

Cultural Identity in Kavery Nambisan's *On the Wings of Butterflies*

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Abstract

Kavery Nambisan's *On Wings of Butterflies* provides a nuanced exploration of the intersection between traditional values and cultural identity within contemporary rural India. The narrative delves into how deeply rooted customs, such as family honor and communal solidarity, influence the characters' decisions and social roles. Through the protagonist's struggles and the depiction of gender-based constraints, Nambisan highlights the dual nature of tradition as both a stabilizing force and a limiting factor. The novel also examines the impact of modernization, revealing how characters must navigate the tension between maintaining cultural heritage and embracing new opportunities. By illustrating the evolving nature of tradition and cultural identity, Nambisan offers a rich commentary on the challenges of adapting to change while preserving one's cultural roots.

Key words: cultural identity, traditional values, modernization, social duty and gender constraints.

Introduction

Kavery Nambisan's *On Wings of Butterflies* intricately explores the dynamic interplay between traditional values and cultural identity in the context of modernizing rural India. The novel vividly captures how deeply entrenched, customs and societal norms shape the lives of its characters, particularly as they confront the pressures of contemporary changes. Through a rich narrative and complex character portrayals, Nambisan examines the significance of traditions in maintaining cultural identity while also addressing the challenges posed by modernization. This exploration not only highlights the role of tradition in providing a sense of belonging and continuity but also underscores the constraints it can impose, especially on women. As such, the novel offers a profound commentary on the evolving nature of cultural identity and the negotiation between preserving heritage and adapting to new realities.

In *On Wings of Butterflies*, traditional values form the backbone of the narrative, shaping the characters' lives and the societal structures in which they exist. Set in rural India, the novel vividly portrays a world where family honor, social duty, and communal solidarity are not just abstract concepts but concrete realities that guide daily life.

In traditional societies, family honor plays a crucial role in shaping individual decisions, particularly for women, as reflected in both Kavery Nambisan's *On Wings of Butterflies* and broader social research. Nambisan's portrayal of the hierarchical structure within a family, where women are ranked based on their marital status and number of children, exemplifies the societal pressure to conform to prescribed roles: "A woman married for two years or less, and with no children, will be Housewife junior... A woman with eight to ten married years and three children is Housewife major... And right up on top is the general who has six or more children and over twenty-five years at the job" (OWB, 91-92). This emphasis on family roles is closely tied to research findings that suggest men benefit more from marriage because women tend to promote their spouses' health more than vice versa (Ray et al., 2009; Umbersan, 1992; Umbersan et al., 2006).

The connection between these two points highlights how traditional gender roles not only shape the family dynamic but also reinforce unequal benefits in marriage, with women sacrificing personal desires and well-being for the sake of family honor and the health of their spouses.

Evita's relationship with her mother-in-law reflects the complexities of patriarchal family dynamics, and her secret affair exposes the tensions between personal desire and societal norms. Ultimately, her decision to leave her husband marks a turning point in her journey towards selfdiscovery and empowerment. Through Evita's journey, Nambisan sheds light on the need for women's empowerment and autonomy, highlighting the importance of self-discovery and social change.

Communal solidarity is another critical aspect of traditional values portrayed in the novel.

The characters often find their identities intertwined with the well-being of their communities.

Festivals, rituals, and collective responsibilities play a significant role in reinforcing these bonds. For example, communal activities such as festivals provide a sense of belonging and continuity, linking individuals to their cultural heritage and to each other.

Despite their role in providing stability, traditional values also impose constraints. For women, these constraints can be particularly severe, as societal norms often limit their roles to those defined by family and community expectations. The novel portrays the struggle of female characters who are bound by these restrictions, revealing the tension between conforming to traditional roles and seeking personal fulfillment. The protagonist's journey highlights how these constraints can stifle personal growth and self-expression, presenting a nuanced view of how traditional values both support and confine.

Cultural identity in *On Wings of Butterflies* is depicted as a complex interplay between tradition and individual aspirations. The novel delves into how cultural identity is constructed, negotiated, and sometimes fractured by traditional values and modern influences.

Traditional values offer a strong sense of cultural identity. The rituals, customs, and communal practices depicted in the novel provide characters with a sense of belonging and continuity. For instance, participating in traditional ceremonies and adhering to cultural practices reinforce characters' connections to their heritage, creating a sense of unity and shared history. This connection to tradition offers emotional and psychological stability, helping characters navigate their lives amidst change.

The novel also highlights the complexities of balancing personal desires with societal expectations. Characters, especially women, often face conflicts between their individual aspirations and the roles prescribed by traditional norms. The protagonist's internal struggles reflect a broader conflict where personal identity must be negotiated within the confines of cultural expectations. This conflict underscores the dual nature of cultural identity—while tradition provides a framework for belonging, it can also restrict personal freedom and self expression.

The constraints faced by female characters are particularly pronounced. Traditional roles often limit their opportunities for education, career advancement, and personal agency. The novel portrays these limitations with empathy and insight, illustrating how cultural expectations can impose significant barriers to women's autonomy and growth. By focusing on these challenges, Nambisan provides a critical perspective on the gendered dimensions of cultural identity.

Nambisan's portrayal of tradition is dynamic, reflecting the ways in which cultural practices evolve in response to modernization and societal change. The novel explores how characters adapt their traditional values to accommodate new realities, highlighting the fluid nature of cultural identity.

As the characters encounter modern influences, such as new technologies and changing social attitudes, they face the challenge of integrating these elements into their traditional framework. The novel depicts how modernization impacts traditional practices, prompting characters to rethink and sometimes modify their customs. For example, the introduction of new educational opportunities or career paths may lead characters to question and adapt traditional roles.

Kavery Nambisan and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie both highlight the evolving nature of tradition and cultural identity in their works. Nambisan, in **On Wings of Butterflies**, observes how traditional gender norms still influence behavior in modern settings, noting that "most guys in our college move about in groups, they're afraid of the Nice Girls" (ibid, 77). This shows how traditional ideas of gender roles persist, even as modernization creates new social dynamics. Similarly, Adichie, in **Americanah**, underscores the fluidity of cultural identity by stating, "Cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'" (236), emphasizing that culture is not fixed but continuously reshaped.

The connection between these quotes lies in their shared understanding of culture as an adaptive force. While Nambisan's characters navigate the tension between modern values and traditional expectations, Adichie articulates that cultural identity evolves through this very process of balancing the old with the new. Both authors suggest that tradition, far from being static, changes over time as individuals like Evita, in Nambisan's novel, strive to honor their roots while embracing new possibilities.

Family and community play central roles in shaping cultural identity in *On Wings of Butterflies*. The novel highlights how these social structures influence individual choices and reinforce cultural values.

Evita's interactions with her family in Kavery Nambisan's *'On Wings of Butterflies'* highlight how familial expectations deeply shape her choices and influence her sense of self. The pressure to conform to family norms is a recurring theme, showing how family bonds can simultaneously support and constrain personal development. For example, Evita's desire for education consistently clashes with her family's expectations of her roles as a wife and daughter. Nambisan underscores this tension through a contrast between Maria, who lacks confidence and states, "we are nobodies," and Evita's firm rebuttal: "we're somebody. Maria and Evita" (ibid, 6). This assertion of identity reflects Evita's determination to define herself beyond her family's limitations, even as societal and familial pressures continue to shape her path.

Nambisan also highlights broader societal injustices, as Evita notes, "We witness injustice every day and everywhere. Two thirds of the illiterates are women. The men find it easy to divide and rule" (ibid, 39). This observation connects Evita's personal struggle with the larger systemic oppression of women, where educational opportunities are limited by traditional gender roles.

The tension between family expectations and personal aspirations is mirrored in academic discussions of how mothers can influence their daughters' education. Scholars Anne Hill and Elizabeth King, in their work for the World Bank, argue that increased education for women improves not only family health and child survival but also long-term investment in children's human capital (King and Hill, 1993). This research suggests that educated women are more likely to support their daughters' education, highlighting a generational divide between mothers who have had access to education and those who have not.

Evita's journey encapsulates this tension between familial obligations and personal goals, illustrating how family dynamics can simultaneously restrict and encourage personal growth. While her family's expectations limit her autonomy, Evita's determination to pursue education signals a shift towards breaking generational patterns and redefining the role of women within the family and society.

The novel also explores the role of the broader community in reinforcing cultural values. Communal activities and social interactions are depicted as integral to maintaining cultural identity. The expectations of the community, including participation in rituals and adherence to social norms, play a significant role in shaping characters' behaviors and choices. The pressure to conform to communal standards can be both a source of support and a constraint on individual freedom. Characters often face the challenge of balancing their personal identities with communal expectations. The novel portrays the complexities of navigating this balance, where personal aspirations must be reconciled with the need to fulfill communal roles. This negotiation reflects the broader struggle to maintain cultural identity while responding to the demands of both family and community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *On Wings of Butterflies* offers a rich exploration of traditional values and cultural identity, presenting a nuanced view of how these elements interact within the context of contemporary Indian society. Nambisan's novel provides a comprehensive examination of the ways in which traditional values shape personal and communal identities while also addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by modernization. Through its detailed characterizations and thematic depth, the novel highlights the dynamic interplay between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to new realities, offering valuable insights into the evolving nature of cultural belonging.

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