

Feministic Views - Seeking Self-Identity of the Protagonist with Reference to Kavery Nambisan's *Mango- coloured Fish*

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Abstract: 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- coloured 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.

Keywords: *Exploitation, Humiliation, Oppression and Self – Identity.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian English writer Kavery Nambisan portrays the painful life of women in the patriarchal society. Patriarchy privileges men by oppressing women. The novel *Mango- coloured Fish* examines the exploitation of Shari, Paru, Teji, Yash, and Ruku in their daily life. These characters aspire for love and happiness in their family life but they suffer disappointment and humiliation in reality. The story revolves around Shari's introspection in her marriage with Gautam.

II. FEMINISTIC VIEWS

Feminism aims to create awareness on the oppression of women in the contemporary society. The main issues of feminism include reproductive and abortions rights, sexual harassment, voting rights, affordable childcare, affordable health care, legal rights, job opportunities and education as men. The Feminist theorist argues that patriarchy is used to oppress women as it is the system in which father is the head of the family and men have authority over women and children. Betty Friedan, an American writer, activist and feminist motivates women to seek their identity in the society. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* quotes that,

"...women who 'adjust' as housewives, who grow up wanting to be 'just a housewife,' are in as much danger as the millions who walked to their own death in the concentration camps...they ate suffering a slow death of mind and spirit."

Friedan has pioneered the "second –wave feminism" movement with her book *The Feminine Mystique* and has established the National Organization for Women (NOW) to fight for equal rights. In the books *The Second Stage* and *The Fountain of Age*, Friedan discusses the role of women in the family and in the society.

III. THE EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN

The novel *Mango – coloured Fish* mainly focuses on the issues of the Second- wave and the Third – wave Feminism movement, in order to inspire women on their individual identity. The author Kavery Nambisan claims that, though the life of women has greatly improved, still they experience oppression in the society. Marriage plays an important role in the life of every Indian woman. Mostly women in the patriarchal society are raised with the stereotype idea of engaging themselves in the domestic work and child care whereas men work outside the home for which they are paid. Women become an unpaid maid servant and depend on men for their livelihood. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* declares that,

"The feminists had destroyed the old image of woman, but they could not erase the hostility, the prejudice, the discrimination that still remained."

The submissive women characters in the novel become the victims of male domination. Shari, a young kindergarten teacher gets attached to Naren, a blind teacher at Boy's High School. They spend the evenings at cafe or in the beach sharing their joys, sorrows, thoughts and ideas. Shari wishes to marry Naren and veils her eyes with a scarf like the classical figure Gandhari, to experience his world. This allusion makes the readers recollect Githa Hariharan's debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* where she links her characters with the mythological characters of the great Indian epic *Mahabaratha*. Shari loves Naren but he is an egoistic person, exploits her companionship to pour his failures and disappointments. He insults Shari for being herself less ambitious and deserts her on his mission to clean up his ancestral town Thenmalai. Naren tells Shari that, "The why of our friendship, it worries you, doesn't it? It doesn't worry me. Does that make any sense?" (p.210)

Shari is shunned from making decisions of her marriage by her dominating mother, who arranges a meeting with Gautam in the party at Mrs Sher Singh's house. Gautam is a materialistic person, considers Shari as a mere possession. Gautam wants her money to become a successful business man. He is aware of the emotional nature of Shari and believes that he can mould her as his ideal wife. He tells Shari that, "It's you I want. You can be moulded."(p.73) Shari is fooled by her authoritative mother, self-centred Gautam and Naren. She believes that her marriage with Gautam is a love marriage until Chitra reveals the foul play of her

mother and Mrs Sher Singh. She loves Gautam, imagines a happy family with children whereas he is an experienced person sexually and prefers her to fulfil his materialistic needs. The distress and dilemma arouses doubt in Shari, which forces her to meet her sister-in-law Teji and her childhood friend Yash before her marriage with Gautam.

Teji and Krishna are doctors in the Vrindaban Charitable Hospital. Although Teji has resurrected Krishna from his drug addiction, she feels a vacuum in her heart as he is adamant to suffer and content to serve in the village. Teji worries about their career development and tells Shari that,

“He doesn’t want a post graduate degree, doesn’t care about his future as a surgeon. Working here is a wonderful experience but there’s no hope of furthering his career. I worry sometimes.” (p.54)

Yash obeys the command of her parents, quits the college and her preference for love marriage to tie the knot with Satyamurthy. He is a microbiologist marries the teenage Shari to project himself as a successful person in the society. He avoids her and spends most of his time in the research laboratory. The patriarchal society expects woman to sacrifice her dreams of life to serve man and bear children. Yash has lost her aspiration and ends up as a housewife and mother of two children like a typical housewife.

Shari’s surrogate parent Paru aunty struggles with her drunkard husband. He fights with aunty, sometimes beats her, steals her savings for his next drink, but aunty hopes for a better future with him. “And yet, Aunty believed that her husband’s redemption was just around the corner. Always, when he promised it wouldn’t happen again, she believed him.” (p. 214) He utilizes her innocent love and promises to give up his addiction to alcohol and cheats her. Uncle is jobless whereas aunty works at home and in the college as a lecturer to fulfil their needs. He exploits her for his monetary benefits.

Ruku, a maid servant in Shari’s house is rejected by the groom’s family for her dull appearance and dowry. Ruku tells Shari that, “See, if I had a pretty face, he would have agreed for five thousand.” (p.28) Woman is considered as a possession and not as a human being in the patriarchal society.

Shari meets her brother Krishna and his wife Teji in Vrindhaban but fails to disclose the uncertainties in her marriage. She then carries the doubts to her childhood friend Yash, who resides in Delhi. The adulterous nature of Yash makes her keep the secrets within herself and finally moves to the hostel. Shari thinks about the miserable life of her aunty and the maid servant Ruku, realizes her purpose of life and transforms in to a self-radiant woman.

IV. TRANSFORMATION OF SHARI FROM ILLUSION TO REALITY

The pain of exploitation forces Shari to quest for her identity. Shari realises the sufferings and complexities in the life of Yash, who expects love and attention from her husband and becomes adulterous to fulfil her physical desires. Yash pretends as a happy wife and mother of two children. Shari confirms that the marriage of Yash is a failure. Yash says that, ““Shari I’m not so stupid that I’ll wreck myself over one person. I use men. Swallow and spit them like seeds. Really you must believe me.” ” (p.120) Shari’s aunty bears the troubles of uncle with a positive hope but it ends with his death. Ruku wishes to get married and live for her husband and children but each time she is disappointed by the groom’s family. Ruku ends up in the kitchen with wet eyes.

Shari observes the happy and the sad part of her kinfolk and prepares herself to face the problems. These external forces influence Shari to understand the selfish nature of Gautam and the fugitive nature of Naren. She compares their behaviour in various situations and understands their needs of life. She ends her hypocrisy as a happy girl who is betrothed to a smart System Analyst and removes her engagement ring. Shari cancels her marriage with Gautam and decides to continue as a KG Teacher.

“I can feel myself leaping out of the cage. I have prisoned myself in, I savour the joy of being me. Where is the sense of living by someone else’s rules? I cannot do it any more than Thanpura, the boy I used to admire in the fourth standard. I started hearing my own thoughts a long time ago, now I’m ready to listen and obey.” (p.240)

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.

CONCLUSION

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.

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