

Pesticide, Politics and a Paradise Lost: Toxicity, Slow Violence and Survival Environmentalism in Ambikasutan Mangad's Swarga

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Abstract

Ambikasutan Mangad's *Enmakaje* (translated into English as *Swarga* by J. Devika) is a dystopic tale of socio-environmental crisis that represents the actual event of endosulfan disaster in the Indian state of Kerala in literary imagination. This paper examines how Mangad's text represents the "slow violence" the endosulfan disaster unleashes, in encrypted and incremental ways, upon the environs, bodies and psyches of the victims. It looks into how the politics of denial tries to suppress the inconvenient truth about the invisible invasion of the foreign element in an area where the local people live in reciprocity with their immediate environment. The paper also dissects how Mangad's use of the images of deformed human bodies with congenital anomalies in rendering the amorphous threats visible brings the environmental and disability concerns together and how these contravened and disabled bodies mark the uncanny nature of the disaster. Finally, it focuses on how the poor victims put up a collective protest in the form of an ecopopulist movement against the pesticide lobby and how their resistance to the socio-environmental injustice substantiates the fact that in a postcolonial country like India environmental issues are integrally connected to the issues of sustenance, shelter and survival of the "ecosystem people".

Keywords: Pesticide, disaster, slow violence, disabled bodies, survival environmentalism

Resumen

Enmakaje de Ambikasutan Mangad (traducido al inglés por J. Devika como *Swarga*) es una historia distópica de crisis socioambiental que representa el evento real del desastre del endosulfán en el estado indio de Kerala en la imaginación literaria. Este artículo examina cómo el texto de Mangad representa la "violencia lenta" que desata el desastre del endosulfán, de forma encriptada y progresiva, sobre el entorno, los cuerpos y la psique de las víctimas. Analiza cómo la política de la negación intenta suprimir la verdad incómoda sobre la invasión invisible del elemento extranjero en un área donde la gente local vive en reciprocidad con su entorno inmediato. El documento también analiza cómo el uso que hace Mangad de las imágenes de cuerpos humanos deformados con anomalías congénitas para hacer visibles las amenazas amorfas une las preocupaciones ambientales y de discapacidad y cómo estos cuerpos contravenidos y discapacitados marcan la naturaleza misteriosa del desastre. Finalmente, se centra en cómo las víctimas pobres organizan una protesta colectiva en forma de movimiento ecopopulista contra el lobby de los pesticidas y cómo su resistencia a la injusticia socioambiental corrobora el hecho de que, en un país poscolonial como la India, los problemas ambientales están integralmente conectados. a los temas de sustento, cobijo y supervivencia de la "gente del ecosistema".

Palabras clave: Pesticida, desastre, violencia lenta, cuerpos discapacitados, supervivencia ambientalismo

Introduction

In the year 1962, Rachel Carson, an American author-conservationist published *Silent Spring*, a treatise on the danger of pesticide poisoning, that ignited the modern environmental movement in the West. Carson's "toxic discourse"¹ engages with the physiological and eco-environmental problems caused by chemical pesticide overuse across the world in post-war time which sees rapid growth in industrial agriculture and excessive consumption of toxic "substances of incredible potential for harm" (Carson 25).² Carson observes that an indiscreet overuse of persistent synthetic pesticide in capital-intensive and resource-intensive commercial farming results in adverse environmental conversions and slowly unfolding disaster that causes insidious harm to the whole biota and people exposed to the contamination, directly or indirectly. Disaster experts across the world believe that sudden, calamitous and spectacular events are less ravaging and fatal than the apparently invisible and gradually unfolding disastrous "processes" where the "catastrophic events are consistently entwined with "ordinary," "chronic," or "slow onset" disasters[...]or where the state itself constitutes a "hazard"" (Carrigan 121). The ineffability and elusive nature of these accretive disasters make them pervasive processes that take their toll "gradually and out of sight" (Nixon 2). The endosulfan disaster³ in the Indian state of Kerala is one such invisible and attritional chemical pesticide disaster that has been taking its toll on the environment and vulnerable local people for the last five decades. The unrestrained aerial spraying of endosulfan in the cashew plantations of the Kasaragod district in Northern Kerala has resulted in a catastrophe continuum that has terminated normalcy for the environment, the individual and the social collective in the particular area.

¹Lawrence Buell defines "toxic discourse" as a mode of writing that expresses "anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency." See Buell (2001).

²In the post-war era the world saw great proliferation in the use of chemical pesticide, particularly DDT. While the scientific fraternity was silent about the dire impacts of DDT on public health and the whole biota, it was Carson who did thorough research, collected important data and put them together to make people see the reality of the insidious effects of DDT. Within ten years after the publication of *Silent Spring*, the Environmental Protection Agency in the US acknowledged the adverse environmental impacts and potential human health risks involved in the use of DDT and issued a cancellation order for DDT in 1972.

³In the years 1963 and 1964 the Kerala agriculture department started planting cashew trees in a monoculture plantation system in the hill areas of Northern Kerala. In 1978 the Plantation Corporation of Kerala (PCK), which was formed to facilitate the Green Revolution in the state, took over the cashew plantation estate. Since it took charge of the estate, the PCK started spraying endosulfan aerially and unprecedentedly turning a blind eye to its lethal impacts on human health and ecosystem in the area. The disaster came to wider notice when the local people started protesting against the contamination of the environment and the birth of deformed children in the area. It is the concerted action of national and international environmental pressure groups like KSSP and CSE that played a big role in banning endosulfan in Kerala ultimately in 2011.

As regards the representation of the Kerala endosulfan disaster in the literary imagination, the writer-activist Ambikasutan Mangad's novel *Enmakaje*⁴ is a riveting work of imaginative literature that narrates the story of pesticide, politics and a paradise lost involved in the endosulfan disaster. By interweaving myth, lore, folktales, history and fiction in the narrative, Mangad tells a moving tale in a deceptively lyrical manner. The dystopic tale of environmental breakdown, cultural collapse and humanitarian crisis helps to apprehend the formless threats of pesticide poisoning imaginatively that might otherwise have escaped the notice of the literary world. In fact, the representation of the disaster in fictional imagining is an integral part of Mangad's anti-endosulfan activism, and the novel *Swarga* "is not just art but an act of protest".⁵ The main purpose behind representing the chemical threat 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). As a postcolonial disaster narrative the text focuses on a problem of the present and depicts the experiences of a "real-life catastrophe along with (its) deep-lying causes" (Carrigan 131).⁶ In the novel, the actual event and the story are in a "constant dance with each other, one in which the Disaster Unconscious plays the tune to which they move" (Rastogi 8). This pas de deux of story and event foregrounds the interconnection among history, politics, economy, poverty and vulnerability involved in any disaster in postcolonial states. In the novel, a whole raft of environmental concerns has been integrated with serious issues in human society like class discrimination, disability, inequity, injustice and violation of human rights. Although the pesticide industry-structural power nexus suppresses all forms of dissension in the text, the villagers' environmental justice movement substantiates that in the postcolonial South, environmentalism is mostly concerned about an uneven conflict between the powerful "omnivore" sector on one hand and the disempowered "ecosystem people" on the other.⁷ This article reads Mangad's *Swarga* to look into the politics of denial that created an illusion of safety discarding the local people's apprehension of the invasion of the foreign element i.e., endosulfan in the area. It

⁴The original Malayalam novel *Enmakaje* was published in 2009 and J. Devika's English translation of the original text was published with the title *Swarga* in 2017.

⁵ See <https://www.thehindu.com/books/books-authors/it-is-not-just-art-but-an-act-of-protest/article18302952.ece>. Accessed on 06-03-2022.

⁶ There is no denying that disaster risks are disproportionately distributed across the world and that the postcolonial states in the Global South are most exposed to the enduring impacts of different forms of disaster. The disproportionate disaster vulnerability that the postcolonial subjects experience has its roots in the history of colonial exploitation. Critics like Anthony Carrigan have pointed to a connection between disaster vulnerability and colonial past in the post/neocolonial South. Taking his cue from the World Bank's report (2014) and Naomi Klein's work on "disaster capitalism" Carrigan observes: "It is no surprise that these (disasters) take a disproportionate toll on the world's poorest communities, many of which are still grappling with the legacies of western colonialism and neocolonial practices" (117).

⁷ Gadgil and Guha coined the term "ecosystem people" to refer to people who depend upon their immediate environment for shelter and sustenance. According to them, these ecosystem people are the victims of the resource-intensive and socially unjust development system that disproportionately benefits the *omnivores*, people who enjoy extensive control over resources, at the cost of environmental degradation and dispossession of the poor. See Gadgil and Guha (1995).

examines how Mangad's narrative documents the "slow violence" unleashed upon the environs, bodies and psyches of the endosulfan victims in invisible and incremental ways. It investigates how Mangad's use of the images of deformed bodies for the purpose of rendering the formless threats perceptible brings the environmental and disability concerns together and how the crippled bodies with birth anomalies suggest the uncanny nature of the disaster. Finally, it focuses on the impoverished victims who put up a collective protest in the manner of an ecopopulist movement against the pesticide lobby-structural power nexus. It explores how the local people's resistance to environmental injustice and "intra-species inequalities" substantiates the fact that in a country like India, the environment is not only about the beautiful, picturesque and sublime aspects of nature and that environment in India should rather be seen in terms of the interface between local people and the immediate environment they depend upon for shelter, sustenance and survival (Malm and Hornborg 62).

Utopian Vision and Dystopian Reality

In Mangad's *Swarga*, two human protagonists Neelakantan and Devayani repudiate the city life, shed their names and return to original lifeforms in the midst of dense verdure and wild animals in search of a peaceful life in the wild. Unlike in colonial ecological fiction, their return to the forest has nothing to do with the appropriation and colonisation of the environment and local people there.⁸ Actually, it is some unpleasant experiences of urban life that led Neelakantan and Devayani to choose an undisturbed life of seclusion in a remote forest in the Western Ghats. Mangad's novel, in fact, borrows largely from Edenic tropes, as instantiated in the title of the English translation, as well as from the tales of forest exile in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.⁹ The voluntary rejection of the privileges of urban life and the retreat to the sacred grove eventually end in an encounter with a dystopian reality of disease, death and deterioration. The serenity that surrounds the disaffected renunciants' reclusive life far from the chaos and corruption of the city turns out to be a deceptive one. The discovery of a disfigured child with a corroding body in the forest brings them face to face with the harrowing reality of how the land and its people are slowly succumbing to toxic contamination due to unscientific aerial spraying of endosulfan in the cashew plantations in the area. What starts as a

⁸ In colonial ecological fiction like Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) and Edgar Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) that tell stories of white men's conquest of wild (forest)land in Africa, the white, male protagonists renounce the privileges of European civilisation and return to a prehistoric life-form in some jungle where they adapt to primeval ways of life in the wild. The antiquity of life-forms determined by seasons, topography and basic needs reverses the standards of civilisation in these texts.

⁹ In Hinduism, the Sanskrit word "swarga"/ "Svarga" means heaven, the celestial abode of the devas, the divine beings. It is one of the three Lokas as described in the Hindu cosmology [the other two being *Bhuloka* (earth) and *Patala* (netherworld)]. However, the idea of heaven in Hinduism is not similar to that in the Abrahamic religions.

romantic tale of escape gradually turns into a powerful disaster “faction”¹⁰ that represents the grim reality of state-backed environmental catastrophe in a part of “God’s own country”. And as the narrative progresses, the narratorial focus shifts from human characters to the ravaged site to suggest the danger and “horrorism”¹¹ implied in the disaster. The decayed ecosystem and polluted biosphere where the air, water and bodies all host toxins signify the vulnerability of human and non-human lifeforms and their attendant ecosystems in the area.

In her 2015 essay “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin”, Donna Haraway uses the term “plantationocene” to refer to the problem of “extractive and enclosed” monoculture plantation that brings about a dreadful homogeneity disturbing the traditional link between local ecology and local economy (Haraway 162). In *Swarga*, Mangad addresses this problem of monoculture plantation that shatters the traditional understanding of human–environment intercourse in the area. As we see in the novel, the monoculture plantation of cashew trees brings adverse changes in the local ecosystem and the lives of local people who depend upon their local environment for their sustenance needs:

They set up these monoculture plantations, destroying priceless biodiversity forests. And not in a negligible area. Six hundred hectares in Enmakaje alone!

‘And for what? Most of the biodiversity disappeared. The water sources dried up. The land is filled up with sickly people... like the eucalyptus plantations in Karnataka and the pine plantations in the Himalayas. (Mangad 154–155)

However, this problem of monoculture plantation has been addressed only sparsely in the novel, and Mangad’s main focus is clearly on the poisoned plantations with their lethal impacts on human health and the ecosystem in the area. Mangad uses an inductive approach (from Pareekshit’s deformed body to the local people’s experience of the degraded environment in general) to refer obliquely to the implied cause of the disaster. The local people’s experiences of the effects of poisoning in the forms of degraded environment, deformed bodies and disturbed relations between human and non-human life forms are the visible manifestation of the disaster which is ineffable and intangible in nature. Although the local people were initially led to believe that the place was doomed because of the curse and anger of the guardian spirit of the area, the strange disabilities with which children were born and the haunted landscape made them realise that the entire biosphere was at risk because of its exposure to an unseen presence of toxic substances: “Now, all the houses near here have strange children. With enlarged heads[...]tongues too big...It is Jadadhari’s curse, they console themselves. No. I am sure, no God will be so wrathful towards children” (77). It is important to note here that like the Bhopal gas tragedy (1984), the Chernobyl accident (1986) and many other anthropogenic human–environmental disasters, the endosulfan disaster is also caused by environmental negligence, state-

¹⁰ The Sri Lankan English novelist and poet Carl Muller coined the term “faction” to describe his own works which are, according to him, ‘fictional-fact’ or ‘factual-fiction’ (fusion of fact and fiction).

¹¹ According to Cavarero, unlike words like “terror” that refer to the violence from the perspective of the perpetrators, “horrorism” addresses the violence from the perspective of the defenceless and vulnerable victims. See Cavarero (2011).

backed repression of information and the distortion of the truth. As we see in Mangad's novel, it is the politics of denial and suppression of inconvenient truth by the pesticide lobby that gradually led to the disaster. Information about endosulfan toxicity and the health risks associated with it, had been concealed. The safety regulations during the spraying like covering waterbodies before aerial spraying (105), giving two days' notice to local people (105), and doing the spray only early at dawn (105) were completely flouted. When Neelakantan reminded the PCK officer that the precautions needed to be followed before spraying endosulfan were not maintained by the corporation, the officer argued that whatever the government was doing was "for the good of people" (105). Even after the National Institute of Occupational Health (NIOH) and the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) found the presence of endosulfan in the biosphere much above the permissible levels and even when there were visible signs of poisoning in the area, it was promulgated that "Endosulfan is not a poison. It's medicine used to produce more cashew nuts, understand? If there are diseases here, get good doctors" (171). The liaisons between the pesticide industry and the state machinery created an illusion of knowledge that dismissed the reality of experience. And this withholding of information and downplaying of risk apprehensions resulted in the catastrophe eventually¹². As regards the role of the state in this politics of downplaying the truth, it is important to quote what Nayar observes in a different context: "the state as protector and as guardian has not only failed in its responsibility but actively supported the wrongdoers" (50). The politics of repression, apprehension and recognition has been brilliantly recorded in *Swarga*. The sudden absence of butterflies in the forests, "water in which 'no fish, no frog, gro'(sic)" (70), "land where bees don't thrive" (94), strange children with deformed bodies, "wide incidence of cancer, epilepsy, mental aberrations" (120), no leopards in Enmakaje which was once the "leopard's own country" (121), not even an earthworm beneath the soil (122-23), unhealthy areca palm trees (127), "Not a dragonfly or a bird anywhere" (152)-all these are explicit and uncanny signs of poisoning in the area. Neelakantan sarcastically comments on how their utopian vision of living in a *Swarga* (paradise) has ultimately brought them to a mysterious *Naraka* (hell): "This is not Swarga- heaven- Devi, this is Naraka- hell" (73).

As in the other Indian disaster narratives like Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) and Mahasweta Devi's *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, Pirtha* (1993), in Mangad's *Swarga*, myth has been used to communicate the feeling of the uncanny produced by

¹² The environmental activist groups like the CSE and Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) had to fight hard to expose "the tactics the pesticides industries used to suppress information, distort truth and discredit the whistle blowers". The CSE, in particular, fought hard for banning endosulfan and getting justice for the victims. It has been a difficult fight because the pesticide lobby used every means in maligning the organisation and the individuals associated with it. All the details about CSE's war against the endosulfan lobby has been documented in an article titled, "Endosulfan Industry's Dirty War - A Chronology of events" published in the official website of CSE. The above-mentioned quotation is taken from that article. See <https://www.cseindia.org/endosulfan-industrys-dirty-war-a-chronology-of-events--1927>.

the disaster.¹³ However, the use of myths in *Swarga* has another important function which is to highlight how the toxic intervention damages the local people–biota interface in the area. The use of local myths of *Jadadhari Bhoota*, snakes, leopards and monkeys signifies how in the primal forest the other-than-human world is not a passive world of objects. Through references to local myths, legends and folktales, Mangad seems to highlight how the local people live in close reciprocity with flora and fauna and how their cultural practices and beliefs are woven around the immediate environment where the nonhuman is as active as human subjects. Their ecospiritual consciousness and traditional ecocentric culture have been reflected in the celebration of human–environment intercommunication in local myths and folktales. They believe that “Siva is Nature itself. Siva exists in every leaf, every flower.” (185). It is important to quote what Neelakantan tells Jayarajan about the serpent-worship practice in the area: “At the heart of serpent worship, there is huge concern for nature. These groves protected species diversity and the water. They are sacred–no one enters them or cuts the trees, or takes even a dry twig for firewood. That’s how it is here” (134).

This harmonious interrelationship between local people and their physical environs has been completely shattered by the invasion of a foreign element i.e., endosulfan. Significantly, the serpent image has been repeatedly used in the narrative to suggest how it is the arrival of a deadly foreign agent that results in the loss of paradise for the Enmakaje people. The novel exposes the control gradually asserted by toxic biopolitics over all forms of life in the area. It embodies the idea of “biopower” in referring to how the iron triangle of the pesticide industry, crooked politicians and unscrupulous bureaucrats controls all forms of life and their attendant ecosystems in the area. The pesticide residue that dominates this death-world slowly drains the local people and the environment of life. The poisoned bodies, disturbed reproductive functions and decayed environment, as represented in the text, imply the “necropolitics”¹⁴ that dominates the area. The vulnerability of all lifeforms and the condition of always being-at-risk generate what Nayar calls the “ecological gothic”.¹⁵ The next section studies how this ecological gothic has been produced by lingering toxicity that takes its toll on human and non-human lives slowly and invisibly.

¹³ In Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007), a novel that fictionalises the Bhopal gas tragedy, the protagonist Animal takes recourse to myth to communicate the feeling of uncanny produced by the sight of the derelict factory. The use of Hindu myth in representing the disaster-affected locale intensifies the horror and produces the ecological uncanny. Again, in Mahasweta Devi's novella on pesticide poisoning, *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, Pirtha* (1993), the author introduces a flying reptile-bird from the Mesozoic era to convey the truth about the endangered conditions of Indian tribals in the face of pesticide poisoning. In the story the pterodactyl is both a myth and a messenger.

¹⁴ Necropolitics, according to Achille Mbembe, is the politics of excluding and exploiting a group of people to such a level that they lose control over their bodies and lives. See Mbembe (2003).

¹⁵ Nayar (2009) defines “ecological gothic” as “the horror, the nightmare and the suffering that arise from misalliances and imbalances among the various elements of life in a particular ecosystem. It is the horror that results from the presence, permeation and persistence of waste (wasted humans as well as other waste) in a system” (39). See Nayar (2009).

Pesticide Poisoning and Slow Violence

Unlike sudden-onset spectacular disasters like cyclones, earthquakes, flash floods, and volcanic eruptions, the endosulfan disaster is a continuing disaster, a slow-onset “process” that wreaks havoc on “the living, the unborn and the animate deceased” insidiously and inconspicuously (Nixon 17). In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Nixon defines “slow violence” as a “violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is not seen as violence at all” (2). Concerning the slow-onset dynamics of slow violence, Nixon observes that slow violence “needs to be seen—and deeply considered—as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or labor, or resources, but also over time” (8). The slow violence causes a life-in-death situation for the residents of the disaster-hit area as this violence is “not content merely to kill because killing would be too little, aims to destroy the uniqueness of the body, tearing at its constitutive vulnerability” (Cavarero 8). As represented in *Swarga*, the residues of the chemical linger in natural components and human blood for a really long time. As the residues of organochlorine pesticides move through the food chain and are transmitted from one organism to the other by means of energy flow, they live “beyond their initial deployment and continue to affect the population beyond their initial targets” (Sadler 350). The effects of pesticide fallout are, thus, not “contained by a single spatiotemporal moment” (Sadler 386). It is “incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (Nixon 2). In *Swarga*, after the strange child Pareekshit dies, Neelakantan observes that the child is not dead but rather is killed slowly by the invisible killer: “Not dead, you know, killed... and not with a single blow. Inch by inch. Or milliliter by milliliter...the killer is gloating somewhere, invisible” (163). It is important to note that in naming the deformed infant Pareekshit Mangad must have drawn on the story of Uttara’s son Parikshit in the *Mahabharata* where Parikshit is born lifeless because of his exposure to Aswathama’s *Brahmashira Astra* when he was in his mother’s womb. The creeping illness of Pareekshit owing to his exposure to endosulfan poisoning when in his mother’s womb suggests a resemblance between endosulfan poisoning and *Brahmashira Astra*, the most destructive weapon as described in the epic. In Mangad’s text, pesticide toxicity is compared to a “big bomb (that bursts). Not at one go, slowly, gradually[...]

 (176). Srirama echoes this idea of endosulfan poisoning as a slow-ticking time bomb when he observes that “all the Hiroshimas and Nagasakis now happe’ here, onl’ slowly, ver’ slowly (sic)” (193). All these suggest the long drawn-out temporalities of the slow violence.

One serious ramification of slow violence is the victim-survivors’ loss of their home and transformation of their familiar place into an unknown and foreign one. The slow disintegration of the victim-survivors’ home-place results in their “displacement without moving” (19). As represented in *Swarga*, the impoverished people living in the hills and forests of Enmakaje are dispossessed and displaced in their home, and the slow conversion of their familiar place into a toxic wasteland

renders it into a land of fear. The presence of invisible toxicants transforms the *swarga* (paradise) into a strange *naraka* (hell):

This was no Swarga- Heaven-but hell- Naraka. The land must have yielded gold before endosulfan's entry. The soil was so rich, so well endowed with water sources. Maybe that's why it was named heaven....the curs' of the lan' was tha' poison[...]twenty-five years[...]they sprayed tha' deadly venom on our lan' (sic). (112)

The endosulfan victims experience their familiar landscape of Enmakaje as a strange site owing to the presence of invisible contaminants in land, air and water. It is a "gothicized inverted world" where the known and the familiar are transformed into the strange and frightening, and the survivors' sense of place in which their identity is largely rooted is gradually fragmented (Haider 57). And it is the deformed bodies of the victims and the poisoned wasteland that embody the curse of slow violence which cannot be seen but can only be perceived by seeing the lasting imprints it leaves on human bodies and the land. The victims' bodies become alien to them due to the presence of poison in them. These diseased and disfigured bodies no more fit into the norms of being human. The eroding and crumbling bodies of children with mysterious ailments show how slow violence results in the loss of the sovereignty and integrity of human bodies.

The invisibility of slow violence coincides with the marginality of the poor endosulfan victims in *Swarga*. Nixon argues that slow violence affects poor people the most and "their unseen poverty is compounded by the invisibility of slow violence" (40). As represented in Mangad's text, the endosulfan victims are the impoverished ecosystem people who live in far-off hills area far away from the privileges of the city. These subsistence people are forest-dwellers, and most of them make "a living from collecting honey. They are not honey farmers but collectors, from the forest" (96). In the discourse of national development, these people are, unlike the actively imagined national community, "unimagined community"¹⁶ pulverised by the very governments they have elected (176). Srirama has bluntly pointed to the local people's status of deprivation and dispossession when he says: "'Peopl' here know thi' place is in Kerala onl' durin' election time (sic)." (127). Again, Jayarajan points to the state's indifference to the disaster victims:

This is all I expected. No Agriculture minister in Kerala will ever move against endosulfan. No matter which party in power, the agricultural officers will always side with the manufacturers of this poison. No government-appointed committee will side with us. (158)

The toxic intervention results in complete helplessness for these "uninhabitants".¹⁷ Their belonging to and control over their home are gradually lost due to the invasion of monoculture plantation first and then the pesticide pollution. The poisoning of the landscape beyond repair eventually lead them to an existential crisis because as

¹⁶ Unimagined communities, according to Rob Nixon, are the disenfranchised people who are imaginatively excluded from the idea of the nation. See Nixon (2011).

¹⁷ According to Nixon, slow violence renders the home an alien place for the victim-survivors, and the transformation of the familiar place of safety and security into a land of fear makes them "uninhabitants" in their own home. See Nixon (2011).

Fanon (2004) has observed, “for a colonized people, the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity” (9). The state-backed slow violence condemns these “contaminated communities” to continuing suffering and trauma, and it is their emaciated bodies that manifest their prolonged suffering and continuing trauma (Edelstein 2004). The next section studies how the diseased and deformed bodies of the human victims, as represented in Mangad’s narrative, mark the uncanny nature of the endosulfan disaster.

The Grotesque Body and the Uncanny

In his 1980 book *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot observes that disasters are difficult to deal with in literary imagination because of their nature of defying speech and compelling silence. Again, in *Postcolonial Disaster* (2020), Pallavi Rastogi observes: “Literary narrations of disaster are always aporetic in seeking to depict what cannot be put into words yet needing articulation in order to manage and prevent catastrophe” (Rastogi 17). There is no denying that pesticide poisoning is difficult to deal with in imaginative literature because of the apparent immateriality and invisibility of toxic contaminants. As the cause of the disaster is not apparently visible, it is by representing the marks of toxic presence in human and nonhuman bodies that the severity and intensity of the disaster are represented in toxicity disaster narratives. The transformation of human victims into the grotesque with deformed bodies and postural abnormalities is one commonplace trope used in toxicity disaster narratives to show the peril of poisoning in concrete and visible form. In *Swarga*, disability is the predominant metaphor for representing the “long dyings—the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties” of toxic environments (Nixon 2). As represented in the novel, the endosulfan victims, particularly children, become fragmented bodies lacking consciousness, and this contravention of normal bodily arrangements indicates that “the ‘original’ has been breached, invaded and irrevocably altered” (Nayar 29). Pareekshit’s disfigured body with congenital illness is anything but normal human form as defined by the normative mainstream discourse:

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....The child was still arching its back and trying to scream....Yes, the mouth was cut all right[...]but the throat was not! (12)

The malformed body of the child is a sign of the transformation of the human into an “abhuman subject”, into something “not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-self, becoming other” (Hurley 3). This transmutation of the body and the degeneration of the human into something strangely unfamiliar loom large over “the land of strangely sick people” (129): “Al’ twenty-seve’ ’ouses ’ere hav’ sick people[...]chil’re’ and bi’ people. Nowher’ else you’ll fin’ so many sick people(sic)” (70). Sivppa Nayak’s daughter

Bhagyalakshmi cannot close her mouth: "She stood with a big tongue jutting out through her mouth. A rosy red tongue. It lay well below her chin [...] Tongue 'ung out eve' in sleep. Can' eat anythin' soil'" (69–70). The sight of Narayan Shetty's daughter's deformed body is a nightmare for Neelakantan: "Her body was grotesque[...]her head was bigger than her body, her limbs were tiny[...]Children with big heads, the' wer' many 'ere. Al' died soo', the' don' live lon'(sic)" (71). Tummana Shetty's cognitively disabled children are always kept in chains (71). In the cursed land of Enmakaje, there are children with "enlarged heads[...]tongues too big" (77), children whose "head was the size of an unripe coconut" (80), children with "arms and legs covered with reddish body hair" (80), children who look and act like monkeys (83). Mangad's catalogue of crumbling bodies suggests the collapse of the corporeal identity of the endosulfan victims. The doctor's helplessness in treating children with degenerative diseases suggests the horror of helplessness:

'This lan' is ful' of disease I haven't seen in medical books and journals. My med'cineisn' workin'. Thi' boy's paren's ha' delusions... I'ad given the' med'cin'. Both killed themselves. 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 (sic). (83)¹⁸

The invasion of the body by a foreign agent is also marked by the degeneration of human language and loss of anatomical expressions. The accumulation of toxic chemicals in human bodies results in "the ruination of the human subject", and the disabled bodies are reduced to primal sounds, like groans, cries and screams (3). In Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, the disabled protagonist "hear(s) the screams and cries of dying people" (Sinha 32), and this "sonic depletion" (Bruyn 153) indicates how the noxious MIC gas writes power on the bodies of the victims (Sinha 32). In *Swarga*, the diseased children cannot speak clearly; they can only produce vague and indecipherable sounds. When Devayani tries to make Pareekshit laugh "the child did not laugh....it began to writhe as if in agony, its mouth opening in a scream" (35). Again, when Devayani starts rubbing the medicinal paste on the child's deformed body, "the child....began squirming, beating its hands and legs on the ground. Its mouth was open in a scream..." (60). Another child-victim makes "ugly sounds and baring its teeth. The grimaces and gestures made it resemble a monkey even more than its appearance." (80). This catalogue of vague and inaudible human vocalisations suggests the crisis of human audio caused by an invisible hyperobject's invasion of human bodies. The capacity of the microscopic and inanimate toxicants

¹⁸Critics have found fault with the English translation of the Malayalam original in *Swarga*. They have observed that the local flavour of the Malayalam original mixed with a rich diversity of local dialects is lost in the homogenising English translation. The action of the novel takes place in the Kerala-Karnataka border region of the Kasaragod district of Kerala where people speak Malayalam mixed with a bit of Tulu, Kannada, Marathi and Konkani. Kasaragod district is, in fact, known as *Saptha Bhasha Sangama Bhoomi* ("land where seven languages meet"). This multicultural and multilingual reality of the setting has been well captured in the Malayalam original. In the English translation, the translator has perhaps used fragmented and incoherent English for producing the local feeling which is virtually impossible to do. However, the fragmented English words and sentences certainly highlight the degeneration of human identity of the endosulfan victims in the novel.

to turn human bodies into indistinct sounds suggests how the contaminants achieve “their own animacy as an agent of harm” by poisoning and colonising human bodies (Chen 187).

The notions of the abject and the abhuman¹⁹ concentrating on something alien and atavistic are at the heart of the uncanny. In Mangad's *Swarga*, the deformed body of the infant victims and the poisoned land generate the experience of the uncanny. After Neelakantan sees the “strange(ly familiar) children, neither animal nor human” (73) on the other side of the Kodangiri canal, he “can't bear it any more” (73), and the heart-wrenching images of the screaming and fragmenting bodies produce the feeling of the haunting and the weird. The poisoned and wasted land also contributes to the ecological uncanny because it is both familiar and strange. When Neelakantan passes through the big areca nut garden, the “fatal silence” (123) of the “lifeless” place haunts him and makes him “nervous” (121):

Suddenly something struck him (Neelakantan). In this vast expanse, he could not sense the presence of a single living creature...Neelakantan broke into a cold sweat, feeling as if he were stranded in the middle of a huge graveyard....the thought that not even a cockroach was to be seen was truly scary. (122)

As regards disaster vulnerability, it is no denying that some people and some places are in more vulnerable conditions than others and that disasters take a disproportionate toll on the poor and marginalised communities. The next section explores how the poor endosulfan victims of Enmakaje try to put up a collective protest in the fashion of an ecopopulist movement against the pesticide lobby and how their resistance to environmental injustice substantiates the fact that the idea of environment and environmentalism are not the same everywhere across the world. The endosulfan victims' resistance to toxic intervention also highlights that the “survival environmentalism” of the developing countries is different from the “postmaterialist environmentalism” practised in the developed countries of the Global North.

Environmental Injustice and Survival Environmentalism

Before the 1990s the popular idea about environmentalism was that it was not a global phenomenon and that environmental concerns were limited to the rich people of the developed countries of the Global North.²⁰ It was actually Ronald

¹⁹ In her book *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva defines *abject* as something which falls outside “the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (1). According to Kristeva, *abject* marks a primal order which cannot be assimilated into the normal experience of the Symbolic order. Kristeva observes that an encounter with the *abject* caused by the breakdown of “identity, system, order” generates a feeling of uncanny, the experience of something familiar yet strange (Kristeva 4). Again, in *The Gothic Body* (2004), Kelly Hurley relates the idea of *abhuman*, humans with transmuted bodies to Kristeva's idea of the abject. Hurley observes that abhumanity is linked to abjection in that “the ambivalent status of the human subject...labors to maintain (the illusion of) an autonomous and discrete self-identity”, while welcoming “the event or confrontation that breaches the boundaries of the ego” (Hurley 4).

²⁰ This idea about environmental ethics and praxis as limited to the economically prosperous countries was substantiated in the Brundtland Commission's (1987) report which proclaims that there exists a positive correlation between environmental decline and economic poverty.

Inglehart's "Postmaterialist Value Thesis" that provided the rationale behind how material affluence and luxury were the prerequisites for environmental concerns.²¹ The popular assumption about the correlation between postmaterialist value shift and environmental concerns was later debunked, and two reasons can be identified for this: (i) the active participation of the poor countries of the postcolonial South in the Rio Earth Summit (1992) and (ii) the rise of grassroots ecopopulist movements in Global South countries. Inglehart later revised his Postmaterialist value thesis and put forward the "Objective Problems-Subjective Values" (OPSV) model. The OPSV model posits that while subjective postmaterialist values inspire environmental concerns in developed countries, it is the local environmental problems and a community's direct experience of and fight against them that environmentalism in the postcolonial South is all about. Later Guha and Martínez-Alier extended this idea and elaborated on the difference between the "Full stomach environmentalism" of the developed countries and the "Empty belly environmentalism" practised in the poor countries of the Global South. According to Guha and Martínez-Alier, whereas "Full stomach environmentalism" is preoccupied with affluence, luxury and aesthetics and quality of life, "Empty belly environmentalism" is a survival imperative for local people who depend upon their immediate surroundings for shelter and sustenance. As represented in Mangad's novel, the poor endosulfan victims stood against the resource-intensive, context-insensitive and socially unjust monoculture plantation and the unprecedented use of toxic pesticides in it for their survival needs. They raised their collective voice against an unholy nexus between pesticide industries, political leaders and government officials. However, they were concerned with neither improving the quality of their lives nor protecting the beauty and sublimity of nature. Their resistance to state-backed appropriation and pollution of the local environment and the health risks associated with it was actually motivated by their deprivation of basic sustenance requirements. The destruction of beehives due to pesticide poisoning deprived the poor beekeepers of the area of their livelihood needs:

Pointing to the beehives that hung on the jackfruit and poovathil trees on the bank, he (Subba Naik) continued: '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...But not a drop of honey had been found t'ere for quite some time now. (94)

In the meeting of honey growers and honey collectors, it was deduced that it was the chemical that caused the death of the bees and stalling of honey production. The poisoning of land and water bodies and the corporeal collapse in the area led the subsistence people of Enmakaje to unite and fight against environmental crime. They formed an "environment committee that would fight the ills that had beset Swarga" (117). In fact, it was because of consistent protests by local people and the representation of the case by ESPAC and other organisations that the government of Kerala issued an order to suspend the use of endosulfan in the state in 2001. Mangad,

²¹Postmaterialist value thesis posits that people become concerned about the environment only after their material needs are fulfilled, and that environmentalism is all about enhancing the quality of life.

who was at the forefront of the anti-endosulfan agitation, gives voice to the victims and their struggle by recording the real incident of how local people united under the leadership of people like Leela Kumari Amma against the toxic intervention in their Swarga.²² By referring to the dependence of local people on biomass resources for sustenance in the far-off forest area, Mangad tries to foreground how the local people's 'environmentalism from below' is inspired less by an urge for environmental protection and more by the loss of their usufruct rights to their immediate environment.

The disproportionate exposure of the poor and powerless Enmakaje people to pesticide pollution also addresses the issue of environmental injustice that "arose from the fact that some communities or human groups are disproportionately subjected to higher levels of environmental risk than other segments of society".²³ Environmental injustice refers to the unfair distribution of environmental harms on the basis of "race, color, national origin, or income" (Bullard 1994). As we see in *Swarga*, it is the poor, underprivileged and unrecognised people in the periphery whose lives are at stake because of adverse environmental conversions and pesticide-induced contamination. The environmental and ecological injustice deprives the poor people of their customary rights to the local environment. The "poison network" (180) pays no heed to the sufferings of local people because of their marginalised social and economic status. These "dispensable citizens" (Jalais 11) have been abandoned to die a gradual death in the poisoned land, and the bureaucrats and politicians maintain a "criminal silence" (192). Mangad's text points to the necessity of linking together issues of unprecedented development, environmental degradation and human rights in a world where customary rights of local people to their immediate environment have been ignored in favour of cash crop production. As represented in Mangad's narrative, in Enmakaje there was no law, and what reigned supreme in the land is injustice—social, economic and environmental. Thus, the intertwined themes of vulnerability, fragility and unequal power relations in the novel are complemented by a kind of survival environmentalism where the poor victims of environmental injustice raise their voice not for enhancing the quality of life but for their shelter, sustenance and survival. The references to water sources being polluted (112), sugarcane containing endosulfan (127), jackfruits containing the poison (136), presence of the poison in cow's milk, fish eggs, vegetables and other foodstuffs (143), mother's milk being contaminated (143), women's menstrual cycle being adversely affected (146), and bioaccumulation of endosulfan in the grass,

²²As Mangad himself was actively involved in the anti-endosulfan agitation in Kerala, he has drawn heavily on the real movement in the story, and certain details about the anti-endosulfan movement towards the end of the novel have been drawn from his own experience. To know more about Mangad's involvement in the anti-endosulfan protest and the origin of *Swarga* in his experiences of it, see his interview in *The Hindu* (April 29, 2017). <https://www.thehindu.com/books/books-authors/it-is-not-just-art-but-an-act-of-protest/article18302952.ece>

²³This quotation is taken from the official website of the Environmental Justice Organisations, Liabilities and Trade (EJOLT) project. See <http://www.ejolt.org/2013/02/environmental-injustice/#:~:text=The%20concept%20of%20environmental%20injustice,than%20other%20segments%20of%20society.>

shrimp, pin fish, stripped mullet (233) - all highlight how the local people's environmentalism was a struggle for survival in the face of capitalist intervention.

Conclusion

In 2009, on the 25th year of the Bhopal gas disaster, Indra Sinha reanimated the character Animal of *Animal's People* in the short story "Animal in the Bhopal". In the story, Animal moves beyond the decimated city of Khaufpur for the first time in his life and comes to know about many places like the imagined poisoned city in the novel:

'There are many places like Khaufpur,'...'Some look much like our city, others quite different, but in each the suffering of people, the diseases, and the causes, are the same.' He rattles off a list of names I've often enough heard before - Minamata, Seveso, Chernobyl, Halabja, Vietnam, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Toulouse, Falluja. (Sinha n.p.)

This list of places affected by human-caused chemical disasters indicates the chemical-caused environmental violence which is no more an unusual phenomenon in this age where the chemical industry is one of the indicators of modern development. The Kerala endosulfan disaster is one such chemical disaster induced by capitalist causes, and Mangad's representation of the hydra-headed ramifications of the disaster in *Swarga*, although strongly rooted in a particular locality, becomes synecdochic for understanding pesticide poisoning-induced chemical environmental disasters and the violence they inflict in an incremental way, particularly upon the poor and marginalised populations. The significance of the novel moves beyond the particular setting when ESPAC announces that their "struggle is not just against endosulfan. It is against all pesticides that lead to earth's desertification" (177). The text, in fact, serves as a metaphor for understanding the reality of how industrial capitalism induces environmental collapse and how environmental breakdown leads to social chaos, economic discrimination and bitter conflict between the powerful state-capitalist sector on the one hand and the disempowered subsistence people on the other. Mangad's representation of individual experiences of pesticide poisoning in imaginative literature renders the impersonal and empirical data on the dire impacts of the Kerala endosulfan disaster perceptible to the human mind. Although the novel uses abstract, sensationalist images in telling the story in exciting and melodramatic plotlines, it ends up bringing the pesticide disaster into the popular imagination and engaging readers with the seriousness of the issue. The story of suffering and resistance, in fact, makes *Swarga* a disaster narrative, and this sort of imaginative space is certainly necessary for imagining and perceiving the different forms of the disaster facing humanity today.

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