

Anthropocentric Subaltern: The Protagonist in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

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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.

- Indra Sinha, "Animal's People"

Abstract

The story of "Animal's People" is a tale of the residents of Khaufpur, a town, just like Bhopal, which is experiencing the aftereffects of a Gas Tragedy. The protagonist, who is also the narrator, apparently does not have a name and calls himself Animal. He calls himself that because his body (mainly spine) has been disfigured as a result of a chemical accident at a Kampani ("Company") factory and he can no longer stand upright like a human. It is through the point of view of Animal that we see Zafar, Nisha and other people of the town seek accountability and reparations for the damage done to them by the chemical accident at the Kampani's factory. While Khaufpuris, like Pandit Somraj who has lost his wife and child, have suffered, there are outsiders as well who stand with the marginalised such as Zafar who is up in arms against the Government officials and the Kampani (Company) which is pulling the strings of these officials, and the American doctor Elli who is helping the victims of the poisoning caused by the accident. While other residents are fighting for justice which is a human right, Animal is simultaneously fighting his own battle of being accepted as a human.

The paper attempts to bring to light the Anthropocene that we live in, and the subalterns that arise in the hierarchy of an anthropocentric world. Anthropocentrism, just like Colonialism, consists of a dominating human group, and victims of Colonialism often are also victims of Anthropocentrism, making them subalterns of an Anthropocentric world. I have referred to the subaltern theories of Gramsci and Spivak to identify the subaltern characters in "Animal's People". The world of Khaufpur in Indra Sinha's "Animal's People" is a microcosm of our planet which has begun experiencing Apocalyptic effects of the Anthropocene. The protagonist, Animal, is a subaltern in all aspects if we consider the subaltern theories of Gramsci and Spivak – he belongs to the lowest strata of hierarchy in the novel and he does not have a voice in his society (which Indra Sinha tries to bring out through this novel). These are the motives that inspired me to study "Animal's People" with an Ecocritical lens and trace out elements pertaining to the idea of the Anthropocentric subaltern.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Anthropocentric/Anthropocentrism, Subaltern, Marginalised, Neo-colonial/Neocolonialism.

"Animal's People" by Indra Sinha is a powerful and thought-provoking novel set in the aftermath of a devastating chemical disaster in the fictional town of Khaufpur, inspired by the real-life Bhopal gas

tragedy. The story follows the life of a young boy named Animal, whose body has been grotesquely twisted by the toxic gas leak.

Narrated by Animal himself, the novel presents a raw and unfiltered perspective on the horrors of the disaster and its impact on the victims. Through his narrative, the reader gains insight into the pain, despair, and resilience of those affected by the catastrophe. Animal, along with other survivors, grapples with the physical and emotional scars left by the tragedy. He forms relationships with various individuals, including a doctor named Elli, who arrives to help the victims, and a local activist named Zafar. These relationships offer glimpses of hope and redemption in the midst of adversity.

The novel delves into themes of identity, justice, and the exploitation of marginalized communities. Animal's journey becomes a metaphor for the larger struggle of the survivors against the powerful corporations responsible for the disaster. Sinha skilfully weaves together personal stories with broader societal issues, highlighting the complexities of a post-disaster world where justice seems elusive.

The setting of the story – Khaufpur – is an explicit representation of the Indian city of Bhopal which had witnessed the unfortunate Bhopal gas tragedy in December 1984 when the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) pesticide plant had a chemical accident, killing more than 2000 people and affecting over 5,00,000 people. We have ushered into the age of the Anthropocene, where human concerns outweigh other non-human ecological entities. This has resulted in unbridled Capitalist, industrial activities on a global scale where there are no impediments even on grounds of caution – and this has caused many a man-made disaster, affecting Ecosystems, plants, animals and also the human ‘others’ (the dehumanised) who are brushed-off as collaterals for the price of anthropocentric “developments”. When the novel begins, the chemical accident has already taken place, and the residents of Khaufpur are bearing the brunt of it with hurt, suffering, demand for justice and a hope of undoing the damage done to them. Their voice, however, does not seem to do much harm to the perpetrators of this damage - the Kampany and its owners are the Neo-colonial Americans who are out of reach of these Third-world locals.

Yuval Noah Harari (2015) has outlined how humans are today by far the most dominant because of the three great revolutions – the cognitive revolution which happened 70,00 years ago, the agricultural revolution which happened about 10,000 years ago, and the scientific revolution of the age of Renaissance in Europe which later spread globally. These three revolutions have tipped the balance of power to exponential magnitude in favour of the humans. Consequently, humans went on a spree of rapid mass-scale exploitation of Ecology, causing great harm and damage to Ecosystems and living entities residing there. The third revolution – the Scientific revolution, is important as it led to a kickstart of an age of exponential scientific and technological progress and inventions with the help of which humans could now conquer the mighty nature; he is no longer the underdog Old Man of Hemingway. What is more important to note about the scientific revolution is that it occurred first in Europe, and while it was empowering the Europeans, the rest of the world in those few centuries were not yet aware of this upgrade in human capabilities. This made Europeans far superior to other races and is considered one of the major reasons of colonialism that plagued the closing centuries of the Second millennium A.D. As a result, there was imbalance of power not only between humans and other animals, but between humans of European race and other races as well. The non-European race then became the marginalised, the ‘other’, dehumanised population who can be deprived of the rights and recognitions that the ‘ideal’, ‘proper’, standard humans have. This could be seen in the age of colonialism where non-European races such as the Africans were literally slaves to be marketed and treated like a non-human. This racial hierarchy, however, did not end with the end of colonialism; it continued its existence, this time through the new world order of

Neocolonialism. First-World countries today still hold power over third-world countries through sanctions and international MoUs. In recent decades, as the world woke up to the realisation that Ecological apocalypse is at hand, it became apparent that Neo-colonial power dynamics have enabled powerful people/institutions of First-world countries to exploit the Ecology of third-world countries for Capitalist gains; the gains being so immense that it compels the powerful to dehumanise Neocolonised indigenous population, and treat them as collaterals in development and progress of humanity equal to non-human collaterals viz. animals, plants etc. once, dehumanised, the marginalised victims of accidents caused by Anthropocentric activities can be denied human rights of reparations and legal justices etc.

Khaufpur is thus a Neocolonised entity, the people are subaltern, put among ranks of plant and animal victims of the chemical accident caused at the Kompany factory. The men who own the factory, the Americans, are out of reach of the human victims like Animal, Pandit Somraj, Nisha, Firoz etc. These victims are at the bottom of the hierarchy in the novel, and thus, according to Gramsci, are subalterns. The protagonist, Animal, has the highest attribute of subalternity in him. He, as Gayatri C. Spivak would say, does not have a voice. People in the novel take up the role of becoming his voice, people like the Khaufpuri Nisha, the activist from another city Zafar, and also an American doctor Elli who is a compatriot of the perpetrators. All these people try to do good for him, but Animal's narration tells us that all of them are oblivious to his deep desire to be human, one who would be accepted as a sexual human partner – he longs to be a lover (and probably husband) of Nisha, who, apparently, disregards his sexual love for her as he is an 'animal' and not an upright human.

The protagonist, Animal, is double a subaltern. Animal also seems to be the one most affected non-fatally by the Kompany's factory accident. While others have health and related issues, Animal has been affected to an extent where his humanness has been taken away from him, the accident has deformed him into a four-legged creature, he can no longer stand upright as a human - and he is, now, called Animal, rendering him bereft of a human name. People who die in the accident have died and have been buried and cremated as humans, people who are getting treated are being done so as humans, but for Animal, it is different – he is an animal now. Where other people of Khaufpur are fighting to be humanised in the eyes of the Kompany people, Animal is twice removed from the centre as he is not taken to be a human even among his co-residents of Khaufpur. He tries to get acceptance, even that of a second-rate human that the Khaufpuris are, but is nothing but Animal. He tries to find acceptance, like the protagonist Kersi in Rohinton Mistry's "Swimming Lessons", through sexual acceptance by the female of Toronto where he has recently moved-in. Kersi, when in Toronto, tries to learn swimming so that he can be accepted by the whites as one of their kind; he also has sexual fantasies – and believes when the women there accept him sexually he will be at par with other people there mating with their kind. In "Animal's People", Animal knows he cannot just learn to stand upright like Kersi can learn swimming; however, he can be like the other people by securing females to mate with like the other Khaufpuris. His primary object of sexual desire in the novel is Nisha. He falls badly for her and describes her like an angel, expressing his wish to marry her and live as her husband for the remaining years of his life. As the story moves forward, he finds out that Nisha has accepted Firoz as her lover; this breaks him – his hope of being turned back into a human by having a human wife is crushed. He acts out in jealousy from there onwards, trying to break into their moments of intimacy and isolation. He goes so far as to induce poison into Zafar to hinder his lovemaking with Nisha. On several occasions, Animal tries to woo Nisha with his rhetoric, assuring her of everlasting and unending love if she becomes his lover; however, Nisha rejects these proposals implying his status of an animal and hence the impossibility of their courtship. Animal lusts not only Nisha, but

other women at Khaufpur as well, most of them being women around him. He has sexual fantasies about Elli, the doctor who has come to help the people of Khaufpur, and especially Animal. He is so much lusted for her that he climbs a nearby tree from where he can peek into a sight of Elli naked in her Bathroom. At one point, Animal gets access to sex at a local whorehouse. He lays naked with a prostitute, but he leaves her bed without having sexual intercourse. This is most probably because having intercourse without relationship would be like that of animals (and not humans); he promises the prostitute that he would one day have enough money and free her so that potentially they can live as human couples in the future. On the night of the Ashara Mubarak, all people of Khaufpur have gathered for the religious proceedings, especially to be part of or witness the fire-walk, a ritual where devotees walk on red-hot coal/fire. Nisha and her lover Zafar are talking when Zafar puts his hands around her waist. Animal is not able to tolerate this scene and he lets out an alarming growl, which is effective as this makes Nisha turn around to find Animal just behind them and the intimate moment of Zafar and Nisha come to an abrupt end. Animal has however, been injured emotionally upon seeing Nisha being in love with someone else, he talks to himself, asking how he could convince Nisha of his feelings for her, how he could persuade her to leave Zafar for him. He realises he is no match for Zafar, especially since he is an “animal”. At the moment this realization gives him an impulse to prove his humanness; he decides he is going to do the fire walk like other devotees, this may make him one with the others, he will be, like Faroq., another human who has performed the fire walk. He proceeds and walks right into the file of people lined up for the fire walk; for better or worse, he is spotted and pulled out of the line. Animal is forever in a struggle to become human again. He does exclaim about how he is unique, the only animal of his kind and so on, but deep in his heart he wants to be a human. He wants to be accepted.

In a world of postmodern discourse, the margins have been elevated to a pedestal. Discourse focuses largely on the margins, the subaltern. This however, is not an absolute good, especially the way Animal gives his opinion on them in his narrations. In the world of Eurocentric Capitalism, even upliftment of the margins has been commodified. Stories of the subalterns are commodities of news items and award-earning projects. Animal can see through the soul of these “reporters”, especially Westerners, who frequent Khaufpur in hope of coming across stories and photographic people/situations which would garner them praise, awards, recognition and so on. Animal has seen so many of these that he now recognises them without fail when he sees one. At the start of the novel, Animal describes how an Australian journalist comes to collect the stories of Khaufpur. Animal is not happy with this, he knows it will make no difference. He is sarcastic and mocks how predictable consumeristic righteousness has become for the West. He describes how Chunaram knows exactly to stand at the part of the platform where first class AC bogies of the Shatabdi Express train stops; from those bogies arrive rich journalists from first-world countries looking for “stories”. Chunaram, who has a tea shop, has also realised that he can sell stories of Khaufpur just like his kebabs; he does the usual namaste and arranges for stories of Khaufpur from people like Animal for a price. This is all normal to him, when he goes to Animal with the Australian journalist, he asks Animal to speak ‘the usual’ into the tape:

‘Animal, there’s fifty rupees for you, just keep talking till the tape stops.’

‘What should I talk about?’

‘Usual, what else?’ (4)

Animal could see the eyes of the Journalist taking-in all of Khaufpur, devouring them. A subaltern like Animal does not have his own voice, and when people from centre come with promises of hope and giving

voices, it is not the voice of the margins. Chunaram explicitly tells animal to say what the journalist wants to hear/record/write, not what Animal really wants to say. Indra Sinha has subverted this Eurocentric notion of the white man's burden, for we see that this Australian journalist likes the honesty of Animal - where instead of giving the journalist what he is supposed to, he spits out obscenities directed at journalists like him (which is justified given the situation Animal is in and how these journalists' visitations have done no good to him).

Since the start, animal has been a double subaltern, twice removed from centre. Where people like Zafar and Elli do raise their voice on injustices done to Animal, Animal has no voice of his own and has to depend on these people to be heard and given reparations from the court of law and the perpetrators. This novel, however, looks to subvert subalternity and give voice to Animal – the entire novel is a transcription of the words of Animal on the tape, nothing has been changed except the translation of his words to English. The subaltern has a voice, the animal has a human voice wherein he tells about his humanness – he has thoughts, emotions, urges, feelings - he is not the harmless poor victim of a western journalist's model sob story - he swears, he lusts for women, is sexually indecent, conspires against people and can poison them due to jealousy – he is human!

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