Representation of Women in the Fictional World of Kavery Nambisan

Rimpa Khatun

Research Scholar. Department of English, Bodoland University, Kokrajhar
Assam, India
Permanent Address: Ward No-14, Dhubri P.O: A M Co Road Dist: Dhubri (Assam) Pin: 783323
e-mail: rimpamazing18@gmail.com
Contact No: 8399853454 / 6001039711
Whatsapp No: 8399853454

Abstract: Kavery Nambisan is a celebrated Indian novelist and a surgeon from the Kodagu district of Karnataka. She has written seven novels: The Truth About Bharat (1992), The Scent of Pepper (1996), Mango Coloured Fish (1998), On Wings of Butterflies (2002), The Hills of Angheri (2005), The Story That Must Not Be Told (2010) and A Town Like Ours (2014). In her novels, Nambisan tries to shape a world based on her own traditional Indian society. The major themes that Nambisan talks about in her novels are: widowhood, grief, marginalization, and injustice, quest for identity, women’s will power, courage, liberty and individuality. This paper attempts to focus on Nambisan’s concern towards the oppression of women and their revolt against the oppression. It, again, tries to highlight how Nambisan merges the traditional Indian customs and the modern feminine sensibility in her novels.

Keywords: marginalization, oppression, domination, protest, liberation

Kavery Nambisan is a celebrated Indian novelist and a surgeon from the Kodagu district of Karnataka. She went to school in Delhi and graduated from St. John’s Medical College, Bangalore, and completed her surgical training from England. She even won the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons, London at the age of twenty four. She has been working as a surgeon in different rural areas in the states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. She is married to journalist Vijay Nambisan and begins to live with her husband in the Anamalai Hills in Tamil Nadu. She started writing after practicing surgery and has since combined both these professions successfully.


In her novels, Nambisan tries to shape a world based on her own traditional Indian society. In her writings, she merges the traditional Indian customs and the modern feminine sensibility. Women occupied the role of protagonist in most of her works. Her representation of women seems very realistic and genuine. The readers can connect their lives with the sorrows and pains of the characters. She describes a fictional world which consists of both poor and rich, educated and illiterate, conservative and liberal. She reveals the inner ambitions and quests of the women characters. Though Nambisan depicts her women characters as mother, wife and daughter but they have been permitted liberty to come out from the structural frame and enjoy their individualities. Identity plays a vital role in her novels. Women of different ages from different generations are depicted in various settings. Her characters are both traditional and modern but realistic. The women have been shown as both weak and fighter, marginalized and courageous, hard working and tolerant and moreover, try their best to enjoy their lives in their own interest. The major themes that Nambisan talks about in her novels are: widowhood, grief, marginalization, and injustice, quest for identity, women’s will power, courage, liberty and individuality.

The Scent of Pepper is set in a region called Coorg and the story is all about her own native community called Kodagu in South India. It revolves around some bold female characters from four generations of a family, their attachment with their identity, culture and rituals. Nambisan vividly presents the detailed landscapes, the local natives, their myths and legends, their traditions and customs by applying her gentle tone of satire. Nambisan begins her story with the newly married bride Nanji who belongs to the second generation, the protagonist of the story. It is not her first marriage, she had been married for the first time at the age of twelve.
and unfortunately within one year, her husband died. Hence, now she after spending her five years of mournful widowhood, she again becomes a new bride of Balyamma Kaleyanda, a young vet at the age of seventeenth. The transition of traditional thoughts can be seen in this part as Balyamma was impressed by the simple beauty, colourless widow, Nanji and his father Rao Bahadur were in favour of his son’s marriage with a widow. Nanji is presented as a very strong, brave and straight forward and tolerant who faced all the abuses and tortures from her step-mother. Moreover, the major themes that Nambisan talks in her novels are: rituals and traditional customs of the Kodavas, depression, hygiene, grief, marginalization, injustice, quest for identity and liberation. In The Scent of Pepper, all these themes revolve around the female characters- Nanji, Chambavva, Devaki, Neelu of the four generations.

In Mango-Coloured Fish Nambisan portrays the inner struggles of the female protagonist – Shari whose life has always been tormented not only by her family members – a domineering mother, a sister and an inactive father but also by the society. Her choices are ignored. Her likes or dislikes have been directed by the demands of society rather than her own will. She struggles to polish her created identity and present her individual identity which is her real identity. Hence, she decides to escape from the conventional society and does not want to be trapped in the conspiracy of patriarchy. She ensures that she would not marry a man who she thinks would snatch her individuality. She wants only to escape from the world of domination and she finds herself the strength to confront her own future.

On Wings of Butterflies is a comic farce about gender divide, but the actual concern is genuine. Nambisan’s vision about an imagined world where women live their lives on their own ways is comically portrayed but with deeper significance. The narrative is told from the perspective of a journalist. It is all about an organization WOW (Women or Women) founded by Evita 22 years old, a very talented and brave girl from Panjim, Goa who is determined to unite all the women: working women, housewives, young girls, middle aged women and old women across the country to fight against injustice towards them. The characters like Maria, Milar, Heera, Milar, Trilokasundari (TLS), Lydia, Kripa are the perfect examples of exploitation. On the otherhand, Pushpaben, Tare, Lividia and Evita stand against the prolonged oppression. Evita could not tolerate the submissive nature of women like her mother Maria. She works as a waitress in a roadside café. She wouldn’t think anything beyond her home, Church where she confesses and the café where she works. People used to come to the café only to be served by the attractive Maria as she used to wear short bright dresses. Maria had many admirers, but she was a religious woman, she visits the Church to confess every Sunday. She was beautiful but weak woman. She believes that women are weak and henceforth becomes submissive to all men. She was a confused and ignorant woman who couldn’t differentiate between the men who flatter or abused her. She has been sexually used by many men for which she goes to the Church to confess all those pregnancies although she couldn’t remember the faces of the father’s of her children. Though she didn’t understand all the motives and ideals of WOW, she supported her daughter Evita by thinking that it might bring happiness to their lives. Kripa is blamed for everything by her husband. Even, he blamed her that she wished a baby girl and named her after a Muslim princess, but he thanked god that they had a baby boy. He blames her for her lack of interest in sex and in his political career. He criticizes that she has damaged his reputation by joining the organization Women Or Women. He considers the members of the organization as mentally sick women. He tries his best to control on Kripa . He even criticized Kripa’s dressing sense. He wanted to see Kripa in the frame of traditional Indian women who should wear saree. But, Kripa does not pay her attention to all his reproaches because she has not been physically tortured.

Injustice is one of the major themes in On Wings of Butterflies. In India, Women and girls who face brutal rape, violence or harassment have to wait years after years for justice. Moreover, a kind of stigma always remains attached to them as if they have committed a sin. They sometimes can’t bear the social injustice and embrace death to escape from all the abuses. Nambisan remarks in On Wings of Butterflies that women are the major victims of injustice: We witness injustice every day. Everywhere. (Nambisan : 38-39). It is because of injustice, WOW has been founded to fight against any kind of discrimination to women so that they can lead their lives freely. There would be no one to judge them. The title On Wings of Butterflies itself is very symbolic. Just like the butterflies that fly wherever they wish, the women would enjoy their lives by breaking the male- constructed abstract prison of limitation and judgment. Hence, Kripa encourages the women to understand the importance of justice rather than jewels: “When women came to her shop to buy jewels, she told them that there were better things than gold and coloured stones to be had for money. Like justice.”(Nambisan: 158)
Kavery Nambisan creates a world in her novels where she tries to provide liberation to her characters from the state of marginalization. Her characters resist against being marginalized to gain liberation and maintain their individuality and establish their identity especially the female characters are very active and know how to maintain their individuality and their contribution and responsibilities towards their own tradition and cultures. Though women have made incredible progress, still women are struggling who feel inferior to men. Nambisan highlights her concern towards the oppression of women and at the same time, their revolt against the oppression is not ignored in her fictional world. Identity plays a vital role in her novels. Women of different ages from different generations are depicted in various settings. The women have been shown as fighter, courageous, hard working and try their best to enjoy their lives in their own interest. The women struggle for their self identity and individuality. In *The Scent of Pepper*, the protagonist Nanji is the perfect example. She becomes widow at the age of 12 and loses her mother and grandmother, then her father brings her step mother who tortures her. She has been consigned to the kitchen and becomes a maid at her own home. But, Nanji is a courageous young widow who faces all the abuses, pains and colorless life. She is so brave and straight forward and hence, she has liberated herself from her past status of marginalized by expressing each and every sad, fearful periods of her life to begin a new life with her second husband the way she likes. Nambisan is very realistic human life is replete with ups and downs, joys and sorrows. *On Wings of Butterflies*, Nambisan presents some liberated women. The women have been presented as equal to man. This can only happen if there is channelized route for the empowerment of women. Empowerment is the process which helps them to achieve equal status with men in various spheres - political, economical, social, cultural and civil. She portrays the character of Pushpaben, Tara, Heera, Panna, Lydia, TLS (Trilogasundari) and many others. Pushpaben is one of them. She is a wise and matured woman who enjoys her life with full freedom and equality with her husband. Megha Dasi is an old woman who leaves her home for the Land of Widows to avail her freedom when she feels she has become a burden on her children. Leadership is one of the aspects of liberation which would be found in Lividia King or simply Lydia. She is an extremist. She is the founder of the organization called WOMB (The World of Male Bashers). TLS (Trilogasundari), a politician who comes out from the barriers of married life and political party to avail her freedom and to serve people. She resists her husband’s domination on her who wants her to cut short her hair, slim down, wear contact lenses, better dress. Just like a free bird, she does not like to be captive. She takes up writing as a weapon to solve the problems women face in society. Evita is an independent and liberated girl who a secret plan to organize a large army of woman for several months. She utters Nambisan’s thoughts that the women should raise their voice against any kind of injustice. Nambisan’s fabric of all her characters show her loud protest the many fold of oppression of women in society. She makes her characters aware that the central responsibility of an individual is primarily to herself or himself. Then only, they could break the boundaries or begin to uncover the hidden and make themselves present and enjoy their freedom with confidence that they do exist, they have their own identity. Nambisan try to do justice to her characters by discerning accurately the psychology of Indian social system. The characters have been given courage to overcome from their difficulties. They also endeavour to break the existing framework of mainstream literature and society.

**References:**