

A FOURTH WORLD PERSPECTIVE IN KAVERI NAMBISAN'S THE TRUTH (ALMOST) ABOUT BHARAT

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Abstract

India is a land of myths and stories with a long history of its own literature. Many creative personalities from India secured a place on the global literary arena. One among them is KaveriNambisan, surgeon cum writer, who uses her pen to let out her down to earth experiences and heart breaking glimpses from all walks of life in her novel The Truth (Almost) About Bharat.

The novel starts with a quick look at the casual and calm life of medical students which turns topsyturvy when their fight for the cause of the workers leaves them running helter skelter. Suspended from college, Bharat, the protagonist finds himself on a long journey across the country. This journey is aimless and particularly to nowhere. At first he goes to Delhi and from there to Gwalior, then to Mysore, to Bangalore and to Kerala. The novel continues with a wide range of experiences in the dens of dacoits, in railway compartments, hotels, lodges, etc. Though Bharat initially takes it up aimlessly, all these experiences enable him understand the ebbs and flows of life. Towards the end of the novel he patches up with his friends and comes back home more knowledgeable and sensible for life. Nambisan makes the protagonist's expedition metaphorical to the inward journey he makes experiencing the hard core realities of life. In Mango Coloured Fish too Nambisan uses journey motif for the self-realization of the protagonist and exhorts the readers towards finding meaning for life.

KaveryNambisan says that "it is life that feeds literature". This paper is a study of Nambisan's The Truth (Almost) About Bharat and is an attempt to understand life which feeds literature, along with all its ups and downs.

Key Words: KaveriNambisan, The Truth (Almost) About Bharat, Life, Literature.

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"The one and only substitute for experience which we have not ourselves had is art, literature" says Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a Nobel laureate from Russia. And this experience should have a purpose, and a productive outcome is what people believe and thus stand by the school of thought that promotes the idea of 'art for social purpose'. It understands art and literature as meant to serve the people and help them in their struggle for a better life by arousing people's emotions against oppression, injustice and increasing their sensitivity to suffering.

Present day novelists are aiming at social reform and this, in different dimensions and in all possible spheres of life. Religious, inter racial relations, caste relationships, protests against westernization are vividly depicted in some works and some stood as mirror images of the degraded society. Social criticism and social protest, love triangles, widow marriages and characters from the elite are given an important role along with women emancipation, often depicting a move from innocence to experience.

One prominent personality worth consideration is KaveriNambisan. Though from a family with a sound political background and no literary precedents she never turned towards politics and carved a niche for herself in the literary arena. A surgeon by profession, she has devoted most of her working life to practice in rural India. She is a regular contributor to the national media on literature and health care issues. Besides writing several stories for children she also published a few novels. Her works showcase her ability to bring together human experience of all ages, from all walks of life. She talks about individual and family, village and city, tradition and modernity, ambition and its limits — and finally, about those who settle down, and the few who fly on restlessly, she addresses social issues which are thought provoking and deal with the day to day moral dilemmas of life. Her fiction is less fictitious and demands less of the so called "willing suspension of disbelief".

In KaveriNambisan's The Truth (Almost) About Bharat the 'journey' undertaken by the protagonist gives the much needed twist to the plot and throws light on the realities of life and a glimpse of the 'Fourth World' in the 'Third World'.

Bharat alias Tarzan alias Viswanath, Vishu for short, is a final year medical student and the protagonist. Son of a Lieutenant Colonel posted in Car Nicobar and a mother who is ashamed to be just a Lieutenant Colonel's wife, Bharat leads a relaxed life without worrying much about life itself. A good student in the final year with a very promising life awaiting in Canada, Bharat finds himself forced into being an MC (Master of ceremony) for the college annual function.

He along with his friends, Shanks and Rishi, wishes to grab the opportunity to represent the plight of the mess workers. They face the ire of Chitambaram Pillai, the dean of the medical college and Trivikramananda, the dean of the engineering college and are suspended. Student's reaction to their suspension turns violent and Shafruddin their college chowkidar (a watchman) is injured and is shifted to the ICU. The three are in a dilemma but very soon Rishi apologizes and returns to college. Shanks is not worried, and Bharat, unable to face all this, wishes to be away from home for a while and decides to visit his Tinnu uncle in Delhi. Almost there, at the spur of the moment, decides otherwise and starts his long journey across India.

Heading towards Gwalior, he gets off the highway and stops at a dhaba (a motel). He meets Bhojvi and spends the night with him. Bhojvi wishes that he returns home and pursue his medical education. It is only after Bhojvi's departure Bharat gets to know that he is the most wanted dacoit and turned so because of the circumstances. As a guard to the president, Bhojvi fails to get justice for his sister who was harassed for dowry, raped by five of her husband's friends and murdered. There after he refuses to obey the law, turns a bhagi, a dacoit according to the police, and the dispenser of justice for the common people.

Bharat sets off to Lalithankapur and caught with a flat tyre moves towards Chatara from where he is forcibly taken to the Badshah, who is none other than Bhojvi. Appointed as the doctor for Bhojvi's camp he manages with the help of Banshi, a compounder and smuggled medical supplies. He treats Bhojvi's lice ridden mother and several other patients. On refusing to abort the six months pregnant niece of Bhojvi he is barred from the Badshah's presence and later from the camp as it is moving ahead. This encounter shows Bharat about the ill placed system of justice and the kind heart and just ways of the so called 'cold-blooded'.

Once in Gwalior, Bharat meets TrilokPadmavathi Shastri a small politician, who fights for justice, the oppressed, women, children and animals. Bharat is impressed but is not positive about the outcome. It is only retrospectively, a bit later in the novel Bharat realizes the need for someone to represent the voice of the oppressed and the animals. Off to Mysore he finds himself in a financially tight position, meets Amithab alias Bheeru and Mithun alias Babu, two children, who were deserted by their parents to fend for themselves. Their mother elopes and father goes in search of her. Bharat is amazed at the way they fend for themselves and shocked at the manner they are exploited by the police. Here he gets to see life sans resources and lead the hard way.

Down with malaria when in Mysore, Bharat is taken care of by Dr. Franklin Raghunath Rao, his wife and assistant. Unable to pay the bill, he works for Dr. Franklin Raghunath Rao for a short period. He sees the medical aid available for the common man and puts up with the bare minimum. His inability to undertake a c-section and the uneducated assistant Venkatesh coming to his rescue helps him realize the gap between what is taught and what is practiced, a glimpse of the practical practice in reality. His stay with Dr. Franklin Raghunath Rao turns out to be an eye opener both for his professional as well as personal lives. On the professional side every case he sees throws a challenge and proves a litmus test to his self confidence. On the other hand each person he meets turns out to be an open book for him

and teach lessons for life. A close look at the life and home of Venkatesh, the assistant to Dr. Franklin RaghunathRao, son of a dhobi, shows the real life conditions of the people on the lowest rung of the social ladder.

When on home visits, in the absence of Dr. Franklin, he gets a chance to experience the love of Mrs. Mary Myers for her long dead husband, her act of getting him buried in the backyard so as to stay close, her preparedness to be excommunicated for the same, leave him agape. He comprehends the true love and bliss in marital life when he sees her reading what her husband loves at his tomb. He is reminded of the many couples he knows and met, and his parents who are wedded and remain so for the sake of society and status.

Gaining more wisdom in a few days than what his three years medical course could impart, Bharat pushes off towards Kodagu. His slow paced ride and the stay at Hotel Famous in Virajpet give him ample time to absorb and digest all what he witnesses and experiences. He spends time with a hockey team and the suicide of Hasmukh look alike from the team reminds him of his life, his friends and the options open to one in life. In the drive from Kodagu to Iritty and then to Tellicherry he tastes communism. The suffering of thirty thousand chicken help him, retrospectively, appreciate TrilokPadmavathiShastri's idea of representing animals too in his agenda of the 'To Be Liberated'.

Staying at De Paris and exploring the world around he meets Rajee and falls in love at first sight, in whom he sees a good listener. He voices out his opinions on the pathetic plight of Indians and about the sorry state of affairs, his intention to write 'Kahan Bharat', a story more about India than about Bharat himself. (Nambisan 115).KaveriNambisan's own perception of India is reflected here, not only the busy life in metropolitans but the real life in the remotest nook and corners of the real India. Bharat leaves to Ernakulam, but with an intension to return, propose and marry Rajee.

While dining at hotel Queen of Sheeba in a village, Bharat meets Shanks, catches up with the latest happenings, gets to know of Shafruddin's well being and decides to wind up the trip after visiting a few more places like the Chinese fishing nets, Jew Town, Kathakali, a conglomeration of the 'glocal' the global and the local, the present image of India. This makes it clear that embarking on the journey was not with an intension to escape from harsh realities but, true to what he tells Rajee, 'to discover himself' (Nambisan 115).

Reaching Ernakulam Bharat stays at Hotel Fashion, sees all what he wants and gains more than what he expects. Thence starts the return journey, the uncoiling, back to Tellicherry Bharat meets Rajee and on proposing she reveals that she is married, waiting for her husband to come from Riyadh and take her along with their baby. She expresses her only wish that Bharat should go back, continue his studies and become a doctor. On his way back, when in Mysore he avoids meeting Dr. Franklin RaghunathRao; gets to know of TrilokPadmavathiSashtri losing elections once again and avoids meeting him too. On reaching Gwalior, he visits Bhojvi's camp now under the control of his brother Karan Singh. All this looks like reel life and not real life to Shanks.

Once home, Bharat is forced to face his father who informs him of his mother's absence who is unwilling to accept their apologies. A new Bharat decides on fixing his parents' marriage and then his own life, and heads to Agra along with his father to meet his mother.

In almost all the works of KaveriNambisan there is the separation from the known, transformation in the unknown territory and returning wiser and victorious for good. Her other novels *The Scent of Pepper*, *Mango-coloured Fish*, *On Wings of Butterflies*, *The Hills of Angheri* and *The Story that Must Not Be Told* have portrayals of one or the other characters leaving behind their comfort zones and venturing into the world only to return a different person, be it success, be it knowledge or at least with a sense of satisfaction and clearer picture of oneself and one's life. In this sense journey technique is used to place challenges before the characters, teach lessons for life and prepare to face success and failures with a balanced mind.

As Karl Marx argued, to understand human history, one has to refer not to the stories of great individuals or the conflict between different studies, but track different social classes and their struggles with each other (Meharunnisa 260). KaveriNambisan in all her works and especially in this novel "The Truth (Almost) About Bharat" makes the survey of India easy and clear. For in an interview with Vijay Nair she says, "We know the term 'Shining India' is an oxymoron. While prosperity has reached certain miniscule pockets in our country, the hinterlands expose shameful truths of starvation deaths and farmer suicides" (Nair 30). And yet in another interview with Deepa Mishra she expresses, "I worry constantly about the oppression of those without power or a voice of protest, be they women, children, men or animals. I hate the inequality and injustice that exists" (Mishra 260) and this same is reflected in her works too. India that was considered 'a developing nation' still continues to be under the same label and KaveriNambisan gives a true picture of the ugly side, dissects and makes bare the fact that there exists a 'Fourth World' in the so called 'Third World Nation'. A glimpse of the present state of affairs proves it and the right literature prompts us to respond to the needs of the society.

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