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**Gender, Care, and Medical Responsibility in *The Hills of Angheri* by Kavery Nambisan**

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**Abstract**

Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri* (2005) offers a compelling exploration of gender, caregiving, and ethical responsibility within the context of rural healthcare in India. The novel traces the journey of Nalinakshi (Nalli), a young woman from a conservative village who aspires to become a doctor despite strong societal opposition. This paper examines how Nambisan challenges patriarchal norms that restrict women's access to education and professional spaces, while simultaneously redefining caregiving as an active and socially significant dimension of medical practice. Through close textual analysis, the study highlights Nalli's transformation from a determined village girl into a committed medical professional who prioritizes service over personal gain. The narrative also critiques the commercialization of medicine, particularly through the contrast between Nalli and her childhood companion Jai, whose ideals shift toward urban, profit-driven practice. Furthermore, the paper emphasizes the ethical implications of rural healthcare neglect, illustrated by preventable deaths and inadequate medical awareness in village communities. Drawing on theories of care ethics and social justice, the study argues that Nambisan presents medical responsibility not merely as a professional obligation but as a moral commitment rooted in empathy, resilience, and accountability. Ultimately, the novel advocates for a more inclusive and humane approach to healthcare, where gender does not limit capability and where service to marginalized communities becomes central to medical practice.

**Keywords:** Gender and Medicine, Care Ethics, Medical Responsibility, Rural Healthcare, Women in Medicine, Social Justice.

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**Gender, Care, and Medical Responsibility in *The Hills of Angheri***

Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri* (2005) stands as a powerful narrative within Indian English literature that interrogates the intersections of gender, caregiving, and ethical responsibility in the medical profession. The novel follows the life of Nalinakshi, known as Nalli, whose journey from a small village in Karnataka to becoming a qualified surgeon is marked by resistance, perseverance, and moral conviction. More than a story of individual success, the novel presents a critique of patriarchal norms, the commercialization of healthcare, and the neglect of rural communities. Nambisan, drawing from her own experience as a doctor, constructs a narrative that redefines medical practice as a deeply ethical and socially embedded responsibility.

At the heart of the novel lies the issue of gender discrimination, which shapes Nalli's experiences from childhood. In the conservative setting of Angheri, education and professional aspirations are privileges largely reserved for men. Nalli's desire to become a doctor is met with immediate dismissal by her grandfather, who remarks, "*If God wanted you to be a doctor, you would have been a boy*" (Nambisan 7). This statement is not merely a personal opinion but a reflection of a broader cultural ideology that equates capability with gender. The remark reduces Nalli's aspiration to an impossibility, suggesting that ambition itself is gendered. However, Nalli's refusal to internalize this belief becomes the first step in her resistance.

Nambisan carefully constructs Nalli's motivation as rooted in care rather than ambition for prestige. Her prayer—"Give me that thing, God... only that thing and I won't ask for anything else" (Nambisan 35)—captures the intensity of her desire. The vague expression "that thing" suggests that her aspiration transcends material definitions; it is a calling shaped by empathy and responsibility. This distinction is crucial, as it separates Nalli from characters who view medicine as a means of upward mobility.

The novel expands the concept of caregiving beyond its traditional domestic boundaries. In patriarchal societies, care is often confined to women's roles within the home, where it is undervalued and taken for granted. Nambisan challenges this limitation by placing care within the professional sphere of medicine. Nalli's work during her internship demonstrates that caregiving is not passive but requires knowledge, discipline, and active intervention. She educates villagers about hygiene, sanitation, and preventive healthcare—areas often ignored in conventional medical narratives that prioritize curative treatment.

One of the most striking episodes occurs when Nalli observes a village midwife using an unsterilized knife during childbirth. The midwife's justification—that the knife is

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clean because it is used for vegetables—reveals a fundamental gap in medical understanding. This moment underscores the dangers of inadequate healthcare infrastructure and lack of education. Importantly, Nalli does not respond with condemnation but with a desire to educate and improve practices. Her approach reflects what scholars like Carol Gilligan describe as an “ethic of care,” where moral action is guided by empathy, context, and relationships rather than abstract principles.

The novel further explores the ethical dimensions of medicine through its critique of commercialization. This is most evident in the character of Jai, who initially shares Nalli’s dream of serving their village but gradually shifts towards a more pragmatic and self-serving approach. His assertion, “*Let the village improve, let the villagers show that they can keep a surgeon busy*” (Nambisan 282), reflects a transactional view of healthcare. In this perspective, medical services are contingent upon demand and profitability, rather than need.

In contrast, Nalli’s perspective is fundamentally different. She recognizes that healthcare is a prerequisite for development, not its byproduct. Her commitment to returning to Angheri challenges the dominant narrative that success is defined by urban or international achievements. By choosing to serve in a rural setting, Nalli redefines success as social impact rather than personal gain.

A significant turning point in the novel is the death of a child due to dysentery, a preventable disease. This event exposes the systemic failures of rural healthcare and serves as a moral awakening for Nalli. The tragedy is not presented as an isolated incident but as a consequence of neglect and inequality. Nalli’s response is one of quiet determination; she resolves to prevent such deaths in the future. This moment transforms her aspiration into an ethical obligation, reinforcing the idea that medical responsibility extends beyond individual patients to entire communities.

Nalli’s professional development reaches its peak during her time in England, where she acquires advanced surgical training. Her reflection, “*I diagnosed with my eyes and my hands and my mind*” (Nambisan 244), signifies her growth into a confident and competent practitioner. The emphasis on sensory and intellectual engagement highlights the holistic nature of medical expertise. However, Nambisan ensures that this technical proficiency does not overshadow Nalli’s ethical grounding. Unlike many narratives that equate foreign training with detachment from local realities, Nalli remains deeply connected to her roots.

The novel also introduces other female characters who reinforce its central themes. Sudha, a schoolteacher, represents resilience in the face of personal adversity. Despite

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being mistreated by her husband, she maintains her dignity and independence. Philomena, on the other hand, embodies social activism through her efforts in promoting literacy. These characters serve as parallels to Nalli, illustrating that caregiving and responsibility can manifest in various forms. Together, they challenge the notion that women's roles are limited to passive acceptance of societal norms.

Family opposition remains a persistent obstacle in Nalli's journey. Her cousin Vishnu's hostility reflects both jealousy and ingrained sexism. His remark, "*Most people in the village feel that you've not competent enough to handle a hospital*" (Nambisan 293), represents the collective scepticism of a society unwilling to accept a woman in a position of authority. Even Nalli's father, though more supportive, initially expresses doubt, stating that he has never heard of a woman surgeon. These responses highlight the absence of female role models in professional spaces, which reinforces the perception of such roles as unattainable.

Despite these challenges, Nalli's resilience is characterized by quiet persistence rather than confrontation. She does not engage in dramatic rebellion but instead allows her actions to speak for her. This approach aligns with Nambisan's broader narrative strategy, which emphasizes subtle transformation over overt conflict. Nalli's success is not marked by public recognition but by the tangible impact of her work.

The return to Angheri marks the culmination of Nalli's journey and the realization of her dream. Establishing a hospital in her village is not merely a personal achievement but a transformative act that addresses systemic inequalities. It represents the integration of knowledge, care, and responsibility into a sustainable institution. Nalli's willingness to face scepticism and hardship underscores her commitment to her principles.

Through Nalli's story, Nambisan offers a critique of both gender norms and the medical profession. The novel challenges the assumption that caregiving is inherently feminine and therefore limited to the private sphere. Instead, it presents care as a powerful and necessary component of professional practice. At the same time, it critiques the tendency of modern medicine to prioritize profit and prestige over service.

In a broader sense, *The Hills of Angheri* engages with questions of social justice and development. The lack of healthcare in rural areas is not portrayed as a natural condition but as a result of systemic neglect. Nalli's work addresses this imbalance by bringing medical services directly to those in need. Her approach aligns with Amartya Sen's concept of development as freedom, where access to healthcare is a fundamental aspect of human capability.

Furthermore, the novel emphasizes that ethical responsibility in medicine requires

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more than technical competence. It demands a commitment to understanding the social and cultural contexts in which patients live. Nalli's interactions with villagers demonstrate her ability to bridge the gap between medical knowledge and local practices. This sensitivity is crucial in ensuring that healthcare interventions are effective and sustainable.

In conclusion, Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri* is a nuanced exploration of gender, care, and medical responsibility. Through the character of Nalli, the novel challenges patriarchal assumptions, critiques the commercialization of healthcare, and advocates for a more ethical and inclusive approach to medicine. Nalli's journey illustrates that true success lies not in personal advancement but in the ability to serve others with compassion and integrity. By redefining caregiving as an active and professional responsibility, Nambisan elevates it from a marginalized role to a central principle of social transformation. The novel ultimately calls for a reimagining of both gender roles and medical practice, emphasizing that care, when combined with knowledge and determination, has the power to change lives and communities.

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