

## REDEFINING HUMANITY: TOXICITY AND SLOW VIOLENCE IN INDRA SINHA'S *ANIMAL'S PEOPLE*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

“Animal’s People” by Indra Sinha introduces readers to the fictional town of Khaufpur, India, a place marred by the toxic aftermath of a catastrophic industrial disaster. Set against the backdrop of environmental degradation and social injustice, the novel follows the protagonist, Animal, a young man whose body contorts unnaturally due to exposure to toxic chemicals. Through Animal’s eyes, readers are immersed in a world where toxicity permeates the landscape, affecting both human and nonhuman entities alike. Sinha intricately weaves themes of toxicity and slow violence throughout the narrative, illuminating the insidious ways in which environmental degradation and social inequality intersect to shape the lives of the marginalized residents of Khaufpur. As the story unfolds, the novel confronts readers with profound questions about humanity’s relationship with the environment, the ethics of industrialization, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of systemic oppression and environmental crisis.

### 2. CONTEXTUALIZING TOXICITY AND SLOW VIOLENCE

Toxicity refers to the presence or introduction of harmful substances into the environment, posing risks to human health, ecosystems, and the

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overall well-being of living organisms. These substances, often pollutants or contaminants, can originate from various sources including industrial activities, waste disposal, agricultural practices, and natural phenomena. In a broader sense, toxicity encompasses not only physical harm but also psychological, social, and cultural impacts resulting from exposure to hazardous materials.

Slow violence, a concept introduced by Rob Nixon, describes forms of violence that unfold gradually over time, often imperceptibly, and are characterized by their protracted and diffuse nature. Unlike more overt forms of violence, such as wars or armed conflicts, slow violence operates insidiously, eroding communities, environments, and bodies over extended periods. This concept highlights the interconnectedness between environmental degradation and social injustice, emphasizing the disproportionate burden borne by marginalized populations who are most vulnerable to the long-term effects of slow violence.

### **2.1 Slow Violence and Environmental Degradation**

Slow violence is intricately linked to environmental degradation as it encompasses the gradual destruction of ecosystems, depletion of natural resources, and contamination of air, water, and soil. Activities such as deforestation, industrial pollution, fossil fuel extraction, and climate change contribute to the slow violence inflicted upon the environment, with consequences that unfold over generations. This degradation not only threatens biodiversity and ecological balance but also undermines the livelihoods and well-being of communities reliant on healthy ecosystems for sustenance and survival.

Moreover, slow violence perpetuates social injustice by disproportionately impacting marginalized communities who lack the resources and political power to mitigate or escape its effects. Environmental degradation often exacerbates existing inequalities, leading to unequal distribution of environmental harms and benefits along lines of race, class, gender, and geography. Thus, slow violence not only manifests as physical harm to the environment but also as systemic oppression and structural violence inflicted upon vulnerable populations.

### **2.2 Intersection of Toxicity and Slow Violence in “Animal’s People”:**

In “Animal’s People,” toxicity and slow violence intersect to create a dystopian landscape where the residents of Khaufpur are subjected to the

gradual deterioration of their environment and health due to industrial pollution. The toxic aftermath of an industrial disaster permeates the town, contaminating the air, water, and soil, and causing debilitating health effects among its inhabitants, including Animal whose body contorts unnaturally as a result of exposure to toxic chemicals. This toxic environment serves as a backdrop for exploring themes of environmental injustice, corporate greed, and the resilience of marginalized communities in the face of systemic oppression.

Through Sinha's narrative, readers witness the ways in which toxicity and slow violence intertwine to perpetuate cycles of poverty, illness, and social marginalization. The novel exposes the complicity of political and corporate interests in perpetuating environmental degradation and underscores the disproportionate burden borne by marginalized communities who are often left to suffer the consequences of industrial pollution without recourse or redress. By foregrounding the experiences of those most affected by toxicity and slow violence, "Animal's People" invites readers to confront the ethical and moral dimensions of environmental exploitation and to envision alternative paths toward environmental justice and social equity.

### **2.3 Toxicity as a Characteristic of Postcolonial Landscape**

Toxicity as a characteristic of the postcolonial landscape is deeply intertwined with historical colonialism and contemporary globalization, contributing to the environmental degradation depicted in Indra Sinha's novel "Animal's People," set in the fictional town of Khaufpur. Within the narrative, Khaufpur serves as a microcosm of the broader postcolonial experience, where the legacy of colonial exploitation and contemporary processes of globalization converge to create a toxic environment that profoundly affects the lives of its inhabitants. Historical colonialism laid the groundwork for the environmental degradation and toxicity depicted in "Animal's People." During the colonial period, India, like many other colonized regions, was subjected to exploitative practices aimed at extracting natural resources and maximizing profit for colonial powers. The extractive industries established by colonial rulers often prioritized economic gain over environmental stewardship, leading to the degradation of land, water, and air quality. In the context of "Animal's People," the legacy of colonialism is evident in the presence of industries that continue to operate with little regard for environmental sustainability or human

well-being. The town of Khaufpur, once a thriving center of industry under colonial rule, now grapples with the toxic aftermath of industrialization, symbolizing the enduring impacts of colonial exploitation on postcolonial landscapes. The environmental degradation and contamination depicted in the novel can thus be seen as a manifestation of the historical injustices perpetrated by colonial powers.

Contemporary globalization further exacerbates the toxic environment in Khaufpur depicted in “Animal’s People.” As India undergoes rapid industrialization and urbanization in the wake of globalization, multinational corporations and global supply chains play an increasingly prominent role in shaping the country’s economic landscape. These processes often prioritize profit and economic growth at the expense of environmental sustainability and social welfare. In the novel, Khaufpur becomes a site of exploitation for multinational corporations seeking to capitalize on cheap labor and lax environmental regulations. The influx of foreign investment and industrial development leads to the proliferation of polluting industries and the unchecked dumping of toxic waste, further degrading the environment and endangering the health of local communities.

The toxic environment of Khaufpur in “Animal’s People” represents the convergence of historical colonialism and contemporary globalization, where the legacies of colonial exploitation are compounded by the forces of neoliberal capitalism and transnational corporate power. The novel illustrates how colonial histories of exploitation and resource extraction continue to shape postcolonial landscapes, perpetuating patterns of environmental degradation and social inequality. Moreover, “Animal’s People” highlights the unequal distribution of environmental harms and benefits along lines of race, class, and geography, with marginalized communities bearing the brunt of toxic pollution and industrial contamination. By examining the intersection of colonialism and globalization within the narrative, the novel underscores the urgent need to address the root causes of environmental injustice and to challenge the systems of power and privilege that perpetuate environmental degradation in postcolonial context.

### 3. HUMAN-NONHUMAN INTERACTIONS IN A TOXIC ENVIRONMENT

In “Animal’s People,” the toxic environment of Khaufpur blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman entities, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings within the context of environmental degradation. As pollution permeates the landscape, it affects not only

human residents but also nonhuman entities such as animals, plants, and ecosystems. This blurring of boundaries challenges traditional distinctions between humans and nature, highlighting the ways in which environmental destruction disrupts and reshapes relationships between different forms of life.

### **3.1 Blurring the Boundaries**

One way in which the toxic environment blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman entities is through the physical effects of pollution on the characters in the novel. Animal, the protagonist, suffers from deformities and health issues caused by exposure to toxic chemicals, rendering his body in a state that defies conventional notions of humanity. Similarly, other residents of Khaufpur experience mutations, illnesses, and disabilities as a result of environmental contamination, blurring the line between human and nonhuman forms of life.

Furthermore, the toxic environment of Khaufpur affects nonhuman entities in ways that mirror the suffering and vulnerability of human residents. Animals in the novel exhibit signs of distress and illness due to pollution, and the natural landscape becomes barren and polluted, devoid of its former vitality. This depiction underscores the interconnectedness of all living beings within the ecosystem, highlighting the shared vulnerability of humans and nonhumans alike in the face of environmental degradation.

The blurring of boundaries between human and nonhuman entities in a toxic landscape raises profound ethical questions about the nature of human-nonhuman relationships. In “Animal’s People,” characters grapple with complex moral dilemmas as they navigate their interactions with the environment and other living beings. The suffering of animals and ecosystems compels characters to reconsider their role in perpetuating environmental destruction and to confront the ethical implications of their actions.

Moreover, the novel challenges anthropocentric perspectives that prioritize human interests above those of nonhuman beings, urging readers to recognize the intrinsic value of all forms of life. The toxic environment of Khaufpur serves as a catalyst for re-evaluating human-nonhuman relationships and fostering a deeper sense of ecological awareness and responsibility.

Ultimately, the blurring of boundaries between human and nonhuman entities in “Animal’s People” underscores the profound interconnectedness

of all living beings within the ecosystem. By portraying the ethical implications of human-nonhuman relationships within a toxic landscape, the novel prompts readers to consider their own responsibilities towards the environment and to strive towards more sustainable and equitable ways of coexisting with the natural world.

### **3.2 Effects of Toxicity on Human Bodies and Identities**

The physical and psychological effects of toxic exposure in “Animal’s People” shape individual and collective identities in Khaufpur, exacerbating existing inequalities and power dynamics within the community. The characters grapple with chronic pain, disability, trauma, and loss of agency, yet they also find strength and resilience in solidarity with one another amidst the environmental devastation wrought by corporate greed and governmental neglect. Many character, including the protagonist Animal, suffer from physical deformities and health issues caused by exposure to toxic chemicals. These deformities range from disfigured limbs to respiratory problems and chronic diseases, reflecting the widespread impact of environmental contamination on the health of Khaufpur’s residents. All of this affect the mobility, quality of life and ability to engage in daily activities for the residents of Khaufpur. The characters experience profound trauma and emotional distress stemming from their lived experiences in a toxic environment. Witnessing the suffering of loved ones, grappling with their own physical deformities, and confronting the realities of environmental degradation take a toll on their mental well-being, leading to anxiety, depression, and feelings of hopelessness. Moreover, the toxic environment robs the characters of their agency and sense of identity, as they struggle to assert control over their lives amidst circumstances beyond their control. The loss of autonomy and the constant threat of illness and death further erode their sense of self-worth and purpose. Besides, the physical deformities resulting from toxic exposure contribute to the stigmatization and othering of affected individuals within the community. Animal, for example, is ostracised and labelled as a freak due to his unusual appearance, highlighting the ways in which toxic contamination shapes individual identities through societal perceptions and prejudices. Despite the challenges the residents of Khaufpur face, they are resilient and show solidarity in the manner they support each other, forming tight-knit communities built on shared experiences of suffering and resistance. The text also brings out the harsh reality that the toxicity of environment disproportionately affects marginalized communities,

exacerbating existing inequalities along lines of class caste, and geography. Those living in impoverished areas or belonging to lower castes bear the brunt of environmental pollution, while affluent residents and powerful elites are shielded from its worst impacts. To make matters worse, multinational corporations and corrupt government officials also exploit the vulnerabilities of marginalized populations, further entrenching power differentials and perpetuating systems of oppression and environmental degradation.

### **3.3 Complexities of Communication**

One of the challenges that Animal faces in the human world is his inability to communicate in proper manner. He speaks in a broken, colloquial manner that reflects his lack of formal education and his struggle to navigate the world around him. However, as the story progresses, Animal's relationship with language evolves too and he learns to use words like humans – to negotiate, persuade, communicate and connect with others. The use of language in the novel is intricately connected to the identity of class. Characters like Zafar, who are educated and fluent in English, inhabit a different linguistic and social sphere – highlighting the divide between the privileged and the marginalized sections of the society. Sinha also explores how language can be wielded as a tool of power and control. Animal's narrative, filled with vivid imagery and vernacular language, serves as a counterpoint to the official discourse, offering an alternative perspective on the events and their impact on the community. Animals' relationship with Nisha, a volunteer doctor who helps him read and write, exemplifies how language not only divides, but also bridges gaps and fosters empathy and understanding by transcending social barriers.

### **4. HUMANITY IN ANIMAL**

The title "Animal's People" is evocative and symbolic, reflecting both the protagonist's name and his unique perspective on the world around him. Animal, the central character of the novel, adopts his name as a rejection of the humanity that has caused him so much suffering. He sees himself as a creature of instinct and survival, stripped of the trappings of civilization that define human society. Thus, the title not only serves as a literal identifier for the character but also encapsulates the overarching themes of identity, marginalization, and the struggle for agency.

The contrast between Animal and humans in the novel is stark, particularly when humanistic traits are involved. Animal embodies a primal, instinctual nature that often stands in stark contrast to the more nuanced emotions and behaviours exhibited by human characters. While on one hand, Animal grapples with the trauma of the Bhopal gas tragedy and the physical deformities it has inflicted upon him, he also displays a sense of resilience and solidarity with his fellow survivors that transcends mere survival instincts. On the other hand, human characters in the novel, such as the corrupt politicians and businessmen responsible for the tragedy, often display a lack of empathy, compassion, and moral responsibility. They prioritize profit and power over the well-being of others, exemplifying the darker aspects of human nature. In contrast, Animal's interactions with characters like Zafar, a doctor who strives to help the victims of the tragedy, highlight the capacity for compassion and altruism that exists within humanity.

Through the contrast between Animal and humans, the novel explores complex questions about identity, morality, and the nature of humanity. Animal's rejection of his human identity and embrace of his animalistic instincts serve as a critique of the dehumanizing effects of societal marginalization and trauma. Yet, amidst the chaos and corruption of the human world, Animal also finds moments of connection, solidarity, and resilience that defy easy categorization. In this way, "Animal's People" challenges readers to reconsider their preconceptions about identity, empathy, and the boundaries between human and animal.

It can be argued that the bodily disability and vulnerability causes Animal to recognize both its uniqueness and the meaning of uniqueness. Between man and animal there is an insignificant fluctuation of Animal; and he affirms, "I am not human and I do not need someone's permission to be free" (Sinha 2007, p. 194). Here, Animal feels that as a free being in the material world he belongs to no other category than himself – a clear absurdity, since the main idea of the new materialist environmentalism is that we are all intimately connected. No one is free. Eco-critic Jesse Oak Taylor explains that "an animal's poisoned body makes it acutely aware of the extent to which it is Janvaar – 'alive' – and thus what it shares with all other life, including susceptibility to lethal chemicals" (Taylor 2013, p186). Humans and nonhumans are an organic whole, as Zhuangzi states: "the universe and humans are one" (Chen 2009, p. 80). Animal is a product of both nature and human industrial civilization as a bridge between the human and the non-human world, and its deformity represents a new kind of "factory

life” where “the factory lives as an accompanying chemical prosthesis.” animal” (Johnston 2019, p. 103). In his almost prophetic monologue at the end of the novel, Beast says: “Tomorrow there will be more of us” (Sinha 2007, p. 366). There are more “Apocalypse People”, people suffering from environmental degradation, people whose bodies have been greatly changed from the outside of them. Sinha’s novel clearly and powerfully questions the concept of human corporeality and its limits.

It is necessary to emphasize the vulnerability of human corporeality and it should not be interpreted as a depreciation of human agency in any manner. It is in fact a deliberate attempt to ponder on the question why discussing disabled and vulnerable bodies matters in the Anthropocene. Although Animal in *Animal’s People* has a twisted spine and a deformed body, he is “especially abled,” as Zafar tells Animal: “It means okay you don’t walk on two legs like most people, but you have skills and talents that they don’t” (Sinha 2007, p. 23). Animal is not useless matter but has special abilities. He can “hear people’s thoughts even when their lips were shut [...] get en passant comments from all types of things, animals, birds, trees, rocks giving the time of day” (Sinha 2007, p. 8). He can even understand the psychological activities of animals such as his friend, the homeless dog named Jara. Animal’s disfigurement does not impede him but provides possibilities for him to shuttle through the material world back and forth. However, it is important to note that Animal’s disfigurement is not wholly negative transformation. It also helps him reach places that no one else can or dares to reach. When other people dare not to go near the Kampani’s factory, Animal chooses this shunned, haunted, and dead place as his “lair” (Sinha 2007, p. 29) and “kingdom” (ibid., p. 30). It is more accurate, perhaps, to think of Animal as “differently-abled” than “disabled” (and we might note that this term has come to replace the term “disabled”. One of the things that become very clear in this novel is that the boundary between human and animal is a false one.

Animal’s tongue-in-check reappropriation of the term “Animal” seeks to destabilize those broad divisions between “animal” and “human,” as well as to reflect the ways in which the processes of naming and categorizing define the one who names as much as the one who is named. It also serves not only to question the superiority of the construct of the “human,” but also interrogates the privileges that often accompany that construct. (Holoach 2016, p. 132).

In “Animal’s People,” the character Animal is portrayed as more human than some of the other characters in the novel due to his empathy, resilience, and capacity for compassion, despite his physical deformities and the harsh circumstances of his environment. Firstly, he demonstrates a deep sense of empathy and compassion towards his fellow residents of Khaufpur, especially those who are marginalized or suffering. Despite facing his own physical and emotional challenges, Animal shows kindness and understanding towards others, offering support and solidarity in times of need. His ability to empathize with the pain and struggles of others highlights his innate humanity and moral integrity. Secondly, Animal possesses a strong sense of justice and morality, advocating for the rights of his community and speaking out against the injustices perpetrated by corporations and government officials. He refuses to remain silent in the face of environmental degradation and social inequality, demonstrating a commitment to fighting for what is right and just. Animal’s moral compass and ethical integrity distinguish him as a truly human character, capable of recognizing and challenging injustice. Thirdly, he exhibits remarkable resilience and determination in the face of overwhelming odds. He refuses to be defined by his physical deformities or the toxic environment of Khaufpur, striving to live life on his own terms and make a positive impact on his community. Animal’s resilience in the face of adversity exemplifies the human capacity for strength, courage, and perseverance in the face of hardship. And finally, Animal’s authenticity and vulnerability make him more relatable and human than some of the other characters in the novel. He does not shy away from expressing his emotions or vulnerabilities, allowing himself to be seen and understood by others in his community. Animal’s willingness to show vulnerability and embrace his humanity contrasts with the superficiality and pretence exhibited by certain human characters, underscoring the depth of his emotional and psychological complexity.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, “Animal’s People” by Indra Sinha masterfully portrays the theme of toxicity and slow violence, illustrating how these forces affect all lives within the fictional town of Khaufpur. Through the lens of environmental degradation and social injustice, the novel explores the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman entities, highlighting the profound impact of toxic exposure on individuals, communities, and ecosystems alike. The

narrative vividly depicts the physical and psychological effects of toxic contamination on the characters, revealing the enduring pain, suffering, and resilience of those living in the shadow of industrial pollution. From Animal's deformities to the collective trauma experienced by the residents of Khaufpur, the novel underscores the far-reaching consequences of environmental degradation on human well-being and identity.

Animal symbolizes the tragedy of human rights violations of an individual. Through the novel, *Animal's People*, Sinha brings to light the issue of human rights to cultural discourse to emphasize that human rights need a humane understanding and treatment. This is not possible if left alone to the forces of law and the power of the state. Cultural discourses are better adjudicator of human rights. Literature as an agency of cultural discourses has the "soft power" to unravel and demystify the normalization of violence against the marginalized human beings. In *Animal's People*, the irony is not lost when 'people' start calling a human being "*jaanvar*" (Animal). Sinha wants to drive home the point that human rights need to be made a part of culture, naturalised in the actions, thoughts and behaviour of mankind irrespective of caste, creed, colour, gender, etc. in order for it to become operational and a universal phenomenon. Moreover, "*Animal's People*" exposes the unequal distribution of environmental harms and benefits along lines of power and privilege, emphasizing how toxic environments exacerbate existing inequalities within society. The marginalized residents of Khaufpur bear the brunt of pollution and exploitation, while corporate interests and governmental neglect perpetuate systems of oppression and environmental injustice.

At its core, "*Animal's People*" challenges readers to confront the ethical and moral dimensions of environmental degradation and social inequality, urging us to recognize our interconnectedness with the natural world and to take collective action to address the root causes of toxicity and slow violence. Through the character of Animal and his community, the novel offers a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity, while also reminding us of the urgent need for environmental justice and solidarity in the fight for a more sustainable and equitable future. Through Animal, Sinha shows his belief in literature, like Joseph Slaughter, as a medium to recompense ambiguities in the human rights discourses and narratives. By rendering a cultural discourse to a monumental human tragedy Sinha highlights the rampant human rights abuses and sees the possibility of its operationalization/enforcement through the active involvement of all the stakeholders.

The combination of poverty, social hierarchy, institutional weaknesses, corruption, marginalization of the various minorities/subalterns and an inaccessible justice system makes a lethal poison (which is even more harmful than the poisonous gases released by the pesticide factory), resulting in what can be called “democracy deficit”, the root cause of human rights violations (Basumatary, 61).

Ultimately, “Animal’s People” serves as a poignant reminder that the impacts of toxicity and slow violence extend far beyond individual lives, shaping the interconnected web of life in ways that demand our attention, compassion, and collective action. Animal, who is deformed and walks on all fours like a dog, embodies both the animalistic and human aspects of existence. His struggle to reconcile his physical deformity with his innate humanity serves as a poignant exploration of identity and self-acceptance. Despite his outward appearance, Animal demonstrates empathy, courage, and a deep sense of morality, showcasing that “*insaaniyat*” transcends physical form. Furthermore, through its exploration of humanity amidst tragedy, the novel offers a powerful commentary on the essence of being human and the transformative power of empathy and solidarity. Thus, as we confront the challenges of environmental degradation and social injustice, may we draw inspiration from the resilience and hope exemplified by the characters of Khaufpur, working together to create a world where all lives can thrive in harmony with the natural world.

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