
**ANIMAL, THE 21ST CENTURY POSTMODERNIST OLIVER TWIST: A
GLIMPSE OF KHAUFPUR: DEAD BODIES, POOR BODIES AND “BODIES-IN-
PAIN”**

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Introduction. Even Souls Need Bodies to Perceive the World.

Indra Sinha's 2007 novel *Animal's People* is a strikingly powerful story in which the 1984 Bhopal disaster is re-imagined and re-told through Animal's voice, an ironically "human, too human" character. Rather than simply revisiting "that night", he is in charge of articulating how life develops in the aftermath of a deadly incident in Khaufpur, a fictional, poor Indian city. As Heidegger suggested in *Being and Time*, one normalises what one sees and perceives no matter how harsh the surrounding conditions are. This is why Animal and the other citizens of Khaufpur simply accept what has happened and solely claim for justice to be applied. Western readers –shockingly- seem to be more disturbed by the magnitude of Khaufpur's tragic accident than the people who actually suffered it. Even if Sinha gives voice to these people, "[...] seeing alone does not necessarily entail ethical terms for social or political recognition." (Mahlstedt, 2013: 65). Notwithstanding, knowing about and witnessing these people's sufferings raises awareness of the socio-political and environmental issues at stake, not exclusively in India but throughout the world. Undoubtedly, this is the first step towards recognition, albeit we should debate how to address "[...] the meta-theoretical question of how to ethically represent the poor." (Mahlstedt, 2013: 62).

Shortlisted for the 2007 Man Booker Prize, *Animal's People* is a very important and hugely read book, despite being rather recent. Many scholars have paid close attention to its reading and interpretation, focusing on different issues such as poverty, invisibility of non-powerful citizens or as a critique of contemporary, ferocious

Neoliberalism. Mahlstedt, using Alice Miles' concept of "poverty porn", speculates about this book being yet another example of Western fascination towards whatever is exotic, different, poor and marginal. From the comfortable position of living in a wealthy country, Westerners enjoy diving into these places where poverty is the norm and hopes are few.

My thesis statement is that *Animal* is the 21st century postmodernist representation of *Oliver Twist*; hence, even if they share several features, *Animal* is built up more realistically, his body and physicality being two crucial aspects in Sinha's narration. In fact, it is not only *Animal*'s physicality that is important, but the whole novel revolves around bodies: either dead, in-pain or poor, all point at the Company and Neoliberalism as the main culprits. *Animal's People* is a novel obsessed with the material world: *Animal* is constantly in contact with the physical Earth (literally), he transmits his story by means of a tape machine, and explicit, scatological descriptions are everywhere to be found (from poor people communally emptying their bowels on the rails to the physical lack of food or water when Zafar and Farouq demonstrate against the Company by fasting, risking their lives in the process: "Brother, I'm burning up. Ask them to fetch ice. Crush it in a cloth and put it on my skin, please do the same for Farouq" (Sinha, 2007: 304)).

Modernising the Angelic Figure: From Dickens to Sinha.

Animal and *Oliver Twist* share some main features: both of them are poor orphans, rejected by society, although they find someone who finally takes care of them. Both are political instruments with a very precise aim: to give voice and grant visibility to the people they represent and to concern the reader with the necessity of a social change towards a more egalitarian and fair society. Just like *Oliver Twist* is an "[...] item of mortality[...]" (Dickens 2012: 1), so is *Animal*, who "[...]symbolically bears the burden of the event that locals refer to only as "that night"." (Mahlstedt, 2013: 59). They have a pure heart filled with noble intentions and aspirations, but only *Animal* articulates at the same time a postmodernist language full of swearwords or overtly sexual references: "In my street years I hated to see dogs fucking, my mates would shout, "Hey *Animal*, is this how you do it?" "(Sinha, 2007: 16). On the other hand, *Oliver Twist* speaks a perfectly refined English, avoids all references to "disgusting topics" and is always polite. Obviously, he is not a credible character at all, since he has

no education whatsoever and life has treated him so badly that he should be willing to join any criminal band so as to escape from his fatal destiny. *Oliver Twist* is so angelical and perfect and pure that even in the toughest of the situations, he still shines with the most powerful celestial light.

Mr Bumble refers to Oliver as “[...] a naughty orphan which nobody can love.” (Dickens, 2012: 24). While for Oliver this quotation is literal, if it had been addressed to Animal it would have had sexual connotations. When we talk about “love” in Dickens’ novel, we talk about understanding, caring and family affection; conversely, when “love” is mentioned in Sinha’s novel, the reader rapidly notices that there is always a sexual component attached to it. Animal is a young virgin who –because of that- is obsessed with sex: “*Pussy, pussy, pussy*, says a voice full of dark horrifying laughter.” (Sinha, 2007: 44). Just one page afterwards, he asks himself “What girl’ll do it with you? Fuck off, fuck off, fuck off! I wanted it so badly, every night the wishing would make my monster hard.” (Sinha, 2007: 45). Animal’s postmodernist discourse, so centred in the body, allows him to be at the same time a sympathetic character that also falls in love with Nisha, and even poisons Zafar with pills so as to make him sexually dysfunctional. In this sense, *Oliver Twist* is always described by spiritual/mental terms (he is pure, he is innocent, he is noble), while Animal is portrayed at all times by physical/bodily terms (he is a sex maniac, he is twisted¹, he is selfish).

We could argue that Dickens’ philosophical reference is rationalism, as Sinha’s is empiricism; the two novels represent a bildungsroman-journey from the angelic purity of the main character (the covert political activist) to acceptance of its fully human frailty. Therefore, *Oliver Twist* and *Animal* are not different characters, but the same one (re)presented differently. *Oliver Twist* had to convince middle-class readers that children needed to be protected against the state and its cruelty. Dickens came up with a perfect, noble and loving poor child, whose life was so hard that everybody pitied him; the argument was solely emotional. *Animal’s People* wants to raise awareness about environmental issues, inequality in society and the non-visibility of poor, disempowered people. Sinha created, thus, a real-like character that wants to tell his story to “the Eyes”, the Western audience. Animal is not presented as perfect, noble or ideal; on the contrary, he is a character that readers only come to like as the story progresses and they witness Animal’s unexpected humanity. Animal is precisely human

¹ Both literally and figuratively.

because he is not perfect, because he has dark passions about which he freely talks, because he is envious of Zafar and all men in general and because he is as fragile as we all are. Sinha tries to convince the readers by mixing both emotional and rational reasons.

A Down-to-earth Story: Abject Bodies, Refused Bodies and Invisible Bodies.

Animal walks on all fours since “that night”, the most tragic episode that has ever happened in Khaufpur. By being forced to walk “like an animal”, he has a privileged view of what really happens on the streets where poverty is queen and dirtiness king. All Animal’s experiences are linked to his physicality, and we only have access to the story through his voice. Something as mundane and simple as Elli’s blue jeans are a powerful symbol of Western lust; Animal as well as most of Khaufpur’s men sexualise Elli through the physicality of the image of her clothes. Food and water are also not mere words/concepts but physical realities in *Animal’s People*, especially towards the end while Zafar and Farouq are fasting to protest against the Company. The absence of these basic goods creates the most painful experience in the book for the two most moral characters; the ones who stand up and politically fight against the corrupt Indian justice system.

Animal has a tendency to describe everything material in great detail, and often becomes obsessed with it because of the absence of other material products. For instance, he always wears the *zippo* the journalist gave him, considering it virtually a sacred item. Every time that there is a vehicle described, it is almost worshipped: for Animal that is beyond luxury itself.

Animal, in fact, embodies three different persona. Animal himself, the human who refused to be considered as such and the one who often goes to the ruins of the Company, which is symbolically his lair. This Animal is the most predominant in the story, the one who walks on all fours and cannot see beyond what is there (materialism). The second Animal is the instinctive one, the voice that happens “in the skull”, rather than in the mind/brain. It basically refers to his sexual drive and hunger; it is the body that suffers because of the lack of the desired object. Finally, there is Animal’s genitalia –referred to with different names- whose function is to present Animal as a sex maniac (humanised later on in the book). This is perhaps the most bodily part narrated in the tapes, since sometimes he is way too explicit and even talks about how he had to cover

up his erections in front of people. Animal, thus, is primarily a bodily expression of a human being. The reader feels what he feels, often with an eerie feeling of discomfort.

In Sinha's novel there are three kinds of bodies, rather than characters. The first ones refer to dead bodies. These corpses have no voice of their own; they can only be remembered. They represent up to 15,000 dead people when the explosion occurred. Nonetheless, no one has paid for those deaths and little voice has been given to the tragedy or the people who have suffered it. These dead bodies are absolutely hidden in the story and only pullulate there as ghosts (the absence of Animal's parents); they are invisible and cannot be even mourned. The second kind of bodies are the poor ones. Because of being poor, to begin with, they were forced to live in a dangerous place with no safety measures of any kind (cheaper for the Company and money for the Indian government). The Company established its base near a poor city since in the event that anything happened, it would be better to lose expendable, second-rate lives. Poor bodies fill Sinha's novel, yet they do not fully acquire a voice of their own, and even if they do "[...] the poor are still poor, even if they have gained recognition." (Mahlstedt, 2013: 72). Except for Zafar (the novel's real Dickensian hero), nobody has chosen to be poor and to live in a place such as Khaufpur, without the chance of ever getting out of it. Lastly, the "bodies-in-pain" are the direct consequence of the Company disaster, which represent up to 300,000 people, according to Mahlstedt (59). They are the reason why Elli Barber moved there and tried to help the needy ones. It goes without saying that Animal is the quintessential body-in-pain, just like many other characters (often without a name) are. Sinha's novel is a graveyard full of broken, forgotten and dead bodies; nonetheless, in Khaufpur "[...]people live on, laughing and fighting." (Mahlstedt, 2013: 68).

Conclusions

To sum up, Animal is a postmodernist version of Oliver Twist that rather than focusing on his purity and angelic traits, recklessly shows himself as he is: imperfect, selfish and frail, or in other words: human. Dickens' and Sinha's novels share the objective of moving the reader and raising awareness of current social problems within a corrupt society, yet they use different techniques because of the different ages and public. This postmodernist discourse is evident because of the physicality of *Animal's People*. Material objects (such as Animal's *zippo* or Elli's *blue jeans*) are considered almost sacred due to their scarcity. The narrative is also dominated by bodies and their

physicality: Animal's constant sexual urge, Zafar and Farouq's physical suffering while fasting or the constant hunger and poverty amidst Indians are three of the most important bodily images of the book. *Animal's People* is the story of dead bodies that cannot express their tragedy, of poor bodies that have been sentenced to a life of misery and insufficiency and of bodies-in-pain that rather than live, they simply exist in a temporal and spatial plane.

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