

TRANSFORMATION OF WOMEN IN 'ON THE WINGS OF BUTTERFLIES' BY KAVERY NAMBISAN

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Abstract

This paper examines Kavery Nambisan's novel On the Wings of Butterflies, analyzing its intricate exploration of identity, social hierarchies, and personal transformation. By researching into the personal histories of its characters, the novel highlights how past experiences shape present realities and relationships. The study investigates Nambisan's portrayal of individuals steering the tensions between modernity and tradition, revealing the complexities of social structures and cultural expectations. Through an analysis of her evocative prose and vivid descriptions of nature, this paper explores how the natural world functions as both a metaphorical and literal backdrop to the characters' emotional and psychological journeys. Furthermore, the research identifies resilience, self-discovery, and the quest for belonging as central themes that resonate throughout the narrative. Ultimately, this study finds that Nambisan's work offers a profound reflection on human experiences, emphasizing the intersections of gender, identity, and social justice within contemporary Indian literature.

Key words:

Belongingness, Identity and Transformation, Social Hierarchies, Modernity vs. Tradition Gender

Introduction:

The English-language adaptation of the Indian classic is a monument to the power of narrative. It provides a glimpse into the heart of a country, its rich cultural history, its hardships, and its victories. It continues to enthrall readers everywhere with its singular fusion of tradition and

contemporary, enhancing the literary environment on a global scale. English-language female writers embraced the chance to express their viewpoints and experiences, breaking down barriers and questioning the current quo. The postcolonial era for women writing in English is a story of claiming space, rewriting narratives, and finding one's voice. These women writers challenged societal norms, explored the intricacies of female identity, and tackled previously silenced narratives. Their legacy continues to inspire contemporary authors, paving the way for a future where women's voices are not just heard but celebrated. They laid the groundwork for a vibrant and diverse body of literature that continues to explore the complexities of gender, culture, and the human experience in a globalized world.

The Rise of the National Identity and Social Concerns

A strong national identity emerged in literature during the first part of the 20th century, reflecting the expanding independence movement in politics. Novelists like as Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, and Mulk Raj Anand emerged as trailblazers in delving into a variety of social and political subjects that struck a

chord with a country poised for transformation.

As a proponent of social realism, Mulk Raj Anand found inspiration in his time spent laboring on Assamese tea plantations. His 1936 book "Coolie" revealed the hard reality of working-class existence, especially the abuses that indentured servants experienced. Readers feeling the stirrings of a national consciousness found resonance in Anand's depiction of the harsh working conditions, the repressive hierarchy of the plantation system, and the longing for independence. Through his work, the impoverished were given a voice and the glaring disparities that drove the struggle for political independence and social justice were brought to light.

In contrast, R.K. Narayan took a kinder tone in his Malgudi novels. These works, which are set in the made-up South Indian town of Malgudi, perfectly caught the spirit of small-town India through their perceptive observations on societal structures, ordinary life, and the resilience of the human spirit. The inventive vendor in "*The Vendor of Sweets*" and the mischievous kid in "*Swami and Friends*," two of Narayan's characters, struck a chord with readers because of their common challenges and victories. Subtly mirroring the greater social transformations occurring throughout India moved the country inch by inch approaches independence, Narayan depicted the changing social fabric of Malgudi, with its traditional values struggling against the winds of change.

The 1938 film "*Kanthapura*" by language maestro Raja Rao provided a compelling

depiction of the Indian freedom movement. The event was told from the perspective of a country woman in the novel, highlighting the widespread support for independence that even existed in rural areas. Rao gave voice to the aspirations of the Indian masses through his vivid prose, which portrayed the enthusiasm, the sacrifices, and the intricacies of the liberation movement. In addition to documenting a significant period in Indian history, his work examined the social and cultural awakening that coincided with the struggle for independence.

These writers tackled the deeply ingrained socioeconomic problems that beset India, as did their contemporaries Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya. The horrific depiction of the Bengal Famine of 1943 in Bhattacharya's "*So Many Hungers*" (1946) exposed the harsh reality of starvation in the face of an inflexible caste structure. The Dalits, who suffered the most from the famine's destruction, were among the oppressed communities whose predicament was painfully portrayed in the novel. Bhattacharya's uncompromising depiction exposed the abuse and disregard that the poorest members of society endured, undermining the established social order.

The 1954 novel "*Nectar in a Sieve*" by Markandaya provided voice to the struggles of rural women trapped in a cycle of tradition and poverty. The resilient and subdued defiance of the protagonist's story illuminated the constraints imposed on women in a patriarchal culture. The quest for a better life for future generations,

female education, and child marriage were among the topics covered by Markandaya. Her book was a potent critique of the social mores that limited women's possibilities and supported gender inequity. Both Bhattacharya and Markandaya addressed the topic of partition in their writings; it was a pivotal event in Indian history that tore communities and families apart. Bhattacharya's 1956 work "He Who Finds an Answer" examined the social unrest and psychological damage brought on by Bengal's split. In 1960, Markandaya's "A Silence of Desire" illustrated the loss and relocation that individuals caught in the crossfire of partition went through. These books were powerful reminders of the human cost of political divide and the difficulty of reconstructing lives.

Postcolonial Explorations and Expanding Horizons

Today, the Indian novel in English continues to thrive. Wide variety of perspectives explore the complexities of human relationships, return to historical narratives, and take on modern challenges. Themes of immigration, gender, and identity are expertly and deeply explored by writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, and Avni Doshi. Arundhati Roy and Shashi Deshpande emerged as powerful voices. Roy's "The God of Small Things" shattered societal expectations by delving into the forbidden love story of two sisters. Deshpande, through novels like "The Dark Holds No Terrors," explored the complexities of marriage, motherhood, and self-discovery for women navigating a patriarchal society. These writers challenged the traditional portrayal of

women as passive and submissive, instead showcasing their agency, desires, and struggles for autonomy.

Themes like female inheritance, tradition, and the effects of colonialism on women's life were examined by writers such as Anita Desai "Fire on the Mountain" and Shobha De "Socialite Evenings". In "Fire on the Mountain," Desai's protagonist violates expectations and social standards by running away to live with a widower, which starts a discussion about female sexuality and widowhood. Known for her audacious and humorous speech, De exposed the superficiality and hypocrisy in Indian culture, especially among the upper classes. The authors contested the idea of a single, male-centric historical account by providing viewpoints that emphasized the experiences of women across time.

With books like "The Inheritance of Loss," Kiran Desai, on the other hand, used a magical realist perspective to reveal the intricacies of globalization and its effects on families around the world by fusing fact and fiction. By refusing to be constrained by a single genre, these authors produced a vibrant and varied literary world. These female writers' achievements were not limited by national borders. Their creations struck a chord with people all throughout the world, igniting discussions about gender, identity, and how the experiences of women are universal. Thanks to this international recognition, women from all over the world, including Indian women writers, were able to share their experiences and contribute to the global feminist discourse.



Feminist Utopia and Social Reform- A Vision of Gender Equality and Legacy

Kavery Nambisan is an Indian woman who has carved a unique path as both a surgeon and a novelist. Her life and work bridge the worlds of medicine and literature, with a strong commitment to social justice. Kavery Nambisan's specific writing style is to drawing from experience, focus on Social issues and critical reception as well. Kavery Nambisan's feminist Utopian Book, *On Wings of Butterflies*, envisions a society in which women rule. A society in which women are in charge. The novel imagines a future in which women have abolished patriarchy and founded an autonomous utopian community. Although not stated directly, novel doesn't delve into detailed descriptions of this Utopian society, but instead offers glimpses through the characters' aspirations and the societal changes they implement. This planet is alluded to by the protagonists' objectives and the social reforms they bring about. Imagine living in a society where women are in positions of leadership in the corporate and government sectors, where social and legal structures are created to support and empower women, and where gender norms are being questioned and reinterpreted. We might see a society in which women run businesses and government organizations, laws and social conventions support and empower women, and conventional gender roles are not only challenged but also demolished and rebuilt in a more fair manner. A world where women have complete power over their lives and destinies is being created by this

cultural revolution, which also affects family structures, healthcare, and education. The novel challenges established patriarchal systems, yet it does not downplay the significance of legacy and family. The protagonists work to improve not only their own futures but also those of coming generations. One way to interpret WOW's social justice activism is as an effort to guarantee a future in which women are not subjected to the same restrictions as they did. This emphasis on legacy draws attention to the universal human urge to make a positive difference that extends beyond individual lifetimes. Rani's character demonstrates this goal by lending her wealth and resources to the WOW movement, realizing that her future generations will also profit from a just society. In a similar vein, Kripa's political activity stems from her desire to see her girls grow up free from prejudice. The characters show that their fight for equality is about more than simply individual empowerment; it's about leaving a lasting legacy that guarantees a better future for all women by putting the needs of future generations first.

The story recognizes the limitations of a political party led solely by women, even as the creation of WOW represents a potent movement. Men's exclusion from discussions on gender equality calls into doubt the viability of this strategy for bringing about long-lasting societal change. Is a nation genuinely egalitarian if one gender dominates politics? Characters such as Milar promote an inclusive strategy, implying that breaking down the patriarchal structure necessitates changing men's

attitudes and actions in addition to empowering women. Education efforts that question established gender norms and advance equality and respect can help achieve this. WOW may use its platform to encourage men to have constructive conversations about reaching gender parity in addition to fighting for women's rights.

We get to know a diverse group of women, including the bold police officer Tara, the affluent Rani, the political savvy Kripa, and the fiery Lividia. Each of these ladies has an own story to tell. WOW is fighting for equality on all fronts and challenging the status quo as they gain momentum. The achievements and difficulties of this social revolution are examined in the book. These women's relationships are intricate and dynamic. Sometimes, Lividia's more radical strategies—which stem from her own past suffering—collapse with Evita's idealism, which is fueled by her own experiences of oppression. The movement becomes tense as a result, and they are forced to make concessions and find common ground. They come to understand that, despite the differences in their strategies, achieving equality for all women is a top priority. Tara's desire for prompt action to solve the daily challenges encountered by women can clash with Kripa's political maneuvering, which is aimed at attaining long-term systemic change. These divergent viewpoints spark discussions about the best course of action, but in the end, they come to understand the value of cooperation and the contributions that each woman brings to the table. The characters' continuous conversation and exchange of ideas serves as an example of

the difficulties and possibilities that emerge when women with various experiences, viewpoints, and origins band together to pursue a common goal. It emphasizes how crucial it is to have open lines of communication, treat others with respect, and be able to come together when working for a bigger objective.

Exploitation of women shown in the novel

In a culture where men predominate, many women are denied access to the necessities of existence. In the hands of manipulators, they are puppets. Due to their lack of education and ignorance of their potential, people endure suffering throughout their lives. Through the portrayals of Maria, Panna, Heera, Trilokasundari, Milar, Lydia, Kripa, and Megha Dasi, the author illustrates the exploitation of women in the home and in society. Maria, Evita's unmarried mother, works the nightly shift as a waitress at a wayside café. Her livelihood depends on guys being drawn to her attractiveness. Without thinking about her future or her health, she gives her life to these strangers. “Maria was a confused woman who could not tell the difference between men who flattered and men who abused her: she was used by man after unknown man.”

(P.17)

Panna's father, a drunkard, destroys her life. He pawns her to get cash. At thirteen, Panna is too young to fight against her father and the pawnbroker. She fights for a long time before escaping with Shiva and Heera, her two children. She still makes her living as a flesh merchant. Shiva tries to

possess his mother after learning about her business with the strangers, but his attempt is unsuccessful. Heera imagines a nice life with her dhobi husband, but she quickly learns that he is worthless since he thinks having sex in public will result in the birth of a son. In order to protect her daughter Heera, Panna ties up and threatens her inebriated son-in-law. When Shiva tries to harass Panna, she beats him to death.

The goal of Trilokasundari is to enter politics. She enters politics at the age of 19, against opposition from her family. Since her name doesn't correspond with her appearance, she receives harsh criticism. The most attractive woman in the three worlds—Heaven, Hell, and Earth—is represented by the name Trilokasundari. Within five years, her marriage to a Party member ends in divorce. She then decides to become an activist and overthrows the Party and her husband.

The lady guardian teases Milar, a gorgeous girl in the orphanage, every Sunday during inspection because of her rumpled clothes and unattractive plait. However, the male warden treats her with kindness, complements her with chocolates, irons her clothes, and beautifully plaits her hair. Thus, eleven-year-old Milar runs away from the physical punishment and asks the male warden for help. It is only then that she becomes aware that she has jumped into a frying pan of flames. His cruel nature is revealed when he tries to molest her. "Now I shall iron your underclothes and reached for her chemise". (p.114) When wealthy businessman Sam Billimoria proposes to her and says he would give the elderly

couple who adopted Milar their pension as well. After she says yes to his proposal, their lovely married life in the white home in Goa begins, but it ends quickly as a result of her inadequacy for marriage. She married at the age of fifteen, and after one and a half years she becomes a widow. Despite her attractiveness making many want to marry her, she stays a widow. Others refer to her as "the mad goddess" because of this. She sews women's undergarments for her bread and butter and lives alone. Because her spouse usually gives her books as gifts, she has a nice collection. She loves to read and write about history and is an avid reader.

Kripa, a jeweler is the wife of a politician Dinakar Kiran Kagal;

"He accused her of being responsible for all the problems in his life; she did not give him more children."(p.45)

Thus, it appears that having more children is a sign of potential for men. Dinu, who gives off the impression of being a regular guy with a reputation for control, expects Kripa to be a completely obedient homemaker and becomes upset when this isn't the case. As a result, he fundamentally threatens to divorce her. She is committed to serving as the Party's leader for the remainder of her life.

Dr. King wishes to marry the teenage Lydia in his late thirties. He readily offers a fat reverse dowry to win her hand. He reminds the readers Baroka, the sixty year old bale

of a village, the symbol of lion and who owns and molests an eighteen year belle, Sidi, the symbol of jewel, in Wole Soyinka's masterpiece, *The Lion and the Jewel*. Lividia King remains a happy wife with her two children until she learns about her husband's adulterous nature. When she finds that Dr.King yearns for the company of young girls, her anger becomes aggression.

“Lividia was an unhappy woman, shamed by the infidelities of her husband...” (p.95).

She hides her sorrows in the smile.

Megha Dasi, a widow, gathers and sells cremation ash to hotels so that she can feed her boys and daughter Torulata. However, as she ages, she becomes a burden to her boys. They don't feed her adequately because they want her to pass away quickly. Megha Dasi makes the decision to leave Howrah and spend her final days in Vrindhaban after learning of her son's hopes. When Evita meets her, she learns about WOW's future, which helps her understand why she is here. She decides to search her granddaughter in the slums of Howrah and finds Jyotika. The young girl does odd jobs to her neighbors and prefers to draw either women or butterflies, because she remembers her dead mother as a “magnified butterfly”. (p.130) Jyotika's painting “... women running, with their eyes fixed on a faraway”. (p.136) is the symbolic representation of independent woman in the novel. Megha Dasi confirms Jyotika's blissful future from her drawings,

dies happily. The female characters in the novel experiences injustice as men exploit her to satisfy their economic, social and sexual needs.

The Burdened Past: Family and the Seeds of Revolution

The pivotal event that turns the main character, Evita, into a revolutionary is when she sees her mother being taken advantage of by men. This firsthand account reveals the patriarchal family structure to be a miniature version of the oppressive society that the WOW movement seeks to eradicate. Nambisan uses the narrative of Evita to show how injustices and power disparities within the family can act as a fertile foundation for dissatisfaction and rebellion. Evita first becomes aware of gender discrimination at home, where she sees her mother's constrained options and freedoms. Maybe her husband had more freedoms and educational chances, whereas her mother was forced into an early marriage, denied an education, or expected to take care of the household duties. A young Evita saw these injustices on a regular basis, which eroded under the guise of a reasonable and equitable social structure. Her passion for change is sparked by this early exposure to the reality of patriarchal tyranny, which paves the way for her future advocacy. In the context of WOW, the idea of family assumes new significance. The women's camaraderie goes beyond their biological families. They provide one another emotional support, direction, and a feeling of community, fostering a safe environment in which they can recover from previous

traumas and develop as a group. They are able to endure in their struggle for a more equitable society because of the fortitude and resiliency of this particular family.

Transformation: From Personal to Societal

The Exploitation of all the women in the novel leads to their self – realization, which strengthens them towards transformation. However, the Prolonged suppression, depression and oppression thrust them to be lost in the crowd, they upraise for equal rights.

“Karen Harney prevailed and continued her pioneering efforts for women. She argued convincingly that women must be given the opportunity to find their own personal identities, to develop their abilities, and pursue careers if they choose.” (Wood, E Samuel, Green Wood, R Ellen, *The World of Psychology*, p.412)

Evita realizes that many women are helpless, meek and submissive like her mother, they easily fall a prey to the men. She is the victim of her mother's promiscuous life. At an early age of fifteen decides to leave her home to earn her livelihood. She travels through many places for job and starts her career as a waitress, later becomes a receptionist in a chain of hotels. She chances to meet various people with social, cultural and psychological

problems and decides to start an organization for the future of womankind.

“As a child I had to watch my mother suffer. She was so helpless. I waited seven years to start WOW. I want to see change”. (p.106)

Evita sketches a proper plan about the members of the organization, All Women Political Party and its goal. On her twenty-second birthday she uncovers the details of WOW to her mother and friend Maria, and then posts the envelopes to the members. The members are selected from Magazine, Television, and Newspaper. She tries to build confidence and empower women through WOW. Pushpaben is an elderly woman with the leadership quality. She designs pamphlets, plans workshops to motivate the members of WOW. Her husband supports her in all her deeds. She extends her selfless help to the poor and needy through Nari Adalat in the villages of Rajkot and solves the family disputes. According to her India needs WOW for, “We witness injustice every day, everywhere. Two – thirds of the illiterates are women. The men find it easy to divide and rule.”(p.39) The members of WOW and other women join to support Evita in organizing the meeting. Tara Amar is the Deputy Commissioner of Police in charge of crime. She is a spinster, known for her promising nature. She helps Evita in all her ways and provides protection to the public during the meeting. Heera is practical and down to earth, stitches clothes for living. She shares her problems to Kripa, and

becomes a member of WOW. She establishes Swargalok Sewing Centre with Kripa's help to teach sewing for the poor and illiterate women. Though she is poor, bravely fights her economic problems alone. Trilokasundari becomes an activist and publishes papers on social evils in the conferences. Milar reacts bravely and punches the male warden on his face and then leaves the orphanage on her own. This exhibits her potentiality and self – realization. Kripa is defiant, joins WOW, and starts All Women Political Party in Mumbai with string of jasmine as the Party's symbol. Though Dinu hurts and criticizes her, she conducts workshops and meetings for the downtrodden women. Lividia King establishes The World Organization of Male Bashers WOMB and stresses on “Adam – bashing” (p.96). She always shares real incidents to the gathering to motivate them to be bold. “We teach women to unlearn outdated virtues like timidity and submissiveness”. (p.96) At last, Lividia King admits her defeat in the violent approach to the gender bias. When a woman realizes her strength, she learns to oppose injustice and set as an example to others.

The Achievements of WOW

The confident Evita leads the convention of WOW in Delhi. The growing number of members marks the initial success of the organization. Their demands include “Every child should bear the name of the mother and father, and inheritance laws should be the same for sons and daughters”. “Panchayat, parliament and assembly seats must be impartially shared. When fifty percent of all political leaders are women,

there will be true democracy”. “House wives should be paid wages” etc... (p.91) The last day of the convention marks a drastic change in the view of the conflict between men and women. To the surprise of its members and others, the children play an important role in bringing people together. Their secret mission is to kidnap Evita to pacify and lesson the folks that a healthy relationship between men and women are essential for the future generation. “... thousands of children with their hands linked together formed circles around the building. Boy – girl – boy – girl - boy – girl”. (p.248) At last the demands of WOW are accepted and treaty is signed by the leaders to end the suffering of women.

Conclusion:

This study finds that *On Wings of Butterflies* presents a nuanced exploration of feminist utopianism, social justice, and the dynamics of gender equality. The novel argues that genuine societal transformation requires a multidimensional approach— one that not only empowers women but also fosters inter-gender collaboration and dismantles systemic barriers to equality. While the narrative envisions a world led by women, it also acknowledges the complexities of exclusionary politics and the need for inclusive strategies to effect lasting change. The research highlights that Nambisan's portrayal of women's leadership and social reform is both aspirational and critical, offering a vision of justice and equality while also questioning the feasibility of a singularly gendered governance model. The novel's engagement with themes of memory, transition, and legacy underscores the

importance of historical awareness in shaping a just future. By deconstructing patriarchal structures and forging new networks of solidarity, the characters exemplify how personal agency and collective action intersect in the struggle for equality. Ultimately, this study concludes that *On Wings of Butterflies* serves as both a speculative vision and a social critique, demonstrating that sustainable gender justice is achieved not through absolute power shifts but through continuous dialogue, systemic reform, and intergenerational commitment to equality.

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