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

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In the 21st century marked by communicational advances and technological developments, issues related to environment have gained momentum. Man's changing relationship to the natural world has become the focus of many literary texts produced in the contemporary era. The ambivalent attitude of man towards nature has been continuing since eons, as he is not willing to accommodate the role of the environment within the paradigms of the socio-cultural framework. The literary world has witnessed the production of numerous narratives which bring to the fore the existential and material crisis confronted by man within the space of the environment. The present paper entitled *Poetics of Belonging: An Ecocritical Reading of Kavery Nambisan's The Scent of Pepper* proposes to analyse Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* from an ecocritical perspective, as it demonstrates the intrinsic relationship that exists between the landscape of Coorg and its central character Nanji. Set against the lushy hillside of Coorg, the novel also throws light on the postmodern condition characterized by alienation of man from nature and erosion of ethical values related to the preservation of environment against the onslaught of the demanding needs of urbanisation and techno-modernity.

Ecocriticism as a literary movement is gradually making its presence felt in the mainstream scenario, and with its interdisciplinary collaboration is maturing itself into a school of criticism in its own right. Ecocriticism, with its environment-oriented study of literature, emerged as an important theoretical tool in the 1990s, and focuses on the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Several literary critics and scholars have worked on defining the term "ecocriticism." The term was first coined by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." As Cheryl Glotfelty points out the word "ecocriticism" explains the "application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature"(xix).

Kavery Nambisan is one of the significant voices of Indian English fiction whose *The Scent of Pepper* reveals her genuine concern for the pressing issues related to the age-old question of man's relationship with the natural environment. In her brilliant evocation of the landscape of Coorg, Nambisan reminds us of Hardy or Narayan. Just as the Malgudian landscape permeates the spirit of Narayan's novels, so also the appalling beauty and exquisite grandeur of Coorg leaves an indelible impression on the minds of the readers. It is interesting to note how the entire story of the novel gets unfolded against the robust Coorg, exploring its full potential, and with an emphasis on the material existence of the natural beauty of Coorg which affects the life of its main character Nanji.

Cast against the story of the trails and tribulations in the life of Nanji, a Kodava woman, the novel displays a sense of strong commitment to nature. It is through the character of Nanji that Nambisan quite dexterously brings to the fore the interrelationship that exists between nature and man. The physical being and pristine beauty of the natural landscape of Coorg come alive in the imagination of the readers when Nanji takes the readers through its flora and fauna and climatic variations. As Nambisan observes:

...the climate of Kodugu- with its heavy rain, months of dry weather, and abundant shade- was ideal for pepper cultivation. Nanji, like many of her neighbours, had already experimented with a few vines, which she planted around the trees near the house. They produced just enough pepper to season her fried port. Now she planted them near every tree in a five –acre clearing of robusta. Within months, the vines with their shiny dark leaves climbed upward, festooning the trees like frilly apparel. (SP 34-35)

Nanji's deep-seated emotional attachment with the land and its local environment need to be seen as co-existent with her concern for and environmental justice. It is true that Nanji, an ordinary woman, cannot bring about improvement in the environmental conditions on a large scale. Rather, she works hard as a manager of her immediate environment. Nanji who is put in charge of a large household looks upon nature as a source of culinary sustenance and moral support. She finds her alliance with nature as scared and comforting, and considers it as vital not only for her survival, but for the entire Kaleyanda clan.

Even from her childhood days, Nanji has been tutored in the fact that man exists in only in relation to other living beings. As Donald Hughes comments:

Human ecology, then is a rational study of how mankind interrelates with the home of human species, the earth; with its soil and mineral resources; with its water, both fresh and salt; with its air, climates and weather; with its many living things, animals and plantes, from the simplest to the most complex; and with the energy received ultimately from the sun. (3)

Having imbibed ecological knowledge right from her childhood days, Nanji, considers Coorg as a veritable repository of natural resources. In fact, Nanji derives immense spiritual strength while working in the paddy fields along with other Kodava women labourers. The undue influence exerted by her grandmother on Nanji has its share in contributing a respectful attitude towards nature for whenever she feels sad or frightened, she would look at the sky for confidence :

Nine year old Nanji did not pause to think if her grandmother was weaving a story or telling the truth. She watched the clouds that trailed like fugitives, unfurled like banners became angels. Warriors, weapons, rakshasas and god. When Nanji was sad or afraid, she would look at the sky, and even a few powdery, chopped-up clouds pulverized against a summer sky would infuse her with confidence. (SP 102-103)

Imbued with an ecocentric consciousness, Nanji's attitude towards nature is tinged with an aura of divinity.

The canvas of *The Scent of Pepper* remains restricted, as it presents events and characters in terms of its locale and its microscopic geography. The essential grandeur and gorgeousness of Coorg come alive through Nanji. Nanji's care and concern for the nature around is cultivated in her by her grandmother, as so it is natural that she finds something reassuring about the presence of the Coorgian landscape. The ease and efficiency with which Nanji correlates her domestic work and her work in the coffee and pepper plantations is in tune with the characteristic Kodava life style. Her intimate attachment to the land makes her a tough woman, and as a true Kodava woman, she adopts a typical anti-imperialist attitude towards the changes initiated by the British government under the pretext of development. With her staunch admiration towards the firm faith in and the local customs and traditions, Nanji attributes the British onslaught on Coorg to the displeasure caused by the ancestors of the Kodavas. Workship of nature is an integral part of Kodava lifestyle.

The arrival of the British, as Nanji fears, contaminates the living ecological space of Coorg. The fast-paced modernization only serves to tilt the equilibrium of the rural landscape which has fallen as a victim to unprecedented changes:

.... Now the neighbours too became eager to modernize. They pooled money, got loans.... The Kodavas found themselves with money in the bank. Electricity and pumped water entered homes, western toilets replaced the bogs in the bushes... the telephone came and then the fridge, cars replaced bullock carts. (SP 244)

The devastating and deadly effects of the process of modernization are embodied in the character of Thimmu who is symbolic of the "systematic sophistication that came with wealth" (SP 244). A hard core materialist, Thimmu hopes to make himself immensely rich through the sale of timber. Nanji looks down upon Thimmu as betraying nature, and as having a concern for environmental ethics. Thimmu, in fact, strikes the readers as a representative of the postmodern man whose attempts at deforestation attests to his materialistic attitude to life. It is through the character of Thimmu that Nambisan foregrounds the effects of environmental threats and degradation that mankind confronts across the globe. Unmindful of the consistent pleas by his father, Thimmu decides to cut down the abundance of trees, as "trees would be one easy way of making money" (SP 262). Without the slightest regard for either his family or his land, Thimmu initiates and directs the process of felling trees:

...People talked of loving trees, but cut them down without regret, as if the money they got in exchange could replace the loss. Trees were being chopped down and flung in a mountainous heap; Subbu punished himself by watching their disremembered 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. (SP 262-263)

Man's indulgence in the foolish and irrational act of chopping down trees has led to the destruction and disappearance of vast stretches of forests. Against the context of massive felling of trees and the subsequent threat to the ecological equilibrium, it is pertinent to make note of Aldo Leopold's observation :

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, but He is no longer the only one to do so. When some remote ancestor of our invented the shovel, he became a giver: he could plant a tree. And when the axe was invented he became a taker: he could chop it down. Whoever owns land has thus assumed, whether he knows it or not, the divine functions of creating and destroying plants. ("Axe in Hand" 448)

With the world getting commodified day by day, people like Thimmu find themselves adrift in the midst of changing values and modes of thinking. The consumerist culture fails to promote and instill ecological values in an individual's life, and so weighs heavily on the environment. Man's utter disregard for environmental concerns and the craving of nature only serve to hit back at him and render him even more vulnerable. Such an attitude also accounts for the multiple forms of ecodegradation that afflict our planet. Quite surprisingly, man fails to understand the basic truth that he, like other living beings, belongs to the earth and that his superior feelings overrides his feelings for nature. As Tucker point out:

Our problem is that we are too smart for our own good, and for that matter the good of the biosphere. The basic problem is that our brain enables us to evaluate, plan, and execute. Thus, while all other creatures are programmed by nature and subject to her whims ... Amount living species, we are the only one possessed of arrogance deliberate stupidity, greed, hate, jealousy, treachery, and the impulse to revenge, all of which may erupt spontaneously or be turned at will. ("Is Nature Too Good for Us?" 655)

The Scent of Pepper turns out be a powerful evocation of the symbolic relationship existing between man and nature. It is high time that we should contemplate on environmental issues, and acknowledge the fact that man's life is regulated and controlled by the nature around, for nature is at the centre of man's life.

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