

Narratives on Lost Terrains: A Neocolonialist Reading of Select Contemporary Fictions in Malayalam

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ABSTRACT

Neocolonialism, a term coined by Kwame Nkrumah, is defined as a covert project of the developed countries to exert their economic, political and cultural domination over the third-world countries by making them follow blindly the ideas of development imposed by them and exploiting the land, labor and resources of these countries in a view of generating limitless profit. The paper studies two contemporary novels, *Aathi* (2011) and *Swarga* (2017) written by two renowned writer-activists, Sarah Joseph and Ambikasuthan Mangadu of Kerala, and posits to underscore the prophetic vision in them that challenges the myopic ideas of development and the relentless ways of exploitation that are the hallmarks of neocolonialism. The paper also analyses the idea of the slow poisoning of nature that has been dexterously incorporated into the narratives, as a direct outcome of neocolonial endeavors. The paper also argues that by taking up the concept of bio-imperialism into the ambit of its discourse, the writers have set a wake-up call for all the stakeholders to be vigilant in their engagement with neocolonial forces.

KEYWORDS: *Neocolonialism, Slow-poisoning, Bio-imperialism*

Neocolonialism is a term defined and conceptualized by Kwame Nkrumah, the renowned anticolonial leader and former president of Ghana, who used the term to characterize it as the last stage of imperialism. He observes that even after independence, the erstwhile colonized countries of the world are under the grip of an economic system and political policy that are directed from 'outside'. Several of these policies go counter to the environmental imagination and sustainable resource management that was the hallmark of the pre-colonial ages. Nevertheless, many of the dogmas of development that India, a postcolonial nation borrowed from the West see nature as a commodity to be manipulated, exploited and used for material gains. The state and the people with monetary power become agents of mass destruction of landscapes and displace both humans and the animals of the region, upsetting the delicate balance of nature.

This paper studies two novels by two of the renowned contemporary writers in Malayalam, Sarah Joseph and Ambikasuthan Mangadu to exemplify and substantiate the devastating effects of our myopic

How to cite this paper: Dr. Sheethal S. Nair "Narratives on Lost Terrains: A Neocolonialist Reading of Select Contemporary Fictions in Malayalam" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-7 | Issue-4, August 2023, pp.995-998, URL: www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd59830.pdf



IJTSRD59830

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idea of development. The first novel taken for study is the English translation of *Aathi*, titled *Gift in Green* (2011) by Sarah Joseph, which tells the saga of a bunch of people who were displaced from their pristine land in the name of development. The second novel is a translation of the critically acclaimed novel *Enmakaje* by Ambikasuthan Mangadu which is titled *Swarga* (2017) and narrates the physical and psychological deterioration that affects the people of a village owing to the poisoning of their land by lethal chemical, endosulphan in the nearby cashew plantations.

The Flipside of Development

Globalisation has triggered the process of neocolonisation by paving the way for the establishment of several multinational corporations, which chiefly operate in the third world countries where labour and resource costs are relatively low. These corporations often form a nexus with the corrupt officials and bureaucrats thus accentuating the process of exploitation of the local people and the indigenous landscapes. Gadgil and Guha in their book *Ecology and Equity*, explain how the 'intensification

of resource use' in independent India was taken up by the bureaucratic apparatus who were the direct followers of the British policies.

In the novel *Gift in Green*, at the onset, the villagers of Aathi are leading a life of content with the rice from their pokkali (flood-resistant paddy) fields and the fishes from the water bodies that encircled their land. They had a peaceful community life with story-telling rituals, and a strong spiritual anchoring in nature. The same element of harmony is present in the lives of the people in Swarga, which means heaven. The people mostly depended on the forests for food and fodder and were engaged in activities of fishing and collecting honey. A sense of shared existence with nature and with the creatures of the land makes the characters of both the novels similar. In *Gift in Green*, Kumaran acts as the human agency that plants the seeds of exaggerated notions of development into the minds of the innocent villagers. He buys vast tracts of fields, often by tricking the villagers to exchange their deeds with very little money. He sells the land to huge land mafia who try to connect Aathi to the mainland through a bridge and converts the village into a landfill where the waste from the city begins to pile up. Consequently, a land covered with pure water bodies gets converted into a sewage dump with toxic wastes spreading into the habitations of poor people denying them access to clean water and food. The ruin of Aathi thus starts with a skewed notion of development inscribed into the minds of the villagers which is often part of the strategic process of land acquisition by neocolonial agencies. Vandana Shiva voices her concern over this alleged form of development that has taken shape in the specific context of capitalist expansion

Development was to have been a post-colonial project, a choice for accepting a model of progress in which the entire world remade itself on the model of the colonizing modern West, without having to undergo the subjugation and exploitation that colonialism entailed. The assumption was that Western-style progress was possible for all. Development, as the improved well-being of all, was thus equated with the Westernization of economic categories—of needs, of productivity, of growth. (*Key Concepts: Ecology* 273)

The ruthless atrocity perpetrated by a state agency in the name of alleviating pests and maximising the profit from cashew plantations resulted in an unprecedented tragedy, which is articulated in Ambikasuthan Mangadus's *Swarga*. The story revolves around a couple who wanted to live alone in the woods. But when they are destined to find the cause of the mysterious disease of an orphan child,

they are drawn into the vortex of a tumultuous tragedy that had affected the local community and is forced to find a way out. The cause of the disease of their foster child was similar to hundreds of diseased kids with both congenital deformations and elders with detrimental health conditions. The cause was attributed to the presence of a concoction of pesticides sprayed around their places in helicopters to protect acres of cashew plantations. No research was done before the application of this poison, as the local people were mostly tribals and other socially disadvantaged people.

Slow Violence and the Plight of the Dispossessed

In both Aathi and Swarga, two places that were out of the mainstream society, the violence inflicted by the agents of development was so slow in the beginning that it was seldom noticed by the world outside. Even when noticed, the response was delayed and justice was often denied. Rob Nixon in his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* identifies and defines a new kind of violence that forms the hallmark of neo-colonial legacies: "By slow violence, I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (4).

In her novel *Gift in Green*, Sarah Joseph presents us with the fate of the people before the urbanisation takes over and afterwards. In the beginning we see through the lives of these characters, the sustainable ways of agriculture that formed the basis of Indian culture over centuries. Slow poisoning of their fields and waters with chemicals and fertilizers, was unacceptable for the people of Aathi. The people of Aathi engaged in a ceremony called *Kappukalakku*, in which they harvested the prawns and fish from the fields before preparing them for paddy cultivation. When Komban Joy, an incarnation of unbridled greed posits the idea of mixing poison into the water to bring out the fish easily, the female protagonist Kunjimathu vehemently opposes the move. She says, "There is a way of making prawn farms that has come down to us from our elders over the ages. The new way that involves spraying pesticides, mixing quicklime, spreading various potions is unacceptable to us." (177). Their lack of education did not come in the way of realising was best for their land.

Similarly, the novel *Swarga* is a partially fictionalized representation of the environmental disaster caused by the misuse of endosulfan pesticide in Kasargod district of Kerala in India. The novel explores the environmental and public health consequences of pesticide misuse. It also concentrates on those health-

related effects of endosulfan misuse, that persist even to the present day. The author has made a great effort in portraying the plight of the victims. Endosulfan was introduced to Indian agriculture after the Green Revolution of the 1960's to increase the food production. When the couple in Swarga gets actively involved in finding the root of the misery, Neelakandan is dumbstruck by the sheer number of diseases and abnormalities suffered by the people, who believe that the adversity that struck them is because of the fury of Lord Jadadhari who their ancestors had insulted and defeated through black magic. 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. The people of the area were so naïve that they could not understand even the cause of their plight.

Once they realise that it is the aerial spraying of endosulphan that has brought the mishap and not any divine curse, they 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 turns. What a cruel joke!" (176).

The novel is successful in bringing a regional issue to a global level by giving an audible voice to the silent sufferings of the people. The sacredness associated with the land is expressed through the tribal old man, Panchi, who becomes the mouthpiece of Mangad. He narrates the spirituality associated with the land of Enmakaje through the images of sacred groves, Jadadhari hill, Basava cows, holy snakes, Sakkijal (the steps of truth) and Kondangiri canal (the stream compared to the holy Ganges). The fertility and biodiversity of the land ensure the well-being of the self-sustaining community

Bio-imperialism as a War against Nature

Bio-imperialism is the term designated to one of the recent and most sinister forms of neo-colonization, which has taken the entire globe in its grip. The global corporate giants who are constantly waging war against the poor and the dispossessed have now entered into their wombs and arteries to claim a space. This war is being carried out through the

process of innovations in biotechnology, genetic engineering and the patenting of indigenous seeds. As Vandana Shiva rightly points out:

Every vital, living resource of the planet that maintains the fragile web of life is in the process of being privatised, commodified and appropriated by corporations. Every inch of land that supports the life and livelihoods of tribal and peasant communities is being grabbed, leading to land wars. Every drop of water that flows in our rivers is being appropriated leading to water wars." (*Making Peace with the Earth* 4)

In *Gift in Green*, Sarah Joseph hints at the importance of the *pokkali* rice seed in the ecosystem of Aathi. As the place was filled with saline water and was frequently fraught with floods, the people needed a variety of paddy that was both salt-resistant and flood resistant. The long stalks of the *pokkali* were ideal for both and the ancestors of the people in Aathi had this knowledge and brought it to the land. *Gift in Green* discusses how the indigenous varieties of seeds are important by their trait of being location-specific and easily reproducible. The author, by pinpointing the importance of such local knowledge is also hinting at the resourcefulness of our traditional wisdom. Most of the local varieties of crops are able to withstand the local climatic changes. They are less dependent on pesticides, fertilizers and even water. The self-sufficiency of people who depend not only on the rice but on the fishes of the region, held by the mangrove forests also point to a life-style that is totally in tune with nature. The life-supporting vision of the people of Aathi is common to the people of Swarga too. In fact, many of the indigenous communities of the world over are living a life of harmony, until the exploitative tentacles of the outside world crush them and displace them. The 'scientific' systems of the day splits agriculture from forestry by assigning lands for the cultivation of single varieties of crops on a large scale and undermining the scope of cultivating multiple crops thereby enhancing biodiversity. Such monocrops as we see in Swarga, are actively grown to obtain maximum profit by spraying pesticides and fertilizers often oblivious to the fact that they upset the delicate balance of nature.

Vandana Siva argues that the Green Revolution which brought a surplus of wheat and rice production in India has marginalised several useful varieties of nutritious crops like ragi and jowar. She considers this move as a "biased agricultural science based on capitalist patriarchy" (*Monocultures of Mind* 24) that would consider highly nutritious crops as inferior. She says that 'The diverse forest and ecosystems are reduced to 'preferred' species by selective

annihilation of species diversity which is not 'useful' from the market perspective. Moreover, the monocultures of rice and wheat invite pests on a large scale. The fertilizer-intensive cultivation proposed by the Green Revolution further reduces the quality of the soil and increases the necessity of water for irrigation.

It is often the prime duty of writers to sensitize society on the issues of gross negligence that affect the lives of the poor people and the environment. Two of the contemporary writer-activists of Kerala, Sarah Joseph and Ambikasuthan Mangadu have interfered actively in the debates on development, land appropriation, environmental degradation through the medium of writing.

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