

Defeating Endosulfan, the Behemoth and Coca-Cola, the Giant: Life Narrative as Environmental Justice

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Abstract--- *The basic working premise of this paper centres on two life narratives- Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior transcribed by JothibaiPariyadath and Jeevadayini (The Life-Giver) by Leelakumariamamma. An attempt is made to construe these self-narratives as Environmental Justice Life Writings by looking at the way they confront the mindless and imperceptive implementation of mega developmental programmes in the southern state of Kerala in the wake of Globalization. It is the tireless alertness over the environment coupled with their rustic wisdom that equip them well enough to intersect the ecological imperialism. While Leelakumariamamma chronicles her elongated legal battle against the demonic Endosulfan, Mayilamma dwells on her aggressive involvement in the Plachimada struggle against the 'Cocacolanisation.'*

Keywords--- *Endosulfan, Coca-Cola, Ecological Imperialism, Globalization, and Environmental Justice.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In an age which is appallingly on the verge of environmental corrosion, human beings are perpetually susceptible to the choices of consumerism. Self-aggrandizement and self-gratification immanent in human temperament make nature sulk at the receiving end. Scott Slovic observes, "It is clear that the Thoreauian process of awakening is not merely a timeless private quest, but a timely -even urgent- requirement if we are to prevent or at least retard the further destruction of our planet. In this respect both Leelakumariamamma and Mayilamma turn out to be eco-warriors trying to intersect the ecological imperialism.

II. DISCUSSION

Jeevadayini (The Life-Giver, 2011) unravels an extraordinary and exceptionally unique life story of a woman who waged a relentless legal battle against the use of a deadly pesticide- Endosulfan in the Cashew Plantation Corporation in Kerala. M.A. Rahman testifies, "When the Endosulfan was banned all over the world our Leelakumariamamma became the global mother. When they did the aerial spraying of the poisonous Endosulfan, she was the first one in the village to drain the well-water using kerosene motors and removed the poisonous sediments. And her book serves an ample testimony to her struggle of resistance"(Jeevadayini12).

Although Endosulfan is termed as life annihilator by Leelakumariamamma, the message she gives in the book is that of life providing, hence the title *Jeevadayini*. In the wake of

the Green Revolution, the state agricultural department started distributing high yielding variety (HYV) seeds and pesticides to the peasants. As an employee in the department, Leelakumariamamma became a link of that chain of unrestrained distributors. Initially farmers were reluctant to experiment with these newly marketed high yielding seeds. In their squalid attempt to attract farmers, the department announced 'subsidy' scheme. Farmers revelled at the high production using new seeds and pesticides. But it did not last long. The new farming could only upset the local biodiversity. Leelakumariamamma recalls:

... However the much celebrated Green Revolution had its own limitations. Pests could survive pesticides. To destroy the much powerful pests, much more powerful pesticides were used. Farming became all the more expensive due to a huge agricultural loss. Many farmers came out of farming and some of them even ended their lives using the same pesticides. (18)

There were some groups of people who flourished excessively under Green Revolution in Kerala. Those who took advantage of the situation were the big manufacturing companies of pesticides and fertilizers. Many government employees were given gifts by these business tycoons. Such an inordinate nexus between these two groups were at the expense of the poor farmers who were being devoured one by one. Very often Leelakumariamamma met with reprimanding of the higher authorities as she raised voice against the indiscriminate use of the pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

Leelakumariamamma narrates a very significant anecdote in her life. A new phase of her life starts when she was transferred to Periya, a place in Kasargode district of Kerala. That was a period of the large scale cashew production in the Kerala State Government owned Plantation Corporation (PCK). Since 1982 PCK has been doing aerial spraying of the carcinogenic pesticide Endosulfan using helicopters purportedly to protect the cashew crops from 'tea mosquitoes.' When they did this, it reached out the nearby houses and wells. But the local villagers were not at all aware of those facts. They were only concerned about a good yield as most of them were the workers in the same plantation. Even though many people in the locality died of choking hazards and unknown ailments, nobody connected it with Endosulfan. Leelakumariamamma noticed how the school children passing by the plantation site gravely suffer from cough and related choking hazards. When she lost her own brother it was like a last straw on camel's back.

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With a staunch determination and an unflinching courage she initiated a legal battle in the year 1994. Though she did not get any reciprocal correspondence, Leelakumariamamma continued writing letters and complaints to the authorities including the Women's Commission of the State. The Lower Court verdict staying the Endosulfan use was the first act of justice on her path. Those were the days of threats and intimidation. The Plantation Corporation, a huge force to be reckoned with, forged a false petition against Leelakumariamamma and her associates. At that juncture *SEEK*, an environmental organization stood with her. Resistance and protest rallies were organized in all quarters. The High Court of Kerala pronounced a favourable verdict banning Endosulfan forever.

Towards the end of her memoir Leelakumariamamma recalls:

Our long waging struggle ended with the ban on Endosulfan. Now it's the time for action. Many lives have withered away in the poisonous rain. Now they have to be rehabilitated safely and comfortably. There are parents who constantly bemoan the future of their children affected by Endosulfan. To make them pacified, rehabilitation should be done impeccably. (67)

Unfortunately even today Endosulfan victims have to rely on protest rallies and strikes to ensure justice for them. The ongoing protest under the leadership of the noted activist Dayabai speaks volumes about the deplorable condition of the pesticide victims in Kerala.

A link between the ethnicity and the global ecological consciousness Mayilamma displayed an unflinching courage to resist the 'Cocacolonisation' in her village Plachimada, a small hamlet in the district of Palakkad in Kerala. Hindustan Coca Cola Beverages Private Limited (HCCBPL), the Indian subsidiary of the multinational giant Coca Cola Company started its bottling plant at Plachimada in March 2000. With the consent of the Perumatty Panchayat, HCCBPL acquired 34.4 acres of paddy field and converted it as the bottling plant. As per the statistical details provided by Rohan D. Mathews, "The Kerala State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) granted the company a permit to produce 561,000 litres of beverage per day, with an average requirement of 3.8 litres of water for a litre of beverage. The source of water was primarily ground water from about 6 bore wells and 2 open ponds and about 2 million litres of water per day was extracted" (Mathews). This kind of mindless exploitation and lopsided development were absolutely beyond the ken of those local villagers whose rustic wisdom shapes their ecological consciousness.

As a tribal woman who cannot claim any academic credentials, Mayilamma relies solely on her unvarnished experience. She could clearly perceive that the unrestrained extraction of ground water can pull down the local biosynthesis. She remains absolutely realistic in her approach to the problem of ecological imbalance. The Plant's hazardous and highly detrimental effects were deeply felt in the whole village. The chemical sludge resulting from the bottle washing was deposited on the road side. The unknown diseases gripped the villagers. The ground water was contaminated signalling environmental alarmism. Mayilamma was the first person to be warned against her community's ecological dispossession. Under

her courageous leadership, they erected a protest pandal in front of the Coca Cola Company at Plachimada on 22 April 2002. Mayilamma asserts: "I learnt it was a special day - Earth Day! For poor people like us could there be a more appropriate day than this to fight for our soil, air and water... wherever I go I have only one thing to say, our air, water and soil belong to us alone! We will always fight against those who try to destroy them" (55-57).

Mayilamma's intimate reminiscences of her childhood times which are full of pastoral vignettes serve as temporal brakes in the narratives. The wretched and highly unpleasant environmental conditions of the present day Plachimada get juxtaposed too:

Those were the days! These days there are no rituals or festivals. Getting our daily mealson time itself has become quite an achievement. Also a demon has arrived which is sucking up all the water and destroying everything around. The rich 'muthalalis' have bought up the remaining lands and converted them into coconut groves. What work do we have there now?...but now we have got a new job - squatting in the protest pandal! It was then the fathers and mothers would narrate the stories of their childhood and its flavours. (42)

The company's attempts to sabotage the protests of the local population heightened the tragedy of those illiterate commons. The tribal uprising against a corporate giant takes a different turn when many interest groups and NGOs joined the affected group. "Protests, public speeches, processions, rallies, humiliation - that is how a year passed. In the meanwhile, all sorts of people came and left. Some of them, I heard, had come to test the purity of water. They declared that the water was unfit for drinking! It became clear to me as the days went by that the Company brought ruin to the people of the place and nothing else" (59).

Mayilamma interrogates the notion of nationalism and freedom when she defines freedom as unrestricted access to land, air and water. Abnegation of these vital elements is nothing but a state of slavery. She poses a perspicuous question: "Will eating sweets, planting the flag and shouting 'Jai Jai' mean freedom?" (70).

III. CONCLUSION

Without being confined to the bounds of an 'atrocious narrative' by the subalterns, both *Jeevadayini* and *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* attain the status of a planetary narrative of environmental justice which can connect the local destruction and ransacking of natural resources with other global environmental struggles by the disadvantaged group against the arrogance and impunity of the corporate giants.

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