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Shifting Identities: A Reappraisal of Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper*

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Abstract:

This paper highlights the problematic relationship between the coloniser and the colonised in a colonial context as manifested in Kavery Nambisan's novel *The Scent of Pepper*. It also reveals the stereotypical depictions of Orientals and the constant process of 'formatting' or brainwashing to which the Other is subjected, in order to generate colonisers who are all the same. Further, it deals with the image of the land as being hostile to the colonisers, fighting them and intensifying their feelings of alienation and exile. The article particularly makes use of the ideas of theoreticians like Albert Memmi's and Frantz Fanon to represent the problematic issues of identity formation and the complexities of colonial discourse in hybrid contexts. The issue is allied with both the coloniser as the colonised, in that both face the same problem of a waning identity.

Keywords: Coloniser/colonised, Other, stereotypes, identity colonial discourse.

> And so everywhere they went they turned it into England; and everybody they met they turned English. But no place could ever really be England, and nobody who did not look exactly like them would ever be English [...]
>
> Jamaica Kincaid *A Small Place 24*

Reading literature from the perspective of Orientalism as espoused by Edward Said has by now familiarised that unequivocal rendering of Eurocentric universalism which takes for granted the superiority of the West and the inferiority of what is not. Said claims that European culture formed its identity through figures of contrast and difference "by setting itself off

against the orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (*Orientalism* 3). This consolidation of European self-hood could be traced to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment superiority of western scientific reason. For the European to be "rational, virtuous, mature and "normal", the oriental has to be "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'" (*Orientalism* 40). The paradoxical amalgamation of the east as a repository of inferior qualities whilst simultaneously being a realm of the exotic which fascinates and seduces has been implicitly highlighted in postcolonial writing. The West is not a monolithic entity devoid of discrepancies but it was essential to create an identity for themselves in order to establish the 'otherness' of the East and impose their rule on an alien culture. The coloniser's attempt to define and encapsulate the colonised lies in this basic urge to control the Other. Colonisation aims at a denial of the cultural identity of the colonised lands. The colonised had his own world "with its own national, cultural and epistemological boundaries" but it needed the coloniser to give it an "intelligibility and identity" (*Orientalism* 40). This set the terrain for the European as the 'all knowing' actor endowed with the capacity to know and understand the world and the Other. It is this Manichean dichotomy which structures colonial relations and such discursive binaries are crucial in constructing not only the colonised but also the coloniser.

One of the major concepts that postcolonialism addresses is the issue of identity of the colonised which could be claimed only by retrieving their past. It is within this framework that I intend to trace these identity formations prevalent in Kodagu during the early twentieth century through Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* (1996). A very interesting fact about Nambisan's personality is that despite having acquired her medical degree and then her surgical training in England, she has dedicated herself to working in the rural areas of India. Nambisan's hands-on experience of the life of the poor in a rural community has seeped into her writing to impart a realistic note to it. She began her literary career by writing stories under the name Kavery Bhatt and has published novels *Mango-Coloured Fish (2000) and On Wings of Butterflies (2002) The Hills of Angheri* (2005) and *The Story That Must Not Be Told* (2010) which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008. Currently she is working as surgeon and medical advisor of the Tata Coffee Hospital in Kodagu.

The Scent of Pepper narrates the story of the great Kaleyanda family headed by Rao Bahadur. His son Baliyanna, the vet skilled in his profession was popular among the British in Kodagu. He is married to Nanji who portrays throughout the novel that "a Kodavathi is born tough". The white woman, Clara who is enamoured of her husband poses no threat but the problem throughout is the malady of depression endemic to the area which hits the men of the

family. The novel is set in Kodagu, a small enclave in the hills of the south western coast of India. Back in history, several rulers, from the Pandya, the Ganga the Chola, the Hoysalas and the Haleris ruled Kodagu. Captivated by the extensive coffee plantations and lured by the prospects of a flourishing coffee trade, the British settled there. They deposed the reigning Haleri Raja and annexed Kodagu (renaming it as Coorg) in 1834 and remained there till India won her independence. They realised that Coorg with its black moist soil and plenty of shade would be the most ideal for the cultivation of coffee. The British planter, Alistair, in his book advised the British regarding the suitability of Coorg in the cultivation of coffee unlike their plantations in Europe: "It is wise to remember that but for coffee, the British would never have settled in the beautiful valley of Coorg; and the natives, in spite of all their ignorance, are wise when it comes to cultivation" (*Scent* 84). The suitable climatic conditions for cultivation, the picturesque landscape akin to Europe and concerns of health made them occupy the hill stations as against the plains. But here too they realised, they were not spared of diseases nor were the natives in any way different. Kodavas who are different from the many other ethnic races of India owing to their love for meat, liquor, dancing, sports and hunting, found it easy to emulate the life of the European planter in Coorg (Srinivas 59). They are a brave warrior like race and Kodagu has its unique cultural and regional specificities which have no counterparts elsewhere in India. But what colonialism does is to deny the natives of their history and their culture and supplant it with an alien one.

The act of 'naming' is an important strategy adopted by the coloniser to assign an identity to the colonised as well as the colonial lands they occupied. Just as they changed Kodagu into Coorg, names of estates like Kodanad, Thenupare and Kurudarahalli were changed to Glenview, Windermere and Balmoral respectively. The changing of the names of places denotes a loss of identity and imposes a new one. Encountering lands with a diversity of geography and culture, the colonists used familiar metaphors from Europe to comprehend the diversity of the unfamiliar contexts. This coupled with the stereotypical reproductions of the colonised gave them a strong foothold in the newly occupied lands. But the incomprehensibility of the lands they encountered baffled them, constantly reminding them that they were strangers there. Irrespective of the locale, the routine life of the British included their tea times, their club life and sports and their associated etiquette. The clubs were symbols of their alienation from native life. In Coorg, the British planters met at the European club in Mercara with rosewood panelled walls, gleaming floors, Victorian sofas and curtained windows "that guarded their exclusiveness". The British considered only a few natives worth

maintaining a relation and mingled with them for golf, tennis and invited them to their 'at-homes'. Most of the Kodavas deemed it their privilege to serve the British to such an extent that Coorg was declared a model state. These chosen few acknowledged the superiority of the British and "borrowed names, food habits, attire and etiquette with sincerity and it formed a flaky crust over their timeless culture" (*Scent* 48). Far from making any genuine attempts to understand him, the colonizer is preoccupied with remoulding him and reassigning an identity for him. Albert Memmi, the Tunisian anticolonial revolutionary intellectual notes that "one after another, all the qualities which make a man of the colonized crumble away" (128). To the coloniser, the colonised "is hardly a human being. He tends rapidly toward becoming an object" (130). This "object' has a new identity conferred on him by his colonial master- "Wilfully created and spread by the colonizer, this mythical and degrading portrait ends up by being accepted and lived with to a certain extent by the colonized" (131).

A sign of the colonised mind is a ready submission to the fabricated notions and concepts of the Western world which are nothing more than expedients to keep the new colonies in subservience. Colonisation leads to "a systematic negation of the other person" (*Fanon* 200) and instils in the minds of the colonised a sense of inferiority on the basis of their race. Emulating the British, they named their children Robin, Peter, Kitty and Pat. Baliyanna speaks of the Alsatians and Labradors as fashionable pets of the upper class Kodavas, which were useless for hunting unlike the kani, rajapalyam, chippiparai which belonged to pure hunter breed of Kodagu. He was much grieved to see the shameful spectacle of Kodavas "preening themselves on an alien culture" (*Scent* 85). They were also impressed by the flowers neatly grown in geometrical beds in front of the English bungalows and hurried to do the same. The hibiscus, rajairita, kankabhara, savanthige, sampige that grew wild in their gardens were pulled down and poppies asters and snapdragons were planted with "meticulous precision... and began a chain reaction of unvaried copying" (*Scent* 95). The extent of their imitation is revealed at the party in Belquarren where "The Coorgs talked, laughed and moved with the same precise confidence as the white men and women; they painted themselves, shrieked and flirt" (*Scent*48). Seen from a postcolonial perspective, this could be identified as what Fanon calls "unqualified assimilation". But no matter how they tried they could never become one with the British. The coloniser strove to maintain this strict divide to ascertain his superiority and all attempts made by the colonised to strike a similarity was disapproved. This led to a disillusioned lot with muddled identities belonging to neither category.

Just like the colonised, the coloniser too is forced to don a new garb and this metamorphosis from an ordinary middle class English man into the ruler leads to a total effacement of his self-identity. He thoroughly identifies himself with his new role in the colonial lands based on the myth of racial and cultural superiority. No longer the benevolent native of his homeland, the coloniser is now the cruel usurper who exerts his power. “The colonial situation manufactures colonialists, just as it manufactures the colonised” (Memmi 100). Intoxicated by their new identities the coloniser forgets that the privileges he shares is at the expense of the natives. Nambisan depicts the typical coloniser in the novel through Rupert who strips the native of his character as a human being and by naming him devalues him as being nothing more than an animal. He could never understand the natives and brands them as “a confused, emotional, puzzling, variegated lot” (*Scent* 50). He conceived Coorg to be a land of snakes, scorpions and “dangerous natives”: “They consorted with devils, worshipped animals and ancestors, they even got married to dead tigers. They still do it! Barring a few, they’re unpredictable and untrustworthy, like natives everywhere” (*Scent* 51). He was aghast at Clara, his wife who maintained relations with the vet, Baliyanna but couldn’t prevent her. He warned her that the Coorgs were an uncivilised lot till the British took over and “sanitized them” (*Scent* 61). Colonialism pepertrates on the grounds that it is beneficial for the natives. So, as Memmi points out, the coloniser takes up the civilising mission of “bringing light to the colonized’s ignominious darkness” (100). This “mission” legitimises the colonisation and enslavement of other races.

In the novel, we have the white woman, Clara disappointed with the whole affair - the ‘get togethers’ and the club life. She liked Nanji who was neither awed nor enamoured “of the white people” (*Scent* 52). Her association with Baliyanna, the native was looked down upon by the British. But Clara cared little for their remarks and ventured to go on a hunting trip with him along with the other native Kodagas. Clara, a nurse in England had always been enamoured of Coorg after hearing stories from Rupert’s grandmother, Feodera. She had married him because of this fascination for the place “where the air was like satin and the murmur of the bees on the giant fig trees made maddening music you never forgot” (Scent 58). Foedera refers to Coorg as paradise and regrets that she couldn’t get to know the locals well:

> They’re cleaner than we are. And they know it. You’ll never find natives washing their faces in basins of water or bathing in tubs. It’s always running water for them. They

> kept their distance lest we polluted them but we should have tried harder to be friends. A pity! (*Scent* 59)

Though the native tribes of Coorg like the Yeravas, and the Kodubas were not hostile, they averted their eyes" whenever the English lady passed by. Disappointingly, Clara realised that she had learnt about Coorg but was never able to get close enough to the natives. Memmi notes that "humanitarian romanticism is looked upon in the colonies as a serious illness, the worst of all dangers" (65). To the other colonisers, a coloniser who has this 'illness' is "nothing but a traitor" (65). Consequently "His friends will become surly; his superiors will threaten him; even his wife will join in and cry" (Memmi 66). Initially she was frightened by the "gong like voices of the natives" and she detested their food and the heavy scents of lemon and mango along with dung that filled the air. She got used to all this and so her fellowmen disliked the planter's wife. She scandalised them by speaking about the injustice of the British and refused to attend the billiards tournament and the 'at-homes'. She found solace in her nursing and her patients now where the Yeravas. She cleaned their ulcers and fungifying wounds with simple remedies and warded off their hostility. After Rupert's death she took over the estate and devoted herself to looking after it till, she left Coorg. Despite suffering from "humanitarian romanticism", Clara, the coloniser who refuses colonisation, cannot help judging the colonised and their civilisation (24). She is, thus, compelled to accept the fundamental difference between the colonised and herself. Like her British counterparts though one half of Coorg excited her imagination, she found the monsoons and the smells of fruits and fungus abhorable unlike her "clean cold sterile England" (*Scent* 86).

The Kodavas shared an ambivalent relation with their colonial masters - blind adoration on the one hand and indignation and hatred on the other. Baliyanna disliked the British was shared by his wife Nanji. When Appachu, his brother returned from England with his English wife he was thrown out of the house. The handsome Appachu had met her in England outside a grocer's distributing pamphlets "love Christ and be saved". She accepted his proposal on the condition that he'd get baptised to Appachu Basil Pinto. When news reached Kodagu that he had married a Majorie Hicks from England, Baliyanna tore the photograph of the couple to shreds and threw it in the chamber pot where Rao Bahadur had vomited blood. Baliyanna cried "He's married an English whore" where in actuality she was neither in English nor a whore but the fair complexioned Eurasian daughter of an undertaker from Tootin Bec (17). The family bore the humiliation caused by Appachu and the natives blamed the Kaleyandas for the lack of rains that year. Chambavva was grief stricken as she had warned her sons to keep away from

the English women who had no morals before they set out for England. “Keep away from them or you’ll contract diseases more gruesome than small pox or plague” (*Scent* 18).

Sartre in the Preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* speaks of the how the European elite instilled their values and ideas to create a native elite till “their mouths opened by themselves; the yellow and black voices still spoke of our humanism but only to reproach us with our inhumanity” (7). With the fervour of nationalist movement creeping up in Coorg, the ‘inhumanity’ was addressed by the Kodavas through the incident of Mallapa, the coal carrier. His creaking hand-cart irritated Jane Peacock, the Chief Commissioner’s wife who was “a chronic insomniac of delicate, irritable constitution” (*Scent* 148). Orders were issued and Mallappa was forced to stop carrying coal to the hotels. This irritated Subbu and his Congress friends and they wrote a letter to be published in the newspaper. The British infuriated, issued a warrant for arresting the boys. The Kodavas were offended and for the first time they protested before the commissioner’s residence. Jane implored to her husband “Let’s get out of this mad country”. Succumbing to the native was weakness but the British gauged the depth of their discontent and Mallapa was allowed to resume his earlier route. When Jane and her husband returned to England, they entertained the visitors with stories about their glorious stay in Coorg but Mallapa issue was never mentioned.

The text manifests that these recast identities hardly belong to those of the (formerly) colonised or coloniser. As identities are dynamic, the fabricated models of the colonised are also subject to change. It is true that the colonised cannot retrieve their pristine pre-colonial identities but this is not to dismiss it as something unattainable. As Stuart Hall puts it “The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as simple factual ‘past’, since our relation to it, like the child’s relation to the mother, is always-already ‘after the break’ (395). The encounter with the coloniser has no doubt generated cross-cultural tensions but it has not led to a total cultural displacement. Here the colonised native of India, as pointed by Partha Chaterjee, is keen on preserving his “spiritual core” which includes the essence of his culture and it is only in the material domain that the supremacy of the west is acknowledged (6). Towards the end of the novel, Nanji’s son, Subbu perseveres to emphasise this fact regarding his land and race. He realises that the truth of their destiny lies in their roots: “Sophistication was a shell. You were what you were, children of Thadiyandamolu, Malethrike and Brahmagiri, with a kernel of honour and fearlessness, born to care for the land made sacred by the goddess and protector of Kodagu” (*Scent* 255).

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