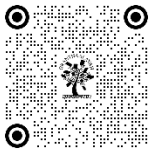


A TOXIC LEGACY OF ENDOSULPHAN: TRACING TRAUMA IN THE NOVEL SWARGA BY AMBIKASUTHAN MANGAD

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the existence of human beings, various forms of atrocities like wars, terrorist activities, communal skirmishes, natural calamities, sexual offences, etc. have been occurring paying the price for mental and physical beings. The scars caused by violence have a resonating impact on humans leaving a profound psychological imprint in the human mind causing trauma. Trauma has emerged as a keyword to approach violence and its aftermath thus gaining impetus in the critical and literary realm. It is quite appalling to note that human beings themselves pose a great peril to the sustenance of their fellow beings. In a world driven by materialistic concerns, the humane aspect is deplorably nonexistent from all walks of life. Globalisation has alarmingly set its pace exploiting all resources on our earth making it an uninhabitable place. In a scenario, where the capitalists are enthralled with the absolute mantra of reaping maximum profit from minimal effort, the perpetrators of disequilibrium are numerous. Many hazards are bound to occur as a result of the connivance of the state officials with international organisations causing umpteen problems to fester leading to gruesome traumatic experiences among the ordinary folk. The trauma caused by endosulfan, a lethal pesticide, is one such catastrophic disaster that affected a major population in Kasargode in Kerala. Though the initial phase of spraying endosulfan seemed innocuous to the naive populace, it had a gruesome impact on those hapless people. This incident had its repercussions globally leading to the complete banning of endosulfan. The literary realm could not unlink itself from the dismal happenings affecting the innocent society and many activists from the literary domain including Sugathakumari, Leelakumariamamma, Ambikasuthan Mangad, etc. had taken a keen interest in erasing the panic among the victims and restoring resilience among them. The express purpose of the present paper is to delve deeper into the myriad ways in which endosulfan victims are yet traumatised both physically and mentally by undertaking a critical expedition through trauma theories. The gruelling event though was not assimilated at the time of its occurrence has great relevance in the current context as it demands sensible reactions and interventions from the academic circle rendering meaning to human lives.

Keywords: Trauma, Horror, Lethal Pesticide, Endosulfan Victims, Neo-Feudalism

1. INTRODUCTION

There is nothing in the world more dreadful than human beings who are powerful enough to efface the whole living species from the face of the earth. Moreover, humans reveal themselves to be a self-annihilating race benumbing the benevolent traits attributed to them. The onslaught of globalisation has shaken humanity with such a magnitude that the whole race has become bereft of conscience. Vandana Shiva has rightly remarked in her essay 'The Social Costs of Economic Globalization' that our society, which has been transformed by the rule of greed unleashed by globalisation, poses a pervasive threat to humans' ability to be decent beings living at peace with diversity. The human avarice has led many to indulge in connivance with potent nations and the so-called social democrats to ruin the calm of the inhabitants of our nation. India under the spell of major ordeals like neo-colonialism, neo-feudalism, and neo-fascism paves the way for numerous protests among the ordinary people against the government laws and policies. The propensity for greed

among politicians and policymakers urges them to attach prime significance to economic growth with a calculated deferring of environmental preservation. According to Nandan Nilekani, until the 1990s, the environment was relegated to the margins, associating it with sheer social responsibility and 'green' activism. But now that the environmental dilemma has been transformed into a disconcerting global issue, the hour demands a snappy political and public intervention.

The environmental crisis looms so large that the ensuing problems escalating day by day cannot be ignored easily. The rapacity of ruling and administrative officials transforms our promised land into a purgatory causing havoc in the lives of simple human beings. It is quite surprising to find people devoid of their altruistic nature ruthlessly scaling the heights of prosperity crushing the rightful claim of ordinary people to live. Though the initial phase of spraying pesticides like endosulfan seemed innocuous to the innocent population there, it had a gruesome impact on these hapless people. This incident has struck tremors among the victims and had its repercussions globally. The indiscriminate use of the lethal pesticide endosulfan to kill pests and other rival organisms, which were supposed to pose a threat to the lush growth of cashew crops, left a negative impact on the environment and its inhabitants. It followed a series of horrendous events which seemed to be entirely beyond the control and wishes of the victims. They were rather plunged into a traumatizing shock.

Trauma is ubiquitous and has always been a recurrent phenomenon in the lives of human beings. But the fact that human beings themselves are responsible for the devastation of their fellow beings is quite appalling. In a world driven solely by materialistic considerations and concerns, the humane element is deplorably missing from every sphere of life. Trauma is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "a wound or external body injury" and "a psychic injury, especially one caused by emotional shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed". Though initially trauma served as a metaphor borrowed from the medical domain it has now emerged as a term to embrace a wide variety of experiences. It was during the late 1880s that the term came to be associated with the new types of wounds evolving out of the dismal consequences of industrialisation and the hasty pace of modernity. The metaphor denudes the gruesome way in which the traumatic experiences pulverized the body and mind.

Trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality of truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our every action and our language.' (Caruth 1996, 4).

It is quite cumbersome to record the traumatic experiences in consciousness with the same immensity of its occurrence and becomes unavailable to conscious recall. The horror of a traumatic experience cannot be divulged or articulated with the exact enormity of the real occurrence of the event because it is beyond the capability of the human mind to capture and assimilate and it also seems beyond expression through language. The trauma survivors keep processing and communicating their excruciating pain overriding the unfathomability of traumatic experience attempting to attenuate their ghastly experience. Many traumatic incidents go unheard or forgotten but the narratives show how it is persistent within the power structures of our society and embedded in the eddies of human lives. Caruth, who pioneered a psychoanalytic and post-structuralist approach, envisaged trauma as an unresolvable problem of the unconscious which emphasised the experience and the language as disparate things. Leigh Gilmore, a trauma theorist, opines, "Something of a consensus has already developed that takes trauma as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way."

The very occurrence of trauma is inextricably interlinked with the deep psyche of the trauma victims. It becomes an onerous task for the trauma victims to shirk away from the irksome reality of the hideous incident. Trauma is re-lived by the survivors through nightmares, hallucinations and flashbacks which finds evidence in many trauma narratives. According to Bessel A van details Kolk and Onno van details Hart, "Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes and be transformed into narrative language." In a world which staggers in the panic of intermittent incidents of violence more generated by human connivances than naturally generated, trauma studies gain prominence as it usher in pertinent solutions to such a world.

The trauma generated by the highly toxic pesticide endosulfan is conceived as one of the most lethal incidents on record. This catastrophic disaster which devoured the lives of thousands was due to the Environmental crisis hampering the health of the environment and specially humans. It became a calamity well negotiated by the Plantation Corporation of Kerala (PCK) to enhance their vested interests of amassing maximum profit. The PCK beguiled the inhabitants of

Kasargode into believing the spraying was a strategy to ward off the tea mosquito bug and other rival organisms hampering the lush growth of cultivated land of cashew plantations.

From 1973 onwards the aerial spraying of this lethal pesticide conducted thrice a year was conceived by gullible farmers as 'marunnu'. The first symptoms of the malaise were detected in the 1990s when the food chain was deplorably affected and the victims were beset with pinging assault of various congenital diseases, nervous disorders, epilepsy, cerebral palsy and both physical and mental disabilities. The gruesome consequences of the fatal pesticide on children reflect the virulent nature of humans vested with commercial interests. The way such a grave issue has been treated by the state rulers is certainly despicable. Many activists from the literary academia including Leelakumariamamma, Sugathakumari, Ambikasuthan Mangad, etc. had taken a keen interest in erasing the panic among the victims and restoring resilience among them to overcome trauma. The gruelling event though was not assimilated and experienced fully at the time of its occurrence it demanded sensible reactions and interventions from the academic circle rendering meaning to human lives.

The excruciating pains of the hapless victims of the deadly chemical endosulfan were authentically articulated by writers of trauma narratives who often encountered the biggest impediment of sustaining a balance between the exigent need to heal from the despicable occurrence and the pressing need to deliver the reality and horror of trauma. Such writers were racked with the tension of achieving parity between the urge to manifest the immensity of trauma and the imperative need to mitigate and minimise the terror of the occurrence. It became the sole responsibility of trauma writers to alleviate the tormenting thoughts of the victims without diminishing the gravity of reality the trauma survivors encounter. The representation of traumatic experiences encountered by the victims became useful in eradicating the horrendous memories and also in deciphering the effective measures to instill confidence among the fragile lot.

Ambikasuthan Mangad's Malayalam novel Enmakaje translated into English by J Devika as Swarga is one such key text which highlights the traumatic outbreak of epidemics necessitated by the fatal use of endosulphan spraying on State-run cashew plantations in Kasargode district. Swarga is one of the rarest novels which exposes environmental degradation and human dilapidation with great lucidity. The narrative serves as an incisive critique of the brutal selfishness and corrupt nexus between the political leadership and business magnets suppressing dissent among common people. The work chronicles the decade-long struggle ventured by a community against the gruesome impact of rampant use of the deadly chemical. Mangad, the celebrated writer and a professor of Malayalam, in his novel Enmakaje recorded with great authenticity the poignant real life experiences of the victims of the endosulfan tragedy drawn from his intimate interaction with them. He confessed that his characters as more than real and their agonies were too real.

The author created a milestone in the undeterred struggle for justice for the victims of endosulfan. He succeeded in showcasing the momentous issue which mutilated and snuffed out life from naturally enriched regions in Kasargode district. Devika made her reasons very explicit for choosing Enmakaje for translation so that it could reach a wider public and gather extensive visibility on the pivotal issue. The text without being straitjacketed by the demands of healing or truth-telling, it serves as a testimony to lived traumatic experiences which are deliberately stylised and fictionalized. Mangad challenged the interventionist technologists who ravaged the health of rivers, soil, mountains and forests denuding the extent to which the well-endowed nature is devastated disrupting the traditional ways of living. Such narratives divulge the 'slow violence' (a term introduced by Rob Nixon) infiltrating the earthscapes which spewed out quite disturbingly and surreptitiously.

Swarga endearingly captures the mesmerizing beauty and splendour of Jadadhari hills and its surroundings conceived as earthly paradise 'the swarga'. The protagonists Neelakantan and Devayani shun the degenerated ways of human life and travails of urbanism and retreat into the cascades of raw nature hidden in the folds of the Jadadhari hills. Relinquishing their identities they resolve to seek the serenity of the resplendent nature far from the bustling cities and lead the lives of hermits. Unable to cope with the overwhelming emotions of despondency and chaos resulting from a retrogressive humanity they decide to lead a reclusive life among animals relying fully on fruits and vegetables provided by the lush vegetation. The novel booming begins with the Man shuddering at the sight of the Woman cuddling a baby swathed in old clothing probably foreseeing the shocking truth and trouble rupturing their paradise.

Their contemplative existence henceforth faces a jolt with the unexpected intrusion of a third person disrupting their harmonious relationship. The Man bristles with ire and annoyance at the Woman for violating the pact agreed between them of not having any human entrappings. The ensuing tensions and disputes generated in their family with the intrusion of the diseased child announce the gradual poisoning gripping the remote forest abode and the

surrounding villages. The succeeding skirmishes over the infant provoke Man to storm out leaving a breach between them for the author to devise a unique strategy in unveiling their past where Man converses with a cave and Woman simultaneously divulges to her mirror. A journey through their past enables the couple to patch up the schism created temporarily between them. Moreover, Man begins to empathise with the ailing childbearing sores and greying hair.

The Woman undertakes an inward journey persuading her to pure love and empathy which ultimately led her to the adoption of a feeble and abandoned child on her way back from the downhill market. The mother instinctively picks the infant to decipher its desolation and isolation after the departure of its parents. She thus becomes an epitome of the highest ethical perfection a human mind can

Achieve on account of her ability to reach the exalted state of incredible compassion. It is the Woman who through her deed of adoption influences the Man to undergo a similar self-introspection and urges him to experience a traumatic epiphany leading to an abrupt change in their initial assumption of their cosy solitude as unreal. Consequently, the duo find their mindscape transcending to an elevated state of compassion opening the way for deciphering an aberration in nature. They become the harbingers of the unforeseen crisis engrappling the land. They indulge in their relentless altruistic struggle towards the noble cause of the fatalistic fight against endosulfan. The child introduced in the story as a grotesque creature becomes the first endosulphan victim culminating in death despite the sedulous care and treatment offered to it.

The exploration undertaken by Man to seek medication for the sore-ridden child prompts him to venture far from the cottage across the Kodangiri canal during which he encounters Panji, the healer of Enmakaje. Panji attempted to unravel the strands of folklore and myths associated with the land and Man found the tales quite appealing. The news of strange and unknown diseases affecting the children, teenagers and elders in the neighbouring places left the Man quite flustered. His travail with Panji through nearly twenty-seven houses was a heart-wrenching experience as it brought him closer to the weird diseases endangering the lives of innocent children which he exasperatedly verbalises to Devayani as, "Now, all the houses near here have strange children. With enlarged heads...tongues too big...I can't understand it. It is Jadadhari's curse, they console themselves. No. I am sure, no God will be so wrathful towards children. It is in a place like this, Devi that we lived for five or six years in total ignorance, seeing nothing but the trees, like animals. Oh, what cruelty!" (pp 77-78). It gradually dawns on him that the apparent serenity which surrounded them till then was deceptive. He expresses his frustration for his incapability to help the cursed land and its hapless inhabitants who were succumbing to the wrath of Jadadhari Gods. Man and Woman together decide to reenter the human world to launch an unarmed struggle against endosulfan sensing its potential for the ruination of a civilisation. His interaction with Srirama, a freelance journalist and farmer and Arunkumar, the benign doctor of the village unfolds the crude reality of the intense trauma engendered by the unabated use of lethal chemicals to trigger the growth of the cashew nut and areca plantations.

Enmakaje 'the land of truth' and 'goodness' within a short space of time gets transformed into 'the land of strangely sick people' a place 'where grunts and screams and crackles rang incessantly.' The multiculturalism and biodiversity of the place got ruined and gave way to the worst casualties with a congenital illness, malformation and deformities in children, mental ailments, immobility among teenagers owing to heavy-sized heads and twisted limbs, the birth of three-legged calves and complete absence of bees, frogs and other creatures. Man and Woman are forced to face the reality of 'swarga' which, contrary to its name, becomes the contentious site of the worst cases of human suffering. Watching the natural resources of Enmakaje, Man mumbles to himself: 'This was no Swarga-

Heaven- but hell- Naraka. The land must have yielded gold before the endosulphan's entry. The soil was so rich, so well endowed with water sources. Maybe that's why it was named heaven. The most fertile land Swarga.' A good number of journalists reported that 'the illnesses which plagued this land were caused by the endosulfan sprayed in the cashew plantations'. Opening a clinic at Swarga, Arunkumar played an indispensable role as he noticed 'that most patients with strange deformities and illnesses were from Swarga'.

Jayaraj, an activist from Cheemeni in the story, plays an astute tactical game against crooked politicians and other higher authorities but ultimately his acts for justice to the victims are rewarded with a mysterious vanishing of himself. This offers the readers a perturbing portrayal of what happens in combating crime on the environment. "Denial, repression and dissociation operate on a social as well as at individual level", notes the psychiatrist Judith Herman. The articulation of traumatic experiences is limited, shaped and defined by societal norms. Arunkumar comments on the gravity of the illness that besets Swarga with his remarks, "We didn't see that curse of the land was that poison...twenty-five years...they sprayed that deadly venom on our land." (p114) The apathy of ruler's finds expression in Srirama's words: "People here know this place is in Kerala only during election time. Or why is no one bothered even after such a

big tragedy?" (p.127). The impassiveness and callousness hidden behind the avuncular visage of governing officials are explicitly exposed in comprehending the uncanny means embraced by the responsible officials in decimating both the land and the people. The story however ends in hope like Noah's ark where different samples of life are preserved from being annihilated by the human world's insensitivity. Swarga thus becomes a sordid story articulating the abhorrent strategies adopted by officials to satisfy their vested interests and the common people's perpetual struggle against endosulfan spraying.

Leelakumariamma's Jeevadayini serves as a testimony to her relentless struggle against endosulfan usage. She employs the language of emotion to verbalise her observations of the destruction caused to the fabric of tribal lives by the displacement of traditional agro-centric ways of life. Mangad mentions her in Swarga as "a wonder-woman who had fought alone against her department and the Plantation Corporation in court and secured an order against endosulfan spraying for the first time." Leelakumariamma's evocative involvement in endosulfan justice activism was invigorated by the abrupt death of her elder brother Ramakrishnan. She pensively acknowledges, "Within almost three years we, agricultural officers killed a rich heritage of the local farmers". Her poignant reflections on the pernicious pesticide find expression in Swarga as she remarks, "The tea mosquito is just a myth. It's just an excuse to spray poison and swallow commissions and bribes." Her overwhelming sense of guilt is overtly expressed in the lines, "The department has been giving farmer's terrible poisons for years now calling it medicine! In the 1980s, it used to be Endrine. Now it is Furedan. People drank

They commit suicide. There are targets set for its sales and orders from above. I too have sold quite a bit to simple folk...we are suffering for those sins now..." (p.190).

The slow genocide was not endured timorously hence protesters like activists, writers, scholars, journalists and even photographers erupted from various corners forming a coterie to fight the horror wrought by endosulphan. Photographs taken by Madhuraj, renowned photographer of Mathrubhumi Daily, also served as trauma narratives. Many photographs capturing the heart-rending sights of deformed babies, twisted limbs, oversized heads, and tongues stuck out, slipping legs, inflated bellies, convulsions, congenital illnesses, vanishing eyeballs, and emaciated bodies created a tremor in the public sphere. Trauma drawing an analogy with a wound demands to be heard and comprehended. Caruth projects the metaphor of "wound" as a literary image denoting the 'psychic rupture' which gushed out blood and words to grab the public's attention.

The "wound" symbolises the truth or reality which is beyond one's grasp. Thus 'Enmakaje' became a contentious site of anti-endosulphan agitation held against surreptitious business operations of the corrupt officials leading resentments to fester. Though many were accused of sedition, the protest movements fostered court judgements and finally led to the ban of endosulfan in 2011. But the place is still gripped with the curse of endosulfan where thousands of children are yet born with congenital defects and it also reverberates with echoes of the wailing mothers feeding their children poison unearthing the emotional trauma and agony experienced by women in the process of mothering. The cardinal lesson to be learnt from such distressing occurrences is that optimal care needs to be taken to put a cap on humanity's mad pursuit for growth and development or else such traumatic incidents will keep reiterating in myriad forms.

It is certainly despicable to witness the way such a grave issue has been dealt with by the state officials when an urgent action should have been initiated. The monstrous effects of the lethal pesticide on the children throw light on the malignant nature of human beings with their vested commercial interests. The impactful chronicling of traumatic experiences encountered by the victims through the narrative Swarga was found to have a massive benefit in eradicating the horrendous memories and also in deciphering the tactful measures to instil confidence among the fragile lot.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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