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“We are the people of Apokalis”: Third World Disaster through Animals’ Eyes in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*

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Abstract: The focus of this paper is to study the representation of industrial disaster, power politics and social inequity in the novel, *Animals’ People* by Indra Sinha. The setting of this novel is the fictitious city of ‘Kaufpur’ representing the city of Bhopal, India, that experienced the Gas Tragedy occurred in 1984. The narrative illustrates what happened after the toxic gas emissions from an American-owned chemical plant. The novel follows a 19-year-old boy’s life named Animal who was severely deformed by the disaster caused by the factory and how he perceives its social consequences on himself, and subsequently how corporate negligence and Western political dominance have affected the environment and have negatively impacted society as a whole. The novel addresses eco-crime and the notion of “slow violence” as a long-term way for those causing eco-crimes to inflict pain on both the ecology as well as the people who inhabit that space. This study examines these issues and the themes of marginalized voices, the effects of eco-crime on both human as well as the nonhuman world, and the critique against colonialist hegemony throughout the text.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Disaster fiction, Ecocriticism, Slow violence

Listen, injustice will triumph, thousands will die in horrible ways. [...] We are the people of Apokalis [apocalypse].
(Sinha 63)

Set around 2002 or contemporary Khaufpur, which translates as “terror town”, a fictional town based on 1984 Bhopal, the novel is dictated by Animal, a young, deformed boy of nineteen whose back is twisted by the poisonous gas explosion making him walk on all his four. Khaufpur is a fictional town, devastated by a toxic gas explosion from a chemical plant owned by an American “Kampani”. The narrative is set in the backdrop of industrial disaster of Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India, where on the night of 3rd December of 1984, an American owned Union Carbide plant emitted at least 45 tons of highly poisonous Methyl Isocyanate gas [MIC] in the neighboring densely populated area killing at least 15000 people as a direct result of the gas leak. Those who did not pass away right once suffered for decades afterward.

The fiction is divided into 23 chapters which are presented as tape records of several days in the form of interview of Animal by an unnamed Australian journalist. Through this interview the “Kakadu jarnalis”, as addressed by Animal, wants to pen down a book about the incident of that night and the direct sufferers of that man-made catastrophe. These 23 tapes are

interwoven to display the story of “Animal” and his “people”. The story is about the struggle of the poor, helpless people for equality, dignity and justice in a society which is made hollow by inequality, injustice, violence and corruption. Animal’s “people” or the inhabitants of Khaufpur are the victims of marginalization, ecological exploitation and discrimination by the wider community and their voices are silenced by those in power turning them into subalterns. However, despite all these obstacles Animal and his “people” refuse to surrender against injustice and keep on searching for justice. By making a community of resistance, they come together to protest against those in power and demand change in their circumstances.

Articles by various scholars have been written on Sinha’s masterpiece that analyses the text in multiple layers. In “A Memento Mori Tale: Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* and the Politics of Global Toxicity” Stacey Balkan observes the text as a reminder of inevitable death or the reminder of suffering of the poor as a constant phenomenon. Liam O’Loughlin in his “Negotiating Solidarity: Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* and the ‘NGO-ization’ of Postcolonial Narrative” discusses the text from a different perspective. It examines the “relationship between transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and postcolonial disasters as represented in literature”(101). Délice Williams’ “Spectacular Subjects: Abjection, Agency, and Embodiment in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*” analyses the representation of body in the text through Julia Kristeva’s concept of “abjection” (586). Adele Holoch in her “Profanity and the Grotesque in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*” discuss the question of “what is human, as well as what constitutes human rights, across national and class boundaries” (127). Taylor in his “Powers of Zero: Aggregation, Negation, and the Dimensions of Scale in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*” observes how the nothingness of the have-nots can be their strength to fight the profit driven exploitation. But none of the above mentioned research articles discuss the text as a text about postcolonial disaster and its outcome on the inhabitants of Global South in the epoch of Anthropocene. This chapter of the thesis emphasizes on how the profit making, ‘first world’ industrial giants appear in a ‘third world’ country with a promise to uplift the country from its ‘postcolonial’ position and finally ends up exploiting and destroying its human and other natural entities and turning the country into a mere dump yard of industrial waste.

Neo-colonial/Corporate capitalism and disaster of ‘that night’:

A capitalist market economy known as corporate capitalism is ruled by bureaucratically structured, hierarchical corporations that control the means of production and the amount of profit they produce. Most of the corporations are held by developed nations, meaning that their liability and accountability are restricted. The corporate giants are multinational companies that invest mostly in the undeveloped or underdeveloped third world nations to make much profit in exchange of cheap labour. On the other hand, the unemployed people of the third world nations like India are bound to toil in the industry in exchange of promised wages. Thus works the politics of neo-colonialism. People of the third world are re-colonized in a different way by the developed European nations. The Union Carbide or UC, as it is also called, is a US based chemical

company, which opened its plants in India during the Cold War period of 70s. During the inauguration of the plants in Bhopal, the company was boasting about its safety measures, claiming them to be up to the world standard. However, it turns out that the claims made by the company were nothing but a sheer fiction. The rate of cancer in Kanawha valley of the US where the research centre of the UC is located, was found to be as high as 21 percent above the national average. As a result, according to Mukherjee's *Postcolonial Environments* (2010), the said company was "fined for dumping carcinogenic waste into the Kanawha river" (139). According to the United States Federal Environmental Protection Agency (Lapierre and Moro 46–56), more than sixty seven cases of poisonous gas leaking, which is nothing but the MIC, from Union Carbide research laboratories between the year 1980 and 1984 have been reported.

The reputation of the company was already bad in its own country i.e. US but unfortunately it was never been stopped by any government or any authority to spread its branches across the world. The intention of the said company was to make maximum profits as possible without even caring about the ecological damage. In such a situation, the company set up its plant in Bhopal's densely populated area without any cross check by the Indian Government or any other authority. Hundreds of containers of MIC were stored in that area, which were transported from far Bombay in fragile containers that could have leaked and spread in the air causing massive hazards. In a location like Bhopal, the careless storing of extremely toxic elements is akin to placing an atomic bomb in the centre of a facility that could blow at any time (Lapierre and Moro 95). According to Chauhan's view in his *Bhopal: the Inside Story* (1994), the safety measures were not sufficient to protect the workers as the major consequence of the chemical was experienced firstly by the workers themselves. Workers like P. R. Koshe confessed about their direct exposure to the poisonous chemical. P. R. Koshe had to work amid MIC which caused him vomiting, choking and indigestion (Chauhan 92).

When the protesters eventually went for a legal battle with the multi-national company, the company argued that it couldn't be charged and tried in India just because Union Carbide was considered a multinational company. Alternatively, the American court didn't hear the case as the problems are "incomprehensible to Americans living in the United States" (Everest, 155). Several other international rules restricted the company from being tried in a court and thus depriving the victims of the anthropogenic disaster from justice. Such instances have been portrayed in the text when Zafar claims:

For the past eighteen years these American defendants have not shown up in the court. They have not even bothered to send lawyers. They sit in Amrika claiming this court has no jurisdiction over the, yet nothing can be achieved without them being here, thus these proceedings drag on, for the people of the city justice continues to be delayed and denied. (Sinha 52)

As the protests proceeded, the company attempts an out of court settlement which was later dismissed by the protestors. Eventually the U.S. Government interfered and threatened Indian Government on the ground of economic assault under

‘Special 301’ trade provisions (Mukherjee 143). This reveals their complete disdain and contempt for the individuals they dislike—these unfortunate folks (Asia-Pacific People’s Network 44). The third world economic and ecological exploitation in the hand of the ‘first world’ brings focus to the ‘political ecology’ in the southern part of the globe. The uneven access to the resources of the earth and uneven treatment defined by power relations arise environmental problems, mostly in the southern sphere.

The disaster of 1984 Bhopal is a prime example of acute crisis and systematic failure. Alongside, this profit driven exploitation gave birth to the denial of the sufferings of natives of Bhopal. The suffering and torture that the natives of Bhopal experienced are invisible to the Company; invisible to the Elite and to the Government also. This becomes evident Sinha’s novel when Zafar asserts:

Thousands in this city have died since that night, for them was no justice. The factory is abandoned, full of chemicals which, as we speak, are poisoning the water of thousands more. Must all perish before Amrikan defendants appear? [...] I think in no other country would the law be allowed to become such a farce, if the will existed to resolve the matter, it could have been done long ago. (52-53)

When we take look at the Global South, we think about poverty and we consider the bad condition of the poor is due to poverty. But what we overlook is the repercussions of ecological degradation or ecological exploitation. Sinha also points out such example of politics of denial of the suffering of the characters and limits their cause of exploitation within poverty. It is obvious from the description of the text that ‘Animal’ is a deformed boy whose back is twisted by the gas of ‘that night’. But as the novel progresses we see the company blames the poverty of a third world nation.

A power dynamics works in this scenario to nullify the intensity of the protest against the new form of colonial segregation i.e. subjugation of poor through corporate capitalism. Those in power decide who should be blamed for the destruction; whom to be tagged as “terrorist” and who causes extremism. Colonial mentality takes a different turn when the protests by the natives of Khaufpur are tagged as terrorism. The definition of terrorism and terrorist changes depending upon the powerful-powerless binary as Zafar once rightly asserts:

What is terror? The dictionary says it’s extreme fear, violent dread, plus what causes it. On that night our people knew terror beyond what a dictionary can define. Who caused it? ... Terrorists are those who cause terror, who endanger innocent lives, who don’t respect law. The only terrorists in this case are those who run the Kampani. (Sinha 283)

The corporations are driven by profits and have little regard for the local ecology and local community. In this sense they create a socio-economic dominance reminiscent of colonialism or colonial though process. The catastrophe caused by the chemical as portrayed in Sinha’s novel itself is an instance of the result of unchecked safety measures and disregard and

disrespect for ecological interests by the corporates. The oppression of the Khaufpuris are multiplied when their own ministers are corrupted and think only about the company's benefits. The craving for remedy of local people from the catastrophe is shunned when the massive disaster is faced with denial of those in power; by the corporate company, and even by the ministers of Khaufpur. This denial of the anthropogenic catastrophe is the thing that renders the catastrophe even more severe to deal with. The motivation of the "Kampani" to build up the factory in Khaufpur is evident from the above discussion and evidently it answers Animal's query: "why did the Kampani choose this city to make its factory? Why this land?" (Sinha 32)

Eco crime and 'slow violence':

...you told us you were making medicine for the fields. You were making poisons to kill insects, but you killed us instead. (Sinha 306)

The term "Eco crime", also known as environmental crime or green crime or green criminology, is generally used to refer to various forms of illegal activities that lead to the commission of large-scale crimes against the environment and natural resources. In most instances, these offences have negative consequences on the nature and involve the damage of natural resources illegally or lead to direct or indirect damage to natural resources. However, the notion of green criminology has been used to assess these types of offensive crimes. This phenomenon has become the fourth-largest type of crime worldwide and threatens the world's climate while crossing international borders (Saida 6). These crimes can cause adverse effects such as ecological consequences, biodiversity loss, and socio-economic impacts.

This text of Sinha portrays the theme of eco crime as the author explores such a phenomenon as one of the environmental damage resulting from the said company's created pollution as well as the company's refusal to accept its responsibility. The company's poison caused serious health issues, or deformities to the town's native residents. One can call this crime an eco crime, as the company pours waste and poisons the nature of that region being irresponsible and selfish as they care only about the profit and do not consider the result of their actions on the nature and the people. Sinha exposes the corruption network that covers both government and local authorities and allows the MNC to continue its harmful actions for the officials' personal gain. The author reveals the deal between the government, company, and local authorities which resulted in the cover-up of the poisoning incident. Thus, the problem of eco crime is intersected with slow violence as the novel depicts the fatal outcome of a chemical disaster on the nature and people.

"Slow violence", a term coined by Rob Nixon in his most acclaimed book named *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), points out the violence that occurs gradually and often imperceptibly over time, resulting in harm to communities and ecosystems. Unlike immediate and spectacular acts of violence, slow violence operates in a subtle but intense manner, making it difficult to understand (Nixon 6). The gas tragedy, as depicted in the text, brings out a sort of slow violence. The environment gets contaminated as the pollution caused by chemical slowly seeps into the

soil, air and water. The ramifications of this pollution are not visible immediately but they unfold over time, resulting in long-term suffering and disability of the local people.

The text is full of such instances of slow violence as the natives of Khaufpur are suffering from long term undetectable and incurable diseases. For example, Nisha's father Pandit Somraj, a well-known singer who was once called as the *Awaaz-e-Khaufpur*, lost "his wife and baby son" (Sinha 33) and also lost his melodious voice by the contaminating poisonous gas. Apart from Animal and Somraj, there are numerous characters depicted in the text who are the sufferers of the anthropogenic disaster that kills them slowly day by day. Ma Franci, a nun from France, who is in Khaufpur to provide social help to the natives, was present in the town that night and eventually fall prey to the noxiousness of the gas. She suffers from an untimely fever and loses her life. Innumerable people passed away due to the poisonous gas explosion of that night, but those who survived the perils of that night were destined to suffer for an indefinite time. This is how the concept of slow violence works. Pyare Bai's husband Aftaab's condition was worst as his eyes burnt like chilies and he coughed "foam tinged with blood". His condition deteriorated in the days to come. He was "too breathless to be able to do any physical work. His condition grew worse. His eyes suffered, he got rashes all over, plus fevers and pains in his joints" (Sinha 84). Pyare had to sell out their tiny house to provide medical attention to Aftaab. After his death, Pyare had to move out to the streets with her two daughters. As Sinha puts:

...it was the only place Pyare could find, right by the stinking naala, in the monsoon the rain came right in. The small girls were always hungry. At night they cried. She would bind cloths round their waists and give them water to fill their empty bellies. She found a job carrying cement on a building site. (Sinha 84)

The displacement of the natives and their livelihood is also nothing but the consequence of slow violence. In tape eight, Animal seemed to describe a woman who got some serious disease from the gas explosion. When Animal and Eli, the doctor, took a trip to a place to set up her clinic, they come across a young woman sitting on a stool in the sunlight. She had on a

...deep blue petticoat, but from waist up her body is bare. Her skin's very dark, black almost, her breasts are round and swollen. With slow fingers, she's pressing her breasts, sending jets of milk spurting onto the earth. (Sinha 106)

The woman lost her child to the anthropogenic catastrophe and now she is inflicted with this type of a severe disease.

She is squeezing pale milk from her nipples. On asking the reason, she replied: "I won't feed my kid poison" (106).

Through the personas like 'Animal' and others, the novel emphasizes the psychological toll of slow violence. Animal's deformed body is nothing but the echo of the lingering residues of the disaster, and his internal struggle and identity crisis mirror the psychological trauma experienced by the community of Khaufpur. The name 'Animal' itself reflects the effects of slow violence, as he adopts the animalistic identity to cope up with the harsh reality of his society. Overall, the novel calls for the immediate need for environmental justice and the importance of recognising and addressing the enduring effects of

environmental degradation. The novel serves as a call to action to demand accountability alongside it advocates for the rights of communities affected.

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