Chapter Five
Kodagu: Exploring Selfhood

This chapter seeks to study Kavery Nambisan’s novel The Scent of Pepper from the perspective of regionalism. In doing so it attempts to bring to the fore how the region of Kodagu with its distinct culture encompassing its myths, customs and beliefs, structures her narrative and examines how far the author has been successful in artistically realising it. Shyamala Narayan remarks that a lot of research and first-hand experience of life in Kodagu has shaped the narrative of the novel (“Changing Perceptions”43). It is also for the first time that the ethnic minority of the Kodavas ingress Indian English fiction. Another novelist belonging to the same region, Sarita Mandanna has published her debut novel Tiger Hills in 2010 with Kodagu as the backdrop. The Scent of Pepper (cited hereafter as Pepper) published in 1996 has been revised by the author and for the purpose of this study, the revised edition published in 2010 will be referred to. The novel becomes a space where the identity of the Kodavas and their racial and ethnic history gets inscribed. In chronicling the saga of the Kodavas, the text could also be seen as an attempt made by the novelist to preserve their ethnicity on the onslaught of migration and westernisation.

Having spent her childhood in Kodagu and being brought up on her grandmother’s stories, Nambisan is able to render the novel its distinctive regional flavour. She had been an avid reader of Kannada literature and later a reader of English literature when her
father, who was a politician, moved to Delhi. Nambisan writes: “My method is to think in the language of the character I’m writing about and then translate it in my head into English, which, since it isn’t my Mother Tongue, is perhaps my Father Tongue, the tongue which enables me to communicate with more readers while retaining my very Indian thoughts” (“Migration”). A similar oft cited quote which succinctly sums up the case of most Indian writing in English has been put forward by Kamala Das: “I am Indian, very brown, born in/ Malabar, I respect three languages, write in/ Two, dream in one”(26).

A very interesting fact about Nambisan’s personality is that despite having acquired her medical degree and then her surgical training in England, she has dedicated herself to working in the rural areas of India. Nambisan’s hands-on experience of the life of the poor in a rural community has seeped into her writing to impart a realistic note to it. She began her literary career by writing stories under the name Kavery Bhatt for the now defunct children's magazine Target in the 1980s and her debut novel, The Truth (Almost) About Bharat (1991). The cross-country journey of Bharat, a medico-student, on his motor bike through the cultural contours of India forms the core of the novel. Enroute to Kerala, he passes through Mysore and stays in Kodagu—a place he loves with its clustered bamboo groves, coffee estates, and pepper creepers. Her novels, Mango-Coloured Fish (2000) and On Wings of Butterflies (2002) narrate her experiences with women who are physically, mentally and psychologically exploited by society. All her novels depict a medical character and the experiences in her surgical life
are best reflected in the character of Nalli in *The Hills of Angheri* (2005). Along with her husband, Vijay Nambisan (poet and critic) she ran a medical centre mainly for migrant labourers and also a learning centre for children at Lonavla, 100km away from Bombay. The poverty and squalor of the slums and the apathy felt by the middle class towards the migrant labourers on whom they depend for their sustenance have been vividly etched in her work, *The Story That Must Not Be Told* (2010). The book was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008 and for the 2012 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. Currently she is working as surgeon and medical advisor of the Tata Coffee Hospital in Kodagu.

*Pepper* narrates the story of a feudal family in Athur village, the Kaleyanda, headed by the pattedara, Rao Bahadur. He had sent two of his sons to England and one to Madras for their education. When Baliyanna graduated as a veterinary surgeon from Madras with “a degree that even the British respect”, Rao Bahadur decided to move from the family’s Iyn House. He bought a “sprawling house, one hundred and twelve acres of newly-planted coffee and five thousand battis of land in Athur” (10). As widow remarriage was permitted among the Kodavas, Nanji, the young widow of the Kongeitra clan is married to Baliyanna, a popular vet among the British planters settled in Kodagu. On the very first day, the tough Nanji decides to make her home into a strong fortress and takes charge of the sprawling house in Athur. Having tided resolutely through thirteen pregnancies, and braving her way through the travails of life, she remains steadfast and
indispensable to her home. By the end of the novel, Nanji is an old lady with only her favourite son Subbu for company.

The annexation of Kodagu in 1834 by the British set the stage for the entry of the British planters who were searching for an alternative as their plantations in Ceylon were destroyed by the borer pest. They discovered that Kodagu with its black moist soil and plenty of shade would be the most ideal for the cultivation of coffee and that the natives, inspite of all their ignorance, were wise when it comes to cultivation. Captivated by the extensive coffee plantations and lured by the prospects of a flourishing coffee trade, the British settled down in Kodagu having “discovered the Eldorado of honest industry in a delightful climate and home-like country!” (Ritcher 96). Coffee, an indigenous product of Kodagu thus becomes instrumental for it being colonised and eventually leads to its modernisation. Historical details of the life of the British planters in Kodagu and their association with the indigenes have been portrayed through the narrative. Nambisan illustrates the typical coloniser through Rupert, the British planter who devalued the very existence of the native. He was infuriated with Clara, his wife who maintained relations with Baliyanna but couldn’t prevent her. He warned her that the Kodavas were an uncivilised lot till the British took over and “sanitized” them (59). The borer and the leaf-rot that had first appeared in Ceylon, crept along the ghats and gradually invaded Kodagu. With less than fifty British planters in Kodagu who paid him promptly, Baliyanna the vet “led a life of genteel poverty” (101). Their personal disgruntlement at the dwindling prices of coffee and the rising hostility of the natives for
independence were now making it obvious to the British that their departure from the land was inevitable. As waves of nationalism swept across the breadth of the country, the Kodavas too were not spared. While majority of the Kodavas were busy imbibing an alien culture, a few like Subbu and his friends join the Congress. Pepper also draws attention to the issue of the merger of Kodagu and the modernisation of the region.

The detailed descriptions of the landscape, the people, their myths and legends, their customs and traditional beliefs presented in the novel poses a potent counter discourse to the unifying grand narratives of nationalism. While the earlier nationalist historiographies presented a pan-Indian glorified picture of the nation, Nambisan’s attempt of foregrounding the region with all its specificities could be seen as an attempt made by the region as a defiant subaltern to write its own history. Moreover, by making a woman, the “doubly marginalised” in nationalist discourses as the chief protagonist of Pepper, Nambisan has made audible the small voice that has long been suppressed under the grand narratives of the patriarchal nation. The novel, in this respect, turns out to be an exercise of writing back to these discourses.

Myths form an integral part of the local culture and are fraught with the knowledge of the region’s history, ecology and religious beliefs. One notices that the myths illustrated in Pepper are never a direct explanation of the subject matter but reflect “the fullness of life itself from which the myth is born” (Malinowski 198). The exact origins of the Kodavas are shrouded in mystery and no definitive research has ascertained this fact. In Pepper, the
myths regarding the origin of the Kodavas include the names of actual kings and civilisations drawn from history. Nambisan describes the race to be the descendants of the troops of Alexander who settled down in “the heavenly hill country.” Another myth stated is that they were descendants of the “nobility whose blood stayed red for six hours after death” and to these clans belonged the most beautiful women that a man had to slay nine suitors before he won his bride (168). Such myths have been incorporated into their marriage rituals, as one is made to understand from the novel, wherein the groom cuts down nine banana trees with his odikkathi before claiming his bride. Religious myths mentioned include the divine origin of the river Kaveri and other localised myths associated with the Forests of Kolabenna. Rather than resorting to the myth, Nambisan claims that the Kodavas adopted their distinct style of wearing their saris “from the toddy-tapping Kudiya women who swung back the pleats when they climbed the panne tree” (Pepper 26). By blurring the boundaries between myth and history, the novelist has provided scope for the relativity of truths and falsehoods.

In Pepper, the region is realistically rendered through its verdant valleys, fast flowing streams, paddy fields, coffee bushes, cardamom and pepper plantations and the unfailing rains that assure them of a bountiful produce. The isolation of the region located amidst thick jungles and mountain ranges contributes to the distinctive mode of life and culture of the Kodavas. The various nads mentioned in the novel can be actually located in the geographical map of Kodagu. The novel roughly pans the period
from 1850s to 1960s which the reader is able to deduce from the influx of the British planters to Kodagu, the fall of the prices of coffee due to the extension of cultivation in Brazil, the nationalist movement, the visit of Gandhi and the merger of Kodagu. However, the passage of time in the novel is indicated through the cycle of seasons, the cultivation of paddy and coffee and the onset of festivals. The text offers an authentic depiction of how the people of the region mark the progress of time in their daily lives.

Nambisan presents the Kodavas to be a handsome, brave and warrior like race. Its distinguished martial tradition continues even today with many young Kodavas enlisting themselves as soldiers. Nambisan writes: “‘A Kodava makes a fine soldier. When he wears his army greens, laces his boots and raises the gun, there is no fumbling, no clumsiness’ “(Pepper 155). Commenting on their “noble bearing and a proud appearance”, the German Missionary, Henry Moegling in his Coorg Memoirs opines that they “consider themselves as Lord of the Mountains” and indulge in war like pursuits (27). Pepper clearly substantiates this:

‘We’re a physically strong race, athletic and skilled in arms[. . . .] [and] it is said that you can roam the length and breadth of the country and never find as unerring a shot as the best among us’[. . . . ]‘Tiger skins and bison heads grace our homes. Any woman worth her man has a handful of tiger-claw ornaments to choose from. Our children cut their first teeth on the meat of bison, boar, wildfowl and rabbit . . .’” (64)
The novelist repositis the stereotype of bravery normally associated with men. She succeeds in creating an arena where the women are as capable of displaying physical bravery as the men. Every Kodava family has a fund of stories citing the valour of their women. In his *Coorg Memoirs*, Moegling cites the case of Doddi Auwa of the Almanda House renowned for her wisdom and strength in Kodagu (33). Veena Poonacha’s *From the Land of a Thousand Hills: Portraits of Three Kodagu Women* (2002) chronicles the valour of Kodagu women with special reference to lives of three women –her great grandmother, grandmother and mother. Sarita Mandanna also projects this strength of character through Devi in *Tiger Hills*. Nambisan’s Nanji came from a family where the women were industrious without the lazy habits of men and they toiled in the fields along with their workers. She discovered from her grandma Neelakki, who had learnt to shoot when she was young, that as a woman one could be strong or weak as one wished. Nambisan’s description of Nanji reflects this:

> Her toughness had mingled with the mud with which the walls were built and the varnish that coated the beams; it had blended into the cowdung wash on the floors and split into the paddy fields and the soft soil beneath the coffee bushes. You could taste her determination in the sweetness of the oranges, and the charm of her hospitality in the flowers that grew around the house. (187)

The concept of bravery as depicted by Nambisan bears a resemblance to the ancient Chinese philosophy of valour, where
the idea of bravery is approached as a “steadfastness that fuels people’s attempts to virtuous lives” (Peterson and Seligman 223). This is implicit in the comment, “A Kodavathi is born to be tough’” (Pepper 105).

Nevertheless, Nambisan points out that the tragedy of this fierce and iron willed people is that they fall prey to the disease endemic to the area. “The contagion of mental depression that wove its sly web around many Kodavas” did not spare the mighty Rao Bahadur of the Kaleyanda: “It was worse than plague. With plague you were subjected to a short, fierce illness and a dramatic exit; with this depression that had no cause, the victim lingered between life and death for an interminable period” (10). Nanji witnessed the inevitable signs of depression in her own husband when he indulged in long sessions of loneliness. It was this very malady which compelled her uncles, her brother-in law and many other men of Kodagu to commit suicide. Later on in the novel, her son Subbu succumbs to this “insidious, unrelenting awareness of the futility of existence” (259). The following description reveals a disturbing side of this illness:

He [Subbu] did not fight it for it was hopeless to fight what was in the blood. He began to carry the revolver with him. It was the same revolver which the Rao Bahadur had rejected in favour of his diamond ring, the one that Baliyanna had kept beneath his pillow until death took him unawares and denied him the luxury of choice. Subbu carried it as an ally, a comforting aide, in his trouser pocket. It massaged his thigh as he walked.
It assured him of the choice to use it when he pleased. Until then, he would live. (259)

In an e-mail message, the novelist (being a doctor) identifies this malady called Endogenous Depression to be common in Kodagu, a depression without an obvious traceable cause (7 Oct. 2011). A reference to this malady has also been made in her novel, *The Truth (Almost) about Bharath*, wherein the protagonist Bharath’s stay in Kodagu ends abruptly on seeing a fellow hockey player hang himself on the basket ball pole. In the past, this loneliness was created to a large extent by Nature itself. The sprawling house of a clan was separated from its neighbours by vast stretches of hills and jungles. The loneliness experienced, especially by the men folk could account for the malady mentioned above (Prabhakaran 87). Unlike them, the women who constantly engaged in the activities of the large household along with the other women of the joint family were strong and shouldered responsibility. As rightly evaluated by the noted Malayalam writer, N. Prabhakaran in his travelogue *Kodagu Kurippukal*, while the women bravely confront the hardships and obstacles of life, at a particular stage of their lives most of the men folk become alcoholics and depressive by nature (87). Even when the house was thronging with relatives, Baliyanna “sat on the porch all day, gazing at the swaying areca palms, while the constant chatter of female voices and the outrageous revelry of innumerable children passed by him like the gusts of wind” (*Pepper* 95). The changes she noticed in her husband made Nanji willingly take up the responsibility of the house and the fields. The only comfort he
derived was from alcohol which gave him “the passive contentment of partial living” (98). Love for liquor and the excessive amounts the Kodavas consume on ordinary or festive occasions may probably be another reason for this hazy mental state they find themselves in.

The very character of the people of a region can be, to a certain extent, understood from their food habits (Namboodiri 206). Liquor and pork which form the most popular food items of the Kodavas are also made as offerings to their gods. Their martial nature coupled with their love for hunting could account for their “strong carnivorous appetite” (Pepper 36). Jeannette Isaac remarks: “Nothing makes them happier than returning home with a wild boar after a long hunt in the woods to make pandhi curry, their traditional pork dish”(22). Kodavas are presented in Pepper as food lovers and elaborate references to their cuisine are generously strewn into the narrative. Nambisan comments: “Whatever a Kodava does or does not do, he loves to eat like a king” (Pepper 111). As a people who revelled in their hospitality, there was never a dearth of food lavished on guests. Nanji fed her guests who came in large numbers from the neighbouring villages to the Kaleyanda house. She willingly looks after her brother-in-law, the invalid Appachu till his last days. While Dervla Murphy, the Irish traveller, in her book On a Shoestring to Coorg: An Experience of South India elucidates the warmth and hospitality of her rich Kodava host, N. Prabhakaran testifies this quality even in the home of a poor farmer like Kushalappa.
Brief descriptions of the calendar festivals and harvest festivals which emphasise the solidarity and individuality of the community have been integrated into the novel. While Kaveri Sankramana celebrates the birth of the river Kaveri, Kailpodh (festival of arms) and Puthari are associated with paddy cultivation. The eminent Indian sociologist, M.N. Srinivas, in his anthropological monograph *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (1952) notes that though customs and rites are borrowed from the neighbouring cultures of South Canara and Malabar, a martial twist is given to them in Kodagu (238). The most significant among all the celebrations in Kodagu is the harvest festival called *Puthari*. The rites performed at the harvest festival, directly or indirectly stresses the great value of rice to the Kodavas (Srinivas, *Religion* 232). On the auspicious Puthari full moon night, the family with all their workers wend their way into the paddy fields and cut the first ripe sheaves of paddy to the cries of ‘Poli, poli, poli deva. . .’ (‘increase, increase O God’). The sheaves were then tied to their doors and bedposts and the ancestors were propitiated (*Pepper* 109). The Kodava customs, the songs sung from the olden days, enchanting ballads about local deities and heroes as also humorous stories and plays narrated during the harvest festival have been compiled in one of the first classic folklore collection, *Pa¶¶olé Pa½amé: Kodava Culture - Folksongs and Traditions* by Nadikerianda Chinnappa in Kannada in 1924 which was translated by his grandchildren Boverienda Nanjamma and Chinnappa in 2003. After the culmination of the games and dances, all the males cooperate in the collective hunt that is held
after the Kailpodh and Puthari festivals. The share of the hunt is distributed as in the song sung by the hunters soaked in toddy:

Come, oh wild boar . . .
My knife is sharp for you.
Your thighs are for me,
Your breasts for my mates.
A cut for the Yeravas,
Your head for the dogs.
Come, oh wild boar. . . . (Pepper 135)

Songs, as the one quoted above, are very popular in Kodagu and Nambisan claims to have grown listening to them (E-mail 7 Oct.2011). Such oral renderings aid in asserting the collective identity of the community. Srinivas remarks that Kodava custom of hunting demanded that “a man who shoots at an animal must not only hit it, but must draw blood as well” and punishment is meted out on failure to do so (Religion 240). Subbu’s punishment for missing the deer is a case in point in the novel (134). Another interesting practice connected to hunting was the mock wedding performed to honour someone who had slain a tiger (“nari mangala”). Though Pepper offers only a passing reference to this practice, a detailed description of this custom is found in Mandanna’s Tiger Hills. When the Puthari festivities were over, the Kodavas would get down to serious business of paddy selling and coffee picking. Every clan participated in the annual caravan that proceeded to Malabar and the return of the men with money in their purses signalled the onset of festivities and marriages. When
coffee replaced rice, as illustrated in the novel, the caravans loaded with coffee beans set out for Mangalore.

A mention of a harvest festival in the novel could have been confused with *Pongal* of Tamil Nadu or *Puthari* festivities in Malabar. The festivities after *Puthari* could also remind one of Onam in Malabar which lasts for ten or more days when feasting, games, songs and dances prevail. As the rice on the coast ripens two months earlier, *Puthari* celebrated in Malabar takes place nearly two months ahead of that in Kodagu (Ritcher 151). The “Puttari Pat” cited in the *Paolle Palame* vividly describes the harvest festival in “the golden land of Kodagu” and “*manika Malenad*” (253-54). A major difference noted in north Malabar is that the *Nara* and *Puthari* are conducted on different days and the new rice alone is cooked on *Puthari* day. The new crop is always an occasion for great rejoicing and festivities have their own variations across the country (Grover 106). What can be incurred from the aforementioned is that no essentialist conceptualisation of cultures is possible.

Besides the festivals mentioned above, births, deaths and marriages are also occasions when ritual performances become mandatory. The ritual idiom integrated into *Pepper* sheds light on their unique customs and traditions. When death occurs among the Kodavas, the news is announced by the firing of a rifle. When Rao Bahadur died:

> They dressed him like a bridegroom in kupya-chale, with the peeche kaththi at his waist, covered his wispy
hair with the gold-lined turban and put a mirror in his hand. They stuck a gold sovereign on his forehead and sat him up in the front room because the Kaleyanda men never took anything lying down. (13-14)

A significant fact to be noted in connection with all the rituals in Kodagu is that the ancestors are placed along with or even above their gods. Ancestor worship, one of the oldest practices of worship in the world, holds a prime place in Kodagu. Nanji believed that the spirits of their ancestors resided in the clouds blessing their lands with bountiful rains. This ethnic race worships their local cobra-deity, Lord Iguthappa, who is prayed to for rain and prosperity. In Pepper, the sacred texts of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are alluded to. This allusion confronts the concept that the Ramayana or Mahabharata symbolises a singular Sanskritic tradition rooted in an Aryan past. The Kodavas with their unique faith can easily find themselves in the epics. The Ramayana or Mahabharata could be conceptualised as a cultural language through which different social groups engage in a cultural dialogue. Rather than being the cultural epitome of any single race, these texts have a live presence even among the less known minority sects and groups of India. F. Kittel in his article “Coorg Superstitions” mentions that apart from being ancestor worshippers, the Kodavas were ghost and demon worshippers and were extremely superstitious (171). Nambisan’s knowledge of the superstitions and beliefs of the Kodavas have been knitted into the novel, a few of which are listed here – white and red flowers are placed on the idol of the deity in a temple and it was believed that
if the white flower falls first it was a good omen and marriages could be solemnised (180), rains falling vertically down or slanting were indications of the temperament of their ancestors (169) and when Baliyanna plucks out the tooth of his children, he puts it in a pellet of cow dung and threw them on the thatched roof of the house “to guarantee a strong new successor to the evicted tooth” (98).

It therefore becomes apparent that the rituals and beliefs in Pepper act “as a form of cultural shorthand” (Fetterman 27) in providing a framework to convey the essence of a culture. Though Kodagu which lies at the periphery of three distinct linguistic areas Kannada, Malayalam and Tulu shares certain cultural practices, beliefs and rituals in common with each of them and touches several aspects of the general Hindu custom, it is evident from the text that this ethnic group is undoubtedly a community apart with its own recognised cultural traits and religious rituals with no counterparts elsewhere in India. Nevertheless, they belong to the “Hindu” religious sect which is not a monolith, but an entity that accommodates not a single Hindu culture, but cultures.

Pepper adopts the narrative device of interiorisation, which according to Ayyappa Paniker is common to Indian storytelling narratives. Nambisan draws on the surface simplicity “as a clever device to interiorise a deeper and more complex end” (Indian Narratology 5). To the casual reader, the novel deals with the regional specificities of the Kodavas, but on closer examination one finds that the basic doctrine saturating her text has been drawn from the Transcendentalist philosophy and the Bhagavad Gita. The
focus of this study is on the concept of transcendentalism as evinced in Emerson’s essay on “Self Reliance” and Thoreau’s *Walden*. It may seem paradoxical to seek the philosophic vision of transcendentalism, a movement which flourished in the early-nineteenth-century America, especially in New England, in a novel written about a remote region in India. The Western intellectual insights gained during her stay in England have been braided together with the philosophy of the *Gita* into an Indian mode of narration. In an interview, Nambisan acknowledges that Gandhi and Thoreau have greatly influenced her as a writer and in her medical profession. It is a known fact that Emerson and Thoreau were palpably influenced by the deep knowledge of the Eastern texts, particularly the enduring value of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The transcendentalists were mainly opposed to the rigid rationalism, social conformity and materialism that they found increasingly dominant in American life (Abrahams 326). Their new outlook emphasized the ethics of individualism – of self trust, self sufficiency and self reliance and a return to nature. In place of the formal or doctrinal religion, they advocated a faith in the ‘spirit’ or the ‘soul’ in which both humanity and the cosmos participate.

In *Pepper*, Nambisan espouses the concept of *dharma* which is to a large extent accomplished through the character of Nanji. Perhaps the nearest English equivalent for the Sanskrit word *dharma* is good and righteous conduct. *Dharma* is “the essential nature of a being that determines its mode of behaviour” (Radhakrishnan 155). As long as one’s conduct is in conformity with his essential nature it gives him a rootedness, the very
essence of an individual. The realisation of this essence of one’s individuality or selfhood leads to what is called “Swaraj” (Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* 47). According to Gandhi, Swaraj is not as simple as terminating the British rule and instituting an Indian government. It is a quality of spiritual being, a quality of internal realisation. Nanji is, in a sense, striving for realising her selfhood and succeeds in her endeavour. She believes in work and follows the dictum of the *Gita* that work is worship and has “no time for frivolous feminine pastimes, like singing or embroidery, that seemed to engage other women” (*Pepper* 24). In his essay, “Self Reliance”, Emerson emphasises on work which he considers is necessary to reinforce oneself (32). Nanji believes that her dharma lies in managing her home and caring for her husband and children, working in the fields and living truly and honestly as a Kodavathi. In her world, Nanji finds the scope for the expression of her life and hence the social routine never becomes a bondage. Instead of rejecting her duties and relationships, she remains with her family till the end of her days. Her unity with the world around her is achieved through her spontaneity of love and unselfish work. Nambisan never presents her as the “passive and suffering” woman who fails to find a voice for herself. Nor is she presented as one who overthrows existing values and systems to build a world of her own. Nanji celebrates her womanhood and cherishes it. This is evident in her discourse on women to Neelu, her grandchild: “We are all of us both delicate and strong. . . .Look– men can be clay in our hands and every woman knows it. But we must never misuse that power. Nor should we exist only for them. You
understand?” (251). She faces the death of her children as if it were “a physical battering” and keeps herself occupied with the rituals of mourning: “There was no time for grief or rejoicing; always there was work, work and more work” (Pepper 176). The signs of depression she noticed in her husband made Nanji willingly take up the responsibility of the house and the fields. She lets her husband go to the gypsy women hoping he would find solace there and has absolute faith in him regarding his friendship with Clara. This is not the callousness of a woman or her defeatism but it is her capacity for tolerance that shows her strength as an individual in the face of adversities. Her pragmatic approach to life springs from her “instinctive dislike for changes” and resistance “to those that did not spring out of her tenets” (22). Nanji realises the only honourable way is to rely on oneself (103). This explicitly underscores Emerson’s thesis statement on self reliance: “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string” (28). This magnitude of the self has been emphasized in the Bhagavad Gita (6.5) as also revealed in the Buddhist doctrine of having the self as the lamp and no other lamp – “Self is the lord of the self, who else could be lord?” (Dhammapadham XII).

Baliyanna’s brother, Appachu who marries an English lady and gets converted to Appachu Basil Pinto tells Nanji: “Did you know that Christianity is the only religion that forgives?” (28). Nanji fails to understand this. Having imitated another’s dharma Appachu realises his mistake: “Parodharma bhayavaha: Beware of another’s dharma” (Pepper150). This explicitly refers to the well known sloka in the Bhagavad Gita (3.35).
Here *dharma* is to be understood in the sense of the concept, as mentioned above, as a mode of life. When Appachu gets converted, he fails to retain his essence and faith as an individual. He returns to his fold but his brother and the other Kodavas do not accept him. He doesn’t get entrapped in the malady common to the race, but his guilt leads to a life bordering on insanity. Seen from this perspective, even the malady endemic to the community could be considered as a metaphor of illness affecting the whole of mankind when one’s mind and body are in a state of unrest. Subbu realises this when the malady affects him. What Nambisan says of the itch that irritates Subbu could well be applied to this context: “Was it an outward manifestation of his discontent. . .” (*Pepper* 259). It is only when the individual commemorates his integrity that he discovers the oneness with the region and transcends it to become a part of the universe at large. For Gandhi what the *Gita* says of *svadharma* equally applies to Swadeshi: “Swadeshi is *svadharma* applied to one’s immediate environment” (63). It is in its purest form that Swadeshi becomes “the acme of universal service” (Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir* 64).

The novel underscores the Emersonian conviction that envy is ignorance and imitation of any sort is suicidal to one’s individuality (28). On similar lines, Thoreau remarks: “Let everyone mind their own business, and endeavour to be what he was made” (215). Both Emerson and Thoreau stress the need for every individual to avoid conformity and false consistency, and follow his or her own instincts and ideas. The true children of Kodagu—the Yeravas along with the Kurubas who roamed the hills to collect wild
honey and the Kudiyas who climbed the palm trees and tapped
toddy, remain ingrained in their own identities and never ape the
higher class Kodavas. In contrast, Nambisan presents the few
upper class Kodavas who having assimilated the coloniser’s
mentality, consider themselves to be culturally superior and
rubbished their cultural values. Little do they realise that “a foolish
consistency is the hobglobin of little minds”(Emerson 34). The
British in Kodagu consider only a few natives worth maintaining a
relation with, mingle with them for golf and tennis and invite them
to their “at-homes.” These chosen few deem everything British “as
worthy of imitation” and borrow names, food habits, attire and
etiquette which form “a thin flaky crust over their timeless
culture”(Pepper 48). Just as Kodagu became Coorg, names of
estates like Kodanad, Thenupare and Kurudarahalli are changed to
Glenview, Windermere and Balmoral respectively. Emulating the
British, they name their children Robin, Peter, Kitty and Pat.
Baliyanna speaks of the Alsatians and Labradors as fashionable
pets of the upper class anglicized Kodavas, which were useless for
hunting unlike the kani, rajapalyam and chippiparai that belonged
to the pure hunter breed of Kodagu. The hibiscus, kanakambara,
savanthige and sampige that grew wild in their gardens were
pulled down and poppies, asters and snapdragons were planted
with meticulous precision. The extent of their Anglicization is
revealed at the party in Belquarren where “the Coorgs laughed,
talked and moved with the same precise confidence as their white
superiors. They painted themselves, they flirted” (Pepper 48).
Despite all their attempts, these indigenes of Kodagu could never
become one with the British. The coloniser strove to maintain this strict divide to ascertain his superiority and all attempts made by the colonised to strike a similarity were disapproved. Even the religious superstitions of the natives are not as much ridiculed as this blind imitation. The evil effects of modern civilisation on the natives are strongly emphasized. Gandhiji’s words are pertinent in this context: “[Modern] civilization is like a mouse gnawing while it is soothing us. When its full effect is realized, we shall see that religious superstition is harmless compared to that of modern civilization” (*Hind Swaraj* 31).

*Pepper* expresses its strong belief in pantheism which enforces the idea of the sacredness of nature and considers the cosmos as the all encompassing. By endowing a pantheistic outlook to her characters, Nambisan is able to further resist the common charge that regionalism is limited in its perception. Nanji’s forte, says Nambisan, was her affection “that extended not just to everyone, but for everything that lived” (42). When Clara asks Baliyanna if he would miss her when the British left India, he gives a cryptic response:

‘You and I, we treat sick animals and people without knowing which lives are more precious. This is a blessing because we will try to save them all. Sometimes you see a special appeal in a sheep, horse, cow or– a person, and it hits you. I– will miss you when you go.’ (80)
It is the reply of a man who loves every individual without attaching to anyone in particular. Nowhere in the narrative is nature described for its sheer aesthetic beauty. Pepper gives a profound vision of man in harmony with his natural world and a close echo of Nambisan’s approach to nature is found in Thoreau’s *Walden*. A similar vein of thought is found in Tagore’s *Gitanjali*:

“The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures” (LXIX). Furthermore, Subbu’s relationship with the land seems to carry overtones from Wordsworth’s pantheism as reflected in the “Tintern Abbey.” As a child, Subbu’s contact with nature was physical and sensuous: “There were so many thirsts to quench and wasting time in classrooms seemed so pointless. Learning, Subbu reasoned could wait till old age when the only thing worthwhile in one’s body was the mind. Life now was meant for dizzy pleasures” (Pepper 40). As a youth he craved for the presence of nature and dreams of Kodagu—“the stickiness of bubbling earth, the smell of rotting leaves that fell from the sprawling jackfruit and athi trees, and the itching from the sweat that cooled his back” (Pepper 137). Later on in life a subdued power of experience overcomes him and endows him a sublime and blessed mood which lightens the burden of the world:

The stream, now full in rain water, would gurgle a friendly greeting . . . . He would sit on the rocky bank and watch the daylight pour out of the darkness and light up the stream as it flowed away into the Maneyapanda paddy fields. He would spit out the
chewed leaves, wash his mouth with the cool water and know that here on his own land was where he wished to be. He belonged to this one place that breathed peace and did not suffocate him. (Pepper 241)

Nambisan advocates the healing power of nature in her text. Nanji prescribes innumerable remedies to the locals for various illnesses but when she sees her husband in throes of mental depression, she suggests he go for hunting. She feels the hardships of the jungle would help him uplift his spirits. Thoreau suggests in Walden that hunting is one of the best parts of man’s education which brings him in “closest acquaintance with nature” (141). Nature guides her in the form of her ancestors and educates her. It could also be possible to consider the grandmother of Nanji who constantly guides her in life, to be Mother Nature herself. For Nanji nature had been her classroom. She wishes for Subbu to be educated and simultaneously “wonders if education had anything to do with the practicalities of living” (139) as the children of the soil like the Yeravas, the Kudubas were able to bring up their children without any of it. Thus, through her portrayal of Nature in the novel, a purely regional entity is metamorphosed into a cosmic experience.

Besides dwelling on the bounties of nature, the text also voices a plea for preserving the ecology of the region. Nambisan has expressed her concern over the disappearance of tigers in Kodagu. The issue of deforestation too finds a mention in the novel. Subbu mourns the loss: “People talked of loving trees but cut them down without regret, as if the money they got in
exchange would replace the loss” (*Pepper* 262). In the narrative, one finds nature at times partaking human qualities. Subbu dreams of the trees standing at his window encircling his throat with their “newly sprung leafy arms”:“You let us be killed, you let us be killed. . . see how it feels. The branches scratched him and he woke weeping”(263). Here, Nambisan is making use of the trope of pathetic fallacy to impart a sense of the unbroken sympathy between man and nature. The novel carries Thoreau’s message that a man’s first step in redeeming himself is to let nature be (*Walden* 137).

The novel debates the issue of the Other of Kodagu, the original inhabitants who have been neglected for ages, both by the local and national elites. In the pattedars meeting held at Rao Bahadur’s house, the issue of the marginalised groups of Kodagu is taken up for discussion: “But how many Yeravas, how many Kudiyas or Kurubas own even a patch of land? How many of their children go to school, how many can read a newspaper or get a job other than that of a labourer? We are exploiting them, without even realizing that we do it”(66). The Diwan exhorts the Kodavas to stop living in their glorified past and uplift these ‘other’ of Kodagu—the Yeravas, Kurubas, Kudiyas and Amma Kodavas. The immense foresight of a good chieftain is revealed in the following quote:

Ignore these brothers and sisters of ours and one day the problem will be too big to solve. . . . Some of them, especially the Yeravas are dying due to lack of proper nourishment and too much drink. . . . If they become
extinct, we the Kodavas, will have to bear the blame. Lift them up, take them along with you and they will be your best, most loyal supporters. (*Pepper* 66)

Baliyanna realises the true significance of the Diwan’s words when he exclaims that “we exploit their innocence, just like the British” (80). Their upliftment lies not in the mere acts of charity but in striving to make them realise their potential for work. Nanji passes on her zest for work to the indolent Yeravas and shows them that “it was more fun to work than to be lazy” (*Pepper* 9).

In *Pepper*, one finds not a single voice but polyphonic voices and multiple perspectives. Such voices and perspectives comprise of the indigenes as well as the British, thus giving the region its complex nature. It also lends an open-endedness to the text, as there is no single grand or macro narrative of the community but numerous little narratives which enables the reader to fathom the intricacies of the locale. The concepts of truth, freedom and morality are also presented as not absolute. Truth has its multiple connotations in the text. Subbu raises the epistemological issue of understanding the relative truths and realises that what may appear as truth to one person will often appear as untrue to another (239). This, according to Gandhi need not worry the seeker: “When there is honest effort, it will be realized that what may appear to be different truths are like the countless and apparently different leaves of the same tree” (Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir* 3). The ideas of empiricism and rationality that are characteristic of the Enlightenment discourse are evident in Patrick’s views on morality: “Never believe in morality. You cannot
see it or feel it, like power and success. The only truth, Subbu, is that two plus two makes four. Mathematics. Believe in mathematics, not morality” (Pepper 194). When he learns of Subbu’s plans to retire from the army, he scoffs at the values of karma and dharma that Subbu and his family uphold:

We’ve got to achieve, like the Americans. Every man for himself, each person a business unit. Every cell in the body is worth so many rupees, pounds, dollars. There’s nothing else.’ He chuckled. ‘Ah, yes there’s one more thing. A woman.’

Subbu brightened. ‘You’re right. One has to marry–’

‘Who’s talking of marriage? Man, never burden your heart with attachments. Appease sexual hunger and you’re free from everything else.’

(Pepper165)

But Subbu resigns realising that his dharma- his identity lies in Kodagu, in working on the land and being close to his mother. Likewise, the concept of freedom has different implications to the various characters in the text. Nambisan seems to accentuate the view of Gandhi that true liberation is freedom from the social patterns of western rationalism and Indian nationalism.

A recurring feature in the text is a repudiation of the Enlightenment axiom which stresses on scientific observation and reasoning. The indigenous cures and practices of the regions have
always been considered inferior to the textualised knowledge obtained from science and medicine. As against the knowledge received through scientific study and observation as in Enlightenment, the practical knowledge for indigenous cures is mainly gained through “watching, telling and doing.” This claim was further intensified by the place it occupies in the nationalist discourse of progress and prosperity. Indigenous cures and practices resist their integration into the health system propounded by this sort of reasoning. Many such cures have been valorised in Pepper. Nambisan, having been educated in England on the Western concepts of medicine would have experienced this in her encounters with the locals during her rural practices. A notable feature of Pepper is that one finds medicine constantly being pitted against a home remedy or an indigenous cure. When the pregnant Nanji is down with malaria, she is prescribed quinine. On realising that the baby did not kick as usual, she took gooseberry wine and “a lehyam of jiggery, asafoetida, almonds and til smothered in ghee to counter the effect that the quinine might have had on the baby” (27). Nanji cures her son’s lameness by applying tiger milk ointment prepared by a Kuruba woman on his legs. Such mysterious cures are beyond the empirical rationality of science. Other ailments like burns and wheezing also have their local remedies. Nanji values pepper for its magical properties. She has a handful of pepper tied to the edge of her sari from the day of the dramatic birth of her son, Subbu till the very end – thus imparting the novel its intrinsic title. Nanji accidentally realises that the vet’s medicines for animals worked quite well for
humans. Baliyanna being the vet acknowledges this and attends to his human patients accordingly. These cures highlight the fact that the cure lies in the faith and the faith has to be generated in the self. The main emphasis of the text thus becomes a repudiation of the western concepts of modernity which enforces a kind of cultural imperialism upon the local and indigenous cultures. As Gandhi observes:

They [British writers] have a habit of writing history; they pretend to study the manners and customs of all peoples. God has given us a limited mental capacity, but they usurp the function of the Godhead and indulge in novel experiments. They write about their own researches in most laudatory terms and hypnotize us into believing them. We in our ignorance then fall at their feet. (Hind Swaraj 37-8)

The nationalist struggle as presented in Kodagu shifts the focus of the event from the centre to the periphery. The theme of Gandhi’s visit to the villages has become a stereotype in Indian English fictional writings. The glorified image of Gandhi in Kanthapura, Gandhi’s pervading influence throughout the Waiting for the Mahatma and a reflection of Gandhian idealism in Bhabhani Bhattacharya’s Shadow from Ladakh are a few cases in point. Gandhi’s ideas had only a partial impact on the Congress and more often than not the leaders acquiesced as they knew that it was a means to secure their future economic and political interests. But the nationalist movement hallowed him as the very pulse of the nation, whom the gullible peasants would believe and readily
accept. In *Pepper*, the Kodavas come from far and near to see the “small, fragile looking man” (192). The very simple fact that Gandhi is an avowed vegetarian and teetotaller and “would eat no mutton pulav or taste crisp fried pork” upsets the Kodavas known for their hospitality (192). The Kodavas fail to understand his principles and to identify with him. The apathy of the few older Kodavas who doubt the principles of Gandhi is expressed through the voice of Baliyanna who dislikes inaction. He grudges the sound of the charkha and counters it by buying a second-hand gramophone. The khadi, the charkha and the tricolour flag are but feeble symbols: “‘Why not something daring like a lion’s paw, a tiger’s eye, a cobra or an eagle. Or something beautiful’” (Pepper 167). Here one notices the nationalist symbols being rejected by the Kodavas as it fails to appeal to their imagination. Subbu, who in the idealism of youth joins the Congress, fails to appreciate Gandhi’s path of ahimsa. He spins khadi and talks of non-violence but his firm conviction is that India could never win freedom without fighting for it. When Gandhi visits Gonicoppa, Subbu sees “on the faces of his mates the soft smug glow of faith which was Gandhi’s faith and not their own, gummed on their faces and their souls” (170). He argues with Govinda that he has “no faith in the blind spots that make great men behave like fools” (178) and decides to leave the Congress “which had very little to do with what Bapu believed in.” Though she admires “the bat-eared, bespectacled, dhoti-clad leader”, Nanji is shocked by Gandhi’s stupidity in living with the Harijans. She takes pride in her ancestors who had come from the hills of Thadiyandamolu and
Pushpagiri and lived by their weapons and their honour: “How could anyone be equal to a Kodava or a Kodava equal to anyone else?” (169). This is not to mean that she disparages the Other of Kodagu. In fact, one finds her relishing the company of her Yerava workers and the Maplahs who come to Kodagu from Talacheri and Kozhikode to sell mathi in exchange for her bananas. As noted by M.N. Srinivas, in Kodagu, great affection prevailed between the affluent families and their Yerava and Poleya servants (Religion 21). Nanji believes that having been born into a particular caste and station in life, it is incumbent upon a person to live righteously in accordance with it, and that alone is dharma. It is no wonder then that she finds it difficult to accept Gandhi’s views of untouchability. The reader is thus made to understand that what is true to Gandhi is not true to Nanji nor Subbu nor the Kodavas. Even Gandhiji’s political and social ideas cannot satisfactorily address the cultural plurality and regional diversity of India. Nambisan has a very definite purpose in bringing Gandhi into the novel. Her intention is not to deify Gandhi but to drive home the point that Emerson has so often stressed regarding the infinitude of the private man. When ordinary people like Nanji realise their worth and act according to their inner beckoning, they rise above the mundane and achieve greatness.

By taking up the issue of the merger of Kodagu into the larger state of Karnataka, Nambisan links the history of the region with the state of Karnataka and the national history of India. It exposes the colonialist character of the nation whereby the myriad voices of the country are subsumed into a single whole. This brings
to mind Thoreau’s poetic comparison of the nation to a butterfly
having the body of a caterpillar with a tiny head (143). The
caterpillar-like body of the nation consumes more than it can chew
with no idea of what its diminutive head can shoulder. During the
reign of the Nayakas, the Haleri Rajas and the British, Kodagu
existed as a little kingdom with its own individuality. After
independence, the nationalist elites, keen on a totalising narrative,
decides to merge Kodagu with the state of Mysore (later
Karnataka). Sardar Patel and Nehru were the ardent advocates of
this plan:

The new state, with certain strategic amalgamations,
would be known as Karnataka. It was part of the grand
plan for the Reorganization of States into more
meaningful entities on the basis of language and
geographic feasibility. By merging the smaller states
and union territories . . . with larger neighbouring
states, governance could be simplified and the centres
of power made fewer. (Pepper 234)

This leads to widespread protests and the Chief Minister of Kodagu
and his government strongly resisted the merger. In the end as
“Coorg could not stand up against the iron will of the Sardar or the
charming guile of the Prime Minister” they had to submit as “the
merger was for the good of the nation”(Pepper 234). It is seen that
the nationalist elites have no direct contact with the masses but
achieve it through the local leaders who in turn gained
prominence. Nambisan satirises the hypocrisy of the turncoat
politicians:
The CM spoke feelingly about the importance of unity and togetherness among fellow Indians. He praised the diverse cultures of communities that would be represented in the new state and made a special mention of Coorg, the land of Kodavas, who were a warrior race. . . . When the British annexed Coorg . . . it was affiliated to the Madras Presidency for various reasons. But we, a people who speak a dialect similar to Kannada have always followed the Kannada script . . . . Now, thanks to our leaders at the centre, Karnataka welcomes a daughter back into its fold.’ (239)

Subbu’s friend Govinda (the nationalist Brahmin), by now an MLA tries to convince his friends of the benefits of modernisation and urges them to extend their loyalties beyond Kodagu to the larger unity of the nation. To keep themselves in power, they rely a great deal on the authority of the nationalist elitist discourse in its philosophical and methodological strategies entrenched in the Enlightenment reason:

If Coorg is left on its own, it will not be able to cope. The roads are not even tarred; there are no railways, no airport, and no factories. The price of coffee, oranges and paddy is dismal. What if it falls further? You will end up begging for help from your neighbours all the time. What will happen to Kodava pride? (Pepper 236)
It is to be construed that the opposition of the Kodavas to the national demands reveal the acute helplessness of the people in their attempts to preserve their identity. Repeating an earlier argument, the unity which has been displayed by nationalism refuses to acknowledge the plurality of different regions with each having its identity rooted in its distinctive history, customs and beliefs. By providing equal rights and opportunities to all citizens, the governments allege that due recognition has been given to the cultural specificities of individual regions. The idiom of “nation building” fails to realise that such diversities can never be cobbled up into a single whole. In this context, it is worth quoting from Arif Dirlik:

Land in the indigenous conception is not only intimately connected with the people who work it and draw their sustenance from it, but derives its meaning from that relationship, which is as much a spiritual as a material relationship. The claim is one that has created much legal headache for nation-states, but also has exposed the fundamentally colonialist character of the nation. It is, in fact, an assertion of place-based sovereignty not only against an off-ground globalization, but also against the abstractions of the nation state. (25)

This project adopted by the hegemonic government of transforming ethnic identities into a national identity will naturally lead to further insecurity. Such ethnic groups as the Kodavas feel
that they have lost control over issues and decisions which concern their very existence.

After India achieved independence, Kodagu like the other regions enters into a phase of modernisation. The Kodavas get loans, buy tractors and other irrigational equipments which increases their yield of paddy and coffee. Co-operatives fix fair prices, the Coffee Board is established and the Kodavas become a rich race. As Nambisan admits: “Even in the days when they had lived on wild meat, bamboo, crabs and mushrooms and could barely scratch together enough money for a bus journey to Bangalore, they had the air of wealth about them. Now it became a reality”(244). The Anglicisation which Baliyanna detested became part of their new lives: “What started as adoration of a new culture, had nearly obliterated the old.” Instituting an Indian government that would continue with British institutions and practices never addresses the true liberation of the individuals and the nation. In his book Hind Swaraj (1938), dialogic in nature, when the Reader (an extremist character in the book) describes his idea of independence, Gandhi retorts:

> You have drawn the picture well. In effect it means this: that we want English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger’s nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English. And when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englistan. This is not the Swaraj that I want. (Hind Swaraj 21)
In the light of the discussions made so far, it may be concluded that though the Kodavas have become westernised in many “superficial” ways, they have emphatically remained a race apart. The changes are visible in the material sphere of their lives and the spiritual core which is left untouched accounts for the unsuccessful attempts of Christian missionaries to influence them. Dervla Murphy opines that the “Coorgs seem emotionally and intellectually capable of moving from East to West and back again without showing any sign of inner conflict or loss of integrity” (100). P.P. Raveendran refers to it as the schism which characterises and constitutes Indian modernity. Through this schism “the traditional ideas make their unobtrusive entry into modernity and act as an effective bulwark against the forces of Euro-centrism dominating colonial modernity” (“Indian Modernity” 8). It is this modernity which reveals itself in the Kodava wherein an effort is made at a redefinition of the self by recovering from the past what really constitutes their history and cultural identity.

Nambisan validates this concept of Indian modernity through her text. The close bonding they share with the land endows them a rootedness which is not found in other regions. For Murphy “a civilised harmony still exists between the landscape and the people” (102). Even when they move out in search of jobs, they have one or more branches of their clans living in the ancestral home to look after the land. In Pepper while Subbu’s brothers leave home, Subbu stays back with his mother helping her with the work on their land. This strong bonding of the Kodava with his land is also evident in a character’s remark in Tiger Hills:” ‘This land, it’s
like breathing for me, Avvaiah’” (377). The fact remains that the call of the land is so irresistible that it finally draws them back to its fold. Towards the end of Pepper, Subbu perseveres to emphasise this fact regarding his land and race. He realises that the truth of their destiny lies in their roots:

For all their stylish ways, the Kodavas now were no different from their ancestors. The sophistication was a shell. You were what you were, the children of Thadiyandamolu, Malethirike and Brahmagiri. You had that kernel of honour and fearlessness and were born to care for the land made sacred by the goddess and protector of Kodagu. (245)

For Nambisan, the rustic Concord, an economically backward town free from the evils of industrialism evident in other areas of Massachusetts resembles her land of Kodagu. Like Thoreau, she wishes for her people a region where men would not be dwarfed by external persuasions but would devote themselves to the pursuit of self-culture. Baliyanna’s disquisition to Clara regarding the culture of the region sums up Nambisan’s concept of regionalism: “‘So you think the weddings and a few dances and pujas make our culture. How little you know’”(63). Nambisan’s discourse of regionalism explores not only the topography and cultural aspects of a region, which however cannot be neglected, but it also lies in the realisation of the self, the immense potentiality of the individual that keeps him firmly rooted to the region. For her, the concept of regionalism does not become a parochial or fanatical propaganda for securing oneself compactly to one’s own region, it consequently
becomes a liberating force. In a pluri-cultural society like India, unity is to be achieved by inculcating a spirit of harmony, and this is paradoxically achieved only by recognising the diversity of regions and the distinctiveness of each individual.

The novelist, adopting a mode of self communication, speaks to the reader, the community and mankind as a whole. In addition, Nambisan adopts various roles – of a raconteur, philosopher, historian, sociologist and ethnographer. The novel has hitherto been analysed from its thematic perspective. On evaluating the text with regards to its form, one would tend to agree with Pramod Nayar who argues that in Nambisan’s text “the enunciative modes of fiction and the anthropological text merge” (“Ethnopoetics”76). Postcolonialism has firmly criticised western ethnographic studies for the reason that these studies were conducted to generate descriptions of the Other. However, contemporary scholars find many insights of ethnography useful in describing their community. When people belonging to the same community describe themselves, they no longer remain its passive participants but emerge as people actively recreating their self identity. Pepper fuses literary and ethnographic techniques to foreground the regional element of Nambisan's plot. An insight into the literary modes of the structural design resorted to in the text will be relevant. The opening chapter serves as exposition, as in a Shakespearean play and sets the stage for the unfolding of the drama of the story. All the major characters of the novel feature in this chapter as does the martial nature of the Kodavas, the strength of their women, their myths, their customs(marriage) and
the strange malady that affects the people. The novel, thus, in its embryonic form exists in this exposition. The visual rendering of her characters is remarkable. Even a minor character like Cachera Machaiah elicits her close attention:

He was the only Kodava with cheek enough to sport a galle meese without ever having shot a tiger. . . . At sixty-five, he had the audacious, twinkling eyes of youth, and silver hair sprouting from shapely ears which he cleaned with a little silver scoop that dangled from the chain of his pocket watch. His unique aspect was his whistling breath, with its lovely variations in pitch and tone. When young, he had accidentally swallowed a policeman’s whistle. (44)

A born story teller, Nambisan works out a faithful account of the lived experiences of the Kodavas through an omniscient narrative point of view which gives her the scope to make occasional authorial interventions and lay bare the innate workings of the minds of her characters. Her protagonist, Nanji is modelled after her own grandmother and some of the other characters in the novel are based on her real-life acquaintances (E mail 4 May 2012).

Reading Pepper, one is able to locate the key features of an ethnographic text. The ethnographer makes a study of the people of a community in their everyday contexts and the focus is usually on a single setting or a particular group of people to facilitate an in depth study (Hammersley and Atkinson 3). Into the ethnographic account of the race of the Kodavas, Nambisan, the novelist-
ethnographer weaves her story with specific reference to the Kaleyanda clan. The contention here is that this would not be an easy task for an unskilled narrator as it may tend to read as a documentary characterising the mundane experiences of everyday life. It requires a more systematic and deliberate approach. The ethnographer “must render the foreign familiar and preserve its foreignness at one and the same time” (Crapanzano 52). This could be understood as making the strange familiar by appealing to the rational and the familiar strange by resisting the tendency to comprehend other people’s lives in general terms (Hammersley and Atkinson 231). Nambisan has very carefully disentangled the multiple strands of the heterogeneous lives of the Kodavas before she has effortlessly interwoven them into her fiction and given life to her characters. Her textual approach, as in any ethnographic writing, includes thematic and chronological arrangements which have been dealt with in the earlier part of this chapter.

Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to attempt to detail all ideas drawn from and alluded to in ethnographic textual writing, a few illustrative cases in Pepper could be discussed. The practice of interweaving particularised narrative with objectified description which is characteristic of ethnographic narratives is evident throughout Pepper (10, 82, 168, 244). The following description is an illustration:

She went to the fields, picked a sheaf of green paddy and bending from the waist, began to plant. She loved the feel of soft mud on her hands and the breeze on her ankles. Nanji, like a lot of Kodava women, was
industrious and without the lazy drinking habits of the men. They stepped into the fields like cranes, worked alongside the Yeravas, planted, threshed paddy and stacked hay. (Pepper 26)

In situations when Nambisan refrains from the omniscient narration, she casts her characters like Nanji, Baliyanna, Clara and Alistair as ethnographers. Through the “indigenous ethnographer” (Clifford, “Introduction”9) Baliyanna’s description to Clara, the reader gets an oral ethnographic account of the history, customs, myths and rituals of the ethnic race. He thus, assumes the role of a participant–observer (term used by the anthropologist, Malinowski) in ethnography wherein he constantly shifts his mode between learning from and speaking for the other (Clifford, “On Ethnographic Allegory” 108). A similar role is adopted by Alistair Fox in his written ethnographic text “Notes on Coffee” which is read out by Clara to Baliyanna on “how to start a plantation and keep it viable” (Pepper 86). Clara, the ethnographer initially confronts an alien culture from the view of a romantic searcher of exotic cultures. She longs to be in Coorg “where the air felt like satin and the murmur of bees on the giant fig trees made maddening music you never forgot” (57). The sense of alienation and strangeness Clara experiences becomes integral to her learning, and the novice “field worker” learns through trial and error methods. She gains knowledge about the people from Baliyanna, and through her interactions with the locals, is successful in warding off their hostility towards her: “Clara now felt more at home in Coorg. The gong-like voices of the natives, which
had at first frightened her, the curries that once ravaged her stomach . . . were now familiar and pleasing” (Pepper 79). This is not merely the cultural clash experienced by the Westerner in encountering an “exotic culture” but also that of an ethnographer who sets out to study a “new world” through direct observation of that social world. After her period of intense fieldwork and research Clara returns to England with the fund of knowledge she has accumulated about the natives.

As in the opening narratives of ethnographies, Pepper displays an account of travel in a vestigial form at the very beginning and sets the stage for what follows. This positions the reader in the specific region in which the ethnographer-novelist intends to situate her text. It clearly manifests what is known in ethnography as the “arrival story” (Herndl 325). A poetic description of the ethnographer, Nanji entering the native scene (in Pepper it is her new home in another village of Kodagu) illustrates this:

There was half a minute of daylight left when the boxcart carrying the bride reached Athur. The jackals began their maniacal music in the bamboo groves and the sun bled behind the areca palms as the oxen waded through the stream, pulling the boxcart up the last slope to the house. . . . and through the window of the boxcart the bride saw the sprawling Kaleyanda house with its roofs as high as the areca palms outside. (emphasis added Pepper 3)
In the opening chapter, Nanji, the ethnographer has positioned herself within her specific milieu and establishes her identity and authority as she assertively embarks on a total rearrangement of the household and its routines (Pepper 8-9). The other ethnographers, Clara and Alistair, too make such “arrivals” into their field in Pepper.

The goal of the ethnographer is not only to collect an emic or insider’s perspective but also data from an etic or external socio-scientific perspective. In her “case study”, Nambisan draws upon various sources which include documents, both formal (“Notes on Coffee” and the Rajendranama) and informal (letters, photograph), personal narratives and oral traditions. Memories of the British lady, Feodora’s long stay in Kodagu, Nanji’s memories of her childhood and her previous marriage are effective ploys in conveying information to the reader about the life in Kodagu in the bygone years. As an insider studying her own culture, Nambisan offers “new angles of vision and depths of understanding” (Clifford “Introduction” 9). A very pervasive theme in ethnographic narrative is the lamenting of the loss of a way of life– of the vanishing of the essence of traditional society. Nostalgia for one’s land and vanishing cultures is also a theme of regional novels. Nambisan records this loss in Pepper.

Regarding the representation of culture in texts, Carl Herndl remarks that “the imaginative power which wins readers’ assent is a matter not simply of knowledge but also of rhetorical skill. Ethnographies persuade readers not by the power of factual description but by employing the narrative structures, textual
tropes, and argumentative topoi developed by the ethnographic genre” (321). Tracing one’s way through her narrative, it becomes remarkably clear that Nambisan has combined the language of ethnography and fiction in *Pepper*. Hammersley and Atkinson assert that the “graphic use of metaphorical descriptions must always be part of the ethnographers repertoire” (197). Home spun metaphors like water from the streams rushing down in sugary white foam (58), counting children considered to be as difficult as counting slithering sardines in a basket (95), children bursting upon the front yard like just-hatched chicks (98), arms dangled like the big wooden spoon (10) sighs that sounded like the bursting of air-filled paper bags (102) are abundantly made use of in *Pepper*. The authors further pinpoint that the master trope of metaphor is complemented by synecdoche (Hammersley and Atkinson 198). In *Pepper*, the Rao Bahadur family becomes synecdochic of the entire ethnic race. Among the variety of registers she employs in her narrative, the most prominent is hypotyposis, a strategy of impressing an experience so strongly and vividly on the readers through extraordinarily vivid descriptions (Crapanzano 57). This lends a visual veracity to the novel, enabling the reader to sympathetically engage with the social scene and its characters. Clifford argues that contemporary ethnography has rejected visualism of the Western tradition and has given importance to the other senses of sound, smell, touch and taste (“Introduction”11). Obviously, Nambisan resorts to visual descriptions, as in traditional ethnography, but one notes that along with the visual paradigm (16, 109, 127), *Pepper* is replete with rich details of sound (76, 88),
smell (79, 108), taste (36, 44) and touch (33, 39), to name a few. Along with such imagery are also found the narrative registers of hunting (70-71), drama (10, 154) and romance (67, 73, 116) as in literary texts. Thus it is apparent that her language is richly evocative.

Nambisan steers clear of the usage of a rigid standard English structure and employs an English much closer to home grounds (e.g., “I’ll go-and-come”(200) could be seen as a literal translation of the vernacular). The novelist’s penchant for elaborate cataloguing of food adds to the local flavour of the novel, but however, at times it tends to hinder the smooth flow of the novel. Sarita Mandanna’s *Tiger Hills* set in a similar milieu and roughly during the same period as *Pepper* is worth a comparison here. Nambisan’s prose imparts a rustic simplicity to her characters which unwittingly draws the reader closer to them unlike the finely chiselled prose adopted by Mandanna. Besides this, Nambisan’s approach tends to show an inborn sensitivity to a region riddled with ambiguities and contradictions. What strikes the reader is the outright honesty of a writer who delves deep into the intricacies of her community. While on the one hand, she portrays the “steely bulliance of Kodagu’s women” (Chakraborthy 191) through her characterisation of Nanji, on the other she valiantly puts across the malady affecting the men folk of the region.

The novel offers insights into various aspects of the Kodava society and highlights its traditions and cultural practices that is inevitably changing and evolving with the times. Although
Nambisan specifically delineates the life of a feudal family, she finds space in the revised edition of *Pepper* (2010) to voice her concern for the Other as she does in some of her other novels like *On Wings of Butterflies* and *The Story That Must Not Be Told*. Only a passing reference had been made to the Other in the earlier version. Apart from this, a few other notable changes would be worth mentioning in this context. An entirely new chapter highlighting the merger of Kodagu into the larger unit of Karnataka following the reorganisation of states on a linguistic basis and its repercussions has been incorporated (ch.35). Localisms have been used without glossing throughout the revised edition of *Pepper*. Names of food items (akkiotti[9], kadambuttoo, pulav[111]), ornaments (kokkethathi, gunduman[133], jomale[186]), festivals (Kailpodh[17], Puthari[108]), months (Tula[70], Minyar[134], Kakkada[151]) and others like peechekaththi (3), gallemeese (45), mandh(109), kupyachale (109) muhurtham (183) and smashana(229) are illustrations of the few of the localisms used. By weaving imagination into her narrative, she has very effectively tied up the history of Kodagu with the Kaleyanda clan. For instance, the Diwan of the last Raja is said to be the grandfather of Balyanna and the wife of the last Raja, Nanji’s grand aunt. The revised edition has undoubtedly contributed to and enhanced its distinctive regional ethos.

Nambisan mentions that many Kodavas were upset with the book and wanted it to be withdrawn by her publisher. Such an allegation was made on the grounds that it hadn’t showcased the bravery and honour of the community (“Woman”173). The novelist
firmly notes that “it is not a writer’s business to showcase her people, her nation or anything else. Her job is to open the windows wide and let the reader look in” (173). An undercurrent of subtle humour permeates throughout the novel—be it regarding the myths concerning their origins, their nobility, their ancestors, their futile attempts at Anglicisation or the hypocrisy of the politicians. Such disquisitions need not necessarily be taken as malicious attacks of the writer on her community. Being an insider, she is fondly pointing out the foibles of her people.

The saga of Kodagu embalmed in Pepper is a work comparable with novels of the vernacular languages. It will be pertinent to make a comparison of the region with Wynad, it being one of the bordering districts of Kodagu and sharing close similarities with the region in terms of its topography and cultural practices. The Malayalam novelist, P. Valsala describes the geo-cultural space of Wynad in her fictional works—Aagnayem and Nellu. The distinct ethos of Wynad, the life of the Adiyars, a tribal group of Wynad and the colloquial use of language authenticate Valsala’s fictional endeavour. The novelist succeeds in evoking the flavour of Wynad through her works. Nevertheless, Nambisan in no way lacks in intensity in depicting the regional ethos but on the other hand, being a native of Kodagu and incorporating a holistic vision of life to her characters, she has effectively brought out her concept of the region. What the novel seems to lack could be only attributed to the “the ill fitting robe of the language”, to quote Homi Bhabha’s phrase (“DissemiNation”314), which indisputably becomes the impediment to achieving this essence. The Indian
English writer’s depiction of the regional ethos depends to a large extent on the writer’s skill in appropriating the English language to suit the milieu. Though Nambisan’s work lacks the innovative and experimental techniques used by contemporary Indian English fictional writers, she successfully resorts to a simple and realistic mode of narration to impart her moral and poetic vision of life. Probably it would be more evident in a writer like Arundhati Roy whose fictional endeavour will be dealt with in the following chapter.