

Green Roof's and Pictorial Meadows: A Multiscalar Look at Landscape and Literature in Kaveri Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper*

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Abstract

In this shrinking world love too shrinks. The world is full of pretence and only feigned love is found everywhere. Nambisan, as a visionary suggests that the coexistence of man and woman is possible only when there is love. Surgeon-writer Kavery Nambisan plays on the body motif as her novel winds through a complex village life and cadavers in medical school. Kavery Nambisan is a renowned Indian writer and she has written six novels so far, namely: 'The Truth about Bharath (Almost)' (1992), 'The Scent of Pepper' (1996), 'Mango Coloured Fish' (1998), 'On the Wings of Butterflies' (2002), 'The Hills of Angheri' (2005) and 'The Story That Must Not Be Told' (2010). Kavery Nambisan's novel *The Scent of Pepper* attempts to bring to the fore how the region of Kodagu with its distinct culture encompassing its myths, customs and beliefs, structures her narrative and examines how far the author has been successful in artistically realising it. The detailed descriptions of the landscape, the people, their myths and legends, their customs and traditional beliefs presented in the novel poses a potent counter discourse to the unifying grand narratives of nationalism. Nambisan's attempt of foregrounding the region with all its specificities could be seen as an attempt made by the region as a defiant subaltern to write its own history.

KEYWORDS; Tradition, Women, Region, Culture, Identity

Introduction

Kavery Nambisan is basically a surgeon by profession, but she is also a fictional writer. She combines at time her life experiences with those of the fictional world. There is also a use of medical registers in Nambisan's fiction. She uses the medical science language in her writings. *The Scent of Pepper* published in 1996 is an ethnographic narrative. The novel is a study of Kaleyanda clan, a land owing family of the Kodava race in the district of Coorg, Karnataka State, India. Yet, it is also about the whole race of Kodavas deep in the remote province of Kodagu in South India, the mighty Kaleyandas, a family born of warriors and owners of vast estates, are the envy of the local feudal group. The Rao Bahadur presides over an extended family that includes his elder sons, Baliyanna, a talented vet who falls secretly in love with the wife of British planter who despises natives, Nanji, Baliyanna wife, a resolute and ingenious woman indispensable to the family she has married into, and Subbaiah her, born lame but magically cured. Troubles begin to envelop the family.

Nambisan's perception on Landscape

KaveryNambisan's novel *The Scent of Pepper* attempts to bring to the fore how the region of Kodagu with its distinct culture encompassing its myths, customs and beliefs, structures her narrative and examines how far the author has been successful in artistically realising it. It is also for the first time that the ethnic minority of the Kodavas ingress Indian English fiction. *The Scent of Pepper* becomes a space where the identity of the Kodavas and their racial and ethnic history gets inscribed. In chronicling the saga of the Kodavas, the text could also be seen as an attempt made by the novelist to preserve their ethnicity on the onslaught of migration and westernisation. Having spent her childhood in Kodagu and being brought up on her grandmother's stories, Nambisan is able to render the novel its distinctive regional flavour. This paper seeks to study KaveryNambisan's novel *The Scent of Pepper* from the perspective emphasizing landscape. In doing so it attempts to bring to the fore how the region of Kodagu with its distinct culture encompassing its myths, customs and beliefs, structures her narrative and examines how far the author has been successful in artistically realising it. The novel becomes a space where the identity of the Kodavas and their racial and ethnic history gets inscribed.

Nambisan writes: "My method is to think in the language of the character I'm writing about and then translate it in my head into English, which, since it isn't my Mother Tongue, is perhaps my Father Tongue, the tongue which enables me to communicate with more readers while retaining my very Indian thoughts" ("Migration"). The annexation of Kodagu in 1834 by the British set the stage for the entry of the British planters who were searching for an alternative as their plantations in Ceylon were destroyed by the borer pest. They discovered that Kodagu with its black moist soil and plenty of shade would be the most ideal for the cultivation of coffee and that the natives, in spite of all their ignorance, were wise when it comes to cultivation. Coffee, an indigenous product of Kodagu thus becomes instrumental for it being colonised and eventually leads to its modernisation. Historical details of the life of the British planters in Kodagu and their association with the indigenes have been portrayed through the narrative. As waves of nationalism swept across the breadth of the country, the Kodavas too were not spared. *Pepper* also draws attention to the issue of the merger of Kodagu and the modernisation of the region. The detailed descriptions of the landscape, the people, their myths and legends, their customs and traditional beliefs presented in the novel poses a potent counter discourse to the unifying grand narratives of nationalism. While the earlier nationalist historiographies presented a pan-Indian glorified picture of the nation, Nambisan's attempt of foregrounding the region with all its specificities could be seen as an attempt made by the region as a defiant subaltern to write its own history. Moreover, by making a woman, the "doubly marginalised" in nationalist discourses as the chief protagonist of *Pepper*, Nambisan has made audible the small voice that has long been suppressed under the grand narratives of the patriarchal nation. The novel, in this respect, turns out to be an exercise of writing back to these discourses. Myths form an integral part of the local culture and are fraught with the knowledge of the region's history, ecology and religious beliefs. One notices that the myths illustrated in *Pepper* are never a direct explanation of the subject matter but reflect "the fullness of life itself from which the myth is born" (Malinowski 198). The exact origins of the Kodavas are shrouded in mystery and no definitive research has ascertained this fact.

In *Pepper*, the region is realistically rendered through its verdant valleys, fast flowing streams, paddy fields, coffee bushes, cardamom and pepper plantations and the unfailing rains that assure them of a bountiful produce. The isolation of the region located amidst thick jungles and mountain ranges contributes to the distinctive mode of life and culture of the Kodavas. The various *nads* mentioned in the novel can be actually located in the geographical map of Kodagu. The various *nads* mentioned in the novel can be actually located in the geographical map of Kodagu. *Pepper* expresses its strong belief in pantheism which enforces the idea of the sacredness of nature and considers the cosmos as the all-encompassing. By endowing a pantheistic outlook to her characters, Nambisan is able to further resist the common charge that regionalism is limited in its perception. Nanji's forte, says Nambisan, was her affection "that extended not just to everyone, but for everything that lived" (42). *Pepper* gives a profound vision of man in harmony with his natural world and a close echo of Nambisan's approach to nature. Furthermore, Subbu's relationship with the land seems to carry overtones from Wordsworth's pantheism as reflected in the "Tintern Abbey." As a child, Subbu's contact with nature was physical and sensuous: "There were so many thirsts to quench and wasting time in classrooms seemed so pointless. Learning, Subbu reasoned could wait till old age when the only thing worthwhile in one's body was the mind. Life now was meant for dizzy pleasures" (*Pepper* 40). As a youth he craved for the presence of nature and dreams of Kodagu— "the stickiness of bubbling earth, the smell of rotting leaves that fell from the sprawling jackfruit and athi trees, and the itching from the sweat that cooled his back" (*Pepper* 137). Later on in life a subdued power of experience overcomes him and endows him a sublime and blessed mood which lightens the burden of the world. Nambisan advocates the healing power of nature in her text. Nanji prescribes innumerable remedies to the locals for various illnesses but when she sees her husband in throes of mental depression, she suggests he go for hunting. She feels the hardships of the jungle would help him uplift his spirits. Thoreau suggests in *Walden* that hunting is one of the best parts of man's education which brings him in "closest acquaintance with nature" (141). Nature guides her in the form of her ancestors and educates her. It could also be possible to consider the grandmother of Nanji who constantly guides her in life, to be Mother Nature herself.

Besides dwelling on the bounties of nature, the text also voices a plea for preserving the ecology of the region. Nambisan has expressed her concern over the disappearance of tigers in Kodagu. The issue of deforestation too finds a mention in the novel.

Conclusion

In *Pepper*, one finds not a single voice but polyphonic voices and multiple perspectives. Such voices and perspectives comprise of the indigenes as well as the British, thus giving the region its complex nature. It also lends an open-endedness to the text, as there is no single grand or macro narrative of the community but numerous little narratives which enables the reader to fathom the intricacies of the locale. By taking up the issue of the merger of Kodagu into the larger state of Karnataka, Nambisan links the history of the region with the state of Karnataka and the national history of India. It exposes the colonialist character of the nation whereby the myriad voices of the country are subsumed into a single whole. The close bonding they share with the land endows them a rootedness which is not found in other regions. For Murphy "a civilised harmony still exists between the landscape and the

people” (102). Even when they move out in search of jobs, they have one or more branches of their clans living in the ancestral home to look after the land. For Nambisan, the rustic Concord, an economically backward town free from the evils of industrialism evident in other areas of Massachusetts resembles her land of Kodagu. Nambisan’s discourse of regionalism explores not only the topography and cultural aspects of a region, which however cannot be neglected, but it also lies in the realisation of the self, the immense potentiality of the individual that keeps him firmly rooted to the region. For her, the concept of regionalism does not become a parochial or fanatical propaganda for securing oneself compactly to one’s own region; it consequently becomes a liberating force. In a pure-cultural society like India, unity is to be achieved by inculcating a spirit of harmony, and this is paradoxically achieved only by recognising the diversity of regions and the distinctiveness of each individual. The novel offers insights into various aspects of the Kodava society and highlights its traditions and cultural practices that is inevitably changing and evolving with the times. Though Nambisan’s work lacks the innovative and experimental techniques used by contemporary Indian English fictional writers, she successfully resorts to a simple and realistic mode of narration to impart her moral and poetic vision of life. Land in the indigenous conception is not only intimately connected with the people who work it and draw their sustenance from it, but derives its meaning from that relationship, which is as much a spiritual as material relationship. The claim is one that has created much legal headache for nation-states, but also has exposed the fundamentally colonialist character of the nation. It is, in fact, an assertion of place-based sovereignty not only against an off-ground globalization, but also against the abstractions of the nation state. Nambisan validates this concept of Indian modernity through her text.

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