

**REGIONALISM A KEY APPURTENANCE: RACIAL AND ETHNIC INSCRIBE IN
KAVERY NAMBISAN'S *THE SCENT OF PEPPER***

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Abstract

This article seeks to study Kavery Nambisan's novel *The Scent of Pepper* from the perspective of regionalism. In doing so it 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. This article becomes a space where the identity of the Kodavas and their racial and ethnic history is 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.

Key words: Regionalism, Nationalism, Ethnography, Indianness, Marginalized, Colonial

Introduction

Regionalism is a comparatively recent phenomenon in the intellectual discourses and its origin and growth can understand broadly by analysing the concept of nationalism. Nationalism is directly related to the spirit of European Enlightenment. It emerged as a social, philosophical, political and literary movement during the seventeenth century and reached its heights in the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment thinkers regarded the past ages, particularly the faith-dominant medieval period, with extreme resentment and found them bereft of genuine human achievements. They sought to evaluate and understand life by way of scientific observation and critical reasoning.

English historians have claimed that countries like India and Africa nurtured their ideas of freedom from Europe and hence their anti-colonial nationalisms were shaped by European political and intellectual history. As Liah Greenfield puts it: “The birth of the English nation was not the birth of a nation, it was the birth of nations, the birth of nationalism” (23).

Nationalism captured the people’s imagination through a variety of cultural processes such as history, folklore, songs, popular prints, icons and symbols. Another means was through the reinterpretation of history and discovering its glorious achievements in various fields of knowledge. Though the nationalists (as moderates and extremists) had internal differences, outwardly they posed a unity and both were equally distanced from the masses. Local issues never being their concern were suppressed, leading to the inevitable widening of the chasm between the nationalist elites and the native population.

There have been long periods in Indian history when regions have played a more significant role than the overall unified nation. Joseph Schwartzberg’s historical atlas of India illustrates that from the eighth to the twelfth century, the kingdoms were loosely held together by political arrangements among overlords and lesser rulers. This absence of a single predominant power proved conducive for regional polities to promote their regional cultures (186).

Racial and Ethnic Inscribe – An Overview

This article seeks to study Kavery Nambisan’s novel *The Scent of Pepper* from the perspective of regionalism. In doing so it 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. Shyamala Narayan remarks that a lot of research and first-hand experience of life in Kodagu has shaped the narrative of the novel (“Changing Perceptions”43). It is also for the first time that the ethnic minority of the Kodavas ingress Indian English fiction. Another novelist belonging to the same region, Sarita Mandanna has published her debut novel *Tiger Hills* in 2010 with Kodagu as the backdrop. *The Scent of Pepper* (cited hereafter as *Pepper*) published in 1996 has been revised by the author and for the purpose of this study, the revised edition published in 2010 will be referred to. The novel 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.

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.

Kodagu: Reconnoitre Selfhood

Nevertheless, Nambisan points out that the tragedy of this fierce and iron willed people is that they fall prey to the disease endemic to the area. “The contagion of mental depression that wove its sly web around many Kodavas” did not spare the mighty Rao Bahadur of the Kaleyanda: “It was worse than plague. With plague you were subjected to a short, fierce illness and a dramatic exit; with this depression that had no cause, the victim lingered between life and death for an interminable period” (10). Nanji witnessed the inevitable signs of depression in her own husband when he indulged in long sessions of loneliness. It was this very malady which compelled her uncles, her brother-in law and many other men of Kodagu to commit suicide. Later on in the novel, her son Subbu succumbs to this “insidious, unrelenting awareness of the futility of existence” (259)

A significant fact to be noted in connection with all the rituals in Kodagu is that the ancestors are placed along with or even above their gods. Ancestor worship, one of the oldest practices of worship in the world, holds a prime place in Kodagu. Nanji believed that the spirits of their ancestors resided in the clouds blessing their lands with bountiful rains. This ethnic race worships their local cobradeity, Lord Iguthappa, who is prayed to for rain and prosperity. In *Pepper*, the sacred texts of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are alluded to. This allusion confronts the concept that the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* symbolises a singular Sanskritic tradition rooted in an Aryan past. The Kodavas with their unique faith can easily find themselves in the epics. The *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* could be conceptualised as a cultural language through which different social groups engage in a cultural dialogue. Rather than being the cultural epitome of any single race, these texts have a live presence even among the less known minority sects and groups of India. F. Kittel in his article “Coorg Superstitions” mentions that apart from being ancestor worshippers, the Kodavas were ghost and demon worshippers and were extremely superstitious (171). Nambisan’s knowledge of the superstitions and beliefs of the Kodavas have been knitted into the novel, a few of which are listed here – white and red flowers are placed on the idol of the deity in a temple and it was believed that if the white flower falls

first it was a good omen and marriages could be solemnised (180), rains falling vertically down or slanting were indications of the temperament of their ancestors (169) and when Baliyanna plucks out the tooth of his children, he puts it in a pellet of cow dung and threw them on the thatched roof of the house “to guarantee a strong new successor to the evicted tooth” (98).

The novel debates the issue of the Other of Kodagu, the original inhabitants who have been neglected for ages, both by the local and national elites. In the pattedars meeting held at Rao Bahadur’s house, the issue of the marginalised groups of Kodagu is taken up for discussion: “But how many Yeravas, how many Kudiyas or Kurubas own even a patch of land? How many of their children go to school, how many can read a newspaper or get a job other than that of a labourer? We are exploiting them, without even realizing that we do it”(66). The Diwan exhorts the Kodavas to stop living in their glorified past and uplift these ‘other’ of Kodagu—the Yeravas, Kurubas, Kudiyas and Amma Kodavas.

For Nambisan, the rustic Concord, an economically backward town free from the evils of industrialism evident in other areas of Massachusetts resembles her land of Kodagu. Like Thoreau, she wishes for her people a region where men would not be dwarfed by external persuasions but would devote themselves to the pursuit of self-culture. Baliyanna’s disquisition to Clara regarding the culture of the region sums up Nambisan’s concept of regionalism: ““So you think the weddings and a few dances and pujas make our culture. How little you know”“(63). Nambisan’s discourse of regionalism explores not only the topography and cultural aspects of a region, which however cannot be neglected, but it also lies in the realisation of the self, the immense potentiality of the individual that keeps him firmly rooted to the region. For her, the concept of regionalism does not become a parochial or fanatical propaganda for securing oneself compactly to one’s own region, it consequently becomes a liberating force. In a pluri-cultural society like India, unity is to be achieved by inculcating a spirit of harmony, and this is paradoxically achieved only by recognising the diversity of regions and the distinctiveness of each individual.

The novelist, adopting a mode of self communication, speaks to the reader, the community and mankind as a whole. In addition, Nambisan adopts various roles – of a raconteur, philosopher,

historian, sociologist and ethnographer. The novel has hitherto been analysed from its thematic perspective. On evaluating the text with regards to its form, one would tend to agree with Pramod Nayar who argues that in Nambisan's text "the enunciative modes of fiction and the anthropological text merge" ("Ethnopoetics"76). Postcolonialism has firmly criticised western ethnographic studies for the reason that these studies were conducted to generate descriptions of the Other. However, contemporary scholars find many insights of ethnography useful in describing their community. When people belonging to the same community describe themselves, they no longer remain its passive participants but emerge as people actively recreating their self identity. *Pepper* fuses literary and ethnographic techniques to foreground the regional element of Nambisan's plot. An insight into the literary modes of the structural design resorted to in the text will be relevant. The opening chapter serves as exposition, as in a Shakespearean play and sets the stage for the unfolding of the drama of the story. All the major characters of the novel feature in this chapter as does the martial nature of the Kodavas, the strength of their women, their myths, their customs(marriage) and the strange malady that affects the people.

The novel offers insights into various aspects of the Kodava society and highlights its traditions and cultural practices that is inevitably changing and evolving with the times. Although Nambisan specifically delineates the life of a feudal family, she finds space in the revised edition of *Pepper* (2010) to voice her concern for the Other as she does in some of her other novels like *On Wings of Butterflies* and *The Story That Must Not Be Told*. Only a passing reference had been made to the Other in the earlier version. Apart from this, a few other notable changes would be worth mentioning in this context. An entirely new chapter highlighting the merger of Kodagu into the larger unit of Karnataka following the reorganisation of states on a linguistic basis and its repercussions has been incorporated (ch.35). Localisms have been used without glossing throughout the revised edition of *Pepper*. Nambisan mentions that many Kodavas were upset with the book and wanted it to be withdrawn by her publisher. Such an allegation was made on the grounds that it hadn't showcased the bravery and honour of the community ("Woman"173). The novelist firmly notes that "it is not a writer's business to showcase her people, her nation or anything else. Her job is to open the windows wide and let the reader look in" (173). An undercurrent of subtle humour permeates throughout the novel— be it regarding the myths

concerning their origins, their nobility, their ancestors, their futile attempts at Anglicisation or the hypocrisy of the politicians. Such disquisitions need not necessarily be taken as malicious attacks of the writer on her community. Being an insider, she is fondly pointing out the foibles of her people. The concept of regionalism in contemporary Indian English fiction endeavours to challenge the canonical assumptions of “Indianness” as projected in the novels written till the 1980s. These interrogations necessitate a rethinking of the very concept of “Indianness” to promote a better understanding of the immense diversity of a country like ours. Narrativising the region, hence, becomes a covert form of resistance.

Conclusion

Though Nambisan seriously embarks on the issue of the upliftment of the varied tribes of Kodagu, they are left to remain on the fringes. Nevertheless, the novelist emphasises the close ties shared by the upper caste families with their workers. Novels exploring regionalism in English lead to the development of an open dialogue bridging gaps between cultures. These novels have been successful in putting the regions of Kodagu or Ayemenem on the world map and to make that given “dot on the map come passionately alive” (Welty 236).

The distinctive regionalism of Indian English fiction needs an in-depth exploration to open avenues for further research. A land of myriad regions brimming with sagas, holds immense potential for future generations of writers. Reclaiming the region has been one of the primary objectives of the novelists of the nineties. There is further need to relocate the issues of gender, caste and religion which are the main contentions of struggle in a living society of India.

Globalization which attempts at diffusing all differences makes the concept of regionalism all the more relevant. It calls for a constructive and creative resurgence of regional identities into contemporary Indian English writings.

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