

The Scalpel and the Pen: An Interview with Dr. Kavery Nambisan

Jennifer L.

Kavery Nambisan is a novelist. She is also a surgeon who practices in rural India. Nambisan's career in medicine has been a strong influence in her fiction. She has authored several novels for adults, each with widely differing themes, and has also contributed to *Indian Literature*, a journal published by Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters. Nambisan's writing is greatly influenced by Thoreau and Gandhi as she finds them uncomplicated and candid. She has penned seven novels so far, viz. *The Truth (almost) About Bharat* (1991), *The Scent of Pepper* (1996), *Mango-coloured Fish* (1998), *On Wings of Butterflies* (2002), *The Hills of Angheri* (2005), *The Story That Must Not Be Told* (2010) and *A Town Like Ours* (2014). Out of these, *Mango-coloured...* was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award and *The Story That...* for the Man Asian Literary Prize 2008 as well as The DSC Prize.

Below is an interview with Kaveri Nambisan - conducted through an exchange of emails by Jennifer L. - on her views about the writing process.

JL: "My one prayer, which I say aloud is for myself. When all this is over and done with, Pingakshi, grant that I have my feet, my eyes turned backwards". The closing prayer of Rajkumari in *A Town like Ours* is heart touching. Could you please elaborate on it?

KN: It is a cry of despair for what she has lost; and what she has seen happen to her village and to some of the people she cares so much about. She cannot bear to think of living in a future when things can only get worse.

JL: The haunting words (inner voice) of Nalli - 'Give me that thing' - is repeated in various places in *The Hills of Angheri*. Nalli is a combination of physical weakness and mental strength. Please talk about the character's endurance and will-power.

KN: Nalli is nothing if not earnest. This earnestness is about everything in her life. She is imbued with a sense of purpose. And I think this constant refrain, 'Give me that thing,' is a prayer that she be granted a purpose and for that purpose to be true. But prayers don't transform themselves into the real always and she often ends up disappointed; mostly I think, with herself.

- JL:** We see Simon's love-hate relationship under the obsessive control of Harini; Manohar's childlessness; and, Gautam's superior attitude and his own set of rules. Do you think that the temperament of each portrays psychological realities?
- KN:** To me, they are real. These complex character-traits are not essentially found only in men, though. Deep disappointment, sorrow and hubris, can bring out strange traits which we ourselves do not realise exist within us and lead us to certain forms of behaviour.
- JL:** *The Scent...* and *The Hills...* describe the minute cultural details of a community. How far do you believe that cultural authenticity is significant when it comes to the creation of a literary work by an author?
- KN:** Cultural authenticity is the right expression. Its meaning in literary fiction should be understood clearly. The writer must be familiar with the true trajectory of background and events in history and only then attempt to subvert or re-imagine the truth. I find it lends richness to fiction but is not easy to pull off. Unfortunately, our reading public may not have the intellectual sophistication to appreciate any of it. (I'm not trying to be condescending in any way, please understand, but it can be frustrating for a writer.)
- JL:** Satire is the art of writing which requires bold observation and just the right degree of representation. Your stories are packed with a striking satire on society, lifestyle, relationships and individual behaviour. Do you feel that your novels should reflect your consciousness of and commitment towards social responsibility?
- KN:** I have increasingly come to believe that every serious writer is an activist, politically speaking, in particular. It is borne out in the present situation because politics has undermined the social fabric of our society. Like it or not, writers (not hacks) wear the mantle of activism.
- JL:** A striking feature of your novels is the titles. Could you please tell something about such titles as *Mango-coloured...* and *The Scent...*?
- KN:** The credit for both the titles goes to David Davidar, the editor of my early novels. The brief scene about the 'mango' coloured fish was in the novel and he picked it up as the title. It works beautifully because the colour of a mango changes as it ripens; also, the colour is perceived differently by every eye. Much like human nature.
- JL:** Your works are a melange of satirical nuances, psychological portrayals and cultural values. How do you like your novels to be acknowledged and remembered?

- KN:** One of my readers based in New York never fails to tell me that I am not known well enough, and not appreciated enough. The fact that quite a few of my readers tell me this is satisfying. I find that they are usually readers who have read my work more than once and each time find something new to talk to me about.
- JL:** The style of your work is rich and simple; attractive and straightforward. "Moulded, how? Pulled, pushed, elongated, flattened, hammered, punched and gouged out until I was the right specimen, the perfect wife?" (*Mango-coloured...*) Each word of yours echoes the deep meaning of a disturbed soul. In what kind of temperament do you sit down to creating such a work?
- KN:** I don't try anything special or get into any temperament. All along, I have written while also being a busy surgeon which means I had to snatch whatever time I could get each day. The only thing significant is that I pay a lot of attention to my dreams. They are always vivid and I learn about my own subconscious through them. I'm certain they influence the way I shape my characters and stories.
- JL:** The most surprising quality of your writing is the versatility of the characters and the motifs employed. How is it that everything you write about creates an impact in the mind of the readers?
- KN:** Tough to answer this: I really don't know. While a few characters like Nanji, Subbu and Nalli, are pinched from real life, the others are created. Probably, it is the consummation of that which is observed and what is imagined. Dreams, after all, are speech and art of the subconscious, so they are vital. I have the greatest respect for dreams.
- JL:** 'Death, Decay, Collapse, Destruction' – Be it human beings, buildings, nature or relationships. Please share the magic of what makes your depictions so emotional and heart wrenching?
- KN:** I try to see the world with an honest eye. It's all there.
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