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## **Cultural Ethos and Complementarianism in Kavery Nambisan's *On Wings of Butterflies***

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### **Abstract:**

Kavery Nambisan, the South Indian writer is efficient in handling the relationship conflicts in her novels. *On Wings of Butterflies*, her fourth novel could be identified as a political satire reflecting the thoughts of a particular women group establishing WOW- 'Women or Women', the new political movement. This relentless endeavour is the outcome of women exploitation, oppressive patriarchy and prevailing injustice of the society. Having experienced a serious setback in the cultural ethos, Evita, the protagonist takes up a determined effort to fight against the male chauvinistic environment through WOW, while Lividia, the other activist's WOMB- 'The World Organisation of Male Bashers' is violent, revengeful trying to wipe out the hatred and dominance of men. Carrying the plot with these two movements, Nambisan elucidates the failure of the above groups as WOW wanted to overcome men by creating a separate platform for only women whereas WOMB spilled detestation of men. Through Milar, Megha Dasi and Aunt Foot, the author brings out the need of complementarianism in a society. Any society progresses only when men and women balance and complement each other's needs. The children at the end bring the men and women together thus defining the rule of interdependency in life.

**Keywords: Society, complementarianism, interdependency, culture.**

Kavery Nambisan is a South Indian writer who has penned seven novels so far. The intellectual thoughts and deep truths of reality portrayed in her writing emphasize the cultural

ethos and immorality of the society. Ethos is a Greek word which means moral character. Any society is constructed by the cultural values and ethics of the living community. Culture represents the conventional practices of the people and the pride of their belief system in mind.

The man and woman form the society but the contemporary world has lot of prejudices and distinctions about women. The waves of feminism vary in the degrees of pseudonym, imitation and at last to acquire individuality. Though there are views of misogamy and feminist ideologies simultaneously, this paper is an attempt to elucidate how complementarianism is significant among the men and women to have a balanced relationship. Complementarianism is a theory in religions like Christianity, Judaism and Islam which enunciates that men and women have different roles but they are complementary to each other by fulfilling responsibilities in family circle and marriage.

*On Wings of Butterflies* (2002), is a plot of the rebellion of women to form a political movement affected by the patriarchal beliefs of the society. This story of Nambisan runs deep through the agony of women in the first part and the second section is a political endeavour of a women's group. The author presents this feminist world with vivid characterisation and different perspectives weaving a collective consciousness striving to celebrate womanhood.

The protagonist Evita, the daughter of Maria, reveals a plan of sending sixty two envelopes to form the world's largest political organisation with its headquarters in 15 Figaro Street, Panjim, Goa. The author narrates the personal life and the reasonable background of every member of the political movement. They are the victims of social injustice, male domination and gender inequality. Maria, the mother of Evita was irresistibly attractive and this waitress never imagined a world beyond home. Maria wished that this majestic plan has to be fulfilled as it would bring the lost smile on Evita's face, which had been wiped away when she was ten.

The wretchedness of her mother's life brought all changes in Evita's life. Maria was beautiful but a weak woman coming around in floral skirts with perfume and smiles. She confessed her sinful life of prostitution every Sunday to which the priest would ask her to repent for her sins. Neither the advice of the priest nor the weekly sermons helped her to control her desires. She was a confused woman who had lot of men in her life. Maria attempted to abort the twins but Evita seeped in to the world. At last, her womb was removed and no longer had she the worry of bearing children from men who did not truly love her.

Here, the helpless mother becomes the inspiration for the child. Evita proves her strength by retaining goodness throughout her life and is not deviated by teenage infatuations or the prostitute life of her own mother.

The reason of hatred, seeded within Evita can be related to her bitter childhood memories and she never experienced the intimacy of breastfeeding as Maria's nipples were always sore. She kicked the milk bottles splashing milk out of anger. She grew witnessing men exploiting her mother. Men made more demands on her body than Evita did even as an infant. She could never forget the look of her mother which was like an orange flame. That was the fire which kindled Evita's anger against men.

Being the eye witness of sexual abuse, Evita left home to find her future. Recalling the tongue of fire flame, she managed to acquire a decent job of waitress. Evita's stern attitude and determination not to be the victim like her mother can be looked as the sign of maturity and strong will power. Her adamant eyes drove away lusty men leaving them frustrated.

Evita establishes an identity by returning to Panjim with a dignified lifestyle unlike her mother. She pursued a quest to bring a significant purpose to her life. She felt that she had a huge responsibility to reform the society through her efforts. She was never scared of her larger goal which can even be a threat to her life. Maria realized if she had not gone away, Evita's life would not have been different from others.

Evita is twenty two and had a sincere belief possessing answers. Her aim is to form 'WOMEN OR WOMEN', a women political party uniting the largest minority to a single group. The first person Evita met was Pushpaben, who was motivated by her husband to join WOW. Hiten Pushpa Chand, the husband is contrasted to other dominating men through his nature of treating her wife with respect, equality and love.

To Milar, her childhood friend, Evita shared her dream of creating a revolution, the need of the hour to fight injustice. As women fight in small groups, they are ignored every time and hence Evita wanted to form an army of powerful women. She expresses, "The sting of one bee is only a sting, but when there's a hive of bees?"(Nambisan 21). Milar appreciated the wise nature and good heart of Evita asking her not to transform her anger in to hatred.

Through Tara, the Deputy Commissioner of Police in charge of Crime, Nambisan sketches the independent nature of a woman who wants not to be webbed in the clutches of

love or marriage. She enjoys her solitude, spinster life and her police profession. Though she was at ease with the company of Chetan, a writer and Geekay (Dr.Girish Kumar), chief of orthopaedics who were in love with her, she was devoted entirely to her work and not men. Her only friend was Aunt Foot and she felt herself comfortable in police uniform than in a sari.

The happy life of Kripa Kagal, the owner of Swargalok Jewellery with MLA husband turned sour when she came across Heera, the poor social worker. Dinu, her husband felt 'a woman is never safe to be on her own'. He felt she would damage his reputation by joining some mad group of unfit women. Kripa experiencing a peaceful life wishes that "she had a wife beating husband and a cruel mother in law to justify unhappiness" (Nambisan 45) after she heard the story of Heera.

Kripa was inspired by Heera's childhood, her outstanding courage, sacrifice and strength. Nambisan brings out the sick life of Heera being the victim of a drunkard and a pervert of violent sex expecting a male child. The mother-in-law's attack turned Heera's husband into a meek person with the remembrance of an invisible chain around his neck. A woman is forced to become violent by the devastating nature of the others. Sometimes, immorality and retaliation are the solutions to overcome the tougher life in the society.

Kripa lost her happiness because of a peaceful marriage and she became restless that her life was without a purpose. Kripa was unhappy and vexed of her own life where she has never undergone any of Heera's sacrifices. This peaceful frustration, anger, at not experiencing love from her husband made her to be the part of WOW. Thus Heera was a catalyst of Kripa's intention to join the rebellion.

Ms Naveena Tandon was found to be more curious than being socially responsible. She being the former beauty queen gave lot of importance to her physical appearance and diet. She wanted to be a part of WOW and she discussed her success oriented plan for women with Evita contributing five hundred dollars to the cause. The Nice Girls- Babs, Femina, Karola and Sharmili are portrayed as irrational feminists. These college girls felt proud that they have made the campus free of ragging. Their revolutionary ideals are hasty in nature and not radical. The Nice Girls were stubborn that men are never indispensable commodity to be dependant. Kripa judged them of being childish as WOW is a practical and reasonable movement. Among those, Karola is not impressive and her inferiority complex

turned in to anger. Karola pined for single unforgettable experience and thus committed a forced sexual assault on James Jaisalmer (JJ).

Kripa was shocked to hear the incident of a self confessed rape. Karola expressed that love is easier for pretty girls but not for girls like her. Babs argued that every woman is so cautious of beauty as Gods and Goddesses are always young and beautiful. She says, “You cannot imagine a buck-toothed Christ, an ageing double –chinned Saraswathi or squint-eyed God in any religion” (Nambisan 83). Ugliness was always shunned. Karola has decided to keep the baby and she hoped for Karola’s brain and JJ’s beauty. Kripa had no advice to offer them rather asking them to attend the convention.

The novel has also the first person narrator, a failed journalist, who was accused of being asexual, which means epicene, lacking in feminine charm. The desireless narrator was mistaken for asexuality. The second part of the novel begins with an epigraph from Grace Nichols ‘Skinteeth’ insisting the strength and perseverance of women to rise and strike the goal with determination.

In the morning of March in Delhi, Evita arranged the first council meeting exactly after a year of WOW formation. A major convention was decided to be held in another six months time with a peaceful protest strike. Tara, Evita and Pushpaben are the hard workers behind this movement. The demands were equality of jobs, similar inheritance laws, equal seats of 50% of women into politics, two months of paternity leave, paid wages for housewives, and an honorarium to all the women who manage both housework and career. The council accepted all the demands with minor doubts and queries.

Evita invited Lividia who talked about her secret group called WOMB (Women Organization of Male Bashers). Lividia is a strong woman with an aim to punish men for all their degrading immoralities. Evita and Lividia had different views because the former did not believe in bashing men. Lividia got married to forty year old Dr.King, a neuro surgeon when she was seventeen. He complained that he could not tolerate her relentless smile. He wooed the young nurses and interns as he felt he was imprisoned in marriage.

When Lividia was aware of the infidelities of her husband, she was not a woman of patience. Being loud in appearance, wearing dazzling clothes, bright colours of lipstick and nail polish made her confident and slowly her anger turned in to antagonism. She irritated him with her smile as a weapon. A young nurse who revolted Dr. King’s dirty game caused

him a vegetable existence in the hospital. Lividia's effort to prove his husband's connection to the incident was in vain as he had a good reputation.

The movement WOW endeavoured to establish a political arena, where only women enjoy power, equality and justice while the WOMB propagated animosity. Lividia shared her tragic past to the council members of WOW with her incredible smile, her weapon. She evaluated that tears make a person weak and irrational. Lividia said "An eye for eye is our message. A tooth for tooth" (Nambisan 99). She told revenge would be the only lesson for the honey tongued gentlemen in appearance but well groomed savages in heart.

Lividia told that they trained members of WOMB to look in to the eyes of men, to disrespect smooth talk and mockery. The members of WOMB were taught to unlearn virtues like nervousness and modesty. Evita understood their anger but not their hatred. Lividia showed her animosity telling that all women should hate the squirming monster, the object of manliness, domination and cruelty. Evita never expected this speech from Lividia and she was embarrassed of bringing her in.

WOW believed in determination and persevered effort. Lividia advised Evita not to plead men to treat with equality, which will never work out practically. Lividia was distinguished for her brutal speeches. She refused to join WOW as she has overcome their level of patience and anger. WOW, the moderates aim to change men softly, but WOMB, the extremists want to punish them for their atrocities.

The success of their first council was marred by the strong speeches of Lividia's WOMB. Evita met Milar, her friend on her mother's advice. The old widow had shifted sewing to writing in the night. Evita recalled the tragic marriage of Milar and Sam Billinoria, the owner of the largest lingerie industry in the country. Milar was in an orphanage till eleven, where the male warden tried to exploit her with pretense of love. She reacted with a punch on his face recollecting her knowledge on the PT lessons.

Dismissed in Orphanage, Milar was adopted by an older couple. Sam Billimoria was attracted to Milar when she wished for the book in his hand - 'A Concise History of Goa'. Milar accepted his marriage proposal on one condition of not leaving Goa. So Billimoria built a two storeyed white mansion in two weeks and the revelry of marriage continued for three days. The fifteen year old bride had a rare hemorrhagic illness and thus her husband decided to visit her once in three months from Mumbai. Only books strengthened her. They lived the

strange life of love making once in three months followed by hospitalization. Thinking Milar would die sooner, Billimoria even built a marble cemetery near the grotto of the Virgin Mary. The saddest part was that he had a mysterious pain in the bones one day. Milar's glance at him increased his pain and he died in her arms.

She was sixteen and a half and she never married again. She started the underwear business of her own - brown, buff, grey, khaki of thick durable cloth buttoned, buckled and strapped. She had few regular customers. Milar had read all History books and thus she started writing in the night. As she refused the great proposals of marriage, she was named as Mad Goddess of Truth. Men looked her with terrified reverence and women with admiration.

Milar guided dejected Eva with her wisdom. She delivered historical knowledge of Purusha and Prakrithi, man calling woman as Mother Goddess. She told that everyone is afraid to focus the minds on past. Evita understood that her childhood memories had brought her a sense of fear and dejection. Milar convinced her saying that women should first understand their own anger. The false anger against men is only anger against us. Apart from softness and carrying a child in the womb, a woman is given strength and courage. Man is the child of the woman and there's no point in hating him as the woman has the power to guide him. They must be in harmony as man and woman are the two sides of a coin. If hatred is spread, there will be a fruitless world where men have no wives.

Evita met TLS, Trilokasundari, a tremendous lady who was at her thirties. She joined a political group at nineteen against their family. She tolerated the marriage for 5 years and then left her husband as well the political party. She started an activist group to work for justice and she worked on gender discrimination for her doctorate. TLS wished a world without prejudice and the voice of women is important to this issue. Evita went through the articles of TLS about gender based censorship, brutal rape cases and mild punishment, female literacy rate.

A woman without education didn't have any right in family matters. Political parties were patriarchal and women in the group were mere shadows. Evita slowly grasped the meaningful effort of TLS through her writing. TLS discussed her paper on censorship disclosing that chauvinism was not sprouted from the fundamental systems and governments. Most of the silencing was done in families either by a husband or a father or a brother. She boldly told that only when women learn to be women then they can be feminine. They should not expect men to tolerate their timidity and fear for cockroaches and lizards. Even the



women writers were expected to be very choosy about their works avoiding the loss of love or sex. This censorship was the maximum violent act in the society indirectly demanding the women to be quiet.

TLS spoke about her challenges when she was in politics. She was advised by her husband to cut down her hair, slim down, wear contact lenses but she was not of that kind to live for others. When Evita asked her opinion about future of women's struggle, TLS told that there was no winning or losing and even the anger of Lividia was to be accepted. TLS expressed that WOW's battle was with men. She wants a world of equality, where women are not treated as glamour dolls or slaves. TLS was clear that she fights against injustice and it has no opponent. Evita was satisfied talking to an intellectual who is the most beautiful woman in three worlds.

Tara wondered at Aunt Foot's emotional wisdom and was seeking her advice how to proceed further in WOW. She talked about the psychological tragedy of female genius. Women sacrifice their own talents to protect male ego and hence their creativity remains untapped. Women find difficult to handle success because they are more respected and admired for being good daughters or wives rather than good professionals. She wanted Tara to think herself and decide whether to support this sisterhood. Tara at her departure had no answer for Aunt Foot's question- 'When women get the freedom they want, what do they plan to do it?' (Nambisan 151).

The convention began grandly with a strike declared by women a day before. Many speakers, activists shared their experiences. On the third day, Aunt Foot pointed out the vacuum of love, unconcern of men and the need of everlasting love to experience the equality. On the fourth day of convention, Evita was kidnapped. The children also cornered Lividia and their harsh treatment made her realise the cruelty of her preaching. Thus the novel has three types of women – revengeful activists (WOMB), rebellious activists (WOW) and humanists who believe in equality like Milar and Aunt Foot. The third category emphasises the necessity of complementarianism.

Any society progresses only when men and women balance and complement each other's needs. Thousands of children (a boy- a girl - a boy - a girl) formed a circle with their hands linked showing that men and women together could create a healthy future. Aunt Foot was happy that at last children understood the meaning of togetherness preaching elders

through their actions. The children could not accept the hatred spread against the other gender.

The demands of WOW were accepted later with twenty-two pages agreement. Thus all the members of WOW were happy returning to their previous work while Lividia disbanded WOMB and began a school for men with special needs. The children who were the prime reason behind this peaceful situation were busy with their dreams. It could not be finalised whether the movement was a success or a failure as Aunt Foot pondered that the story of women is yet to begin. The ethos of the society sustains morality only when there is ideological balance between men and women.

Kavery Nambisan brings the essential need of the contemporary society through this plot. The men and women need to respect and love each other. The mutual concern is the biggest part missing in the family circle. This novel is a tight slap on the minds of male and female chauvinists who consider the other sex as either superior or inferior. Life is worthier when everyone feels equal and treats other with compassion, love and humanity comprehending the law of interdependency. Men and women support each other and their sustainability remains positive only when the theory of complementarianism works out between them.

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