

The Conflict Of Tradition And Modernity In Kavery Nambisan's *Mango-Coloured Fish*

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Abstract

In Kavery Nambisan's *Mango-Coloured Fish*, modernity serves as a pivotal theme that drives the narrative and character development. The protagonist, Shari, navigates the complexities of contemporary life as she confronts traditional societal expectations, particularly regarding marriage and personal autonomy. The novel captures Shari's journey of self-discovery and her quest for independence, reflecting the broader cultural shifts occurring in India as younger generations seek to reconcile their identities with modern values. Through her rejection of an arranged marriage, Shari embodies the struggles faced by many young women who aspire to define their own futures while grappling with the pressures of family and tradition. Nambisan uses Shari's experiences to highlight the transformative power of modernity in shaping individual lives and identities, ultimately portraying a nuanced perspective on the interplay between tradition and modernity in Indian society.

Keywords: Modernity, Tradition, Identity, Self-discovery, Arranged marriage, Contemporary Indian society, women 's autonomy, cultural shifts.

Introduction

Kavery Nambisan's *Mango-Coloured Fish* offers a nuanced exploration of the conflict between tradition and modernity through the experiences of its protagonist, Shari. Set in contemporary India, the novel captures the struggles of a young woman navigating her way through societal expectations while yearning for personal freedom. The tension between adhering to traditional values—particularly the pressure of arranged marriage—and embracing modern ideals of autonomy and self-identity forms the central conflict of the story. In a society where cultural traditions hold deep significance, Shari's decision to break away from her family's expectations symbolizes a larger shift happening within modern Indian society. The novel encapsulates the evolving role of women and the challenges faced in balancing duty to family and self-fulfillment. By focusing on Shari's journey, Nambisan explores the complexities that arise when deeply entrenched traditions meet the growing desire for individual choice and independence. In *Mango-Coloured Fish*, Kavery Nambisan vividly portrays the struggle between tradition and modernity through the protagonist, Shari. This conflict is central to the novel, as Shari's life is shaped by her desire for personal freedom and her responsibility to uphold traditional values. The tension between these forces creates a profound inner conflict as she navigates the expectations of her family and society. In Shari's world, tradition serves as the cornerstone of life, influencing fundamental aspects such as marriage, family roles, and societal duties. Her family, like many in India, upholds the practice of arranged marriages as a deeply entrenched cultural institution. This tradition is not merely about the union of two individuals but carries profound social significance. It is seen as a means of preserving the family's honor, maintaining its social standing, and ensuring the continuation of values passed down through generations. From the beginning of *The Mango-Coloured Fish*, Shari is expected to acquiesce to an arranged marriage with a man her family deems suitable, despite her personal feelings or preferences. Nambisan poignantly critiques the concept of marriage through Shari's observations, stating, "Marriage is a mirage because people choose to see only the icing on the cake. Every person longs to meet another all the way. Even DNA is a double-stranded molecule, pair-bonded with its mate. The best relationships improve with time" (56). This metaphor exposes the superficial idealism often associated with marriage and highlights the complexity of building a relationship that thrives over time. It also underscores Shari's skepticism toward the process of arranged marriage, which prioritizes societal expectations over mutual understanding and personal connection.

The practice of arranged marriage, as portrayed in the novel, embodies the oppressive weight of tradition. For Shari, the match is not a matter of personal choice but a binding obligation to uphold her family's wishes and safeguard their reputation. This reflects a recurring theme in traditional societies where individual desires are often subordinated to collective goals, particularly for women. Shari's reluctance to embrace the proposed marriage symbolizes her internal conflict and resistance against a system that prioritizes conformity over self-expression. Nambisan uses this setup to explore the broader implications of societal expectations, particularly how they disproportionately affect women. Shari's situation exemplifies the gendered nature of cultural norms, where women are often viewed as the bearers of familial honor and tradition. This results in a significant loss of autonomy, as they are pressured to conform to roles that prioritize the family's interests over their own happiness and freedom.

The concept of arranged marriage is further analyzed through a sociological lens. As Lee and Stone define it, arranged marriage involves “mate selection undertaken by the marital agents, who base their selection on subjective criteria with the aim to align the agents in a durable relational conjugal union”(319). This definition emphasizes the pragmatic approach often associated with arranged marriages, where compatibility is assessed based on factors like social status, family background, and shared values rather than personal affection or romantic connection. While this system has historically provided stability and aligned families within a social framework, it often disregards the emotional and individual needs of those directly involved. Through Shari’s experiences, Nambisan critiques these entrenched norms, highlighting the psychological toll they take on individuals who struggle to align personal aspirations with societal expectations. Shari’s family’s insistence on the arranged marriage symbolizes the rigidity of traditional practices that leave little room for dialogue or dissent. The narrative becomes a lens to examine the tension between preserving cultural heritage and embracing modern ideals of autonomy and self-expression.

By focusing on Shari’s perspective, Nambisan delves into the complexities of reconciling these conflicting forces. Her resistance is not an outright rejection of tradition but a yearning for a middle ground where she can honor her roots without compromising her individuality. This nuanced portrayal invites readers to reflect on the evolving dynamics of tradition and modernity in contemporary societies and challenges the notion that adherence to cultural norms must come at the expense of personal freedom. Through Shari’s journey, Nambisan underscores the need for balance and the importance of choice in shaping one’s path, even in the face of deeply rooted cultural expectations.

Shari’s rejection of the arranged marriage in *Mango-coloured Fish* represents a pivotal moment in her journey toward self-determination and individuality, standing in stark contrast to the traditional values that dominate her family and community. Her decision to turn down the marriage proposal is not just a personal choice, but a powerful act of defiance against a life that is preordained by the expectations of society. In a culture where arranged marriages are often seen as a necessary and honorable part of social structure, Shari’s refusal challenges this longstanding practice, demonstrating her desire to carve out her own identity rather than being defined by others. This rejection symbolizes Shari’s desire to control her own destiny, especially in a context where women’s lives are often shaped by familial and societal pressures. The arranged marriage, a hallmark of tradition in her community, would have confined her to a prescribed role—one that might not have resonated with her personal values or aspirations. Instead, by rejecting it, Shari asserts her right to choose her own path, a decision that speaks to her broader yearning for personal autonomy, freedom, and the ability to live according to her own desires and beliefs.

Shari’s act of rebellion, while deeply personal, also reflects a larger societal shift within contemporary India. Over time, there has been a marked change in the attitudes of younger generations, especially in urban settings, where the traditional concepts of family obligation and arranged marriage are increasingly being questioned. Modern ideals—such as individualism, love-based marriages, and the pursuit of personal happiness—are gaining prominence. Shari’s rejection is part of this cultural transformation, where the younger generation is more inclined to prioritize personal choice and emotional connections over societal expectations. Moreover, Shari’s actions align her with ideals of independence and self-agency that are central to the modern worldview. In stepping away from her family’s carefully laid plans, she not only chooses to live on her own terms but also embraces the empowerment that comes with this decision. Her choice is an expression of self-respect and a commitment to living authentically, free from the constraints of tradition. In doing so, Shari embraces a modern vision of life that places value on the individual, personal freedom, and the right to choose one’s own path—ideals that are reshaping the fabric of contemporary Indian society.

Throughout *The Mango- Coloured Fish*, Kavery Nambisan masterfully delves into Shari’s internal struggle as she attempts to reconcile the opposing forces of tradition and modernity. Shari’s life is shaped by the duality of these influences—on one hand, the comforting, structured world of tradition with its prescribed roles and expectations; on the other, the exhilarating yet uncertain possibilities of modern values that promise autonomy and self-expression. This dichotomy is central to Shari’s character arc and is poignantly captured in her confession: “For a long time now, I have lived by rules, it’s easier. But inside my head, I live against them” (Nambisan 10). Her words reflect the universal tension between outward conformity and inner rebellion, a theme that resonates deeply with readers who have faced similar struggles in their own lives. Shari’s journey highlights the broader challenges faced by young Indians, particularly women, who must navigate a rapidly modernizing world that is still deeply rooted in age-old customs. As a representative of her generation, Shari’s conflict mirrors the evolving cultural landscape of India, where tradition and modernity are not just social constructs but deeply personal forces that shape identity. Alexander Grewe’s observation about cultural conflict aptly contextualizes Shari’s dilemma: “This conflict occurs when people’s expectations of a certain behavior coming from their cultural backgrounds are not met, as others have different cultural backgrounds and expectations”(10). Shari’s life is a microcosm of this clash, as she struggles to meet familial and societal expectations while also honoring her own desires and aspirations.

Nambisan uses Shari's physical journey across southern India as a compelling metaphor for her internal quest for balance. Each new setting and encounter introduces her to diverse perspectives that challenge her preconceptions and compel her to reevaluate her values. For instance, she meets individuals who embody the rigid adherence to tradition, as well as those who have embraced modernity, often at great personal cost. These encounters force Shari to grapple with difficult questions: What aspects of her cultural heritage are worth preserving? Which modern ideals truly resonate with her? This process of introspection and growth is not about rejecting one path for the other but about forging a new way forward—one that allows her to remain grounded in her roots while embracing the independence she yearns for. Nambisan's nuanced portrayal of this internal struggle underscores the complexity of reconciling tradition and modernity. It is not a binary choice but a delicate balancing act, a navigation of gray areas where neither tradition nor modernity is wholly good or bad. Tradition offers comfort, identity, and a sense of belonging, but it can also be restrictive and stifling, especially for women. Modernity, with its promise of freedom and self-determination, can be empowering but often comes with uncertainty and alienation. Shari's experiences reveal that true fulfillment lies not in outright rebellion or blind conformity but in the ability to integrate these opposing forces into a cohesive identity that reflects her authentic self.

By the end of the novel, Shari emerges as a character who has embraced this middle ground. She recognizes that honoring her cultural roots does not mean sacrificing her independence, and asserting her autonomy does not require abandoning her heritage. This reconciliation reflects not only her personal growth but also Nambisan's broader commentary on the Indian experience in a globalized world. The novel suggests that identity is not static but an ongoing negotiation, a dialogue between the past and the present, the individual and the collective. Through Shari's story, Nambisan invites readers to reflect on their own struggles with identity and change. The themes of the novel resonate universally, as the challenge of balancing tradition and modernity is not unique to India. It is a question faced by individuals and societies across the world as they grapple with the forces of globalization, cultural preservation, and self-expression. Shari's journey, both literal and metaphorical, becomes a powerful exploration of what it means to live authentically in a world where the old and the new constantly intersect.

Kavery Nambisan's *Mango-Coloured Fish*, offers a compelling exploration of Shari's internal conflict, a struggle that resonates deeply with the larger societal shifts unfolding in India. As the country experiences rapid modernization, urbanization, and increasing global influences, many young Indians, like Shari, find themselves questioning their place in a world where traditional values and modern ideals coexist uneasily. Shari's journey reflects the universal dilemma of reconciling the past with the present, where honoring heritage must be balanced against the desire for personal freedom and self-expression. This tension is central to Shari's story and is emblematic of a society caught between two worlds. As Hofstede (1980, 2001) notes, individualism highlights the degree to which people are empowered to make their own choices and shape their lives independently. However, in a culture steeped in collective traditions and familial expectations, the assertion of individual autonomy can feel like a betrayal of one's roots. The novel captures this intricate dynamic, illustrating how the ideals of self-determination and personal freedom often clash with the expectations of a society that values conformity and duty.

For Shari, her struggle is not simply about choosing between two suitors, Ravi and Gerard, or even between two lifestyles—one tied to her Indian roots and the other offering the allure of modernity. Instead, her conflict delves deeper into the essence of her identity. It is about defining herself as a person who can embrace both tradition and change without losing her authenticity. The choices she faces are symbolic of a broader generational challenge: how to navigate a world in flux without being consumed by its contradictions. Shari's raw and evocative reflection—"Moulded. How? Pulled, pushed, elongated, flattened, hammered, punched and gouged out until I was the right specimen, the perfect wife" (Nambisan 73)—captures the emotional toll of societal expectations. The imagery of being physically shaped, almost brutalized, into an ideal form reveals the intense pressure women face to conform to prescribed roles. This vivid metaphor speaks not only to her personal experience but also to the collective struggle of many young women caught between the traditional archetype of the self-sacrificing wife and the modern ideal of a liberated, self-actualized individual.

Through Shari's nuanced portrayal, *Mango-Coloured Fish* offers a richly layered narrative that delves into the complexities of identity in a rapidly changing world. The novel examines the interplay between tradition and modernity, between societal expectations and personal desires, and between collective duty and individual freedom. It challenges the reader to consider whether it is possible to reconcile these opposing forces or whether the act of self-definition inevitably requires letting go of one for the sake of the other. In the end, Shari's journey is not just a personal odyssey but a reflection of the broader societal evolution in contemporary India. Her story underscores the resilience required to carve out a unique identity in a world where the pull of tradition is as strong as the push of modernity. By navigating this delicate balance, *Mango Coloured Fish* transcends its narrative confines, emerging as a powerful commentary on the evolving nature of identity, culture, and the individual in an interconnected, ever-changing world.

Conclusion



In *Mango Coloured Fish*, Kavery Nambisan provides a nuanced exploration of the conflict between tradition and modernity, as experienced by the protagonist Shari. Through Shari's struggle to reconcile her family's expectations with her own desires, the novel captures the broader societal shifts happening in contemporary India. Shari's journey ultimately reflects a universal human experience—the search for identity in a world where the old and the new area in flaxtion.

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