
HUMAN VS. NON-HUMAN. AN ANALYSIS OF INDRA SINHA'S *ANIMAL'S PEOPLE* AND THE LIMITS OF THE NOTION OF HUMAN

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In *Animal's People*, Indra Sinha reflects on the Bhopal Disaster in 1984 through the fictional village of Khaufpur, the American “Kampani”, Animal and the people who surround him. The Bhopal Disaster has been considered one of the worst industrial disasters ever. About 45 tons of toxic gases were accidentally leaked from a pesticide factory owned by the American company Union Carbide. The gas stayed low to the ground and people’s throats and eyes were burnt. There were between 15,000 and 20,000 deaths, countless injured and devastating future consequences, such as mentally and physically disabled newborn children. The questionable maintenance and policies that Union Carbide applied to the factory were the major contributing factors of the catastrophe: the maintenance of the facilities had been neglected, the safety systems had been shut off to save money, there was a shortage of skilled operators and a lack of an adequate emergency action plan plus the fact that the plant was located near a densely populated area. In this setting, Sinha reflects on some themes such as the Westernization/Neocolonization of the non-Western countries, the notion of love and the notion of identity. Within the notion of identity, Sinha unleashes some binaries that can be compared and contrasted. Through *Animal*, he presents the conflict between what is considered to be “human” and what is considered to be “non-human”.

In 1946, Martin Heidegger published *Letters on Humanism*. According to Sloterdijk (2001), “Heidegger analyzed and criticized the characteristics of European Humanism; and, in doing so, he opened up a transhumanistic or posthumanistic space for thought, one in which a considerable portion of the philosophical consideration on man has taken

place ever since” (Sloterdijk, 2001: 17). Sloterdijk (2001) also suggests that Heidegger believed that man differs from animals not in species or genus, but in ontology. Therefore, man cannot be considered an animal with a cultural or metaphysical addition. Nevertheless, as Rostand (1966) suggests, man is like any other animal for the biologist, made out of cells, that is subject to the same rules, needs and biological laws. He also suggests that there is the same difference between humans and big apes, and between big apes and smaller apes. Then, Rostand (1966) points out that the main difference between man and, in this case, the apes, is that humans have the capacity to communicate by articulating words that belong to a language, whereas apes –as has been shown in different experiments-, have difficulties in learning how to articulate words.

Another important notion to take into account is the idea of the “Human Zoo”. This idea perceives society as if it were a zoo and a theme park at the same time. As Sloterdijk suggests, “the keeping of men in parks or stadiums seems from now on a zoo-political task” (Sloterdijk, 2001: 25). Sloterdijk also states that “Humans are self-fencing, self-shepherding creatures. Wherever they live, they create parks around themselves. [...] everywhere people must create for themselves rules according to which their comportment is to be governed” (Sloterdijk, 2001: 25).

Having said that, in order to approach the character of *Animal*, we need to take into account the notions of racism and speciesism. According to Plumwood, these two notions extend “both to environmental and animal actors”, and that the notion of humanity created and accepted by the West “still depends on the presence of the ‘non-human’: the uncivilized, the animal and animalistic” (Plumwood in Huggan & Tiffin, 2010: 5). Therefore, as Wolfe (1998), citing Derrida, in Huggan and Tiffin (2010) states, the humanist concept of subjectivity is inseparable from speciesism. Wolfe also mentions that “the full transcendence of the human requires the sacrifice of the animal and the animalistic” (Wolfe in Huggan and Tiffin, 2010: 5).

Within the notions of racism and speciesism, there is a strong debate in order to confine the idea of rights. According to Cavalieri, “if the intention to enjoy freedom and welfare qualifies one to possess rights, then the rights cannot be confined to humanity itself”

(Cavalieri in Mukherjee, 2010: 145). Another important statement is the one Mukherjee, citing Singer, provides:

Our concern for others ought not to depend on what they are like, or what abilities they possess [...] the fact that beings are not members of our species does not entitle us to exploit them, and similarly the fact that other people are less intelligent than we are does not mean that their interests may be disregarded (Singer in Mukherjee, 2010: 146).

Taking all these ideas into account, we can approach the notions of human and non-human. However, as Bentham proposes, there is a question that can give the answer to the discussion of rights: “Can they reason? Nor can they talk? But, can they suffer?” (Bentham in Mukherjee, 2010: 146). If the being can suffer, it is not only claiming for rights but for equality and justice, and here is where we can begin to understand the binary that Sinha proposes through *Animal*. Where are the limits of humanity? Who is entitled to rights? Who can endow the other beings with rights? Through all these questions, the fact that rights are not universal but rather an anthropocentric notion becomes clear, the powerful humans being the ones that entitle rights to the other creatures. This neocolonialist perspective can be really critical, not only for the ones who have been denied the possession of rights, such as animals, plants, or non-western people victims of neocolonization, but for the ones that now possess some rights but that were once seen as inferior, marginalized, disrespected beings.

In *Animal's People*, the character of *Animal* represents this conflict. *Animal* is a poor, nineteen-year-old Indian youth that has his spine bent over due to the hazardous gases that were leaked from the factory, so he must get about using his four limbs. That is why people started to address him as “*Animal*”, and he started to feel that he “used to be a human once” (Sinha, 2007: 1), but he is not a human anymore. This declaration of his non-humanity from the very first page is crucial to understand the conflict presented throughout the novel. *Animal* embodies what are thought to be “human” and “non-human” characteristics. His obsession with his own sexuality, virginity and his relentless lonely masturbation episodes while having fantasies about his female friends are attitudes that are believed to be closer to animals than to rational beings, such as humans. Another rather “non-human” feature is the bond he establishes with *Jara* the dog. This non-human bond can be seen as a “non-human” feature, even though it could also be approached as a “human” feature as well. As can be seen in several passages of the novel and as Mukherjee (2010) proposes:

Sinha freights Animal with exaggerated amounts of both the 'liabilities and powers' that non-humans share with humans and the 'human-definitive' features that mark the acts of species boundary-making. Roaming the desperate margins of Khaufpur, Animal's remarkable capacity of survival finds its most memorable expression in his twin drives towards copulation and feeding. A scavenger, there is nothing that Animal will not eat in order to stay alive, including bits of himself (Mukherjee, 2010: 150).

Notwithstanding these facts, Animal's gift with languages, his apparent adroitness to read, or at least understand, other people's minds and thoughts, and his capacity to "slip porously, in the picaresque manner, between different social strata" (Nixon, 2009: 453) are thought to be abilities and skills that are usually associated to what is considered to be "human" and "rational". All these characteristics bring us back to the following question: what is the difference –if there is any- between the human and the non-human? Why is there one above the other? Why are there some that are entitled to rights, privileges and why are there others that are not? Bearing in mind these questions, Animal can be perceived and approached as what Kristeva (1982) defines as the abject, having the only quality of being opposed to the idea of "I". As Kristeva proposes in her celebrated essay *Powers of Horror* (1982):

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior... [...] He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts its disrespect for law –rebellious, liberating, and suicidal crime. Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you (Kristeva, 1982: 4).

Animal can be seen as a representation of Kristeva's abject: a being that hovers between humanity and non-humanity, rationality and irrationality. In Tape 22, animal experiences a hallucination while he is wandering around the jungle. During this hallucination, he realizes the differences he has with other non-human beings, precisely after the conversation he has with the lizard, when Animal is about to eat him: "A broken rib may mend' says the lizard, 'but your nature you can never change. You are a human, if you were an animal you would have eaten me" (Sinha, 2007: 346).

After this episode, Animal feels like he does not belong to humans or non-humans. He is the abject, the in-between. In Tape 23, Animal is found by his people. He believes he

is in heaven, surrounded by his friends - who are apparently dead - animals and plants, where there are no worries and no pain. This allusion to Heaven and Animal's "comeback" to life can be interpreted as a reference to the Christian notion of resurrection after being in Heaven. It is at this moment when he realizes the existence and connection between himself and the others, and he also realizes that the other beings do the same as well, accepting themselves as they are. Again, this idea can be connected with Kristeva's (1982) abject. As Mukherjee (2010) proposes, "this acceptance of himself as he is, and the realization that others –humans and non-humans, 'local' Khaufpuris and cosmopolitan Americans- do the same, soon gives rise to a sense of positive difference" (Mukherjee, 2010: 154).

Sinha unleashes through *Animal's People* several targets related to the conception of the body, the human and the non-human. From the ending of the novel and Animal's evolution from the rejection of his humanity to the acceptance of himself and the connection, not only with his human friends, but with the environment surrounding him, Sinha wants to continue the debate of human rights, animal rights and humanity. Through the character of Animal, Sinha frames the idea defended by Plumwood that the notion of humanity is directly connected with the existence of the non-human, the animal and the animalistic. Sinha differs from the ideas presented by Heidegger, and reaches some common points with the positivist, biological view that Rostand defends in perceiving humans and animals as beings that are made out of cells with the same biological necessities. As mentioned above, Rostand states that the only major difference between humans and other animals –in his case, the apes- is the capacity to articulate oral language. However, Animal shows throughout the novel his capacity to communicate eloquently not only with humans from all the social strata, but with animals of all kinds. Consequently, the question of perceiving Animal as human or non-human is left open again. Animal can be perceived as the abject, the being that is between one world and the other, being able to connect both.

Although the question of what is human and what is non-human is left open to pursue in future debates, what is clear is that, no matter if the being is considered human or not, if it can suffer, it is claiming for rights and equality. Throughout history, the anthropocentric Western colonial perspective has treated certain beings as inferior that now happen to have rights, such as women, black people, the queer community or

Native Americans. These rights have been granted by the powerful entity to the less-powerful collective. *Animal's People* also criticizes this perspective, showing a conflict between the Khaufpur community and the Kampani. By playing with the name of its main character, Sinha is not only claiming for justice and rights for the affected people in Khaufpur –and Bhopal- but for the communities and collectives that are being treated as inferior, such as animals.

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