

ENVIRONMENTALISM AND POSTCOLONIALISM: RE-READING THE BHOPAL GAS TRAGEDY IN THE LIGHT OF AMULYA MALLADI'S A *BREATH OF FRESH AIR*

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After the First World War (1914-1918) and the Second World War (1939-1945), one of the many equations that the global community could infer is that the advancement of science is directly proportional to the fervor of terror in the destructive activities carried out in the world with the assistance of scientific technologies or scientific inventions. The progress in the arenas of science, commerce and technology begets a simultaneous decline of humane considerations towards natural beings, towards living beings. The horror is that this imbalance has been construed to be natural or normal in our times by scientists, laymen, administration and the like.

One of the objectives of this paper is to study how environment is considered in an era of capitalism when the governments have to make policies and introduce projects keeping in mind the economic progress and prosperity of the nation or the States. It also studies how the neo-colonial powers view the environment in the postcolonial countries, especially when the former gets opportunities to open industrial firms in the ambit of the latter. As demonstrated by selected social occurrence, this study lays bare the fact that the State and industrial firms with imperial interests have not been having an acceptable feeling towards nature in the recent centuries. Their motives harm nature as an immediate effect, and without fail, this would ultimately lead to the disaster done to the human community.

Development has been one of the slogans of the State always. Industrial establishment and the economic and infrastructural benefits that they bring are important modes of development for a nation. The State may invite commercial powers from foreign nations too to operate in its domain---a policy which showers advantages through taxes imposed and internationally competent products manufactured. However, complications arise when the State, in haste, releases permissions and red-carpet welcome for foreign companies irrespective of the suitability of company's operation in the host nation.

It has been promoted widely by the knowledge systems of vested interests that progress of the nation can be afforded at the cost of environment. The contentions in connection with the setting up and operations of nuclear power plants in our nation are a typical example. As a precise instance, can be cited the controversies revolving around the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant. The agitations are made to face the seemingly reasonable claim that nuclear energy is inevitable to satisfy both needs and luxuries of the nation today. The unappealing haste and eventual lack of impeccable planning in executing the decisions related to constructing nuclear power plants in our nation are the real fathers of such controversies. Both happen on the sides of the administration and bureaucracy. When such placards like scientific progress and nation's

welfare do not work, the state will then employ oppressive measures to shove off agitations and revolting voices. To let science and technology have a red carpet welcome, the State thus become an oppressive system over the mass, over physical environment.

Innumerable instances of the State becoming an outright destroyer of nature, and thus humans, can be seen in the history of our nation. One of them is selected here to explicate how nature and human beings are helplessly placed in danger zones when the rule has an eye only for the status of a developed country before the global imperial powers. The study of fictions or social, political and cultural incidents in literature in the contemporary scenario attains greater scientific quality and authenticity only when the study has a theoretical background. A research on the issue of physical environment has to be carried out in the light of the theory named ecocriticism as far as the present scene of literary theory and literary research goes. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (Glotfelty 1996: xix). Ecofeminism, as an offshoot line of thought of ecocriticism, too needs to be relied upon for the purpose of carrying out this research. Ecofeminism must not be seen as making women the primary caretakers for the local environment, but as bringing men into the work of care for the household and earth that is now borne disproportionately by women (Ruether ix).

Amulya Malladi's 2003 novel *A Breath of Fresh Air* is the text critically analysed in the present chapter. In the novel, all the incidents narrated have their roots in the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. This true incident in the history of India is also an instance of the State rendering unthoughtful welcome for industrial firms with colonial inclinations. Ecocriticism and environmentalism have always been anxious about the neo-colonial forces exploiting the environmental peace in the developing and under-developed nations. The tragedy is that the latter category of nations becomes welcoming hosts to the former, expecting a shower of progress and prosperity. This paper reads the novel *A Breath of Fresh Air* to unveil such political conditions which are explicit and at times implicit.

World's most tragic disaster associated with industrial establishments, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, took place at night on 2nd December in 1984. The toxic chemical named methyl isocyanate leaked out of the pesticide plant Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh and the death toll reported in various surveys and news reports varies from 3000 to 8000. The number of injured persons, according to the government report, is 5,58,125. This amount, in total, would come up to 75% of the total population of Bhopal. One and half lakhs of the victims still survive. As the presence of MIC inside human body creates serious gynaecological problems and genetic aberrations, the horrid after-effects get transmitted to posterities too.

. . . I had seen people die around me that night. I had seen the city of Bhopal turn into a cemetery for months to come after the incident. Mass burials had taken place and I couldn't shrug the thought that I could have been one of those bodies piled up against. One another, buried anonymously, or burned to a cinder without any last rites . . . I knew that every breath I took was leading me to death, untimely or otherwise. (BFA 173)

It is to be noted here that the company was warned beforehand by various bodies of the expected leakage. In 1976, trade unions complained of pollution inside the plant. In 1981, a labourer in the factory inhaled phosgene accidentally and died. Even experts from the US, after

1981, suggested taking measures to prevent a leakage that was likely to happen. However, the authorities in charge of UCIL did not make any constructive move to stop the great tragedy from taking place. It was found that methyl isocyanate was stored in huge tanks and that too in an amount which is greater than the prescribed one. In 1983 and 1984, before the disaster, there were severe leaks in the plant. But even after these incidents, the safety measures were not intensified by the concerned officials. Several safety systems were maintained poorly and some were even stalled in order to save money. All these factors paved the way easily for the greatest industrial disaster to happen in Bhopal, India.

It was reported that in the United States, the plants that use methyl isocyanate as a raw material implement great security systems so that no harm to the people is anticipated. However, UCIL did not take any significant care regarding the safety of the lives of people in India. The land contiguous to the factory was made a spot for disposing the unwanted chemicals. These substances were indisputably harmful to each and every element in nature. The tube wells near the factory were helplessly poisoned and had to be abandoned. The test reports of 1989 showed that the soil and water in and around the UCIL plant were fatal to fish and other small living beings. The major pollutants are found to be mercury, chromium, copper, nickel, lead, naphthalene, etc... The State Government had to even introduce a scheme for improvement of pure water supply to the area.

The colonial project of subjugations into colonies using physical strength as in wars has become outdated or little viable. Nevertheless, the imperial powers devise new strategies as they can't cease their obsession with colonizing the weaker nations. The neo-colonial project centres mainly on markets and industries. Establishing of factories and such commercial establishments by developed countries within the purview of developing or under-developed nations must be seen as a part of that neo-colonial project.

Pramod K. Nayar points out the necessity for an alliance of environmentalism with postcolonial theory. In his article "Postcolonial Theory: A New Ontology and Radical Politics", Nayar introduces the term Postcolonial theory which, according to him, "equally highlights the ecological and postcolonial concerns of his theorizing" (245). The new forms of colonial agenda disregard nature in its way to set up industrial firms. This leads to ecocide – fatal destruction of nature. Marginalization of nature is the effect. So "a greening of postcolonial thought" (Nayar 245) is necessary in the present context.

The State devises its plans to execute developmental projects disregarding the interests and rights and wishes of those whom it finds to be less important in the totality of a state or nation. Driving off *en masse* from the homes and homelands, forced vasectomy and even communal massacres are some which the history of India has already witnessed. Nuclear radiation, leakage of poisonous gas and spraying poisonous pesticides are the recent strategies unconsciously born out of the unholy alliance of the State with the profit-ridden capitalism.

The Bhopal Gas Tragedy, as it is known in the history, took place in Madhya Pradesh in December 1984. The majority of the victims of this total leakage from the Union Carbide factory were slum-dwellers. The poor residents of the colonies named, Oriya, Chola and Jayaprakash and the homeless who camped beside the railway lines formed the majority who fell victims to the spread of methyl isocyanate. The dwellers of the Oriya colony were really dalits who migrated to Bhopal from Orissa.

The greatest threat is the foreign mercenary firms' indifference towards the natural resources, moral frame work and humans of the host nation. The Union Carbide Factory's cruelty to the whole district of Bhopal is a historical lesson to the State that placing development

on a zone antagonistic to survival of humans and nature would bring great disasters. “Analysts had likened it to the atomic bomb disasters in Japan” (BFA 77). The Narmada and Chipco movements are epitomes of struggles against development that denies the human beings the right to live peacefully. Environmental justice must be ensured in all developmental projects.

The words like development, nation’s progress and employment possibilities convert any injustice done to the people through polluting the environment into great new technological endeavours. The major product manufactured from the Union Carbide factory, was the pesticide named Sevin. The Union Carbide is a multinational company with its head office in the USA. Sevin was produced by adding alpha naphthol with methyl isocyanate (MIC). The Union Carbide authorities once hindered the release of a report that clearly states that MIC is one of the most dangerous chemical substances ever produced and that handling of it could definitely effect serious harms.

While the company decided to reduce the total expenditure, the security facilities were made to deliberately decline. The Federal Agency functioning for the protection of the environment even found that there were 67 gas leakages during 1980-1984. When a worker named Muhammed Ashraf died due to leakage of the poisonous gas, controversies came to the limelight. However, the then Employment Minister of Madhya Pradesh rejected all arguments that the Union Carbide factory is a potential threat to the people of Bhopal.

The company agreed to give the victims 470 million dollars on the condition that no legal proceedings will be done against the factory. It proved to be totally a matter between the government and the factory authorities while the victims had absolutely no role. The agreed amount was not released ever; the company sold all its assets to another company and the Union Carbide chairman Warren Anderson could enjoy safe life in the USA. Therefore the Bhopal Gas Tragedy is a clear case of the State becoming a party to the initial violence and final injustice inflicted on the powerless by the mercenary mercantile system through the havocs done to the physical environment.

The foundation for the episodes in Amulya Malladi’s *A Breath of Fresh Air* is the Bhopal Gas Tragedy which took place in 1984 in Madhya Pradesh, India. This fact is obvious from the narrative pattern of this family story as the mention of the tragedy intervenes frequently in the novel. The story revolves around three characters namely Anjali, Sandeep and Prakash. Prakash, a military officer, agrees to pick up his wife Anjali from Bhopal Railway Station in December 1984. However, he spends his evening with the wife of a superior officer who happens to be his extra-marital relation. Prakash then goes to sleep proving to be an epitome of irresponsibility.

Anjali expects Prakash’s arrival and waits for him at the railway station. At that same hour, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy occurs – thousands of people get exposed to methyl isocyanate gas that leaked out from the Union Carbide factory. Anjali too couldn’t escape from inhaling the gas which results in physical disorders later in her life. If Prakash could take her off to his residence at the right time from the railway station, Anjali would have been spared of even minor consequences of one of the greatest tragedies in the history of India.

Later, Anjali becomes convinced of Prakash having illicit relation outside marriage and divorces him. She then marries Sandeep and Prakash marries Indu. Anjali – Sandeep couple has a son named Amar who bears the traces of Bhopal Gas Tragedy as fatal heart and lung diseases on account of being born in the womb of Anjali, whose internal organs consumed the poisonous gas on the day of the tragedy. Obviously, Anjali has more than enough reasons to hate Prakash. After years, Anjali and Prakash happen to live in the same place – in Ooty – with their respective families. Prakash makes in his presence felt in the life of Anjali again, with repentance this time.

Though Anjali finds this second coming of Prakash as mere intrusion and nuisance, Sandeep is disturbed, comparatively, to a greater extent. He is doubtful whether Anjali repents for her decision to divorce Prakash before whom Sandeep feels inferior for various reasons.

Amidst these emotional confusions, Amar's physical condition worsens and he is subjected to more serious medical treatment. He is hospitalized and shifted to military hospital with the assistance of Prakash. The hospital becomes the place of final scene in which Amar expresses his desire to go out and have a breath of fresh air. Anjali, his mother, lets him have his wish and takes him out of the room to the balcony. From there, Amar takes his last breath. The Bhopal Gas Tragedy literally shook the conscience of the whole nation at the time of its occurrence. Innumerable lives were lost as mentioned earlier and the sad and horrific thing is that the region and its inhabitants are still not absolutely free from the evil effects of the gas leakage. Babies born even today manifest traces of the 1984 tragedy through biological deformities. Methyl isocyanate has disturbed the genetic make-up of the innocent victims who inhaled the gas and these aberrations get displayed through their later generations which are presently in Bhopal. Here is a portion of the narration of the day of leakage by Anjali in the novel:

The homeless had started gathering their meager belongings, while others were standing up, moving, looking around, asking questions, trying to find out what could be done. Soon it became unbearable and the exodus began. People started to clamor to get out of the station . . . The struggle to get out of the station became harder because no one could breathe . . . People who just like us were trying to find a way out. It looked like every automobile in the city was out on the streets. The sound of honking vehicles mingled with the cries for help . . . We reached the taxi and as soon as we got inside, people clamored and banged at the car windows . . . I opened the taxi door and pushed into the people who swarmed around the car. There was no relief for anyone . . . the voices of others, screaming and yelling and demanding the gods for an answer. (BFA 3-7)

The above scene is pictured in the prologue of the novel which is narrated by Anjali. After being taken to the military hospital from the mess in the street, the next day, Anjali failed in her attempts to concentrate precisely on anything.

. . . I heard the faint voice of a newscaster saying something about a Union Carbide factory and some gas that had leaked into the city of Bhopal. (BFA 7)

Thus ends the prologue. This is how the Bhopal Gas Tragedy finds its way for the entry into the novel.

The remarkable feature is that the novel focuses on the social disasters caused by the great tragedy explicitly and in detail only at this part which is the very beginning of the novel. Though statistical data reveal the depth and vastness of the cruelties of the leaked gas, the novel little depends on such factual elements related to the real incident. The novel is more a fictional work rather than a political one. The greater focus throughout the novel is on the emotional conflicts of and the chemistry of relations between the prominent characters which are few in number. For the purpose of dragging the work on to a terrain of discussions on the great social disasters that the Bhopal Gas Tragedy has effected, the individual characters in the novel should be construed to be the representatives of the whole class of victims of the tragedy. However, even then, among the leading characters, Anjali and Amar only can be attributed that status.

How Bhopal Gas Tragedy is portrayed as disastrous through the portrayal of the character Anjali needs to be analysed here. She, unfortunately, becomes one among the thousands who inhaled the gas to suffer its consequences on the body during the whole of their remaining days on earth.

The struggle to get out of the station became harder because no one could breathe. My lungs felt like they would implode and even though I tried to suck in as much air as I could, it was not really air that I was breathing. It was something toxic, something acrid, something that was burning my insides and scratching my eyes. Each breath I took made me dizzy and the burning sensation, the terrible burning sensation, wouldn't go away. . . I held the edge of my sari to my nose, hoping to dissipate some of the spice in the air, but nothing would make the air clean. (BFA 4-5)

The inhalation of the gas gave Anjali chronic bronchial asthma. This point would suffice to treat Anjali as a representative of those many patients with incurable breathing troubles who are one of the products of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Those sufferers had to live with the diseases almost until their death and some transferred the bodily difficulties to their offsprings too. In the novel, Sandeep elaborates the manifestations of the internal harm done by the gas on Anjali:

Her breath was labored and each time she inhaled she made a hissing sound . . . when she clutched at her chest trying to breathe, I started to panic. I wanted to call an ambulance, get her into an emergency room. And then her eyes bulged out and she fell to the floor.

. . . She managed to grab her bag that was lying by the feet of the chair she has been sitting on and yanked out an inhaler from inside it.

When she could breathe again, she told me she had asthma and how she had gotten it. I listened intently, in rapture that she had survived one of the worst chemical catastrophes of the century. . . Anjali had been there that night, breathing the poisonous gas. And she was here now with me, struggling to breathe. (BFA 76-77)

The title of novel refers to the fettle of the victims at the time of the spread of the gas and also after that. Like Amar, the victims do not relish absolutely the soothing effect of a breath of fresh air. A breath of fresh air is, by nature, a right of all living beings in the universe. Even this right, which is accomplished with ease, is barred as far as the Bhopal Gas Tragedy victims are concerned. When the State offers assistance and protection for the profit-ridden corporate groups, even the elementary, natural rights and privileges of both humans and nature are frozen.

The repression flows from the State and its corporate interests to the citizen, through nature. Debauching the nature in an incurable manner becomes an easy mode for the State to forcibly impose its interests upon the general public. It is obvious that any harm on nature and environment would cause harm to human beings of all community, class, gender, time and region. Therefore, when the State disregards this indisputable truth, it can be assumed that the State is free of the fear of getting harmed, that the State is inhuman.

Amar, the only son of Anjali and Sandeep, serves more than one purpose in the novel. Like Anjali, he too is a representative of the community of patients with severe respiratory diseases which is one of the major horrific consequences of the leakage of the toxic gas. The doctor found that the baby to whom Anjali gave birth had difficulty in inhaling oxygen immediately after its birth. The baby was put in an incubator and a doubt lingered whether there was a problem with his lungs.

The couple consulted many a specialist and realised that their child's inborn deformity or disease was a result of the presence of methyl isocyanate gas in the internal organs of the mother, i.e., Anjali. Amar suffered from pulmonary fibrosis. This is a disease that appears only after forty years of age. However, in the case of Amar, the methyl isocyanate gas damaged his lungs. Amar once undergoes an operation to cure valve stenosis which is a problem that appears on the heart valve. Nevertheless, this treatment did not better his condition. Major Mukesh Mohan, the pulmonologist who treats Amar, says:

I have had a few cases from the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, but they were relatively minor . . . Madam, I am very sorry that you got trapped there that night. I have heard some scary stories from colleagues who were posted in Bhopal then . . . we still don't know how damaging the gas really was. New lung diseases caused by the gas seem to keep cropping up . . . (BFA 195-6)

Amar, in the novel, signifies one of the important credos of ecofeminism---women suffer first the consequences of all harm done by humans to the environment. Ecofeminists observe that the tragedies, which are results of man's exploitation of nature, at the global level, affect primarily the women of the Third World countries. For instance, cutting of trees would reflect as homemakers' realisation that they are losing their sources of fuel. However, more serious reflections of chemically disturbing the environment through incidents like the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, etc... are manifested in the fatal physical troubles that women of the respective places bore. The chemical particles affect their wombs and this would only make the forthcoming generations too victims of the great tragedies. In the Japanese cities that were shattered towards the close of the Second World War, women of even today give birth to children with physical and mental deformities. In Bhopal too the condition is the same.

A Breath of Fresh Air has thus taken special care to represent those mothers whose wombs were perpetually made impure after the leakage. Through Amar, the novel portrays the tragic state and life of those children who were destined to feel the toxic gas right in the womb in thus to be physically or mentally challenged. Anjali writes:

. . . Amar's breathing problems were related to the methyl isocyanate gas I had inhaled in the Bhopal Railway Station.

But that was years ago and I couldn't understand how something that happened so long ago could effect my baby. Then I found more about the deadly gas and how I shouldn't have more children, that any child we had would probably have the same set of problems. Some of the specialists said that they were surprised that I had even gotten pregnant. One of the symptoms of inhaling methyl isocyanate gas was infertility.

And just like that, my past took over my future. (BFA 205)

Setting up of industries has always been considered as a mark of national progress. In the next era, where globalization and liberalization are widely accepted policies across the world, it has become easier for the private firms from foreign nations to set up industrial projects in lands which they find to be fertile. The host nations get enticed by the economic benefits that such a project would bring to enhance nation's development. However, the companies with imperial and colonial interests are found to be taking less care in the matter of preserving the environmental peace in the host nation. The authorities of the US-based Union Carbide factory disregarded every warning against the harm that they would render the people of Bhopal. The

victims are spread across generations in Bhopal. Amulya Malladi's novel *A Breath of Fresh Air* focuses on this aspect – that disturbing the rhythm of the physical environment will be giving rise to disasters not among one generation but those disasters will be transferred even to innumerable generations of the forthcoming era.

The scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries involuntarily facilitated a utilitarian, calculating view of the natural world that not much later would become the driving force behind its violation and exploitation by the industrial revolution (Bertens 199). Rather than being a literary theory, ecocriticism is a sustained attempt to set right the approach towards nature. Ecocriticism demands to take nature seriously, as far as is possible, in its own right and for its own sake. Kate Soper once satirically commented thus: "It is not language which has a hole in its ozone layer" (Coupe 124). All the major philosophical schools of thought which later enjoyed the status of literary theories were found to have an obsession with language and linguistic matters. They disregarded social matters like destruction of nature and eventual hazards. Sopers' comment was a direct attack against this existing attitude.

While earlier theories took a philosophical stand negating the existence of a thing called real nature, ecocriticism challenged this standpoint asserting that solid nature really exists. If Raymond Williams is right in his opinion of having great complexity in the very word 'nature', nature cannot be proved so simplistically to be non-existent. It should be added here that ecocritics do not fall in the traps of naive realism on their way to prove nature to be a real matter. They defend nature and make efforts to bring it to the centre of critical thinking and practice. It has thus come to such a stage that ecocriticism is the most popular term for the study of literature and culture from a perspective informed by environmental politics or scientific ecology.

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