

Environmental Catastrophe as seen in *Swarga-The Posthumanist Tale*

Mrs. A.K. Hidayath Unnissa Begum

Research Scholar, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies, Chennai.

Dr.P.Preethi

Assistant Professor & Research Supervisor, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies, Chennai.

Abstract

Examining how human and nonhuman worlds collide within toxic ecologies has become more important in the Anthropocene, upending traditional narratives of agency, responsibility, and survival. *Swarga*, a South Indian novel set against the Endosulfan poisoning crisis in Kasargod accentuates such entanglements through its depiction of communities devastated by agrochemical capitalism. The text underscores a system in which state-sanctioned pesticide regimes prioritised plantation productivity over human and ecological welfare. Drawing on Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence and posthumanist ecocritical frameworks, this paper argues that the novel functions as a site of "entangled agencies," revealing how bodies like human, animal, vegetal, and chemical interact under conditions of slow environmental harm.

Keywords:

Posthumanism, Toxic Ecologies, Endosulfan, Ecocriticism, *Swarga*, Entanglement, Anthropocene.

In the age of the Anthropocene, it has become imperative to reckon with the value of all life forms human and nonhuman alike. The Anthropocene, a term coined by Paul Crutzen, basically means the current geological epoch in which human activity has become the dominant force shaping planetary systems. Human actions altering climate, polluting ecosystems, and causing extinction of species at an alarming rate. Over the last couple of decades, environmental humanities scholarship has been relentlessly investigating the causes and consequences of this crisis. This crisis extends to the toxic contamination of human and nonhuman bodies, the acceleration of ecocide, the emergence of pandemic, and the structural violence embedded in global capitalist systems. These literary inquiries show a growing recognition that the ecological catastrophe of our time is not a natural disaster but a political one.

It is produced by specific histories of extraction, colonialism, and the subordination of living worlds to the logic of profit.(LeCain,5)

The question of grief and responsibility is central to this emerging discourse. Kriss A. Kevorkian (2004) defines 'environmental grief' as the emotional response to collapsing ecosystems because of human activity. This idea of environmental grief is rooted in deep ecology, encouraging human beings to honestly confront the consequences of destruction caused by them. Deep ecology coined by the Norwegian philosopher and environmentalist, Arne Deike Eide Naess is a philosophy and a way of environmental activism which insist that everything alive has value, no matter if it's utility to humans or not. This claim thus carries ethical implications in a time of mass ecological devastation. Kevorkian is of the opinion that recognizing this loss can help us find the strength to resist and renew our commitment to life.

In order to engage with the affective and ethical aspects of ecological crisis, literature has become a pertinent space. From Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which exposed the devastation caused by pesticides on nonhuman life, to Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018), which places human history within the deeper temporary lifeworlds of plants, to Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (1989), which is both a lament for the loss of pristine nature and a call to reconsider humanity's place within the Earth's systems, all of these works demonstrate a persistent literary recognition of the significance of human ecological hegemony. A common ethical impulse among these works is to extend the scope of moral concern beyond the human and to make visible forms of harm that are invisible in official discourse. In her reading of Cherie Dimoline's *The Marrow Thieves*, Andrea Ruthven takes this tradition into posthumanist territory by exploring how, in a world devastated by ecological collapse, narrative becomes a stage for making the ethics of reciprocal care between humans and non-human entities. Similar to this, Rob Nixon's notion of *slow violence* states "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2). These concepts have opened up novel opportunities for recognising how literature bears witness to forms of suffering that defy spectacular representation. When taken as a whole, these frameworks indicate that literary works actively contribute to the endeavour to make ecological crises visible, grievable, and politically readable rather than merely reflecting them.

It's in this context that we need to analyse *Swarga*, a South Indian novel set against the backdrop of Endosulfan poisoning in Kasargod, Kerala. The government-owned Plantation Corporation of Kerala sprayed Endosulfan pesticide over cashew plantations for over two decades. This pesticide led to one of the worst examples of agricultural violence in post-colonial India that resulted in cancer, birth defects, neurological issues, and deaths to both human and nonhuman entities.

By turning the historical tragedy into a narrative *Swarga-A Posthuman Tale* depicting the suffering of communities whose lives were given up for the sake of plantation production. The novel centers on what this paper calls "entangled agencies" a term borrowed from Karan Barad – the violent and entangled lives of human bodies, animals, plants, and chemicals that define life in a toxic environment. Barad's concept of intra-action foregrounds that "distinct agencies (what we call as entities) do not precede rather emerge through intra-action" thereby emphasising the mutual interconnectedness of entangled agencies (Barad, 2007:33). Furthermore these entangled agencies according to her are inextricably interconnected with each other because their entire existence as determinate agencies result from their intra-action.

Swarga-A Posthuman Tale accentuates the political, scientific, and economic systems that are responsible for creating and sustaining ecological trauma. It creates a 'toxic lifeworld,' a shared environment where human and nonhuman bodies are so intertwined that it is impossible to maintain the distinction between self and world, between organism and chemical. This paper analyses *Swarga* through a posthumanist ecocritical lens. It investigates that the novel's primary theme is not just human suffering but also the undermining of the very divisions between nature and culture, between humans and nonhuman beings, and between the living and the chemically altered.

Ambikasuthan Mangad (b 1962) is a writer from Kerala , known for his essays and environmental activism. His canon of work explores the connection between human ethics, morals, ecological vulnerability, and social justice. He taught Malayalam at Nehru Arts and Science College in Kerala. Mangad has written a good amount of creative and critical writing which includes novels, short stories, four volumes of literary criticism, and a dictionary of folk idioms. His writings not only present Kerala's culture and society but also give importance to environmental issues of the state.

As an activist, Mangad is actively engaged in the struggle in Kasaragod, Kerala, against the use of the pesticide Endosulfan. He spearheaded a vigorous campaign to draw attention to the detrimental effects of Endosulfan spraying on cashew plantations. Even after Endosulfan was outlawed by the Supreme Court in 2011, the struggle for justice, assistance for impacted individuals, and compensation for families is still ongoing. Mangad's activism extends beyond environmental issues to include a humanitarian and moral appeal for acceptance and assistance. His book *Enmakaje* (2009), which Dr. J. Devika translated into English as *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale* (2017), provides a fictionalised account of the aftermath of environmental injustice and toxic exposure. Mangad examines the effects of contamination on humans and blurs the distinction between human and non-human suffering in his fiction. Interestingly, the title *Swarga*, which means 'Heaven', is ironic, as it reveals the dark side of progress. The introductory chapters illustrate the landscape it names which constitutes the exotic and mesmerising Jadadhari Hills, the captivating serpent groves, the intriguing suranga water tunnels and the amazing Kodangiri canal. As the narrative unfolds, this heaven is transformed into what the text calls Naraka an embodiment of hell.

The book is a posthuman text where the effects of toxins show how vulnerable all living and non-living things are. As the nation is struggling to balance economic growth and ecological preservation, literary texts like *Swarga* offer an invaluable insight into the complexities of the issues facing the environment. Mangad's novel challenges readers to reflect on the consequences of unchecked industrialization and the urgent need for sustainable practices. Through his vivid storytelling, he prompts us to consider the interconnectedness of all life forms and the importance of finding a harmonious balance between progress and environmental stewardship.

In postcolonial South Asia, the Endosulfan tragedy of the Kasargod region in Kerala presents as one of the most extensively documented examples of state-sanctioned agrochemical violence. The Plantation Corporation of Kerala for nearly two decades beginning in the 1970s, conducted aerial spraying of Endosulfan, a broad-spectrum organochlorine pesticide over thousands of acres of cashew plantations. The pesticide infiltrated wind and water of the surrounding villages, contaminating soil, groundwater, and food sources, and also exposing generations of people to chemical toxicity that produced catastrophic consequences for human and nonhuman life alike. The communities affected reported dramatic increases in cancers, congenital disabilities, neurological disorders, epilepsy, and infertility. Children were born with severe physical and cognitive impairments. The rich ecosystems which had sustained diverse multispecies communities for generations were systematically degraded.

What makes the Kasargod tragedy ground breaking rather than exceptional is not the scale of its harm alone but the political and institutional framework that allowed and sustained it. The Plantation Corporation of Kerala was a state-owned corporation, and its pesticide regime was sanctioned, administered, and long endorsed by the government. The government which was constitutionally responsible for the welfare of the communities was destroying it. Scholars have identified the neoliberal governance of postcolonial ecologies as characterised by this alignment of state interest with agrochemical productivity. This mode of administration consistently prioritises development imperatives over ecological and communal welfare, externalising the costs of agricultural productivity onto the bodies of nonhuman ecosystems and peripheral communities.

According to Doshi (2018), neoliberal administration in postcolonial settings may unintentionally encourage slow violence by giving priority to development projects that result in environmental displacement and create new, frequently permanent material realities. The Kasargod case serves as a striking example of this dynamic: the toxic persistence of Endosulfan in soil, water, and biological tissue was a direct result of a governance structure that made the welfare of nearby communities and ecosystems invisible while the welfare of cashew plantations was visible.

The suppression of accountability in Kasargod followed a pattern that Nixon identifies as constitutive of slow violence more broadly. Scientific uncertainty was manufactured and sustained by institutional actors with interests in continued pesticide use. Medical evidence of harm was disputed, minimized, or attributed to other causes. Anecdotal and non-scientific community testimony was disregarded. It was challenging to show causality within the empirical frameworks recognised by legal and scientific institutions because of the temporal dispersal of the harm, which

accumulated across years and generations rather than erupting as a single catastrophic event. Decades of harm had already been done by the time Endosulfan was outlawed in Kerala in 2001 and then by the Supreme Court of India in 2011. The communities of Kasargod were left to deal with the fallout without much assistance from the government. Mangad by utilising a specific geographical locale- 'Kasargod' provides a microcosm through which to explore the broader issues faced globally namely environmental justice and sustainable development.

The pesticide is the central figure in this catastrophe. In *Swarga*, Endosulfan is not simply a human invention deployed as a background hazard. Drawing on Jane Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter," we can understand the chemical as possessing what Bennett calls "thing-power" — a capacity to act upon and reshape the world independent of human intention. It does not act according to human categories of guilt or innocence, productivity or waste. It acts indiscriminately, and in doing so, it reveals the fiction of human exceptionalism — the belief that human bodies occupy a privileged space beyond the reach of the material world they have set in motion. (Benett, 10)

“ Even if they stop the sprayin’ it will be ther’ contaminatin’ the soil and other thin’s for fifty years. The shockin’ fact is thi’: the changes to the DNA will appea’ repeat’dly over many gen’rations ” (Mangad, 229).

This indiscriminate action is rendered in the novel through what Stacy Alaimo terms "transcorporeality" — the recognition that bodies are not bounded, self-contained units but porous, open systems through which substances continuously flow. In *Swarga*, this porosity is rendered with devastating specificity. The human and nonhuman are interconnected from the very first page of the novel. Children are born with octopus-like fingers (86) and profound cognitive impairments. (87) Children whose menstrual cycles begin as early as seven (132); men grow sterile. Cows cease to calve, monkeys disappear from the forest canopy, and the birds fall silent. When one species suffers, it sets off a chain reaction that affects the entire ecosystem. The disappearance of these animals is a stark reminder of the delicate balance that must be maintained for all life to thrive. Panji, an adivasi and his family had once collected honey from the forest, but now not a drop can be found. Srirama, a resident of Enmakaje and a freelance journalist, informs about the disappearance of the honey bees. Prakasa, a honey collector, asserts that it is not a divine curse but the pesticide spray used on the cashew plantations that led to the death of the bees. It has been twenty years since they began importing honey.

A total of six hundred hectares of land and some ten plantation sites have been devastated by monoculture plantations. The spread of acacia, a useless tree that dries Kerala by increasing soil acidity, depleting groundwater, and causing allergies, is another example of the dangers of monoculture. Prakasa reminisces that Enmakaje was once called the "Land of Leopards"—now, not a single leopard is to be found. After attending a protest as Neelakantan walked home he sensed the absence of all living creatures like the fishes, crabs, crows, butterflies, worms, lizard, chameleon, frog, snake, mongoose, or earthworm was in sight. There was absolute silence. *“What a fatal silence, this!”* (147)

The vanishing bees, frogs, butterflies, earthworms, and leopards from the ecosystem of Enmakaje appear like each one piece of the web of life disappearing. It does not scream 'disaster,' but slowly adds up to one. It's a kind of slow violence that you feel and hear: the world getting quieter as it gets more polluted, the silence a sad echo of lost life. For the Adivasi elder Panji, this silence is grief, the land itself grieving its losses in the only way it can.

The pesticide does not distinguish between species, and the novel insists that its reader should not either. To mourn the poisoned child without mourning the barren cow and the vanished monkey is to misread the nature of the harm. The suffering in *Swarga* is multispecies, dispersed throughout bodies that were already entwined rather than human suffering with nonhuman casualties at the periphery. This collates Barad views of "'environment' and 'bodies' are intra-actively co-constituted" (Barad, 170). Thus interchange between the two entities human and nonhuman remind how important our actions and their implications constitute.

Beyond the biological, there is also a social and political component to this entanglement. What Rosi Braidotti refers to as "zoe-centered egalitarianism," an ethical perspective that gives moral consideration to all forms of life, is embodied by the characters of Neelakantan and Devayani - the protagonist, who try to plant healing trees, preserve local ecological knowledge, and recount the community's history of suffering. (Braidotti, 60) Jane claims that it is "thus not enough to say that we are 'embodied.'" We are, rather, an array of bodies, many vitality and self-interest different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes" (Bennett, 113). However, the institutional power structures that surround them routinely ignore and marginalise their resistance. Their knowledge is affective and relational rather than technocratic, grounded in multispecies empathy rather than quantifiable data — and it is precisely this quality that renders it illegible to the state. The novel's portrayal of Sugrivan, identified by Neelakantan as "the last of Enmakaje's monkeys," (Mangad, 169) crystallizes this dynamic. Sugrivan is not merely a symbolic figure of ecological loss; he is a witness — a nonhuman subject whose disappearance marks the terminal unraveling of a multispecies community that once sustained itself in relation. His extinction is the novel's most concentrated image of what it means for an entire web of entangled agencies to be severed.

If *Swarga* were the story of a single catastrophic event — a chemical spill, an industrial explosion, a flood — it might be more easily assimilated into existing frameworks of environmental disaster narrative. Victims could be counted, damages assessed, responsibilities assigned, and remedies demanded within the temporal and juridical structures that modern states deploy in response to crisis. But the harm in *Swarga* refuses this legibility. It is, in Rob Nixon's precise formulation, a slow violence — "neither spectacular nor instantaneous" but "incremental and accretive," unfolding across years and generations in ways that resist the dramatic visibility upon which political attention and media representation typically depend. (Nixon, 2)

The people of Kasargod as rendered in *Swarga* do not die overnight. The novel grounds its narrative in a tangible reality, they fall ill gradually, lose memory incrementally, grow infertile across years. Their children are born already carrying the chemical signature of a harm inflicted

before their existence. The violence is temporally dispersed in a manner that makes causation difficult to establish and accountability easy to defer. This is not accidental — it is structural. Slow violence, Nixon argues, is particularly effective as a mechanism of oppression precisely because it operates below the threshold of spectacle. It does not produce the images — the burning buildings, the mass casualty events — that mobilize public outrage and political response. It produces instead a quiet accumulation of damaged bodies, diminished lives, and eroded futures that is all too easy for those at a safe distance to ignore, dispute, or attribute to other causes.

Swarga works against this invisibility through the formal resources of literary narrative. By tracing the lives of individual characters across time — their bodies, their relationships, their losses — the novel gives duration and specificity to harm that official discourse consistently renders statistical or ambiguous. The medical camps in the novel offer little more than paracetamol and performative concern. Committees falsify reports. Government officials invoke bureaucratic uncertainty. Scientists dispute causation. Each of these gestures is a mechanism of what might be called epistemic slow violence — the systematic production of doubt and deferral that protects institutional actors from accountability while extending the suffering of those most affected. The village, in Nixon's terminology, is marked as a sacrifice zone — a space whose people and ecosystems are rendered expendable in the service of plantation productivity and state revenue(Nixon,162)

Despite growing evidence of harm, the state-owned Plantation Corporation of Kerala continued to spray Endosulfan from the air over cashew plantations for decades. A system where the gradual devastation of a community's biological future was not only allowed but actively managed was established by the integration of state interest with corporate agricultural productivity. The ideological framework of this system is exposed by *Swarga*, who shows how the language of productivity, development, and scientific authority was used to undermine the testimony of people whose bodies showed signs of injury. In this way, the book is a work of political anatomy as well as ecological witness, dissecting the institutional mechanisms that create, maintain, and deny slow violence.

Swarga does not end with resolution. Endosulfan has destroyed the landscape; there is no court victory, no governmental accountability, and no restoration. Instead, Mangad provides a calm, unwavering account of loss: of children whose futures were sealed off before they even breathed, of animals whose extinction signifies the final disintegration of a multispecies community, and of a landscape whose ability to support life has been methodically and purposefully destroyed. This rejection of closure is a political and ethical insistence rather than a literary failure. Offering redemption in the absence of any would be a part of the very politics of invisibility that the book aims to undermine.*Swarga* demands that its reader sit with the weight of what has been lost — and in doing so, it demands something more difficult than sympathy. It demands a fundamental rethinking of the frameworks through which we understand life, harm, justice, and responsibility in an age of ecological catastrophe.

According to this paper, *Swarga* is best interpreted as a posthumanist ecocritical work that rejects the anthropocentric presumptions found in popular accounts of political responsibility and environmental catastrophe. The novel challenges the myth of human exceptionalism that underpins both mainstream environmentalism and contemporary political thought by depicting pesticide as a dynamic, agentic force that transcends species boundaries. It asserts that ecological harm is never just harm to nature as an external category but rather damage to the shared biological commons within which all life is entangled. This is because it renders transcorporeal harm—the passage of toxic substances through human bodies, animal bodies, soil, water, and air. The gradual, dispersed, institutionally sustained harm that agrochemical capitalism causes to vulnerable communities is its anatomy of slow violence.

In the end, *Swarga* provides a rethinking of ecological justice in addition to bearing witness to a particular historical atrocity. The book argues that justice cannot be limited to the register of human rights and human loss. In a story whose true subjects are people, the poisoned child, the barren cow, the missing monkey, and the silent forest are not incidental casualties. They are co-subjects of a common disaster, and any justice system that ignores their suffering is insufficient. It is urgently and fundamentally necessary to extend this posthumanist ethical and political imagination of ecological justice beyond human limitations. Speaking of justice for Kasargod means speaking of justice for its cashew trees, cows, monkeys, and its waterways — or it is not yet to speak of justice at all.

The ramifications of this growth go far beyond the novel itself. *Swarga* makes a substantial contribution to what is becoming a clearly situated posthumanist ecocriticism in the larger context of South Indian and postcolonial literatures. This ecocriticism pays attention to the unique histories of colonialism, extractive capitalism, and state violence that have shaped ecological catastrophe in the Global South in addition to the theoretical frameworks developed in Western academic contexts. The Endosulfan tragedy in Kasargod is a sign rather than an exception of the structural subjugation of nonhuman ecosystems and peripheral communities to the demands of capital accumulation and agricultural output. To read *Swarga* is to read one of the most articulate literary indictments of this structure available in contemporary South Indian fiction.

Kevorkian reminds us that environmental mourning is a moral and political attitude to be developed rather than just an effect to be controlled. In order to undertake the challenging task of rethinking what it means to live morally in a planet that human activity has so severely harmed, one must lament the loss that *Swarga* describes, completely, without deviation, throughout the entire spectrum of species and lifeworlds that the novel presents. *Swarga* urges us to do both: to acknowledge the inherent worth of all living things and to reject the political and economic structures that made their loss unavoidable. Deep ecology calls for us to dismantle the hierarchies of significance that have enabled their sacrifice.

Reading a book like *Swarga* is in and of itself an ethical exercise in a time when ecological disaster is no longer a danger but rather a reality. The poisoning of Kasargod's soil, the restoration

of infants born into ruined bodies, and the return of the last monkey to the forest canopy cannot all be undone by literature. However, it has the power to make pain visible, grievable, and morally urgent across the entire spectrum of lives—human and nonhuman—that share the world we are collectively unmaking. This is something that policy documents, scientific reports, and legal proceedings frequently cannot do. *Swarga* is such a novel. It asks us not only to witness but to be changed by what we witness — and in that demand, it performs the most essential function that literature in the age of the Anthropocene can offer.

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