



Treatment of Kodagu Culture in Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper*

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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). She is a physician by profession and she serves the poor and needy. She says that she has been influenced greatly by Mahatma Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau. This study aims at an analysis of Kavery Nambisan's novel, *The Scent of Pepper* so as to bring out her treatment of the Kodagu culture.

Kavery Nambisan's 1996 novel *The Scent of Pepper* is a detailed fictional journey into the world of Kodavas. It gives a great picture of the Kodavas who are a fierce, proud, martial race and owners of vast coffee estates. It tells the story of the Kaleyanda clan who own vast expanses of coffee plantations in Coorg. Kavery Nambisan belongs to Coorg (Kodagu), a hilly district of Karnataka also known as Scotland of India, and the speaker of native language. For the first time, the small ethnic minority, the Coorgis, enter Indian English fiction in her second novel, *The Scent of Pepper*. The characters in the novel are very real as the author has picked up real life stories from Coorg which she heard from her grandmother and used them in the plot of her novel. The distinctive culture and religious practices of the people of Coorg are faithfully presented by the novelist by tracing the fortunes of Nanji, who enters the Kaleyanda clan as a young bride. Baliyanna, an England-educated veterinary doctor and a wealthy land owner belongs to Kaleyanda family. He marries the child widow Nanji who has married

at the age of thirteen and became a widow at fourteen. The thin-faced girl of seventeen year old in a white sari has captured Baliyanna's interest and his heart.

The colourful locale of Coorg with its decorated hills and valleys are really enchanting. Kavery Nambisan is a gifted writer and she brings out the mountainous majesty of the district of Coorg. As the reader reads her novels namely *The Hills of Angheri* and *The Scent of Pepper*, he 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, the orange country is famous for coffee plantations and hilly areas inhabited by vibrant people who identify themselves as nature's people. Though they depend on nature for their livelihood and are deeply aware of nature's blessings came through the blessings of Gods and ancestors, they too are influenced and carried away by the sweeping winds of capitalism. They are influenced by the British imperialism and adopting the foreign culture at the cost of their own customs and rituals of the community. The reader can visualize the picturesque surroundings of the Coorg region filled with cloud kissing mountains and the magnificent flora and fauna. Even the British citizens who have visited the place fall in love with the tranquil and peaceful atmosphere of Coorg and often reluctant to leave the place.

Nambisan pens the novels with interesting anecdotes about the Kodagu tribes, their customs and cultural practices, the mixing of the western and the local culture and their effects on the people of Coorg. The characters are both modern and traditional. 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, dressing and even the cultivation of the gardens.

Nambisan blends the story with her magic words and description. "As the red blush in the west merged with the violet darkness, the lamps inside the house were lit. The festive sounds of kombu, kottu and dudi filled the house. Bride (Nanji) dropped a pinch of saffron rice into the copper pitcher at the doorway and bent down to touch his (Rao Bahadur) feet" (3). The distinctive cultural and religious practices of the people of Coorg are faithfully presented by tracing the fortunes of Nanji, who has entered the Kaleyanda clan as a young bride. "After two days of forced hospitality, her (Nanji's) stepmother subjected her to a meager diet and coffee without milk, though it was established Kodava custom to overfeed pregnant women. That wasn't mindless pampering but wise tradition" (11). The novelist lists out the edible items offered in the Kodava household to the pregnant women.

"Tradition demanded that pregnant Kodava women eat eggs laid by red hens, two ladles of ghee a day and rotis with honey, in addition to a *lehyam* made of jaggery, sesame seeds, cashew nuts, almonds and sunflower seeds in the morning"(11). "Women who could read were given the *Mahabharatha*, *Ramayana* and the *Gita* in hope that they could bear a son who could be a saint or a scholar such as Kodaku had never produced" (12). It shows their faith in religion and they want to get pious offspring.

When Rao Bahadur's the eleventh – day death ceremony, with Nanji Chambavva walked to the backyard with the food covered in banana leaves, laid it near the well and clapped her hand, called

Ka..Ka...Ka . . . On same day hundreds of people were fed. “The family followed the age-old Kodava custom of pilgrimage to Talakaveri at the top of the Brahmagiri hill. There they scattered Rao Bahadur’s ashes in the river” (16). These are the rituals practiced by the Kodavas after the death of a person in their families.

Kodava’s marriage is a grand ceremony. During Boju’s marriage Baliyanna arranges five hundred bottles of soda and fifty of whisky and he considers it as an unavoidable expense. At the *muhurtam*, it was a custom that the bridegroom should bend to touch the feet of his elders who have come to bless him. In dressing, Kodavas follow Kudiya tradition, with a few modifications. “The free-flowing end of the sari was brought beneath the left arm across the back and knotted over the right shoulder. The straight, no-nonsense fall of the sari over the front accentuated curves and enhanced the beauty” (26). It shows their dressing pattern and the wearing of sari in this manner increase the beauty of their women.

The novelist brings out the various festivals marking the different seasons and Kodavas 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 people of the region. Puthari is celebrated at the time of harvest. During the Puthari, the auspicious night of full moon when the crop is ready to harvest, they go to the fields to cut the first ripe sheaves of paddy and tie them to the doors and bedposts. It is a ritual which shows that they offer the best of food and toddy to the gods and ancestors. They use rose and tulsi leaves to prepare garland which is the favourite one for their god. The month of Tula in Kodagu is the time of rejoice. They celebrate Sankramana during this time that is the end of the monsoon. The Kodavas go to Talakaveri at the top of the Brahmagiri hill to bathe in the sacred waters. “Coconuts dressed in red, jeweled and garlanded, are floated upon the river. It is the time of promise” (69). They use traditional food varieties such as *puttu*, *nooputtu*, pork, mutton *palav*, *payasam*, mango chutney, *jeerige-sanna* rice, *thambattoo* (a sticky-sweet item) and so on. All these reveal their different varieties of food.

The Kodavas absorbed many aspects from the foreigners, except their religion. They have gods namely Lord Igguthappa and Bhadrakali. The Hindu gods have come secretly to Kodagu. Before that they have worshipped their ancestors who constantly hover over Kodagu and guard them. Most Kodavas have aped the British. They have borrowed the names, food habits, attires and etiquette from the Britishers. They have no time to worry about the freedom struggle movement in India. They are the only race in India which has been permitted to have guns without license. Kavery Nambisan is extremely brilliant in her style and language. The novel ends on a note of hope and reassurance as educated, self-possessed Neelu who is the archetype of Nanji comes back to the village as a symbol of hope, progress, reformation and rebirth.

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