
THE BODY AS A REPRESENTATION OF A DAMAGED ENVIRONMENT

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The representation of a damaged body which we see in *Animal's People* has a direct correlation with the vision of a spoiled and perverted natural environment. Such correlation is identifiable throughout the novel and constantly linked with the Bhopal plant natural disaster. In fact, *Animal's* twisted spine is a direct consequence of the irresponsible management by a Western company, which is the metaphor for all developed societies, as regards fulfilling its only purpose: revenue. Contamination, poverty and injustice are just mere side effects of this immoral race towards a grim goal which neocapitalism has turned into. What is more, what we call 'natural disasters' are in fact man-made catastrophes which have a tendency to happen from time to time, which is why, besides the Bhopal disaster we find Fukushima, Chernobyl or Doñana, just to name a few. Moreover, such man made catastrophes are very difficult to recover from:

The complex and lengthy recovery process involves many organizations and individuals, including local, federal, and state governments, businesses, politicians, and community activists. Often members of the international community and international organizations are also involved. The function played by organizations differs; some organizations are regulatory, others financial (i.e., provide support). Increasingly, research recognizes the influence of social norms and public perceptions in the process, . This has led to calls for greater participation by members of the disaster-stricken community. (Gardoni & Murphy, 2008: 322)

Pollution, and its consequences on natural life, has become an accepted collateral damage justified by a tireless capitalist machinery.

In the novel *Animal's People* we find that the main character is a victim of the Bhopal tragedy. Through his recordings we are gradually presented with a human being who calls himself an animal due to the way in which the toxic gases from that terrible

night twisted his back, now he walks on all fours. But Animal is not the only victim, hundreds of people died that night because of the gas, and many others still suffer the consequences to this day. What is more, not only human life has been dramatically affected by the gas leak, but also nature has suffered its terrible consequences. The shaping of nature in order to fulfil human necessities is nothing new, to some extent has always occurred, the problem is that in the last one hundred years the changes we produce on nature are affecting its balance. Just like Animal's spine, the toxic waste that companies produce all around the globe in order to fulfil our consumerist needs, are twisting the balance of a natural world which is not prepared to take all the poison that contemporary societies generate as toxic waste from their lifestyle. It is because of that toxic waste that is constantly generated as a side effect of our way of life, and the balance in the natural environment is compromised.

It is a known fact that the most toxic industries are located in developing countries. That is due to the fact that their regulations against those sort of industries are more permissive or, sometimes, inexistent. Therefore, companies take advantage of the situation and place their most aggressive and unstable factories in these countries leaving the locals no choice but to live with this kind of situation. In the same way that Animal had to live with his body, he was given no choice. The grotesque portrayal of Animal's body has a direct correlation with the natural landscapes which have been corrupted by careless industrial pollution.

In essence, what we contemplate in the novel is a constant fight between different forces, sometimes the fight is explicitly mentioned, "Look throughout this place a silent war is being waged. Mother Nature's trying to take back the land"(31). On other occasions it is not explicitly mentioned to us, nevertheless the conflict is there, such as when Zafar and Farouq decide to go on a hunger strike in order to protest against the company. The body of Animal is a constant reminder about the fight that takes place every day between two forces: human progress and nature. His body reminds the reader that no action goes without consequences and about the practices of our developed societies and the effects on those who are less privileged. Another element related to this conflict is the creature in the jar, it is the representation of the absolute grotesque that humanity is capable of achieving.

I am the egg of nature, which ignorant and arrogant men have spoiled (...) As for you, poor fuckwit, you think you're an animal, I am your mother and father, I was you in

your childhood, I'll be you when you're old. Dead am I who never lived, wasn't buried, waits to burn. Though I'm and tender, now you see me now you don't, I go down into the earth and leap up to the sky, I am full of the natural light, yet those who meet me think I'm worthless, nothing, less than a fuck all. (139)

The creature in the jar is the representation of a deformed nature, spoiled and preserved just to be morbidly looked at, with no more purpose than to be kept in a glass jar. Such a creature is the example of the extreme to what a capitalist society is able to go in order to maintain its unjust privileges.

We find another example of the consequences of neocapitalism in the short story *The Rubbish Dump* by Steve Chimombo. In the story we encounter two humans contemplating the consequences of the destructive tendencies that emanate from consumerist lifestyles. The most visible consequence, like Animal's body, is the huge rubbish pit which lies in the surroundings of an airport, where the less privileged live: "Each was lost in his own thoughts. Humid putrefaction wafted around them, into them, and through them to the native quarters" (109). Like the creature in the jar, or Animal's body, the enormous rubbish dump is the open wound inflicted on nature. At the same time, the grotesque way in which such a representation of the consequences of capitalism is portrayed shows the carelessness of the people who are supposed to be setting an example, that is: developed countries that hypothetically want to 'help' those less privileged nations. The author builds a story around a spot corrupted by the waste that comes from the planes that land in the airport. There is an implicit metaphor that criticises the capitalist paradigm and, especially, the way in which societies from privileged countries tend not to acknowledge the damage that they are inflicting.

Going back to Animal, his body is a reminder of the effects that certain practices can have on the environment and on every creature living in it. We all are familiar with war, many books have been written and movies made, we have been so bombarded by war that now we seem to take it for granted. One of the premises of a war is that there must exist a fight, two forces fighting each other, and one will win and the other will fall and lose. Nobody would claim that there is anything worse than a war, we all have been properly lectured by history books and movies. However, the horrors of a disaster of the proportions of the Bhopal gas plant, which are still noticeable to this day, may exceed the apparent and fatal destructiveness of a war. As Nixon points out in his article "Neoliberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque":

The role of what I call slow violence in the dynamics of concealment derives largely from the unequal power of spectacular and unspectacular time. In an age that venerates instant spectacle, slow violence is deficient in the recognizable special effects that fill movie seats and flat-screen TVs with the pyrotechnics of Shock and Awe. Instead, chemical and radiological slow violence is driven inward, somatized into cellular dramas of mutation, into unobserved special effects. From a narrative perspective, such invisible, mutagenic theater is slow-paced but open-ended, eluding the tidy closure, the narrative containment, imposed by the visual orthodoxies of victory and defeat. (Nixon: 2009: 445)

The point is not to compare which is worse but to bring to light the fact that such an ‘accident’ lacks the attention that its fatality deserves. There is no fight, there are no winners, only death and misery; we do not contemplate cheering crowds, the governments do not send international aid, and international press will not set foot in the area, at least not for a long time. After a war, when a certain amount of time has passed, people will rebuild their houses, schools will reopen, shops will go back to trading their products; but after such a poisonous disaster there is no chance of continuing life where it was left off, the scar that is left cannot be properly healed, Mukherjee relates in his essay “Dead Air: Indra Sinha” some of the effects of the gas escape:

At first, the air smells of burnt chillies. If you do not take the hint and get away as fast as possible, soon you find yourself in thick white mist. Your eyes, throat and lungs begin to burn and fill up with oozing fluid and melting tissues. Blinded, you gasp for breath as fluid begins filling up your lungs. Then you lose control of your nervous system, you vomit uncontrollably cramps seize your stomach. If you are lucky, you lose consciousness quickly and you die. If you are not, your death is a long drawn out, agonizing affair. If you survive, your lungs and eyes will never work properly again. Muscle pains and ulcers will prevent you from working or leading a normal life. You will give birth to unimaginably deformed or dead babies. (Mukherjee, 2010: 134)

That is just an example of the catastrophe; just like in Chernobyl or Fukushima, life will drastically be stopped. In her book *Voices from Chernobil*, Svetlana Alexievich recreates the first reaction to the fire in the reactor and how the authorities lied about it. In the same way that Sinha tells how the Indian government and Union Carbide did the same. It seems that the pattern is repeating itself: in Spain the local government at first lied about the magnitude of the tragedy, when in 1989 there was a case of colza oil poisoning.¹ There seems to be a pattern of poorly managed deadly industries failing, and

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/05/21/world/trial-in-spain-on-toxic-cooking-oil-ends-in-uproar.html>

governments' first reaction to the problem is trying to hide it. In her book *Voices from Chernobyl*, Svetlana Alexievich narrates how in the first days of the incident, when the most dangerous radioactive waste was coming out from the nuclear plant, the competent authorities lied about the danger of the radioactive waste.

The two incidents follow a similar pattern, and in both, the reactions from the competent authorities have an undistinguishable narrative: no blame is taken, hiding the truth from the victims is common. Perhaps from our perspective, we might find it hard to believe that people did not react and rise to such an injustice, but the voices of the victims were silenced. In the novel we see how the American doctor does not understand why people do not react against those who are oppressing them, "that is the strangest thing of all about Khaufpur, that people put up with too much" (151).

Whether it is Animal's twisted back, an unborn child in a jar or a rubbish dump, they all are paradigmatic representations of a prevailing convention: developed countries contaminating the natural environment of less privileged regions. The richer and more privileged societies will continue to take advantage of those who are less protected against certain practices, and that is why disasters such as Bhopal will continue happening. Moreover, victims like Animal will continue being ignored and voices against such unhealthy situations will be silenced. The body of Animal, closer to the ground (to nature) than to other peoples' faces, holds the essence of the idea that only by creating a common conscience that can positively face such problems, will we be able to find a more equal and just solution. Animal's body is a constant reminder that there is suffering and injustice in the world, and not only that, but also that the suffering of those less privileged, most of the times, could be stopped if we were more conscious about our lifestyle.

In essence, the novel is a statement against the two-faced patronizing attitude that Western governments hold towards the very same nations of which they are constantly taking advantage. Animal is a victim and a fighter at the same time, for he represents the enormous consequences that our thoughtless actions may have, and carries the voice of those who will not give up against public injustice. The constant contradiction between progress and morality is represented in the novel by the twisted shape of Animal's body, which is a reminder how the consequences that irresponsible attitudes can have on life and nature.

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