

History, Myths and Legends in Ambigasudan Mangad's 'Swarga-A Posthuman Tale'

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Abstract:

Most of the writers explain the unexplainable phenomena of the world through remarkable history, traditional legends and allegorical myths. This is because these elements give deepness and richness to the story. This rich backdrop creates a more immersive and believable fictional world. It also represents culture and different ways of looking at the past. Myths, history and legends plays a major role in a narrative fiction. This paper analyses the role and purpose of history, myths, and legends and how it connects the past and the present. It also deeply portrays the struggles of Enmakaje inhabitants through the novel *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale*. This is a Malayalam based novel translated into English and a fact fiction written by Ambigasudan Mangad. He tries to depict the poisoned environment of the north Kerala, sufferings of human against the pesticide of endosulfan poisoning and their struggle to ban it.

Keywords: history, myth, environment, pesticide,environment, narrative, endosulfan, toxic

Stories play a vital role in every culture at all times. Each culture has its own traditional stories- epic, history, myths and legends which is handed down from one generation to the next either orally or through written record. Since ages, these tales always played a major role in literature as well as in individual's lives. They not only entertain but also teach remarkable life's lessons. Such tales creates deeper meanings to connect with complex ideas. It is the only principle and powerful way on passing the beliefs and culture through generations. Basically, it involves human values to interpret and needs rationalism to understand the depth of the concept beyond its literal meaning. In India, most myths and legends are derived from epics like Mahabharatha and Ramayana. Ambigasudan Mangad uses such mythical stories in the novel and enthral at some places, excites in few places and also frightens his readers. He sandwiches the reality with myth, history and legends in his best way to enrich his views.

The Malayalam author, Ambigasudan Mangad is a professor by profession and aliterary critic and an essayist from India. He has written four volumes of literary criticism, a dictionary on folk idioms, two novels and few short stories. He has won Ankanam Award, V. P. Sivakumar Keli Award, Ithal Puraskaram, Edasseri Memorial Award and many more. He has also been involved with the endosulfan struggle in North Kerala for the past decade. The novel *Enmakaje* was originally written in Malayalam and was translated to English by Dr. J. Devika as *Swarga*. Dr. Devika is an academician from Kerala, social critic, feminist and a professor. She has translated many fictional and non-fictional books of Malayalam and English.

Swarga definitely a captivating book that takes the reader into a dreamlike world inside a forest as its setting. Story starts with a couple unnamed and identified as man and woman to live a solitary life in this paradise-Swarga who has withdrawn from all their connections with humans and their pasts by renouncing their identity. They decide to live near the mythical Jadadhari hill, which is guarded by a spirit. The identity of Devayani and Neelakantan are revealed when the woman decides to bring home an abnormal orphaned infant from the nearby town. They name him Pareekshit. The child looks different with grey hair and sores all over his body, which has not walked in his life for seven years. The plot threads the struggle of the Enmakaje people highlighting the trauma due to the poison rain and the protest against endosulfan.

A simple definition is necessary to understand better for further study. In Classical Greek, “mythos” signified any story or plot, whether true or false. In its central modern significance, a myth is one story in a mythology—a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group. *Swarga* connects myths to the life’s realities.

Mangad weaves the reality of endosulfan’s tragedy through the Jadadhari Bhoota’s myth. Through the ancient history of Enmakaje, the curse of sickness is inscribed in the minds of Swarga people. The medicine man Panji narrates the anger of Jadadhari myth to Devayani in the story. A long time ago, Jain Ballalas were the lords of Enmakeje. The Sivoli Brahmins had defeated them and captured the lordship. This aggravated the anger of Jadadhari hills Bhoota, Teyyam. So Sivoli brahmins performed black magic to trap the Bhoota and Kurathi, the female tribal deity. They were successful in trapping Bhoota where Kurathi escaped. Later when the sorcerers moved away from the hill, she rescued the Bhoota. Bhoota re-emerged furiously and caused terrible troubles made them to run away from Swarga. This terrible curse caused plague and that is the reason people are sick and have deformities. The people believed that the place was doomed. “This place was doomed unless the Jadadhari Bhoota’s anger was appeased.”(18). The awareness of sickness in and around Swarga is well understood by the illiterate people through this myth.

Another myth about the place *Enmakaje* shows it has a great history. History records that this name is derived meaning a place of hills, not one or two but in thousands. It is a place of multiple languages. But this doesn’t hinder people from communicating. Enmakaje is a place of truth. There are numerous “steps of truth” around the place. The interesting myth is

once anyone are on those steps, has to tell the truth and only truth. The belief is that the person will not be able to come down from these steps if lied. Such myth instills the value of truth while reading.

With its value-based approach, *Swarga* articulates the fact that a pesticide called endosulfan known for its acute toxicity was sprayed for twenty-five years in the cashew plantations owned by the government. The ignorant people of Swarga village in Enmakaje believed it for a medicine. People of Swarga who suffered from illness and deformities believed it is due to the wrath of Gods. Many species such as fishes, crabs, crows, butterflies, or worms in the hills got vanished. Even animals showed deformities. “And now, here, calves that have grotesque bodies and very short lives are born.”(112) The water which used to be a medicinal has become a deadly poison. “Suddenly something struck him. In this vast expanse, he could not sense the presence of a single living creature. Not even a lizard or a chameleon or a frog or snake or mongoose.”(122) Adds, “This was no Swarga – heaven – but hell – Naraka. The land must have yielded gold before endosulfan’s entry. The soil was so rich, so well endowed with water sources. Maybe that is why it was named heaven.”(112).

Mangad’s this special narrative style typically addresses the social and the political issue of the place Enmakaje impactful and since it also accompanies scientific evidence puts it in the fact fiction genre. These tales speak the traditional stories of the past and presents the curse of pesticide of the present creating strong awareness on environmental issues and bridges imagination and reality to the readers.

Legends are retold as if they are real events and were believed to be historical accounts. It usually tells a story about human events or actions that has not been proved nor documented in real history. According to the literary terms, the word Legend is derived from Medieval Latin term *legend* meaning things to be read. The mythical tales referring to King Mahabali, is one of the popular legends of Kerala. A righteous king who is known for his love towards his people and the quality of extreme generosity. Mangad enhances the plot by mixing Bali’s and the Deity King Indra. Their conversation on self-knowledge, power, and renunciation leads the Neelakantan character to face reality of fighting against the endosulfan crime not to hide in the cave as a result of selfish- immature resort of ugliness. This blending is so powerful and this paradigm shift of story becomes powerful from then.

Mangad uses the talking cave as the omniscient narrator of the story to introduce many myths and legends and parallelly sequencing and building the tension in his plot. The donkey birth of Bali enlightening Indra on the secrets of the universe and time emphasizes moral ethics in Neelakantan and modifies his actions. Through the medicine man Panji Mangad picks another chance of incorporating history into his plot. The history of Jadhaharitale unfolds – with serpent hill and serpent grove of Jadhahari on one side and the Kodanigri hill and stream on the other gives the biodiversity of the place which is necessary to understand the abundance of natural resource. When Panji narrates to Neelakantan and Devayani it opens the mysteries of the past to explain the current travails. These histories help them to understand the diseases spreading that are attacking the inhabitants of Enmakaje.

A history of rule of the Koragas, the Maayilar and the Mogyeyar on this land, thereafter, is scattered in the text to indicate that ransacks the ‘land of truth’. The curse of Jadhari, which has resulted in children being born with congenital deformities and residents of the area suffering from sores, respiratory disorder, infertility and other ailments. The curse on humans is so strong that the water in the area has been polluted and the biodiversity in the area has been impacted also tells the side effects of endosulfan. The fish and frogs have died; there are no birds and bees – in fact, which the title is *Swarga*-heaven ironically the hell given by the translator.

Mangad’s references to the woman and the man in the forest draws on Adam and Eve’s story and how human actions determine the course that nature takes. Also draws on tales from the Mahabharata, when Sita and Ram leave Ayodhya to live in the forest.

Mangad craftily weaves in folktales, social norms and hierarchies into the narrative which determine people’s livelihoods in the region and access to land or rights over trees. In the first half of the book, this prolonged focus on building the characters and socio-political context with mythical analogies, may slow down the interest for some readers. The narration picks up its pace after Pareekshit dies. Devyani and Neelkantan get involved in the movement to stop endosulfan spraying in the region with the support of Jayarajan, a journalist who writes on environmental issues.

Through this important book, Mangad sheds light on human suffering, compassion, entrenched politics and structural power that the protesters of the endosulfan spraying and similar environmental movements and activists fight against. With a narrative style that weaves in folklore and analogies, myth, history, legends and scientific evidence, this book will appeal to a diverse audience. It also created revolution against spraying of endosulfan pesticide in northern Kerala. In 2011, the use of endosulfan was finally banned in India and in January 2017, the Supreme Court reiterated the devastating effect of the use of endosulfan and directed the state government to release compensation to the affected families immediately. According the *New Indian Express* news, Partial Implementation of the Supreme Court’s order was done in March 2017. The suffering remains, and stories like this bring to light on various environmental threats.

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