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Cultural conflict in KaveryNambisan's *The Scent of Pepper*

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KaveryNambisan's novel *TheScent 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. She had been an avid reader of Kannada literature and later a reader of English literature when her *Pepper* narrates the story of a feudal family in Athur village,the Kaleyanda, headed by the pattedara, RaoBahadur.

He had sent two of his sons to England and one to Madras for their education. When Baliyanna graduated as a veterinary surgeon from Madras with "a degree that even the British respect", RaoBahadur decided to move from the family's Iyn House. He bought a "sprawling house, one hundred and twelve acres of newly-planted coffee and five thousand battis of land in Athur" (10). As widow remarriage was permitted among the Kodavas, Nanji, the young widow of the Kongeitra clan is married to Baliyanna, a popular vet among the British planters settled in Kodagu. On the very first day, the tough Nanji decides to make her home into a strong fortress and takes charge of the sprawling house in Athur. Having tided resolutely through thirteen pregnancies, and braving her way through the travails of life, she remains steadfast and indispensable to her home. By the end of the novel, Nanji is an old lady with only her favourite son Subbu for company.

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, inspite of all their ignorance, were wise when it comes to cultivation. Captivated by the extensive coffee plantations and lured by the prospects of a flourishing coffee trade, the British settled down in

Kodagu having "discovered the Eldorado of honest industry in a delightful climate and home-like country!"(Ritcher 96). 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.

Nambisan illustrates the typical coloniser through Rupert, the British planter who devalued the very existence of the native. He was infuriated with Clara, his wife who maintained relations with Baliyanna but couldn't prevent her. He warned her that the Kodavas were an uncivilised lot till the British took over and "sanitized" them (59). The borer and the leaf-rot that had first appeared in Ceylon, crept along the ghats and gradually invaded Kodagu. With less than fifty British planters in Kodagu who paid him promptly, Baliyanna the vet "led a life of genteel poverty" (101). Their personal disgruntlement at the dwindling prices of coffee and the rising hostility of the natives for independence were now making it obvious to the British that their departure from the land was inevitable. As waves of nationalism swept across the breadth of the country, the Kodavas too were not spared. While majority of the Kodavas were busy imbibing an alien culture, a few like Subbu and his friends join the Congress. *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 myths regarding the origin of the Kodavas include the names of actual kings and civilisations drawn from history. Nambisan describes the race to be the descendants of the troops of Alexander who settled down in "the heavenly hill country."Another myth stated is that they were descendants of the "nobility whose blood stayed red for six hours after death" and to these clans belonged the most beautiful women that a man had to slay nine suitors before he won his bride (168). Such myths have been incorporated into their marriage rituals, as one is made to understand from the novel, wherein the groom cuts down nine banana trees with his odikkathi before claiming his bride.

Religious myths mentioned include the divine origin of the river Kaveri and other localised myths associated with the Forests of Kolabenna. Rather than resorting to the myth,

Nambisan claims that the Kodavas adopted their distinct style of wearing their saris "from the toddy-tapping Kudiya women who swung back the pleats when they climbed the panne tree" (*Pepper* 26). By blurring the boundaries between myth and history, the novelist has provided scope for the relativity of truths and falsehoods.

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 thegeographical map of Kodagu. The novel roughly pans the period from 1850s to 1960s which the reader is able to deduce from the influx of the British planters to Kodagu, the fall of the prices of coffee due to the extension of cultivation in Brazil, the nationalist movement, the visit of Gandhi and the merger of Kodagu. However, the passage of time in the novel is indicated through the cycle of seasons, the cultivation of paddy and coffee and the onset of festivals. The text offers an authentic depiction of how the people of the region mark the progress of time in their daily lives.

Nambisan presents the Kodavas to be a handsome, brave and warrior like race. Its distinguished martial tradition continues even today with many young Kodavas enlisting themselves as soldiers. Liquor and pork which form the most popular food items of the Kodavas are also made as offerings to their gods. Their martial nature coupled with their love for hunting could account for their "strong carnivorous appetite" (*Pepper* 36). Jeannette Isaac remarks: "Nothing makes them happier than returning home with a wild boar after a long hunt in the woods to make pandhi curry, their traditional pork dish"(22). Kodavas are presented in *Pepper* as food lovers and elaborate references to their cuisine are generously strewn into the narrative. Nambisan comments: "'Whatever a Kodava does or does not do, he loves to eat like a king'"(*Pepper* 111). As a people who revelled in their hospitality, there was never a dearth of food lavished on guests.

While KaveriSankramana celebrates the birth of the river Kaveri, Kailpodh (festival of arms) and Puthari are associated with paddy cultivation. The eminent Indian sociologist, M.N. Srinivas, in his anthropological monograph *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India(*1952)notes that though customs and rites are borrowed from theneighbouring cultures of South Canara and Malabar, a martial twist is given to them in Kodagu (238). The most significant among all the celebrations in Kodagu is the harvest festival called *Puthari*. The rites performed at the harvest festival, directly or indirectly stresses the great value of rice to the Kodavas (Srinivas, *Religion* 232). On the auspicious Puthari full moon night, the family with all their workers wend their way into the paddy fields and cut the first ripe sheaves of paddy to the cries of 'Poli, poli, poli deva. . .'("increase, increase O God"). The sheaves were then tied to their doors and bedposts and the ancestors were propitiated (*Pepper* 109).

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