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**HUMAN OR ANIMAL? DUALITY AND IDENTITY IN INDRA SINHA'S *ANIMAL'S PEOPLE***

ALEX GIRONA SALMERÓN

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona  
[alexgironasalmeron@gmail.com](mailto:alexgironasalmeron@gmail.com)Received: 10-01-2018  
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Duality is a central concept in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, and it is represented mainly by the conflict inside Animal: Has his state turned him into an animal or does he still remain human despite his appearance? In this essay I aim to discuss this topic by looking at several traits that Animal exhibits in his varied experiences throughout the novel.

*Animal's People* is set in Khaufpur, India, a fictional city that suffered the consequences of a gas leak from a pesticide factory. The incident, which is really the Bhopal gas incident of 1984, resulted in the death of thousands of people and the effects of the gas affected several thousands more. Animal, the main character of the novel, is a nineteen-year-old boy who, due to the gas, walks on all fours. In the novel he has issues originating from the notion of identity and humanity: What makes a human human? Is Animal a human or an animal?

At the beginning of the novel, in the very first sentence, we can see that Animal does not consider himself to be human anymore: “I used to be human once” (Sinha, 2007: 16). The change began when his spinal column began to twist forcing him to use his four extremities to move, which prompted the other children at the orphanage he grew up in to call him “Jaanvar” (“Animal”) (Sinha, 2007: 54). His lifestyle also contributed to the appropriation of the name, as he would live in the streets, panhandling and scavenging for anything that could be considered food.

While his manner of motion is the main source of this inner struggle between human and animal there are several examples of this “animality” of his. Besides telling us that he used to bite to defend himself, in Tape 2 Animal introduces us to his “friend” Jara:

Jara's my friend. She wasn't always. We used to be enemies. In the days of living on the street we were rivals for food. We used to work the same territory, the alleys behind the eating houses in the

old city [...] I might arrive to find Jara crouching over some prize [...] Or I'd be there first, slobbering over a choice morsel, and look up to see her eyes fastened on mine. (Sinha, 2007: 57).

At a first glance this would seem perfectly normal – another poor child that must survive by eating what she can find on the street. However, some lines after that description Animal tells us an extra piece of information: “She licked her lips, wagged her tail so hard her whole backside shook. Man, what a dog. A yellow dog, of no fixed abode and no traceable parents, just like me”(Sinha, 2007: 59). Although some hints are dropped before that revelation, everything Animal says could be attributed to a starving child left to take care of herself just like him, and yet we find that the one being he compares himself to is none other than a dog – an animal.

However, does that really make Animal an animal? After all, he calls Jara his friend, which brings us to a common saying regarding dogs – that they are *man's best friend*. Moreover, in a later encounter with a lizard that he is about to eat but in the end does not, Animal is told “You are a human. If you were an animal you would have eaten me”(Sinha, 2007: 346), which suggests that compassion is an intrinsic human quality. Animal shows that same compassion when meeting Jara, as he chooses to share a feast that he found instead of keeping it all for himself (Sinha, 2007: 59).

The blurriness of the line between animal and human is not only seen in Animal's body and interactions, but also in other places like his home. He lives in the abandoned factory where the incident took place, a ghastly space filled with terrifying memories – “It is a shunned place, where better for an animal to make its lair?” (Sinha, 2007: 88). The factory is depicted as follows:

Look inside, you see something strange, a forest is growing, tall grasses, bushes, trees, creepers that shoot sprays of flowers like fireworks. [...] Fucking place is full of cobras. Dogs too you've to watch for. [...] This is my kingdom, in here I am the boss. [...] Mother Nature's trying to take back the land. [...] Under the poison-house trees are growing up through the pipework. Creepers, brown and thick as my wrist, have climbed all the way to the top, tightly they've wrapped wooden knuckles round pipes and ladders. (Sinha, 2007: 88-92).

What Animal describes is a place that is, much like him, not totally human or animal, but a gray space in-between the two concepts. On the one hand we have the man-made, completely artificial pesticide factory (notice its final end too: to create a tool with which to kill bugs that hinder the growth of crops), with its brick walls and iron pipes, while on the other hand we have nature claiming that territory back as trees and other overgrown plants invade the factory. As with Animal's case, it could be argued either way whether the factory is now human or natural. Interestingly, Animal says that the factory is his kingdom, that he is the boss around there, which is yet another finger pointing to the internal struggle he is facing regarding his identity.

A final issue I would like to address are the Eyes to whom Animal tells the story, the presumably Western audience (Snell, 2008: 5):

I am saying this into darkness that is filled with eyes. Whichever way I look eyes are showing up. They're floating round in the air, these fucking eyes, turning this way and that they're, looking for things to see. I don't want them to see me [...]. They watched quietly, blinking now and again, waiting for something to happen (Sinha, 2007: 46).

Eyes are very important in the animal world, as they are one of the most important factors in the detection of predators:

Because many predators rely on binocular vision and focus their eyes towards their prey as they attack, eye-gaze direction would be an even more sensitive cue of predation risk. Eye-gaze cues are likely to be of limited use when predators are distant or in visually cluttered environments, but could provide the necessary sensitivity to allow prey to function efficiently when their potential predators are nearby (Carter et al., 2008: 1709).

In the context in which we find them, the Western audience – the Eyes – would be considered predators, with Animal being their prey. This could be interpreted as Sinha exposing how a number of Western readers consume testimony narratives of Third World speakers like *Animal's People* to understand or empathize with those communities while not making any significant effort to help them or their cause (in this particular case the legal fight of the affected by the Bhopal gas incident and the company that owned the factory).

However, this is only one of many interpretations. Eyes are not only important in the animal world – they are also extremely relevant in human contexts:

The face provides a plethora of social information about an individual's gender, age, familiarity, emotional expression and potentially their intentions and mental state. The eyes are very important components of the face that can provide this information, especially information about emotional and mental states. [...] The eyes provide very subtle signals to other individuals, and information transferred by this manner is dependent largely on the ability to understand that the eyes capture information about the world. This level of processing may not be available to non-primate animals (Emery, 2000: 581-582).

Eyes provide a lot of information and are an essential part of social interaction, as they allow us to communicate in a non-verbal way by expressing certain feelings or perceiving certain gestures to help us “read” the other person. While Animal may be considered lacking in some aspects, such as rudeness or inadequate vocabulary, he is certainly capable of handling most social situations. One example of this would be the fact that he is able to “read” people’s thoughts – “Inside your skull thoughts were scrabbling like rats. I could hear them like voices in my own head” (Sinha, 2007: 26) – which requires quite a bit of knowledge of the human mind and thought processes, as well as a

great deal of empathy to be able to hypothesize what others may be thinking. In this interpretation behind the meaning of the Eyes, then, Animal would be the one in charge, the “showmaster” so to speak, as he is the one that decides what the Eyes see and how much importance should be given to every element in his story. In his own words, “If you want my story, you'll have to put up with how I tell it” (Sinha, 2007: 20).

All in all, regarding Animal's humanity it is clear that there are arguments to be made both for and against it. I, however, am personally more inclined to believe that he is as human as any other character in the novel. He may present some traits characteristic of animals but, in the end, are humans not still considered animals – even if more “civilized” ones – after all?

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ALEX GIRONA SALMERÓN is a fourth year English Studies student at UAB. His present interests include crime writing and environmental issues.