ABSTRACT

This essay discusses Indra Sinha's 2007 novel 'Animal's People' as a representation of disability, environment and postcolonial 'disaster' through the lens of critical posthumanism. I interpret Sinha's novel as positioning the character of Animal alongside external figurations of posthuman bodies, such as the classic Western superhero - a body transformed through exposure to 'disaster' into a higher being. I posit that in the postcolonial setting, narratives of transformation through chemical exposure are dominant, and mass disablement is the consequence. Quite apart from being raised to a post-human status, postcolonial collectives are instead, materially and bodily disenfranchised. The character of Animal, the protagonist in the novel demonstrates this through his continual identification as non-human. The application of the term 'posthumanist' to the novel then, seems to detract from Animal's agency and 'voice', and can be seen to demonstrate a willing neglect of postcolonial agency more broadly. However, Sinha's project is more complex than simply denouncing a possible move towards a critical posthumanism. Sinha conscientiously collapses the boundaries between the categories of human, animal, machine and environment in order to advocate a collective valuation of an inclusively posthuman future.

Keywords: Literary studies, postcolonialism, disability politics, environmentalism, posthumanism, identity

Indra Sinha’s 2007 novel, Animal’s People, narrates the aftermath of catastrophe through the eyes of Animal, a nineteen year old boy who suffers from a severe form of scoliosis. Stemming from “that night”, Animal’s condition stands in for the historic and contemporary exploitation of postcolonial collectives that Sinha details throughout the novel. This narrativisation of disaster draws heavily on real-life events, most obviously the Bhopal Gas Tragedy of 1984. It also brings to mind Western graphic novel explorations of ‘especially-abled’ bodies, transformed by chemical exposure into posthuman or superhuman subjects. In reading Animal’s People in parallel to these narrativisations of disaster and transformative (dis)ability, I hope to explore the ethics of discursively replacing ‘disability’ with ‘enhanced ability’ in a postcolonial setting. Using Judith Butler’s conception of which bodies we perceive as ‘grievable’, I examine Sinha's representation of disaster and how Animal’s People both mimics and diverges from the science

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fiction genre. Animal’s character has already been read as a posthuman subject. Certainly, Animal’s liminality and sense of himself collapse the binary categories of ‘animal’ and ‘human’. This furthers our understanding of Animal as potentially something beyond this either/or construction. However, I posit that whilst Sinha entertains a commitment to posthumanism, the ascribing of posthuman subjectivity perhaps avoids the violent history of bodies which have been materially and bodily disabled by (neo)colonial exploitation. I ask what it means then, to ascribe a posthuman subjectivity and/or aesthetic to bodies which have only just been permitted to be conceived of as ‘human’ at all?

In order to grasp the theoretical underpinnings informing my argument, a distinction needs to be drawn between the ‘post-human’ and critical posthumanism. Katherine N. Hayles suggests that an uncritical utilisation of the posthuman paradigm simply grafts a humanist sensibility onto the post-human conceptual frame. Critical posthumanism therefore attempts to abandon the liberal ideal of the sovereignty of Man and instead transcend anthropocentricism, looking towards a non-hierarchical future. In the case of *Animal’s People*, Sinha draws on the apocalyptic genre, employing the reader’s fear of a post-human dystopia. However the novel ultimately reaches a critical conclusion, with Animal accepting his transcendental body and consciousness and moving towards an advocation of a truly posthuman future.

Sinha’s novel opens with Animal’s reflection: “I used to be human once”. This immediately situates Sinha’s protagonist outside of the reader’s recognition of what is identifiably human. Animal therefore inhabits either a ‘past’ (animal/pre-human existence) or more crucially, a posthuman future. The use of the past tense to describe the state of being ‘human’ affirms this placing of Animal as a potentially posthuman subject. Animal’s frustration with his own exceptionality and the consequential impossibility of identification is belied on the

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4 Sinha, p. 1.
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next page, (“how can you understand this?”). This further connotes the tale of the ‘lone survivor’, familiar from canonical narratives of catastrophe.

Zafar’s insistence that Animal should think of himself as “especially abled” coincides with language used to speak of the ‘super’ or post-human paradigm. Here the field of disability studies and its relation to postcolonial collectives will be considered alongside the problems of Euro-centricism within it that Jina B. Kim identifies. Kim observes that dominant trends in the field have come from Euro-American perspectives and so have tended towards prioritizing individual liberation and discursive empowerment. This problematization chimes with Zafar’s liberal rhetoric which Animal voices a vehement opposition to. In a case like Khaufpur, where postcolonial disposability results in mass disablement, minority politics cannot fully account for the material needs of the population as a whole. Thus, Animal’s cynicism highlights the way in which individualistic approaches to disability politics are all but irrelevant where disability is produced through poverty, irresponsible corporatism and the demand for cheap (and thus unprotected) labour.

Animal’s perception of himself is perhaps the most important voice to consider. His ‘mantra’ of “I’m not a fucking human being, I’ve no wish to be one” refutes ‘Saint Zafar’s’ progressivism by refusing erasure and leaves Animal insisting on being taken “as I am”. This opposition encompasses conflicted identifications permanently straddling the categories of ‘animal’ and ‘human’. Animal hints at the futility of binary opposition in the tone of frustration Sinha injects into his protagonist’s avoidance of: “that long argument […] about what was an animal and what it meant to be human”. This conflict between resolutely opposing other’s attempts to include him, against Animal’s fervent yearning to walk upright should not only be

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5 Sinha, p. 2.
6 Sinha, p. 23.
8 Sinha, p. 23.
considered as contradictory. We should bear in mind that a key part of Animal’s wish to walk upright is his desire to enter into a sexual relationship – an apparent ‘animal’ need to procreate.\textsuperscript{10} Animal’s liminality therefore disrupts the strict boundaries of both categories, pointing towards a conception of human/animal/environment as an interconnected organism.

We might consider character’s attempts at ‘placing’ Animal alongside the way in which critics such as Bartosch have positioned him as embodying a form of posthuman subjectivity.

This brings us to the issue of consent in disaster narration. Whilst of course Animal is fictional, we might interpret the demand for his story to be told in “his words only” as indicative of Sinha’s own preoccupation with the ethics of representing postcolonial disaster.\textsuperscript{11} In choosing the tape recording as a narrative frame, Sinha does allow his protagonist a measure of agency. At the same time, this format and the text’s translation arches over Animal’s words, reminding the reader of the mediated nature of the narrative and that Animal’s voice is not a truly authentic one.

The continued attempts by Zafar, Nisha, Farouq and Elli to ascribe the category label ‘human’ onto Animal recall the issue of consent in self-identification and the violent history of prescribed racial and medical identities that were an intrinsic part of the ongoing colonial project. Here bell hooks’ critique of postmodern discourse is apt. hooks states that we might be suspicious of a theoretical standpoint that critiques ‘subjectivity’ at a point in time when the historically subjugated are first permitted a subjective voice at all.\textsuperscript{12} In a similar way, the insistence on a break with humanist philosophy might be unforgivingly read as a neo-imperial strategy for precluding newly ‘human’ bodies the right to humanism at all.

Poised between lamenting the ‘loss’ of his humanity (“is it kind to remind a blind man he could once see?”) versus his mantra of: “I no longer want to be human”, Animal’s contradictions

\textsuperscript{10} Sinha, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{11} Sinha, p. 9.
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are symptomatic of the precariousness of his position. Donna Haraway’s provocative and influential ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ praises this kind of dualistic vision as a political challenge where “each [perspective] reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point”. Haraway calls for an imagining of a new world order in which our joint kinship with animal, environment and machine is not something to be afraid of, but rather, a site of transformative possibility. Animal’s seemingly contradictory standpoints reveal a self-awareness of what Haraway terms his “permanently partial ident[ity]”. In this way, Haraway’s theory of a posthuman future is one that rejects the transhumanist position of utilising technology to further an anthropocentric mastery over nature. Instead, she seeks to collapse the distinctions between social categories, including race, class, human and non-human animal in order to move beyond hierarchical stratification and closer to the consciousness that Animal creates for himself.

In being refused inclusion within familiar social categories, Animal creates for himself what Sandoval calls an “oppositional consciousness”. This intentional placing of himself outside the dominant order of power gives Animal a unique perspective and ability to effect change. Sandoval’s theory can be applied to Sinha’s novel in its envisioning of a “new subject position” that is concurrently “within yet beyond the demands of dominant ideology”. In examining Sinha’s characterisation of Animal, this demand for liminality is articulated alongside Zafar’s unshakeable belief in the “power of zero”. This form of resistance takes its inspiration from broader anti-colonial struggles, as Mukherjee notes: “deriv[ing] its strength from the very

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15 Haraway, p. 295.
17 Sandoval, p. 77.
18 Sinha, p. 54.
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poison with which the Kampani seek[s] to disable them’. This strategy ties together the interconnecting oppressions of enforced disablement, disposable postcolonial populations and socio-political disenfranchisement, ultimately enabling the Khaufpuris to seek posthuman collectivism over anthropocentric individualism.

Animal’s final embrace of his unique status easily lends itself to a posthumanist interpretation. However, this should be regarded with some caution. Whilst Animal’s decision can be read as self-made acceptance and therefore liberating, his final warning is less comfortable an ending. The case of Khaufpur belies a distrust of narratives of post-disaster enhancement. Instead, we might come to regard Khaufpur as a parable through which to begin a more democratic deconstruction of the increasing shift towards posthumanism as a discourse. Animal’s rejection of the offer of surgery poses a larger question than just ‘correcting’ his twisted spine. Instead, this refusal advocates a broader resistance to Euro-American attempts at ameliorating, rather than precluding, the multiple crises of neo-liberal exploitation. In its imagining of Animal as the physical embodiment of what literally comes after human domination, *Animal’s People* reveals the destruction and mutilation of the human body due to (neo)colonial sensibility and anthropocentric hierarchy. This alternative reimagining of a dystopian ‘*post-human*’ future holds echoes of the apocalyptic neglect that Marx envisions as the final stage of capitalist alienation.

In his article ‘Postcolonial Disaster, Pacific Nuclearization and Disabling Environments’, Anthony Carrigan points to the way in which colonial inheritances and neo-colonial presences create an environment in which, due to complex emergencies such as war, famine and genocide disability is a “constitutive feature of community life”. This ties in with the representation of

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the Nutcracker as a locale in which the conglomeration of colonial, neoliberal and industrial agendas has created a ‘disabling environment’ whereby what is ‘normal’ is shifted in meaning to encompass a compound crisis. This setting allows Sinha to explore the real-world affect that contemporary colonialism has on people and environments.

Animal frequently highlights his entanglement between craving normalcy and revelling in his disgust (and distrust) of humans. Animal’s first “impossible wish” is of course, to stand upright. This is born out of a desire for some facet of normality (in an environmental collective marked by its abject otherness), and perhaps a traumatic want to recover what has been ‘taken’ from him (and the other Khaufpuris) without their consent. Animal’s retelling of his ‘naming’ encompasses these myriad complexities and unclear demarcations that collapse the boundary between ‘normality’ and disabling irruption that are apparent throughout the novel. The scene opens on a childish façade: Animal is eight years old and has gone to swim with some others. However, this idyll is quickly reversed as the reader is told that the lakes Animal invokes are really pits behind the Kampani’s factory “where bulldozers would dump all different coloured sludges”. This interruption exemplifies Carrigan’s identification of the ‘disabling environments’ that are a common feature of postcolonial landscapes, and serves to remind us of the alternative contextual framework in which Sinha’s novel locates its preoccupation with disability.

Sinha’s remapping of the parameters of what constitutes as ‘normal’ recurs throughout the novel. This is exemplified in the scene that begins Tape 5: whereby Animal, Zafar and others debate the authenticity of 9/11 as it unfolds on Chunaram’s television screen. Farouq’s response that in America “such things…” as bombs exploding and buildings falling “[…] are normal” stands in stark contrast to Union Carbide’s statement following the Bhopal Gas Tragedy that: “it

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21 Carrigan, p. 255.
22 Sinha, pp. 75-76.
23 Sinha, p. 16.
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couldn’t happen here [in the United States]). Furthermore, the equation of September 11th with a ‘movie’ uncannily echoes the first words of spectators on the ground in New York that day. Moreover, Animal’s countering of this (“Stuff like that doesn’t happen in real life. Not in Amrika anyway”) suggests an innate knowledge of global disparities in the processes of disaster production. Animal follows this by emphasising the history of imposed structural and societal stratification that leaves postcolonial nation-states more susceptible to catastrophe – “Here in Khaufpur it’s different. Here in Khaufpur we had that night”. The question of normalcy is posed in its actuality by Ma Franci: “Poor four-foot Animal, for you what is normal”? This question seems to haunt the novel, repositioning an understanding of mass disablement in the postcolony as reconstituting the boundaries of what we can class as ‘normal’ to those people who have had all facets of normality stripped from them through historic exploitation.

The interior of the “death factory” provides one of the most pertinent examples of the possibility of a posthuman, symbiotic relationship between nature and human industry. The haunted factory is abandoned, by terrified Khaufpuris and the neglectful Kampani, but this, as Animal tells us, makes it the perfect site for “an animal to make its lair”. This confluence of nature and machinery invokes Haraway’s vision of an egalitarian posthuman future. The conglomeration of snakes, dogs, plant matter, chemical powders and Kampani papers coalesce to create Animal’s home: at once a warning and an imagining of a possible move beyond the realm of the human. Zafar’s warning of the possible recurrence of disaster: (“if the dry grasses inside the factory ever caught light […] it’d be that night all over again”) suggest the lurking danger

26 Sinha, p. 61.
27 Sinha, p. 61.
28 Sinha, p. 29.
29 Sinha, p. 29.
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masked by the enchanting beauty of the setting that Animal is also entranced by.\(^{30}\) Animal’s description of the vines “want[ing] to rip down everything the Kampani made” does not contradict the apparent mutuality of the relationship between nature, machinery and human/animal agency, but rather points the reader to the abusive history of capitalist ventures in the postcolony.\(^{31}\) Furthermore, Sinha’s choice of language directly sets up an equitable image of Animal’s arm and the creeping vine: (“Creepers, brown and thick as my wrist […] they’ve wrapped wooden knuckles round”). This simile blurs the assumed boundary between plant matter and Animal’s dexterity, suggesting a combined common outlook.

The fictionalised Khaufpur disaster can also be read alongside representations of catastrophes in Western comic books and science fiction. As Sinha himself states: “the book could have been set anywhere where the chemical industry has destroyed people’s lives”.\(^{32}\) This makes the narrative interesting to compare to creative fascination with the transformative effects of fictional disasters. Stories of human exposure to chemical or nuclear power, and their subsequent bodily augmentation sit somewhat uncomfortably alongside Sinha’s narrative, which draws heavily on real-world events such as Bhopal, emphasising the ongoing crisis rather than the glimmering potential of human enhancement. However, science fiction also explores the material and psychological effects of ‘disaster’, often borrowing from historical processes and events as springboards for discussion of philosophical and ethical themes. Furthermore, at the close of the novel Sinha provides the reader with a way of conceptualising an alternative ‘posthuman’ future through the eyes of Animal. Therefore, looking to textual fascination with the enabling potential of chemical catastrophe might prove a useful way of reading *Animal’s People* as provoking productive discussions about disability and posthumanism in a postcolonial context.

\(^{30}\) Sinha, p. 30.

\(^{31}\) Sinha, p. 31.

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Here Judith Butler’s conception of the ontological processes through which we have come to identify certain lives as more “grievable” than others is useful to consider. Whilst we might shift the parameters of Butler’s argument slightly by extending the question of what is ‘grievable’ to include the mass disablement of postcolonial collectives, the term is still useful to my argument. Whilst not wishing to position disability as an inherent ‘loss’ or as a metaphor for postcolonial disenfranchisement more generally, the example of Bhopal/Khauppur can be classed as an externally imposed mass disablement, and therefore a result of the dehumanising effects of colonialism and hyper-capitalist exploitation. Therefore, Butler’s argument can be transferred to Sinha’s attempt to expose the disparities in grievability through his narrativisation of the world’s worst industrial disaster, which is still relatively under-mourned. The distance between the tale of the subaltern and the superman is evidence of Butler’s theory. We might position Animal’s People as an answer to these fictionalisations of disaster that continue to privilege the Western individual body, even in the aftermath of catastrophe.

Butler’s example of how an “ethnic frame” was used to construct a notion of the Guantanamo Bay prisoners as un-‘human’ can be translated across to my illustration of the difference between Western creative fascination with catastrophically (en)abled bodies expressed through the comic-book medium and the postcolonial voicelessness Sinha unveils in Animal’s People. Whilst the majority of science fiction superhuman narratives focus on the survival and enhancement of privileged bodies through (un)fortunate chemical accidents, Animal’s People reverses this paradigm to consider the lived experience of the postcolonial subaltern, in which such ‘accidents’ quickly become disasters as a result of histories of exploitation and the ongoing perception of postcolonial expendability. Sinha’s task then, is to reconfigure dehumanised disaster victim ‘masses’ into relatable personalities. In successfully doing this, Animal’s People challenges the assumption made in science fiction that traumatic histories of catastrophe can only

33 Judith Butler, Frames of War, pp. 1-6.
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be empathised with through fantastical analogy. By transplanting the trope of apocalyptic disaster into a quasi-real world setting in which ‘disaster’ and disability are a constitutive part of everyday life, Sinha furthers the work of both postcolonial and disability studies scholarship by insisting on the recognisable (and often crude) humanity of his protagonist and the Khaufpuri collective that surrounds him. Through his simultaneous employment of the apocalyptic post-human genre and critical hesitance regarding the posthuman, Sinha suggests that we first have to regain compassion for the hitherto dehumanised, before we can collectively progress to a critical posthuman future.

Edward Said’s *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* is useful here in formulating a path between this vision of ultimate neglect and the liberating promise of a biocentric, genuinely posthuman future. Said calls for a more democratic approach to humanism that acknowledges and attempts to redress the omissions of the Western liberal tradition. Animal’s decision to use his money buy Anjali out of economically-necessitated prostitution is perhaps an attestation of the energy that Said commends as evidence of the profoundly humanistic spirit that continues to motivate global struggles. However, this form of humanistic spirit that Said maintains faith in, although present (as evidenced in Zafar’s struggle against the Kampani), is complicated by Animal’s cynical view of “talk of rights, law, justice”.35 This refusal to surrender disbelief is not lost by the end of the novel. Despite the tantalizing possibility of an available, accessible cure, Animal’s decision to remain as he is instead directs the reader’s attention towards the continuing dehumanisation that the majority of people in Khaufpur are subject to, without hope of emancipation. In this way, Said’s faith in a critical, democratic humanist approach is countered by Animal’s agency as a character. His cynical attitude and final prophecy that there will continue to be more ‘Khaufpurs’ suggests a shift away from the supposed universalism of

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35 Sinha, p. 3, italics in original.
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humanism towards the necessity of deconstructing the rigid distinctions between human, animal and machine.

Animal’s People poses important philosophical questions regarding what it means to be human in the aftermath of catastrophe. Farouq’s continual disavowal of Animal’s identification as an animal betrays the common concern that Said also gives voice to about the disintegration of models of participatory citizenship.36 Alternatively, Animal’s liminality points us towards a model of belonging rooted in the abjectivity of the picaresque tradition that Nixon attributes to the text’s narrative voice.37 Edward Said provides a useful outline of the limits of the humanist tradition, especially in regard to postcolonial collectives. However, in his characterisation of Animal and deliberate obfuscation of the distinct separation between categories of human, animal and environment, Sinha departs even from Said’sadvocation of a more democratic humanism.

The difficulties we encounter in ascribing a posthuman aesthetic onto the literature of catastrophe are thus countered by Sinha’s conscientious attempt at deconstructing binaries. In purposefully situating his character just outside the sphere of neo-liberal hegemony and anthropocentric hierarchy, Sinha offers the reader a way of envisioning Animal’s peculiar model of resistance that can be placed alongside a posthumanist reading of the text.

In conclusion, Sinha draws upon Western fictionalisations of industrial disaster in order to expose and bridge the gap between which lives the reader perceives as grievable. In utilising familiar elements of the fictional catastrophe genre, Animal’s People concurrently enriches our understanding of a postcolonial reality whilst looking towards a non-hierarchical future. Frantz Fanon’s envisioning of the postcolonial departure from the European tradition is apposite here. In calling for an alternative approach to nation-building and human relations, The Wretched of the Earth can be read alongside Animal’s People as an invocation of the possibility of a postcolonial

36 Sinha, p. 87.
37 Nixon, p. 444.
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Sinha suggests that only in collapsing the boundaries between categories of animal, human and environment can we collectively move forwards into valuing an egalitarian, inclusively posthuman approach.

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