

Slow Disaster, Changing Ecological Landscape and Disability: A Critical Reading of Ambikasutan Mangad's *Swarga*

Triparna Mukherjee

Assistant Professor, Department of English, South Calcutta Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal

Abstract

Ambikasutan Mangad's novel *Swarga* which was translated into English by J. Devika is a saga of the enormous suffering of the indigenous people of a village in Kerala named Enmakaje as a consequence of neocolonial endeavour of slow poisoning the environment in God's own country by spraying of poisonous pesticide endosulfan aerially over cashew plantations of Kerala to drive tea mosquitos. Mangad blatantly exposed the various facets of this anthropogenic chemical disaster through literary imagination. The paper argues how the western, patriarchal model of development oppress nature as well as the marginalised strata of society through so-called modernisation in agriculture and its implementation through mono-crop farming and the use of poisonous pesticides. I intend to examine how the novelist presented plights of the neocolonised victims due to slow disaster and how this "faction" portrayed the discernible manifestation of anthropogenic disaster. It seeks to show how the novel depicted the difference between the "survival environmentalism" of developing nations and the "postmaterialist environmentalism" of developed nations. It looks into how this novel portrayed the termination of "normalcy" both for human being and the environment. The paper discusses how the novelist represented the pangs and sufferings of the disabled who were the victims of state-sponsored chemical disaster. Finally, the paper will focus on how a creative work like Mangad's novel becomes a "cultural apparatus" in understanding the narratives of environmental rights.

Keywords: Indigenous, neocolonial, endosulfan, slow disaster, marginalised, disabled

Climate change and other ecological catastrophes that the global world confronts today are mostly the repercussions of the disruption of the close nexus between man and nature. Because of his avarice and callousness, man considers himself superior, and unscrupulously exploits and destroys nature. Ambikasutan Mangad's

famous novel *Enmakaje*, published in Malayalam in 2009, focuses on the real incident of Endosulfan tragedy that occurred in Kasargod district in North Kerala. In 2017, J.Devika translated this novel into English as *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale*. As the title of the English translation indicates, the novel delineates the gradual transformation of the beautiful, heaven-like village or Swarga into an uninhabitable land or rather a hell. The novel is a powerful outcry against the man-made ecological disasters; it also reminds us of the need to develop a deep ecological awareness. The prime objective behind representing chemical disaster in literary imagination is to “lodge crisis into the heart of political and public consciousness while soliciting new ways of negotiating with disaster” (Rastogi 4).

The beginning of Ambikasutan Mangad’s novel *Swarga* was deeply inspired by Edenic tropes and the narratives of forest exile from Indian Epics, the Ramayana. Unpleasant experiences of urban material world compelled Neelakantan and Devayani to seek refuge in the dense forest of the Jadadhari hill. They avoid human connection in their abode. Mangad delineates these characters as Man and Woman in the Edenic forest life as the denizen living in the lap of nature. After severing the bond with material world, the protagonist of the novel, Neelakantan have extreme faith in Nature’s benevolence. He believes that materialist human being becomes more harmful in compare to even wild animals. He inspired Devayani, “We don’t have to be afraid of the creatures of the forest, ever. They will not harm us” (Mangad 13). In his belief and action, he internalised the underlying meaning of the Sanskrit Sloka-“one tree is equal to ten thousand sons” (Mangad 141). Tribal leader Panji introduces to Neelakantan the spirituality linked with this “Land of Truth” (Mangad 66) as well as “Land of Water” (Mangad 127) by giving detailed description of imagery of Basava Cow, holy groves, holy snakes, Sankhapalan, Jadadhari Hill, sakkijal or the steps of truth and the holy Kodangiri Canal which is comparable to the holy Ganges. The realisation that the divine is omnipresent in and around us was cosmologically wholesome and restorative as spiritual ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak’s opined in her research paper titled-“Ecofeminism: Our roots and flowering”. Moon-rhythm blood of menses, the ecstatic dance, the holy grove, the womb-like caves, the totemic animals, plants and the goddess in her various guises were all fascinating. Spretnak remarked, “Experience of knowing Gaia, her voluptuous contours and fertile plains, her flowing waters that give life, her animals as teachers” (Spretnak 5).

Land’s fertility and biodiversity have assured the self-sustaining community’s well-being. In *Swarga*, human beings and non-human creatures co-existed in harmony flourishing a wide variety of cultures, customs, myths and languages. Mangad deliberately highlights the animal’s companionate attitude towards people, provide them equal importance with humans, in contrast to the prevalent practice of imposing stereotypical ‘otherness’ to non-humans and shoving them to the hinterland. In Chapter two, the novelist has shown a deep bond between the protagonist Neelakantan and non-humans- his love for the serene natural beauty, love for the trees, building tree-house, giving name to the trees- for example,

Nagamaram, the serpentine tree. With his two non-human friends, Sukan, the Squirrel and Sugrivan, the monkey, he shared his pain, his distress. Mangad represented an innate value interwoven within every living being as disseminated by Deep Ecology. Human-animal bond is beautifully portrayed through Sugrivan's offer of 'thondi fruit' to Neelakantan when he was hungry, depressed and was not in a mood to eat. Sugrivan gibbered in agitation, "So you plan to starve to death?" (Mangad 7). The ample instances of nature-human interconnectedness in the novel echo the philosophy of Arne Naess's Deep Ecology (Naess 4).

The notion of 'feminist Utopia' is replicated in Mangad's novel *Swarga*. Val Plumwood wrote,

[t]his is a land where there is no hierarchy, among humans or between humans and animals, where people care for one another and for nature, where the earth and the forest retain their mystery, power and wholeness, where the power of technology and of military and economic force does not rule the earth, or at least that part of it controlled by women. (Plumwood 7)

In Enmakaje, cowsheds were built close to the houses and on the same height of the ground which implies equal importance to family members and cattle which were considered as extended family members. By retrieving ancient myths and indigenous beliefs of worshipping Nature in utmost respect, the novel thus adheres to ecofeminist spirituality.

Mangad's *Swarga* is a testimony of Enmakaje's indigenous people's extreme faith in folktales and myths of local deities. In chapter Four, Devayani summoned Panji, the tribal seer, a mooppan to diagnose the strange disease of Pareekshit who gradually becomes greyed. Panji becomes nostalgic about pristine nature of Swarga in the past. He informs Neelakantan about the healing power of pure water of the canal-

When you go' stomach ache, my father'd say drin' thi' water, three times a day. W'd tel' chil'ren wit' skin disease, bathe 'ere three times a day. All sic' wen' away. (Mangad 70)

This two hundred years old seer unravelled the mystery of the strange disease which could not be cured through constant medication of last five years. To the indigenous people of Enmakaje, this strange disease is not "...sicknes', it is anger...the anger o' Jadadhari...it won' go wi' med'cin (Mangad 16). Neelakantan questioned the indigenous belief of Jadadhari's curse as the cause of disability of children in Swarga- "Is God Jadadhari so cruel, Panji? Why are these innocent children being punished thus?" (Mangad 71).

Panji grew eloquent while remembering Nature's boons before intrusion of poisonous pesticide in Swarga. The healing canal was full of fish then. But now it has 'no fish, no frog, gro'(Mangad 70). The similar lamentation is evident in Rachel Carson's seminal book *Silent Spring* that begins with the story of an

imaginary county. She predicts the impending disaster that the earth has to confront in near future. Carson stated-

There was strange illness. The birds, for example- where had they gone? The feeding stations in the background were deserted... the birds trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. (Carson 10)

The silence that Carson observed has a strong similarity with Mangad's 'fatal silence' as Neelakantan felt while crossing areca gardens. He could not find any living creature, not even an earthworm. Due to this scarcity of living creature, Neelakantan and Devayani felt utmost happiness when they saw a butterfly in the forest of Jadadhari hill. Mangad discussed the plight of the marginalised beekeepers who could not collect honey as there was no bee in the forest. Carson also observed same kind of environmental degradation, "the apple trees were coming into bloom but no bees droned among the blossoms. So there was no pollination and there would be no fruit" (Carson 10).

Neelakantan and Devayani's idyllic life was shattered by Devayani's discovery of a diseased, deformed child whom she decided to bring up. To find medication for this disabled child unveiled to them the horrendous reality of toxic contamination. As a companion of tribal chieftain Panji, Neelakantan witnesses environmental degradation, changing of landscape, death and disability of both human and non-human. Panji takes him on what Phaedra C. Pezzullo called the "Toxic Tour" which she explains, is "More and more of these (affected) communities have begun to invite outsiders in providing tours as a means of educating people about and, it is hoped, transforming their situation" (Pezzullo 5). Dr. K.S Arun Kumar scientifically explains the unscientific, unlawful Endosulfan-spraying aerially over the cashew plantations in North Kerala as cause of this disaster. He added a medical viewpoint to the accounts of disaster victims. Gradually, the focus of the narrative shifts from human characters like Neelakantan and Devayani to the Endosulfan victims as well as ravaged sites to project the "horrorism" implied in the disaster (Cavarero 10).

The novel is a saga of pangs and sufferings of the disabled who were the victims of state-sponsored chemical disaster. Mangad's novel portrayed the termination of normalcy both for human being and the environment. Mangad documented various types of disability both for human being and non-human beings prevailed in God's own country. Children were suffered most. Pareekshit's body was full of sores and he started becoming gray. He cannot laugh. Narayana Shetty's daughter's "body was grotesque" as "her head was bigger than her body and her limbs were tiny" (Mangad 71).

Neelakantan was numbed when he saw Tummana Shetty's two mentally disabled children in chains and especially the boy who was rubbing his shit and piss into the floor. He was shattered while visiting Anvar who was twenty-six years old but looks like twelve years old.

His fingers are strangely long and thin...like Octopus arms, all curled up.

His eyes are all white...with no pupils. (Mangad 74)

Anvar's sister Fatima's eyeballs are sinking too and her legs have started to give away gradually. Neelakantan and Devayani witnessed different types of disability and enormous suffering of those disabled people as a result of this endosulfan disaster. They met monkey-like boy Abhilash at Dr. K.S Arun Kumar's clinic. Abhilash's "head was the size of an unripe coconut" (Mangad 80), facial bones stuck out, eyes were small and sunken. It was very difficult for anyone to recognise him as human-child because his "arms and legs were covered with reddish body hair" (Mangad 80). As a consequence of this strange disease, their life-span becomes too short.

Neelakantan blamed himself for his escapist decision to shun human-connection for last five or six years and lived in ignorance like animals. After witnessing the strange children who were neither human nor animal, in the houses of the other side of the canal, Neelakantan perceived that there is no existence of Jadadhari's curse. It is only the tool of consolation for the indigenous, peripheral people in Swarga. Neelakantan bemoaned, "This is not Swarga-heaven, Devi, this is Naraka-hell" (Mangad 74).

In the beginning of the civilisation, a person's basic necessities were food, clothing and a place to live. Education is the next fundamental need for human beings. In the earlier education system, it was forbidden to educate any child with disability. Education is currently regarded "as the birth right for all citizens, including the disabled who are among the most marginalised groups in society" (Mukherjee 470), following many hardships since the ancient times. The "PL: 94-142 (1975) – the education for all Handicapped Children Act" states that it is the responsibility of the nation to provide education and rehabilitation for all children who are disabled. In *Swarga*, this state-sponsored slow disaster deprived the disabled of their basic human rights, their right of getting educated. Anvar's schooling had to be stopped after detection of his disability at the age of ten. His sister Fatima had not been going to school since last month—"Her eyeballs ar' skrinkin' too. Maash said, don' sen'..." (Mangad 75).

This alienation of the disabled child Fatima from getting education by her teacher would hamper the growth of her personality. In Anita Ghai's view,

Indeed it would not be misnomer to say that education is closely related to personhood. Though education is important for every human being, disabled people however have always existed at the precincts of the society. They have been excluded socially, politically, economically and, what is more critical, educationally. The educational discourse in India and in other countries begins with the process of 'othering' the disabled student by segregating them from a more caring interactive context both with fellow students as well as teachers. (Ghai 112)

In this context, it is evident that the novel upholds an ideology of cure and thus represents medical model of disability. Mangad demonstrates the way disability is

societally constructed when most marginalised individuals in a nation ruined by neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism. Cashew Plantation Corporation of Kerala compel the parents of neurologically impaired children to choose between tying their children up at home to work in the plantations or resigning from their jobs for taking full-time care of their children. It puts them in danger of hunger or incurring more debt. Mangad projected the suffering of two mentally ill children of widower Tummana Shetty-

They saw two children, both mentally ill, in chains. A dog lay beside them, like an ever-alert watchman. Tummana feeds them gruel and goes to work. (Mangad 71)

The narrative limits its focus solely to the description of disability. The novel fails to showcase the much-needed empowerment model of disability which emphasises on both material and non-material infrastructure such as accessibility which includes roads, public transport, medical assistance, technological support and financial welfare as well as breaking the cultural stereotypes of the society that are ‘much more a source of problems than particular impairments’ (Smith 60).

But Mangad’s narration as well as characterisation could not escape the stereotypical framework of fictional representation of disability. Like Zafar in *Animal’s People* (Sinha 3), Mangad’s main characters such as Neelakantan, Dr. K.S. Arun Kumar and Jayarajan are educated, elite outsider and become spokesperson of the marginalised indigenous people especially the disabled. Instead of their benevolent intention, they are “essentially filling a space that could be occupied by the speech of the subaltern” (Spivak 76).

Rob Nixon defined “Slow Violence” as “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” (Nixon 2). Nixon’s “Slow Violence” and the environmentalism discuss in details the impending disaster that the marginalised strata of the developing countries has to face the advent of recent modes of imperialism in the disguise of technological advancement. Nixon foregrounds the impact of neoliberal policies on the lives of “ecosystem people” of different continent (Rangarajan and Slovic 106).

The narrative highlights the neo-colonial influences to perpetuate inequalities and challenges faced by indigenous people at Swarga, echoing historical colonial patterns in a modern context. In the context of the novel, neo-colonialism explores the indirect exploitation and domination of marginalised indigenous people in post-colonial India by external forces mostly in the form of corporate globalism, economic policies, cultural influences or political manoeuvre and this corporate globalism often ends up in massive environmental degradation and with the lenience and active support of the local government and bureaucrats, the developed countries exploited the valuable resources of the third world nations and the multinational companies of the first world detracted the developing nations as mere markets and laboratories for capitalist experimentations and dumping ground for

toxic waste disposal.

In chapter thirty, Jayarajan apprised Neelakantan and Devayani about the massive damage caused by this “brown powder, Endosulfan. If it falls on human body, that part become swollen and reddish” (Mangad 143). The disastrous effects of Endosulfan spreads worldwide “In Sudan, children accidentally ate grain doused in endosulfan meant to curb birds and thirty one of them died” (Mangad 145). Mangad compares endosulfan as ‘Brahmashira Astra’, the dreadful weapon mentioned in the Mahabharata. Its toxicity is like “a big bomb (that bursts). Not at one go, slowly gradually” (Mangad 176). This slow disaster in Kerala has the everlasting impact on the lives of the indigenous people as “all the Hiroshimas and Nagasakis now happe’ here, onl’ slowly, ver’ slowly” (Mangad 193).

Eighty five people were died in Phillipines and all the fishes in some twenty kilometres died in Albama when this poison was sprayed on cotton fields and it was mixed into river water. In *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson also fictionally represented the environmental degradation in her imaginary hamlet, “Even the streams were lifeless ...all the fish had died” (Carson 10).

Mangad’s novel blatantly exposed hypocrisy of the Multinational companies of the developed countries. In the first world countries, it is mandatory for the labours to wear special protective garments and respiratory equipment. But in the developed country like India, the manufacturers diminished their responsibility into mere cataloguing of the precautions in their brochure such as- endosulfan should not be stored near water body, spraying only at dawn, spraying of this pesticide would not be allowed if any possibility of mixing it into water bodies detected, local doctor must be informed about the proper knowledge of the pesticide, its side-effects, possible health hazards and its remedy and treatment. Environmental activist Jayarajan claimed that Plantation Corporation of Kerala flouted all these precautionary measures intentionally- the doctor was not informed even the name of the pesticide and the labour who “mixes the poison wouldn’t even be wearing a shirt” (Mangad 145). Gyanendra Pandey termed this negligence of the authorities in terms of policy making and implementation as postcolonial subalternisation that “disdains the security of the people who remain in the periphery and thus diminishing their status to the level of Fourth world citizens” (Pandey 18).

Mangad critiques the westernised development models that oppress nature as well the marginalised strata of the society through so-called modernisation in Agriculture and its implementation through mono-crop farming and the use of poisonous pesticides which were banned in developing countries. The novelist tried to expose the hypocrisy of the MNCs of the developed countries because in their own country, they are showing concern about environment after fulfilling their materialist desire and luxurious life-style as pointed out by Ronald Inglehart in his “Postmaterial Value Thesis” where he clearly stated that in the developed country, “people become concerned about the environment only after their material needs are fulfilled and that environmentalism is all about enhancing the quality of

life” (Inglehart 8). In contrast to this, distinct environmental strategy is needed for India because of its diverse ecosystems, climate, agricultural usage, cities, economy and distinct social and religious past. The Bhopal Gas disaster in 1984 marked the beginning of modern environmentalism in India. Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* is a fictional representation of this tragedy that documented the devastation caused by this industrial disaster which left millions of people permanently disabled and death of thousands of people. This tragedy signified the culmination of India’s Green Revolution. The miracle chemicals that increased agricultural production massively so that India’s granaries are overflowing, preventing starvation even during a protracted drought, denoted as weapons of unthinkable devastation. This state-backed devastation paves the path for survival environmentalism in third world nations like India as it is focused on addressing critical threats to human survival and health caused by environmental degradation. Mangad’s novel is a testimony of survival environmentalism that emphasises urgent action to address environmental issues like endosulfan disaster in Enmakaje and safeguard the planet’s capacity to support life by adopting practical measures and technological solutions. Ramchandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier foregrounded the difference between “Full Stomach Environmentalism” of the developed nations and the “Empty Belly Environmentalism” of the developing nations of the Global South. In their opinion, quality of life opulence and ostentation are the focal point of “Full Stomach Environmentalism” in contrast to that of “Empty Belly Environmentalism” which becomes the survival imperative for peripheral, indigenous people depending upon Nature for their everyday existence (Guha and Martinez-Alier 20).

In *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson expresses caution both for the common people and policymakers about the dangers of using chemical and synthetic pesticides. In a broader sense, she warns about the possible risks that could arise if society injudiciously embraces technological advancement that result in human control over nature without fully considering the dreadful ramifications. Carson provides proof of bioaccumulation through that process chemicals can persist in the environment for extended periods of time and their detrimental effects can be transferred from species to species, even from mother to child. In *Swarga*, Mangad catalogued the bioaccumulation of endosulfan in water bodies, sugarcane, jackfruit, cow’s milk, fishes, vegetables, mother’s milk, even women’s menstrual cycle being adversely affected (Mangad 146). Eminent Bengali novelist Sadhan Chattopadhyay’s novel *Joltimir* is also a testimony of environmental degradation due to water pollution and few environmental conscious people’s resistance against negligence of the government pertaining to public health. The setting of this novel is a village in rural Bengal and it has similarity with the setting of Mangad’s novel *Swarga* where the village Enmakaje is situated in the border of Kerala and Karnataka and the government as well as the political leaders shifted their attention to this rural village only at the time of Election. Both Mangad and Chattopadhyay draw a parallel between ancient Indian myths and the poisonous circumstances. Mangad compares the contaminated breast milk to that of “demoness Puthana who

tried to kill baby Krishna by contaminating her breast milk” (Mangad 174). It reminds us Sadhan Chattopadhyay’s comparison of arsenic-stricken rural Bengal’s deplorable situation with that of ‘Kalidaha’ where no creatures could live, even the birds who were tried to fly over the lake died as the water and the surrounding of that lake was contaminated with the dreadful venom of ‘Kaliyanag’. Water, which we think as indispensable for our existence, becomes responsible for endangering lives of the marginalised people in rural Bengal. In chapter twenty six of *Swarga*, Srirama informed Neelakantan about Nature’s boons for this place where there is no wells, rather they have so many ‘surangams’ and for that reason Enmakaje was called the ‘Land of Surangams’ (Mangad 90). Despite any weather extremities or natural disaster, the water directly flows to the house of the denizens. In the ancient era, people was completely dependent on water and Enmakaje was Heaven to them due to this abundance of water. But, in this anthropocentric era, this abundance of water becomes the curse for the inhabitants as the poisonous pesticide, endosulfan have been sprayed on this waterbodies for last twenty five years. If wells were the source of water, those can be covered. But as the pesticide was sprayed on the hills aerially, it was directly mixed with the water of the surangas and poisonous water reached the home of the indigenous people and endanger their lives. Srirama lamented, “Thi’ abundance of water whic’ made this place heaven is wha’s makin’ it hell now” (Mangad 127). Against this bioaccumulation of poisonous pesticide, indigenous people’s survival environmentalism was struggle for existence against ruthless neocolonial-capitalist intrusion in their Motherland. Mangad symbolically compared the suffering of people at Swarga to the misfortune of the mythical king of Kerala, Mahabali who had to sacrifice his kingdom by Lord Vishnu appeared “in the disguise of a dwarf Brahmin” (Mangad 56).

Mangad’s novel *Swarga* challenges traditional narratives of disasters by presenting diverse testimonies of violence and the experiences of the indigenous, marginalised inhabitants. The novel uses the ‘ecotestimonio’ (Finzer 3) narrative approach which documents the lives of impoverished individuals and their survival strategies, challenging the notion of a singular authoritative truth. This technique also exposes hidden private violence, promoting an ecocritical ethics of witnessing. Undocumented narratives are highlighted as evidence of disastrous acts, challenging the prevailing logo-centric perspective. This novel introduces the concept of non-spectacular, enduring forms of violence. It also highlights the discrepancy between government assurances to support victims and the actual realisation of those assurances. The government’s support for the Plantation Corporation of Kerala is criticised for deviating from its duty to safeguard citizens. The novel is a saga of the suffering of the oppressed environmental activists who was intimidated and was always under supervision. They are branded as radical or ‘Naxalites’. Even the Chief Minister of the state labelled them as ‘terrorists’ (Mangad 125). It is sheer luck that some activists like Neelakantan and Devayani managed to escape from assassination attempts. The police imposes fake charges on some of them. Environmental activist Jayarajan was brutally murdered as he gathered information about nefarious tie-up between local political leader,

multinational company, government and pesticide lobby. Mangad skilfully interweaves the narrative within the catastrophic event, highlighting the profound sorrow for loved ones, erosion of physical well-being and community resilience in the face of violence as well as this unwavering, passionate determination of the campaigners and support of the media that paved the path for banning of this poisonous pesticide by Kerala Highcourt in 2003.

To conclude we can point out that in *Swarga*, Ambikasutan Mangad foregrounded the idea that failure in taking Nature's lesson, leads to ecocide. E.O. Wilson opined that the relentless human interference and modification of nature ultimately leads to "eramezoic era", the age of loneliness. In this context, Mangad unveiled the hypocrisy of westernised development models and its nefarious bond with the government, local political parties and administration. His novel is a testimony of the termination of normalcy both for human being and the environment by this neo-colonial endeavour as well as the resistance of the victims against this state-sponsored slow disaster. Based on the real incident of endosulfan disaster at Kerala, Mangad's novel *Swarga* provides readers a space to imagine and perceive the various facets of anthropogenic slow disaster that challenges humanity today.

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