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Animal and the Apocalypse: Religion and Urban Ecology in Indra

Sinha's *Animal's People*

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Abstract: The emerging field of Ecocriticism has revolutionized the study of literary texts by drawing attention to the relationship between the poetics and politics of environmental concerns. The paper attempts to explore how Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007) deploys religious tropes and imagery as a textual strategy to raise questions about urban ecology and environmental activism. Based on the events of the 1984 Bhopal disaster, Sinha's novel (which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2007) can be read as an engagement with the ethics and politics of socio-centric environmentalism where both ecology and human society become victims of economic and political manipulation.

Key Words: Mythology, Religion, Animal, Environment, Ecocriticism.

The paper attempts to explore how Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007) deploys religious tropes and imagery as a textual strategy to raise questions about urban ecology and environmental activism. The deployment of mythical narratives highlights the centrality of religious eclecticism in the novel. Just as the cosmopolitan worldview of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) gets underscored through the coming together of folk mythology and ecology especially through the legend of the forest goddess Bon Bibi, Sinha's *Animal's People* also brings together narratives from Hinduism, Islam and Christianity as embodied in the idea of destruction/Qayamat/Apocalypse:



Tonight is this night the night of Qayamat which Ma calls Apokalis, a word in which is Kali's name, who's also called Ma. Yes, Ma is Kali Ma, why did I never think of this? Garlanded with bones she'll stalk the streets of Khaufpur crying the end of the world. (333)

The sense of apocalypse connects the traumatic memories of the factory disaster to a sense of future marked by retribution and justice. In the quoted passage, the image of the Goddess Kali who signifies death and destruction gets juxtaposed with the night of the "Apo(kali)s" thereby bringing out a larger humanistic concern with survival and struggle. It is important to see how on the one hand, the protagonist who is named as 'Animal' rejects any kind of religious identification/affiliation yet at the same time he is also aware of diverse religious discourses. It is through Animal that the author incorporates polyglotism in the narrative not just in terms of language but also through the various mythical narratives. This polyglottic mixture of religious discourses serves to emphasize the secular worldview of the *Khaufpuris* in the novel as these marginalized people manage to transcend their religious and communal barriers and thereby stand united against the oppression and injustice meted out by the Company. In other words, the transformation of the sacred into the secular then offers a space where collective human agency can be voiced and harnessed, as for instance, the activist Zafar often cites mythical codes of heroism as a rhetorical strategy to sustain the collective struggle. He is inspired by the figure of Imam Hussein, who is a warrior martyr from Islamic mythology and serves as an icon of strength and endurance against the powers of evil. In fact, the myth of Hussein then becomes a central force that connects the *Khaufpuris* to a sense of collective identity and memory.

The mythological narratives in the novel also perform a crucial function in relation to the representation of trauma itself. Mythology becomes the site where trauma can be articulated. Throughout the novel Animal describes that night of the disaster through gothic and surreal images and invokes Hindu and Islamic mythology in order to convey a sense of horror that



could not be described otherwise through conventional tropes of language. In the Third Tape, Animal questions:

Do you suppose anyone can explain, why did the Kampani choose this city to make its factory? Why this land? Is it by chance that the old name for this place is Kali's ground? Is it by chance that Siva her husband wears cobras round his neck? (32)

In the cited passage, Animal yet again refers to Goddess Kali and her husband Siva as both these Hindu deities signify time, mortality and the terror of destruction. It becomes a moment where Animal attempts to explain the trauma through the irrational or the supernatural. Despite his conscious rejection of religion, Animal subconsciously resorts to religious iconography in order to rationalize the collective suffering. The fire walking episode in the novel also becomes a significant moment in this context.

On the occasion of *Ashara Mubarak* or the ninth night of Muharram- which is a mourning festival among the Muslims to memorialize the killing of Imam Hussein- Animal accepts the challenge to walk over the fire. It is worth noting how the entire scene has a carnival like atmosphere where the mythical narrative of death, loss and mourning is manifested through the ritualized and performative act of inflicting pain and torture onto the physical body. Through a rich narrative structure, the *Ashara Mubarak* invokes the night of that chemical disaster through the image of the infernal fire. Animal offers a long, intense monologue punctuated by the cry of "Ya Hussein" that transforms his trauma into a moment of catharsis. Animal's body then becomes the embodiment of the collective suffering of the Khaufpuris and at one point he even considers surrendering to the fire in a moment of anguish and defeat. But what is also remarkable about Animal's response to the *Ashara Mubarak* is the way in which he yet again secularizes the whole event. As he says in the Fourteenth Tape:

The mourners are defiant, never will they give in to evil powers. For me, who am neither Muslim, nor Hindu, nor Isayi, this is a music that could also comfort Isa



miyan dying on the cross or go with Sri Rama into exile from Ayodhya. It's all one to me, what I like is the defiance, I like it a lot. (215)

In a very subtle way the fire walking episode aligns Animal with the various mythical figures of martyrdom such as Jesus Christ and Hussein whereby he is transformed into an archetype of suffering humanity itself. The *Ashara Mubbarak* performs another crucial function as it brings together characters like Elli, Zafar and Somnath who represent different worldviews and sentiments. It is interesting how the fire walk reminds Elli of the “hell hole” or the hazardous furnace where her father worked at the steel mill. In other words, the fire itself becomes a loaded metaphor, an image of terror and de-humanization that connects Elli's memory of Pennsylvania with the inhabitants of Khaufpur. In fact, Sinha's novel celebrates a cosmopolitan and secular ethos as evident in the inter-communal romantic affair between Zafar and Nisha or in the marriage of Somnath and Elli.

Mythical and religious narratives henceforth allow cosmopolitan values to emerge in the novel. Apart from religion, Hindustani classical music as emblemized in the character of Somraj plays a significant role in the novel. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee in his analysis of Sinha's novel argues how the underlying philosophy of classical music connects the world of the human with that of the non-human (Mukherjee 158). For instance, Somraj observes how the frog's croaking inspires the sixth note of the Indian classical scale. In other words, Somraj and his music embody the “principle of unity through dualities in aesthetic, social, political and environmental dimensions” (Mukherjee 159). Music facilitates the romantic union of Somraj and Elli which also symbolizes the union of two different cultures. In other words, music, in the manner of mythology, too becomes the site of cosmopolitan ideals in the novel. This reminds us of a similar episode in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* where the worldviews of Piya, Fokir and Kanai get interconnected through Fokir's song and Kanai's translated version of it. However Mukerjee's discussion of the trope of music in the novel does not take into account the thematization of trauma. Just as mythology enables Animal to articulate his trauma, music for Somnath becomes a constant effort to recuperate from his



trauma. Somnath who was once the “Awaaz-e-Khaufpur”, the “Voice of Khaufpur” is no longer the cultural representative of the town because of the lung damage he suffered from the chemical disaster. The loss of his voice then reflects the symbolic silence of Khaufpur itself whose traumatic history remains unheard in the national and international forum.

Animal’s imagination, apart from mythology, is also shaped by popular Bollywood and Hindi songs. In Tape Eight he mentions to Elli a song from the Hindi film *Jaanvar*- a melodramatic tale of romantic love that mirrors his own aspirations- “The name means Animal, so it’s my movie” (94). In the novel, Animal comes across as the stock figure of the urban flaneur and given this subtext of Bollywood, he also reminds us of the cinematic figure of the *tapori* or the street thug. He also uses the metaphor of cinema to assert his position as a speaking subject who controls the narrative on his own terms rather than just offering what the journalist wants to hear. In the second tape, he tells Chunaram “In my movie there is only one star and it’s me” (9). There is an interesting episode in the fifth tape where 9/11 attack on the twin towers is juxtaposed with the factory disaster at Bhopal. While the former gets international media coverage, the massive tragedy at Khaufpur is often left unspoken and unrepresented in mainstream media. As Animal observes “Here in Khaufpur we had that night. Nothing like that happened anywhere else” (61). He sees the 9/11 destruction as a constructed hyper-reality, a trick similar to that of “Bollywallah special-effects” as he calls it. As readers we catch the irony in the fact that while an event of violent terrorist attack can be represented in popular media, stories of environmental degradation never reach the news. There is an apparent gap in how reality is perceived by the First and the Third World. However, as the novel progresses we see how the townspeople finally manage to draw international attention to the questions of legality and justice.

Animal’s bawdiness, dark humour, comic wit, voyeurism, multilingual performance and his cynical yet poignant contemplations bring out the liminality in his character. As Mukherjee argues, the character of the Animal embodies both human and non-human attributes. If hunger and hyper sexuality define his animal instincts, his linguistic abilities



confirm his humanness (Mukherjee 151). And as we have seen his humanness is also defined through his knowledge of religious iconography, mythology, music and Bollywood. Endowed with this liminality, Animal can freely negotiate not just between “humans of various kinds, but also between non-humans and humans” (Mukherjee 152) At the same time Animal does not exercise absolute agency even when he has access to certain people and places. As Patrick Murphy points out in his essay “Community Resilience and the Cosmopolitan Role in the Novels of Ghosh, Grace and Sinha”, how despite his polilingualism Animal cannot be officially heard given his deformity and status as an outcast. Rather it is only the cosmopolitans such as Elli and Zafar who have voices that can be heard by government officials, lawyers and Khaufur elite (Murphy 160). Nevertheless, the figure of the Animal also becomes symbolic of the collective de-humanization suffered by the subalterns in the wake of economic exploitation and environmental disasters.

As mentioned before, the urban ecology occupies centre stage in *Animal's People*. As Lawrence Buell observes in his essay “Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends”, while the First Wave ecocriticism privileged rural and wild spaces over urban areas, second wave ecocriticism has challenged that dichotomy and has also reclaimed metropolitan landscape as an equally fruitful ground for ecological work (Buell 93). First Wave studies followed a preservationist ideal where “environmentalism equals nature protection in thinly populated remote areas” where as Second Wave ecocriticism examines the other historical strand of environmentalist thinking-“public health environmentalism, whose geographic gaze was directed more at landscapes of urban and/or industrial transformation rather than at country or wilderness, and whose environmental ethics and politics were sociocentric rather than ecocentric” (Buell 94). In other words, issues such as work place safety and waste disposal then become central to questions of environmentalism. Sinha's *Animal's People* can be read as an engagement with a similar ethics and politics of socio-centric environmentalism where both ecology and human society become victims of economic and political manipulation.



The questions of environmental and human safety in the context of global corporatism occupy centre stage in Sinha's novel which is a fictional re-telling of the aftermath of the 1984 Bhopal Gas Disaster. Rob Nixon in his essay "Neo-Liberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque" argues how Sinha's novel becomes a critique of the contemporary neo-liberal order where Animal and the community at large are stripped of their basic humanity due to the exploitation by transnational corporations and other forms of absentee corporate colonialism. (Nixon 449). As Nixon observes, the novel engages with "a local materiality while exposing the web of transnational forces that permeate and shape the local" (Nixon 450). The idea of 'slow violence' also becomes important in Nixon's essay as the various form of chemical and radiological slow violence cannot be represented unlike the other forms of spectacular violence (Nixon 445). This is also reminiscent of the 9/11 allusion in the novel which juxtaposes the spectacular violence in America with the "slow" and unrepresentable violence of Khaufpur/Bhopal. Pablo Mukherjee also mentions in his book how the American media interpreted the Bhopal Gas disaster as an Indian failure of management and human error and its incompatibility with advanced technology of the West (Mukherjee 137).

To conclude, Sinha in his novel celebrates collective human agency that can resist and challenge the hegemonic state structures. As the closing lines of the novel end on an affirmative note where Animal sees himself not as an individual but in terms of a collectivity- "tomorrow there will be more of us" (366). He redefines humanness on his own terms and emerges as the representative voice of the de-humanized subaltern. While Sinha primarily engages with the question of socio-environmental activism, he also advocates a cosmopolitan ethos through the various tropes of polyglottic language, religion and culture that allow various communal, social and racial identities to be transcended. This paper has explored how religious and mythological narratives in the text become cosmopolitan forces that can bring individuals together for collective activism. The secularizing impulse as embodied in



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Animal becomes a highly resourceful element in the micro world of Khaufpur to counter the repressive apparatus of the state and global imperialism.

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