

# Interrogating the Norm: The Dilemma of Marriage in KaveriNambisan's *Mango- Coloured Fish*

<sup>1</sup>Dr Prasanth V G, <sup>2</sup>Vidhya Viswanathan

**Abstract:** *Feminists over the years have brought to the forefront those silenced aspects related to the predicament of women in a patriarchal society. Critics and theorists including Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Kate Millet and Elaine Showalter have discussed and debated on the marginalization of women, their quagmire in patriarchal society and spatial justice with respect to women across the globe. In spite of all the discourses on gender equality and justice, true feminine experiences and expressions are still smothered by both matriarchy and patriarchy. In this context, the present paper makes an attempt to analyze the suppressed voices, questions and uncertainties that rise in the mind of the protagonist in KaveriNambisan's novel, Mango-Coloured Fish from a feminist perspective. The concept of marriage and its aftermath are analyzed within the framework of feminism and patriarchy with the respect to the selected novel.*

**Key words:** *feminism, gender equity, matriarchy, patriarchy.*

## I. Introduction

Feminists over the years have strived to bring to the forefront those silenced aspects related to the predicament of women in a patriarchal society. Critics and theorists including Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Kate Millet and Elaine Showalter have discussed and debated on the marginalization of women, their quagmire in patriarchal society and spatial justice with respect to women across the globe. In spite of all the discourses on gender equality and justice, true feminine experiences and expressions are still smothered by both matriarchy and patriarchy. The archetypal images of silent, all sacrificing women are propagated among girls from infancy. Regardless of the physical and mental suffering, some women accept the role of being an auxiliary to the dominating man. Such women characters are explicitly depicted in fiction. In Indian English literature too this can be traced from the novels like *Rajmohan's Wife* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and *Nectar in a Seive* by Kamala Markandeya to the contemporary works of writers like ManjuKapur, Anita Desai, Anita Nair and KaveriNambisan. But in the works of present day novelists the conflict between

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<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Dept. of English, R Sankar Memorial SNDP Yogam College, Koyilandy.

<sup>2</sup>Asst. Professor in English <sup>12</sup>RSM SNDP Yogam Arts and Science College, Koyilandy. Affiliated to University of Calicut

tradition and modernity is vibrant. Education and empowerment have redefined women and such empowered women characters voice their thoughts and dilemmas without being ashamed of it. These characters question and challenge the institution of marriage, womanhood and motherhood that stoop women to remain docile.

Indian English writer, Kaveri Nambisan who is a surgeon and a medical advisor challenges the threads of patriarchy like marriage system and womanhood in her fiction, *Mango-Coloured Fish* (1998). Other prominent works by this author include *The Truth (almost) About Bharat*, *The Scent of Pepper*, *On Wings of Butterflies*, *The Hills of Angeri*, and *The Story that Must Not Be Told*. The novel, *Mango-Coloured Fish* revolves around the character Shari, and exposes her thoughts, predicaments, and a number of questions on the role of women in a family for which she seeks answers. In life, she is dominated by her domineering mother who wants Shari to talk, walk and dress according to the mother's taste. Even her father was too passive and lost in the constantly changing world of current affairs. Her sister too did not bother to upset the conventional flow of matters and advises Shari to fall in line. Hence, at home she had none to open her heart and head to. The only solace she got was from her profession as a KG teacher. This enabled her to venture outside and meet other people to some of whom she could open up. One such character that Shari meets is Naren, a blind teacher who worked at the Boy's High School. It is this friendship that takes her a long way to uphold and believe in her own thoughts, choices and independence. Feminism aims to safeguard the rights of women in a patriarchal society and to create awareness among them to uphold their physical and emotional space. According to Jane Freedman, the base of feminism is "the assertion that feminisms concern with women's inferior position in society and with discrimination encountered by women because of their sex." (1) In spite of all the awareness and empowerment provided some women continue to play the passive role under patriarchal oppression. As Simon de Beauvoir said in the *Second Sex*, "The situation of woman is that she is a free and autonomous being like all creatures—nevertheless she finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of other." (29) This kind of women characters who live to the tune of males can be seen in this select novel as well.

In majority of the cases the role of women in marriage weighs them down in life. This is what creates dilemma in the mind of Shari as her mother fixes her marriage to Gautham, a well-placed system analyst. Unable to make up her mind she decides to leave home to visit her brother Krishna and his wife Teji at Delhi, a few weeks before her marriage. Her intention was to discuss with her brother the uncertainties of married life that she had observed around her. But she soon learns that even his marriage runs on a rough road. She reads a sign put up by Teji on the shelf: "Marriage is a mirage." (40) Instantly she feels it to be "A cautionary message for me? Or is someone bitter around here." (40). Later on, Teji reveals the truth about their marriage, "I'd be lying if I said everything was all right. We suffered.... I didn't think too much, just jumped into marriage as my folks still like to remind me." (41) Disappointed with this revelation, Shari leaves them a few days later to be with her friend and college mate Yash who also lived in Delhi. On the way Shari recalls Yash's marriage that had taken place due to the demands of her parents, while they were still in college. Yash had tied the knot with Satyamurthi, a rich microbiologist. Now he cares little for her and spends most of his time in the laboratory. As a result, the once vibrant Yash has now become an unenthusiastic typical house wife and a mother of two kids. Of her marriage she tells Shari, "Wish I didn't feel like a Pomerian that's kept." (121) On another occasion Yash tells,

Look, don't get worked up about this marriage thing. What does this all mean anyway? A legal document on paper, saying who you are married to and when. From then on in all the forms you fill, you write your name and beside that enter wife of ---- while previously you entered daughter of -----A woman is always the wife of or the daughter of someone. Will Satyu ever fill a document and enter husband of----- beside his name? (121)

Similar is the situation with her surrogate parents- Paru aunty and uncle whom she loved very much until she came to know the truth about their intolerable and vengeful relationship. Paru aunty struggles with her drunkard husband. They abuse each other physically and verbally. The jobless man steals her aunt's money and all the savings. He goes on cheating her and their fights become frequent and raucous threatening to kill each other. Shari sympathizes and is also hurt by this reality: "There was bitterness in their fights and I could not take the bitterness. It was getting to be tiresome. And yet, aunty believed that her husband's redemption was around the corner. Always, when he promised it wouldn't happen again, she believed him." (214).

Shari calls to mind the marriage discussions of her maid servant Rukku, whose mother was always hunting for a husband for her daughter. Even after all the arrangements made with a man with the promised dowry, her marriage was called off. About this she tells Shari, "See if I had a pretty face, he would have agreed for five thousand."(28) With all these in mind, she thinks of her fiancé, Gautham and tries to convince herself that he would be a different and better person, but she fails in her attempt. She thinks of a conversation they had had in which she realized that he was a materialistic person who did not have any consideration for her individuality. Of his choice of her in marriage, he says, "It's you I want. You can be moulded."(73) She thinks of how he would pull, push, elongate, flatten, hammer, punch and gouge her until she became the expected perfect wife. Shari is shunned by all these revelations and marriage becomes a dilemma to proceed. Naren, whom she thought loved and respected her, leaves to satisfy his own cravings of achievements in life without even letting her know.

Unable to resolve her uncertainties, with her brother and Yash she shifts to live in a hostel to be by herself. The freedom and independent thinking space helps Shari to retrospect on life. She understands the mere living to adjust life of Teji and Krishna, Yash's adulterous style to satisfy her physical needs, Paruaunty's miseries caused by her uncle and Ruku's urge to get married and the disappointment caused by the groom's family that leave her eyes wet. All these realities enable her to gain the confidence to realize her potential and purpose of life and transform into a self reliant woman. She decides not to be a commodity for consumption by sacrificing her own existence. Commenting on these rebellious characters the critic, Inamdar on Atwood's *The Edible Woman* observes,

They are eager to break the balance between their public and private lives. They have an instinctive dislike for their home and hearth. They hardly recognize what women have to bring into the world of men to make their lives whole and meaningful. They are eager to achieve their goals by sacrificing their nature. For them autonomy is the hallmark of their psychic health. To get married is to invite subordination and obligation. For them fear of divorce does not hang heavily over their heads but they voluntarily intend to enjoy that liberty. As Virginia Wolf said that she had to kill the Angel of the house before it killed her.(182)

At the hostel, by herself, free of commands and commitments, Shari says “I took off my(engagement) ring, wrapped it carefully in a hanky and put it away in a corner on the bottom shelf.” (162) Shari gains the courage to call off the marriage with Gautham. As MeeraBhai said, “The new woman’s demand for her rightful place, recognition and respect due to her is prompted by an inner urge to make her existence a meaningful one.” (135) Shari brightly feels, “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 started hearing my own thoughts a long time ago, now I’m ready to listen and obey... I’m going to give this marriage thing a rest.” (240)

Shari thus puts her foot down asserting her individuality and breaking the age old notion that women are incapable of rational thought. These types of bold characters are supported and rescued by feminism that shatters the shackles of patriarchy. Of all the women characters who submit to patriarchal norms, Shari challenges the doctrines and becomes a rebel who dares to cast away the unpleasant constructed life of womanhood and wifehood. She is dissatisfied with man-made values and is reluctant to be a mere wife of somebody. As Simon de Beauvoir puts it,

The woman who does not conform devaluates herself sexually and hence socially, since sexual values are an integral part of society... the adolescent girl often thinks that she can simply scorn convention; but even there she is engaged in public agitation; she is creating a new situation entailing consequences she must assume. When one fails to adhere to an accepted code, one becomes an insurgent. (692)

Kaveri Nambissan successfully depicts the tangled threads of marriage, motherhood and womanhood in the novel, *Mango-Coloured Fish*. The novel offers an insight into the traditional Indian culture that chain women to domestic chores and also exhibits the struggle of the educated empowered women to challenge the gendered role plays and break the structural inequalities. Education and financial independence encourage these characters to challenge restrictions based on gender by being vocal about injustice and coercion. These outspoken characters also remind the readers that the family structure should not in any ways limit individual development. These women who transgress the boundaries of old patriarchal system can be seen in the context of their unending quest to understand and locate the identity of womanhood along with their attempts to redefine the patriarchal matrix which place them in the category of non-conformists or deviants. It also points out the fact that proper opportunities, guidance and support will enable women to flourish in their endeavors.

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