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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

An Ecocritical Reading of Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper*

Savitha Sukumar
Research Scholar
University of Mumbai

Ecocriticism that came into being in the 1990's as an important critical school discussing and evaluating the relationship between environment and literature is seen to have a significant foray into the nature versus culture debate. Though William Rueckhart is credited to have used ecological analysis in understanding literature as early as 1974, the movement received a stimulating response with the unstinted efforts of Cheyll Glotfelty in her landmark book *The Ecocriticism Reader Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Glotfelty succinctly enumerates why reading nature oriented literature is extremely vital in the present day environmental crises and how nature literature and writers writing with a strong preference for nature as a foreground are helpful and valuable in understanding the environmental threats and degradation facing mankind across the globe.

Regardless of what name it goes by, most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging our planet's basic life support systems. We are there. Either we change our ways or face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse. . . . The answer lies in recognizing that current environmental problems are largely of our making, are, in other words, a by-product of culture. . . . (Glotfelty xx-xxi)

Ecocriticism since its inception has increased manifold and transgressed disciplines, cut across boundaries to initiate and establish mutual coexisting relationship between environment and literature and between man and nature. In our clamour for increasing material consumption and the race to achieve a near perfect materialistic life, we have often forgotten the simple pleasures that nature can offer. The sunrise and sunset that inspired many poets, artists and literary personalities have been swallowed by tall buildings and towers providing electricity and mobile networks for people all over the world. The race for urban living and to be a part of the global identity has also uprooted the structure of the rural countryside and the modernisation of villages at the cost of urbanism. This paper attempts to understand the nuances of the relationship between nature and the characters inhabiting the novel *The Scent of Pepper* by Kavery Nambisan through ecocritical lens and also examine the interconnectedness of the characters with nature in the novel.

Kavery Nambisan is a gifted writer bringing alive the mountainous majesty of the district of Coorg. As one reads her novels namely *The Hills of Angheri* and *The Scent of Pepper*, the reader is immediately reminded of the writer's sense of place that gives a strong identity to the novels similar to Wordsworth's Lake District or Hardy's Wessex. Coorg famous for coffee plantations and hilly areas inhabited by robust people identify themselves as nature's people. Though they depend on nature for their sustenance and are deeply aware of nature's bounty invoked through the blessings of deities and ancestors; they too are influenced and carried away by the sweeping winds of capitalism, British imperialism, adopting the foreign culture and customs at the cost of

severing from the customs and rituals of the community. Nambisan is gifted with a keen sense of perception and an eye for detail that does not miss the shape and contour of the coffee leaves or the slope of the mountain or the various domestic tasks that make the novel an interesting read. She bravely attempts to project her characters made of eccentric personalities, quirky tastes, lofty ambitions and aspirations to create a niche for themselves but indicates a victory for the characters who remain true and faithful to nature and their roots.

Nambisan's novel the *Scent of Pepper* is a haunting tale of a family belonging to the Kaleyanda clan inhabiting much of the novel and the characters. It is a moving saga of the life and times of Nanji, the central character around whom the novel centres about though Nambisan does not envisage this development in the novel. The novel develops in a linear fashion from the time Nanji is married into the big landowning family headed by the ageing patriarch Rao Bahadur Madaiah and grows old enough to see her succeeding generation amidst developments in Coorg, British imperialism, the rise of patriotism and nationalistic feelings among the people of Coorg especially the youth, Gandhian sentiments, the working and reworking relationship between the different members of the family- their rise, descent and their destruction before the end of the novel. Nanji lives through both happy and unpleasant times to witness many events unfold before her but take charge of each responsibility as a natural course of events. Nanji knows only thing that is to work and keep on working and does not discharge her duties even growing old. Nambisan projects Nanji as a strong character completely in charge of her internal and external environments that is she is connected to her home and the coffee estates owned by the family. Nanji never felt the need to leave Coorg unlike other characters who seem to leave Coorg and live in different Indian towns. The home and the coffee estates seem to instil in her a sense of peace and calm. Nanji drowns her sorrows and pleasures in her work and looks at work not as drudgery or a mundane task but as an irredeemable object of life. She was born to work and does not shirk from her innumerable tasks be it feeding a large family, looking after her ailing father-in-law Rao Bahadur Madaiah, the servants of the house and the supervision of labourers in the coffee plantations.

Nanji enters the family by marrying the peace loving veterinary doctor Baliyanna famous and skilled in his profession of treating animals across Coorg. Nanji gives birth to thirteen children in the course of the novel but finally lives with Subbu who is born with a pair of deformed legs but becomes perfect at the age of seven. Nanji's children die due to unforeseen events in the novel but she seems to be unmoved by these calamities and takes the personal tragedies in her stride unlike Baliyanna who agonizes over each death in the family. Due to Baliyanna's preoccupation with his profession and a detached interest to supervise the household and the plantation affairs, Nanji with ease and efficiency proves to be charming, decisive and firm with both her inmates and the household servants. Nanji is adept at the multitude of domestic tasks and also familiar with agricultural aspects like sowing seeds and supervising the yield of the crops. In addition to managing her home and the outside environment, Nanji keeps an eye on her children and attends to their caretaking with the same efficiency of managing her household. Nambisan has carved Nanji's character as someone entrenched deeply to her domestic environment without unsettling her during Baliyanna's brief friendship with Clara Fox, the wife of the British planter Rupert Fox. On the contrary, Clara feels stifled in her environment amidst the firm control of Nanji over her environment and his afraid of uprooting her home. Clara though an outsider seems to slowly come to an understanding with her life in the Coorg plantations by mingling with the locals much to the chagrin of her husband. She constantly longs for the company of Baliyanna and

invites him on one pretext or the other. The death of her husband estranges Clara from the family and she leaves Coorg for England.

Nambisan populates the novels with interesting anecdotes about the Kodagu tribes, their customs and cultures, the mixing of the Western and the local culture and its effects on the people of Coorg, planting of coffee seeds, characters who are both modern and traditional; senile and eccentric, people who are out of tune with nature and bore the devastating effects of nature's fury through drought, flood, poor coffee yield and people preferring to live a wealthy life despite their frugality. She writes with amusement at the blind adoration for the British culture by the Kodavas and the extent of Anglicizing their life in terms of names, lifestyle, food habits, customs and dress and the cultivation of the gardens.

Amidst all the developments in the novel, Nambisan has portrayed the character of Nanji that remains true to her craft and draws the reader like a magnet to her strength, integrity and the practical approach to her life. Nanji's character truly reflects the basic premise of ecocriticism as the interconnectedness between nature and culture and also the connection between the physical world and human nature. Nanji remains an ardent follower of the soil and cherishes and nurtures it with her love and affection. Nambisan's craft displays strong ecocritical strains as she is familiar with the environment of Coorg that is lovingly captured in Nanji's internal and mutual co-existing relationship with nature. The reader can visualize the picturesque surroundings of the Coorg region inundated with lofty mountains, magnificent flora and fauna that can preserve and destroy the wealth of the region if spurned by the local inhabitants. The British inhabiting the place fall in love with the tranquil and peaceful place of Coorg and are often reluctant to leave the place.

The Scent of Pepper is very much a novel about Nanji as much as it about nature of the place. Nanji seems to permeate the essence of the novel and Nambisan integrates the character of Nanji seamlessly into the novel and every character is inadvertently related to her. Nature in this novel does not provide a beautiful backdrop but emerges as a force to reckon with when the coffee yield decreases one year as the ancestors have been angered, "There will be no escaping the anger of our ancestors. Kodagu will be punished" (*The Scent of Pepper*17). That is why the writer comments on the various festivals marking the different seasons and their functions with respect to agriculture. For instance festivals such as the Kalipodh, Puthari and the Shankramana are celebrated to rejoice the nature's bounty and power to rejuvenate the body and soul of the region and the people. Nambisan nativity and interconnectedness to the Coorgi environment translates effectively into the shaping Nanji as she is always seen working the pliant soil with her hands and making it as worthy as possible. Nanji comes across with a body and soul enmeshed with nature and her environment and nobody can separate the two.

Kavery Nambisan creates a wonderful working relationship and interconnections that are steeped in domestic realism in the novel through Nanji. What Nambisan skilfully attempts to project is the woman's domain extending from the hearth to the external environment and how she effectively manages the smooth operation of the household to the supervision of agricultural work. If Nanji is occupied with the enormous task of feeding her family and the retinue of servants with nutritious meals, pickling of fish, preparing delicacies for various festivals; she is equally at ease sowing, transplanting seeds and looking at errant leaves of the coffee plant. In fact Nanji is most comfortable when she is working in the paddy fields along with other women labourers and often relives nostalgic moments with her grandmother Neelakki. In a sense,

Nambisan has extensively discussed about the region of Coorg and the Coorgi way of life through Nanji.

Nanji doesn't seem to indulge in feminine pleasures of knitting, sewing or tending to the garden unlike other women. On the contrary she carelessly throws the seeds in her backyard and allows a plethora of plants to survive unlike the neat patches of landscape adorning many Coorgi homes. Nanji thrives in disorder and does not attempt to stifle nature in her growth. When her daughter-in-law Mallige is busy decorating the house with her sewing creations, Nanji frowns over the delicate temperament and disposition of Mallige and begins to doubt her capacity and efficiency to run a household.

Nambisan applauds the sturdy physical disposition of the Coorgi women to withstand failure, hardships and their capacity to outlive their husbands like the coffee in the novel and Nanji is no exception to the rule. As observed in the novel after Baliyanna's lack of interest to live and genetic disposition to depression culminating in his death, Nanji continues with her chores with determination and ensures the family is well attended to. Indeed, Nanji outlives her husband, her deceased children and remains a ageing figure in the novel. The only person that remains to take care of her is her sixth son Subbu.

Subbu like Nanji is not exactly a man of the soil but returns to Coorg after his stint in the army. Though reluctant to leave his mother, Subbu is held on to his mother's hip till he starts walking naturally. Subbu is initiated to the pleasures of boyhood by his uncle Boju, joins a boarding convent school and befriends Govinda, Patrick and Sunny and is drawn to the satyagraha movement with nationalistic fervour and patriotic passion. Subbu's tryst with Gandhian ideology is based on Nambisan's father who was brought up as a Gandhian. Subbu joins the army to prove an identity for Coorgi people and also at his wife Mallige's insistence to have a separate household. After the military stint he returns to his home and realizes that this is the true place for him. His family comprising his wife and son are in Bangalore and daughter Neelu is studying in Mysore. Subbu is happy to see the beautiful relationship between his daughter and mother with love and affection. Subbu gradually begins to love the land and supervises the plantation and agricultural tasks. He observes with disdain the manner in which Coorg becomes modernised with the advent of the British planters, people getting commercialised with every appliance present in their household. The unexpected and unprecedented commercialism of Coorg gnaws at him and his cocooned existence with his mother Nanji, "What started as a blind adoration of a new culture had nearly obliterated the old..." (*The Scent of Pepper* 244).

The extent of the commercial development in Coorg is witnessed when Thimmu, Subbu's son starts razing trees for timber amidst the protests and helplessness of Subbu. He dreams that the strong trees of Coorg are mourning and walking to him for help bleeding profusely. Nambisan deftly creates a poignant scene that is representative of modern India where the environment and nature is constantly stripped to support man's development and nourishment.

. . . People talked of loving trees but cut them down without any regret, as if the money got in exchange could replace the loss. Trees were being chopped down and flung in a mountainous heap; Subbu punished himself by watching their dismembered carcasses from the bedroom window. When he took his midday nap, he dreamt that each log of

wood got up and walked to him. The trees stood at his window and with newly- sprung leafy arms, encircled his throat. You let us be killed, you let us be killed . . . see how it feels. The branches scratched him and he woke weeping. (*The Scent of Pepper* 262-63)

Kavery Nambisan's novel *The Scent of Pepper* gives out a strong message as to be an individual truly connected to one's own environment and nature like Nanji analysed through ecocriticism is similar to the definition of ecology as *oikos* and *kritis*. In fact Nanji is the supreme embodiment of the notion of *oikos* as the widest home and *kritis* as the best house judge and keeper of the house in order.

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