



Ecofeminist Quest For Identity In Kavery Nambisan's *Mango-Coloured Fish*-A Study

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Abstract

This article attempts to analyze Nambisan's novel *Mango-coloured Fish* on the lines of Ecofeminism. The theory of Ecofeminism believes that the domination of nature and women are intimately connected. The Ecofeminist philosophy aims to take away the hierarchal power structures of domination to establish a democratic society. Ecofeminists point out that the male dominated society is built upon dualistic forces where nature, feeling, body are considered feminine and reason, logic, rationale, mind, and cleverness are considered masculine. Ecofeminism intends to deconstruct the cultural attitude spun roughly the essentialist role assigned by patriarchy to nature and women. The novel *Mango-Coloured Fish* deals with the journey of an educated urban woman named Sharada, called Shari, who tries to find out her own self amidst a number of patriarchal pressures working on her. The novel portrays the inner conflict of many women who are caught in the quandary of independence/individuality against marriage.

Key Words: Ecofeminism, frustration, anxiety, predicament, patriarchal society, domination, Identity, Essentialism, marriage system, masculine, accomplishments, gender bias, etc

Kavery Nambisan, being born at the dawn of independence, is a witness to the changes that Indian society has undergone ever since the country came out of the control of British colonialism. Furthermore, her contact to a broad variety of people across the country opened up a wide variety of opportunities for her to delve deep into the inner recesses of people's minds, particularly women.

Mango-Coloured Fish is her third novel. The novels around the urban women of India and their struggle for identity and individuality in man driven society. Witnessing a series of social and cultural changes in post-colonial India, women experience aggravation, nervousness, fear, and other psychological differences in their daily life which lead them to introspect their identity.

Nambisan highlights the predicament of women in her novels in an impartial and neutral tone. She doesn't side with either women or men because she seems to believe in the complementarity of both men and women. However, a reader finds different types of feminism in her novels. She often points out the demeaned status of women and their lack of independence in this male-dominated world in spite of their education or social status. Shari in *Mango-Coloured Fish* starts her journey towards self-discovery. The societal and cultural conditioning teaches the Indian woman to be self-effacing, obedient and subordinate to man, the suffering of a male dominated society in silence. Kavery Nambisan, by making her heroines undergo stages of self-introspection and self-reflection, makes them develop themselves into more unconventional individuals than what their biological nature or culture have sanctioned.

Kavery Nambisan's novel *Mango-coloured Fish* on the lines of Ecofeminism. The theory of Ecofeminism believes that the oppression of nature and women are closely linked. The Ecofeminist philosophy aims to remove the hierarchal power structures of domination to establish a democratic society. Ecofeminists point out that the patriarchal society is built upon dualistic forces where nature, emotion, body are considered feminine and reason, logic, rationale, mind, and intelligence are considered masculine. The protagonist of the novel, Shari, is caught amidst the dichotomy of domination and acquiescence, culture and nature. She suffers from a cracked sense of self which she intends to investigate into in order to recover her identity. The themes depicting man-woman relationship in the context of marriage and different forms of oppressive phenomena prevalent in a society stressing the need to think over obtainable traditional ideology make the novel an ecofeminist text. The dualities of the masculine and feminine world constructed and nurtured by patriarchy and the internal struggle of the character run as undercurrents. The protagonist's constant interaction with nature is another ecofeminist aspect found in the novel.

The novel *Mango-Coloured Fish* deals with the journey of an educated urban woman named Sharada, called Shari, who tries to discover her own self amidst a number of patriarchal pressures working on her. The novel portrays the inner disagreement of many women who are caught in the dilemma of independence/individuality versus marriage. Like any other educated woman, Shari gets humiliated by familial and societal forces operating on her for being a woman. Shari embarks on a journey of looking into herself by meeting people who are close to her heart. Through Shari, Nambisan highlights the quest of modern woman who aims at coming out of various patriarchal forces acting on her breaking the traditional restrictive framework.

Shari's resentment against controlled environment begins at home with her mother. She belongs to a Tamil family of Chettiars from Madras who stayed for a while in Delhi. She has a brother named Krishna and a sister called Chitra. Shari's mother wants herself to be called as Bimmy in the north Indian style though her name is Ahalya. Shari is against the domineering nature of her mother who takes total control of the house, including her father. Bimmy feels that North Indian culture is greater to South Indian and often wants to be a Delhian rather than a Tamilian. She wants her children to be accustomed to cultured style of living. Her preference is to be cultured rather than to be natural. Bimmy is delineated as a woman of culture.

She makes her husband also follow the north Indian style of living. He replaces Dhotis with Kurti-Pyjamas and Rubber Chappals with Kolhapuris. He also gives up eating rice and settles for Rotis. He even changes his preferences in music also. Thus, his is total submission to his wife where he has no independent choice left out. Though Shari is against such an artificial and conditioned environment prevailing in the house, she cannot raise her voice next to her mother. She is caught between independence and captivity. The peaceful co-existence of her mother and father appears to her as unnatural and she feels that their relation lacks love and affection which are important pillars of a marriage.

Bimmy is successful in moulding her husband and Chitra, her eldest daughter as per her wish, but cannot exert her influence on Krishna, her son and Sharada, her youngest daughter. Krishna and Shari hover at the periphery of things. Chitra is her favourite child. Chitra fits herself into the kind of woman that her mother wants her to be. Shari is not feminine in her looks whereas Chitra is beautiful. Shari is not very ambitious and is satisfied with being a kindergarten teacher. Unlike Chitra, Shari is at

constant opposition to her mother's domination but she never pronounces it outwardly. She suffers silently. Bimmy considers herself to be a modern mother, she thinks conventionally. Like any other mother, she too wants to get her daughters married and thinks that marriage is the only purpose for women. She plans with Mrs. Sher Singh and traps Shari into engagement with Gautam.

At first, Shari tries to fit herself to Gautam. She gets attracted to the physical appearance of Gautam. She feels that she is in love with him and imagines herself in the position of being a homemaker to Gautam. She gets disappointed when she comes to know that Gautam is offered a huge dowry by her parents and though she is against it she does not open her mouth. Gautam is determined and wants to have a bright future for himself in the field of computers. He finds Shari to be the perfect cut out for being his wife. Shari finds Gautam to be spiritually greater to her and hence is unable to share her mental space with him. Her interaction with Gautam creates a quandary in Shari. When she says that she loves Gautam, she doubts if it is true. Moreover, Gautam's words that she can be moulded to be his wife make her more confused. Gautam's concept of a wife is traditional. He wants a wife to serve him and bear his children. He is in tune with the patriarchal thinking restricting women to the domestic sphere. Moreover, Gautam agrees to marry Shari for the dowry that her family offers him. When Shari tells him that she does not believe in premarital sex. Shari's obedient nature prevents her from raising her voice either against dowry or the premarital sexual experience of Gautam. Shari tries to change her attitude for the sake of Gautam but she seems to be skeptical about losing herself if she marries Gautam. She does not find a chance to open her mind to Gautam. Shari flees from Madras to share her dilemma with her loved ones Krishna and Teji, and Yash, her childhood friend. Through her visit to their individual homes, Shari gets an opportunity to look deep into their lives. Later she ventures to live on her own independently in a hostel in Delhi for a few weeks. Her independent living for a while enables her to think on her own without anybody's influence or interference. Shari's quest for identity can be interpreted from Ecofeminist viewpoint.

The idea of identity has been the constant pursuit of study for Ecofeminists. They intend to build and assert an identity for nature and women. Ecofeminism holds both essentialist and constructionist viewpoints. Essentialism believes in an analogy between nature and women in terms of reproduction and nurturing qualities of both. The constructionist move toward indicates that dissimilar historical, political, social, and cultural institutions and their interacting forces create a system. Marriage is one

such social institution that is governed by patriarchy. Indian marriage system demands more from a woman when compared to a man. Dowry, burden of domestic chores, husbands not paying much attention to the needs of wives, lack of identity, and time for self are some of the common issues faced by all women. Women are expected to sacrifice everything for the sake of their families and children. In the process of attending to the needs of the family, women lose themselves and their identity which is very much connected with their family. They often remain as a gendered category daughters, wives, or mothers. Like nature, they too are resources to be fully exploited by men for their needs. Ecofeminists stand against the treatment of nature and women as resources to be exploited. A woman is denied her independent survival and individuality in society. Ecofeminists questions the social structures which restrict women from being fully grown, individual. Some strands of ecofeminism that tread the path of constructivism argue that a woman's closeness with nature is not a gender issue, but it is built by patriarchy to constrict the identity of women.

Ecofeminism intends to deconstruct the cultural beliefs spun around the essentialist role assigned by patriarchy to nature and women. Women writers like Nambisan wish to create a new voice that stands for societal alteration and change of approach towards women. Ecofeminists aim to create new codes to alter the existing oppressive hegemonic power structures.

Shari, on her journey into her inner self, analyses her experiences at Vrindaban and Delhi which enables her to get some clarity. As mentioned earlier, the question of identity of a woman in most of the cultures revolves around marriage, an organization which often works in consonance with patriarchy. At Vrindaban where Shari meets her brother Krishna and sister-in-law Teji, she finds the words MARRIAGE IS A MIRAGE on a wooden shelf. When Shari asks about the phrase on the wooden shelf, Teji answers her that Marriage is a mirage because people choose to see only the icing on the cake.

Teji advises Shari to talk to Gautam and get to know about each other and plan a future for themselves. Teji resurrects Krishna from becoming a wreck because of his drug addiction. Teji conveys to Shari that Krishna is not a perfect husband and she never wanted a perfect husband. Teji and Krishna get along well with each other in spite of Krishna's drug addiction in the past, his affair, and also his lack of ambition. Krishna understands that Gautam is not what he appears to be and assesses Gautam's personality correctly. Several conversations between Shari and Gautam prove Krishna to be correct.

Gautam always talks about his job and his ambition without caring the least about Shari's job or her importance. The superior/inferior dichotomy is found in the attitude of Gautam. He considers Shari to be an object to be modified according to his needs.

Nambisan conveys to the reader that no marriage is without imperfections but the bottom line is neither husband nor wife is superior to the other. She stresses the importance of each having their own space and liberty. The character of Gautam can be studied from an Ecofeminist point of view.

Shari is a resource to Gautam to realize his masculine activities. He enamours people around him and Shari also gets carried away by his handsome physical appearance and presence. Gradually, she comes out of this state of attraction and starts analyzing him to which Krishna and Teji give valuable inputs. When Shari rewinds most of their interactions, she finds herself only to be a passive listener when Gautam pours out the greatness of his work unrecognized the greatness of any work people undertake. On the contrary, Shari's job of being a kindergarten teacher never appeals to either Gautam or Shari's mother. Shari's mind contradicts her submission to marital sub-ordination. She discovers that her marriage with Gautam does not help her in being her independent self.

The novel is written by Nambisan from the perspective of a woman who stands alone amidst the compelling societal forces acting on her and the dilemma she experiences in having an identity of her own. Ecofeminists dispute against this trap of essentialism. They aver that masculine hegemony is a potent tool nurtured by masculine consciousness. It creates two-level hierarchies unraveling the patriarch at the top with all else, or the other under him. Krishna advises Shari not to fall prey for such hegemony.

Shari loves Naren, a Physics teacher. He is blind and he never takes it as his deformity. He wears his blindness like a crown. Like Shari, Naren is also a victim of his authoritative mother Stephanie Selvaraj. She married Naren's father who worked at a pharmacy. Naren comments that they are an unlikely pair: "she with an ambition to get on in life; he, naturally lazy and satisfied with his nine-to-five job" (101).

Besides his laziness and lack of ambition religion is often the bone of contention between the two. Stephanie wants her son to be ambitious. Naren feels that his parents forbade him to think his own thoughts. His mother never allowed him to think on his own. She ate my mind, chewed my thoughts, and replaced them with her own (102). Naren further says that his mother smashed his "instincts until

life became a conditioned reflex” (102). But Naren admits that Stephanie made him think that he is special. He proclaims that he had enough belief in himself because of his mother. Naren’s intentions are not in match with his mother’s ambitions. He becomes a school teacher much to the dislike of his mother because he doesn’t earn much being a teacher. She wants her to go for an MBA or IAS. There is much similarity between Naren and Shari in terms of being controlled by their respective mothers, having passive fathers, and their profession of teaching. This could be the reason for Shari’s closeness to Naren. Moreover, Naren gives Shari enough scope to speak and there is much argument, sharing of opinions between them which make them love each other, but Naren does not reveal his love and he is not ready to enter into a relationship. Shari is happy when she is with Naren: “When I was with Naren my mind moved and swayed in unpredictable ways. How he scuffled! Tapping and teasing, teasing and tearing and nibbling and scrunching into each other’s minds, like two puppies jousting in the mud. Sometimes we would think the same thought and it was like sipping through one straw.” (99)

Naren proudly announces that his blindness is his gift and he has his own unique world. He is drowned in his own complexes. His mother Stephanie and his friend Veeru also suggest Shari not to be serious about Naren. Naren wants to transform Thenmalai into an ideal town. He wants to build toilets there and hence, leaves for that place on this mission. Shari goes to Thenmalai to express her love to Naren. After talking about Paru Auntie and Uncle she says “We spend a lifetime living our lives for others when what we need are time for ourselves” (209). Naren understands the feeling of Shari but he is not ready to enter into a relationship with her. He says, “The why of our friendship, it worries you, doesn’t it? It doesn’t worry me. Does that make sense?” (210). Thus, he makes his intentions clear to Shari. While Shari has options to marry, women like Ruku have no options. They have to wait for the nod of a man to marry her.

On the other hand, for a poor woman like Ruku, the maid in Shari’s house, marriage is often a big liability especially if the girl is dull looking and for the dowry that her family needs to offer to get her married. Ruku is from the Dhobi community. She saves “money in order to buy herself a marriage” (25). Getting her married is the lifetime ambition of Sarasu, the mother of Ruku. A cycle mechanic agrees to marry her for a dowry of ten thousand rupees but demands twenty thousand rupees before the wedding. As Ruku cannot afford the dowry, her marriage is cancelled. “How could any man refuse such a fine woman?” (27). Her search for a husband continues. She learns English from Shari with the

hope of getting a better husband. She picks up English soon and is able to read and write English. Sarasu, Ruku's mother's preoccupation is to get Ruku married as is that of Bimmy to get Shari married. An unmarried daughter is always a burden for parents in Indian families.

Ruku's search for a husband continues and she gets cheated again. Men from outside Madras who intend to see her ask her to reimburse the travel expenses. It is ironic that though marriage is for both men and women for leading a happy life, it is considered more as a necessity for women, and hence, the financial burden of marriage is shouldered to a major extent by the family of brides. A young man from Erode uses Ruku's house, money, and her transistor in the name of marriage and leaves her. If a woman is dull in appearance, she has to face the predicament of Ruku. This is the predicament of not only Ruku but of many girls where a girl's future is linked only with marriage. She has no identity of her own, be it Ruku or Shari. Shari observing Ruku closely finds her to be a gentle woman and she considers her not finding a husband a good fortune. Thus, Ruku is also made a resource and is exploited by several men in the name of marriage. She is treated more like an object and her emotions are often played with by men. Shari feels Ruku is "much too good for most men" (230). From the instances of Shari and Ruku, Nambisan drives home the point that the concern of marriage has been materialistic.

Love and affection which are the most important factors for a happy marriage are often undermined. Marriage seems to be a big disappointment to Yashoda, Shari's childhood friend. She is academically brilliant and aspired to join the Indian Foreign Service. She dreams of colourful future like being the ambassador to Russia, seeing "*Swan Lake* at the Bolshoi" and wishes to "play chess with the Russians" (78). Her marriage is fixed with a microbiologist called Satyamurthy. By that time Yash tops her first year in college. She is made to discontinue her studies and marry Satyamurthy. This is the plight of many young girls who aspire to reach higher echelons but their dreams are often shattered by unexpected marriage and their confinement to domesticity that follows after marriage. In spite of being academically brilliant and a good sportsperson, Yash is shut in the cage of marital life at a tender age. Yash is decorated with jewels and made to sit before the family of Satyamurthy to give their judgement about her. It is a humiliating experience undergone by every girl. Shari finds it to be a painful experience for Yash. The ambitions of Yash are shattered by her marriage which, in turn, pushes her into the stereotypical role of wife to carry out domestic chores. As the wife of Satyamurthy,

she becomes the mother of two children and appears to be outwardly happy covering her inner turmoil. Her role in her family is to reproduce children and to do household work which is often undermined as valueless. She seems to internalize her own subordination, but her tumultuous mind is understood by Shari. Though she claims that she is happy to be Satya Murthy's wife, Shari knows that it is false.

Yash arranges a party in her house and asks Shari to be ready for the party. Shari finds Yash to be too much involved with men in the party. Satyamurthy sits in a corner with the least interest in the ongoing event. Yash is the cynosure of the party. Shari, suspicious of Yash's behaviour, comes to know about her adultery because of her discontentment with marriage. Satyamurthy is unable to satisfy her either physically or mentally.

It is the predicament of every woman whose identity is always dependent on man said by Yash. Another important relationship in the novel is that of Paru Aunt and Uncle. Shari considers them as her real parents. Paru Aunt is the half-sister of Shari's mother. Shari likes to be with Paru Aunt and Uncle and believes that theirs is true love till reality dawns upon her. Paru Aunt (named Saroja before marriage) decides to marry Engineer Shivram Pujari (Paru Uncle) which creates a crisis in her family. Paru Aunt's family disowns her because of her marriage. Shari's mother reestablishes contact with her when her husband gets transferred to Madras. Paru Aunt and Paru Uncle face a severe financial crunch which never gets better. Paru Aunt works as a Lecturer in Physics. Paru Uncle quits his job and designs a factory at the back of his house and works there to make gadgets like burglar alarms, wet-grinders, water heaters, and table fans. They live in Thiruvannamipur, a village on the outskirts of Madras. Shari finds that Paru Aunt and Uncle like each other very much. Shari feels that her parents "don't appear to enjoy being married to each other" (179). Witnessing the love between Paru Uncle and Paru Aunt, Shari feels that "My parent's is a synthetic alliance. I feel depressed when I think that they can stay married, have three children, keep a home, entertain and live normally without loving each other" (179). Shari enjoys her time with them and is taken care of by both as their own child.

In course of time, Paru Uncle becomes a heavy drunkard. He steals money from Paru Aunt's purse and makes things worse for her. But she has a blind belief about her husband's sure redemption. It gets worse day by day. Shari also plays his accomplice to hide the truth of his drinking more and more during the day in Paru Aunt's absence. She encounters severe financial problems because of her husband's alcoholism and his lack of earning. Fed up with her husband's drinking addiction, Paru

Aunty roams around the house with an axe. Paru Uncle leaves the house never to return. Thus, Paru Uncle's obsession for alcohol victimizes Paru Aunty and she stands defeated in her choice of marriage. According to Padmavathy, Paru Aunty's "widowhood teaches her about her failures in life" (17).

Like a cultural Ecofeminist who finds women closer to nature, Nambisan's women protagonists like Nanji, Shari, Nalli, or Rajakumari are close to nature. As an Ecofeminist does, Nambisan too believes in the interconnectivity of life and hence her protagonists live with nature and they listen to nature. She describes the sights and sounds which are unique to the locale. A reader often sees Nambisan making the ordinary things look extraordinary with her picturesque narration. Different elements of nature are found throughout the novel. The sea, the farm, the mornings, the nights, the stars, the sun, the earth, the flora and the fauna all find space in Shari's world. Her aesthetic sense is often aroused through her keen observation of the nature that she finds around her.

Shari often finds some interesting phenomenon in her surroundings and at Yash's house, it is the fish. Yash also finds the fish to be "her best friends" (91). Yash who is not so happy with her husband seems to communicate her plight with the fish. The listen to her without questioning her about anything. That gives her comfort and maybe she believes them to be the most suitable beings to confess her sin of adultery. Fish in the pot seems to change their colour because of the reflection of light on the glass. Fish imprisoned in a glass pot symbolize the state of women. Like fish in water, the freedom of women is restricted to the domestic sphere and it is more or less death of one's self.

Shari is in constant communion with nature. Like Nanji, Shari is also a child of nature. Unlike Nanji who dwells in rural setting, Shari is a modern woman who is an urbanite. But the feminine sensibility of both towards nature remains the same. The spirit of nature probably strengthens her urge to be independent. Nature seems to inspire her towards transformation. Shari's desire to be individualistic kindled by the search for her identity enables her to nurture an eco-consciousness.

Shari's sensitivity to her surroundings draws her attention to the suffering of women and the underprivileged. Like an Ecofeminist activist, Nambisan points out various oppressions prevalent in society. In another incident, Nambisan reports how married women condition themselves to be tongue-tied. A woman comes to Krishna in Vrindaban along with her Devar. She is shy to speak to the doctor about her menstrual problems. Her face is covered with sari pallu and her Devar, husband's brother, speaks on her behalf. Krishna asks him to let her speak, but she doesn't. It takes ten minutes for

Krishna to convince her to show her face and to speak for herself (45). Women are considered a man's/family's possession. They don't even open their mouth before another man. It is the usual practice in rural India where women do not speak before a man.

Nambisan also talks about the denigrated status of divorced women. A divorced woman is looked down upon by society. Women avoid speaking to her and men look greedily. Such a woman is deemed to be a failure and the plight of Sumitra who comes to the party given by Yash is such. Nambisan also voices the insensitivity of people towards those who work as housemaids. Some of them don't even consider themselves human beings. Nambisan illustrates the poor and the rich dichotomy among people on several occasions in her novels. The poor and the rich dichotomy envelop humans so intensely that the rich often fail to be sensitive and sensible towards the poor.

Nambisan seems to believe that all kinds of oppression are interconnected and she intersperses oppression based on caste, work, etc., along with gender and nature in most of her novels. It is explicit in *Mango-coloured Fish* also. Shari's inner nature and her journey towards transformation from a submissive person to an assertive woman who rejects herself being consumed by the patriarchal forces are significant. Her transformation involves several issues dealt with by ecofeminists resistance against patriarchal domination, identifying the oppression of fellow human beings, listening to the subconscious mind, denial of being prey to the patriarchal social system, and following a simple lifestyle.

Gautam, Bimmy, and Stephanie Selvaraj are the symbols of patriarchal forces. The institution of marriage described in the novel symbolizes the patriarchal control of society on women. The prospective marriage of Shari, Ruku's plight in searching for a husband for herself, and Yash's disastrous marriage with Satyu are illustrations of how the institution of gender-biased marriage stifles a woman. A woman's personality and her identity are at stake if she doesn't find a suitable partner.

Nambisan takes an ecofeminist stand while she denounces patriarchy which underrates women and exploits them. Her protagonists are often delineated as women close to nature. She voices the plight of women and nature with the tendency of an ecofeminist activist to establish a peaceful and eco-friendly society for posterity. She makes the reader identify that lack of education; health care and independent decision-making complicate the marginalization of women besides the prevalent gender bias.

Nambisan's experience in rural areas and her living in urban areas helped her to meet and know

women of different backgrounds and she identifies that lack of independence and individuality are common predicaments of both educated urban women and uneducated rural women.

Through Shari, Nambisan portrays the predicament of women whose quest is for self-identity and to think beyond the cultural and societal constraints imposed on them hampering them from being their own selves. Nambisan, like an ecofeminist, attempts to emphasize the importance of rebuilding the society on the values of reciprocity, cooperation, and complementarity.

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