

LAND, WOMAN, AND CULTURAL SURVIVAL: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF KAVERY NAMBISAN'S THE SCENT OF PEPPER

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ABSTRACT

Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* presents Kodagu as an agrarian-cultural world where land, clan memory, and women's labour remain inseparable. This study reads the novel from an ecofeminist perspective by following Nanji's work across household, field, ritual, and estate. Her life joins household management, agricultural knowledge, food practices, pregnancy care, estate work, and cultural memory. Land, in her world, carries ancestry, labour, food, ritual value, and moral obligation. The study also examines the pressure of colonial and global habits on Kodava life. British manners, plantation capitalism, western dress, English names, and imported standards of refinement enter Kodagu and disturb an older relation between culture and land. Nambisan presents ecological decline and cultural change as allied disturbances: once land becomes estate, asset, or spectacle, its sacred and communal meanings diminish. Nanji's rooted labour counters colonial imitation, masculine authority, and profit-driven treatment of nature. Her ethic of use, care, memory, and responsibility anchors the ecofeminist reading. *The Scent of Pepper* becomes a narrative of land, womanhood, ecological memory, and cultural survival.

KEYWORDS: Ecofeminism, Kodagu, Nanji, land, cultural identity, colonial modernity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* grows out of the soil, climate, memory, and cultural life of Kodagu. The novel follows Nanji, a young widow who enters the powerful Kaleyanda clan after her marriage to Baliyanna. Around her life, Nambisan builds a social world made of coffee estates, paddy fields, ancestral rituals, childbirth customs, clan pride, British influence, local labour, and the altered moral atmosphere of colonial Coorg. Beneath its family-saga structure lies a sustained meditation on people and place. Kodagu functions as an active cultural field. It forms habits, values, food, labour, gender roles, and social identity. Recent studies on the novel also stress this sense of place, especially the relation between Kodava culture and the natural environment of Coorg (Ponnanna et al. 3301-02).

The present study reads *The Scent of Pepper* from an ecofeminist perspective. Ecofeminism begins from the recognition that the domination of women and the exploitation of nature often arise from connected structures of power. Glotfelty's well-known definition of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" supplies the broader critical frame for this reading (xviii). In Nambisan's novel, that relationship becomes most visible in Nanji. Her life remains tied to the house, the fields, the estate, the kitchen, the children, the workers, and the seasonal rhythm of cultivation. She knows the land by use, touch, habit, and care. Her knowledge grows out of daily labour: sowing, transplanting, cutting paddy, preserving food, supervising workers, preparing for rituals, and managing the household economy.

Nanji's ecological presence matters because Nambisan joins women's labour with environmental life. The coffee estate and the household operate as linked spaces. The field, kitchen, storeroom, cattle shed, courtyard, and ritual space form one economy of survival. Nanji moves across these spaces with authority. Her bond with land is practical, bodily, and inherited. Her sharp rebuke to Mallige's ornamental taste, where she calls beauty apart from value criminal and insists that work waits everywhere, gives the moral ground of her life (Nambisan 189). Beauty, for Nanji, must remain answerable to use, care, and survival. Work gives value to beauty; cultivation gives moral substance to belonging.

The novel also places Kodava culture inside a historical moment of change. British colonial presence alters the social imagination of Coorg. Coffee plantations bring wealth, along with new forms of power, imitation, and cultural displacement. The British are drawn to Coorg because of its climate, soil, hills, and coffee-growing possibilities. They rename places, reshape manners, and create new standards of refinement. Nambiar's study of shifting identities in the novel reads this process in relation to colonial identity formation, where native histories are recast by colonial language and values (113-15). In the novel, Kodagu becomes Coorg; local estate names are replaced by English ones; western food, dress, clubs, pets, and etiquette become signs of prestige. Kodava culture remains alive, yet a crust of imitation begins to settle over older ways of life.

This imitation carries an ecofeminist meaning. When land becomes an estate, a commercial resource, and a sign of class pride, older forms of ecological intimacy weaken. The land remains sacred in ritual memory, while it also enters profit, status, and competition. The movement from belonging to exploitation gives the novel its ecological tension. Nambisan's Kodagu is beautiful, fertile, and culturally dense, yet it faces colonial modernity, market desire, and later commercial development. Nanji stands at the point where these tensions meet. Her authority comes from competence. She supervises workers, cares for children, manages pregnancies and deaths, sustains food practices, protects family memory, and participates in agricultural life. *The Scent of Pepper*, then, can be read as a narrative of land, womanhood, and cultural survival. It examines Kodagu as an ecological and cultural world; Nanji's labour as an ecofeminist ethic; colonial and global influences as disturbances to local identity; and the novel's movement from ecological intimacy to environmental loss. The novel becomes a study of how a community lives with land, how women sustain that relation, and how modernity can turn rooted life into imitation, profit, and loss.

2. CULTURAL ECOFEMINISM AND THE WORLD OF KODAGU

Ecofeminism is especially useful for reading *The Scent of Pepper* because Nambisan treats land, woman, family, and culture as interdependent fields of experience. In Kodagu, land is remembered, cultivated, feared, worshipped, and inherited. Its hills, coffee estates, paddy fields, pepper vines, forests, rain, and soil hold the life of the community together. Kodava festivals, food habits, rituals, clan pride, labour practices, and domestic arrangements arise from this relation to land. Das observes that Nambisan gives Coorg a strong identity by connecting the characters with the natural environment, while Ponnanna, Pinto, and Aishwarya describe the novel's Kodagu by means of geography, community memory, and local history (Das 4-5; Ponnanna et al. 3301-02). Nanji carries this relation in its most practical form. She speaks of land by work rather than poetic abstraction. She knows the body of the field, the demands of the estate, the timing of crops, the moods of workers, the household's food needs, and the discipline required to keep a family alive. She supervises home and estate with the same alertness. Her movement across these spaces revises the usual division between the inner space of woman and the outer space of land. The house becomes an ecological unit, and her household sense reaches outward into cultivation, care, discipline, and seasonal labour.

The novel gives this ecological consciousness a cultural depth by linking land with ancestors. When the coffee yield decreases, nature is read as ancestral anger that will punish Kodagu (Nambisan 17). Crop failure becomes a moral disturbance. Rain, fertility, yield, and ancestral approval belong to the same belief system. Such a view may seem traditional, yet it protects land from reduction to commodity. The soil has memory. The harvest has moral meaning. Labour takes place inside a sacred order.

Nanji's rebuke to Mallige brings the same ethic into domestic life. Her statement that beauty separated from value becomes criminal rejects decoration that loses touch with use (Nambisan 189). She distrusts beauty that floats above necessity. For Nanji, value comes from labour, usefulness, nourishment, and responsibility. A purely decorative landscape turns nature into display. Nanji's instinct moves in another direction. Plants grow, food is prepared, seeds are sown, and soil retains use. Nanji's ecofeminism is practical rather than sentimental. She belongs to nature by body, memory, patience, and will. Her childhood training strengthens this bond: she works with her grandmother Neelaki in the paddy fields, learns the care of coffee plants with the Yeravas, watches flowers turn into berries, and waits for the right time to pluck them. This is agricultural knowledge acquired by long contact. It is also women's knowledge, passed by practice more than formal instruction.

The Yerava workers deepen Nanji's ecological identity. They call her "Baliyakka" and bring her bamboo shoots, mushrooms, crabs, kembu leaves, and river fish. These offerings suggest affection, labour, and local knowledge. The Yeravas know the edible and medicinal world of the forest and river. Nanji's authority over them belongs partly to estate hierarchy, but the novel also allows a quieter exchange of trust. Ponnanna, Pinto, and Aishwarya call Nanji a "medicine" woman to the Yerava workers and note that many of her preparations come from common plants, including the indigenous pepper vine (3301). Women's ecological knowledge in the novel includes agriculture, food, medicine, pregnancy care, ritual participation, and survival. Kodava women transmit culture to the next generation by ceremonies, songs, dances, festivals, and household practice. They also carry the burden of childbirth and family continuity. The novel admires Nanji's endurance and also records the heavy demand placed on Kodava women. Ecofeminism helps us read this double position. Nanji is empowered by land-based knowledge, while the cultural system draws heavily on her body, time, and emotional stamina. Her body becomes one of the estate's sustaining forces.

3. FOOD, BODY, AND RITUAL CUSTODIANSHIP

The ecofeminist strength of *The Scent of Pepper* also lies in its treatment of food. Food in the novel is tied to season, pregnancy, health, fertility, clan pride, ritual memory, and labour. Kodava culture survives in what is cooked, stored, served, preserved, and eaten. Nanji's work in the kitchen carries the same value as her work in the field. She feeds the living, cares for the pregnant, prepares for festivals, supervises labour, and keeps the family's daily rhythm intact.

The custom of feeding pregnant women shows the bond between body, culture, and ecology. Swathi and Kumar cite the novel's account of Nanji's early pregnancy and highlight the phrase "a wise tradition" for the Kodava practice of feeding pregnant women richly (Nambisan 11; Swathi and Kumar 381). The passage presents food custom as bodily wisdom. Pregnancy requires nourishment, warmth, protection, and abundance. Eggs, ghee, rotis with honey, and medicinal lehyam made of jaggery, sesame, cashew, almonds, and sunflower seeds become part of an inherited medical ecology (Nambisan 11). Food becomes medicine, and women become the carriers of that knowledge.

Nanji's relation to food also shows how women's labour sustains a clan economy. She prepares nutritious meals, pickles fish, makes festival delicacies, and feeds servants and family members. The same woman who works in the paddy field also preserves food inside the house. The field produces; the kitchen transforms. The household survives because Nanji understands both spaces. Her competence gives her authority, and that authority grows from knowledge gathered by use.

Festivals carry the same relation between nature and culture. Kalipodh, Puthari, and Shankramana mark seasonal observances connected with nature's bounty and the renewal of the region's body and soul (Durga 443-44). Such festivals show that the Kodava world reads time agriculturally. A season is a period of sowing, waiting, harvesting, thanking, and renewing social bonds. The novel's culture is ecological before it is ideological. People belong to land because they eat from it, work on it, fear its anger, and celebrate its abundance.

Nanji's place in this ritual order is firm and demanding. She participates in ceremonies and sustains domestic order, while the same culture asks her to absorb pain quietly. The phrase "a Kodavathi is born tough" suits her well. She survives child widowhood, remarriage, repeated pregnancies, the death of children, her husband's emotional distance, estate responsibilities, and old age. Her toughness extends beyond physical endurance. It is a way of holding the world together when others fail. Men in the novel often move toward colonial prestige, depression, desire, politics, or mobility. Nanji remains with the grain of daily life. She cooks, stores, heals, commands, remembers, and continues.

4. COLONIAL MODERNITY, GLOBALIZATION, AND CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT

The ecological world of Kodagu comes under pressure when colonial modernity enters the region. British rule serves as a political background and a cultural force. It alters names, habits, desires, taste, clothing, food, and ideas of refinement. The British come to Kodagu because of coffee, climate, soil, and plantation wealth. Nambiar notes that the British were drawn by Coorg's coffee prospects and that Kodagu itself is renamed Coorg after annexation (114-15). Alistair's comment in the novel makes the economic logic clear: coffee brings the British into the beautiful valley of Coorg (Nambisan 84). This remark exposes the foundation beneath colonial admiration. Coorg's beauty attracts the British, but coffee makes settlement profitable. The landscape becomes valuable because it can be cultivated for empire. For Nanji, land is memory, food, work, ancestry, and duty. For the colonial planter, land becomes climate, yield, estate, and commercial promise. These two relations to the earth stand in tension throughout the novel.

Colonial influence also produces imitation among the Kodavas. Nambisan describes Kodava men adopting "trousers, well-cut jackets, hats and bowties," while women who try frocks return to the sari because the foreign dress sits awkwardly on their bodies (48). The detail is comic, and the comedy carries unease. Clothing becomes a visible sign of cultural negotiation. Men adjust more quickly to the external grammar of British respectability. Women feel the awkwardness more sharply on the body. Colonial modernity first enters by surfaces: dress, manners, names, clubs, food, and cultivated taste.

Nambiar's study explains this process by colonial identity formation. British renaming changes Kodanad, Thenupare, and Kurudarahalli into Glenview, Windermere, and Balmoral. Such renaming imposes a new identity on land and weakens local memory by replacing native names with familiar British ones (Nambiar

115-16). A place with its own language, ritual, and history is made readable to the colonizer by being recast in colonial terms. Here the ecofeminist and postcolonial concerns of the paper meet. Colonialism disturbs land and culture together. It takes political power and trains the colonised to look at themselves from outside. Local habits begin to seem rough, while foreign habits acquire prestige. Swathi and Kumar argue that Kodavas embrace westernized life in names, lifestyle, food habits, customs, dress, and even cultivation practices (378-79). Nambisan presents this change as slow accretion rather than total destruction. Kodava culture remains alive, but its surface is altered.

Although the novel belongs to colonial and early postcolonial Kodagu, its concern with globalization has a clear basis, since the same pattern continues into the present. Globalization works by mobility, market desire, cultural imitation, and the weakening of local economies. In the novel, colonialism already trains native elites to value foreign manners, makes coffee estates part of wider commercial circuits, and turns local identity toward outside approval. Kodava identity lives in clan houses, marriage customs, birth rituals, death rites, agricultural work, festivals, ancestor worship, and the special relation with Coorg's landscape. When colonial or global forces alter these practices, they alter the community's sense of itself. Nanji resists this shift by continuity. Her body remains close to the soil. Her habits remain tied to usefulness. Her values remain agricultural and ancestral. Against the imported polish of colonial life, Nanji represents a harder, earthier intelligence. The novel studies what happens when a land-based community begins to desire another civilization's approval. The danger lies in environmental decline and in the loss of a way of seeing land. When land becomes estate, prestige, commodity, scenery, or colonial possession, the older ethic of care weakens.

5. FROM CULTURAL CHANGE TO ENVIRONMENTAL LOSS

The final ecological anxiety of the novel appears more sharply in the later generation. Subbu's consciousness records a changed Kodagu. Nanji knows the land by labour; Subbu learns to love it by return, memory, and reflection. He supervises the plantation, watches the spread of modern habits, and begins to feel the damage caused by commercial desire. One sentence in the novel may be read as its moral diagnosis: "What started as a blind adoration of a new culture had nearly obliterated the old" (Nambisan 244). The danger begins with admiration. The community imitates what it considers superior. Names, dress, food, manners, whisky parties, western education, and polished speech gradually acquire prestige. The old culture is covered and thinned by repetition.

Subbu's later awareness differs from Nanji's instinctive rootedness. Nanji lives culture by labour. Subbu has to rediscover it after exposure to politics, war, modernity, and generational change. His realization that "Sophistication was a shell" returns the novel to its oldest moral claim: outward refinement loses meaning when the inner bond with land has been lost (Nambisan 243). The Kodavas are born to care for a land made sacred by memory, ritual, and the goddess who protects Kodagu. This insight arrives late, but it gives the narrative a reflective gravity.

The most painful expression of ecological loss comes when Thimmu begins to cut trees for timber. Here the novel moves from cultural imitation to environmental violence. Subbu protests, yet he is helpless before the new commercial logic. Timber has value in the market. Trees become money. The ecological memory that Nanji lived by has faded as a social force. Durga notes that Subbu dreams of Coorg trees as wounded presences, moving toward him and bleeding (444). The novel's bitter observation, "People talked of loving trees but cut them down," gives this scene its moral weight (Nambisan 262). This moment broadens the ecofeminist frame. Earlier, the novel links woman and land by work, fertility, food, and ancestry. Later, it links environmental damage with masculine ambition and commercial expansion. The old order had patriarchy, hierarchy, estate authority, and clan restrictions, yet it still preserved a sacred fear of land. In the later order, that fear weakens. Ancestors lose their restraining force. Trees become timber. Land becomes asset. Heritage becomes negotiable. The land loses its sacred and emotional thickness. Utility remains in a narrow sense. Cultural survival in Nambisan's novel demands the survival

of relations. Land must remain more than property. Women's labour must be valued as knowledge. Food must remain connected to ecology. Ritual must retain memory. Plants must remain healers as well as crops. Once these relations break, culture becomes surface. It may still wear its costume, sing its songs, and display its symbols, but its living base weakens.

6. NANJI, FEMALE CONTINUITY, AND RENEWAL

Nanji's significance lies in the kind of memory she carries. She is an agrarian custodian rather than an educated theorist, reformer, or public speaker. Her knowledge belongs to the hand, foot, eye, tongue, and back. She knows what must be cooked, stored, sown, cut, fed, cleaned, healed, and guarded. Such knowledge is often left out of written histories because it belongs to women's repeated labour. Nambisan gives that labour narrative dignity.

The original eco-critical readings of the novel often see Nanji as a bridge between human nature and the physical world. Kavithalaya and Kandasamy emphasize her ease in moving from home to estate, while Dhesika and Suganya read the novel by ecocritical, feminist, and cultural approaches (426-27; 143). These approaches are useful, but Nanji also needs critical attention. Her authority is real, yet it is gained within a demanding patriarchal structure. The culture honours her toughness because it needs her labour. It praises her fertility because the clan depends on lineage. It respects her household power because men often leave practical survival to women. Nanji's strength carries a heavy cost. Her life is admirable and exhausting.

Nanji's care for Appachu offers a small but telling extension of her character. When Appachu is rejected for conversion and marriage outside Kodava norms, Nanji still cares for him and tries to secure his rites on their land. This act matters because her rootedness is spacious. She values tradition, but she is capable of ethical action beyond rigid custom. Her relation to land is protective rather than possessive. She understands belonging as care.

The ending of the novel carries a guarded hope. By the time Neelu returns, Kodagu has already changed. Colonial habits have left traces. Commercial development has wounded the land. Subbu has seen the old life lose confidence. Yet Neelu's return offers continuity. Swathi and Kumar read educated and self-possessed Neelu as a figure of hope, progress, reform, and rebirth (383-84). This is important because ecofeminism here means renewal more than a return to an untouched past. Nambisan asks for recovery of an older ethic of relation: care for land, respect for work, responsibility toward community, and ancestral memory freed from cruelty.

Neelu is educated, yet education can remain rooted. She belongs to a later world, but she may still inherit Nanji's moral discipline. Cultural survival depends on deciding what must be carried forward. The useful, healing, land-bound, community-sustaining elements of Kodava life must survive. Empty imitation, status anxiety, and careless commercialism must be resisted. Nanji's generation held the clan by endurance. Neelu's generation must hold it by awareness. Between them, the novel imagines a line of female continuity that carries tradition toward reform.

7. CONCLUSION

Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* is a novel of land, womanhood, and cultural survival. Its world is built from the soil of Kodagu: coffee, pepper, rain, paddy, bamboo, mushrooms, river fish, festivals, ancestors, clan houses, and the discipline of agricultural labour. Against this living world, the novel places colonial modernity, cultural imitation, estate capitalism, and later commercial development. The conflict lies between rooted value and surface value.

Nanji gives the novel its ecofeminist centre. She joins domestic work and ecological knowledge. She cooks, preserves, heals, supervises, gives birth, mourns, commands, and cultivates. Her body and mind are

trained by soil, season, food, and responsibility. She speaks little in the language of reform, yet her life resists waste, ornamental weakness, and rootless imitation. Her rebuke to Mallige becomes a key to her ethic: beauty must feed life, protect continuity, and remain answerable to work.

The novel also shows that Kodava culture absorbs, imitates, resists, adapts, and remembers. British influence alters manners, names, food, dress, and social ambition. Globalization may be read as a later extension of this pattern, where outside values enter local life and weaken older forms of ecological belonging. Nambisan presents this change while keeping Kodagu vivid, flawed, and necessary.

The image of trees cut for timber deepens the novel's warning. A culture that speaks of loving land while permitting its destruction loses the substance of belonging. Subbu's grief reveals what Nanji had always known by instinct: land is memory, food, ancestry, and moral duty. Neelu's return gives the ending a small measure of hope. Renewal remains possible when the next generation carries forward the life-giving parts of tradition.

An ecofeminist reading of *The Scent of Pepper*, then, presents the novel as a study of how women preserve ecological memory, how land sustains cultural identity, and how careless modernity can injure both. Nambisan's Kodagu survives most fully in Nanji's labour. Her life teaches that cultural survival begins with the soil and continues when care, memory, and responsibility pass from one generation to another.

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