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The Anatomy of Inequality: Gender, Class and Identity in the Fiction of Cauvery Nambisan

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of gender, caste, class, and identity in the fiction of Cauvery Nambisan. As both a practicing surgeon and a novelist, Nambisan occupies a unique place in Indian English literature. Her narratives are marked by an observational clarity that resembles the diagnostic precision of medical practice. Through novels such as *The Scent of Pepper*, *The Hills of Angheri*, *The Story That Must Not Be Told*, and *Mango-Coloured Fish*, she exposes the structures of inequality that shape everyday life in India. Rather than presenting idealized images of rural or urban society, Nambisan reveals how patriarchy, caste hierarchy, and economic disparity influence personal relationships, professional aspirations, and moral choices.

This paper employs theoretical perspectives such as intersectionality, subaltern representation, and gendered space to analyze how Nambisan's characters negotiate identity within restrictive social systems. The matriarch Nanji illustrates the burden of tradition within a clan-based society, while Malli's journey as a doctor reveals gender bias within professional institutions. Similarly, the depiction of urban slum life in *The Story That Must Not Be Told* highlights the invisibility of the poor, and the psychological struggle of Shari in *Mango-Coloured Fish* demonstrates the pressure placed upon women within middle-class marriage culture.

By bringing together these narratives, the study argues that Nambisan's fiction maps the "anatomy of inequality" in contemporary India. Her works show that identity is not a fixed state but a continuous process of negotiation shaped by social structures and personal resilience.

Keywords: Cauvery Nambisan, Indian English Fiction, Patriarchy, Intersectionality, Gender Identity, Urban Inequality, Rural Healthcare, Feminist Literature, Social Hierarchy, Cultural Tradition.

Introduction

The Scalpel and the Pen

Indian English fiction has long served as a powerful platform for examining the complexities of Indian society. From colonial encounters to post-independence transformations, writers have used the English language to explore questions of identity, power, and social change. Among contemporary writers, Cauvery Nambisan occupies a distinctive position because of her dual identity as a surgeon and a novelist. Her professional experience in medicine gives her fiction a unique observational depth. Much like a doctor diagnosing illness, Nambisan dissects the structures of society—caste hierarchies, gender discrimination, and economic inequality—revealing the hidden mechanisms that shape human lives.

The foundation of Indian English fiction was laid by writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao. These authors explored colonial realities, social reform, and cultural identity. In contrast, contemporary writers increasingly examine the intersection of gender, class, and profession

within rapidly changing social environments. Nambisan belongs to this later generation of writers who focus on the layered experiences of individuals navigating modern India.

Her medical background strongly influences the way she portrays characters. Hospitals, illness, physical labor, and aging frequently appear in her narratives. The human body becomes a site where social inequality is visibly inscribed. For example, characters from poorer backgrounds often endure exhaustion, illness, and inadequate healthcare, while privileged individuals experience different forms of emotional or psychological pressure. By presenting the body as both a biological and social entity, Nambisan reveals how inequality affects everyday life.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Representation

To understand Nambisan's fiction, it is useful to apply the concept of intersectionality introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectionality suggests that systems of

oppression such as patriarchy, caste hierarchy, and class inequality do not operate independently but intersect to shape individual experiences. In Nambisan's novels, women are not defined only by gender. Their identities are influenced by their cultural background, social status, professional roles, and economic circumstances.

For example, the character Nanji in *The Scent of Pepper* belongs to a respected clan within the Kodava community. Although she occupies an important role within the family, her authority remains limited by the patriarchal structure of the clan system. Similarly, Malli in *The Hills of Angheri* faces challenges not only because she is a woman but also because she works in a rural environment where medical resources are scarce and social expectations are deeply traditional.

Another useful theoretical perspective comes from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's discussion of the "subaltern." In *The Story That Must Not Be Told*, Nambisan attempts to represent the experiences of the urban poor. However, this representation raises ethical questions about whether a middle-class writer can authentically portray marginalized voices. The novel highlights the invisibility of slum communities and forces readers to confront the moral contradictions of urban development.

Virginia Woolf's concept of "a room of one's own" also provides insight into Nambisan's portrayal of female identity. Women in her novels often struggle to find both physical and emotional space to define themselves outside traditional roles. This struggle is particularly visible in *Mango-Coloured Fish*, where the protagonist Shari attempts to assert her independence within a society that expects her to conform to marriage and domesticity.

Patriarchy and Tradition in the Scent of Pepper

The Scent of Pepper explores the cultural traditions of the Kodava community in Coorg. The novel centers on Nanji, a matriarch who appears powerful within her household. She manages family affairs, preserves traditions, and acts as the guardian of the clan's history. However, her authority exists only within the boundaries defined by the patriarchal clan system known as the Okka.

Through Nanji's character, Nambisan reveals a paradox within patriarchal societies. Women may exercise influence within domestic spaces, yet they rarely control the structures that define those spaces. Nanji's role is therefore both powerful and limiting. She is respected for maintaining family traditions, but she must also conform to expectations that prioritize male lineage and clan authority.

The landscape of Coorg plays an important symbolic role in the novel. The pepper plantations and rugged hills represent both continuity and constraint. The "scent of pepper" becomes a metaphor for the lingering influence of history. Just as the scent remains in the air long after the spice has been harvested, the traditions of the clan continue to shape the lives of individuals across generations.

Professional Identity in the Hills of Angheri

While *The Scent of Pepper* examines patriarchy within a traditional community, *The Hills of Angheri* focuses on the professional world. The protagonist Malli is a young doctor working in a rural medical setting. Her experiences reveal the challenges faced by women who pursue careers in fields historically dominated by men.

Malli must constantly prove her competence in an environment where female professionals are often treated with skepticism. At the same time, she faces pressure from

family and society to prioritize marriage over career. This tension reflects a broader contradiction within modern society: women are encouraged to pursue education and professional success, yet they are still expected to conform to traditional gender roles.

The rural setting intensifies these challenges. Medical facilities are limited, and patients often lack access to basic healthcare. Malli's work therefore requires resilience and dedication. Through her interactions with patients, she develops a sense of identity rooted not in social approval but in professional commitment and compassion.

Urban Inequality in the Story that Must Not be Told

The Story That Must Not Be Told shifts the focus to the urban environment, revealing the deep inequalities hidden within modern cities. The novel centers on the Sitara slum and the experiences of its residents. Through the character of Simon, Nambisan portrays the everyday realities of slum life—overcrowded housing, unstable employment, and constant vulnerability to eviction.

One of the novel's central themes is the invisibility of the poor. Slum residents provide essential labor for the city as domestic workers, drivers, and construction laborers, yet their lives remain largely ignored by the privileged classes. This invisibility allows urban society to benefit from their labor while avoiding responsibility for their living conditions.

Quest for Agency in Mango-Coloured Fish

Mango-Coloured Fish is perhaps Nambisan's most psychological novel. It focuses on Shari, a young woman who struggles with the expectations placed upon her by family and society. The image of the "mango-coloured fish" serves as a powerful metaphor—beautiful yet confined within a bowl. Similarly, Shari's life appears comfortable but is limited by social expectations regarding marriage and femininity.

The institution of arranged marriage plays a central role in her struggle. Potential partners evaluate her based on family background, education, and social status. In this process, Shari begins to feel that her identity is being reduced to a set of qualities that can be judged and negotiated.

Her refusal to accept a "suitable" match becomes an important moment of self-definition. By rejecting the expectations placed upon her, Shari begins to imagine a life shaped by personal choice rather than social approval. The conflict with her mother further reveals how patriarchal values are often transmitted across generations.

Synthesis and Conclusion

Across these novels, Nambisan consistently demonstrates that struggles related to gender, class, caste, and professional identity are interconnected. Her characters inhabit different social environments—rural communities, hospitals, slums, and middle-class homes—but they all confront structures that attempt to define and limit their identities.

Nambisan does not provide simple solutions to these problems. Instead, her narratives emphasize resilience and negotiation. Identity in her fiction is not a fixed state but a continuous process shaped by experience, resistance, and adaptation. Through the combined perspectives of a doctor and a writer, Nambisan offers a powerful diagnosis of the inequalities embedded within contemporary society.

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