

# **Melange of Nature and Culture in Kavery Nambisan's**

## ***The Scent of Pepper***

**Jenniffer.I**

Ph.D Research Scholar  
St. Joseph's College of Arts & Science for Women  
and

**Dr.K.Lavanya**

Asst. Prof & HOD  
St. Joseph's College of Arts & Science for Women  
Hosur

Kavery Nambisan is the noteworthy Indian writer in English and also a surgeon working in rural areas. *The Scent of Pepper* was written in 1996. Kavery Nambisan begins the novel with a striking epigraph of the destructive power of wind and fire related to a person's knowledge and action. The burning fire itself cannot be spread unless it is stimulated by the moving wind. The author questions – "Do men know it's like that with knowing and doing" (ii). *The Scent of Pepper* reveals the story of Kodava race, known for their valour and unique rituals. This paper analyses how nature is fused with culture among this courageous race.

When the entire place of Athur was shifting from red shades of sunset to gradual darkness, Nanji, the seventeen year old bride was gently welcomed by Rao Bahadur, the Pattedara of the Kaleyanda clan to place a handful of saffron coloured rice in to the reddish-brown vessel. Chambavva, the wife of Rao Bahadur was known for her royalty and had two panther cubs as pets. Though Nanji is a widow, Chambavva allows her son Baliyanna to marry her. Nanji's unpleasant marriage with a drunkard husband ended when she was thirteen. Her return to father's home troubled her stepmother as she loathed her stubborn courage. Baliyanna accidentally sees Nanji's ease of milking the cow. With the soothing rhythm of milk flowing in to the bucket, the righteous sentiments of Baliyanna induced him to marry Nanji.

The villagers were closely associated to nature. The Yerava servants were assigned to sweep the land of lemon and Mango trees, clean the granary and disinfect the coop of chickens. The pregnant Kodava women are fed nutritious food like eggs of red hens, akki otti with wild honey, seeds of sunflower, almonds and paste of garlic, cinnamon and asafoetida. When Nanji had given birth to two children, Rao Bahadur suffering from mental depression swallowed his diamond ring to end his life. The death was publicly announced by Boju firing twice near the flowering Mango tree. The ashes of him were scattered in Talakaveri on Brahmagiri Hill on the eleventh day.

## Melange of Nature and Culture in Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper*

– January – March - 2019

Following his death, the other catastrophes of the family were with the two brothers of Baliyanna. Those were the marriage of Appachu, with a white woman and the death of Machu, being drowned in Torquay. When rains failed, the people gossiped that the family of Rao Bahadur was the reason as they carried the anger of Kodava ancestors. Baliyanna, the head of the family and the professional veterinarian was more fascinated towards the treatment of animals than the long green paddy fields and coffee fields. Hence, the responsibility was willingly chosen by Nanji and she was confident of managing the Yerava servants.

Nanji's experience of farming was deep as she had been treading her soft feet on the earth since she was three. She had worked along with Neelaki, her grandmother in paddy fields when she was five. At seven, she learnt to trim the coffee bushes along with Yeravas. She had noted the process of fragrant flowers turning in to green berries and the pleasure of plucking red, ripe berries at the right time. Her effortless sincerity, precision and efficiency attracted the Yerava workers. They affectionately called her 'Baliyakka' bringing her shoots of bamboo, mushrooms, crabs, green leaves of kembu and river fish.

Nanji was passionate of farming that she could not rest at home even in advanced stage of pregnancy. Along with the Yeravas, she stepped in to the fields enjoying the soft touch of mud and the whispering breeze. She planted the paddy seedlings with perfect rhythm and her diligent efforts intensified malaria in her. The incessant rains of Athur kept the place damp and sweet smelling ever. The people warmed themselves with pot filled with hot coals. When Appachu, the neglected brother of Baliyanna visited Nanji, she fed him steamed paputoo, chicken curry and ghee fried red bananas.

Nanji was dextrous and clever of growing a banana grove cleaning two acres of weeds and unwanted plants. In a year, it yielded eight varieties of banana like rasa, the golden raja, chonda bala and poo bale. Acquiring the information from Maplahs, Nanji endeavoured planting pepper around the trees of five acres of land. Pepper crops needed drained soil, high temperature and lots of shelter. The vines enclosed in trellis produced ripened berries which later shrivelled in to dry black pepper corns due to enzymes. Nanji preserved the pepper as is it was a natural medicine treating sore throats, indigestion and gastric disorders after selling a part of it. After the gripping delivery of Subbu, Nanji had the habit of tying a small handful of pepper to the fringes of her sari.

Nanji wept when her sixth child Subbu was born cripple. When the born baby lied silent, she rubbed pepper in to its nostrils which led in to shrieking cry. She tried all natural medicines to make Subbu a normal child. She massaged his cripple legs with peacock fat and coconut oil. Subbu (Kunta) was told many stories of rakshasas and giants by his uncle Boju carrying Subbu all

## Melange of Nature and Culture in Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper*

– January – March - 2019

around spending lot of time in water. The little Subbu wanted to move his feet but his lifeless legs had no motion. His childhood was spent mostly in the warmth of nature watching Boluka catching large juicy crabs, fresh mushrooms, koile menu, Kurubas gathering honey, tasting warm honey and roasted seeds of jackfruit. When Subbu was eight, an effective emollient made from tiger's milk is sold by a Kuruba woman to Nanji. After a month's massage, Subbu had high fever and almost stayed still similar to the day of his birth. The frightened mother unknotted the edges of her sari and applied a pinch of pepper in to his nose followed by a loud sneezing. The fever lessened after ten days and the cripple Subbu began walking firmly.

Nanji was ecstatic to see his son's laughing reflection in the river. Subbu was proud of his delicate feet which he was not able to control all these seven years. He was delighted with the crucial pain of the thorns and leeches penetrating deep in his feet. Nanji never restricted his wandering as she wanted him to go through the phase of fear first to be courageous. Boju uncle took him to cock fights witnessing the deadly blood sport of the duel in the mid-air. Being an adult, he visited religious processions, markets and toddy shops but never touched alcohol till his fifty years just to please his mother.

Clara Ernestine Kearns, an Irish lady settled in Coorg developed a fascination for Baliyanna, the Vet when he was called for regular visits to treat horses. Coorg is the Scotland of India in the eyes of foreigners. When she worked as a staff nurse in London, she came to know about Coorg, the valley of paradise through Lady Feodara, one of the patients. She narrated Clara about her stay in the thick green forests of the Coorg for 51 years. The entire atmosphere provides the heavenly feel with coffee plantations. Feodara describes, "Where the air felt like satin and the murmur of bees on the giant fig trees made maddening music you never forget".

Clara accepted the proposal of Rupert, the grandson of Lady Feodara as he was living in the heavenly earth called Coorg. She was dejected when the natives were hostile and not friendly. Her living in Coorg shattered her anticipations when she found none to discuss or share among the natives. She was warned constantly by Rupert to be careful on the roads among the natives.

Baliyanna took Clara to the top of Brahmagiri Hill in the month of Tula. This is the season of rejoicing as the water soars high at Talakaveri. The people purify themselves in sacred waters and float garlanded coconuts on water symbolising plenitude and the end of monsoons. She watched the hunting tradition with breeds of trained dogs from the Nilgiri Hills. The famous hunting breeds were Rajapalayam, Kumbai, Chippiparai and Kanni. Nachappa, the skilled hunter killed a boar and the meat was cooked in mud pots.

## Melange of Nature and Culture in Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper*

– January – March - 2019

Clara was excited among the deep, dark, dense trees and thick roots. She beheld tiny frogs, sluggish snails, venomous scorpions and ringed snakes. She tasted multifarious colours of succulent fruits, staining her memory with this wild experience. She visited the stone temple, a sanctified shrine for the health of pregnant women and the unborn. Baliyanna illustrated her incidents of Kolebana, the forest of death. The murderer in the village was usually left here as a prey for tiger. The community then carried out the last rituals to his spirit and the next new born had his name. "We did not kill you but the cruelty that lived inside you" (72).

He recalled the practise of leaving a well-nourished calf to the tigers so that they do not enter in to villages. Baliyanna ironically pointed out that that British government rewards the tiger hunters and thus one day, the species will be wiped out of the earth. When Clara aimed killing two cobras, five feet long, Baliyanna snatched away the gun. He notified that the laws of hunting were not to harm the animals that are love-making, copulating, pregnant, young or feeding.

After a short time, it rained and they both took shelter under the roof of the temple. He gave her Savanthige flower, sacred to Gods. The monsoon rain gushed forth as a clear stream with bouncing leaves and stones. She played with the beetles coiling up at a single touch. Enjoying the resonant sound of the forest, the dripping leaves, striking boughs and grazing animals, she remembered the advice of Feodara to be careful of leeches, snakes and buffaloes. These chaotic dreams of Clara vanished as Baliyanna returned with food. She relished the hot rice and vegetables. Baliyanna's assumption of leeches getting in to the feet of Clara was true. He burnt the removed leeches and suggested that salt keeps away these clean creatures.

Clara got used to the strong voices of natives, the odour of decayed leaves and the powerful fragrance of lemon, mango mixed with dung and hay. She treated the hardworking Yerava workers suffering from foot sores with gentian violet told by the Vet. Subsequently, Nanji was not happy to see the disciplined gardens of the British. The groomed and sober plants were grown in calculative distances geometrically. Nanji compared these stern plants to the soldiers' march and school children seated on a row unable to comprehend the teacher's ideas.

Nanji's garden did not follow the uniform arrangement of plants and flowers. The Sunflower plants decorated the backyard of home; Hydrangea of different hues filled the space near Mango trees; Marigolds, Jasmine, Dahlia, Savanthige, Kanakambara grew disorderly with fragrant blooms for Gods and girls. The author also notifies how the harmless race of bugs was completely vanished by the strong chemical pesticides. Baliyanna took Subbu for hunting to the forests of Kuthnad. The slow roasted meat of a shot bison was salted and dried before taking home. The hunters sang praising the meticulous feat of killing the animal. "Come, Oh wild boar,

## Melange of Nature and Culture in Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper*

– January – March - 2019

Here I stand. Today I will surely, surely take you home" (135). Nanji woke up to cook the fresh meat which was divided among the children.

Nanji trusted that the benevolence of her ancestors enriched land fertility and rain showers. The vertical rainfall denoted the happiness of the predecessors; the wasted water of horizontal rainfall to their dejection. The downpour was crossways and furious when a Kodava married a person from other community. She was proud to be a part of Kodava community. Mallige, the wife of Subbu is silent and passive unlike Nanji. Nanji disliked Mallige's romantic ideas of decoration with flower vases. She raged, "Beauty without value is criminal. There's work, work, work waiting to be done" (189).

Though Subbu joined politics and later in the army, he was always passionate to work in green fields tirelessly. When he was about to be promoted, he quit the army and returned to his native. His son Thimmu loved urban spaces and never had love towards the earth and nature. He was never guilty of cutting abundant trees of Kalyenanda clan to make a good profit. Subbu imagined smelling the blood of trees crying at him, asking him why he has let them killed. His second child Neelamma was delivered by Nanji. The baby was quiet folding her hands and legs in a serene position. Nanji affectionately called her 'God's Insect' resembling praying mantis.

Kavery Nambisan, the master story teller has recorded the pains, likes, dislikes, cultural heritage of the community depending on the mother lap of nature throughout their lives. Their bonding with nature is out of the ordinary where it teaches them to be better human beings helping each other. The author brings out the differences of opinion from generation to generation with the eco-critical awareness.

### Work Cited

Nambisan, Kavery. *The Scent of Pepper*. Penguin Books, 2010.

\*\*\*\*\*

"We do not see nature with our eyes, but with our understandings and our hearts."

- William Hazlett