

## SATIRICAL UNDERTONES IN KAVERY NAMBISAN'S 'THE SCENT OF PEPPER'

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### Abstract

Kavery Nambisan is the prominent South Indian writer as well as a surgeon from the Kodagu district of Karnataka. *The Scent of Pepper* (1996) is the rich cultural portrait of author's native Kodagu and the clan of Kodavas. Though the novel revolves around the strong women characters and their affinity towards their culture, Nambisan has also intertwined noticeable satirical touches. Satire is a delicate art to evoke readers to look into the vices of the society. Satire in her novels helps to interpret the collective psyche and the culture of the community. The ambience of this work of fiction spreads greenish imageries unfolding the aromatic coffee, pepper plantations, education system, post colonial effects of British rule and also the touch of materialism, where the trees are felled for money. The generation gaps and differences of morals of four women – Chambavva, Nanji, Mallige and Neelu portray the plot with lucid, free flowing narration. Subbu, the favourite son of Nanji, the protagonist was tossed between the rural beauty of his village and military duty for dignity. Later, he realises his happiness lies in his village and comes back. This story is truly a picture of a strong cultural community gradually affected by the pangs of materialism, modernism and erosion of conventionality.

**Keywords:** Nambisan, Satire, Colonial Rule, Culture

Out of the significant contemporary women novelists of Indian writing in English, Kavery Nambisan had contributed novels of social magnitude, cultural integrity and psychological insights. *The Scent of Pepper*, written in 1996 sprawls about the culture of Kodava community with the impacts of colonial background. Nambisan's keen observation has woven a skilled artefact with the distinctive satirical vein. The aim of this paper is to analyse the satirical nuances camouflaged with the culture of the Kodava clan and the British demeanour.

The colonisation had a serious effect on the lifestyle of Kodavas. Few Kodavas were trying to imitate their foreign culture while others won the hearts of British with their deep loyalty and innocence. As few people easily adopted their names, food habits, clothing style, the traditional culture was slightly affected. The only thing which prevented them to follow is the religion of British.

Nambisan had employed the plot in the background of post-independent India. Clara, the white lady was attracted to Baliyanna, the veterinarian and husband of Nanji. Rupert, the husband of Clara warned her to be careful of the natives of Coorg. He quoted the fierce spirit of the Mutiny, the first war of Indian Independence as he could never understand how the cartridges greased with the fat of pig and cow instigated a big revolt.

He personally believed that the Coorg people were uncultured and uncivilized till they came under the control of British. Disliking Clara's desire for the Vet, he degraded

them that they look their ancestors and animals as Gods. They were never to be trusted as they could never be judged. Clara, being a nurse asked Baliyanna the reason of Yerava children not sent to school. The Vet satirized the dominating spirit of white men, explaining that the local natives imitated the British in this regard. They kept Yeravas ignorant of the education so that they laboured for the Kodavas. "We exploit their innocence, just like the British". (*Scent of Pepper* 80)

Baliyanna was straightforward on his views about the technological advancement of the British. Though they invented postal system, telegraph and railways, he spit out his hatred, "We can't help it that we don't like you" (*Scent of Pepper* 80). Nambisan also points out that the influence of chemicals, pesticides wiped out the harmless bugs which were substituted by the dark, noisy swarms.

In the second part of the novel, Baliyanna was addicted to drinking habit, hanging around the country club till the last penny was spent. Being the head of the family, he possessed the spirit of negligence and evasion. Haunted with the deepening despair, he reflected the mood of his father's last days. It was ironical to find the husband engaged with hunting and drinking in the clubs, whereas the wife bore the heavy burden of leading a family. Nanji emphasised that men were mostly big dreamers but had no potential to fulfil it. The unavoidable symptoms of his decay never made Nanji weaker.

'A woman can be strong as a man but a man can never acquire a woman's strength'. (Scent of Pepper 106)

Dreams of happy married life induced Appachu, brother of Baliyanna to convert himself to be a catholic. In spite of change in name as Basil Pinto, he could only be a catholic outward as the innate mindset still wanted to be a Kodava. When his wife left him, he only sensed a taste of freedom while others pitied his broken relationship.

The author vividly sketches the scenario of boarding school when education was not everyone's privilege. Subbu was an ordinary boarder in Madikeri Convent School by Irish nuns. He had his food in a barrack style dining room charged eight rupees a month. Above this level are the parlour borders eating chicken on Sundays for twelve rupees a month. The lowest group below these two levels were mostly orphans and illegitimate children, who cleaned the chapel, washed and cooked for the nuns. "They had big hungry eyes... They had sad names like Ada, Maude, Ursula. They wore faded, forgotten dresses that arrived at the convent in huge twisted bundled from God-only-knew-where". (Scent of Pepper 124)

This novel also satirises the flattering spirit of the Coorg people as they mimicked the British culture. Kodira Chengappa alias Chengu Master was one of the teachers of Subbu. His excessive passion for English language influenced him to dress like a European. After marriage, his wife Muthamma became Pearlie. He also took a snapshot of his children Shirley, Sally and Prince were also photographed with his wife in long frock and high heels. Though Nanji had been to school only for two years, nature taught her the wisdom of life. The link between education and practical life was still a mystery to her.

The incident of poor Mallapa brought the cruel picture of Jane Peacock, an insomniac and the wife of British Chief Commissioner. Mallapa's creaking cart carrying coal in the dawn disturbed the sleep of royal Jane Peacock. Hence her orders compelled Mallapa to take the alternative time consuming stone strewn path. The students of Madikeri Convent School sent a letter to Kodagu, the local British newspaper. It just flared up the anger of harassing an honest man for the selfish pleasures of an English lady in power. The ironical stance of the letter was the solution they added that Mallapa's life would not have been in trouble if the commissioner's wife had just plugged her ears with cotton. The British fumes of anger led to the arrest of four boys. The barrister Appachu dealt the case and this revolt made Jane peacock a complete insomniac.

In spite of Appachu's efforts of winning the case, no one welcomed him in to his Kodava community. He soon became paralysed and was taken care by Nanji. Appachu explained that his deep guilt yielding negative emotions, travelled throughout his body causing his limbs immovable. When Nanji gave his share of property – a casket with one hundred and eight silver rupee coins and eighteen gold sovereigns, it troubled his heart of holding luxurious possession but no stamina to use it.

Baliyanna criticised the symbol of charka and the Indian flag as he wished the symbol of the country to be ferocious like the paw of a lion, eye of the tiger or a cobra or an eagle. He felt those symbols were weak and could not accept the sweeping changes of her Indian history. When Subbu was imprisoned for printing rebellious pamphlets against the rule of British, he craved for Nanji's variety of food. "He recalled many delicate flavours until he could make the watery coffee taste like Nanji's filtered ambrosia, the kanji like mutton pulav, and the floating bits of insect like roasted meat". (Scent of Pepper 162)

Mallige, the wife of Subbu and Nanji had differences of opinion, where the former was a feeble, delicate woman spending hours of sewing and the latter branded her as an incompetent housewife. Nanji strung hibiscus with ease and she knew plumped Jasmine buds, fully bloomed Kanakambara, Rose-Tulsi make the better garlands. She believed flowers were either for hair or for Gods but never for decorating vases. She detested the insulting act of Mallige's child's play with flowers. Nanji's vigour and robustness mismatched Mallige's decorative ideas and whimsical notions of life. When Mallige called her son as 'Timmy', Subbu disliked the anglicised name and thus referred him as 'that boy'.

The visit of Mahatma raised questions in the mind of villagers and the British. The meat-eating Kodava community even wondered the vegetarian diet of lean Bapu. The British officials felt their fear and efforts of disconnecting the power supply was unnecessary. Patrick, the cousin of Subbu was cynical and endeavours to become successful in life. His firm belief in education and ambitious nature convinced the innocence of Subbu to steal the money of Nanji. Patrick's ideals were quite contrary to Subbu, where he even advised Subbu to give up the rustic politics and join military instead. Patrick's goals were definite to study at reputed university and to take ICS, after learning the Machiavellianism of the British controlling a lot of colonies. Lacking money as his father refused to part with him, he cunningly persuaded Subbu to take four hundred silver coins without the knowledge of

Nanji. Patrick was the symbol of deceit and selfishness as he was rational and never emotional. He believed that morality can never bring the glory of power or success. Hence morality was absurdity and money became the constant factor of his rational life.

After independence, the state Coorg was adjoined to the Mysore State. The new state was under the grip of industrialisation. Govinda, the MLA promised Subbu that India will be above the poverty line within ten years. Sunny, a victim of leg ulcer submitted a petition to him to save the dogs being shot behind the Madikeri Fort. Govinda's inconsideration shocked Sunny with an innocent question. "What's more important than dogs being killed for no fault of theirs?" (Scent of Pepper 236). He could not bear the mass elimination of animals, when he with his slow dying flesh was not ignored.

The attitude of purposeless existence permeated throughout the generations of Kaleyananda clan and the possession of a revolver was seen as the pride emblem of the family. Rao Bahadur killed himself with a priceless diamond and Baliyanna, his son shot himself with the same revolver, which Subbu was found with the same at the end of the novel.

Thimmu's materialism had voracious ambitions devouring the undying love for Subbu for his village.

Towering trees of bygone ages were felled by Thimmu for money. Subbu's serenity of his waning life accepted the belligerent Thimmu, deprived of love for nature. "Life's decline was terrible, unyielding and devoid of joy" (Scent of Pepper 262). Subbu was hurt sensing the sharp sound of the axe felling the giant trees and the strong lingering odour of raw wood. With the conventional framework of culture and Kodava community, Nambisan analyses the flavour of independence, the clash between past and present, imitation of occidental ideologies, generation gap, piquant growth of politics with mild satire and light-hearted irony. Her satirical tinges bring forth social responsibility echoing ethical wisdom and moral enlightenment. The man-woman relationship becomes the perfect circle only when the broken arc is fixed with the values of patience, contentment and purposeful life. Rao Bahadur, Baliyanna, Subbu represent vacuous insanity, whereas Chambavva, Nanji, Mallige are independent in their own way.

#### Reference

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