

“Plantationocene”, Chemical Toxicity, and “Environmentalism of the Poor”: A Close Reading of Chandrasekhar Kambar’s *Shiva’s Drum*

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Abstract

In this capital-driven human-centric age, popularly known as Anthropocene, nature is always subjected to large-scale human-led violence and destruction, in the name of development, which ultimately results in severe environmental crisis. If we go by the environmental history of the globe, more pointedly, environmental history of India, we shall find that the environmental issues like pollution, global-warming, species extinction are largely due to the unprecedented growth of industrialization, and other anthropogenic activities. Undoubtedly, it’s the underprivileged “ecosystem people” (Guha and Martinez-Alier) who always turn out to be the scapegoats. Moreover, these impoverished people are even denied their fundamental rights for survival by the government and other government-backed powerful agencies. Similarly, Chandrasekhar Kambar’s classic novel *Shiva’s Drum* (originally written in Kannada in 2015 as *Shivana Dangura*) offers a horrifying picture of ecological crisis in the fictional village called Shivapura in the forms of water scarcity, chemical pesticide disaster, loss of livelihood, etc., owing to overwhelming human greed for monetary gain. However, in order to critically examine Kambar’s novel *Shiva’s Drum* (2017), I’ll primarily employ the theoretical framework of “Plantationocene” by Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, Lawrence Buell’s “toxic discourse”, and “environmentalism of the poor” by Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier.

Keywords: plantationocene, chemical toxicity, ecosystem people, environmentalism of the poor, ecological crisis

Introduction

This current geological epoch, popularly known as Anthropocene, bears other alternative names as well such as Capitalocene, Plantationocene, and Chthulucene. While Capitalocene, as proposed by Andreas Malm and Jason W. Moore, is marked by capital-driven ecological

crisis, Anthropocene, a term coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, is a more inclusive term signifying a human-dominated era. On the other hand, Plantationocene and Chthulucene, a couple of ideas put forward by Donna Haraway, refer to two geological epochs respectively characterized by plantation-based ecological crisis and forging connection with non-human living beings. Due to a constant increase in global population in the post-colonial period, particularly in the Asian and African countries, there has also been an unprecedented increase in the demand of food, energy, and other resources which leads to various environmental issues like pollution, poverty, global warming, deforestation, etc. The Plantationocene connotes an exclusively ecological destruction pertaining to profit-driven large-scale plantation. It generally occurs because of unbridled industrialized plantation or monoculture plantation of various cash crops like sugarcane, cotton, oil palm, etc., instead of basic food crops like paddy, wheat, and so on. This inevitably leads to nowhere but a severe loss of biodiversity. As Donna Haraway describes, the Plantationocene “continues with ever-greater ferocity in globalized factory meat production, monocrop agribusiness, and immense substitutions of crops like oil palm for multispecies forests and their products that sustain human and nonhuman critters alike” (Haraway 162). The term “toxic discourse” was first coined by Lawrence Buell in his authoritative book, *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001). The idea of toxic discourse, as theorized by Buell, denotes an existential anxiety arising from the perceived threat of environmental hazards caused by human chemical modification. Buell goes on describing how the idea of toxic discourse is always ignored and debunked by the Western environmentalists. Buell posits, “Seldom however is toxicity discussed as a discourse. This essay aims to define the forms, origins, uses, and critical implications of toxic rhetoric, conceiving it as an interlocked set of topoi whose force derives partly from the exigencies of an anxiously industrializing culture, partly from deeper rooted Western attitudes” (Buell 639). The chemical-induced toxic disaster vehemently destroys the traditional, innocent pastoral landscapes of nature and establishes a gothic-like complex pastoral. And, the immediate victims of these disastrous changes are none but the poor people who belong to the marginalised communities. These “ecosystem people”, who scarcely possess any land, coexist in close proximity with nature. They earn their daily living entirely relying on natural resources like wood, cotton, fruits, flowers, honey, and in return, they are firmly determined to safeguard their mother nature. Ramachandra Guha and Martinez-Alier have defined “ecosystem people” as “those communities which depend very heavily on the natural resources of their own locality- against ‘omnivores’, individuals, and groups with the

social power to capture, transform and use natural resources from a much wider catchment area; sometimes, indeed, the whole world” (Guha and Martinez-Alier 12). These ecosystem people including small peasants, landless labourers, tribals, pastoralists, and artisans, have often been rendered “ecological refugees” by the gigantic “omnivores” such as industrialists, politicians, and government. Thus, they are forced to seek refuge to a vocabulary of protest or “environmentalism of the poor”, which is defined by Guha and Martinez-Alier, as the resistance offered by ecosystem people to the process of resource capture by omnivores: as embodied in movements against large dams by tribal communities to be displaced by them, or struggles by peasants against the diversion of forest and grazing land to industry” (Guha and Martinez-Alier 12). Chandrasekhar Kambar’s eco-fiction *Shiva’s Drum* largely incorporates all the three above discussed major ideas. Another fitting example, in this connection, would be the Malayalam author Ambikasutan Mangad’s epic novel *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale* (2017), a translation of the original Malayalam novel *Enmakaje* (2009), which depicts the challenges faced by the people of Enmakaje, a village at Karnataka border in Kasargod district of Kerala, due to the lethal chemical endosulfan disaster. Chandrasekhar Kambar, hailing from Ghodgeri, Northern Kerala, is one of the stalwarts of Kannada literature. He has twenty-five plays, eleven poetry collections, and six novels to his credit. He has been conferred with numerous awards and honours such as the Jnanpith Award (2010), Sahitya Akademi Award, Padma Shri, and Padma Bhusan (2021). His works bear testimony to his rich experimentation with myth and modernity. Kambar’s famous novel *Shivana Dangura* (2015), written at a much later stage in his career, was translated into English by Krishna K. Manavalli in 2017 as *Shiva’s Drum* which has been “able to hold together Kambar’s ‘ruritania’ which includes everything- gods, myths, demons, dreams, tragic love, and terrible destiny alongside tractors, co-op societies, environmental concerns, global business enterprises, and so on” (Kambar viii).

Reading *Shiva’s Drum* in the light of Plantationocene

Chandrasekhar Kambar’s eco-narrative *Shiva’s Drum* (2017) opens with a historical account of the imaginary village called Shivapura, and it tells its readers how the life of the entire village revolves around the couple of surviving mythologies- one survives in the songs of the jogtis, and the other in the shepherds’ songs. The mythical banyan tree, which is believed to be thousand years old, has divided the village into two parts- one part is occupied by the upper-caste clans like the Gowdas and the Kulkarnis, and the other part is inhabited by the

‘outside’ or the ‘Dalit’ communities. The village is headed by Baramegowda who is vulnerable to women and land, and captures lands of other farmers by taking advantage of their crisis. Apart from his wife Paroti, Gowda has his concubine the Dalit Tungavva also, who has been given land for dwelling at the outskirts of the village. This lecherous Baramegowda, who always keeps himself busy with alcohol and women in his House of Pleasure, establishes a sugar factory, and distributes his lands to the farmers only to avoid taxes. The innocent farmers who earlier had no lands, start growing a cash crop like sugarcane in order to pay the taxes and make some profit instead of growing food crops. As sugarcane plantation requires water all the times and there had not been enough rains, they soon had to take water loans to continue their cultivation. As Tungavva describes the situation in her address to the farmers:

They have become money mad. Instead of growing their food, they grow sugarcane because it’s a cash crop. They think their land is too small for growing this! Rainwater and stream water are not enough! Not enough chemical fertilizer! They keep getting loans and pouring them on the land! They can’t pay back the loans...The crop we grow is not ours! Somebody fixes the price of your crops, somebody else buys them! You take what you get, and get back home with a beaten look on your face (Kambar 141).

This eventually results in the shortage of food as those sugarcane-cultivated lands are no longer suitable for growing paddy and other basic food crops, and a number of suicides committed by the bankrupt farmers. Thus, this monoculture plantation-led ecological disaster aptly validates the idea of Plantationocene that “is distinguished by the racialized, colonial, and corporate exploitation of people and the environment through the global proliferation of agri-food monocultures (specialized agricultural production and food systems based on single types of crops and livestock)” (Karl S. Zimmerer et al 624-625). In this context, we are also reminded of the large-scale indigo plantation during the British Raj in India, when peasants were forced to grow indigo plants in place of food crops.

Exploring Chemical Toxicity in *Shiva’s Drum*:

Chandrasekhar Kambar’s *Shiva’s Drum* prominently deals with the theme of toxic disaster, better say, chemical toxic disaster. As narrated in the novel, the poor Dalit farmers of Shivapura completely abandon the traditional method of agriculture used for growing food

crops, and engage with extensive cash crop plantation such as sugarcane, with the establishment of Baramgowda's sugarcane factory. In order to get a good harvest, they profusely use chemical fertilizer and pesticides. As described by the narrator:

The farmers who had taken to sugarcane, had neglected the crops that were necessary for them. The wealthy farmers never ate the grains or vegetables they grew. Since there was the smell of chemical fertilizers in the grain, they'd get the grain and vegetables from other poor villages where they didn't use such fertilizers. The reason they had thrown away cart-loads of tomatoes wasn't only because they didn't get the prices they wanted, but because they couldn't eat them (Kambar 142).

Thus, when vegetables and grains are further grown in these lands, they not only bear the smell of the chemical fertilizers, but also the residues of the chemical pesticides which are transmitted from one organism to another of the food chain by means of energy flow. This chemical toxicity asserts its malignant impacts upon human and non-human lives in the forms of births of deformed human babies and grotesque dead animals. As we see in the novel, Baramgowda's daughter Bagirti gives birth to a deformed child whose "arms and legs were thin. But the body was big" (Kambar 138). Tungavva's buffalo also gives birth to a dead calf:

A bloody shapeless form with deformed limbs, this stunted calf had a head in the front and another near its tail! The front head looked like it had already grazed, and there was white foam at its mouth. Its hind legs were crooked (Kambar 143).

Moreover, due to the toxic onslaught, the delicious jambul fruits of Shivapura have lost its organic essence and turned tasteless:

He tasted the fruit. It was tasteless. No juice in it either. It felt like biting into leather. When they looked at the other trees, they found the same overripe, shriveled and small-sized fruit (Kambar 144).

But the horrible truths behind the chemical-induced disaster are revealed later on in the novel when Chambasa and the priest Namahshivaya bring to Baramgowda's notice a couple of newspaper article titled "A Gandhian Who Killed His Own Dream" and "Total Development of Shivapura", written exclusively on the ravaging condition of Shivapura. The articles unravel the fact that the Mallimadu, the pond, located in the island of rocks, is getting polluted due to the direct disposal of the chemical wastes of the American Jackson Company

into its water, thus literally spreading poison into the bodies of those who consume it and ultimately paving the avenues for the ongoing ecological disaster. With this, the Gandhian Baramegowda's dream of founding "an English school and college, and a hospital for Shivapura" also gets shattered:

When Baramegowda sent an application to the Belagavi DC to start the English school and the college, and a hospital in Shivapura, the DC promised to get money from an American charity institution. The DC agreed, and the charity institution inspected all the places in Shivapura. Then they decided that Mallimadu was the right place. They wanted to fill the ditches, ponds, and hollows, and level the land...Accordingly, there was an agreement between Mr Erapanagowda and the American Jackson Company. Then we know they started levelling Mallimadu. But what they are filling there is not stone and mud. It is the foreign factory's chemical fertilizer waste! Literally poison! (Kambar 168)

This burning delineation of chemical toxicity resonates with Lawrence Buell's idea of 'toxic discourse' which calls for "an awakened toxic consciousness and green activism" (Buell 642) among the nonprivileged.

Studying "Environmentalism of the Poor" in *Shiva's Drum*:

In Kambar's novel, the majority of the villagers of Shivapura are underprivileged landless Dalits who can rightly be called the people from the "unimagined communities" (Nixon 150)/ the "ecosystem people" (Guha and Martinez-Alier 12). Towards the close of the novel, we see how these out and out "outside" villagers of Shivapura are compelled to suffer a lot in the face of a severe environmental crisis. They are unethically plundered of their resources and subjected to physical and mental torment by the powerful men like Baramegowda, Kuntirapa, and the local police inspector. When these farmers under the leadership of Chambasa and Namahshivaya put up a collective resistance against the rulers, they are inhumanly beaten up and imprisoned. Chambasa's wife Sharava is brutally raped by the inspector. All these heart-rendering injustices lead to a terrible violent end as Chambasa kills all the five accused people. As the novel narrates:

The moment he [Chambasa] reached, people started crowding in. Some farmers played the drums in advance. They began to feel the spirit of the protest. Men who came to participate in the protest stood on one side, and women who came to see them

stood on the other. Both groups grew. Later Namahshivaya also came and joined the group...As they walked, more and more people joined in. Then Belagavi farmers and reporters also joined in...When Namahshivaya was addressing the people from the high rock under the nilgiri trees and telling them of the aims of this protest, a posse of policemen from Belagavi came and surrounded them...The inspector who was in the jeep, looked sharply once at Chambasa and once at the people. Filled with contempt and bitterness, he swallowed his own spit...He slapped Chambasa sharply on the cheek...When Namahshivaya saw that Chambasa was bleeding in the mouth, he came forward. The police hit him too not even bothering about which part of his body they hit. Then they threw him into the jeep (Kambar 173-174).

Thus, the poor villagers of Shivapura who are basically peace-loving people and whose lives are out and out nature centric, are made victims of dirty power politics. In this very context, Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier's idea of 'environmentalism of the poor' can be largely applied.

Conclusion:

Chandrasekhar Kambar's environmental fiction *Shiva's Drum* is a riveting tale of human-nature relationship that also sheds light on the contemporary Dalit injustices. It is a mesmerizing tapestry of myth, history and legend that dexterously pen-portrays the plight of the farmers in the age of industrialization and capitalism. Kambar's novel is indeed a fable of our times.

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