

## THE SUBALTERN STATUS OF WOMEN IN KAVERY NAMBISAN'S MANGO-COLOURED FISH

Ms. G. Seshu

Lecturer in English,

Govt. Degree College for Women, Bapatla, Guntur District.

[seshugomati@gmail.com](mailto:seshugomati@gmail.com)

&

Prof. M. Neeraja

Dept. of English,

SPMVV, Tirupati.

### Abstract

*Culture or traditions in a society play important role in shaping the identity of an individual. Culture, which is nothing but beliefs springing from a group of people, creates dominance of one form of ideology over the other. Consequently, there emerges a tussle between two groups and intolerance of one group for the other. Gender discrimination is one such feature of intolerance between the two genders, namely the male and the female, in which the man restricts the woman in various ways for his self-interest. Though the pre-civilized society had not known these kinds of restrictions on either of the sex, with the progress of cultivation, accumulation of wealth, and implementation of codes and conduct related to law of inheritance, the suppression of woman physically, emotionally, and financially gained momentum. Since centuries, women have been facing gender discrimination and experiencing a subaltern status in the society. In India, traces of unfair treatment could be seen in the practice of Sati, prejudice towards widows, and forced child marriages. Even an educated woman is made to live by the terms of male-oriented society. Many women novelists, like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Gita Hariharan, and Anita Nair, to name a few, have tried to bring to focus the conflict that erupts due to a forced submission and acceptance, especially in terms of marriage, and leading a life in accordance to parents and husband. Kavery Nambisan in her novel Mango Coloured Fish analyses this agony among educated young women through characters of Sharada and Yashoda. The present paper analyses the turmoil that Sharada undergoes for being forced to live under her mother's dominance.*

**Key Words:** discrimination, intolerance, suppression, subaltern, conflict, submission, acceptance, dominance.

The novel under study contains various issues related to gender discrimination and subaltern status of women with respect to marriage, education, individuality, etc. The present paper intends to study various concerns related to Gender in the novel, *Mango-Coloured Fish* written by Kavary Nambisan. Most of the women all over the world, in their writings, speak of their place and status in the society. In manmade society where political, economical, and psychological issues and concerns related to race, colour, and ecology play an important role, speaking of gender bias sounds either monotonous or pointless. Yet attitudes like lack of gender concern among both men and women, or ignoring the essence of woman in society are creating an imbalance in the human world and, in consequence, affecting the ecological homogeneity of the earth. Therefore, as Rajul Bhargava in the introduction of the text *Gender Issues* points out “if this bias is taken care of, other things will follow naturally (9).” Women writing about themselves emerged as a reaction to “male domination in the private and public areas of woman’s life (9).” The subaltern status of women in every sphere of life has resulted in making the latter look for new perspectives.

Gender stratification is ingrained not only among the rural and illiterate women but also among those women who are rich, educated, and living in urban areas. Many feminists like Sarah Grand, Betty Friedan, Simon de Beauvoir, Bell Hooks have tried to raise the question of woman’s marriage. Especially the Third wave of feminism turned its attention to the so-called “micro-politics” and called everything that was hidden or “personal” as “political.” Carol Hanisch’s article “Personal is Political” raised a furore speaking about the “pro-woman line” (p 4).

Sarah Grand in her article on *The New Aspect of the Woman Question* says, “The man of the future will be better, while the woman will be stronger and wiser. To bring this about is the whole aim and object of the present struggle, and with the discovery of the means lies the solution of the Woman Question” (272-273). The difference in the valuation of roles between the genders leading to gender inequality is a common point of expression among the Indian English Women Writers.

In India Feminists like Savitri Bai Phule, Pandit Ramabai Saraswati, R. Lakshmi Debi, Krupabai Santhiananthan protested and tried to create an awareness of their problems in the Olden Indian scenario. Savitri Bai Phule started schools for the girls and Pandit Ramabai criticized the rigid, ruthless, and difficult conditions existing due to strict patriarchal structures. Groups and Federations like All India Women’s Conference, National Federation of Indian Women, and many writings on the subjugation of women made the new women to think in an alternative way. The Indian Independence period gave momentum to women where they began unlearning the forced lessons on family values and female loyalty. It is necessary to unlearn the experiences the man-made society because only a woman’s development can bring a positive change in the society as proclaimed in an old adage that

says, “If you educate a man, you educate an individual. If you educate a woman you educate a whole family,” was made true through various struggles taken up the women in the past. Women writers have tried to oppose and deny the regular and routine portrayal of their own selves “as self-less, self-denying, compliant or else as villain’s victimizers, predators (6).” They began re-defining the spaces and re-discovering the places allotted to them at home and in the society respectively. In the process of exploring a place and space for themselves, they ask not for an equal status but for “essential humanity (8).” Many Indian Women writers have dealt with the themes on gender, gender concerns, and gender stratification where five areas like “individual, family, division of labour, social classes and nation-building have been influenced by gender” and “non-inclusion” of women (*Gender Issues*, 174).

The works of Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Gita Hariharan, Manju Kapur, Shobha De, Anita Nair, and Arundhati Roy trace the journey of Indian Women from a life of meek, silent, and trembling woman to a state of acquiring rebellious spirit, self-determination, and an assertive mind. Kavery Nambisan’s novel, *The Mango-coloured Fish*, in a similar way, reflects the transformation of the protagonist, Sharada. She is timid and submissive due to the domination of her mother, Ahalya, an epitome of male-centric opinion. She, who lacks courage initially, gathers strength to stand up to fight for that that is right for her.

Sharada, a young woman of twenty-two years old, is not allowed to voice her thoughts and live a life of her own. She is forced to follow her mother, Ahalya, not just in terms of daily lifestyle, namely etiquettes and hobbies, but marriage alliance as well. Sharada fears her mother and does not like the conflicts that might disrupt her smooth progress of life. For this reason, she leads a low life of suppression when compared to her elder sister Chitra. Chitra, who is a replica of her mother, leads a life characterized by sophistication and womanly traits. Sharada hates feminine tendency and is repulsed at her mother and sister’s pretensions and at their enactment of dependency of men. While Sharada’s father, who is in reality a puppet in the hands of his wife, is treated as a man who rules the house, Ahalya controls under cover. Though she feigns to be a mere homemaker, Ahalya dictates her terms and conditions of living to her husband and three children, namely Krishna (Sharada’s elder brother), Chitra, and Sharada. Krishna manages to oppose his mother’s pseudo lifestyle and domination by marrying a girl of his own choice and working at Vrindavan as a medical Doctor, thereby escaping his mother’s dictatorship. Chitra follows Ahalya’s decision and marries the boy that the latter chooses. Sharada, like her brother, prefers to work as a teacher in a kindergarten school. Ahalya, fearing Sharada’s individuality fixes a match with a boy, Gautam, a system analyst. At first Sharada, who believes that it is a love marriage, is deceived by Gautam’s looks and words. Later she realises that Gautam’s materialistic tastes, sophisticated behaviour, and practical attitude are similar to her mother and sister’s and is heart broken when she learns that her match with Gautam was pre-fixed by her mother.

According to Ahalya, Gautam would transform Sharada's life by creating a "purpose in life" (*MCF*, 74). Both Ahalya and Gautam believe that Sharada leads an aimless life and underrate latter's physical beauty, hobby of drawing cartoons, and simple tastes like leading a leisurely life, spending time in her village, and living with her Aunt and Uncle Paro.

She is disappointed with me for all sorts of reasons: I have never been impelled by a desire to excel. My decision to be a KG teacher was a cruel blow, she said. And physically, I am a fizzle. I am not blessed with a single feminine trait. (*MCF*, 11)

Gautam, like Ahalya, nicknames Sharada sarcastically as "teacheress" and taunts her for her lack of unambitious attitude and desire for a low life. Sharada attempts to change herself for his sake after her engagement to Gautam. However, she is hurt when Gautam reveals that he chose her not out of love for her but because she could be moulded the way he wants. The thought of being "Pulled, pushed, elongated, flattened, hammered, punched and gouged out until" she "was the right specimen, the perfect wife," terrifies her (*MCF*, 73). She was looking for an escape from her mother through her marriage to Gautam. Her dissatisfaction with Gautam and her inability to break her engagement with him forces her to take a short trip to her brother to Vrindavan and later to Yashoda (also called Yash), her schoolmate who lives in Delhi on the pretext of meeting them before her marriage.

Krishna, Sharada's brother, opts to marry Tejaswini (called Teju in short), the former's junior in medical college, after a heart breaking affair with another girl. Though he marries Teju out of love for the latter, they have a tough time in adjusting with one another. Sharada observes that both Krishna and Teju try hard to withstand one another's ideologies but the tiffs create animosity between them at times. Yash, an intelligent student, discontinued her career to marry Satyamurthy, a well-settled scientist, while in her Undergraduate course. Yash agreed to the match her parents selected and settled down as a homemaker. Yash attempts to show the bright and colourful side of her rich and luxurious life, yet fails in hiding her disoriented life from Sharada. Sharada, who is quick enough to notice Yash's false and make-believe marriage set up, comes to know from her behaviour in a party and from Yash herself that the former is not happy with her husband. Consequently, Yash has given herself to extra marital affairs. Sharada confused and disgusted at her friends' debased condition leaves her house to live in a hostel for a few days.

At the hostel, she relives her past relationship with Naren, a blind schoolteacher, a friend, and her first love that Sharada's mother had rejected out rightly. She realises that she was more comfortable in her relationship with Naren than with Gautam. The relationship between her Aunt and Uncle Paro (her mother's half-sister), though not stable was unique, full of trust, and love when compared to the one between her own parents. Even the bond between her brother Krishna and Teju, despite the disputes, was more reliable and had a promising future than the artificial and exaggerated affection between her parents. The plasticity in the marital life of Chitra and the spurious and shallow wedded life of Yash makes Sharada foresee her

own future with Gautam. Sharada's independent and solitary days at the hostel leads her to throw off the yoke of pretension between herself and her mother. She had been pretending to act as a dutiful daughter to her mother. However, Sharada decides that she would no longer deceive herself and fall into the same sludge, which Yash had unknowingly entered. Sharada resolves to face her mother for the first time, give up the option of marrying Gautam, and lead an independent life of her own for some time.

The writer through Sharada's character points out that an educated young woman in Indian society due to her gender stands discriminated and is not at liberty to take a stand of her own. A woman can prevail and gain identity either under the shade of her mother and father or under the cover of her husband. N. D. Chandra in an essay in *Critical Response to Indian Fiction in English* making a note on this point says:

Indian woman's identity is usually connected to and defined by the societal and cultural norms of a practicable familial structure. This identity is defined within the parameters of their social relationship to men. They are traditional, conservative, and therefore, they are reluctant to cross the 'Laxman rekha' of their family and culture. ... They are to smile always, welcome their guests and entertain them, care for their family members performing all the household responsibilities and if there is any pain, they are to hide it behind their veil. (p 22)

Tejaswini and Aunto Paro due to their independent thinking and outspoken attitude never gain any sort of recognition in the society due to women, like Ahalya, who propagate male-centric ideologies. Yash for fear of losing this respect within such society acts as a dutiful daughter, wife, and mother. However, this kind of an approach gives rise to a split personality within Yash and makes her lead a life of infidelity. Sharada's courage to speak out and pronounce her opinion, unlike Yash, is a change that the writer wishes to look forward to in modern women of the present day.

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