


‘Slow Violence’ and Ecocide: An Ecocritical Reading of *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale*

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Abstract

The influence of the environment upon human life necessitates the preservation of nature with all its diversity. During industrialised farming, the excessive use of chemical pesticides contaminates the water bodies, soil, air and all-natural elements. The chemical content is passed on from one organism to another, linking the food chain and resulting in mysterious diseases in humans and animals, loss of biodiversity, and extinction of species. Ecocritics analyse the relationship between literature and the physical environment. They critically view the descriptions of nature in literature and the irreversible changes that happen in the environment. Swarga: A Posthuman Tale, written by Ambikasudhan Mangad, is a painful account of the endosulfan disaster in the village called Enmakaje of Kasargod district in Kerala. The strategy adopted by the Plantation Corporation of Kerala for the aerial spraying of endosulfan on cashew plants can be viewed as slow violence against impoverished communities. The intolerable pain experienced by the people who suffer from strange diseases and the challenges faced by those who look after them are analysed. Human beings efficaciously commit ecocide during the anthropocene epoch.
Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecocide, Anthropocene, Anthropogenic, Slow Violence, Posthumanism.

The portrayal of various characters and their life in literature eventuates the description of the sociocultural context they are exposed to and the natural environment that helps in the existence of all living creatures. Since time immemorial, literature has been providing space for the meticulous narration of nature and its inhabitants. During the era of the anthropocene, man’s dissolving acquaintance with nature and the convulsions in the natural equilibrium due to the indiscriminate interventions of man in natural resources became the focal areas of some literary texts. The American nature writer Rachel Carson explains in her book *Silent Spring* (which pioneered modern environmentalism) that “[t]he history of life on earth has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings” (5). She further explicates that:

To a large extent, the physical form and the habits of the earth’s vegetation and its animal life have been molded by the environment. Considering the whole span of earthly time, the opposite effect, in which life actually modifies its surroundings, has been relatively slight. Only within the moment of time represented by the present century has one species—man—acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world. (5)

Man, with acquired power, intrudes into nature and disturbs its serenity. According to Carson, “The most alarming of all man’s assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials” (6). This pollution causes mostly irreversible changes in the natural environment, which in turn perilously affects the existence of humanity because the human being is not the only element in the ecosystem. The danger of using chemical pesticides and fertilisers in agricultural lands which aim at yielding plenteous harvests is hardly realised. The diffusion of chemical substances to the water bodies, soil, plants, air and all organisms inarguably increases the chances of finding chemical content even in human blood, which may be through the consumption of food, drinking of polluted water and exposure to the contaminated environment.

As Raymond Williams voices, “Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language” (219). This signifier, ‘nature’, is complex enough to decipher the exact signified because it can have multiple associations. Literature during the late twentieth century resonated with the existing environmental nuances, and accordingly, the field of ecocriticism emerged. Swarnalatha Rangarajan asserts in her book *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies* that “[i]t helps us to make sense of the myriad ways in which ‘nature’ is defined and debated in our cultural spaces, which in turn influences our understanding of the unfolding environmental crisis”(2). The environmental catastrophes indicate the natural apocalypse in the anthropocene age.

Cheryll Glotfelty, in her book *The Ecocriticism Reader*, defines ecocriticism as:

...the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (xviii)

It envisions a substantial shift from anthropocentric to earth-centric ideologies. The anthropogenic environmental crisis is a result of human’s materialistic perceptions towards nature. Neil H. Kessler, in his book *Ontology and Closeness in Human-Nature Relationships*, analyses the widening relationship of humans with natural surroundings. He notices that the “faulty or flawed” relationship between modern humans and the natural world serves as the driving force behind various academic disciplines dedicated to addressing environmental issues, striving to redefine human interactions with the environment (3). The consequences of this faulty relationship are intolerable to the entire living creatures as human intervention brings irrevocable changes in the climate and leads to loss of biodiversity, deforestation and extinction of many organisms. The indifferent attitude of humans towards nature is predominantly reflected in literature. Lawrence Buell, in his notable work on ecocriticism, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, demarcates the first and second waves of ecocriticism in literary studies. According to Buell, his book:

...distinguishes between “first-wave” ecocriticism and “second-wave” or revisionist ecocriticism, in recognition of a growing diversification of critical method and a broadening of focus from an original concentration on such genres as nature writing, nature poetry, and wilderness fiction toward engagement with a broader range of landscapes and genres and a greater internal debate over environmental commitment that has taken the movement in a more socio-centric direction. (138)

For the first wave of ecocritics, “environment” effectively meant “natural environment” (21). Buell, in his other article, “Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends”, states that the first-wave ecocritics “typically privileged rural and wild spaces over urban ones” (93) and glorified the natural environment. However, the second wave of ecocritics theorised nature, broadened the concept of environment and expressed an inclination towards environmental injustice and social criticism. According to Buell, literature and environmental studies must promote social criticism that considers

urban and degraded landscapes just as vital as natural landscapes (22). Later, Lawrence Buell, in his article “Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends”, speaks about the primary characteristics of second-wave ecocriticism as more closely related to the “public health environmentalism, whose geographic gaze was directed more at landscapes of urban and/or industrial transformation rather than at country or wilderness, and whose environmental ethics and politics were sociocentric rather than ecocentric” (94). The concern regarding the violation of environmental ethics and devastation in nature due to human intervention is conspicuous in second-wave ecocritical texts. Buell, in his *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, points out that “[s]econd-wave ecocriticism has so far concentrated strongly, for example, on locating vestiges of nature within cities and/or exposing crimes of eco-injustice against society’s marginal groups” (24).

It is in this context of second-wave ecocriticism that the novel *Swarga*, written by Ambikasudhan Mangad, appears. It unravels the excruciating effects of the lethal chemical Endosulfan on the lives of the people and other organisms in Enmakaje village of Kasargod district in Kerala. It opens up the aftermath of modern industrialised agriculture and the social injustice against the natives of the village. The second wave of ecocriticism in the West takes “a special interest in narratives of representative endangered communities” (Buell 68). Ambikasudhan Mangad vociferously speaks for the endangered communities afflicted with the convolutions of endosulfan spraying on the cashew plants by the government organisation, Plantation Corporation, in around five thousand hectares of land. The novel was first published in Malayalam with the title *Enmakaje* in the year 2009 and was translated into English by J. Devika in 2017 with the title *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale*.

Swarga, a realistic account of the Kerala endosulfan disaster, delineates the plight of pesticide victims and the contamination of the whole ecosystem through the injudicious use of pesticides. Humans efficiently commit biocide, which the authorities who earn financial profits never pay attention to. The impoverished people in Enmakaje and the nearby areas believe that children are born with anomalies and people dying out of mysterious diseases are all the curses of their God, Jadhari. The myths persist in the indigenous community, connecting them with nature, and thereby, they worship each natural element as God. Mohammad Ataulah Nuri analyses that “[e]cocriticism specially studies those literary texts that give special focus on the portrayal of the reality of the relationship between humankind and the world it inhabits and shares with other beings” (4). The novel *Swarga* truthfully portrays the interconnectedness of human life with natural surroundings.

The story revolves around the life of Neelakantan and Devayani in a forest, who deliberately recluse themselves from other humans due to the ordeals they experienced in a civilised world. As they do not want to bring forth an offspring to this treacherous world, Neelakantan becomes sterilised, and Devayani gives up her womb. To break the ties with the human world, they renounce their names and vow to stay away from other human beings. In the forest, closely connected to nature, they live like ascetics who quench thirst with water from streams, satiate hunger with fruits from wild trees and assume time by observing the sun. Both of them have been oblivious to the reality of the place, bearing stories of gods and the exploitation of the capital community for six years. Until they come across a child with deformities and a mysterious disease, they do not realise the painful life of people in Enmakaje. *Swarga* records the story of ecocide and also the pain of the victims.

The lexical meaning of the word ‘ecocide’ is the destruction of the natural environment by deliberate or indiscriminate human action. The authorities of Plantation Corporation continue to use the pesticide without following any of the precautions, and that causes adverse impacts on the soil, water resources, air, plants, animals and also human beings. It happens like slow violence

on the earth and its inhabitants. Jayarajan, one of the activists, reveals to Devayani that the PCK operates cashew plantations in an extensive area of around 5,000 hectares across fourteen additional panchayats in Enmakaje, where aerial spraying is a common practice. This widespread use of pesticides has led to numerous health issues among plantation residents and nearby communities, and the Karnataka government's CDD also employs similar methods. "In short, this poison has spread everywhere – in air and water and soil" (144). The government authorities purposefully use this pesticide under different names only for financial benefits. The people in Enmakaje and nearby areas are mainly settlers from other parts of India. The innocence of these inhabitants is being exploited by the politicians, thinking that they will not voice against them. They are too tactful to deal with the aggressive mass. The leader of PCK asks the masses at Swarga:

'What's the real reason for the health problems in Enmakaje? That is not yet proven. Maybe it is endosulfan. But it could be a hundred other reasons also. Until proven clearly, that chemical should not be branded a villain. That chemical earns us crores of dollars through exports! It's just a chemical! Should we spend so much time fighting it? No, we must try to find who the helpless patients are and try to cure them, isn't that the right way?' (221)

The leader succeeds in convincing the people. The powerful people exert power over the impoverished. The violence and crime they commit cannot be perceived as Rob Nixon, in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, theorises that "Chemical and radiological violence, for example, is driven inward, somatised into cellular dramas of mutation that—particularly in the bodies of the poor—remain largely unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated" (6). By the word slow violence, Nixon means "...a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). The people in Enmakaje do not understand the root cause of their illnesses and diseases.

Neelakantan does not seek the reasons for the rarity of living creatures in the unfathomable forest area. Albeit he is perplexed and asks the squirrel, whom he names 'Sukan', "[h]ow come you don't have any company at all?" (6) and the monkey, whom he names Sugriva too, comes alone. The gradual extinction of snakes, butterflies and such creatures due to the contaminated environment was not critically observed during the early part of his life in Enmakaje. Panji, a nearly two-hundred-year-old indigenous man, explains the spiritual relevance of the forest, hills and rivers to Neelakantan. When Panji introduces the Naga stone to Neelakantan, he says, "[i]t had a serpent's shape. There was no place anywhere near here which had so many serpent groves. Every house had two or three" (62). Unfortunately, the snakes are very rare now, "No'now, ver'few now" (62). Before much intrusion of human beings into the natural environment of Jadadhari Hill, there was a desirable range of biodiversity:

In the olden days, the Jadadhari Hill was full of snakes. ... The snakes were numerous but never harmed human beings. The Serpent Hill nearby was full of snakes too. So humans would not climb there either. People here still believe that each of the hills was guarded by a Shanghupalan snake. (62)

As humans never intrude into the forest life and control the creatures, animals do not harm them. Besides, there exists a strong understanding between man and nature. Panji represents the ancient forest community who can perceive the language of forests and live along with nature. He can sense the changes, but he is uncontaminated with the trickeries of the present world. So he believes the sickness of people is the curse and anger of the God Jadadhari (70). Unknowing of the fact that the aerial spray of endosulfan happens just near Jadadhari Hill. The stories of the forest and hill resonate in Neelakantan's mind, and he later wonders that "...now it was like seeing a new world altogether, and the sights became clearer. And before his eyes, not just Enmakaje but also the world

beyond turned lucid” (65). “Enmakaje is the land of truth” (66), and it never obstructs anyone with a thorn fence, “[t]hat was Enmakaje’s uniqueness – fences with no thorns, in perpetual bloom! The traveler was not beset by thorns; even strangers were welcomed with the smiles of blooming flowers” (67) of hibiscus.

The land has become inhospitable for the animals, birds and other organisms. Punji remembers a canal which served as a healing river, but now it is empty “ [t]hi’s now water in which’ no fish, no frog, gro” (70). The question that reverberates within Neelakantan is, “Why were butterflies so rare in these forests? Flowers were not rare here – rather the contrary. The forests burst with flowers of many hues and kinds” (10). The presence of pesticide in the soil, air and water bodies kills insects and catalyses the production of crops. Hence, there is an absence of creatures but the presence of flowers, fruits and vegetation.

The description of the natural environment is abundant, and the silence never threatens Neelakantan until he undergoes an anagnorisis that he lives in a deadly world. When he cannot see even a tiny fish in the canal, “...for the first time now, he felt a stab of fear” (87). The lonely crab near the stones upraises its legs towards Neelakantan as if it asks for rescue.

The widespread use of endosulfan is for killing tea mosquitoes and protecting cashew plantations. But it also kills other useful insects like bees. One of the inhabitants points towards the beehive emptied of bees and tells Neelakantan that “[b]’for’ ther’ wa’ som’ hun’red ’ives ‘ere. We us’d to live on thi’. All the bees are dea’ now, and ther’ s no honey. Stopp’d farmin honey, some twenty’ears back” (94). The impossibility of finding bee hives and honey creates an upheaval in the lives of honey collectors.

Not only the small animals but also wild animals like leopards have vanished from Enmakaje. Previously, every hill had two or three leopard dens. However, the perilous pesticide gradually removes the life on earth and threatens the existing biodiversity. As Rachel Carson observes, these kinds of chemicals get transferred from one organism to another through the connections in the food chain (22). Therefore, it is obvious that if one organism is extinct, the other organism in the food chain will also be destroyed. Thus, the anthropocentric world is indulged in committing ecocide without admitting the fact that it also threatens the existence of human beings.

Alan James and Denny Emmanuel report in their article “An Overview of Endosulfan and the Aftermath of its Biohazardous Administration in Southern India” that:

The Endosulfan tragedy in Kerala resulted in the death of at least 4000 people and also induced chronic health ailments in more than 10,000 residents of the affected area. Exposure to endosulfan through food, water, air or soil resulted in a high incidence of neurological complications as well as congenital and reproductive abnormalities among the affected people. (214)

The environment and human interaction with its elements influence human health. The polluted environment puts humans in an existential crisis. The doctor in the novel, Dr. Arun Kumar, informs Neelakantan about the health status of Enmakaje:

‘This lan’is ful’of disease I haven’t seen in medical books and journals. My medicine isn’t workin’... Ther’re fifty mental patients i’the small numbe’o’ouses just aroun’ere. Lots o’ abortion, cancer. My personal opinion is tha’ some terrible poison ha’sprea’all o’er the soil and wate’ere. Jus’can’make ou’wha’that’is. The little boy you saw befor’, Abhilash? He wa’jus’like a monkey when he wa’small, now somewha’ human in form... what’is that forc’ that’s reversing evolution? I’ve no clue.’ (83)

The news of the deadly diseases in the village makes Neelakantan panic. The dissertation submitted by a group of students at NIT Calicut records the effect of endosulfan on human beings. Like Ambikasudhan Mangad’s narration in his story, the dissertation states that many residents of Padre village in the Enmakaje Gram Panchayat, located in Kerala’s Kasargod district, attribute

the sudden rise of mysterious diseases to a supernatural curse believed to be cast by Jadadhari, the guardian spirit (theyyam) of the region(19).

Neelakantan and Devayani get an orphan child from the forest whom they call Pareekshit; “Its body was covered with sores. The sores gaped mostly around the junctions of the limbs and the neck... the child’s hair was grey in some patches” (12). The child’s screaming with agony disturbs Neelakantan, and he sets forth to learn more about the place along with Panji Mooppan.

As Alan James and Denny Emmanuel note in their article, “Early and aggressive symptomatic treatment is crucial since there is no specific antidote for endosulfan intoxication” (213). Unfortunately, the people in Enmakaje remain ignorant about the deadly impact of this endosulfan, and thereby, they live in a polluted environment which causes the birth of infants with congenital diseases and deformities. The pain of the sick explained in the novel proves that the place is not Swarga (heaven) rather, it is a hell. After witnessing the horror of painful lives, Neelakantan proclaims to Devayani that:

“...we have arrived at the right place indeed. Didn’t we seek a land without human beings?

In the houses on the other side of the canal there are strange children, neither animal nor human.

Like this mysterious child of ours! This is not Swarga – heaven –Devi, this is Naraka – hell.” (73)

Neelakandan, who has seen many people with illness and stands as a caretaker, sighs, “I have cared for many sick people. Mostly lepers. Also, prostitutes with venereal disease, sore-ridden beggars... but I am pained far more when I see this child. Not able to enjoy even a single pleasure in life, in pain all the time... oh, it is unthinkable” (60). The life of the people of Enmakaje in the abyss of strange diseases and great pain causes tremors in Neelakantan. The house visits with Panji shudder him with the sights of deformed people with mysterious diseases. A girl “stood with a big tongue jutting out through her mouth. A rosy red tongue. It lay well below her chin. Moments passed, but she did not take it back and close her mouth” (69). She cannot close her mouth or have food other than a paste of cooked rice. He then meets a girl with a grotesque body with an enlarged head and tiny body parts; two mentally ill children; a boy having sore on the body with restricted growth; children with weakening eyesight and walking difficulties; and infants born in unusual forms, some do not resemble human child at all.

Deformed children are born not only in the human world but also in the animal world. People in the forest also consider cattle as their family members. Neelakantan shrieks on seeing a calf with three legs:

The calf had only three legs. Balancing itself on its two hind legs, the calf wobbled up to the old man and puts its head on his lap. He ran his gently on its forehead and said, ‘Th’one b’fore this, it wa’also born wit’three legs onl’. Lived only one or two weeks. There’s another Sindhi cow i’side. ‘Er calf ha’ two heads. Wa’d dead b’fore its head touched the groun’... Narayana Bhat nex’door also ha’a calf wit’three legs. It’s a yea’ol’now. The child’reen tease it – give it a nicknam’... “autorickshaw”!’ (91-92)

The dissemination of chemical pesticides into the natural bodies creates hindrances to the normal life cycle and leads to the birth of disproportioned beings. The Endosulfan Spray Protest Action Committee (ESPAC) takes measures to fight against the Plantation Corporation to stop aerial spraying of the pesticide. Thereby, they believe that they can escape from the painful life in a contaminated environment. But, the leader of PCK, with his political strength, defeats the protesters. The man, Jayarajan, who possesses all evidence against the leader, is killed secretly, and thus, both Jayarajan and the proofs never come up. According to Jayarajan’s studies, the US-based researchers discovered that:

When the milk produced by sheep affected by endosulfan spraying was examined, they found that the highest concentration was in its cream, in sulphate form. That’s even more deadly than endosulfan itself. They found endosulfan alcohol and alpha- hydroxyl endosulfan either.

They've found this poison in cow's milk too. Also in fish, eggs, vegetables... in many kinds of foodstuff. (143)

The studies show that the whole landscape is affected by pesticides and chemical content in other forms, which is rather the most dangerous and is found even in breast milk. The deposition of chemicals in the body causes biological and psychological changes, and there it remains until death. Unless and until nature is free from the presence of this deadly pesticide, people will suffer for generations with fatal diseases and deformed bodies. Rachel Carson's views on the use of pesticides are significant in this context:

...chemicals sprayed on croplands or forests or gardens lie long in soil, entering into living organisms, passing from one to another in a chain of poisoning and death. Or they pass mysteriously by underground streams until they emerge and, through the alchemy of air and sunlight, combine into new forms that kill vegetation, sicken cattle, and work unknown harm on those who drink from pure wells. (6)

The PCK authorities inflict slow violence on these people and manipulate the facts for more than two decades. They do not perceive the intolerable pain experienced by the sick people in Enmakaje. The deterioration of human values in the materialistic and industrialised world is also evident here.

Ambikasudhan Mangad's *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale* delineates the dilemma of impoverished communities being exploited by political authorities for their vested interests. Posthumanism, as a critical discourse, is the 'deconstruction of humanism' and challenges the concepts of anthropocentrism and exceptionalism, upon which humanism is based (Herbrechter 2). The word posthuman suggests that man is not superior to anything on this planet and is merely a part of it. Stefan Herbrechter analyses the concept of posthuman as:

the age-old idea that humans wish to overcome what they think they are, reaches a new, intensified, phase in the twenty-first century driven by nano-, info-, neuro- and biotechnologies on the one hand, and climate change, loss of biodiversity and extinction threats, on the other hand. (3)

As the subtitle of the novel indicates, it is a posthuman tale that narrates the stories of ecocide, loss of biodiversity and existential crisis of living organisms.

The utilisation of chemical fertilisers and pesticides in agricultural areas may rapidly increase production. However, it contaminates the entire environment and inadvertently leads to the accumulation of chemicals in the living organisms of the food chain. Consequently, some species are extinct from the scene and ecocide results in imbalances in natural equilibrium. The people in Enmakaje become the victims of the anthropocentric and materialistic actions of the authorities. The slow violence inflicted upon these people leads to diseases and a gradual deterioration of their health, causing them to live in a polluted environment. The intolerable pain of the people and animals suffering from ill health and diseases is articulated. The continuing ecocide and the life with pain bring unimaginable consequences.

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