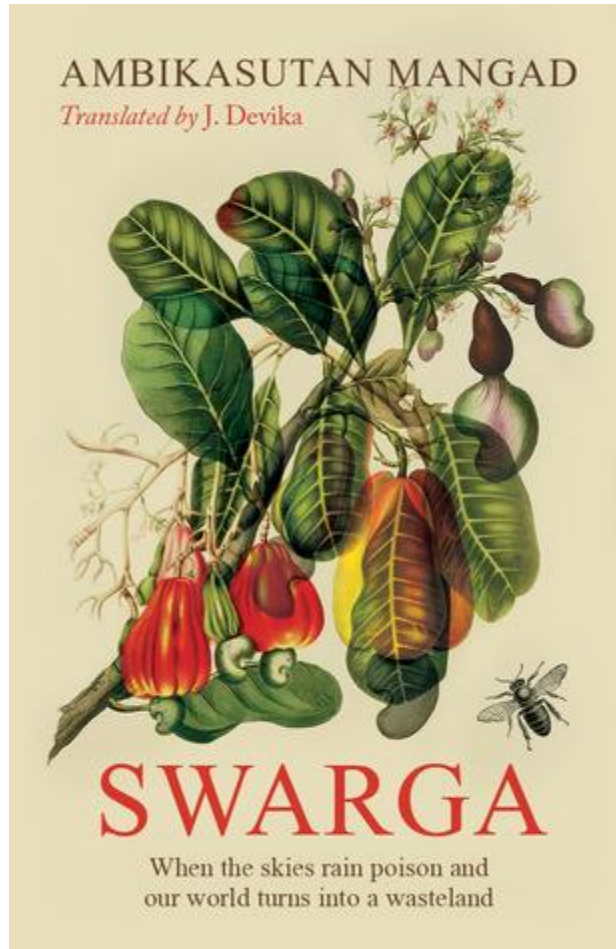


**The Doom of a Generation: A Reading of Ambikasutan Mangad's
*Swarga***

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Abstract

Kerala, often mentioned as ‘God’s Own Country’ by nature enthusiasts, is famous for its unique landscape and rich flora and fauna. Of late, its natural vegetation got replaced by high yielding cash crops, with the silent nod of administrators. *Swarga*, throws light into the plight of people who have faced the adversities of the deadly poison, endosulfan. This toxin sprayed in

plantations got mixed up with the land and water bodies thereby polluting it. Moreover, a generation is begotten, who are suffering from many physical and mental ailments. Thus, a land and its people are doomed with no hope for the future and a dagger perpetually hanging over them. *Swarga* is a realistic account of this brutal tragedy by an author of the same place, who has witnessed the sufferings of these subalterns and their lone battle against multinational corporate giants. The paper would focus on bringing out the life of these marginalized people and their poisoned environs.

Keywords: Ambikasutan Mangad, *Swarga*, ecology, subaltern, multinational corporates

Postcolonial Situation

European Enlightenment or Modernity, according to Anthony Giddens, prioritized rational and optimal utilization of resources in order to ensure maximum profits, and this also forms the economic basis of capitalism. Even today, this colonial legacy continues in post-colonial nations, as Fanon puts it, propagated by the elite classes of that society. Although power struggles between the colonial master and the native subject has ended with political independence of the colonies, it re-emerges in a postcolonial society in a different form. Native elites occupy the spaces of power once occupied by White masters; and the corruption, oppression and exploitation of the have-nots continues, and this is termed as neo-colonialism. It is manifested in *Swarga*, where the power structures exploit the ignorant and superstitious people of Enmakaje by over powering them with the aid of certain discourses or ideological state apparatuses, thereby exploiting the people, their land, and depriving them of their resources and a good livelihood.

According to Pramod K. Nayar, “we live in a world increasingly lost to pollution, contamination and industry sponsored bio- disaster”, and “Ecocriticism originates in a bio-social context of unrestrained capitalism, excessive exploitation of nature, worrying definitions and shapes of development and environmental hazard.”(241) All these issues figure prominently in *Swarga* and therefore it carves out a space for itself in the list of toxic discourses along with Rachael Carson’s *Silent Spring*. Toxic discourses, a concept coined by Lawrence Buell, and

developed by Rob Nixon; undertake to study faulty land claims and environmental degradation brought about by over exploitation of land resources.

Neelakantan and Deivayani

Neelakantan along with his soul mate Devayani, arrive at Swarga; which literally translates into heaven, a remote hamlet of Enmakaje in Kasaragod district. They had renounced the city, along with its comforts, turmoils, chaos, and unpleasant life marked by crimes and negligence; discarded their names and identities in order to retire to an austere and pious life, in the midst of exuberant flora and fauna in a remote area adjacent to the mythical Jadadhari hills. They were living there as ‘man and woman’ for some time, until Devayani broke her vow and brought a young child home, whose parents had died. Although Neelakantan was averse towards the child initially, since he detested the presence of human beings around; later on, Pareekshit influences his life so much that he is once more heralded into social activism and becomes a foremost crusader against the deadly poison affecting the region and its youth adversely.

The couple gets associated with the community outside through an ‘Adivasi’ elder, a veteran in traditional healing using medicinal plants and herbs, and who comes there to treat the child of his body sores and premature graying hair. They are amazed when Panji says that he has been treating the child for five years since the child just looks and behaves like a one year old, apart from having many other ailments. Neelakantan accompanies Panji downhill and into the valley where he is mesmerized by “Enmakaje’s uniqueness- well trimmed hibiscus fences...in perpetual bloom!” (67).

Enmakaje Uniqueness and Diseases

Later on this wonder turns into nightmare when Neelakantan is dumbstruck by the sheer number of diseases and abnormalities suffered by the people, who believe that the adversity which struck them is because of the fury of Lord Jadadhari whom their ancestors had insulted and defeated through black magic: “‘Al’ twenty – seve’’ ouses’ ere hav’ sick people... chil’re’ and bi’ people. Nowher’ else you’ll fin’ o many sick people.’... ‘Jadadhari’s ang’r and curs’.”(70) Even the verdant landscape and its fauna are not spared and the land is bereft of lizards, chameleons, frogs, snakes, mongoose, cockroach and even crows. As Neelakantan proceeds to

explore the land seeking a remedy for the maladies which afflicted it, he recognizes that many places regarded as sacred by the native populace has been trampled with- the Seat of Truth, sites of snake worship and sacred grooves which are rich in biodiversity to name a few. He even realizes that bees do not thrive there anymore, adding to the misery of the people who sustained on bee cultivation and the sale of honey.

Endoksulfan

A serious discussion about endosulfan comes up at a meeting of bee cultivators and gatherers in Enmakaje. A young man Prakasa, was the first person to dismiss the maladies suffered by people as a curse of God and remarked: “It isn’t Jadadhari’s anger. Eve’ see’ how they spray pesticid’ on th’ cashew plantations on th’ hil’ from the air? *That’s* the reaso’.” (100) Srirama, an agriculturalist and a writer on agricultural practices agrees with him, as it goes in agreement with his earlier studies on the ill effects of Endosulfan. Dr Arun Kumar, the sole medical practitioner of Enmakaje joins in: “... Here’ ever’bod’s’ouse ha’ a patient. No’ jus’ chil’ren... many hav’ died. ... the curs’ o’ thi’ lan’ is tha’ poison. That poison they brin’ year afte’ year in the aeroplan’’nd spray dow’ below’.”(101-02) He had published his findings about the morbidity caused by endosulfan in the *Kerala Medical Journal* inviting assistance from specialist doctors and also promising his help to them in the form of medical reports and so on but no one responded or showed interest in the malady.

Plantation Response

The Plantation Corporation had initiated aerial spraying of the deadly chemical in Ukkinadukka way back in 1979 in the name of the pest ‘tea mosquito’, which according to them brought down cashew production drastically, thereby affecting the revenue earned by the government adversely. When the residents organized a protest march to the Corporation demanding a ban on endosulfan, the authorities disregarded them and dismissed them casually paying no heed to their words by remarking that if human beings are unwell, they should be given the proper treatment. Gradually the aerial spraying of the pesticide spread to other areas too- Saya, Bajakkoodalu, Nalkka, Oद्या, Peryaal, Swarga, Seraja, Uthrakala, Perdala. People involved in the protest marches and those who educated the masses about their plight were

branded as extremists, terrorists, naxalites and so on, and on various occasions they were arrested, tortured and thereby silenced. At times, the pesticide lobby also resorted to brutal acts like killing or trying to kill the people who raised voices against them.

Involvement of Newspapers

Gradually, newspapers started publishing horrifying reports and the outside world came to know about the effects of the poison especially within a radius of four kilometers where aerial spraying was rampantly done - incidence of cancer, epilepsy, mental aberrations, low intelligence, deformed limbs, skin diseases, and so on were widely reported. Although, the District administration and the state government conducted medical and relief camps, all these were a farce since the people in power left the venue soon after the inauguration, citing other priorities, after waxing eloquently about the welfare activities of the government and how committed it was towards the people; without speaking a single word about endosulfan or the health crisis in Enmakaje. The fact that all the verandas of the school buildings, the pavilion set up in the middle of the school ground, and beneath the shade offered by the trees, were overflowing with the sick and the destitute projects the sheer masses of people affected by the chemical in Enmakaje.

III Effects of Endosulfan

Studies have proven that endosulfan was capable of mimicking hormones and could upset women's menstrual cycles as well as the sexual organs of men, thereby reducing sperm count. They were even capable of causing genetic mutations which accounted for the deformities in a large number of new born infants. Endosulfan was even detected in breast milk beyond permissible limits thereby proving that it was not degradable, and accumulated, and passed on in the food chain leading to bio-magnification. Jayarajan, a social activist, managed to collect many reports against endosulfan : "One of those is from US- based researchers. When the milk produced by sheep affected by endosulfan spraying was examined, they found that the highest concentration was in its cream... They've found this poison in cows' milk too. Also in fish, eggs, vegetables... in many kinds of foodstuff. (143)

The harm done to the environment in the name of cashew and rubber cultivation too was beyond reversal since monoculture practiced in plantations destroyed the rich multifariousness of a huge portion of the ecosystem; nearly, almost 600 hectares of land in Kerala itself. Similar environmental damage is brought about in Kerala citing afforestation, by planting a large number of acacia trees across the state. These trees were initially used to dry up swamps in Australia, and are known to increase the acidity of the soil, besides causing various allergies to the people in its vicinity. So acacia trees bring about environmental damage and destroy the fragile ecosystem.

Colonization and Imperialism in a Different Dimension Today

Colonisation and Imperialism carried out by the West is still taking place in an altogether different dimension today, where the land and its material resources are no longer captured by military or despotic powers, but the traditional and indigenous knowledge is exploited and looted away. To cite an example, the ‘aryaveppu’, a medicinal plant which is known to ward away pests is being harnessed and utilized by western companies who have developed almost 75 patents out of it. They have perceived the baneful effects of chemicals and stopped using it, replacing it with organic and bio- fertilizers, while thrusting it upon the third world countries in the name of increasing agricultural productivity. So there occurs a kind of double jeopardy or neo-colonisation in the guise of globalization.

Although reports were pouring in from different corners of the world regarding the ills of endosulfan, all these are not enough for the government to stop its further use: “In Sudan, children accidentally ate grain doused in endosulfan meant to curb birds, and thirty-one of them died. In the Philippines, eighty-five people were killed. In Alabama, this was sprayed on cotton fields and it got into the river water, and all the fishes in some twenty-five kilometers died.” (145) It is saddening to note that the pesticide used at the Plantation Corporation estates in Cheemeni was even more lethal. ‘Roundup’, the pesticide used, was just another name for Agent Orange, the fatal poison used by United States in their war against Vietnam. It is also ironic to note that all the hazardous chemicals are named after wars or violence or in language of cruelty- for example roundup, machete, assert, avenge, prowl and so on.

Far from banning endosulfan, the authorities flouted all the laws in the air with regard to the aerial spraying of endosulfan. The natives were not given prior notices, and the water bodies were left uncovered, thereby rendering the numerous streams and canals in the area poisonous: “In Swarga- in Pedre village- alone ther’ are mor’ tha’ a thousan’ surangas! The water flows to you’ house, in an’ weathe’! And besides, thousan’s of water channels flowin’ ev’rywher’!... ‘Thi’ abundance of water which’ made this place heaven is wha’s makin’ it hell now.’(126) Moreover, endosulfan was used indiscriminately for a number of years when the law makes it mandatory that one particular pesticide should not be used more than three years continuously at the same place, since the pests would become resistant to it. It was also not permitted to be stored near water bodies, but in Kasaragod the excess pesticide, following a temporary ban in the year 2000, was buried in the soil in the vicinity of streams and canals. There were no local doctors trained to treat the victims, in case of a calamity and the workers were not given protective garments and respiratory equipments. So, it is clear that the authorities were exploiting the natives, who remained on the fringes, both in terms of geography and with regard to policy making and implementation. This phenomenon termed by Gyanendra Pandey as post colonial subalternization, neglects the people who remain in the periphery, thereby reducing their position to the level of Fourth World citizens.

The fact that Karnataka government has also been using endosulfan in its tea, banana and vegetable plantations shows that the use of endosulfan is not an isolated case in Kasaragod (Kerala) alone. This chemical, under its several brand names would have been used in different parts of the third world countries. The chemical apart from deteriorating the fertility of the soil is proven to affect the plants too, incapacitating plants to draw out nutrients from the soil.

Since there is a nexus between MNC’s, scientists, agricultural officers and authorities who pocket a huge sum from the companies for endorsing the product, the different committees and commissions set up to study about the harms, if any, and the health hazards caused by the chemical falsely testify and do not give out the actual case studies. Even though independent and autonomous bodies like National Institute of Occupational Health, and Centre for Science and Environment under the able leadership of Sunita Narain, had come out with strong evidences against endosulfan, the committees set up by the government gave it a clean chit. Dr Shanbaug’s

(professor of pharmacology at Kasturba Medical College) study which runs into one hundred and forty pages also gave a bleak report, “He stresses tha’ the samples fro’ here contai’ very dangerou’ levels of endosulfan. Even if they stop the sprayin’ it will be ther’ contaminatin’ the soil and other thin’s for fifty years...the changes to the DNA will appea’repeat’dly over many gen’rations”. (192) The plight of people at Enmakaje is symbolic of Mahabali, the mythical demon ruler of Kerala, who ultimately was forced to sacrifice his land, when demanded by the Lord who came in the disguise of a dwarf Brahmin.

Author’s Emphasis

The author, through his mouthpiece, Neelakantan, calls for the harnessing of nature to meet the needs of men, rather than for wealth creation as echoed by Marxist Environmentalists namely, Peter Dickens and Ted Benton. According to them, “species- life or species being is based on the fact that man lives from nature, nature is his body, and he has to maintain a proper relationship with it or die.” (247) David Pepper argues that with globalization, sites of production shifts to third World countries, where both labour and nature are taken advantage of, and *Swarga* is reminiscent of this growing trend.

To Conclude

One can conclude by stating that *Swarga*, a faction (fact + fiction) developed along the lines of Carl Muller’s *The Jam Fruit Tree*; incorporates shocking and disturbing facts, fictional characters, and draws upon innumerable anecdotes, while relying deeply on mythology to expose the blatant effects of the chemical endosulfan in Kasaragod district of Kerala. The author incorporates the philosophy of deep ecology propounded by Arne Naess, which believes in the interconnectedness of all life forms and natural features, and adheres to ecofeminist spirituality throughout the narrative, by retrieving old myths and religious beliefs in which nature was held in high esteem.

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