

An Exploratory Study on Indigenous Knowledge and Rituals of the Kodava Tribes in Kaveri Nambisen's *The Scent of Pepper*

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Indigenous knowledge includes culture, cultural practices, heritage and legacy of clan by clan or generation by generation. Indian tribes are mostly concentrated as marginals or subalterns down the line. However, the changing environment challenges their livelihood, by sustaining rituals and festivals in a modified way. In the literary oeuvre, writings on tribes remain beyond the canon. In the bioregional aspect, Kavery Nambisan a South Indian writer offers a rich portrayal of the cultural life, traditions and spiritual practices of the Kodava community of Kodagu district, called Coorg. Her *The Scent of Pepper* reflects how rituals and festivals play a vital role in shaping the social and spiritual identity of the Kodava people. These practices are deeply connected to the land, ancestry and agricultural cycles, forming an essential part of their cultural heritage. Through the narrative, the author illustrates how traditional ceremonies and festive gatherings function as a means of preserving collective memory and reinforcing community bonds. Ceremonial practices, seasonal celebrations and ancestral worship demonstrate the spiritual worldview of the community, where nature, family lineage and faith are closely interconnected. Rituals and spiritual festivals always act as a medium through which cultural knowledge and social values are transmitted across generations. In this line, the present paper discusses memory of Kodagus, cultural loss and eco aesthetics of Kodagu district.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, collective memory, cultural loss, eco aesthetics and Indian Tribes

Introduction

Indigenous knowledge systems constitute a vital framework through which communities understand, interpret and sustain their relationship with nature, culture and identity. These systems are not merely repositories of traditional practices but dynamic, evolving bodies of wisdom transmitted across generations through rituals, oral traditions and lived experiences. As Vandana Shiva asserts, **“indigenous knowledge is not just about tradition; it is a living, evolving knowledge system that sustains biodiversity and cultural diversity”** (Shiva 32). This perspective foregrounds the inseparable connection between indigenous communities and their ecological surroundings.

In the context of Indian tribal communities indigenous knowledge plays a crucial role in shaping social structures, spiritual beliefs and environmental ethics. These communities, often positioned as subalterns within mainstream discourse have historically preserved their identity through ritualistic practices and collective memory. According to Ramachandra Guha, **“for indigenous communities, the environment is not an external resource but an integral part of their cultural and spiritual existence”** (Guha 45). This intrinsic relationship highlights how rituals and festivals function not only as cultural expressions but also as mechanisms for ecological sustainability and social cohesion.

However, the pressures of modernisation, globalisation and environmental transformation increasingly threaten the continuity of these traditions. As Madhav Gadgil observes, **“traditional ecological knowledge is rapidly eroding under the impact of developmental changes and cultural homogenisation”** (Gadgil 78). This erosion raises critical concerns about cultural loss and the diminishing transmission of ancestral knowledge.

Within literary studies, the representation of indigenous communities has often remained marginalised, with limited attention given to their rich cultural narratives. In this regard, Kavery Nambisan’s novel *The Scent of Pepper* offers a significant intervention by vividly portraying the Kodava community of Kodagu. The novel encapsulates the intricate interplay between land, memory and ritual illustrating how festivals and ceremonial practices sustain cultural identity. As literary critic G. N. Devy notes, **“literature becomes a crucial space where marginalised**

voices reclaim their histories and cultural memory” (Devy 112). Despite growing scholarship on indigenous knowledge and environmental humanities, there remains a critical gap in literary studies concerning how ritual practices function as dynamic sites of cultural memory and ecological consciousness within regional Indian narratives. In particular, Kavery Nambisan’s *The Scent of Pepper* has received limited critical attention in relation to eco-aesthetics and the bioregional dimensions of indigenous identity. This absence highlights a broader theoretical gap in understanding how literature mediates the tension between cultural preservation and transformation under conditions of modernity.

Therefore this study situates itself at the intersection of indigenous knowledge, cultural memory and eco-aesthetics, examining how ritual practices in *The Scent of Pepper* function as a medium for preserving identity and resisting cultural erasure. **It specifically interrogates the tension between continuity and change, demonstrating how indigenous traditions are not merely preserved but actively reconfigured within literary representation.** By analysing the Kodava community’s traditions this paper aims to highlight the enduring relevance of indigenous knowledge systems in contemporary ecological and cultural discourse.

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach grounded in eco-critical and cultural memory frameworks. Drawing on theoretical insights from scholars such as Vandana Shiva, Jan Assmann and Lawrence Buell, the paper examines how indigenous knowledge systems are represented through ritual practices in Kavery Nambisan’s *The Scent of Pepper*. The analysis focuses on narrative structure, symbolic motifs and cultural representations to explore the interconnections between ecology, memory and identity. By integrating literary analysis with interdisciplinary perspectives from environmental humanities and indigenous studies, the study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how cultural knowledge is preserved, transformed, and rearticulated within the text.

Indigenous Knowledge and Tribal Identity in India

Indigenous knowledge in India forms the foundation of tribal identity, functioning as a living repository of cultural memory, ecological wisdom and social values. Rooted in centuries-old traditions, this knowledge is transmitted through oral narratives, rituals and everyday practices, shaping the worldview and identity of tribal communities. As Verrier Elwin observes, “**the tribal**

world is not a backward remnant of the past, but a distinct and meaningful way of life, deeply connected with nature and community” (Elwin 14). This insight challenges dominant narratives that marginalise tribal societies and instead affirms their cultural autonomy and richness.

Tribal identity in India is inseparable from land, ecology and collective memory. Indigenous communities perceive land not merely as property but as a sacred entity intertwined with ancestry and survival. Ramachandra Guha emphasises that **“for tribal societies, the forest is both a source of livelihood and a space of cultural and spiritual significance”** (Guha 67). This relationship underscores how indigenous knowledge systems sustain both ecological balance and cultural continuity, reinforcing identity through environmental interaction.

Moreover, indigenous knowledge plays a crucial role in preserving social structures and community cohesion. Rituals, festivals and customary laws act as frameworks through which knowledge is encoded and transmitted across generations. According to Madhav Gadgil, **“traditional ecological knowledge embodies a cumulative body of practices and beliefs that evolve through adaptive processes and are handed down through generations”** (Gadgil 102). These practices not only regulate the use of natural resources but also affirm a shared sense of belonging and identity among tribal groups.

However, the forces of modernisation and globalisation pose significant challenges to the preservation of indigenous knowledge and tribal identity. The encroachment of industrialisation, deforestation and cultural assimilation disrupts traditional ways of life leading to a gradual erosion of cultural heritage. Vandana Shiva warns that **“the disappearance of indigenous knowledge is closely linked to the erosion of cultural diversity and ecological sustainability”** (Shiva 58). This highlights the urgent need to recognise and protect these knowledge systems as vital components of both cultural identity and environmental resilience.

In the Indian literary context the representation of tribal identity has gained increasing attention as writers attempt to document and preserve indigenous experiences. Literature becomes a powerful medium through which marginalised voices articulate their histories and assert their identity. As G. N. Devy notes, **“the survival of tribal identity depends significantly on the preservation and expression of their languages, stories, and cultural practices”**

(Devy 135). Thus, indigenous knowledge not only defines tribal identity but also serves as a means of resistance against cultural erasure and homogenisation.

Rituals and cultural practices among the Kodava community are integral to their social identity, spiritual beliefs and connection to the land. Rooted in ancestral traditions, these practices reflect a deep reverence for nature, lineage and collective memory. As Kavery Nambisan illustrates in *The Scent of Pepper*, Kodava rituals are closely tied to agricultural cycles and family heritage, reinforcing both ecological awareness and kinship bonds.

These ceremonial practices function as a medium of cultural transmission ensuring continuity across generations. Madhav Gadgil notes that **“ritual practices in indigenous communities often encode ecological knowledge and sustainable living patterns”** (Gadgil 109). Festivals, ancestral worship and seasonal ceremonies thus become symbolic expressions of a worldview where nature and culture are inseparable.

Furthermore Kodava rituals embody a collective identity that resists cultural erosion in the face of modernisation. As G. N. Devy observes, **“cultural practices and rituals are essential in sustaining the identity of marginalised communities”** (Devy 142). Therefore within the Kodava community rituals are not merely traditional acts but living expressions of cultural resilience and continuity.

The environmental concept within indigenous studies emphasises the intrinsic relationship between human life and the natural world viewing ecology not as a resource but as a living system. This perspective aligns with bioregionalism which advocates understanding culture, identity and sustainability within specific ecological regions. As Kirkpatrick Sale defines, **“bioregionalism calls for a way of living that is rooted in the ecological realities of a place, including its climate, soil and native species”** (Sale 43). Such an approach foregrounds the idea that human communities must adapt to and coexist with their natural environments.

In the Indian context indigenous communities embody this bioregional perspective through their sustainable practices and ecological knowledge systems. Ramachandra Guha asserts that **“many traditional societies have historically maintained a balanced relationship with nature through restraint and respect for ecological limits”** (Guha 78). This ecological ethic is

evident in the way rituals, agriculture and daily practices are harmonised with seasonal cycles and environmental conditions.

Literary representations particularly in *The Scent of Pepper* by Kavery Nambisan reflect this deep ecological consciousness by portraying the Kodava community's life as inseparable from the landscape of Kodagu. The narrative captures how land, memory and identity are interwoven within a specific bioregion. As Vandana Shiva notes, **“ecological sustainability is inseparable from cultural survival, especially for indigenous communities”** (Shiva 65). Thus, the bioregional perspective not only highlights environmental awareness but also reinforces cultural identity and continuity.

However, it is important to recognise that the representation of indigenous knowledge within literary and academic discourse can sometimes risk romanticising tribal life as ecologically harmonious and culturally stable. In reality indigenous identities are shaped by ongoing negotiations with modernity, state structures and economic pressures. Therefore, indigenous knowledge must be understood not as a static ideal but as a dynamic and contested field of meaning.

Cultural Memory and Transmission of Indigenous Knowledge

Cultural memory plays a vital role in preserving and transmitting indigenous knowledge across generations, functioning as a collective repository of traditions, beliefs and practices. Unlike written histories indigenous knowledge is often sustained through oral narratives, rituals and lived experiences that reinforce communal identity. As Jan Assmann argues, **“cultural memory is the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity”** (Assmann 130). This highlights how memory acts as a foundation for sustaining cultural continuity.

In indigenous communities the transmission of knowledge is deeply embedded in everyday practices and ceremonial traditions. Madhav Gadgil notes that **“traditional knowledge systems are preserved and transmitted through continuous practice and social reinforcement”** (Gadgil 121). Ritual's festivals and storytelling thus serve as living mechanisms through which

ecological wisdom and social values are passed down ensuring the survival of cultural identity. However, the disruption of these practices due to modernisation and cultural assimilation poses a threat to this transmission. Pierre Nora observes that **“memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history replaces memory with critical reconstruction”** (Nora 8). This suggests that when lived traditions decline cultural memory risks becoming fragmented or lost. In literary works such as *The Scent of Pepper* by Kavery Nambisan, such tensions are reflected through the portrayal of changing traditions and the gradual erosion of indigenous practices. Therefore, cultural memory and the transmission of indigenous knowledge remain essential for sustaining identity, resisting cultural loss and maintaining the continuity of indigenous worldviews.

Kavery Nambisan is a distinguished Indian writer and medical doctor whose works sensitively explore themes of culture, identity and social change. Born in 1950 in Madras (now Chennai), she pursued a career in medicine and worked as a surgeon in rural India an experience that deeply influenced her literary imagination. Her exposure to diverse communities and lived realities is reflected in her nuanced portrayal of marginalised voices and regional cultures. Nambisan’s writings often foreground the intersection of landscape, memory and community life. Her novel *The Scent of Pepper* is particularly noted for its vivid depiction of the Kodava community of Kodagu, capturing their rituals, traditions and ecological consciousness. Unlike widely popular mainstream authors Nambisan occupies a unique literary space focusing on lesser represented cultures with authenticity and depth.

As critic G. N. Devy remarks, **“regional writers play a crucial role in preserving the cultural diversity of Indian literature by documenting voices that are often excluded from the mainstream”** (Devy 118). In this sense, Nambisan’s work contributes significantly to the documentation and preservation of indigenous cultural narratives. Through her dual identity as a doctor and writer, Kavery Nambisan brings a rare humanistic perspective to Indian English literature making her an important yet relatively under recognised voice in contemporary literary studies.

This tension between memory and transformation suggests that cultural continuity is not simply a process of preservation but one of reinterpretation where traditions are selectively retained, adapted or even reinvented in response to changing sociocultural contexts.

Textual Overview of *The Scent of Pepper*

The Scent of Pepper by Kavery Nambisan is a richly layered narrative set in the Kodagu (Coorg) region of South India, tracing the life of a Kodava family across generations. The novel centers on the ancestral home and its inhabitants, capturing their intimate connection with land, lineage and tradition. Through a series of interwoven episodes rather than a linear plot Nambisan portrays the rhythms of rural life, agricultural practices and the socio-cultural transformations affecting the Kodava community. The narrative vividly depicts rituals, festivals and everyday customs emphasising how they shape both personal and collective identity. At its core, the novel reflects the gradual transition from tradition to modernity highlighting tensions between continuity and change. *The scent of pepper* itself becomes a symbolic motif representing memory, heritage, and the lingering presence of the past within the present. As Kavery Nambisan illustrates the land is not merely a backdrop but a living entity intertwined with the community's emotional and cultural life. From a critical perspective the novel can be read as an exploration of indigenous knowledge, cultural memory, and eco aesthetics. It foregrounds the Kodava people's deep ecological consciousness and their sustainable relationship with the environment. As G. N. Devy observes, **"literature serves as a vital space for recovering and representing marginalised cultural experiences"** (Devy 121). In this sense, Nambisan's work resists the marginalisation of tribal narratives by placing them at the center of literary discourse.

Furthermore, the text subtly critiques the forces of modernisation and cultural erosion showing how traditional practices are altered or diminished over time. The novel's episodic structure mirrors the fragmentation of cultural memory, reinforcing the theme of loss alongside preservation. Thus, *The Scent of Pepper* emerges as both a cultural document and a literary intervention, offering a nuanced portrayal of the Kodava community while engaging with broader questions of identity, memory and environmental belonging. At the same time, the novel resists a purely nostalgic reading by foregrounding the fractures within cultural continuity, thereby complicating the idea of an unbroken indigenous past.

Ritual, Festival and Eco Aesthetics in the Narrative

In *The Scent of Pepper*, Kavery Nambisan intricately weaves rituals and festivals into the narrative to reflect the ecological consciousness of the Kodava community. These cultural practices are not merely symbolic but are deeply embedded in the rhythms of nature and agricultural cycles. Rituals associated with harvests, ancestral worship and seasonal transitions reveal a worldview in which human life is inseparable from the environment. As Madhav Gadgil observes, **“in many traditional societies, religious and cultural practices are closely linked with ecological prudence and sustainability”** (Gadgil 134). This connection underscores how rituals function as ecological practices that sustain both nature and culture.

Festivals in the novel further reinforce communal identity and environmental belonging. They act as collective expressions of gratitude toward the land and its resources strengthening social cohesion while maintaining ecological balance. The celebration of seasonal cycles reflects a bioregional sensitivity, where time is measured not by modern calendars but by natural rhythms. Vandana Shiva notes that **“cultural diversity and biodiversity are mutually reinforcing and rituals often play a role in protecting this relationship”** (Shiva 72). Thus, festivals become sites where ecological awareness and cultural memory converge.

From an eco-aesthetic perspective, Nambisan’s narrative transforms the landscape of Kodagu into a living sensorial presence. The recurring imagery of pepper vines, forests and monsoon rains evokes a deep sensory engagement with nature where aesthetics arise from ecological harmony. As Lawrence Buell suggests, **“environmental imagination in literature involves seeing the natural world as an active presence rather than a passive backdrop”** (Buell 2). In this light, the novel’s eco aesthetics highlight the interdependence of environment, culture and identity. Therefore rituals and festivals in *The Scent of Pepper* are not isolated cultural acts but integral components of an eco aesthetic framework that sustains indigenous knowledge, reinforces collective identity and preserves the ecological ethos of the Kodava community. This eco-aesthetic representation not only celebrates ecological harmony but also implicitly critiques its fragility in the face of environmental degradation and cultural change.

Cultural Loss and Changing Traditions

The theme of cultural loss and changing traditions emerges prominently in indigenous narratives reflecting the tension between continuity and transformation. In *The Scent of Pepper*, Kavery Nambisan portrays how modernisation, migration and socio-economic changes gradually reshape the traditional life of the Kodava community. Rituals and customs that once held deep communal significance begin to lose their original meaning becoming fragmented or adapted to contemporary realities. This process of cultural erosion is closely linked to the weakening of collective memory and traditional knowledge systems. As Jan Assmann states, **“when the living carriers of cultural memory disappear, the continuity of tradition is fundamentally threatened”** (Assmann 138). The decline of oral traditions and communal practices thus leads to a gradual disconnection from ancestral roots. Importantly, this transformation should not be viewed solely as decline but as a process of cultural negotiation, where loss and adaptation coexist within evolving frameworks of identity.

Moreover, the forces of globalisation and cultural homogenisation intensify this loss. Vandana Shiva warns that **“the erosion of cultural diversity goes hand in hand with the erosion of ecological diversity”** (Shiva 89). In this context, the transformation of rituals and festivals reflects not only social change but also a diminishing ecological consciousness embedded within indigenous practices. From a critical perspective such changes do not simply signify loss but also reveal a complex process of adaptation and negotiation. Homi K. Bhabha argues that **“cultural identity is not fixed but is continually produced and transformed within historical and social contexts”** (Bhabha 2). This suggests that while traditions may evolve, they also create new forms of identity shaped by changing realities. Thus, in *The Scent of Pepper* cultural loss and changing traditions are depicted as intertwined processes highlighting both the vulnerability and resilience of indigenous communities in preserving their heritage amidst modern challenges.

Conclusion

This study has explored the intricate relationship between indigenous knowledge, cultural memory and eco-aesthetics in *The Scent of Pepper* by Kavery Nambisan with particular focus on

the Kodava community of Kodagu. The analysis demonstrates that indigenous knowledge systems are not static traditions but dynamic frameworks that sustain identity, social cohesion and ecological balance. Rituals, festivals and everyday cultural practices emerge as vital mechanisms through which knowledge is preserved and transmitted across generations. A key finding of this study is that cultural memory plays a central role in maintaining the continuity of indigenous identity. Through oral traditions, ceremonial practices and communal participation the Kodava community reinforces its connection to land, ancestry and collective heritage. At the same time the study highlights how these practices embody a bioregional and ecological consciousness where human life is deeply intertwined with natural cycles and environmental ethics.

However the paper also identifies the growing impact of modernisation and socio cultural transformation which contribute to the gradual erosion of traditional practices and cultural values. The narrative reflects a tension between preservation and change revealing both the vulnerability and adaptability of indigenous traditions. While certain rituals and customs undergo transformation they continue to function as sites of cultural resilience and negotiation.

Ultimately, this study finds that *The Scent of Pepper* serves as a significant literary intervention that documents and preserves the lived experiences of the Kodava community. It underscores the importance of recognising indigenous knowledge systems as essential to both cultural diversity and ecological sustainability. More importantly, the study demonstrates that literature functions as a critical space where the tensions between memory and modernity, preservation and transformation, are not only represented but actively negotiated. By foregrounding marginalised voices and tradition, the novel not only enriches Indian English literature but also contributes to broader discourses on identity, memory and environmental consciousness.

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