



Disabled and vulnerable bodies in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*: transcending the human and nonhuman world

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Abstract

Foregrounding the disabled and vulnerable bodies in British writer Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007), this article contends that the disability and vulnerability of the human body provides an approach for re-thinking the relationship between the human and non-human world in the Anthropocene. The article seeks understandings about how conceptions of corporeal disability are intertwined with ideas about the non-human world; it also analyzes the vulnerability of the human body to toxic environments. "Disabled and vulnerable bodies in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*" offers a close reading of various disabled and abnormal bodies in *Animal's People* through material ecocriticism to question dualisms that pervade our thinking about corporeality and to suggest that the differences between human and nonhuman are not as great as we like to pretend in the Anthropocene.

Keywords Body · Disability · Vulnerability · Trans-corporeality · Anthropocene · *Animal's People*

Relationships between the human body and the environment are at the core of many Anthropocene discussions, both in scholarship and literature. British writer Indra Sinha has constructed a new type of connection between the human and non-human world in his novel *Animal's People* (2007) by representing bodies in states of illness, deformation, and vulnerability, each the result of interactions with toxic environments. Disabled and vulnerable bodies seemingly lose human agency and drift between the human and non-human worlds. For instance, the character named

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Animal, the protagonist in this novel, seems to be of both the human and non-human worlds. He has become disabled with irreversible spinal damage caused by toxic gas, and what is under critique in the novel clearly is the Bhopal disaster of 1984.¹ Despite his disability, Animal has some very special skills. By reading *Animal's People* through the lens of material ecocriticism, this article argues that the human body is vulnerable to the toxic environment and that, because of the increasingly dangerous effects on humans of the material intercourse between the two, it is vitally necessary to rethink the relation between the human and non-human world in the Anthropocene.

The relationship between human and non-human worlds is one of the central issues that concerns current theories of corporeality in the Anthropocene. Bernice Bovenkerk and Jozef Keulartz, who focus on environmental ethics and philosophy, argue in their co-edited *Animal ethics in the age of humans: Blurring boundaries in human-animal relationships* for the necessity to reconsider the changing relationships and boundaries between human and non-human animals in the Anthropocene (Bovenkerk and Keulartz 2016, pp. 14–15). Yet, as Catherine Parry explains in her compelling *Other animals in twenty-first century fiction*, the separation of human and animal has become the structuring principle of the Western world for centuries (Parry 2017, p. 2). This separation is a central concern of ecocriticism, and dismantling this dualist paradigm has become one of the starting points for theorizing about the environment.

Ecocriticism and new materialism have challenged the human-nonhuman binary framework and proposed alternatives. Ecologist and philosopher David Abram put forward the notion of the “more-than-human” (Abram 1996, p. 24) world to describe the enmeshment of human/non-human animal worlds as a response to position “the human” as a subset of the material world and reject what Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino call a “nature-culture bifurcation” (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, p. 16). As a subset of the material world, human beings maintain what Stacy Alaimo identifies as “transcorporeal” exchanges with non-human entities all the time (Alaimo 2010, p. 2). Both human and non-human bodies are agential for Alaimo and mutually affect each other. We seldom think, however, about how the agency of the human body changes in the context of an agential toxic environment that disables the body.

Focusing on the disability of the human body is indispensable for discussing human/non-human relations in the Anthropocene. If, as Timothy Clark claims, “the place of non-human life is both pervasive but unseen” (Clark 2011, p. 187) in most canonical literary texts, and if, to cite Simon Estok, “the topic of animals has remained on the fringes” (Estok 2009, p. 215) in environmental movements and ecocriticism, then Sinha has given prominence to the meaning of being an “animal” in *Animal's People*. Sinha’s protagonist is unable to stand up straight and walks on all fours, “feet on tiptoe, head down below, arse en haut” (Sinha

¹ The Union Carbide India Limited pesticide plant in Bhopal had a gas leak on December 2 and 3, 1984, and a half a million people were exposed to a severely toxic gas. It is the worst industrial accident in history (see also Lapierre and Moro 2002, Epilogue).

2007, p. 16), like an animal. His literal point of view is that of an animal, with an angle and range of visibility limited to the waist-level, since his head always hangs down because of his twisted spine.

The victims of the Bhopal disaster, like *Animal* in the novel, suffer from different diseases and effects to their bodies, and they experience what Rob Nixon calls a “slow violence” (Nixon 2011, p. 2) of the poison. The damaged organs or parts of the body become what Michelle Murphy calls “chemical embodiment[s]” (Murphy 2008, p. 696), which later turn out to be “toxic embodiments” (Cielemecka and Åsberg 2019, p. 101) because of the all-pervasive toxicity in the environment. People are still suffering from the Bhopal disaster even today, and Sinha’s novel narrativizes this suffering.

The human body is fragile and vulnerable, and toxic environments easily produce various disabilities that place the body in an inferior position. In *Animal’s People*, Sinha presents damaged and crippled bodies that are the result of industrial toxins. It is not only *Animal’s* terribly twisted spine that we see. There are other victims—memorably, the poisoned dead fetus with two heads and named Khā-in-the-Jar. By inhaling the toxic air, drinking toxic water, and eating toxic fruits or vegetables, people suffer damage of the eyes, damage of the lungs (like the character Somraj, who cannot sing anymore), or damage of the womb (which causes half of the pregnant women to abort on the night of the gas leak and many newborns to be deformed at birth). It is a reality that such “slow violence” from the toxic environment unfortunately produces “bioaccumulation,” a process by which “toxic substances, industrial waste or human-made chemical compounds, gradually accumulate in living tissue” (Cielemecka and Åsberg 2019, p. 101). The effects of trans-corporeal exchanges between the toxic environment and human bodies can be both crippling and lethal. As Elizabeth Grosz explains,

... environmental illness offers a particularly potent example of trans-corporeal space, in which the body can never be disentangled from the material world, a world composed of emergent, entangled biological creatures as well as a multitude of xenobiotic, humanly made substances. (Grosz 2005, p. 24)

Indeed, many scholars have noted that the “human” does not “preexist” its interactions with the world (see, for instance, Karen Barad 2007, p. 33). Intimately entangled with the material world, the human body is subject to the dangers of that world. In the case of the Bhopal disaster and its literary narrativization in *Animal’s People*, the irony is that the very poisons designed to protect humans (by killing the insects that pose a threat to humanity) ultimately hurt humankind.

There is no difference, in essence, between human and non-human corporeality, and no bodies are exempt from the effects of toxic environments. Industrial toxins permeate soil, air, and water and affect the nerves, blood, organs, and even genes of human and animal bodies. There is poisoned well water in *Animal’s People* that gets into women’s bodies and poisons their breast milk: the “wells are full of poison. It’s in the soil, water, in [their] blood [...] Everything [...] is poisoned” (Sinha 2007, pp. 107–108). Nature is agential, we must remember, and

we see this agency in nature's attempt to recover from the damages that it has sustained: "Mother Nature," as Sinha says, is trying to "take back" (*ibid.*, p. 31) the poisoned and dilapidated Kampani factory that produced all of the pollution problems in the novel. Nature does this by turning the factory into a forest, but the toxins have killed the birds, insects, and other animals. As a result, this is still a poisoned place where there is a silent war between the toxic environment, on the one hand, and human and non-human corporeality on the other.

To emphasize the vulnerability of human corporeality is not to depreciate human agency but to rethink 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. Catherine Parry, in her monograph *Other animals in twenty-first century fiction*, claims that "Animal's disfigurement is not [...] a wholly negative transformation" (Parry 2017, p. 16). Because of his disfigurement, Animal can 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" in common parlance). Increasingly, disability studies is an important area of research.

Nocella (2012), who focuses on environmental studies, develops the philosophy of "eco-ability" by bringing together disability theory, animal advocacy, and ecology. According to Nocella, "eco-ability" combines "the concepts of interdependency, inclusion, and respect for difference within a community; and this includes all life, sentient and nonsentient" (Nocella 2017, p. 141), stressing imperfection and deconstructing the "disability" itself. Therefore, "disability" is another expression of "ability." In this sense, corporeal "disability" renovates the understandings that concern human agency and functioning.

One of the things that become very clear in this novel is that the boundary between human and animal is a false one. In her article entitled "Profanity and the grotesque in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*," Adele Holoch states,

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. (Holoch 2016, p. 132)

Naming, to some degree, is a way to define. In *Animal's People*, the naming of "Animal" is arbitrary (as is the category of "animal" itself). Derrida criticizes the term "animal," pointing out that "animal" is "an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other" (Derrida 2008, p. 23). By questioning the naming process of "animal" and the superiority of the human authority to name it, Derrida criticizes the synthetic category of animal. In *Animal's People*, Sinha also constantly represents the arbitrariness of naming and defining categories of human and animal. The name "Animal," which becomes a designation of the differently-abled protagonist in this novel, is a stigmatized nickname given by jeering children at the very beginning. When Zafar, who is the leader of the group upholding justice for the poisoned people in Khaufpur, insists that Animal should not allow himself to be like an animal and should choose a human name, he arbitrarily provides several "normal" and "proper" names for Animal: "Jatta for example or Jamil, go ahead pick one, whatever you like, we'll call you that henceforth" (Sinha 2007, p. 23). Zafar's insistence seems to be a respect for Animal's differently-abled body, but actually it is not. He treats animals and "abnormal" bodies as the opposites of human and "normal" bodies. By presenting the naming process of Animal, Sinha questions the very definitions of "animal" and "human."

The Anthropocene highlights that "the human" has become a decisive force of the environment; in so doing, the very concept of the "Anthropocene" validates the notion of a discrete "human" with definitive agency; yet it is easy to exaggerate this agency. Material ecocriticism insists that humankind together with nonhuman corporeality forms a "storied matter," a "material 'mesh' of meanings, properties, and processes in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces" as Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann argue in *Material ecocriticism* (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, pp. 1–2). But humankind is not the only agential subject. Material ecocritics have argued that nonhuman corporeality has agency as well, which jointly shapes nature with humans. In this argument, humans are subject to the agential actions of nonhuman corporeality. For instance, in *Animal's People*, breast-feeding women produce poisonous milk, the French nun Ma Franci suffers from aphasia caused by toxic air inhalation, and Animal suffers from auditory hallucinations caused by nerve damage. The human body is clearly connected with the entire material world. It is difficult to argue that in the so-called Anthropocene, humankind is a decisive force independent of agential non-human corporeality. This calls into question the very concept of the Anthropocene.

Although the Anthropocene highly stresses the agency of humankind, what it means to be a human or a nonhuman animal invites further questions. In *Animal's People*, there is a fierce debate about whether Animal is animal or a human being. His friend Nisha, who seemingly never notices Animal's disfigurement and pretends that Animal is not crippled, treats Animal as "completely normal" (Sinha 2007, p. 22). In contrast, Zafar insists that Animal should act like a human.

Animal's People is, to some extent, a world of magical realism, which blurs both the boundary between reality and illusion, and the division between the human and nonhuman world. Animal regards the dead embryo named Khā-in-the-Jar as his friend, and he talks with it and saves it from the fire that people in

Khaufpur set as revenge on free clinic run by the American doctor Elli. Through Animal's communication with Khā-in-the-Jar, we know that even the dead fetuses have constructed an organization to fight for justice: as Khā-in-the-Jar tells Animal, "Eight we were, board members of the poisonwallah shares" (Sinha 2007, p. 336). Animal empathizes with the material world, thinking about what nonhuman animals think and seeing what nonhuman animals see. Meaningfully, such a transboundary move is a product of the nerve damage caused by the toxic environment, which disables bodies on the one hand and unifies the human and nonhuman corporeality on the other. Rob Nixon, as well as Roman Bartosch (who focuses on ecocriticism and animal studies at the University of Cologne), regards *Animal's People* as a picaresque novel and Animal as a postcolonial or environmental picaro (see Nixon 2011, p. 453; Bartosch 2012, p. 17). Animal, who wanders in the toxic environment like a picaro and shuttles back and forth between the human and nonhuman world, is thus the embodiment of this cross-border fusion.

Animal can make such movements because he speaks several languages and can recognize the inner thoughts of human and nonhuman entities. Animal understands five languages, including Hindi, Urdu, Bhojpuri, English, and French, and he takes a role as a translator among people who speak different languages and even explains nonhuman psychological processes to humans. Pablo Mukherjee, who focuses on postcolonial environment studies and postcolonial literature at Warwick University, argues that Animal's gift of language and his capacity for recognizing the inner life of others enables him to adopt "transpersonality," which is "an ability to experience the objective existence of the entire environment of Khaufpur as a network composed of related subjects, including himself" (Mukherjee 2011, p. 226). According to Mukherjee, Animal embodies both human and nonhuman qualities, making his existence "an argument for their continuity and their ontological quality" that further enables Animal "to mediate between not merely humans of various kinds, but also between nonhumans with humans" (ibid. p. 227). Therefore, Animal becomes the bridge that connects human and nonhuman worlds, allowing him to be a voice for a world that otherwise would have no voice.

The way Animal perceives and voices the world is different from how "normal" humans do, and this provides a different perspective with which to look at the world. Animal describes the world that he usually sees:

The world of humans is meant to be viewed from eye level. Your eyes. Lift up my head I'm starting into someone's crotch. Whole nother world it's, below the waist. [...] I know which one hasn't washed his balls, I can smell pissy gussets and shitty backsides whose faint stenchs don't carry to your nose, farts smell extra bad. (Sinha 2007, p. 2)

Animal regards the world he lives in and sees as a "nother world," a world that posthumanities scholar Justin Omar Johnston describes as connecting "the nether world of abject materiality with another world, a place not 'meant to be seen' as part of the 'world of humans'" (Johnston 2019, p. 108), which is also a place "where chemical violence intersects with transnational production" (*ibid.*, p. 110). However, Animal's narrative tone is playful and full of profanity, and it is through such a tone

that he tries to show that he is an animal rather than a human, satirizing the dichotomous way that humans see the world.

It is reasonable to say that it is the disability and vulnerability of the body that makes *Animal* recognize both his uniqueness and the very meaning of being unique. It is meaningless for *Animal* to vacillate between being a human and an animal; instead, he holds a negative attitude to the viewpoint that exclusively attributes the right to freedom to human beings. *Animal* thus claims, "I'm not a human being, plus I don't need anyone's permission to be free" (Sinha 2007, p. 194). Here *Animal* feels he belongs to no category but himself, a free being in the material world—a clear absurdity, since the core notion of new materialist environmental scholarship is that we are all intimately interconnected. No one is free. *Animal* shares his body with the world. Ecocritic Jesse Oak Taylor explains that "*Animal*'s poisoned body makes him acutely aware of precisely the extent to which he is *Janvaar*—'one who lives'—and thus what he shares with all other life, including vulnerability to death-dealing chemicals" (Taylor 2013, p. 186). Human and non-human entities are an organic whole as Zhuangzi² states: "the universe and humans are the one" (Chen 2009, p. 80). *Animal*, as a product of both nature and human industrial civilization, is a bridge between the human and nonhuman world, and his deformity implies a new kind of "factory life" where "the factory lives as a chemical prosthetic that travels with *Animal*" (Johnston 2019, p. 103). In this way, Sinha has given us an alternative type of relationship between the human and non-human world, a relationship that treats the differently-abled body as an ambassador that travels between the human and non-human world or even goes beyond terms such as "human," "animal," "human corporeality," and "non-human corporeality," as well as beyond the binaries those terms imply. *Animal* is clearly not alone. The whole group of *Animal*'s people is involved in this new type of relationship. *Animal* regards these poisoned and differently-abled people as his people, *Animal*'s people—as the title of this novel shows. In his almost prophetic monologue at the ending of the novel, *Animal* says "Tomorrow there will be more of us" (Sinha 2007, p. 366). There will be more "people of the Apokalis," people who suffer from environmental degradation, people who are deeply changed by impositions on their bodies from the world outside of themselves. Sinha's novel clearly and strongly interrogates the notion of human corporeality and its borders; moreover, as Jesse Oak Taylor claims, becoming *Animal*'s people means "surrendering the notion of a bordered body, impervious to its surroundings..." (Taylor 2013, p. 185). A body with no border means that there is no difference between human and nonhuman corporeality at all, and Sinha's novel shows that the increasingly dangerous effects of the material intercourse among agential bodies requires a serious re-thinking of human/nonhuman relations in the Anthropocene.

Sinha's *Animal's People* is filled with numerous "abnormal" and differently-abled bodies, and these damaged bodies resulting from toxic environments have the ability to sense and react with the world. Toxic environments can cripple people. Subjectivity

² Zhuangzi (庄子), who lived from around 369 BCE to around 286 BCE, is one of the representative masters of Taoism in China.

and agency are not the sole privilege of humans. Binaries (normal/abnormal, margin/center, human/animal, human world/non-human world) break down in the Anthropocene. We still have agency, but it is not ours alone. The human body is part of the larger body of the agential material world, and the borders are much more negotiable than we have ever imagined.

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