

# The Dance of Death: Ecocatastrophe and Toxicity in the Select Works of Ambikasuthan Mangad

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## ABSTRACT

The Dance of Death: Ecocatastrophe and Toxicity in the Select Works of Ambikasuthan Mangad Abstract A term coined by Laurence Buell in 1998, toxic discourse is a necessary entry point to the debates about the 'fear of a poisoned world' (Toxic Discourse, 639). The potential exposure to chemicals in our daily lives has been increasing at an exponential rate during the past several years and the outcome of such an indiscriminate exposure looms large before us as many life-threatening diseases and health hazards. The Plantation Corporation of Kerala, (a government-owned body) started the aerial spraying of a lethal pesticide called endosulfan in 1978, and continued it for the next twenty years, over an area of cashew crops covering 15 Grama panchayats in Kasargode. This paper tries to figure out the discourses on human-induced toxicity and the resultant diseases that surfaced as a result of the exposure to endosulfan in the select works of Ambikasuthan Mangad, a contemporary academician, activist and writer in Kerala. It also analyses how this discourse has entered into the mainstream consciousness making the public vigilant on how slow poisoning of the environment may alter and disrupt the delicate balance of nature and enter into human systems causing irrevocable damage. A novel titled *Swarga* (2017), the English translation of his novel, *Enmakaje* (2009) and two short story collections: one titled *Randu Malsyangal* (Two Fishes, 2015) and another titled *Ente Priyappetta Kadhakal* (My Favourite Stories, 2017) have been taken for study.

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**KEYWORDS:** *Ecocriticism, Ecocatastrophe, Toxic Discourse*

In concord with ecocritical discourses, the term toxicity has been widely associated as it serves as a point of departure to serious issues of slow poisoning of the environment, and the resultant diseases and catastrophes springing from human-induced activities. term coined by Laurence Buell in 1998, toxic discourse is a necessary entry point to the debates about the 'fear of a poisoned world' (Toxic Discourse, 639). The potential exposure to chemicals in our daily lives has been increasing at an exponential rate during the past several years and the outcome of such an indiscriminate exposure looms large before us as many life-threatening diseases and health hazards.

It was Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), that sensitized the world on the lethal effects of chemicals and pesticides that travel all the way from the agricultural lands and water bodies to human bodies. This book triggered the environmental movement in

America and engendered a large corpus of environmental literature in the following decades. Further, a chain of nuclear and other chemical-induced disasters like the Love Canal chemical disaster in the US (1970), the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island in the US (1979), leak from the Union Carbide's pesticide plant in Bhopal, India (1984), and the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown in Russia (1986) exposed the horrendous effects of contamination on the fragile fabric of the biosphere. Still, here in India, environmental justice movements were in their budding stage and the effects of slow poisoning of land had never captured the imagination of the average people. The Endosulfan Tragedy that occurred in the Kasargod District of Kerala was an eye-opener in this regard.

The Plantation Corporation of Kerala, (a government-owned body) started the aerial spraying of a lethal pesticide called endosulfan in 1978, and continued it

for the next twenty years, over an area of cashew crops covering 15 Grama panchayats in Kasargode. The initial warning signals in the form of mass deaths of bees, birds and reptiles in the area were grossly ignored. But when congenital anomalies, mental disorders, hormonal dysfunctions and several maladies were reported among the newborns, and grown-ups of this area, studies were conducted and confirmed that the spraying of pesticides has wreaked havoc on the entire ecosystem including its land and water bodies.

This paper tries to figure out the discourses on human-induced toxicity and the resultant diseases that surfaced as a result of the exposure to endosulfan in the select works of Ambikasuthan Mangad, a contemporary academician, activist and writer in Kerala. It also analyses how this discourse has entered into the mainstream consciousness making the public vigilant on how slow poisoning of the environment may alter and disrupt the delicate balance of nature and enter into human systems causing irrevocable damage. A novel titled *Swarga* (2017), the English translation of his novel, *Enmakaje* (2009) and two short story collections: one titled *Randu Malsyangal* (*Two Fishes*, 2015) and another titled *Ente Priyappetta Kadhakal* (*My Favourite Stories*, 2017) have been taken for study.

The plot of the novel *Swarga*, revolves around a couple who disenchanted by the urban culture move to a jungle on the outskirts of a remote village in Kasargode, even eschewing their names and adopting a primitive lifestyle. One day the woman violates the pact of lonely living by bringing a diseased and abandoned child on her return from the market. This enrages the man who leaves the house and retreats further into the forest where he enters a cave. After a brief spell, he joins the woman with the child and they together start to treat the child in all possible ways. The child seemingly only a year old in appearance was weak, grey-haired and riddled with sores. In one of their stints with a traditional healer, they understand that the child is actually five years old and has been brought to him earlier. The child could not be saved and this experience shakes the couple out of their solitary life as they discover that the pristine forest they occupy is slowly being poisoned by some unnamed chemical concoctions and that several people in the nearby villages are succumbing to disease and deaths owing to the same toxic presence right from the genes. Thus begins their crusade against the companies and authorities that are wiping out an entire ecosystem with their myopic pest-controlling measures. In a gathering of the local people, their concern about this local poisoning is voiced in the following words:

Remember the US bombing of Vietnam ... The terrible poison used there was called Agent Orange... Roundup is its new name... There were reports of grotesque-looking children born in Vietnam too. What happened in Enmakaje is not too different... Here too they dropped a big bomb. Not at one go, slowly, gradually... It was not an enemy country that bombed us. Our own government, who are elected by us, dropped the bombs, in turn. What a cruel joke!"(176).

Thus endosulfan, precipitates as the centre of toxic discourse in *Swarga*, uniting and sensitizing a group of hapless people whose outcry for justice later on cascades into a mighty movement. A closer analysis of the other writings of Mangad reveals that the discourse on toxins that disfigures biotic systems including the humans and non-humans is a leitmotif in them. For instance, in the story, *Randu Malsyangal*, (*Two Fishes*, 2015) in a collection by the same title, there is a conversation between a frog and two fishes, where the frog which has been robbed of its pond tells the fishes that first the humans mixed toxins in the water bodies and now they are grinding the hills and taking them away for constructions. The two fishes are on their upward journey through a hill stream as they have to move up into the freshwater for breeding. In the story, there is an outcry for the survival of the very rudimentary forms of life like birds, fishes and reptiles, as their habitats have been devastated by the reckless usurpation of man. The story depicts how in the name of development humans efface, hills and forests and pollute water bodies.

Another story in the same collection titled *Pranavayu* (*Life Breath*), projects a dystopian future where a couple heavily depending on the oxygen kits for survival in a polluted world, run out of the same and finally decide to kill their aged parents to save the kits for their survival. The story again is a grim reminder of a future world where even the air we breathe has to be purchased and hoarded for life to proceed. This can be read alongside the news reports from the capital state of Delhi which suffocates with industrial and vehicular pollutions and the people struggling for uncontaminated air.

The second short story collection, taken for study titled *Ente Priyappetta Kadhakal* (*My Favourite Stories*, 2017), also has at its core, stories with the indelible mark of Anthropocene that disfigures humanity and human-scapes alike. The most poignant among them is the one titled, *Panchuruli*, which is the name given for a tribal God. The story is about a tribal honey-gatherer, Aithappan, who has been jobless as the honey bees of the surrounding forest

have been mysteriously disappearing for a while. Stricken with abject poverty, he is advised by the local money-lender, Lonappan to sell one of his kidneys and get a fortune in return. Aithappan accepts this idea, as he could treat his daughter, Minni,crippled by the birth of endosulfan poisoning. But the illiterate man did not know how much he got and squandered the money aimlessly and could not bear the burden of treatment for his daughter. The naivety of many a villager was exploited by the organ mafia as several people like Aithappan lost their kidneys practically in exchange for very little money. Mangad deftly shows how environmental degradation leads to joblessness for the tribals which again leads to a network of exploitations as is seen in the case of the protagonist of *Panchuruli*.

There is an underlying threat of anxiety over the increasing defilement of the environment that constantly surfaces in the works of Ambikasuthan Mangad. Being at the centre of the endosulfan protests as an activist and academician, the issue organically figures in all his major works. The toxic discourse in his works was pivotal in attracting public and political attention to this pressing issue and in ensuring remedial actions. In the epilogue to *Randu Malsyangal*, he mentions the harrowing sights of the diseased people he witnessed that prompted him to document them into the novel *Enmakaje*. But he had taken two vows: Never to go about and ask them about their suffering to make a plot of the novel and to donate the entire royalty of this novel for the cause of endosulfan victims. Mangad records that he was able to keep both the vows and thus do the teeny bit

of what he could to tone down this epic tragedy. The works of Mangad underscores the vision of Buell which has been articulated in the essay titled *Toxic Discourse* thus, “The spectacle of communities, population groups, and finally the whole earth contaminated by occult toxic networks has been invoked by environmental justice activists in numerous ways. It has furthered the effort to create a sense of community of the disempowered.” (648)

The writer-activist in Mangad through his overt discussion of toxicity through his writings was successful in sensitising and organising a community of the disempowered, lend them an agency to raise their voice and bring their silent struggle to the focal point of the mainstream society.

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