

**Voicing the Ruined Earth: Ecocide and Environmental Injustice in Indra  
Sinha's *Animal's People***

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**Abstract:**

This paper reads Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* through intersecting postcolonial, ecocritical and posthumanist lenses to examine the enduring impact of corporate ecocide and systemic neglect. Set in the fictional town of Khaufpur, a thinly veiled literary space for the Bhopal gas tragedy. The novel portrays a young protagonist, Animal, whose spine was twisted by a catastrophic chemical leak, forcing him to walk on all four limbs. The objective of this paper is to explore how the author's unique, non-anthropocentric narrative voice represents environmental devastation and exposes the structural societal injustices faced by the victims. By employing ecocritical and postcolonial frameworks, specifically Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," (2) the study argues that this intergenerational bodily and ecological trauma is a manifestation of "maldevelopment" that Vandana Shiva critiques, as intrinsically tied to industrial capitalism and corporate colonialism. Drawing on Donna Haraway's "naturecultures" (1) and Lawrence Buell's "place-attachment" (63) approaches, the analysis illuminates how the narrative foregrounds the radical entanglement of human and non-human suffering, effectively giving voice to the marginalised inhabitants of a ruined earth. By synthesising Ursula Heise's "eco-cosmopolitanism" (9) and Dipesh Chakrabarty's arguments on the "climate of history," (197) this paper demonstrates how the novel serves as a powerful indictment of corporate negligence, a poignant platform for subaltern testimony, and an urgent call for global accountability, empowerment, and a radical shift in humanity's relationship with the natural world in a time of planetary crisis.

**Keywords:** Ecocide, Slow Violence, Maldevelopment, Nature-cultures, Eco-cosmopolitanism.

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**Introduction:**

Ecocide and environmental injustice represent two critical and interconnected concepts at the forefront of contemporary discussions on environmental ethics, law, and social equity. Ecocide refers to unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment (Sands et al. 5). This systematic destruction causes substantial harm to a territory or its inhabitants, highlighting the catastrophic consequences of industrial or extractive human activities. In parallel, environmental injustice describes the discriminatory distribution of ecological burdens and the lack of meaningful involvement in environmental decision-making. This manifests as the disproportionate exposure of marginalised and vulnerable communities, typically low-income populations, communities of colour, and indigenous peoples, to environmental hazards and the negative impacts of ecological degradation (Bullard 3). These communities often lack the political power and economic resources to resist the spatial allocation of polluting industries or recover from environmental disasters. As a result, they bear a heavier burden of health risks, suffering greater social and economic disadvantages. Understanding these concepts is important to comprehend how the ruined earth is not merely an abstract environmental problem, but a deeply rooted issue of social inequality and human rights.

The earth groans under the weight of environmental devastation, and the cries of those most affected often go unheard. Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* confronts readers with the brutal reality of ecocide, it seems to demand that people move beyond passive observation towards active solutions. The rise in pollution, contamination, and bio-disasters supported by industries has made parts of the earth uninhabitable clearly illustrating the complicity of mankind in committing ecocide and causing permanent damage to the environment. Amidst persistent unequal growth, literary works that portray the suffocating impacts of industrial disasters continue to rise in popularity. Sinha's *Animal's People* recalls the aftermath of a large-scale industrial disaster with a vivid depiction of life at the gutter level among the dirt-poor of the fictional city of Khaufpur (meaning the city of fear). The novel was shortlisted for the 2007 Man Booker Prize for fiction. Drawing inspiration from the 1984 Bhopal disaster, the novel sheds light on environmental damage, its repercussions, and the demands of the victims for justice. Animal, the main character, embodies this unequal progress through the painful recollections of 'that night,' which he recalls and records on many cassettes.

*Animal's People* is a powerful, satirical, and heart-wrenching work of fiction that serves as a thinly veiled critique of the social, environmental, and corporate injustices following the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy. The novel vividly depicts the catastrophic event,

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which can be considered a form of ecocide due to the extensive and lasting environmental damage it caused. The novel begins with reliving ‘that night,’ but primarily details its post-apocalyptic aftermath two decades later. The trauma affects both the individual and social levels. Individuals like Animal, who embodies a hybrid identity “I used to be a human once. So I am told. I don’t remember it myself, but people who know me when I was small say I walked on two feet just like a human being” (Sinha 1) and Somraji, a singer who lost his musical voice, become the progeny of ‘that night,’ alongside figures like Ma Francy, a nun who died during a hunger strike. The novel masterfully blends dark humour, postcolonial ecocriticism, and disability studies to expose the enduring impact of the disaster on the marginalised residents of Khaufpur. Sinha’s work is a vital piece of protest literature that asks for accountability while exploring the resilience of a community abandoned by the global corporate world.

The central critique of the novel is directed at the vast power imbalance between a wealthy multinational corporation, the Kampani, and the impoverished people it harmed. The Kampani is portrayed as an untouchable entity that skirts accountability through legal deferrals and government complicity. Khaufpur becomes a symbol of ‘environmental racism’, a place where the lives of the poor are deemed less valuable than corporate profits. The ongoing contamination of the land and water serves as a constant reminder of unaddressed ecological crime, forming the backdrop for the characters’ daily struggles and Zafar’s dedicated activism, “No bird 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 are still doing their work” (Sinha 29).

Animal’s identity crisis is a major thematic driver. He has fully embraced his nickname and ‘animal’ status as a form of defiance against a society and a disaster that stripped him of his humanity and reduced his people to ‘bare life’ (a state where rights are suspended). “I no longer want to be human...I caught sight of myself- mirrors I avoid but there’s such a thing as casting a shadow- I’d feel raw disgust. In my mad times when the voices were shouting inside my head I’d be filled with rage against all things...the list of my jealousies was endless” (Sinha 2). He battles internal voices that taunt him, struggling between his self-defined identity and a deeply human desire for love and dignity. His physical deformity serves as a potent metaphor for the community’s collective injury, forcing readers to question what it means to be ‘human’ in a world where the powerful act with such inhumanity.

The Bhopal Gas catastrophe provides the socio-cultural and political backdrop for the novel. This devastation resulted from one of the worst industrial catastrophes on record.

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On the evening of December 3, 1984, a toxic gas called Methyl Isocyanate (MIC) leaked from a Union Carbide facility. The incident was rooted in systemic failures, cost-saving measures driven by market-economy strategies, a lack of knowledge among workers, the hiring of unskilled labourers, outdated infrastructure, and dangerously high pressure in the MIC tanks. The authorities failed to act promptly despite being alerted to the situation earlier, demonstrating the moral deterioration of the business.

Several theorists working on ecocriticism offer valuable frameworks for understanding the complex human-nature relationships depicted in *Animal's People*. Lawrence Buell emphasises the importance of “place-attachment” and the ethical responsibilities that arise from human connections to specific environments (*The Future of Environmental Criticism* 63). In *Animal's People*, the ravaged landscape of Khaufpur becomes a character in its own right, shaping the lives and experiences of its inhabitants. Buell’s concept of the “environmental imagination” encourages considering how literature fosters a deeper understanding of the natural world (*The Environmental Imagination* 138). *Animal's* unique perspective, born from his intimate connection with the polluted environment, embodies this imagination. It forces readers to confront the tangible consequences of ecological destruction.

Ursula Heise challenges the traditional ecocritical focus on localised environments, arguing instead for an “eco-cosmopolitan” perspective that recognises the deep interconnectedness of ecological crises across national borders (90). While *Animal's People* is rooted in the specific, devastated topography of Khaufpur, the predatory actions of the multinational corporation highlight the transnational reach of environmental exploitation, underscoring the urgent need for global accountability. Complementing this planetary viewpoint is Donna Haraway’s posthumanist framework, which decentres the human to recognise the radical entanglement of all living beings within shared “naturecultures” (40-41). The novel resonates with Haraway’s vision through *Animal's* transformed physicality; his posture and lived experience dismantle conventional species boundaries, framing his personal suffering not as an isolated human tragedy, but as a shared, multispecies affliction born from corporate ecocide. This dissolution of species hierarchies is most clearly articulated in *Animal's* radical kinship with his dog, Jara.

Vandana Shiva provides a profound critique of the dominant Western paradigm of “maldevelopment” (6) and its destructive impact on both the environment and marginalised communities in the Global South. Shiva expands on this by explaining that maldevelopment is:

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...the violation of the integrity of organic, interconnected and interdependent systems that sets in motion a process of exploitation, inequality, injustice and violence. It is blind to the fact that recognition of nature's harmony and action to maintain it are preconditions for distributive justice. This is why Mahatma Gandhi said, there is enough in the world for everyone's need, but not for some people's greed. (5)

In *Animal's People*, the corporate body mimics this violent capitalistic logic by treating both the non-human ecology of Khaufpur and its impoverished human inhabitants as entirely expendable resources. By viewing the ruined earth through Shiva's lens, it becomes evident that the ongoing bodily deformation of Animal and the literal poisoning of the local soil are not separate occurrences, but rather simultaneous outputs of a singular, colonialist corporate machine that thrives on ecological devastation and human degradation. Her work highlights the intricate connections between ecological degradation, social injustice, and economic inequality arguing that the same patriarchal and capitalist logic that exploits nature also systematically oppresses vulnerable groups. Shiva argues that the reductionist worldview of modern development transforms living ecosystems into mere resources for industrial profit, which devalues sustainable, holistic ecological knowledge which is traditionally held by local communities (6). She argues:

Maldevelopment is maldevelopment in thought and action. In practice, this fragmented, reductionist, dualist perspective violates the integrity and harmony of man in nature... It places man, shorn of the feminine principle, above nature and women, and separated from both... what is currently called development is essentially maldevelopment, based on the introduction or accentuation of the domination of man over nature and women. In it, both are viewed as the 'other', the passive non-self... Nature and women are turned into passive objects, to be used and exploited for the uncontrolled and uncontrollable desires of alienated man. From being the creators and sustainers of life, nature and women are reduced to being 'resources' in the fragmented, anti-life model of maldevelopment. (5)

Shiva effectively demonstrates how the dominant development paradigm fosters systemic violence by creating a false hierarchy that subordinates nature and women as passive 'others' or mere 'resources'. This dualistic, reductionist worldview, which Shiva powerfully renames as "maldevelopment," is the fundamental source of both ecological destruction and social subjugation. Her work, thus, reveals the necessity of rejecting this flawed model entirely to achieve true ecological sustainability and gender equity. In the novel, the characters' experiences match with Vandana Shiva's concept of "maldevelopment" (5). The catastrophic industrial disaster in Khaufpur exemplifies how a fragmented, reductionist, dualist perspective leads to environmental violence and social

subjugation. The Kampani treats the local ecosystem and residents as mere passive objects or resources for profit, as described by Shiva's theory. The result is the persistent suffering of the marginalised community. They live in a toxic environment long after the disaster, highlighting the 'subjugation of the feminine principle' in both nature and vulnerable people by an alienated, capitalist logic. The novel, thus, serves as a powerful fictional case study of Shiva's argument. It demonstrates that this model of development is inherently destructive to both human and non-human life.

Analysing *Animal's People* through a postcolonial ecocritical lens reveals how the lingering effects of colonialism exacerbate environmental injustice. Neoliberal globalisation operates with impunity, exploiting the local population and environment in a manner that mirrors historical patterns of colonial extraction. This systematic degradation manifests as a form of "slow violence" (Nixon 2), an environmental destruction that is delayed, attritional, and dispersed across time and space, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities in postcolonial settings (Nixon 45-67). The lingering aftermath of the factory disaster in the novel exemplifies this phenomenon, as long-term health consequences and ecological damage unfold silently over generations, far removed from the explosive spectacle of the initial catastrophe.

The narrative probes the underbelly of this contemporary neoliberal order through the innovative framework of an environmental picaresque, tracing the lopsided universe of deregulation from the vantage point of an indigent social outcast. Rob Nixon notes:

The power of *Animal's People* flows largely from Sinha's single-handed invention of the environmental picaresque. By creatively adapting picaresque conventions to our age, Sinha probes the underbelly of neoliberal globalization from the vantage point of an indigent social outcast. His novel gives focus to three of the defining characteristics of the contemporary neoliberal order: first, the widening chasm... that separates the mega rich from the destitute; second, the attendant burden of unsustainable ecological degradation that impacts the health and livelihood of the poor most directly; and third, the way powerful transnational corporations exploit under cover of a free market ideology the lopsided universe of deregulation, whereby laws and loopholes are selectively applied... (46)

Sinha uses an environmental picaresque style to examine issues related to neoliberal globalisation. The novel highlights disparities between the wealthy and the poor, the impact of ecological damage on disadvantaged communities, and how corporations may use deregulation for their advantage in a global market.

The "ecology of affluence" and the "environmentalism of the poor" form a critical conceptual binary that exposes the stark divisions between Western and postcolonial

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ecological movements (Guha 92). While the environmentalism of the Global North often develops as a luxury of a “full stomach”, focusing on aesthetic conservation, wilderness preservation, and the protection of pristine landscapes untouched by humans, postcolonial environmentalism is fundamentally a “livelihood environmentalism” (Guha 98). This paradigm is driven not by leisure or middle-class romance, but by an acute struggle for material survival. Resource conflicts in postcolonial nations are deeply tied to structural inequalities, as marginalised communities rely directly on their local soil, water, and forests for daily existence. Environmental degradation in these settings is never merely an abstract ecological concern; it is a direct assault on the health, human rights, and socio-economic autonomy of subaltern populations. This framework of Ramachandra Guha demands an inclusive approach that shifts focus from saving a remote wilderness to protecting the vulnerable human and non-human bodies that bear the unequal costs of industrial expansion and corporate globalisation (105).

Livelihood environmentalism functions as the central driving force in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*, transforming the abstract struggle for survival into a fierce demand for justice. The residents of Khaufpur do not fight for the romantic preservation of untouched nature, but for access to basic, uncontaminated resources essential to life. This desperate reality is laid bare when the characters launch a hunger strike to demand clean water and corporate accountability, with Nisha declaring that if it is a choice between dying of the Kampani’s poisons and dying of hunger, they will choose hunger. This stark ultimatum underscores how corporate pollution directly threatens their daily survival. For these subaltern victims, environmentalism cannot be separated from political resistance against a state-corporate alliance that prioritises profit over human life. When *Animal* describes the local ecosystem, he does not speak in pastoral or aesthetic terms, but points directly to the corporeal reality of poisoned groundwater, noting how the wells spit fire and how the water in them is bright blue, it smells like rotten cabbage. By grounding the entire narrative in the physical suffering and material dependency of the local poor, the novel rejects elite, wilderness-focused models of conservation and aligns fully with a socio-economically inclusive, livelihood-based environmental justice framework.

Dipesh Chakrabarty examines how the dawn of the Anthropocene, the geological epoch in which human activity becomes the dominant planetary force, fundamentally destabilises traditional humanistic frameworks. His first thesis argues that anthropogenic climate change collapses the age-old distinction between natural history and human history, transforming humans from mere biological actors within a static environment into active geological agents capable of altering planetary cycles (201). The second thesis posits that this new geological reality qualifies traditional histories of modernity and globalisation

(207). It exposes how post-Enlightenment ideals of human freedom, democratic progress, and economic expansion were built entirely upon the unsustainable extraction of fossil fuels and the exploitation of the earth's deep history. The third thesis demands an intellectual bridge between global histories of capital and the deep species history of humanity (212). Chakrabarty asserts that while humanist critiques correctly focus on local inequalities, social classes, and corporate exploitation, the looming climate crisis is a collective threat that must also be viewed through the long-range, biological lens of the human species as a unified, destructive force. His fourth thesis suggests that cross-hatching the history of capital and the history of the species probes the very limits of historical understanding (220). Because humans have no direct phenomenological or emotional experience of existing as a "species," the scale of planetary degradation eludes conventional, localised historical interpretation, forcing a reckoning with a shared universal destiny that escapes the immediate human capacity to comprehend.

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* serves as a poignant literary instantiation of these concepts, illustrating the moment where local corporate exploitation collides with geological and planetary time. The chemical leak in Khaufpur embodies the collapse of natural and human history, as the industrial failure alters the town's biology, transforming the local ecology into a permanent site of toxic degradation. This local crisis directly qualifies narratives of globalisation and progress; the freedoms and financial gains enjoyed by the transnational corporation are explicitly revealed to be parasitic on the poisoned bodies and land of the Global South. Through the physical transformation of its protagonist, the novel maps the history of global capitalism directly onto the evolutionary history of the human species. Animal's twisted spine forces him to navigate the world on all fours, stripping away his conventional status as a human being. By merging his identity with the nonhuman world, his body becomes a living embodiment of the Anthropocene, a raw manifestation of humanity acting as a destructive geophysical force. The narrative probes the limits of historical understanding by contrasting the immediate, short-term legal and political denials of the corporation against the vast, intergenerational timeline of the disaster's toxic aftermath. The poisoned groundwater and genetic mutations in Khaufpur represent an irreversible planetary scar that outlasts corporate cycles, operating on a deep timescale that refuses to be forgotten or contained by human laws.

Applying these theoretical frameworks to *Animal's People* provides a deeper understanding of the novel's complex portrayal of human-animal-environmental relationships. The novel is a powerful indictment of corporate colonialism, ecological destruction, and the systemic inequalities that perpetuate environmental injustice. *Animal's People* also serves as a call to action, urging readers to recognise their own

interconnectedness with the natural world. It urges people to work towards a more just and sustainable future for all beings. The novel reminds people that environmental degradation is not simply an abstract concept but a lived reality with profound consequences for both human and nonhuman lives. It encourages a shift beyond anthropocentric perspectives to embrace a more holistic understanding of humanity's place within the interconnected web of life.

This exploration of the novel examines the multifaceted representation of ecocide. The study focuses on the interplay between environmental disaster, corporate negligence, and the resilience of the human spirit. The depiction of the fictional Khaufpur, inspired by the Bhopal gas tragedy, serves as a powerful indictment of corporate greed and government complicity in the face of environmental catastrophe. By applying the concepts of “slow violence” by Rob Nixon, “maldevelopment” by Vandana Shiva, and “naturecultures” by Donna Haraway, this paper demonstrates how the novel voices the ruined earth, making an urgent case for environmental consciousness and global accountability.

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