt because of one's reaction to the situation and the dominant liberal space offered to the other.

Shari loved to give a surprise visit to Gautam but she experienced a frozen reaction from Gautam. He was neither surprised nor happy and politely advised her not to discomfit him among his colleagues. His dominance made Shari guilty asking sorry, where Shari's mistake was truly nothing. Shari was also weak, feeling relaxed in his warm presence. He was assertive telling Shari that he has chosen her as her personality can be easily moulded. Gautam justified that the dowry offered by his parents showed his worth. The patriarchal pulse of him is revealed through his prejudices of women's frailty and dowry. His professional exuberance and divine charisma instilled inferiority complex in Shari. She attempted to please him in all ways like her mother, as she could never forget Gautam saying that her mother was the most gracious woman he had ever met so far.

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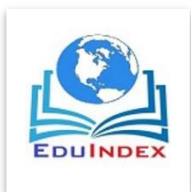
Shari and Yashoda's friendship bloomed in fourth grade. Yash, in spite of her luxurious life, good husband and lovely children, led a double life of cheating her spouse. She shared with Shari that she spat and swallowed men like seeds as she could not pour all her love on one person. Life to her had given everything except peace and satisfaction. At the same time, Yash was sick of her adultery as her husband Satyu was not aware of the truth and their love was more mechanical than emotional. She felt guilty advising children to be good and honest. She said, "My mouth hurts" [5]. She snapped at the patriarchal view of branding a girl as daughter of a man and wife of a man. All arranged marriages seemed to be perfect for the sake of dignity and the irony was there was no surety that the couple love each other. She was cruel enough to deny that love was never noble but it was hunger of men and women drawing each other in to a relationship.

Shari remembered her own false face reiterating the lie hidden in the letters written to Naren. She declared that she was in love with another person which was a true lie and compensated that with writing 'I love you' to Gautam, where she was uncertain of her relationship with him. Shari could not share her innate feelings neither to Krishna nor to Yash. She continued her happy fairy tale of engagement and tried to believe her own story. Her first meeting with Naren happened in a hotel and later they became thick friends teasing each other. Naren, a visually challenged teacher of Maths and Physics was a confident and ardent personality. He was rational in his thoughts and not more exaggerative. He was gratified not seeing the huge statues of Kamaraj, Gandhi on the Beach Road as he disliked the idea of spreading popularity everywhere. It was the outcome of his mother's constant advice of greatness of Gandhi, Nehru, and Kennedy that she had a deep yearning to see him rise above the ordinary.

The parent-child relationship was difficult when there was no harmony between husband and wife. Naren's mother thrashed him when he questioned why she drinks coffee and his father puffed on cancer causing cigarettes knowing that both lead to ill health. Naren felt he had been nurtured egoistic where her mother always made him feel special. Only later he realised that he has deserved pity and not jealousy. Naren knew that her mother was not happy with their lifestyle, his teaching profession and low ambition. Shari wanted to impress Naren and tried wearing best perfumes, kajal, hair style and nail polish. She could not hide her sharp pang of envy when Naren was intimate with others. Once when Naren visited her home with a kitten, Shari's mother threw mean remarks at him that a dog would be better than a cat to guide him.

Naren shared how he detested intimacy at one point of time. His nerves were sharp to detect even small changes around him and he enjoyed touching a thing to understand it more. He loved to touch the edges of a geometry box, pencil and blankets. Once, there was a problem when he ran his fingers over the thighs of his schoolmate and from then on, her mother denied him to touch anything. "Touch became sinful... everything, everybody became untouchable" [6]. He slowly overrode himself of this dependency.

Naren's friend Veeru was a strange fellow who believed that all human beings were faking and it was difficult to carry over the tedious role to be true to everyone. He juggled various professions like being the Statistics professor, waiter, engineer, computer wizard, representative of tamarind exports and recently a substitute of a neurologist Dr.Murali. Nambisan portrays humour through his mannerisms. Veeru used his big toe to rub the ear and



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to pick up a cigarette. He felt his life interesting with these strange attempts like moving his scalp or to eat with hand moving behind the head.

Veeru provided false prescriptions to people and called it as humanitarian work. He called himself a communication officer negotiating kidney and eye donors. He even had a son, whose educational expenses were taken care of but the child did not know that Veeru was the father. Veeru's childhood was terrible with one meal a day, two teaspoons of tea powder for a week and one lifebuoy soap for six months. The picture turned pathetic when he narrated to Shari that he had not washed his hand just to retain the smell of food in his fingers pampering the empty stomach. Working in a grocery, Veeru stole things possessing an honest face. He ridiculed that the world would believe if one was honest in little things like returning the exact change to the boss. He says, "People are such suckers, they'll never mistrust you after that" [7].

Thus, Nambisan brings emotional variants through her complex characterisation exhibiting the ebbs and flows of life. Nambisan with her biting irony and sarcasm is a well regarded author among the South Asian writers. She has demonstrated the tensions, misinterpretations, failures, disappointments of everyday life of the ordinary people. At the same time, her characters possess the quest to fulfil their aspirations.

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