

Searching for an Alternative World: Biopolitics, Necropolitics, and Ecological Resistance in Ambikasutan Mangads *Swarga*

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Abstract

Ambikasutan Mangad's *Swarga* (2013) emerges as a powerful literary response to the ecological and human catastrophe produced by the indiscriminate use of pesticides in the Kasaragod region of Kerala. The novel transforms a local environmental disaster into a broader meditation on the politics of life, death, displacement, and survival. This article examines *Swarga* (*Enmakaje*) through the theoretical frameworks of Michel Foucault's biopolitics and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics to argue that the novel represents environmental disaster not merely as ecological degradation but as a manifestation of political power that determines whose lives are protected, whose bodies are rendered vulnerable, and whose deaths become socially acceptable. The novel's poisoned landscape becomes a necropolitical space in which human and non-human bodies are exposed to slow violence, while the failure of institutional mechanisms of protection reveals the uneven distribution of life and death. At the same time, *Swarga* is not exclusively a narrative of devastation. Its search for an alternative world operates through memory, community, indigenous and local ecological knowledge, relationality, and resistance to extractive modernity. The imagined alternative is not a utopian escape from catastrophe but a radical reconfiguration of human relationships with land, water, animals, and other forms of life. By bringing biopolitics and necropolitics into conversation with environmental humanities and Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, this article argues that *Swarga* ultimately calls for an alternative ethics of coexistence that challenges the political and economic structures producing ecological precarity.

Keywords: biopolitics, necropolitics, ecological violence, slow violence, environmental humanities, precarity, alternative world

1. Introduction: Imagining Another World

Literature has long functioned as a space for envisioning worlds beyond the violence that structures the present. When existing political, economic, and ecological systems fail to sustain life, the literary imagination often turns toward the possibility of an alternative world.

Such alternative worlds need not take the form of conventional utopias; they may emerge as fragments of memory, lost landscapes, damaged communities, resistant bodies, or visions of coexistence that endure within spaces marked by catastrophe. Ambikasutan Mangad's *Swarga* (Enmakaje) is particularly significant in this context. Set against the ecological disaster caused by the aerial spraying of endosulfan in Kasaragod, Kerala, the novel portrays a landscape where the boundary between environmental destruction and political violence becomes increasingly indistinct. The contamination of land and water produces bodily suffering, congenital disabilities, illness, infertility, death, and intergenerational trauma. The catastrophe is thus not confined to a single historical moment; it becomes an enduring condition that reorganizes the lives of individuals and communities. The title *Swarga*, meaning "heaven," generates an ironic tension at the heart of the novel. The possibility of paradise is juxtaposed against a landscape transformed into a site of suffering. Enmakaje, which might signify an ecological space of abundance and belonging, becomes a space in which life itself is threatened. The "heaven" evoked by the title is therefore both a memory of what the land once was and an aspiration toward what it might become again.

This article argues that the search for an alternative world in *Swarga* can be read through the intersecting frameworks of biopolitics and necropolitics. Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics illuminates how modern power operates through the management and regulation of populations, bodies, health, reproduction, and life. Yet the novel also demonstrates the limits of a purely Foucauldian understanding of power. The question is not simply how life is regulated, but how certain populations are exposed to conditions in which death, illness, disability, and premature suffering become structurally produced. Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics becomes crucial here, because *Swarga* represents a world in which political and economic structures effectively determine who may live, who may suffer, and who may be abandoned to slow death. The novel thus reveals a disturbing paradox: the same systems that claim to promote development and agricultural productivity can produce conditions that undermine the biological foundations of life. The governance of life becomes inseparable from the production of death. However, *Swarga* does not remain within the politics of destruction. Its deeper significance lies in its search for another mode of existence. The alternative world imagined by the novel is rooted in ecological interdependence, community, memory, ethical responsibility, and resistance. It challenges the assumption that human progress requires the domination of nature and instead proposes a worldview in which the survival of human beings is inseparable from the survival of the more-than-human world.

2. From Biopolitics to Necropolitics: Theoretical Framework

Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics provides a productive starting point for analysing *Swarga*. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Foucault describes the emergence of a form of modern power concerned with the administration of life. Power increasingly operates not only through the sovereign right to take life but through mechanisms that regulate populations, bodies, health, reproduction, longevity, and mortality. Biopolitics therefore involves the transformation of life into an object of governance. Population becomes a category that can be measured, monitored, regulated, and managed. The modern state exercises power through institutions and technologies that seek to optimise life while

simultaneously establishing distinctions between protected and vulnerable populations. In *Swarga*, however, the promise of developmental modernity is fundamentally disrupted. The population that should theoretically be protected by institutions of governance is instead exposed to environmental toxicity. Bodies become sites upon which the consequences of political and economic decisions are inscribed. The damaged body becomes evidence of a larger failure of governance.

The biopolitical question, therefore, becomes:

Who is protected by the structures that claim to manage life?

This question leads toward Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics. In "Necropolitics," Mbembe extends and complicates Foucauldian theories of power by examining the politics of death and the creation of "death-worlds" in which populations are subjected to conditions that make survival increasingly precarious. *Swarga* can be understood as a literary representation of such a death-world. The victims of environmental contamination are not necessarily killed through a single spectacular act of violence. Instead, they are exposed to an ongoing condition of toxic vulnerability. Their suffering is prolonged, dispersed, and frequently normalised.

The distinction between killing and allowing to die becomes crucial. In this context, necropolitics operates through abandonment. When institutions fail to prevent ecological destruction, fail to provide adequate protection, and fail to address the long-term consequences of contamination, the resulting deaths and disabilities cannot be understood merely as accidental. They reveal a political structure in which some lives are rendered less worthy of protection than others. This condition also resonates with Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence. Nixon defines slow violence as violence that occurs gradually and often invisibly, dispersed across time and space. Environmental disasters are particularly suited to this conceptual framework because their consequences may not be immediately visible. Toxic exposure can produce illness and genetic damage long after the initial act of contamination. The violence in *Swarga* is therefore both biopolitical and necropolitical. It operates upon life, but its ultimate consequences are often expressed through death, disability, reproductive loss, ecological destruction, and the erosion of collective futures.

3. Enmakaje as a Biopolitical Landscape

The landscape of Enmakaje is not merely a geographical setting; it is a political and biological space. Land, water, plants, animals, and human bodies are interlinked through ecological networks that are ruptured by toxic intervention. The pesticide catastrophe shows how environmental governance can function as a form of biopolitical control: agricultural productivity is prioritised over the health of local communities, land is treated as an economic resource rather than a living ecosystem, and human beings are reduced to components within a larger developmental system.

This system operates through a fundamentally instrumental logic:

- land becomes agricultural territory;
- agriculture becomes production;
- production becomes economic growth;

- bodies become labouring populations;
- nature becomes a resource to be managed.

Within this framework, the ecological consequences of technological intervention are externalised. The costs are shifted from institutions and corporations onto vulnerable communities, and the bodies of the affected population become sites of political inscription. Illness, deformity, disability, reproductive problems, and premature death expose the hidden violence of a system that claims to enhance life. The novel therefore poses a crucial biopolitical question: What happens when the management of life produces the destruction of life?

This paradox lies at the heart of *Swarga*. The rhetoric of development promises a better future, yet the actual future experienced by the affected population is marked by illness and uncertainty. The outcome is a form of toxic biopolitics, in which biological life becomes both the object and the casualty of governance.

4. The Necropolitics of Toxic Exposure

If biopolitics concerns the governance and optimization of life, necropolitics illuminates the conditions under which certain populations are systematically exposed to death. The tragedy depicted in *Swarga* is not merely that people die; rather, it is that the very conditions producing their deaths are structurally embedded within political and economic systems that continue to operate uninterrupted. The victims in *Swarga* inhabit what may be described as a necropolitical geography—a spatial configuration in which location determines susceptibility to harm. Rural communities, economically marginalized populations, and ecologically dependent groups typically possess fewer material and institutional resources with which to resist environmental destruction or demand accountability from governing bodies.

This structural arrangement produces a hierarchy of vulnerability:

- Some bodies receive greater protection than others.
- Certain environments are deemed more expendable than others.
- Some deaths provoke public outrage, while others remain statistically invisible.

Swarga challenges this unequal distribution of vulnerability by rendering suffering visible. The damaged body functions as a form of testimony: physical difference, illness, disability, and death communicate truths that official systems may attempt to conceal, minimize, or erase. The necropolitical dimension of *Swarga* thus lies in the transformation of an entire community into a population living under prolonged exposure to death. The catastrophe does not conclude when pesticide spraying ceases; its effects persist through bodies, families, memories, and future generations. This continuity renders the disaster especially significant from a necropolitical standpoint: the community is not merely exposed to death—it is forced to inhabit a world in which death has become an enduring condition of existence.

5. The Politics of the Vulnerable Body

One of the most powerful dimensions of *Swarga* is its attention to the body. The body becomes the archive of ecological violence. Where official narratives may use abstract terms such as "development," "agriculture," or "pest control," the body registers the material

consequences of these policies. Illness and disability transform environmental destruction into visible human experience. This is particularly significant for understanding the relationship between biopolitics and disability. The disabled body is often positioned within modern societies as a problem to be managed, rehabilitated, or compensated. Yet *Swarga* invites a different reading. The disabled body is not merely an object of medical or charitable intervention. It is evidence of structural violence.

The body asks:

- Who caused this suffering?
- Who benefited from it?
- Who was responsible for preventing it?
- Why were certain lives considered expendable?

In this sense, the body becomes politically resistant.

It refuses the disappearance of the disaster. The disabled and suffering body interrupts narratives of progress by demonstrating that development can produce its own victims. The body becomes a counter-archive against official histories. This is where the novel's ecological politics intersects with the politics of precarity. The affected population is not merely biologically vulnerable. It is also socially, economically, politically, and environmentally precarious.

The catastrophe creates a layered condition of vulnerability:

**environmental precarity → bodily precarity → economic precarity →
social precarity → intergenerational precarity**

Thus, the novel demonstrates how ecological violence produces a broader politics of precarious life.

6. From Environmental Disaster to "Death-World"

Mbembe's concept of the "death-world" offers a particularly productive framework for reading the novel. A death-world is not merely a place where people die; it is a space in which people are forced to live under conditions that systematically diminish their capacity to live fully. This distinction is crucial. Victims of ecological catastrophe may remain biologically alive, yet their lives are structured by illness, fear, disability, poverty, loss, and uncertainty. Life continues, but under conditions that continuously threaten its quality and duration. *Swarga* exemplifies such a death-world. The contaminated landscape becomes a space in which:

- Water can no longer be trusted;
- Food can become a source of danger;
- Reproduction becomes uncertain;
- Childhood is marked by illness;
- The future becomes unpredictable;
- Memory becomes inseparable from trauma.

Ecological disaster thus transforms the meaning of home:

- A home that should provide safety becomes a site of exposure.
- A landscape that should sustain life becomes a source of toxicity.

- A community that should guarantee belonging becomes a community struggling against disappearance.

This transformation produces one of the novel's most significant paradoxes: the search for an alternative world begins within a world that has become almost uninhabitable.

7. The Search for an Alternative World

Despite its engagement with catastrophe, *Swarga* is not a narrative of absolute despair. The novel's significance lies precisely in its capacity to imagine alternatives. The search for another world can be understood at three interconnected levels:

7.1 The Search for an Ecological World

The first alternative is ecological. The novel challenges the anthropocentric assumption that nature exists primarily for human exploitation. Its ecological imagination suggests that land, water, plants, animals, and human beings participate in a shared network of life. The alternative world is therefore not a return to "nature" in a simplistic sense. Rather, it represents a different relationship between human communities and their environment.

Instead of domination, it proposes coexistence.

Instead of extraction, it proposes care.

Instead of productivity alone, it proposes sustainability.

Instead of treating nature as property, it recognises ecological interdependence.

7.2 The Search for a Communal World

The second alternative emerges through community. Where institutional systems fail, collective solidarity becomes a form of resistance. The community becomes an alternative political space in which suffering is recognised and shared. This is significant because necropolitical systems often operate through isolation. Vulnerable individuals become invisible when their suffering remains fragmented. Community counters this invisibility. By remembering together, speaking together, and resisting together, affected communities transform individual suffering into collective political testimony. The alternative world, therefore, is not necessarily located elsewhere. It may already exist in the relationships between people who refuse to abandon one another.

7.3 The Search for a World Beyond Extractive Modernity

The deepest alternative imagined by *Swarga* is a critique of developmental modernity itself. The novel raises a fundamental question:

Can a system that destroys the ecological conditions of life genuinely be called progressive?

The answer implied by the narrative is negative. Development cannot be measured exclusively through agricultural productivity, economic growth, or technological advancement. A truly sustainable world must also account for health, dignity, ecological balance, intergenerational justice, and the right to inhabit a safe environment. The alternative world is thus a challenge to the political economy of extraction. It proposes a different conception of progress—one based on the preservation rather than exploitation of life.

8. *Swarga* and the Politics of Slow Violence

Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence offers a crucial lens for understanding how *Swarga* treats environmental catastrophe. Unlike war or terrorist attacks, which produce visible and

immediate destruction, toxic contamination often operates gradually, with effects that may only become visible years later. This temporal delay generates political difficulties: responsibility becomes hard to assign, the original act of violence may fade from public memory, and yet its consequences persist. In *Swarga*, literature reverses this process of disappearance. The novel makes slow violence narratively visible by:

- Giving temporal continuity to suffering
- Connecting past actions with present bodies and future generations

This is especially significant because slow violence often produces a crisis of representation. How can literature depict something that unfolds gradually, invisibly, and across generations? Mangad responds by transforming ecological damage into narrative memory. The novel thus becomes an archive of environmental injustice. Its narrative function is therefore political: it resists forgetting.

9. Alternative World-Making as Resistance

The search for an alternative world in *Swarga* should not be read as escapism; it is an act of resistance. This alternative world is constituted in direct opposition to the necropolitical world. Where necropolitics produces "death-worlds," alternative world-making strives to create "life-worlds." This alternative is especially significant because it expands what counts as resistance. Resistance is not only protest against a specific institution; it also involves imagining different ways of living. The alternative world is therefore a form of political imagination. It asks readers to think beyond the existing structures that produced the catastrophe.

10. From Necropolitics to an Ethics of Care

The movement from biopolitics to necropolitics in *Swarga* ultimately opens a third possibility: an ethics of care. If biopolitics manages populations and necropolitics determines exposure to death, an ethics of care begins with the recognition of interdependence.

Such an ethics would recognise that:

- human health depends upon ecological health;
- individual survival depends upon collective responsibility;
- present actions affect future generations;
- environmental justice is inseparable from social justice;
- disability must be understood within structures of violence and exclusion;
- vulnerable lives deserve protection not because they are economically productive but because they possess inherent dignity.

This ethics of care challenges the logic of expendability. The novel therefore moves beyond the binary between life and death. It asks what kind of life is worth creating and what kind of world can sustain it. In this sense, the "alternative world" is not simply a geographical destination. It is an ethical and political project.

11. Conclusion: From a Poisoned Paradise to an Alternative Future

Ambikasutan Mangad's *Swarga* (Enmakaje) offers a profound literary meditation on the politics of ecological catastrophe. Through its representation of pesticide-induced suffering, the novel exposes the complex relationship between the governance of life and the

production of death. A Foucauldian reading reveals how bodies and populations become objects of biopolitical management. A Mbembian perspective, however, demonstrates that the failure to protect vulnerable communities can transform biopolitical governance into necropolitical abandonment. The affected population is exposed to a prolonged condition of toxic vulnerability in which illness, disability, ecological degradation, and premature death become structurally produced. The novel's significance nevertheless lies beyond its representation of catastrophe. *Swarga* searches for another world. That search begins with the recognition that the existing world has failed. The poisoned landscape is therefore not simply a symbol of destruction; it becomes the starting point for imagining a different relationship between human beings and the environment.

The alternative world envisioned by the novel is grounded in:

- Ecological interdependence
- Communal solidarity
- Memory and justice
- Ethics of care

It challenges the developmental logic that treats certain landscapes and populations as expendable. It also challenges the political invisibility of slow environmental violence by transforming suffering into narrative testimony. The title *Swarga* thus acquires its deepest significance. The "heaven" of the novel is not necessarily a place that exists outside history. It is an imagined possibility—a world that could emerge if human societies abandon the logic of extraction and embrace an ethics of coexistence. The novel ultimately suggests that the struggle against necropolitics cannot end with the demand merely to survive. It must also involve the struggle to imagine and construct a world in which survival is not the highest aspiration, but the foundation for a dignified, ecological, and collective life. In this sense, *Swarga* transforms ecological disaster into a political question:

What kind of world must be created so that life is no longer treated as expendable?

The answer lies in the novel's search for an alternative—not a perfect utopia, but a life-world built through memory, resistance, ecological responsibility, and the refusal to accept death as the inevitable cost of progress.

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