
**Negotiating Patriarchy: Empowered Female Subjectivities in
Kavery Nambisan's Fiction****Dr. A. Rajeswari**

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the portrayal of women in the fiction of the eminent writer Kavery Nambisan with a focus on how the female characters in her novels display assertiveness within a deeply rooted patriarchal social structure. The study adopts Humanist Feminism as its theoretical framework to examine empowerment in terms of ethical agency, dignity and relational autonomy. Contrary to feminist readings that often equate empowerment with overt rebellion, humanist feminism emphasizes the principles of shared humanity, moral responsibility, and emotional intelligence, offering a culturally sensitive lens through which the experiences of women in the Indian social context can be more effectively studied and understood.

Through a close reading of *The Scent of Pepper*, *Mango-Coloured Fish*, *On Wings of Butterflies*, and *A Town Like Ours*, this paper posits that Kavery Nambisan's female characters navigate patriarchal structures through negotiation rather than confrontation. Characters such as Nanji in *The Scent of Pepper*, Shari in *Mango-Coloured Fish*, Evita in *On Wings of Butterflies* and Rajkumari and Saroja in *A Town Like Ours*, assert their selfhood within their limited social space through emotional resilience, care, and ethical choice. Their strategies of empowerment challenge dominant patriarchal as well as Western feminist models that privilege individualism and overt resistance.

By foregrounding ordinary women and their lived realities, Nambisan redefines empowerment as a process rooted in self-respect, responsibility, and cultural continuity. The study demonstrates that her fiction validates women's interior lives and moral authority, presenting a form of "quiet resistance" that is deeply humanist in orientation. Ultimately, the paper situates Kavery Nambisan's work as a significant contribution to Indian English literature and feminist discourse, showing how literary representation itself can function as a powerful means of women's empowerment.

Keywords: Humanist feminism, negotiation of patriarchy, overt resistance, lived reality**Introduction**

Literature has been a powerful platform for the construction and dissemination of social ideologies, including gender norms and hierarchies. Women are often depicted as passive recipients of action rather than as active agents shaping their own destinies. Moreover, women have often been represented in restrictive roles denying them agency and

complex subjectivity. Feminist literary criticism emerged in response to such representations, seeking to interrogate the ideological foundations of literary texts and literary canon while recovering women's voices.

In the context of Indian fiction, the intersection of patriarchy with family, marriage, and community produces culturally specific forms of gendered experience that demand nuanced critical frameworks. Conventional feminist models often emphasize overt resistance and individual emancipation which do not always align with Indian socio-cultural realities, where women's agency is frequently negotiated within relational and communal structures.

Humanist Feminism focuses on the dignity of women, their moral agency, and shared humanity. It considers literature as a space in which women negotiate meaning, identity and selfhood within their restricted social space. Reading literature through this lens allows scholars to move beyond binaries of victimhood and rebellion, highlighting subtle forms of empowerment embedded in everyday life. Humanist feminism allows for nuanced readings that acknowledge women's constraints while also recognizing their capacity for choice, resilience, and meaning-making. Literature, from this perspective, becomes a space where women negotiate identity and selfhood within limiting social structures. Reading texts through this lens enables scholars to move beyond simplistic binaries of victimhood and rebellion, highlighting subtle forms of resistance, moral strength, and everyday empowerment.

This paper proposes humanist feminism as a productive framework for examining negotiated forms of female agency embedded in everyday life. Through an analysis of selected novels by Kavary Nambisan, the study demonstrates how female characters construct subjectivity and empowerment through moral reasoning, emotional labour, and relational autonomy rather than radical rupture.

This study examines three novels of Nambisan, *The Scent of Pepper*, *Mango-Coloured Fish* and *The Hills of Angheri*, in view of their strong portrayal of women protagonists, whose journeys reflect questions of identity, agency, and ethical responsibility. By focusing on these texts, the paper highlights how female-centered narratives articulate experiences of self-realization and social negotiation within patriarchal structures. The selected works provide fertile ground for a humanist feminist reading, as their protagonists embody dignity, resilience, and relational moral consciousness, allowing for an exploration of transformation, autonomy, and care-based ethics.

Theoretical Framework

The study employs humanist feminism to foreground how female characters construct subjectivity through moral reasoning, caregiving, professional commitment, and interpersonal relationships embedded in everyday life. Instead of giving emphasis to overt resistance or radical outburst, the humanist feminism attempts ethical and emotional negotiations through which women assert selfhood within their prescribed social roles. Nambisan's women are not radical rebels, but they emerge as morally reflective subjects

who exercise choice, responsibility, and self-awareness within the constraints of family, marriage, and community.

Women Empowerment is understood as relational, context sensitive, and gradual rather than individualistic or absolute. Acts of caregiving, emotional labour, and professional dedication—often dismissed as signs of feminine self-sacrifice—are reinterpreted as sites of agency, dignity, and meaning-making. By emphasizing women’s lived experiences and ethical complexity, this approach moves beyond binaries of victimhood and rebellion, positioning literature as a dynamic space where gendered identities are continuously negotiated, reimagined, and affirmed within limiting social structures.

Kavery Nambisan’s position in Indian Fiction

Kavery Nambisan, a prominent novelist from South India, occupies a distinctive position in Indian English fiction. Her narratives are drawn from her real life experiences as a medical professional working with people. Her novels often reflect her commitment to realism, humanism, and ethical engagement with everyday life. Her narratives exhibit sensitivity to human vulnerability and moral complexity and are set in the worlds of ordinary people - families, small towns and professional environments where social change is gradual and understated. Dwelling in this domestic and limited spaces, Nambisan’s women neither remain passive victims nor they turn rebellious. They are often reflective individuals negotiating the competing demands of selfhood, relationships, and social expectation. Her humanist orientation aligns closely with humanist feminist principles, emphasizing dignity, balance, and relational agency.

Negotiated Female Subjectivities in Nambisan’s Fiction

This section investigates how Nambisan’s female characters negotiate patriarchal power structures within their familial, marital, and professional spaces through a close textual analysis of her novels *The Scent of Pepper*, *Mango-Coloured Fish* and *The Hills of Angheri*. *The Scent of Pepper* traces the saga of Kaleyanda clan of Kodagu region. The portrayal of Nanji in the novel reflects Nambisan’s strong conviction in women’s individual agency beyond their gender-specific roles. Nanji asserts her selfhood by confronting adverse situations from her childhood onward. She is married off to a drunkard at a very young age and becomes a widow very soon. Later, Baliyanna, and idealist Veterinary Doctor married her. He succumbs to the mental illness which runs in the family and eventually, Nanji becomes the breadwinner of the family working tirelessly for the sustenance of her family simultaneously safeguarding the Kaleyanda estate. Her resilience culminates in her nurturing determination to help her physically challenged son walk, symbolizing both literal and metaphorical empowerment. Thus, Nanji evolves into a powerful figure whose courage and perseverance reshape not only her own destiny but also that of her family, reiterating her belief that “sorrow isn’t permanent unless you choose to make it so.”

From a humanist feminist perspective, Nanji’s characterization foregrounds the dignity, autonomy, and potential inherent in every individual regardless of gender. Humanist feminism emphasizes equality, rational agency, and shared human values rather than

essentialist gender divisions. Nanji embodies this framework by rejecting passive domestic confinement and instead acting as decision-maker, provider, and moral centre of her household. Her strength lies not in opposing men but in asserting her humanity — her right to choice, labour, and self-determination. Through Nanji, Nambisan articulates a vision of empowerment grounded in universal human worth, demonstrating that women’s liberation is inseparable from recognition of their full personhood and capacity for ethical action.

Nanji’s understanding of womanhood itself reflects her self-assertion, as expressed in her statement “men can be clay in our hands... but we must never misuse that power. Nor should we exist only for them.” Acting beyond prescribed gender roles, Nanji exercises autonomy while remaining ethically responsible, reinforcing the humanist feminist ideal of agency balanced with moral consciousness.

In *Mango-Coloured Fish*, Shari’s character further illustrates the humanist feminist vision outlined above, as she negotiates the domineering attitudes of her mother and others through an inward exploration of the self rather than open revolt. Her response to authority reflects Nambisan’s emphasis on introspection and ethical self-awareness as pathways to personal liberation. Significantly, Nambisan demonstrates that domination is not confined to gender binaries; through figures such as Shari’s mother, she conveys that women themselves may participate in sustaining structures of control. This dynamic is particularly evident in intimate relational spaces — mother–daughter and mother-in-law–daughter-in-law relationships — where power circulates through cultural conditioning rather than biological difference. Shari’s engagement to Gowtham further reinforces this insight: although she does not confront him directly, she gradually realizes that his inability to grant her personal space threatens her individuality. In continuity with the earlier discussion, Shari’s journey mirrors Nambisan’s broader humanist feminist stance — liberation is achieved not through antagonism but through reflective self-realisation that affirms dignity, autonomy, and mutual respect within human relationships.

Viewed from the perspective of humanist feminism, Kavery Nambisan’s portrayal of women emerges as an affirmation of shared human dignity rather than a partisan alignment with either gender. Having closely observed the lives of many women, she presents their predicament in an unbiased and balanced tone, suggesting the complementarity and mutual dependence of men and women within the human community. As Ibrahim observes, “Nambisan being a woman writer, instead of talking for women she talks to women” (35), highlighting her dialogic engagement that respects women as autonomous human subjects rather than ideological symbols. Yet, her novels reveal varied strands of feminist consciousness: she exposes the demeaned status of women and their lack of independence in a male-dominated world despite education or social privilege, thereby foregrounding the need for equality grounded in universal human values. Before Evita in *On Wings of Butterflies* attempts to unite the world’s largest minority, Shari in *Mango-Coloured Fish* begins an inward journey toward self-realisation — a process that echoes the humanist feminist emphasis on personal growth, self-reflection, and ethical agency. As Mudaliyar and Chowdhury note, “The years of societal and cultural conditioning teaches the Indian woman to be self-effacing, submissive and subordinate to man, the suffering of a patriarchal society

in silence. Kavery Nambisan, by making her heroines undergo stages of self-introspection and self-reflection, makes them evolve themselves into more liberated individuals than what their biological nature or culture have sanctioned” (40).

The portrayal of Nalli, the protagonist of *The Hills of Angheri* reflects and affirms individual dignity, capability, and self-realization irrespective of gender. Her inspiring journey from a village girl to a surgeon forms the core of the narrative. She realizes the dream of becoming a doctor challenging patriarchal assumptions. Her metamorphosis from a village girl into a qualified doctor reflects the humanist feminist ideal of personal growth and self-confidence through mental strength and strong determination. Her character illustrates how equality is achieved not through confrontation alone but through self-realization and upholding human dignity.

Nalli’s motivation to serve society — particularly her desire to build or work in hospitals and treat patients — also reflects an ethic of care central to feminist humanism. Feminist care ethics emphasizes moral action rooted in relationships and concern for others rather than abstract rules. Her professional life as a surgeon and her commitment to helping communities demonstrate this relational sense of responsibility and social purpose.

Negotiation as Empowerment in Women’s Agency

Taken together, these three novels are considered for their strong portrayal of women protagonists whose trajectories map distinct modes of negotiating patriarchy — endurance and responsibility in *The Scent of Pepper*, introspective self-definition in *Mango-Coloured Fish*, and aspirational self-actualisation in *The Hills of Angheri*. This comparative perspective underscores Nambisan’s sustained engagement with women’s agency across domestic, relational, and institutional contexts.

Humanist feminism emphasizes the core tenets of dignity and rational agency, the universality of human values, ethical responsibility, and the rejection of gender essentialism. The three novels discussed above illustrate how each protagonist embodies different dimensions of this philosophical framework. Nanji, in *The Scent of Pepper*, represents autonomy through labour and responsibility, asserting her personhood not through ideological resistance but through sustained engagement with life’s practical demands. Her transformation into the economic and emotional anchor of her family foregrounds the belief that dignity emerges from the exercise of agency and ethical commitment irrespective of gendered expectations. In contrast, Shari in *Mango-Coloured Fish* exemplifies ethical introspection and self-awareness as pathways to empowerment. Rather than overt confrontation, she undertakes an inward journey, questioning inherited norms and relational dynamics, thereby demonstrating that self-realisation begins with reflective consciousness. Her gradual recognition of personal boundaries and emotional autonomy highlights the importance of moral deliberation and the cultivation of authentic selfhood within human relationships. Nalli, the protagonist of *The Hills of Angheri*, completes this spectrum through her pursuit of self-realisation via education and social service. Her aspiration to become a surgeon signifies the unfolding of human potential through intellectual growth and purposeful contribution to society. By transcending gendered limitations through

perseverance and commitment to communal well-being, she affirms the principle that equality rests upon universal human capability and the ethical use of knowledge. Taken together, these characters map a continuum of empowerment — from resilience grounded in responsibility, through introspective ethical awakening, to socially engaged self-actualisation — revealing Nambisan’s sustained engagement with women’s evolving agency within a humanist feminist framework.

Conclusion

The discussion demonstrates that negotiation emerges as a crucial mode of empowerment in Kavery Nambisan’s fiction, particularly when examined through a humanist feminist lens. Rather than portraying liberation as confrontation or radical rupture, the selected novels reveal empowerment as a gradual process shaped by resilience, introspection, and purposeful engagement with social realities. Nanji’s assertion of autonomy through labour and responsibility, Shari’s inward ethical awakening, and Nalli’s pursuit of self-realisation through education and service together illustrate diverse yet interconnected pathways toward agency. These trajectories affirm the humanist feminist emphasis on dignity, rational selfhood, and ethical responsibility, highlighting that empowerment lies in recognising one’s full humanity rather than merely resisting patriarchal authority. By situating her protagonists within familial, relational, and institutional contexts, Nambisan underscores that negotiation itself becomes transformative — enabling women to redefine their roles without severing their connections to community and shared human values. Ultimately, her narratives suggest that empowerment is not a singular act of defiance but a continuum of self-realisation grounded in reflection, responsibility, and the assertion of universal human worth.

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