

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*: A Study in Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Disaster Narrative

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Abstract

*Of late, literary writers have become more conscious of the destruction of the natural environment and penned down their concerns and grievances regarding this environmental degradation. The pivotal intention of the ecocritical writers is to offer consciousness toward a healthy and serene nature. They mainly highlight the tainted environment that leads to the extinction of living creatures from the surface of the earth in due course of time. Postcolonial ecocriticism provides an amalgamation of studies on social and environmental conflicts, it concerns the complex relationship between social and human history with the natural environment. This paper explores Indra Sinha's fictionalised account *Animal's People* (2007) in a similar context to the industrial disaster in Bhopal (1984) which by its extensive chemical leakage, killed thousands and left countless more physically disfigured. Here the novelist deeply touches on the life and the predicament of a physically blemished and warped protagonist, Animal, who is left with a permanently crooked spinal column that necessitates him to walk on all fours, in Khaufpur, a fictional city modelled on Bhopal in India. The novel highlights the massive disaster and cruel inhumanities of corporate companies and speaks against the injustice. *Animal's People* is a narrative of the movement between humanity and animality and of the nature of the margins between them. The novel has gained much critical acclaim for this paraphernalia, including being rewarded with Commonwealth Writer's Prize and shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize.*

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Environmental Injustice, Gas Tragedy, Disfigured, Corporate Apathy, Inhumanities.

Eco-criticism is the analysis of the environment and literature from an interdisciplinary point of view. It is the scientific analysis of the environment to find out a possible way out for the development of the environmental surroundings. It is a term that is coined from Greek *Oikos* and *Kritis*. "*Oikos*" means "household", a nexus of humans, nature, and spirit. "*Kritis*" means to judge, "the arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order" (Howarth 1988: 163) in all regards. The term eco-criticism was first used by William Ruckerts. Ecocriticism was officially announced by the publication of two original books written in the 1990s, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm

and *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Lawrence Buell. Cheryll Glotfelty is the accepted exponent of Ecocritics in America. Ecocriticism has initiated the interest of profuse researchers and scholars for almost the last thirty years. It is mostly associated with the interrelations between human beings and the natural environment. Early literary theorists focused on the issues of race, gender, class, and region as some of the most significant criteria of critical evaluation. But the late twentieth century has awakened to a new global threat that is ecological imbalance and disaster. Ecocriticism is the outcome of this new thinking and consciousness that in near future there will be hardly anything beautiful in the natural world to converse about unless we are vigilant and cautious from right now about our mother earth. Literary speaking disaster discourses are part of ecocritical studies and are characterized by elemental anxiety between the ethical and aesthetic characteristics of destruction. There are three aspects of disaster narratives: i) apocalyptic scenarios and risk narratives; ii) narrative patterns and the semantics of disaster literature, and iii) the role of literature as a medium of cultural discourse.

My concern here is with the second one i.e. narrative pattern and the semantics of disaster literature: Apart from the master narrative of the apocalypse, environmental disaster literature deploys a range of other narrative patterns and semantics, some of which inscribe these texts into long-lasting literary traditions. The ambivalence of “flirting with catastrophe while remaining sure of security” (Kerridge, 248) is also a pattern of contemporary environmental literature. “The narrative model of the distant spectator, however, may disguise to what extent people are eventually involved in the environmental crisis; it also suggests distance and control and can hence create an ambivalent sub-semantic, running contrary to any intended warning function where an imminent catastrophe is the subject matter. Furthermore, analysis of contemporary disaster discourse reveals the religion or the sacred continue to play an important role.” (Dürbeck 1-2)

My paper is concerned with *Animal's People*, a novel published by Indra Sinha in 2007. Indra Sinha was born in 1950. He is one of the writers of English and Indian origin. This novel was shortlisted for that year's Man Booker Prize and is also the winner of the 2008 Commonwealth Writer's Prize: Best book from Europe and South Asia. It commemorated twenty-five years of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. This novel reminded us of one of the world's most awful industrial disasters that occurred on Indian soil, Bhopal, the Capital city of Madhya Pradesh. On a night of chill December in the year 1984, the ‘Union Carbide India Limited’ (in short UCIL), a division of the multinational company based in the United States and its pesticide plant in Bhopal leaked and dispersed tanks containing 27 tons of deadly poisonous MIC (Methyl Isocyanate) gas, a volatile component of the pesticide Sevin, instantaneously killed thousands of people. Since then, the catastrophe has taken away 3, 787 lives, hurt 5, 58, 125 people including approximately 3, 900 permanent deformities, and continued to inflict disaster and devastation

for the subsequent generations of sufferers. The entire city has turned into a necropolis. After this gruesome occurrence, the general populace as well as the diverse global activists carried on the struggle for the rights of the safety of people and the environment. As Smita Sahu in her essay “The Emergence of Environmental Justice in Literature”, postulates, “The novel discusses the devastating impact of gas leak from a chemical factory on, not just the people, but also on ecology” (549). Sinha, as a writer of Ecocritical consciousness, has apprehension towards the ecology and environment and makes all of us alert about the annihilation of nature and the environment due to the leakage of lethal Methyl Isocyanate gas. Sinha’s *Animal’s People* is situated in the imaginary town of ‘Khaufpur’, an unreal place of terror. The word ‘Khaufpur’ has an Urdu origin which means *fear*. It was the story about an adolescent 19 years old young man named ‘Animal’. ‘Animal’ the very name is embedded in the dichotomy between human and animal. It is Animal’s remembrance that he walked on his four legs because his spinal column had been crumpled due to the deadly chemicals of the horrible gas leakage incident in Kampani’s industrial unit. Priya Naik, in her assessment of the novel, says “In *Animal’s People* the Union Carbide is Kampani, Bhopal is Khaufpur, and Anderson, the man who comes to represent the evils of the Union Carbide is Peterson”.

Animal, the protagonist of the novel, is continually mocked by other kids in his childhood with the nickname ‘Animal’. Instead of separating himself from this insulting epithet, he accepted it heartily and everything that was associated with an ‘Animal’ entails, all but evading his human characteristic and forming a bold, often rude character in the process. In other ways, it represents a case of what critic Monique Allewaert renders parahumans. Allewaert suggests that parahumans reside on a flat surface next to humans and animals, thereby subverting enlightenment organizational thinking that places a specific margin between the two. Animal descends under the hypothetical umbrella of parahumans due to his inability to maintain a humanist or posthumanist ethic, owing to his failure to deconstruct his mental state, and ‘Kompani’ in the novel stands in for Union Carbide. The gas leak that blemished Animal, exposed him to his humankind, but through assuming the change, he is capable of reconstructing his living being and ultimately arrived at a position of acceptance. However, this recognition is stained by internalized binaries that, although challenged by Animal, are never get away with. Perhaps the best thing that summarizes Animal’s parahumans is under the ambit of the harmonious song that he rhymed for himself with the help of Elli:

“I am an animal fierce and free
in all the world is none like me
crooked I’m, a nightmare child
few on hunger, running wild

no love and cuddles for this boy
like without hope, laugh without joy
but if you dare to pity me
I'll shit in your shoe and piss in your tea." (172)

On a broader aspect, the novel projects a redefining of identity and reception of apparent deficiency as available power and strength for combating postcolonial oppression and injustice on an individual as well as a collective level.

This novel is authored from an Animal's way of expression. The entire account is the speech recording in audio records. Indra Sinha has offered 23 audio tapes to divide the whole novel accordingly into twenty-three parts. The audio records unfolded how Animal was accepted by the people of the society, his workings of the mind, the people's ordeal and discomfiture, their brave fight for justice, and the Kampani's sheer apathy and irresponsibility. The hours of that night of the dreadful tragedy on which the whole story was constructed, tolled many deaths to the townspeople. The people, who fortunately outlived the tragedy, survived with horrifying ailments owing to that toxic chemical smog and the contamination of water resources. 'Khaufpur' was mainly occupied by the poor and underprivileged community and they even could not afford to spend adequate capital for their cure and healing. Their expression of sheer anger towards the foreign 'Kampani' made them disbelieve every little move and every single person. Elli Barber, an American medical practitioner, and physician visited 'Khaufpur' to start a charity clinic with the empathic intention to aid and assist the afflicted masses. The people of the city initially doubted that Elli might have a connection with the 'Kampani' people. But later on, they perceived that Elli was not a representative of the 'Kampani' rather she was a humanitarian, and only then did the people start visiting her free clinic.

The novel's opening lines first introduce Animal, the eponymous anti-hero's indifferent and positive denial of his humanity: 'I used to be human once. So I'm told. I don't remember it myself, but people who knew me when I was small say I walked on two feet just like a human being' (1). Matthew Loyd Spencer rightly observed: "With this bit of narration a precedent is already set, in which Animal's humanity is a past condition that has been removed by the trauma, both mental and physical, of the moment of the chemical spill, an event Animal refers to only as 'that night' (14)" (Spencer 2). The characters in the novel served themselves as living reminiscences of the effects of the poisonous gas besides relying on Animal's mode of narration as a resource for proof of the horror initiated by the gas leak. The animal was the most conspicuous instance as his physique and its movement confirmed that not only his individuality was tied to the tragic event forever, but also his very existence served as a signifier

for massive disaster and affliction of the poor and a large degree of corporate profit, severe apathy and lack of proper rationality.

Whereas Animal is the most burning instance of the physical implication of the leakage, other individuals also bear its inheritance. Somraj, once an eminent and accepted vocalist, lost his voice to sing due to 'that night'. A Roman Catholic nun, Ma Franci, who happened to be Animal's surrogate mother, also dismissed her capacity to speak or comprehend either Hindi or English, leaving her only with native French, which Animal alone can understand among all the Kaufpuries. Other characters undergo indirectly more from the long-term poisonous effects of air, water, and earth pollution. The tragi-comical situation that "I'm alive" and unhurt physically by the spill is incredibly more pathetic as they must still have to confront the mental toll of being surrounded by persistent illness, death, and demise. The detrimental lingering effects of the disaster signifying multiple losses for the characters are also illustrative of what is termed by critic Rob Nixon as 'slow violence'. Only the population of 'Khaufpur' must encounter the realities of their corporeal anxiety and uncertainty daily.

Sufferers like Pyare Bai missed her husband, Pandit Somraj was devoid of his family unit and his voice too, and Huriya Bi missed her daughter and was parted with a maimed and disfigured granddaughter. The catastrophe even did not spare the unborn child, like the aborted foetus that Animal defined as "Kha-in-the-jar" (8). It also bore the testimony of the harm done by the lethal gas. Residing in a city, crowded with tragic narratives, Animal described quite a several stories of victimization. The soil of 'Khaufpur' remained tarnished with poison for decades after that fatal accident and the extremity of its inhabitants continued to pollute the environmental and ecological balance of the town. The novel recreated the dreary and desolate image of contemporary Bhopal, where toxic chemicals still lay bare. In general, this novel also exposed the issue of environmental decay and degradation in the metropolitan province and represented a distinctive style and expression of environmental rhetoric.

The complete literary piece is the recorded incidents of the main protagonist Animal to an unnamed journalist ('jarnaliss'). Initially, Animal declined to narrate the happenings and occurrences as he was fully aware that hardly any justice would come out of whatever had happened in reality. After getting convinced, he agreed to recount the tragic events. These utterances by Animal exemplified how perilous the toxin was. "No birds sing. No hoppers in the grass. No bee humming. Insects can't survive here. Wonderful poisons the Kampani made, so good it's impossible to get rid of them, after all these years they're still doing their work" (29). The protagonist, Animal's rendering threw light on the utter callousness of the corporate houses, the fight of the victims for justice, venomous chemical gas, polluting places, and so on. Indra Sinha represented the character of Animal to give voice to the poor, feeble, and

vulnerable citizens who all were patiently waiting for the impartial right. The novel is a communication to the readers by the writer, Indra Sinha, through the recounts of Animal to the anonymous journalist, conveying the incidents and gruesome anguish and misery. “So, from this moment I am no longer speaking to my friend the Kakadu jarnaliss, the name’s Phuoc, I am talking to the eyes that are reading these words, Now I am talking to you” (12).

Zafar was a professional activist and he fought against the ‘Kampani’. He had formed a group to work with. The assemblage comprised Farouq, Zafar’s faithful aide, Somraj, a former specialized vocalist, and Somraj’s daughter, Nisha who later got married to Zafar. Animal also was introduced into Zafar’s squad and acted as a secret agent. They fought for obtaining impartial justice. They gave a fight to the ‘Kampani’ and the greedy politicians who braced the ‘Kampani’. After much disbelief that Ellie was not a representative from ‘Kampani’, they made her join them. Zafar continued his hunger strike as a mark of protest before the trial of the lawsuit and died of that hunger strike. “Zafar is an amazing man in that he holds on to his beliefs and principles even when he is on the brink of death, burning up from within. Even at this point he refuses to sip a drop of water”. Zafar’s demise made it easier for the ‘Kampani’ to win over the lawsuit. The inhabitants of ‘Khaufpur’ were abandoned to negotiate with their awful fate and had any optimistic sign of getting recovered from therein.

Animal reported that the people from different corners of the world expressed pity for their troubled state and the brutal occurrence. But that would not be of any use. Nabanna Mistri interviewed Animal by questioning what made him believe that his reporting about Khaufpur’s tragedy would create hardly any difference. He replied, “Tragedy is a useless word pinned to the arse of what can’t be told or thought or felt. For years I narrated stories of that night, I spoke till my tongue ached and my teeth were ground smooth by the passage of words. Nothing changed. Now I have given up talking of great calamities my story is not about tragedy. It is about small people who live their lives in the shadow of giant words”. He entreated that the journalists were merely vultures. Somehow if an awful thing happens, they would arrive like flying vultures to ‘Khaufpur’ to enquire about. Animal said that the journalist was attracted perhaps by ‘the smell of blood’ on ‘that fucking night’ (5). It would hardly transform anymore. The animal was twice bent with animosity and resentment. But at last, he agreed to record his recounting. He gave a clear and candid commentary of the appalling episodes of the Khaufpuries to the newsmonger journalist. The animal described the unpleasant and repulsive incidents of the poor and hapless people who had been the sufferer of the fatal night. People were struggling with the consequences of the wells with toxic leakage, deformed babies, respiratory problems, and visual impairment even after two decades of the catastrophe. It was like the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust. He vehemently protested against the barbarity and brutality of the ‘Kampani’ because this was also accountable for his physical distortion and

deformity, as for Ma's insanity, similarly for Hanif's sightlessness, equally for Aliya's fever, Somraj's depression, and above all for the torment and agony of the unborn 'Kha-in-the-jar'. It was a foetus in the jar. The spectacle of the tiny living being, also the prey of the leakage, brought him a philosophical insight that being on 'fours with a bent back' is better than the "unborn" (237) victims of the Kampani's venom. Due to that lethal gas, countless unborn children in the womb had to be terminated. He said, 'in Khaufpur, they might be called a friend as Kha so that those unborn were his friends' (59).

Elli stated Mr. Frank, her ex-husband, about the people's extremely bad physical condition. Mr. Frank was a law practitioner who was devoted to the cause of the 'Kampani'. She said the plight of the people whom she encountered in 'Khaufpur', and narrated about Hanif Ali, who was left behind by the toxic chemical gas for about twenty long years. Again Elli noticed a lady with her child spilled her milk on the soil. Elli described the incident to Mr. Frank. She questioned the reason for that strange behavior. The woman replied, "I won't feed my kid poison.....Our wells are full of poison. It's in the soil, water, in our blood. It's in our milk. Everything here is poisoned" (107). Again the woman warned Ellie "If you stay here long enough, you will be too" (107). She added to it the shocking and terrifying thing she witnessed day after day and mentioned how the 'Kampani' declined to offer help to these distressed people. The gas affected every human organ like the eyes, the lungs, and even the uterus of the ladies. Some ladies often had problems with their menstrual cycle due to the severe toxicity of the poisonous gas. Ellie narrated about the foetus and she implored her husband to talk at least with the 'Kampani' to disinfect and clean the industrial unit. "You can cry", she says. At least get the Kampani to clean the factory. Its poison is in the wells, They're in people's blood, they're in mother's milk. Frank, if you came to my clinic, I could show you. Specimens, I mean, Foetuses, babies that never made it, you wouldn't want to see such things, even in your nightmare" (322).

Through this textual analysis, I emphasize the mentioning of physical affliction and distress in survivor's lives and the legal records give evidence to the failure of getting just redress, but more significantly it seems to interpellate an account of the state and its functionaries bestowed in the Processing of Claims Act (1985) and the argument of the state as the protector, that comes before resolution and confront its final result. "Victims have come to formulate personal and political subjectivity through bodily suffering and in doing so mobilize physical pain as a way of making claims upon the state; specifically, to call for the kind of government protections articulated in the logic of *parens patriae* and thus for a welfare state that has not materialized in practice" (Rebecca 73). Differently speaking, victims corroborate not only the failure of providing justice in the Bhopal tragedy but also constitute it, particularly as a failure of just governance that should have been redressed by the words of honour and assurances of the government's safeguard and protection policy to its people. "These

evocations of welfare are revisionary however in so far as they are specific to the needs of survivors, and differ from the state's conception of welfare before and after the explosion" (Rebecca 74). In *Animal's People*, Sinha tried to show the actual failure of the state. This is, somehow, can be termed toxic governance. The state did not show any willingness to protect its inhabitants rather it manifested as a repressive mechanism characterized by corruption and politicization. Instead, the novel radically offered the condition of state and citizen relationship through survivor-specific concepts of welfare. The apathetic political liability, mobilization of the injured physique and its relation with the state, making of claims against the disappointing political realities of toxic governance, and the general public's strategies of survival for a better form of postcolonial governance are some of the major concerns highlighted in the novel. This novel also accounts revision of Animal's unique parahuman method of identity formation and it shapes the tale of global exploitation and violence. It represented a portrayal of private exercise in the form of Animal's life that portrays the supremacy of literature to live outside the pages by situating itself at the core of the issue without claiming to be all engirdling.

Indra Sinha had minutely drawn the pen picture of the affliction of the victimized and the accounts of that tragic night all through the narrative. He mostly emphasized the toxic perception to the readers. People were in deep depression and wretched condition. People were separated from their near and dear ones and the incident made them shrink to the edge of poverty. For more than two decades, thousands of people's physical health had become destroyed by the poison and they waited for proper redress. Thus, Indra Sinha opened the vista of the consequences of toxicity and disaster with the plights of the inhabitants in the narrative. Animal's concluding vocabulary reinforces this view: "All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us" (366). *Animal's People*, as well as the readers, are left with untold potential for transformation.

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