



Research Paper

Reading Kavery Nambisan's The Scent Of Pepper Through Ecocritical Lens

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ABSTRACT :

Literature has always been used as a tool for portraying the interactions between physical environment and human-environment . The modern environmentalist movement which emerged in the late nineteenth century took a new birth in the 1960s where a large number of writers came up with writings concerned with the changing relationship of humans with the natural world . Literature is well known for reflecting the contemporary issues and the world of literature is full of works dealing with beauty and power of nature . However, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of the environment poses on human life has caught the attention of the writers only recently . It is in this sense of concern, that gave rise to a new branch of literary theory : Ecocriticism . The early 1990s, however, has the beginnings of ecocriticism in the literary works .

Ecocriticism is an eclectic and loosely coordinated movement whose contributions have far reaching effects not only in literature but also in various art forms and media . This paper discusses the term ecocriticism and its role in literature specifically in the literary work by Kaveri Nambisan who is a gifted writer from India and she brings alive the mountainous beauty of the district of Coorg which is one of the places known for coffee plantations too.

KEYWORDS : Ecocriticism , Interconnectedness with nature , relation of man and nature

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I. INTRODUCTION :

Ecocriticism that came into being in the 1990s as an important theory evaluating the relationship between environment and literature is seen to have a significant role in the nature versus culture debate . Most ecocritical works share a common motivation : the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems . Ecocriticism has initiated to establish mutual coexisting relationship between environment and literature and between man and nature . The race for urban living and to be a part of the global identity has made man forget the simple pleasures that nature can offer . Ecocritics encourage us to think seriously about this environmental crisis through their writings . **Kavery Nambisan** is a gifted writer bringing alive the mountainous majesty of the district of Coorg. As one reads her novel namely *The Scent of Pepper*, the reader is immediately reminded of the writer's sense of place that gives a strong identity to the novel. This paper attempts to understand the nuances of the relationship between nature and the characters inhabiting the novel through ecocritical lens and also examine the interconnectedness of the characters with nature in the novel.

OBJECTIVE :

Under the light of the above discussion the objective of this paper is to show man's changing relationship to the natural world and how Nambisan uses the ecocritical lens to show the characters' interconnectedness to the natural environment of Coorg .

THE CONCEPT OF ECOCRITICISM :

Ecocriticism is an attempt to understand human and non-human interactions and inter-relationships . It is an attempt to reintegrate the human and the non-human, to retrace the lost links between humanity and the world out there. The word *ecocriticism* is a semi neologism which means it is a new word . *Eco* is short of *ecology*, which is concerned with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment as well as their relationships with that environment. By analogy, ecocriticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. The domain of ecocriticism is very broad because it is not limited to any literary genre. "Ecocriticism" is the word on the recently published anthology titled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. This book is a collection of carefully selected essays on the ecological approach to literary studies.

It signals the emergence of a new type of literary criticism, now unanimously accepted as ecocriticism. As the essays in this book indicate, ecocriticism aims to bring a transformation of literary studies by linking literary criticism and theory with the ecological issues at large. To define it Cheryll Glotfelty writes,

"ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment."(Glotfelty xviii)

USE OF ECOCRITICISM IN INDIAN NOVELS :

Ecocriticism launches a call to literature to connect to the issues of today's environmental crisis. In other words, ecocriticism is directly concerned with both nature (natural landscape) and the environment (landscape both natural and urban). From the literary standpoint, ecocriticism needs a more inclusive and interdisciplinary approach.

There are a few novels in Indian English Literature that can be read through the lens of ecocriticism . The earlier works have used nature as an important backdrop against which the story develops . but the recent writers have taken up the issue of ecocriticism as the main theme of their works .

Raja Rao, one of the most important writers in the Indian English Literature, has depicted the South Indian village culture and environment setting with a true depiction of the relationship between man and man . In this novel the people of the village call the mountain as Goddess Kenchamma and they consider it responsible nature in his novel ' **Kanthapura** ' . He has shown how rivers and mountains play an important role in the life of for both their prosperity and adversity . The first few pages reminds us of the age old practices of our ancestors when nature was respected in its true sense . But besides these few pages we do not get any further discussion in the novel .

R.K. Narayan, another prominent writer wrote in the same decade and gave life to a place named Malgudi, or it can be said that he developed a place as a character which he used in almost all of his works . He used landscape as an important theme which was considered as one of the main concerns under ecocriticism . In his novel ' **The Dark Room** ' the river and the ruined temple leave a benign influence on Savitri, the female character of the novel . The flowing Sarayu, the ruined temple and the stone slabs influence Raju in ' **The Guide** ', and contribute to his sainthood . It is the spirit of Malgudi that helped him to face his fate and transform himself to a better human being . Thus we see how nature was responsible for the moulding a character in Narayan's novels .

Other writers who are well known for ecocritical writings are Ruskin Bond, Anita Desai Although the writers used nature as a backdrop or a character they were not writing with the thought of ecology . One of the reasons why it came as the centre of discussion towards the end of the last century was the threat that human beings felt upon themselves and thus it became a global concern as further neglect would lead to the doom of mankind .

The novel which has been accepted by all the ecocritics, without giving rise to any objection in calling it a fiction with an ecocritical approach, is Amitav Ghosh's ' **The Hungry**

Tide '. It has the elements of the earlier concept of ecocriticism - the interrelationship between human, nature and animal worlds . In other words it deals with the study of nature writing . The book is about one of the most dynamic ecological systems of the world . It takes us to the

Sunderbans . It is about the hardships of the settlers trying to give a meaning to their lives against all the odds offered by the place . We see nature in both its full beauty and its ugliness . He presents before us the anger of nature and fragility of humans . This blend of the political and the social truth with its concern for nature has brought this novel of Indian English Literature under the discussion of the ecocritics . The story is of an urban man Kanai and his uncle's account in his notebook through which we are told about most of the strange and hushed political happenings in the name of conservation . Piyali, the ecologist, and Fokir, the native,

also make us sense the real terror of nature . The Sunderbans abounds in animals and these animals also influence the lives of the inhabitants . In the novel we see the terror of the tigers, known for killing men and animals, among the people of the islands . The main reason for this environmental degradation is the increasing population and the increasing need of this rising population . Amitav Ghosh creates emotional dilemma among us as to whom to support . Intellectually, it seems quite easy to encourage conservation, but on humanitarian ground we cannot stop ourselves from feeling the helplessness of the people while they were brutally killed . Ghosh in this novel tries to show the vastness and terror of the nature which is responsible for life on the earth. He brings before us the limitations of human beings . If nature thinks of revenge for our cruelties towards her the whole of humanity will be washed away from the face of the earth .

And finally Nambisan's novel the *Scent of Pepper* is a haunting tale of a family belonging to the Kaleyanda clan inhabiting much of the novel and the characters. It is a moving saga of the life and times of Nanji, the central character around whom the novel centres about though Nambisan does not envisage this development in the novel. The novel develops in a linear fashion from the time Nanji is married into the big landowning family headed by the ageing patriarch Rao Bahadur Madaiah and grows old enough to see her succeeding generation amidst developments in Coorg, British imperialism, the rise of patriotism and nationalistic feelings among the people of Coorg especially the youth, Gandhian sentiments, the working and reworking relationship between the different members of the family- their rise, descent and their destruction before the end of the novel. Nanji lives through both happy and unpleasant times to witness many events unfold before her but take charge of each responsibility as a natural course of events. Nanji knows only thing that is to work and keep on working and does not discharge her duties even growing old. Nambisan projects Nanji as a strong character completely in charge of her internal and external environments that is she is connected to her home and the coffee estates owned by the family. Nanji never felt the need to leave Coorg unlike other characters who seem to leave Coorg and live in different Indian towns. The home and the coffee estates seem to instill in her a sense of peace and calm. Nanji drowns her sorrows and pleasures in her work and looks at work not as drudgery or a mundane task but as an irredeemable object of life.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF THE CHARACTERS WITH NATURE IN THE NOVEL :

Kavery Nambisan has portrayed the character of Nanji that draws the reader like a magnet to her strength, integrity and the practical approach to her life. Nanji's character truly reflects the basic premise of ecocriticism as the interconnectedness between nature and culture and also the connection between the physical world and human nature. Nanji remains an ardent follower of the soil and cherishes and nurtures it with her love and affection. Nambisan's displays strong ecocritical strains as she is familiar with the environment of Coorg that is lovingly captured in Nanji's internal and mutual co-existing relationship with nature. The reader can visualize the picturesque surroundings of the Coorg region that is flooded with lofty mountains, magnificent flora and fauna that can preserve and destroy the wealth of the region if treated with contempt by the local inhabitants. The British inhabiting the place fall in love with the tranquil and peaceful place of Coorg and are often reluctant to leave the place.

The Scent of Pepper is very much a novel about Nanji as much as it about nature of the place. Nanji seems to spread the essence of the novel and Nambisan integrates the character of Nanji seamlessly into the novel and every character is inadvertently related to her. Nature in this novel does not provide a beautiful backdrop but emerges as a force to reckon with when the coffee yield decreases one year as the ancestors have been angered,

“There will be no escaping the anger of our ancestors. Kodagu will be punished” (*The Scent of Pepper*,17).

That is why the writer comments on the various festivals marking the different seasons and their 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 region and the people. Nambisan nativity and interconnectedness to the Coorgi environment translates effectively into the shaping Nanji as she is always seen working the plain soil with her hands and making it as worthy as possible. Nanji comes across with a body and soul enmeshed with nature and her environment and nobody can separate the two.

Kavery Nambisan creates a wonderful working relationship and interconnections that are steeped in domestic realism in the novel through Nanji. What Nambisan skillfully attempts to project is the woman's domain extending from the hearth to the external environment and how she effectively manages the smooth operation of the household to the supervision of agricultural work. If Nanji is occupied with the enormous task of feeding her family and the retinue of servants with nutritious meals, pickling of fish, preparing delicacies for various festivals; she is equally at ease sowing, transplanting seeds and looking at errant leaves of the coffee plant. In fact Nanji is most comfortable when she is working in the paddy fields along with other women

labourers and often relives nostalgic moments with her grandmother Neelakki. In a sense, Nambisan has extensively discussed about the region of Coorg and the Coorgi way of life through Nanji.

Nanji doesn't seem to indulge in feminine pleasures of knitting, sewing or tending to the garden unlike other women. On the contrary she carelessly throws the seeds in her backyard and allows a plethora of plants to survive unlike the neat patches of landscape adorning many Coorgi homes. Nanji thrives in disorder and does not attempt to stifle nature in her growth. When her daughter – in - law Mallige is busy decorating the house with her sewing creations, Nanji frowns over the delicate temperament and disposition of Mallige and begins to doubt her capacity and efficiency to run a household.

Nambisan applauds the sturdy physical disposition of the Coorgi women to withstand failure, hardships and their capacity to outlive their husbands like the coffee in the novel and Nanji is no exception to the rule. As observed in the novel after Baliyanna's lack of interest to live and genetic disposition to depression culminating in his death, Nanji continues with her chores with determination and ensures the family is well attended to. Indeed, Nanji outlives her husband, her deceased children and remains a ageing figure in the novel. The only person that remains to take care of her is her sixth son Subbu.

The extent of the commercial development in Coorg is witnessed when Thimmu, Subbu's son starts razing trees for timber amidst the protests and helplessness of Subbu. He dreams that the strong trees of Coorg are mourning and walking to him for help bleeding profusely. Nambisan deftly creates a poignant scene that is representative of modern India where the environment and nature is constantly stripped to support man's development and nourishment.

II. CONCLUSION :

Kavery Nambisan is one of the significant voices of Indian English fiction . Her novel, *The Scent of Pepper* reveals her genuine concern for the pressing issues related to the age-old question of man's relationship with the natural environment. In her brilliant evocation of the landscape of Coorg, Nambisan reminds us of Hardy or Narayan. Just as the Malgudian landscape permeates the spirit of Narayan's novels, so also the appalling beauty and exquisite grandeur of Coorg leaves an indelible impression on the minds of the readers. It is interesting to note how the entire story of the novel gets unfolded against the robust Coorg, exploring its full potential, and with an emphasis on the material existence of the natural beauty of Coorg which affects the life of its main character Nanji.

Cast against the story of the trails and tribulations in the life of Nanji, a Kodava woman, the novel displays a sense of strong commitment to nature. It is through the character of Nanji that Nambisan quite dexterously brings to the fore the interrelationship that exists between nature and man. The physical being and pristine beauty of the natural landscape of Coorg come alive in the imagination of the readers when Nanji takes the readers through its flora and fauna and climatic variations. As Nambisan observes: "...the climate of Kodugu- with its heavy rain, months of dry weather, and abundant shade- was ideal for pepper cultivation. Nanji, like many of her neighbours, had already experimented with a few vines, which she planted around the trees near the house. They produced just enough pepper to season her fried pot. Now she planted them nearly every tree in a five – acre clearing. Within months, the vines with their shiny dark leaves climbed upward, festooning the trees like frilly apparel." (SP 34-35)

Ecocriticism thus gives increased attention to literary representatives of nature and is sensitive to interdependencies that ground the author, character or work in the natural system . From the beginning the writers have shown interest towards nature, culture, and landscape. For writers like Narayan, landscape was the part of the theme or the characters which showed growth with time whereas for writers like Ruskin Bond and Amitav Ghosh landscape and environment were shown to be at risk and the attention of the readers was brought towards the conservation of nature to save themselves from being destroyed . The scope of ecocriticism has widened because of the inclusion of the different perspective proposed by the critics around the world and the changing relations between man and nature . Literature has thus dealt with the concerns of the environment and explored the relation of man and nature .

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