

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 16 ISSUE-1, FEBRUARY 2025

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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Environmental Ethics in *The Anthropocene Vis-A -Vis Swarga- A Posthuman Tale*

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14973561>

Article History: Submitted-12/12/2024, Revised-05/01/2025, Accepted-04/02/2025, Published-28/02/2025.

Abstract:

This paper revolves around the aerial spraying of endosulfan in the Kasaragod region of the state of Kerala, India vis- a- vis Ambikasutan Mangad's *Swarga- A Posthuman Tale*, written initially as *Enmakaje* in 2009 and translated in English in 2017. The spraying of the pesticide, meant to promote cashew farming, led to heavy contamination of the natural water bodies that impacted both human as well as nonhuman health grievously. This raised crucial questions regarding the centrality and unbridled rights of some humans in the scheme of things as compared to their marginalized human and nonhuman counterparts.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Ecopopulism, Toxic discourse, Riskscape.

Dasaputro samovapi/Dasavapi samohrata/Dasahrta samomata/Dasamatru Samadaaru (One pond is equal to ten sons/Ten ponds are equal to one lake/ Ten lakes are equal to one mother/ Ten mothers are equal to one tree/One tree is equal to ten thousand sons)

Ambikasutan Mangad

The chemical weed killers are a bright new toy. They work in a spectacular way; they give a giddy sense of power over nature to those who wield them.

Rachel Carson

The geological phase of the Anthropocene is characterized by anthropogenic interventions that have brought about unexpected and undesired environmental changes; such a severely compromised environment has impacted both humans as well as nonhumans raising concern regarding the well- being of the denizens and components of our planet. The concept of 'Anthropocene' brings together the diverse 'global nature and global humanity within a single frame' (Noel 2015). Geoscientists Paul Crutzen and others thus voiced the need for 'an ethic of planetary stewardship' to replace the irresponsible practices that have come to mark the present age. The central concern of this article is to bolster the urgent need for such stewardship and the consideration of the rights of both the downtrodden humans and the marginalized nonhumans simultaneously vis- a- vis Malayalam writer Ambikasutan Mangad's novel *Enmakaje* translated into English as *Swarga- A Posthuman Tale*¹.

Posthumanism, a literary concept, is based on the intersection of the human, nonhuman and technological worlds. This interconnected nature of elements, the basic premise of many religions and cultures is opposed to the Eurocentric mode of thinking where the human is seen as the center of the earth with a right to all the earthly bounties. Posthumanism challenges this idea, decentering the human and demonstrating the interconnectedness and mutual co-dependency of all disparate forms to be seen on Earth, ranging from animals to technology, simultaneously demolishing the Nature/Culture binary. (Nayar 2023) *Swarga* reiterates this foundational idea of Posthumanism.

The plot of *Swarga* revolves around the village and forests of Enmakaje in Kasaragod district of Kerala, lying between the Western Ghats and the Lakshadweep Sea. The village is extremely

fertile and conducive to many crops, including the cash crop- cashew. The hilly eastern part of the state has many small forest tracts facilitated with good transportation. Blessed with many rivers, it is at an advantage with easy irrigation facilities resulting in successful large-scale agriculture. In order to promote the farming of the cash crop cashew nuts, large tracts of forests were cleared and mono farming was introduced with large evergreen plantations. Cashew farming, soon, dominated the area promoted by the state government; the three prominent cashew estates of Kasaragod, Cheemeni and Rajapuram estates occupied an area of 2190.00 hectares.

Given the vast areas and the size of the cashew trees being considerable, these plantations were regularly sprayed with the pesticide endosulfan to control the tea mosquitoes that were considered to affect the cashew yield. As compared to manual spraying, ariel spraying was considered to be more cost effective to deal with the situation. However, the outfall of the prolonged aerial spraying was the contamination of both the land and water bodies that would have a long term impact on the human world.

After several abnormalities were found affecting the humans and the nonhumans of the area, medical investigations were made in and around Kasaragod. There was a marked increase in the death of fishes, honeybees, frogs, birds, chicken and cows along with a rise in calves born with deformed limbs (Neetu *et al.*). What Rachel Carson had observed in *Silent Spring* (1962) would be equally appurtenant in this case as both the human and the nonhuman worlds were toxified due to the inconsiderate usage of the pesticide indiscriminately, irrespective of the impact it would have on the humans and the environment. 'It is cheaper than mowing is the cry,' Carson observes, 'but were the true costs entered...the wholesale broadcasting of chemicals would be seen to be more costly in dollars as well as infinitely damaging to the long range health of the landscape and to all the varied interests that depend on it.' (73-74). True to the observation, in Kasaragod, the investigations pointed towards alarming percentage of

residues of endosulfan in human blood samples, including soil and water. Studies suggest the effects of endosulfan in humans leads to congenital physical disorders as well as mental disabilities and deaths in farm workers and communities cutting across the globe. The same is seen in animals ranging from ‘immunosuppression, neurological disorders’ and congenital birth defects’ to ‘chromosomal abnormalities, mental retardation, impaired learning and memory loss’ (Amizadeh & Saryazdi).

Swarga unfolds like an ecogothic² novel which first introduces the central protagonists, their life till the point when they reach the beautiful and edenic region of Kasaragod where they stumble upon a dwindling population bearing the brunt of an unknown blight, falling prey to debilitating diseases and suffering inexplicable congenital disabilities. The village of Enmakaje, also includes the Jadadhari hill, along with other flourishing hills; the surrounding landscape - once considered paradisaal, earned it the nomenclature of Enmakaje or Swarga. The landscape boasted of a rich source of life and a good water table that was easily accessible to every household.

When the novel opens, the central protagonists of the novel, Neelakantan and Devayani, a couple, are seen residing in the forests of the Jadadhari hill of Kasaragod leading a peaceful existence far away from where they originally belonged. Their escape to the Jadadhari hill to seek refuge from an exploitative social set up and corruption soon finds them embroiled in a struggle for which they had not bargained but encountered. They realized that there was much more to the unsolved mystery behind the large-scale abnormalities of the human and the nonhuman worlds. As, empathetic people, connected with the land and others around them they stumbled upon the realization that the people of the area have had to bear the brunt of the indiscriminate use of endosulfan that had over time contaminated the water bodies of the area. It was the brunt of the contamination which was felt by the human and the nonhuman population of the area.

Given its natural richness, what could have been a land of plenty metamorphosed into a village with diseases as virulent skin cancers, body sores, physical and mental abnormality that infested humans and animals. The village abounds in sick and malformed children born with deformity. Mangad's description of the teenage girl who could have been seen as beautiful indicates the loss as the girl is unable to close her mouth and has her tongue hanging out to the chin. He provides further examples of deformity as Neelkantan observes a child lying on the floor with a head bigger than her body and disproportionate, tiny limbs; mentally ill children kept chained by their families. The suffering is not confined to a few as it has taken hold of almost all the families in the area. One family struggles with a twenty-six year old adult with a stunted body, with 'fingers strangely long and thin...like octopus arms, all curled up. His eyes...all white...with no pupils.' (74) Each family has its own story of suffering with abnormal or mentally challenged children, members suffering from sores as in pox all over their bodies, each with their individual story of abnormality.

The consequences of poisoning cut across class and profession, engulfing in its wake one and all. The agricultural officer, Leela Kumari, also falls a prey to the same as she finds her eyesight weakening along with her brother who catches a cough that was to stay with him till his sudden, mysterious death. With many patients in the nearby houses Leela Kumari had wondered about the cause for the same and had concluded that it could be the aerial spraying of the pesticide. Her recollection of the dead fish in the wells and dead frogs 'strewn all over the place' on the day of the spraying made her suspicion stronger, till scientific tests confirmed it (190).

The lost healing powers of the canal adjoining the village- where children would swim earlier- also highlights the compromised natural world. Previously, a dip in the canal could cure stomach aches and dips thrice a day would cure skin diseases, but the character of the canal had changed over time; toxified by endosulfan spraying it was devoid of any marine life; 'no fish, no frog' (70). The erasure of flora and fauna species is repeatedly highlighted by their

absence in this region. The rotten Jackfruit fallen on the ground has ‘not a fly, not a single creature,’ buzzing around it. (225). The protagonist, Neelkantan notices the absence of marine life in the stream close to his house with horror as the area’s biodiversity is completely destroyed.

Initially, these diseases and deformities are attributed to the wrath of the much wronged Jadadhari Bhoota, a mythological deity who had cursed the land which had thus turned poisonous. Little do the unsuspecting victims know that the prolonged aerial spraying of endosulfan had contaminated the open water bodies. The adjoining land had thus become a ‘riscscape’³ (Deitering 200) with the silent woods of Enmakaje, bereft of wildlife- except snakes, a rare butterfly or the lone monkey.

The mystery begins to unravel when Devayani brings to her home at the Jadadhari hill a severely ill child. A series of incidents is unleashed as the couple realizes with disbelief that the land and the people suffer not due to any curse as the people had long believed, but due to the prolonged exposure to endosulfan as per the local hospital doctor. A disillusioned agriculture officer, Jayarajan informs Neelkantan that the reason behind the decline in the cashew yield over the years was not the infestation by pests as projected by vested interests and believed by a large section of the populace of the region, but climate change, mismanagement by PCK and wrong farming practices; all these factors were induced by greed with the land ‘drowned in poison in the name of eliminating a non- existent pest!’ (153).

The paradisaal land and simple people of Swarga had become a victim of the unbridled greed of a few corrupt elements within the social system. The need for effective checks and balances is established for when the *socius* goes unchecked malfunctioning and imbalance are a natural outcome. Deleuze and Guattari observe ‘The social machine or socius’ ... has its prime

function ‘to codify the flows of desire, to inscribe them to record them, to see to it that no flow exists that is not properly dammed up, channeled, regulated.’ (qtd. in Herzogenrath 246).

In his celebrated letter Chief Seattle had raised the need to realize that the earth does not belong to humans, humans belong to the earth, and all actions would have repercussions. ‘Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.’ (Chief Seattle, Chief Seattle Letter to All). A similar concern is raised by Amitav Ghosh in his novel *The Hungry Tide* where the character Piya defending the rights of the nonhumans, the tigers of Sunderbans, says, ‘Just suppose we crossed that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves. What’ll be left then? Aren’t we alone enough in the universe? And do you think it’ll stop at that? Once we decide to kill off other species, it’ll be people next...people who’re poor and unnoticed.’(301)

The protest of the angry villagers of Kerala as reflected in the novel, took the form of ESPAC as they organized themselves as - Endosulfan Spray Protest Action Committee (ESPAC) to raise their voice against the Plantation Corporation of Kerala (PCK) responsible for the aerial spraying of endosulfan. The fight for ecojustice as led by Devyani and Neelkantan provides a parallel to the Love canal disaster⁴ in the U.S where innocent citizens had to bear the brunt of unplanned development and toxic waste disposal. Their protest and that of ESPAC can also be seen as an instance of ecopopulism.⁵

Aravinda while heading a protest organized by a group of beekeepers to confront the aerial pesticide sprayers voices his loss and that of his fellow villagers, when he says, ‘We are the bee keepers of Swarga. We haven’t been able to collect any honey for some years now. That’s because this poison is sprayed...the bees are destroyed...we won’t let you spray this here again.’ (104).

Neelkantan and Devayani- initially referred to only as Man and Woman, represent Everyman and Everywoman ever exploited, marginalized and disillusioned. Devayani, a woman with one breast, also becomes a potent metaphor for the ravished Gaia, beautiful, nurturing, fertile, albeit raped and mutilated. Neelkantan personifies the protective, caring and sensitive human who is exploited and marginalized for these very reasons. When hunted and defeated Devayani and Neelkantan take refuge in the speaking Cave, the inanimate cave is imbued with life by Mangad embellished with the power to provide refuge against disasters, both manmade and natural. Like the Biblical Noah's ark, the Cave provides sanctuary to the threatened animals and the hunted humans of *Swarga* in their effort to escape from the goons after them.

Swarga can be seen as an extremely relevant instance of Toxic Discourse as outlined by Lawrence Buell. Buell postulates the term as the neglected facet of ecocritical thought which challenges the traditional understandings of environmentalist ethos. The discourse rests on the interdependence of ecocentric and anthropocentric values with the objective of promoting both human health and environmental concerns.

Mangad, employs the twin tropes of magic realism and toxic discourse to accentuate the need for sustainable development and environmental justice where the binaries merge and the weak and the marginalized, the rich and the poor, the human and the nonhuman all get an equal chance to survive and thrive.

Kerala banned the sale and use of endosulfan within its boundary in 2003.

Notes:

1. Here onwards the novel shall be referred to only as *Swarga*.
2. In his essay "Introduction: the EcoGothic in the long nineteenth century " David Del Principe defines the EcoGothic approach as one that poses a challenge to a familiar Gothic subject- nature. He does this by taking a non-anthropocentric position to

reconsider the role that the environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear. He elaborates that the EcoGothic examines the construction of the Gothic body--unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman, posthuman, or hybrid--through a more inclusive lens, as a site of articulation for environmental and species identity.

3. Deitering points out that it was Susan Cutter, a Rutgers University geographer who coined the term “riskscape” to describe landscapes at risk to acute airborne toxics.
4. This is about the toxification of land in the Niagra city, U.S when large amount of hazardous chemical waste with toxic carcinogens were dumped by Hooker Chemical into a deep ditch. Later the large metal barrels that lined the ditch were covered with clay and the land was sold to Niagra Falls school board. Ignorant about the pollution, the board built a school here and the surrounding land was sold for housing projects. With time, the families living along the canal, fell victim to high rates of miscarriages, chromosome damage and birth defects. Initially, the claim made by the protesters was disputed by the New York state Health Department but in 1978 President Carter declared a state of emergency. Amends were made as a federal program, a Superfund was created in 1980 for the identification and damage control of the waste site. See *The Love Canal Disaster op. cit*
5. Popularized by Andrew Szasz’s *EcoPopulism* (1999) the NIMBY, ‘Not In My Backyard’ movements in the U.S, ‘against the privilege and power of dominant, exploiting, selfish, and uncaring elites’ (81) was distinguished by ‘the activism of nonelites,’ aimed towards ‘community, and the reconception of environmentalism as an instrument of social justice.’(Buell 643). Both delineated features of ecopopulism inform the protest of the ordinary people as represented in *Swarga*.

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