



A Study of Family and Female Selfhood in Kavery Nambisan's *Mango-coloured Fish*

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Abstract

Kavery Nambisan's *Mango-coloured Fish* is about a young woman called Shari @ Sharada. She belongs to a well off family in Madras. Her life is controlled by her dominating mother, silent father, and familial expectations. She is engaged to Gautam, but still is confused. She becomes restless thinking about the marriage and her life after marriage. To escape from this pressure, she goes to Vrindaban where her brother Krishna and his wife Teji live. This journey gives Shari some space to think alone. She remembers her childhood days. She recollects her tough relationship with her mother, the kind relationship with Parvati aunty and Paru uncle, old relationship with a blind friend Naren who was very important to her. Shari realizes something very important from these reminiscences. She has understood that she has spent much of her life to please others and hide her true feelings. In Vrindaban, Krishna and Teji's simple and laborious life is contrast to what Shari's family now leads- false respect and societal pride. Their life makes her understand that love, marriage, family, respect all are more complex than her previous understanding. Towards the end of the novel, Shari decides that she could not marry Gautam just for her family's wish. She stops behaving falsely to herself and others. Her decision to stop the marriage for a while is her first true self decision. She learns to listen to her inner voice, accept her past, and to select her own future. This paper analyses the portrayal of female selfhood, family authority and self-directed choice in the novel. In this novel, female selfhood is attained neither as romantic fulfilment nor as simple rebellion, but as the courage to reject false obedience and treat 'own' thought as authority.

Keywords: Female Selfhood, Family Agency, Marriage, Autonomy.

1. Introduction

Mango-coloured Fish starts as Shari waiting for the flight from Madras to Vrindaban. This setting grabs our immediate attention. The airport makes her stand between home and

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elsewhere, duty and desire, departure and return. Shari calls this journey “Flight as in fleeing” (Nambisan, 1998, p. 1). This statement creates the emotional direction of the novel. She makes her journey before marriage. But, it is not an ordinary journey to meet her brother. It becomes an experience of examining the life chosen for her and the ‘self’ which she had kept hidden. Nambisan clearly portrays vulnerability, domestic detail, social behavior, and emotional discomfort in her novel. Shari’s tone incorporates humor, impatience, shame, anger, tenderness, and self-doubt. She closely observes and details airports, saris, food, letters, smells, bodies, family gestures, and silences which give the novel comic energy and psychological depth. Shari’s crisis is felt in nausea; clothing; food; memory; and the continuous pressure to meet others expectations to behave as a good daughter, a good woman and a good ‘future wife’.

At first Shari seems to have the freedom of choice. She is twenty two years old, educated and engaged to Gautam. She stresses “I’m getting married. Not one of those arranged marriages. I’m marrying the man I’m in love with.” (Nambisan, 1998, p. 2). But her confident statement is quickly shaken. Her mother supervises saris, blouses, cooking, travel plans, social conduct and the condition of marriageability. Her father is affectionate but passive. Her sister Chitra has fully accepted the family’s code of feminine respectability. Shari and her brother Krishna, on the other hand, are at the edge of this patterned family world. She states that they were “the stitches that slipped out of a cosy pattern” (Nambisan, 1998, pp. 3-4). This image reflects the notion that the harmony of the family is established upon design, pressure and containment. Shari’s mother Bimmy controls the household without being overtly harsh. Her authority is expressed through concern, taste, refinement and social ambition. She is concerned about Shari’s ticket, food, clothes, weight, complexion, marriage and future. Though this act reflect ‘caring’ it restricts Shari’s movement and speech. The polished modernity of Bimmy hides the severe demand of feminine compliance. Her scales of beauty, culture, and respectability condition Shari to see herself as inadequate. Shari’s conscience resists this but her self-mockery shows how far the family judgment has entered into her sense of self:

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’m a fizzle. I am not blessed with a single pleasing feminine trait. Not a bosom, a hip, a curl or smile to make me desirable. My nose is bulbous, my very black eyes are a bit too large for my face, I need to wear glasses, my cheeks have stayed a shiny, girlish pink. I have a proclivity to plumpness. In spite of earnest efforts at toe-touching and jogging on the spot, my waist is what one calls squidgy. (11)

The plan for marriage intensifies this conflict. Her fiancée Gautam represents order, security, ambition and social approval. He meets Bimmy’s expectations, and provides the family with a respectable version of modern love marriage. Her mother is also pleased about the engagement. “‘We’re not narrow-minded like a lot of parents,’ she says. ‘We never forced Shari. She made the choice and we approved.’”(11) But Shari’s anxiety grows when she starts to understand that he wishes to mould her into the wife he desires. Her fear about marriage stems from the thought of being remade for another person’s comfort. Naren, the blind teacher who is connected to her past gives a more difficult emotional truth. Before departing for Vrindaban, she posts a letter to him and calls it “The Lie” (9-10). This letter shows the divided nature in her life. Outwardly, she is preparing for marriage, but deep inside, she bears guilt, desire, fear and unresolved attachment.

Recent studies have analyzed this novel through the dimensions of tradition, gender, identity, subalternity, and psychological development. Suba and Ashok Kumar (2024) studied Shari’s struggle in relation to the tension between family expectation and modern autonomy with particular focus on marriage and self-definition Seshu and Neeraja (2018) placed Shari in a wider context of women’s subaltern status and stressed that education alone can never free from the clutches of domestic and patriarchal control. Jain and Shanthichitra (2021) examine Shari’s inner division and self-recognition through Jungian individuation. These studies help place Shari’s individual crisis in a broader social and psychological field.

This paper analyses the portrayal of female selfhood, family authority and autonomous

choice in the novel. It aims to describe how Nambisan has transformed a domestic tale into a poignant examination of female sensibility. The discussion is around Shari's life-experience: her dominating mother, the caring aunt, the fiancé who aims to mold her, the blind friend whom she cannot forget, the brother and sister-in-law who show her another world of marriage; and the objects and sensations which make her inner turmoil visible.

2. Family, authority and the formation of Shari's self

Shari's struggle for selfhood starts inside the family. Her household seems to be a place of affection, order, habit, and control. For an outsider, the family might seem cultured and secured. But for Shari, it feels structured by invisible rules. Bimmy, her mother governs this structure through taste, beauty, social ambition and emotional authority. She does not show her power openly but she shows indirectly in her decisions about clothes, food, travel, marriage, manners, cultural identity and feminine conduct. The airport scene shows this authority briefly. Shari wishes to go to Vrindaban before marriage. But, her mother demands, "'Why now, Shari?' ... 'I have to buy your saris, get your blouses stitched. And train you in the kitchen. No, you cannot go.' ... Why go to that filthy-dirty place, Vrindaban?'" (2). Her question "why now" ties Shari's time to saris, blouses and domestic preparation. In Bimmy's view, a daughter who is close to marriage should prepare for respectable wifehood. Individual thoughts have little value before the collective demands of appearance food and social consciousness. The daughter's body, clothing, habits and schedule all become family concerns.

Bimmy's authority is powerful since it is disguised in the form of care. For instance, at the airport she is worried about Shari's ticket, luggage, food and safety. She repeatedly asks whether she has kept the ticket safe, whether she has taken Krishna's pickle, etc.: "Mother ask for the sixth, no, eighth time if the ticket was safe, had I taken the pickle for Krishna, would I write every week, eat well, put on weight?" (5) Though these may seem ordinary questions, they form a pattern of supervision. Even at the time of departure, Shari remains under control. It is a paradox that the journey that is intended for gaining distance begins under a checklist of family control.

Shari understands this structure clearly: "Mother makes all the decisions in the family, which is odd, because both Krishna and Chitra are married, and I'm twenty-two" (2). The humor in this sentence actually is a sharp criticism that age, education and marriage fail to release the children from Bimmy's rule. Her father, though "vigorous and assertive at work", becomes "putty" at home and keeps himself away from domestic conflict. When Shari asked his permission for her journey, he sent her to Bimmy:

I went to plead with Father. He did not speak for or against my going to Vrindaban. He merely lowered the *Business Line* he was reading and offered the type of look he used to bestow on men when he saw my non-progressive progress report. 'It that's what you want, Shari,' he said before adding, 'ask Bimmy.'...Father neither proscribed nor favoured my trip. Instead he said, 'Ask Bimmy'. (2-3).

His affection gives her solace but not protection. His silence reinforces Bimmy's authority.

The family order relies on acceptance from the members of the family. Shari's sister Chitra represents the daughter who has accepted the system. Chitra has always done what her mother Bimmy wants her to do. (3). This obedience gives her a secured place in the house. But, Krishna and Shari do not have that tendency. As Shari puts: "Ours is a close-knit family. That is, Mother, Father and Chitra are close. Krishna and I hover at the periphery of things. We are the stitches that slipped out of a cosy pattern" (3-4). This image jointly depicts warmth, design and exclusion. The family is likened to a carefully woven fabric whose neatness is attained on the removal of those disturb the pattern.

Bimmy not only controls marriage and manners, but also controls culture. She believes that Delhi culture is superior. In fact, she is ashamed of her Tamil identity. As Shari notes: "Mother believes strongly in the superiority of Delhi culture. Shocking, considering that we are Chettians from Madras. She is ashamed of being a Tamilian. Her family had lived in Delhi ever since her grandfather set up Madras Stores in Khan Market, and over the years they have

looked down upon everything south of Nagpur. Which is ironic because they owe all they have to South Indian spices. When Mother married Father, also a Chettiar working in Delhi...As a family, we're weird: true-blood Tamilians living in a sedate locality to the north of the Adyar river, but speaking no Tamil, eating no pongal or poriyal, and every week visiting Mother's North Indian friends in Annanagar. This because Mother worries for our refinement." (11-12). This preference directs their speech, dress, music and social taste. Though from Tamil background, Bimmy prefers the culture of North India. Her children too are forced to inherit this cultural discipline. They are distanced from local habits and start to absorb the notion that refinement requires correction of one's roots. Bimmy's this view complicates the simple contrast between tradition and modernity. Bimmy appears modern only in dress, taste, travel and social life. But her expectations of her daughters remain conservative.

She supports the polished version of modern life and at the same time adheres to the conventional demands of obedience. She picks the choices only which confirms family respectability. She is pleased with Shari's marriage to Gautam since it meets the social standards "...a hotshot Systems Analyst from a 'cultured family'..." (11). Though it is love marriage, the approved form of love already comprises class, culture and status.

Shari's body too becomes a site of judgment. Shari reflects Bimmy's displeasure about her not having conventional feminine appeal: "Not a bosom, a hip, a curl or smile to make me desirable" (11). This statement is not just self-mockery but reflects how far the family standards have entered into Shari's self-image. Beauty, desirability and marriageability have become the yardsticks through which she learns to judge herself. Her wish to become a kindergarten teacher too displeases Bimmy who associates success to display and prestige. For this family, even the profession too must create the right social image. But Shari resist these standards. She exposes the cruelty hidden inside family judgment. She is apparently obedient but is not fully submissive. She learns to live by separating public conduct from personal thought.

Parvati aunty gives a different kind of family care. Shari states that she has "two sets of parents". This statement comes from childhood memories of kindness and bodily comfort. Once, in a car journey, Shari vomits over her dress. Bimmy withdraws herself to protect her sari but Parvati aunty does not do so. She cleans and comforts the child. Later, when Shari is afraid of the first sign of menstruation and imagines pregnancy, Parvati aunty explains patiently, "tilted her chin up towards me and squeezing my hand, explained." (Nambisan, 1998, pp. 7-8). These scenes separate biological motherhood from emotional care: while Bimmy's motherhood values polish, distance and correction, Parvati aunty's care is expressed through personal touch, patience and tenderness. Shari's sense of self develops between these two maternal worlds. She gets discipline, judgment and expectations of acceptability from her mother Bimmy. From Parvati aunty she gets unconditional comfort. This dichotomy shows that familial care can either expand or shrink a child's self. Shari grows up inside both possibilities.

By the time when she leaves for Vrindaban, Shari has already understood about the double life that defines her early childhood. She follows the rules to keep peace but inside, she resists them. Her statement "inside my head, I live against them" shows the inner division (10). The family has given her roles, but not freedom. Before choosing differently, she should clearly understand the domestic structure that has trained her to obey. In this context, the journey becomes very vital in this novel.

3. Marriage, Love and the problem of choice

Shari believes that marriage promises freedom. When Shari talks about her engagement, she stresses that it is "not one of those arranged marriages" because she is marrying a person who she is in love with. (2) Her statement shows her confidence. But we can observe that this confidence is getting weaker as the novel progresses. The marriage is based on Shari's choice. But since it fits family, class, culture and respectability perfectly, her idea about freedom itself becomes doubtful. Bimmy approves of the marriage because Gautam is from a "cultured family", is successful in business and can be presented to the society without embarrassment

(11). While accepting the modern love, the family retains its older norms of approval.

Gautam represents order, security, ambition and social ease. He is capable of giving Shari a future which her family aims at. Since because he is more 'suitable', Shari's individual choice becomes the family triumph. Bimmy can declare, without any hesitation, that Shari selected her husband. But that 'selected' husband confirms to Bimmy's standards. The pressure of social selection is hidden by the language of love marriage. When she starts to realize that Gautam's love demands alteration, Shari becomes doubtful about her marriage prospects. She is afraid that marriage would reduce her into a corrected version of herself. This fear is present in their conversation as Shari asks "Why do you want to marry me?" Gautam replies "It's you I want. You can be moulded" (73). The word "mould" stresses this horror. Gautam's desire to mold her expresses pressure design and loss of form from Shari's part. Jain and Shanthichitra (2021) interpret Shari's concern from Jungian view and link her fear of marriage to a divided-self searching for wholeness. Their study helps us understand the violence behind what seems to an ordinary engagement. Shari's reflects, "Moulded. How? Pulled, pushed, elongated, flattened, hammered, punched and gouged out until I was the right specimen, the perfect wife?" (73). The idea of transforming her as the perfect wife makes her more frightened about getting married as the marriage threatens to convert an individual into a material.

The legal and social meanings attached to marriage also make her concerned. She views marriage as a change in public identity. Before marriage a woman belongs to one family name, after marriage she is tied to another. Though this transition may give status, it can also erase a woman's individual self. When a daughter becomes wife, affection becomes duty and choices become adjustments. Shari's fear of Gautam stems from this greater structure. He is courteous, acceptable but still his ideas about marriage have little room for her unruly thought, humor, doubt and emotional history. Naren brings forth a different kind of emotional demand. He represents memory, guilt desire and honesty. Before leaving Madras, Shari posts a letter to him and names it "The Lie" (9-10). Her letter represents her divided life. She performs the role of a future bride to Gautam and family. To Naren, she send a 'lie' to cut off an attachment which is still present. This act shows that obedience demands cruelty too and that realization wounds Shari. In order to safeguard an approved future, she has to hurt someone who knows another part of her.

Jennifer and Lavanya (2019) analyses this novel and relate Shari's emotional crisis with gendered expectations, social status and the pressure to behave correctly. Their analyses explains the moral strain of the letter. She lies to maintain the order i.e. to avoid conflict, to safeguard the engagement and to avoid the scandal of desire. But still, her conscience does not accept this. The lie makes her feel unclean, tense and exhausted.

The blindness of Naren makes Shari's emotional world still more complex. He is not portrayed as pitiable. He speaks passionately about his inner world and considers his blindness as "gift" (143). His perspective is different from the common notions of disability. In Naren, Shari sees someone who refuses the definitions placed upon him. He offers her intellectual closeness and a kind of attention that she does not get from Gautam. At the same time, he is not a romantic escape from her marriage. He represents unresolved feelings, moral risk, and painful truths.

So, we cannot simply say Gautam and Naren represent false love and true love. Gautam provides Shari with respectable future but asks her to give up part of her 'self'. Naren offers emotional truth but brings guilt, uncertainty, and disruption of her carefully built life. Kalyani (2021) views Shari's relationships as sites of identity conflict, since each relationship demands a different version of her. With Gautam, she has to be an acceptable bride. With Naren, she can remain true to her 'self', yet lacks the courage to accept its consequences. The problem of choice is that she is compelled to choose between the versions of herself let alone choosing between two men.

Krishna helps her realize this problem with greater honesty. Unlike Bimmy, he does not force Shari into respectability. Unlike Chitra, he does not cover conformity with sweetness. He speaks directly by asking her to avoid evasions that prolong her pain. His life with Teji

gives her a working model of marriage outside polished expectations. Their marriage has survived struggle, labor, and crisis. Their marriage is valuable as it allows negotiation. Shari slowly understands that a socially approved marriage can remain hollow if it lacks equality of conversation. Teji's advice reinforces this understanding: She says, "I'll tell you something. Don't waste these months before marriage mooning about each other. Get serious. I mean serious. This is when you should talk, because intentions are pure. Promises are kept, commitments made."... 'Love alone cannot solve problems. Not yours, not anybody's.' (43). This is a practical statement which asks Shari to test love by honesty, responsibility and knowing the other person well. Teji rejects romantic illusion. She does not accept the family's view that marriage is settlement. Her advice helps Shari assess Gautam more clearly. If the marriage demands silence before even it begins, it might demand still more silence afterwards. Towards the end of the novel, Shari starts to break the sequence of lies. Her decision to postpone the marriage is not a hasty revolt or romantic confusion. It is a moral resolution. If she does not postpone, she may continue to be dishonest - to Gautam, to Naren, to her family and more importantly, to herself. Jain and Shanthichitra (2021) interpret this later clarity through the notion of individuation. Suba and Ashok Kumar (2024) explains this in terms of autonomy. Both readings support Nambisa's concern with female selfhood. Shari's real freedom starts when she refuses to let social approval replace inward truth. The novel does not reject marriage altogether. Krishna and Teji show that marriage will have value if it has negotiation, labor, trust and patience. Through Shari, the novel rejects the marriage built on status, silence, molding @ feminine correction. Shari's moving away from Gautam shows not the rejection of love, but her demand that love should grant space for self-respect. In the triangle of Gautam, Naren and Shari, Nambisan explores the different facades of choice: choice as honesty, choice as pain and choice as the refusal to live by a lie.

4. Symbols, Body, and Memory

Nambisan uses ordinary objects, domestic routines, and bodily sensations as recurrent symbols. Shari's emotional life is depicted in tangible terms including fish, sea, food, letters, smell, clothing, and nausea. These details give form to fear, guilt, desire, memory, and the pressure of social expectation. Shari's crisis has intellectual depth, and Nambisan places that crisis in the body and in small objects that gather emotional weight. The title image, the *Mango-coloured Fish*, symbolizes color, motion, fragility, and elusiveness. 'Fish' stands for water, speed, and uncertain capture. 'Mango' symbolizes ripeness and 'color' indicates sensual life and vivid desire. When combined, the words form an image of life which resists enclosure. This image perfectly suits Shari's condition. Her family tries to fit her in clearly defined roles: daughter, fiancée, wife, respectable woman, and future homemaker. But Shari's inner self keeps moving away from that confinement. The title describes that tension between brightness and vulnerability, motion and control.

The sea expands this symbolic field. When going to the airport, Shari's father chooses the beach road since she likes sea. Upon watching the "grey satin sea", she is reminded of the colors it gets before storm: "purplish puce," "olive green," "a throbbing saffron" (4-5). The sea gives a visible form to the inner-turbulence. Like the sea before storm, Shari too is composed on the surface level. But deep inside her, her feelings move toward turbulence.

Food too serve as a domestic symbol. In Bimmy's world, food denotes care, training, control. She is worried about Shari's food, weight, pickle for Krishna, future kitchen duties. The worries may seem affectionate, but they turn the daughter's body and future as matters of supervision. The daughter who is about to marry should eat well, acquire domestic skills, and prepare thoroughly for role expected from her. In this context, food becomes a part of 'wifehood'. Food has a different meaning in Rukku's gift, "the greasy packet of murukkus". The gift has love, but Shari has to hide that gift since her "Mother will not understand. The love should remain outside the boundaries of official family emotion. Though Rukku wanted "very much to see me take off in a plane", she could not come. She was not allowed because "the maidservant is not a part of the family" (8). The packet of murukkus demonstrates the

class limit of domestic love. The household does not give Rukku public space to express her affection. Here food symbolizes both warmth and exclusion. This demonstrates how a household may extract women's labor and deny equal recognition to the woman who gives that labor.

Letters represent secrecy and moral injury. Shari send a letter to Naren from the airport and names it "The Lie" (9-10). A letter is a small and ordinary thing. But, here, it bears the weight of fear, desire, and guilt. It moves beyond her control after it was posted. Shari imagines that it travels with calm and cruelty. The writing which usually brings truth becomes a way to delay truth here. The letter brings out the divided life she has chosen to maintain. Shari's words to Gautam too reflect this dynamic. She expresses her affection that she cannot represent in her life experience. She sends Naren a lie to suppress feelings. In this context, written language becomes a mechanism for imposing order. This imposed order results in psychological harm. Each relationship demand a different version of Shari. The letters reveal this divided state and her emotional crisis. A young woman, using words to manage her emotional turmoil, recognizes that lying has its own consequences.

Shari's body reacts even before she accepts the truth fully. At the airport, she feels nausea and dizziness. She links them to the fear related to family goodbyes rather than the flight (1). After lying to Naren, she feels unclean. Her muscles stiffen and blood pulses in her fingertips (10). These physical responses are significant since Shari's public discourse is still under control. Her body shows the things that are concealed by social behavior. Thus, nausea, stiffness, shame, and discomfort become signs of moral pressure. Jenniffer and Lavanya's study of gendered emotion reiterates this notion. Shari lives in a society that expects women to be pleasing, grateful, and composed. In that society, angry, doubt, and desire have only limited space. Her body becomes the first site of refusal. Her body reacts when the mouth remains silent. It resists the calm image expected from a future bride. Nambisan gives an ethical function to the body which remembers, protests, and warns.

Smell too plays a significant function here. Diwali smoke, stale tea, scent, food, vomit, alcohol and domestic interiors are connected emotional experience. Shari's remembers events by their sensory atmosphere. Bimmy's perfume reminds beauty and distance. Vomit recalls Shari's childhood humiliation and the difference between her mother and Parvati aunty. Stale tea and airport smells intensify the discomfort of departure. These details relate memories to the body. The ecofeminist reading of the novel by Aarthi and Jayachandran relate these symbols to the larger concerns of body, environment, and female identity. The sea, fish, bodily discomfort, and domestic spaces link Shari's inner world to the physical world. But still, Nambisan does not present nature or the body as easy sources of comfort or freedom. The sea is beautiful but at the same time is dangerous. Food can nourish the body but can also control. The body can reveal truth but also can bear shame. These tensions make these symbols more powerful.

Altogether, fish, sea, food, letters, smell, and the body form a material language for Shari's selfhood. They reveal the things that which family life asks her to hide. They preserve memory, show pressure, and reveal the cost of false obedience. Shari's movement toward self-recognition depends partly on her ability to read these signs. Before she can speak with full clarity, her body and the objects around her have already begun to tell the truth.

5. Conclusion

Kaveri Nambisan's *Mango-coloured Fish*, examines female selfhood in the routine pressure of family marriage, class, respect, memory, and desire. Shari begins her journey as escape. But the travel gradually directs her towards self-recognition. At the airport, she stands between the life planned for her and the truth she has hidden from herself and others. Her phrase "Flight as in fleeing" portrays this emotional conflict. (1) Shari's family provides her with affection and security, but it also demands her to be obedient. Bimmy controls through taste, beauty, food, marriage plans, and concern for respectability. Under this influence, Shari learns to appear

compliant even though inwardly resisting all these. This division is further intensified by marriage. Gautam represents approval and stability, yet his plan to ‘mold’ Shari reveals the limits of such security. Naren represents emotional honesty and moral discomfort. Her letter to Naren, ‘The Lie’, shows the personal cost of preserving an acceptable future. Vrindaban gives Shari distance from family expectations. Krishna and Teji’s marriage is not splendid, but still it shows honesty and mutual understanding. Teji’s advice helps Shari reconsider her own engagement. The symbols too intensify these concerns. The sea suggests emotional change, food connects care with control, and bodily discomfort reveals truths that speech hides. Towards the end, Shari accepts the label “selfish” and turns it into a sign of self-respect (241). The term no longer signals failure. It becomes the beginning of self-respect.

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