

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

Environmental Disasters and Disabled Bodies in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.4.453](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.4.453)



Article info

Article Received: 30/11/2025
Article Accepted: 26/12/2025
Published online: 31/12/2025

Abstract

The scope of this paper is to examine Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) which deals with industrial disaster and disability. The novel is based on the Industrial disaster of Union Carbide gas leak that happened in the Indian city of Bhopal on the fateful night of 3rd December 1984 which left thousands dead and thousands more maimed for life. Further the role of literature in upholding environmental ethics and environmental justice is examined. The study is done in the light of important eco-critical and disability theorists to understand the insights offered by the novel about the fallout of chemical disasters.

Key Words: Ecocriticism, environmental disasters, disability, environmental justice.

Introduction

Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death - Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) was a landmark work in environmental literature that apprised the American people with the hazards of using DDT and forced the government to reconsider its pesticide policy

and ban DDT for agricultural uses. The book brought about a revolution in the way we think about environment and shocked people from their complacency and made them aware of the harmful effects of pesticides and other harmful chemicals by effectively describing how lush green scenic region with its flora and fauna can be reduced to a virtual wasteland if we don't take steps to stop the use of pesticides. *Silent Spring* emerged as an epic in the modern Green movement. Writing about the sinister and lethal role of chemicals in converting our environments toxic; she opines that "The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth,

rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials" and in the "universal contamination of the environment, chemicals are the sinister and little-recognized partners of radiation in changing the very nature of the world -- the very nature of its life" (23).

Indra Sinha through his novel *Animal's People* has contributed towards fulfilling the "prophecy" of Lawrence Buell regarding the future of environmental criticism:

I myself believe that environmental criticism at the turn of the twenty-first century will also come to be looked back upon as a moment that did produce a cluster of challenging intellectual work, a constellation rather than a single titanic book or figure, that established environmentality as a permanent concern for literary and other humanists, and...helped instill and reinforce public concern about the fate of the earth, about humankind's responsibility to act on that awareness, about the shame of environmental injustice, and about the importance of vision and imagination in changing minds, lives, and policy as well as composing words, poems, and, books (Buell 133).

Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* is a step towards creating awareness regarding toxic environments and its dilapidating effects on humans particularly on those living on the margins of the society. The book was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in the year 2007 and revisits the Industrial disaster of Union Carbide gas leak that shook the city of Bhopal on the treacherous night of 3rd December 1984. Thousands of lives were snuffed out and thousands were left permanently injured and disabled. Indra Sinha imaginatively brings back the excruciating memories of the irreparable loss and the continuing effects of the disaster which was caused by the accidental leakage of methyl isocyanate gas. The efforts of my paper

are focussed on seeing disability through the lens of ecocriticism. Writers and ecocritics are able to mobilize societies and instigate change by reaching out to the minds and hearts of people whereas environmentalists face difficulty in establishing a link between individuals and global threats. The present study will look into the intersections of Environmental humanities and disability studies and further seek to establish an eventuality between environments and bodies.

The paper seeks to establish a link between disability and ecological disasters as commodification and exploitation of the environment has not only pushed the entire world to an imminent apocalypse but has also wounded and disabled the humans particularly those living on the margins. This apocalyptic vision has been shaped and expressed by many authors in myriad different ways, but their purpose in writing is the same and that is to confront and negotiate anthropogenic disasters through ecocritical tropes. The concern to preserve the environment and forewarn the humanity about the imminent apocalypse cuts across the boundaries of nations and spreads through diverse economic, social, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The paper will further theorise how Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* negotiates disability and environmental disasters through ecocritical tropes while narrating an engaging human drama which unfolds with all its nuances. It will traverse new horizons in environmental consciousness and disability studies while engaging with issues of industrial and nuclear disasters, human and animal rights etc. Further the role of literature in upholding environmental ethics and environmental justice will be examined.

There are many instances in modern history where it has been witnessed that industrialisation, consumerism, unethical use of chemicals in agriculture and food industry have done immense harm to humans, flora and fauna, soil, and air that we breath and sometimes the effects are so disastrous that the toxicity of these

chemicals remains potent for years and continues to poison the soil that produces the fruits and vegetables thus in turn the toxic substance continues to have its ill effect on the generations to come. Our planet earth is passing through a very critical phase and it is high time that researchers and academicians should start discussing and debating about ways and means to contribute in whatever small measures to save the environment.

Literature not only reflects society and its impulses but also offers ways and means to escape from various crisis that it faces from time to time and environmental degradation is one such crisis which can be averted through literary engagements which can help not only in conserving environment but can also assist in creating awareness against the indiscriminate use of chemicals in agriculture and other fields. Besides addressing some urgent issues regarding environment and its conservation the paper will also be negotiating into areas of environmental justice as often it is observed that the worst sufferers of environmental degradation are the poor, tribal and the marginalised who are directly connected to the surrounding environment for their sustenance and unable to buffer themselves from any sort of environmental disasters and how the rich have created several modes of escape from the same.

Background

Although Environmentalist movement has been gaining momentum since the 1960s but ecocriticism made its formal beginnings in America with the establishment of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) in 1992 at a Conference in Nevada to share the ideas regarding literature and environment with Scott Slovic as its first President and subsequently its flagship journal ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment) was established in 1993 by Patrick Murphy. Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship

between literature and the physical environment". She further states:

Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman (xix).

The term ecocriticism was first used by William Rueckert in his 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". Ecocriticism is an umbrella term which is known by many names like environmental humanities, Green Studies, Ecopoetics etc. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and Formation of American Culture* (1995) are the two path-breaking works in the field of ecocriticism. Lawrence Buell in his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism* while tracing the "antecedents" of ecocriticism particularly mentions "two precontemporary books of literary and cultural studies of greatest influence... in American Studies, Leo Marx's *The Machine and the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in American Culture* (1964)... and in British Studies, Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973)...." (14).

In the essay "Literature and Environment" Lawrence Buell, Karen Thomber, and Ursula K. Heise reiterate the importance of imaginative art in bringing to fore issues of environmental degradation:

Ecocriticism begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and the study thereof—by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven, and direct environmental concern – can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple

forms of eco degradation that afflict planet earth today (418).

With Rob Nixon comes the important issue of environmental justice which he brings to the fore in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). Nixon focuses on the fact that how we are not aware of many dangers looming large but their true effects are only seen with the passage of time and this he calls as the "slow violence". Nixon while referring to the proposal of Lawrence Summers; who was then president of the World Bank; regarding dumping the toxic wastes of rich countries into poor nations brings in the debate of "representational challenges posed by slow violence" (2) which he defines as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2) and further emphasises that accountability has to be made for all the chemical wastes or oil spills or for that matter industrial wastes and nuclear wastes to which the poor and the marginalised are exposed to bearing the burden of the progress made by the West in the globalized world. Writing about the "invisibility" of the effects of hazardous toxins he further engages with possibilities of devising ways and means to make it visible and questions; "How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention" (3). Taking the debate further Rob Nixon emphasizes about the significant role played by writer activists in acquainting people about the 'slow violence' caused by toxic wastes and industrial disasters and also dwells over the difficulty and impossibility of making it visible as big corporate houses have huge stakes in the trading and dealing of toxic materials, he opines:

It is here that writers, filmmakers, and digital activists may play a mediating role in helping counter the layered

invisibility that results from insidious threats, from temporal protractedness, and from the fact that the afflicted are people whose quality of life—and often whose very existence—is of indifferent interest to the corporate media (16).

Serenella Iovino, professor of Italian Studies and Environmental Humanities while discussing about the power of art and literature as forms of resistance in her book *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance and Liberation*, writes:

Narratives, either material or cultural, are forms of reaction and resistance. They create that interstice that allows the personal and the interpersonal to merge into one another, and to find their way out in the world: to be acknowledged, recognized, socialized.. A literature, an art, and a criticism that are able to transform these unexpressed voices into stories --- into our stories--- are not only ways to resist. They are practice of liberation (6).

Indra Sinha in his novel *Animals People* attempts to establish how chemical and other ecological disasters can permanently render bodies disabled and further negotiates with disability and etches out a character of Animal to break free from the established stereotypes of disabled bodies. Though from the mythical past to contemporary narratives disability has been a part of literary imagination, the disabled characters have not been presented with insight and understanding thus rendering them either as cunning beings out on taking revenge on the society for their condition or are presented as outright pitiable individuals drawing mercy from the masses. In her seminal work *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1996), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson the renowned disability justice leader and scholar states that "disabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations

operate as spectacles.... Indeed, main characters almost never have physical disabilities" (9), she further asserts that problem is not disability but the "inequalities, negative attitudes, misrepresentations, and institutional practices that result from the process of stigmatization" (32). Although much has changed in the manner in which disabled characters are perceived and represented and how their positioning has also changed from the periphery to the centre of the narratives. Still much needs to be done by creative writers to change the outlook of the society and to help remove the barriers which aggravates the conditions of the disabled body and to create awareness about the toxic environments which render individuals permanently and irreversibly disabled.

Sarah Jacquette Ray and Jay Sibara in the Introduction to their book *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory* insist that "disability studies challenge dominant perceptions of the body as separate from the contexts in which bodies live, work, and play." (1) Elaborating further they write that "the environmental humanities focus on issues, from food justice and migrant farmworkers to climate debt, military legacies, and green imperialism, that also concern disability studies scholars" (1). The book also discusses that the two fields of studies have not developed enough understanding of the other but there is an immense possibility of new research that can be taken as the two fields "have much to offer each other" (3):

Though disability studies scholars show that built environments privilege some bodies and minds over others, few have focused on the specific ways toxic environments engender chronic illness and disability, especially for marginalized populations, or the ways environmental illnesses, often chronic and invisible, disrupt dominant paradigms for recognizing and representing "disability" (2-3).

Environmental Disaster and Disability in Animal's People

In an evocative piece published on 2nd December 2009 in *New York Times*; marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Bhopal gas tragedy, Suketu Mehta revisits that night of horror while the survivors recollect that beastly "organism":

I have traveled to Bhopal and seen the post-apocalyptic devastation, seen the sick, seen the factory. Methyl isocyanate is a deadly chemical used to kill insects. The night that 40 tons of it wafted out of the factory is, for the survivors, a fulcrum in time, marking the before and after in their lives. They still talk about "the gas" as it were an organism they know well—how it killed buffalo and pigs, but spared chickens; how it travelled toward Jahangirabad and Hamidia Road, while ignoring other parts of the city; how it clung to the wet earth in some places but hovered at waist level in others; how it blackened all the leaves of a peepul tree; how they could watch it move to the other side of the road, like a rain cloud seen from a sunny spot. (Mehta)

Indra Sinha's *Animals People* is a novel which attempts to break away from the stereotyped image of disabled individuals and also helps in generating awareness about anthropogenic disasters. The novel gives a fictional account of the Union carbide gas leak that wrecked-havoc in Bhopal on the fateful night of 3rd December 1984 when thousands died, many more were injured and maimed for life as they ran berserk trying to escape that apocalyptic event when death and destruction danced on the streets of Bhopal. The toxic fumes destroyed and crippled everything that came its way, be it flora or the fauna, human or the animal, young and the old, born and the unborn. In many cases the effect of the exposure to the gas was not immediately felt or calculated but

came to the fore with the passage of time which made rescue, treatment and rehabilitation all the more difficult. As a writer activist; Indra Sinha in his novel *Animal's People*; has given voice to the poor and marginalised sections of the society who have been victims of grave environmental injustice that caused irreversible damage to their bodies:

Pyare Bai was married to Aftab, he worked in the Kampani's factory, and he told her how dangerous were the chemicals in there. If by chance you got any on your hand, Aftab said, the skin would blister. On that night he was at home off duty, when the stinging in the eyes began, the burning chillies, unlike most people he knew what to do. He covered the faces of Pyare and their two young daughters with wet cloths then led them, walking not running, out of the wind. In this way they escaped where most of their neighbours perished. All were nevertheless damaged by the poisons, Aftab the worst, because he'd taken less care over himself, he was coughing foam tinged with blood, his eyes were nearly shut (84).

Indra Sinha has been working for the survivors of Bhopal gas tragedy and has played a significant role in raising funds for them. In an article published in *The Guardian*, Sinha not only criticizes Dow Chemical Company holding them accountable for the Union Carbide disaster and how the company has constantly evaded the moral responsibility for the disaster that took place in the Union Carbide due to poor maintenance and negligence which left more than half a million population of Bhopal injured for life and how the dilapidated factory continues to be a major environmental and health hazard as it leaches out toxic chemicals polluting the groundwater and water reservoirs of the city as a result the poisons "gush from taps and enter people's bodies. They burn stomachs, corrode skin, damage organs and

flow into wombs where they go to work on the unborn. If babies make it into the world alive, the poisons are waiting in their mothers' milk" (Sinha). Indra Sinha is also contemptuous of the treacherous role played by political leaders and the apathy of the government in this whole tragedy. The victims have been denied of any government or private aid as the money always lands up in the hands of politicians, rich and the powerful people; who are often found luxuriating in the tragedies of the poor. Globalization and man's hunger for power and progress has not only disabled its own kind but has also afflicted irreversible damage to the environment as well by polluting and desecrating the rivers, forests, valleys, deserts with chemical, industrial and nuclear waste. Ato Quason in his book *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* observes that on looking back on "chemical leakage at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal in 1984 and the terrible impairments incurred" he finds a disturbing connection between "global capitalism and local disabilities" (3).

The protagonist of the novel *Animal's People* goes by the name of Animal as he moves on all fours. He narrates his story in a series of tapes which he does at the behest of Australian journalist who wants to put the story of the Animal in a book to let the world know about the sufferings of the gas tragedy survivors and to bring justice to them. His present state is neither since birth nor it is due to any other chronic illness, rather it is the result of the "slow Violence" of the chemical disaster; the apocalyptic event that took place in the fictitious town of Khaufpur; a flimsy disguise of Bhopal which witnessed the Union Carbide gas disaster. Due to the toxic effects of the chemical fumes Animal not only lost his parents and near and dear ones but also lost his ability to see the world in the upright position or in other words developed a new insight to see the marginalised world (as he walked on all fours) that dissociated him from the world of the rich and the powerful. The novel opens with the words

of the Animal disclosing the past: "I used to be Human Once. So I'm told. I don't remember it myself, but people who knew me when I was small say I walked on two feet just like a human being" (1), a little later Animal once again emphasizes "I used to walk upright, that's what Ma Franci says" (1). Swarnalatha Rangarajan in her book *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies* asserts that Animal destabilizes "the human-animal dichotomy" as "he discards his humanity by reappropriating the name 'Animal' given to him by the children of the street who mock his physical condition that makes him walk on all fours" (94). Rangarajan further observes that "Animal has to come to terms with his own humanity and human values that will ensure responsible action and environmental justice. The novel's 'animal agency' remedies what Richard Kerridge calls 'crisis of representation', by demonstrating how narrative imaginings can make 'slow violence' visible" (94). He was six when the toxic chemicals started to take their toll on his body as he suffered from acute bouts of pain in his neck and shoulders and consequently succumbing to the "slow violence" of the chemical exposure his back became twisted and he was unable to stand straight. In an honest disclosure the Protagonist pours his hatred and disgust towards humans; as he says:

In my mad times when the voices were shouting inside my head I'd be filled with rage against all things that go or even stand on two legs. The list of my jealousies was endless; Ma Franci, the other nuns at the orphanage, Chukku the night watchman, women carrying pots on their heads, waiters balancing four plates per arm. I hated watching my friends playing hopscotch. I detested the sight of dancers, performing bears brought by those dirty buggers from Agra, stilt walkers, the one-leg-and-crutch of Abdul Saliq the Peer Gate beggar. I envied herons, goalposts, ladders leaning on walls. I

eyed Farouq's bicycle and wondered if it too deserved a place in my list of hates (2).

Indra Sinha has successfully etched the character of Animal with utmost honesty, sincerity and realism as he goes on to narrate about his fears and desires, his longing to be loved by Nisha, his ability to hate and feel jealousy towards Zafar and how it feels to see the world "below the waist" (2). Anita Mannur in her article "That Night" observes that "Animal has a story to tell: about a profound act of environmental injustice in which those who bear the burden of telling the story are also those who are least likely to be granted an audience" (389). She further elaborates that Animal is under no illusion regarding his tale or the importance of it for the journalist as "In this environmental and humanitarian crisis characters like Animal are prized for the dramatic value they bring to stories about human suffering.... a perverse kind of visual pleasure and pain in seeing the horror of the disabled children" (392).

Animal's People also problematize the concept of looking normal; as Animal towards the end of the novel finally makes a choice and refuses to undergo spine corrective surgery in the US after which he could have walked on two limbs and prefers to remain in his present condition walking on all fours:

See Eyes, I reckon that if I have this operation, I will be upright, true, but to walk I will need the help of sticks. I might have a wheelchair, but how far will that get me in the gullis of Khaufpur? Right now I can run and hop and carry kids on my back. I can climb hard trees, I've gone up mountains, roamed in jungles. Is life so bad? If I'm an upright human, I would be one of millions, not even a healthy one at that. Stay four-foot, I'm the one and only Animal (366)

The novel depicts Animal's constant battle to renegotiate and navigate the world that privileges able bodied people not only in the physical space but in all imaginable spheres of life. Animal prefers his present state where he can use his limbs and move on all fours rather to choose a life of restricted mobility in order to look normal in the human world. Writing on this issue of visible disability and the tendency of "closeting" it; in her book *Staring: How we Look* (2009) Rosemarie Garland-Thomson states that the "hiding of disability has made it seem unusual or foreign rather than fundamental to our human embodiedness" as revealing sights of disability "both affirm our shared humanity and challenge our complacent understandings" as "visibly disabled body intrudes on our routine visual landscape and compels our attention, often obscuring the personhood of its bearer. Sometimes our startled eyes can stay with such a sight, and sometimes they flee in strained distress" (20). This is precisely what the Animal faces every minute of his life as either he is abused or laughed at by the people he is surrounded by as he moves around with his dog Jara. Except for Nisha and Zafar everyone treated him with contempt and ridicule. It is Nisha who treats him like any other normal being and Zafar who wanted to restore his "dignity and respect" (23) to which he was entitled to. There are still others like Dr. Elli who want to "correct" his problem through surgery so that at least his back might be straightened and he can look like a normal human being:

See Eyes, I reckon that if I have this operation, I will be upright, true, but to walk I will need the help of sticks. I might have a wheelchair, but how far will that get me in the gullis of Khaufpur? Right now I can run and hop and carry kids on my back, I can climb hard trees, I've gone up mountains, roamed in jungles. Is life so bad? If I'm an upright human, I would be one of millions, not even a healthy one at that.

Stay four-foot, I'm the one and only Animal (366).

Conclusion

By refusing the surgery and remaining the way he is; Animal is able to etch out an identity for himself and desires to inhabit a space where he is accepted the way he is and his worth is understood by things that he can do and not by his appearance and tasks which he is unable to accomplish. The final words of Animal "Eyes, I'm done. Khuda hafez. Go well. Remember me. All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us" (366) keeps resonating in the mind of the reader long after finishing the novel. The novel marks a shift in the attitude and perception of disabled characters as Animal is neither defeated nor is he swayed by the desire to conform and fit in and accepts life with all its difficulties and oddities. The novel heralds a change in literary depictions of disability and disabled characters and asks for greater sensitivity and understanding in their portrayal.

Animal's People like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* awakens readers to the apocalyptic effects of "slow violence". The novel evocatively brings to fore the disabilities and suffering of people; especially the poor, in the face of anthropogenic environmental disasters, thus bringing to focus how poverty and polluted environments can act as disabling agents. The novel is very topical in its treatment of disability and its ecological concerns as chemical and industrial disasters are a constant threat to any society and appropriate measures have to be in place to prevent any anthropogenic disaster in future. Through his novel Indra Sinha has been able to generate awareness about such chemical and industrial disasters by writing an intense narrative of pain, disability and loss and by making the apocalyptic event and its horrors more tangible and real for the readers and thus pushing forward the need to preserve our environment and to adopt ways and means

towards sustainable development lest the planet earth succumbs to complete annihilation.

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