

# Tiger Hills and the Scent of Pepper as Novels of Place and Geography

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on Sarita Mandanna's novel *Tiger Hills* and Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* which, though they deal with clan histories, personal relationships and cultural practices, are not autonomous of nature and landscape. These narratives are, in fact, proven to be novels of place and the natural environment, as well as dependable sources of geographical knowledge.

This is achieved by drawing comparisons between the depiction in the two novels of Kodagu's natural environment and Kodava culture, and the reports set down in the factually veracious *Gazetteer of India, Karnataka State: Kodagu District, Coorg*, which cover the same historical period as the novels occupy.

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I do not say that the primary focus of either *Tiger Hills* or *The Scent of Pepper* is geography or place, but I do hold that the sense of place is strongly reinforced on almost every page of the two novels, and the knowledge of local geography incorporated in these works is abundant and reliable.

The relationship of the Kodava people with their land is seen, for instance, in the daily lives of the Kambeymada and Nachimanda family in *Tiger Hills*: the seasonal dishes cooked; the annual worship of the river goddess, Kaveri at Bhagamandala; festivals of the harvest and of weaponry; the pursuit of wild animals and the establishment of man's dominion over nature during the hunt. Instances of the aforementioned are rife. The land of Kodagu, rich with flora and fauna, shapes taste, values and a sense of identity. The slaying of a tiger makes Machu the elusive, powerfully attractive male that he is and serves as the trigger for both romance and tragedy in the novel. In *The Scent of Pepper*, Nanji is a veritable 'medicine' woman to the Yerava workers. Significantly, many of her medicinal preparations are

derived from simple, everyday plants like the indigenous pepper vine.

However, Mandanna and Nambisan have not created a literary territory in quite the same way as Thomas Hardy does with Wessex country and Aquilino Ribeiro with his Terras do Demo. This is probably because the authors whom I am studying have not returned in novel after novel to develop the contours and fill in the details of their chosen territory, thereby creating a unique 'place-time' which will ever after be associated with them. But there is a resemblance between the Coorg of *Tiger Hills* and that portrayed in *The Scent of Pepper*. Both works dwell upon the lives of powerful Kodava clans and the dynamic relationship between the characters and their natural surroundings. In both novels the traditions, religious and social practices of the Kodavas and the shaping influence of their British colonial masters on the lives of the characters have been delineated. To read the novels in succession, is to find oneself returning to a familiar imaginaire concretized by the daily routines, religious and social practices, food habits and habits of dress of the Kodavas, and by symbols and references drawn from the natural surroundings with which the lives of the Kodavas are intimately bound.

While these are literary representations of Coorg, they are rich with factual information about the district and depict the economic practices of the Kodavas, their relationship with their ecological surroundings, and their cultural values. The fact that the novels employ realism adds to their verisimilitude and to the appropriateness of their literary constructions. Clearly, both novels are backed by memory, personal experience, community lore and local history.

Using the methods employed by Ana Queiroz in her article "Landscape and literature: the ecological

memory of Terras do demo, Portugal” (sic), I will attempt to corroborate the claims made in these novels about the lives of the Kodavas; their cultural practices, beliefs and economic activity; the landscape, climate, flora and fauna of Coorg, and the relationship of the people with their land by using factual information recorded in the government gazetteer for those years.

In the *Karnataka State Gazetteer* which contains information on Kodagu, its geographical makeup, social statistics and physical features, the district is described as possessing “[a] mountainous landscape with lush vegetation and picturesque deep valleys....it is the centre of natural beauty consisting of tall hill ranges, deep valleys and shining waterfalls.”<sup>1</sup> Further on, reference is made to its rich economic resources and its sacred river, the Cauvery [alternatively spelt Kaveri] which has its source in the district.<sup>2</sup>

While this information has been gleaned from the revised edition of a *Government Gazetteer* dated 1993, the cartulary also records information collected in British times, dating back to the nineteenth-century and spanning the twentieth, right up to the last decade. So, its data can be compared with the ‘literary information’ that may be derived from the textual Coorg of Mandanna and Nambisan’s novels. Taken together, these occupy a period roughly extending from the turn of the twentieth century through the years of the two World Wars and the Indian Freedom Struggle to the early years of Independent India. This latter period is ideal for my study as it occupies almost the same historical period as my novel.

Let us look at a description of the landscape in the two novels under study. *Tiger Hills* is embedded, so to speak, in ‘Areas two and three’ of nature, as designated by Peter Barry in his chapter on ecocriticism in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, namely the ‘scenic sublime’ and the ‘countryside’, respectively. *The Scent of Pepper* commences with a description of bamboo groves and the red blush of sunset which quickly deepens into violet. Of course, it is human activity that remains a primary focus of this novel, till its conclusion when the rapidly altered natural environment, denuded of trees, is brought to the fore through Subbu’s consciousness and his passionately expressed sentiments. The landscape described in this work, is in keeping with that delineated in the *Gazetteer*: thickly forested hills, rising three thousand

feet above sea level, rich in bamboo and giant fig trees among several other species, and dark, moist soil ideal for agricultural activity.

There is little, in fact, to distinguish the Kodagu of the *Gazetteer* and the textual Coorg of the novels under examination. In the former, Kodagu is described as a district situated on the eastern and western slopes of south India’s Western Ghats. In almost lyrical style, it speaks of the land as possessing, “lush green forests, plantations and cultivated valleys.”<sup>3</sup>In *Tiger Hills*, the green rice paddies and the forests in which Machu triumphantly hunts his tiger, bear a striking resemblance to the topography of the land described in the *Gazetteer*. Hill ranges and forests run across parts of the district to the south, west and north-west. These areas are recipients of very heavy rainfall. The portrayal of the seasons in both novels are faithful to recorded information about Kodagu. “*The Scent of Pepper*” speaks of “sharp bursts of rain, and fruity fragrances that replaced the fusty smells of monsoon”.<sup>4</sup> To a far greater degree, *Tiger Hills* renders the seasons of Coorg, while emphasizing all the while the influence that these exert on the economic activity of the Kodavas; and their cultural practices, including the celebratory and the culinary. In both novels the reader is offered a realistic representation of the lives of a community who work the land, bond with it and live in synchrony with its various seasons, while reverencing it through worshipful rituals and maintaining sacred belief regarding the land, flora and fauna.

The kind of Coorg that is created in both novels is of a land that shapes culture; of physical features and natural heritage that exist in and through the experience of various characters and are internalized by them. The narration in these novels is both objective and subjective. This is so much so that for an individual like Devanna, he and his native place are one; and in the instance of Devi, she becomes almost subsumed by the disposition of the Kaveri, at once loving and giving, yet fierce and willful. Various predominant characters in these two novels relate to their natural surroundings by employing tools that are economic, scientific and aesthetic. However, economic activity and the arrival of technology, accompanied by increased capitalist exploitation of the land, has diminished the human bond with nature and the people’s appreciation of their land.

To return to the *Gazetteer*: the largest river of the district is the Cauvery. I will only dwell on the Cauvery because it is at the source of the river in Bhagamandala that the first electrifying encounter takes place between the now grown-up Devi, and Machu. The *Gazetteer* states that the Cauvery rises at Talakaveri in the Brahmagiri Hills. It has been given the appellation of ‘the Ganga of the South’. Mention is made of the sanctity of the river and its integration with the lives of the Kodavas. It is specifically stated that the river is worshipped by the community and regarded by them as their mother.<sup>5</sup> The gazetted information about the Cauvery matches that given in detail in *Tiger Hills* at the point where Devi, her father and Devanna travel to Bhagamandala to witness the annual reappearance of the goddess Kaveri after her sojourn underground.

The literary writings under inspection in this paper and the *Gazetteer* data are, as in the case of Aquilino’s work, “complementary sources of information about space and place.”<sup>6</sup> As Queiroz says, “They contribute to the characterization and understanding of [a] past cultural landscape.... Joining coherent information details leads to a complementary historical description.”<sup>7</sup> This is precisely why I feel that employing novels as ‘complementary historical description’ is wholly justified.

Queiroz avers that, “Literary landscapes give a dynamic image to the landscape....”<sup>8</sup> *Tiger Hills* in particular makes references to the rice planting season. The novel, in fact, commences with a heavily-pregnant Muthavva standing ankle-deep in flooded rice flats. It also outlines the seasonal rotation of activities undertaken by the Kodavas. Most significant is the creation of a landscape that is both spatial and temporal; one that is born of the cultural and natural interactions between a community and their environment, landscape, soil, flora and fauna. It is not a static landscape either, but one that is continuously in a state of flux.<sup>9</sup> As seen more particularly in *The Scent of Pepper* the landscape, in a paradoxical sense, is both steady and yet changing; the change coming about so gradually as to make the landscape appear permanent and resistant to alteration.

Queiroz quotes Tress and Tress who state that “the concept of landscape itself includes natural and cultural dimensions (the spatial entity, the mental entity, the temporal dimension, the nexus of nature

and culture, and the systemic properties of landscapes....)”<sup>10</sup> I add that the idea of landscape has a spiritual dimension in *Tiger Hills*, and an emotional one may be discerned in both novels under study. In keeping with Queiroz, I argue that both speak of a geographical and geological space, one in which nature may be scientifically studied and information recorded, as well as a cultural place where lived experience is acquired, spiritual sustenance is obtained, emotions are generated and meanings are created. Therefore, “All this suggests an integrated study that could look for different information sources and identifying or understanding forms and origins.”<sup>11</sup>

Another point may be made here: the *Gazetteer* states that tiger hunting was a favourite pastime of Lingaraja’s and this indicates how numerous these magnificent beasts were in centuries gone by and how their slaughter led to a shocking depletion in their numbers in the twentieth century. Indeed, fear of extinction of the tiger put tiger protection laws into force.<sup>12</sup>

Again, among the several bird species listed in the *Gazetteer* are various species of heron. I speak of the heron because it appears repeatedly as a significant symbol in *Tiger Hills* and is bound up with the beliefs and experiences of individual characters. Its appearance is typically ominous. That said, I want to point out that descriptions of the landscape and its flora and fauna while unique to the time-space of each novel and bent to the uses of the author’s creative imagination, also have their counterpart in the real, physical world and its natural environment, and bear fidelity to the same.

Interestingly, in the *Gazetteer* reference is made to an introductory essay titled *Flora Indica* by a certain Hooker and Thomson in 1885. It is the earliest available record of the flora of the Kodagu District. Further, the *Gazetteer* speaks of various plant collectors including a Rev Metz who collected vast numbers of plants of Kodagu, especially from the purlieu of Madikeri.<sup>13</sup> Rev Metz, a missionary and botanist from Switzerland, bears an uncanny resemblance to Rev Gundert in *Tiger Hills*. I do not claim that Gundert is a fictional equivalent of Metz, but that the creation of Gundert bears strong literary verisimilitude; he is a character who could well have had a ‘real life’, historical counterpart. The realism of Mandanna’s narrative is enhanced herein. Mandanna and Nambisan’s literary content has realism running

through it, meshing together the subjective and the objective experience of the landscape. Both novels may therefore, be taken as reliable sources of knowledge about the Kodagu in the time period in which the novels have their 'existence'.

As recorded in the *Gazetteer*: the district possesses rich and varied vegetation from scrub to moist deciduous forests on the higher slopes of the mountains, evergreen and semi-evergreen types of forest on the lower slopes of the Western Ghats, and sholas and grasslands.<sup>14</sup>

The flora and fauna of Coorg play a pivotal role in both *Tiger Hills* and *The Scent of Pepper*, though perhaps, this is not immediately evident. The rich variety of flora excites the curiosity and scientific interest of both Rev Gundert and his star pupil and protégé, Devanna.

Again, the rich soil of Coorg makes it favourable to both the cultivation of rice and coffee. Rice cultivation is a clan activity, labour intensive and not motivated by profit; coffee cultivation is a commercial activity, driven by market forces and in constant competition with the coffee cultivated abroad. The growing of both crops speaks of a community that works the land and bonds with it. But over the decades, as observed in the novels themselves, a qualitative change in the attitude of the people with their natural environment reveals a diminished appreciation of the land and an increased desire to exploit it for commercial purposes.

The *Gazetteer* has something of significance connected with the claims that I have made immediately above. It refers to Kodagu as a 'Botanists' Paradise' and speaks of the over 1,300 species belonging to 700 genera and 160 families.<sup>15</sup> This in a way corroborates what we learn about Gundert's pursuits in *Tiger Hills*: stocking his mission garden with local plants, all of them well-documented in the scientific world. We are told that Devanna and he comb the hillsides collecting armfuls of botanical specimens to be painstakingly studied, classified and labelled. In *Tiger Hills* mention is made of numerous species of bamboo, and in *The Scent of Pepper* of the thick forests of Coorg and the murmur of bees in the giant fig trees. All these details serve as information to be mined about the rich variety of flora available in that Coorg in which the novel is set.

*Tiger Hills* occupies an idyllic space, projecting a pastoral Coorg where the forests are still revered, and natural wealth and beauty abound. The land constitutes 'home' and serves as a form of identity and a refuge in distress. But *The Scent of Pepper* carries a forewarning of things to come.

The information in the *Gazetteer*, therefore, serves not only to corroborate what has been portrayed in the novels under analysis, but also as a kind of baseline to note the changes that have taken place since.

Much like Aquilino does, the authors of the novels under analysis, have constructed their narratives using soundscapes, landscape structures, and the socio-economic activities of their characters to create the agro-pastoral environment of Coorg during the time periods that their novels occupied.<sup>16</sup> Further, at every point the 'claims' made by their literary accounts may be compared with the information recorded in the *Gazetteer* and are found to be veracious. Therefore, these literary works may be considered reliable accounts of a Coorg of bygone days.

Recorded data of the Kodava community constitutes "the organs of the territorial corpus"<sup>17</sup> of Coorg as it is depicted in the novels. This data, by a process of comparison, proves that both Nambisan and Mandanna are reliable in their portrayal of the Kodavas. It is not surprising that they chose their characters from among the clans of this community. The *Gazetteer* tells us that Kodavas constitute "the most important portion of the population of the district."<sup>18</sup> One must bear in mind that both Mandanna and Nambisan are themselves Kodava and were born in Kodava country. While Nambisan spent her early years in Coorg, Mandanna's family and forebears have resided in the district for centuries. This suggests that the authors could have sought diverse sources of information for their novels. These would include personal recollections, and community memory enshrined in clan anecdotes and legends, as also personal ecological experiences and objectively recorded data on the environment.

I must point out that ecological experience of the past must not be confused with the strict definition of 'ecological memory' as given in the context of the natural sciences. Ecological memory in the latter refers to environmental history and carries the conviction that human beings are and have always

been creatures of nature, dwelling as they do in a natural world.<sup>19</sup> In these novels we have both the experience of nature on the personal level as well as some degree of environmental history. For instance, in *The Scent of Pepper*, Baliyanna gives a clear explanation of the annual renewal of the Kaveri on Sankramana in the month of October, after several months of intense monsoon rain. Of course, his explanation is tied up with the religious beliefs and cultural practices of the people of Coorg. Nambisan and Mandanna are, in effect, presenting us with what Queiroz calls a cultural landscape that is both a repository of heritage, and a land-use and lifetime mosaic.<sup>20</sup> As a result, in each instance, the reader is offered an integrated narrative.

There is an almost symmetric comparison between the novels and the *Gazetteer*. I hold that the novels serve as, “[A] baseline for understanding and managing current landscapes, based upon the knowledge of the past and the changing processes that [have] imprinted the current local features.” The novels may therefore be considered dependable works of place and geography.

#### WORK CITED

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<sup>15</sup>*Gazetteer* 19-22.

<sup>16</sup>*Gazetteer* 20.

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<sup>20</sup>Queiroz 15-16.