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**THE BODY IN *ANIMAL'S PEOPLE*: REDEFINING 'HUMANITY' AND CONNECTING  
TWO WORLDS**

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In this essay, I am going to discuss the significance of the body in the novel by Indra Sinha, *Animal's People* and how it is connected to the idea of humanity. *Animal's People* is set in Khaufpur, a fictionalised recreation of the city of Bhopal in India. The narrator is a nineteen-year-old boy called Animal, who, like many other Khaufpuris, suffers from the aftermath of the 1984 Bhopal disaster. The story begins years after the catastrophe and shows how the citizens of the shanty towns are still very much affected by the gas leak caused by the neglect of the Kampani (company), which has gone back to America and eluded its responsibility. Animal's spine is severely twisted due to the inhaling of toxic gas, and, since he was a little boy, he walks on all fours. This malformation plus his aggressive behaviour caused by the other children's mocking earned him the name of Animal or Janvaar. Animal uses this name to refer to himself often and throughout most of the novel he seems to refute the idea that he is human saying things like "‘My name is Animal,’ I say. ‘I’m not a fucking human being, I’ve no wish to be one.’ That is my mantra, what I told everyone." (Sinha, 2007: 23)

In *Animal's People*, the body is an important aspect to take into account because it is a crucial, defining trait of the protagonist and consequently raises questions that resonate throughout the novel. Animal's body is severely deformed as a consequence of inhaling poisonous gases so that "the highest part of me was my arse" (Sinha: 15), therefore he is unable to walk upright unless he has an operation. His physical condition is a direct reminder and a powerful, visual example of the consequences of the Bhopal disaster. Furthermore, Animal's body is the reason why people have named him like that and also why he sees himself not as a human being, but as an animal. This raises questions about 'humanity', like 'what defines a human being' as well as people's perceptions on the topic.

Farouq, a friend of Animal, accuses him of calling himself an animal so that he is exempt of the responsibilities humans have and so that he does not have to abide by the rules of behaviour society imposes on him. “‘You pretend to be an animal so you can escape the responsibility of being human,’ Farouq carries on. ‘No joke, yaar. You run wild, do crazy things and get away with it because you’re always whining, I’m an animal, I’m an animal.’” (Sinha: 209). What Farouq does not know is that Animal confesses to the Eyes (readers) his longing to walk “Never did I mention my yearning to walk upright. It was the start of that long argument between Zafar and me about what was an animal and what it meant to be human.” (Sinha: 23-24)

Animal eventually admits to himself and the readers that the reason he does this is because if he acknowledges his humanity, he will also have to face the fact that he is impaired, that something is ‘wrong’ with him, according to the notion of what makes a person normal or abnormal. Whereas if he calls himself Animal, he liberates himself from these constraints and situates himself in a space that allows him to be free.

“Zafar and Farouq have this in common, I should cease thinking of myself as an animal and become human again. Well, maybe if I’m cured, otherwise I’ll never do it and this is why, if I agree to be a human being, I’ll also have to agree that I’m wrong-shaped and abnormal. But let me be a quatre pattes animal, four-footed and free, then I am whole, my own proper shape, just a different kind of animal from say Jara, or a cow, or a camel.” (Sinha: 207-208).

Furthermore, Adele Holoch argues that

“Animal’s tongue-in-cheek reappropriation of the term ‘Animal’ seeks to destabilize those broad divisions between ‘animal’ and ‘human’, as well as to reflect the ways in which the processes of naming and categorizing define the one who names as much as the one who is named. It also serves not only to question the superiority of the construct of the ‘human’, but also interrogates the privileges that often accompany the construct.” (Holoch, 2016: 132)

So if the one who names is considered ‘in power’, the boy in some way takes power by naming himself, even if he names himself in a way which suggests his inferiority to humanity, or relative powerlessness.

The question of boundaries that constitute what a human being is, raised by Animal’s unusual condition, is explored in Jennifer Rickel’s article “The Poor Remain”: A Posthumanist Rethinking of Literary Humanitarianism in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*. Rickel argues that “[t]hrough Animal, Sinha’s novel deconstructs the binary between the

“human” and “inhuman” that defines the “universal” subject of human rights.” (Rickel, 2012: 101; emphasis in original) and “[a]s the narrative progresses and Animal tells his story, his discussion of the human and the animal changes, becoming more nuanced.” (Rickel: 101). As we see in the end of the novel, Animal refuses the operation that has been offered to him and which would straighten his back so that he could walk upright. He argues that

“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.” (Sinha: 366)

Therefore, instead of undergoing the operation he realizes that “conforming to a normative conception of the human may not actually be a suitable solution for him at all.” (Rickel: 101) Thus, he has understood and rejected the binary opposition between human and non-human, and is content with accepting who he is without the need of fitting into a single category and hence invites the reader to also question these categories and entertain the idea of a more ‘universal’ subject. By spurning the operation, he remains in the middle space between the two categories where he can in fact be ‘unique’, or as he says, “the one and only” (Sinha: 366).

This not only removes the rigidity of categorization but also expands the reach of justice and frees it from an anthropocentric and western-centred view. In other words, by blurring the human vs non-human spectrum and making Animal a post-human, and not a hero but one who sometimes behaves in disagreeable or inconsiderate ways, the story is making a “point: justice should not depend on Animal exhibiting an attention-grabbing level of suffering and ethical correctness to prove he is worthy of rights.” (Rickel:103) As we see in the novel, Animal often lives in such appalling conditions, like when he has to eat the dry skin off his feet or when he has to fight alley dogs to get food from the rubbish, that one would argue they are ‘inhuman’ ways of living. His conditions, plus his deformity, would evoke in the reader profound pathos towards him. Yet, Animal is no saint; as he says himself “saints and angels don’t feel lust, which is how I know I’m not one.” (Sinha: 27), and he often behaves in quite a questionable way, like when he climbs up trees and spies on Elli or Nisha or when he poisons Zafar out of jealousy. On the one hand, Animal shows quite primitive behaviour like when he feels dominated by his sexual desires or grunts at animals to

claim his food, which would be considered more animalistic kinds of behaviour. But on the other hand, he displays really 'human' emotions like the jealousy he feels towards Zafar out of his love for Nisha, or his dedication to taking care of his friend, Ma Franci. Therefore, Animal stands in a sort of limbo between human and non-human nature, where some see him as an animal, and even he himself claims to be one, whereas others see him as a man "entitled to dignity and respect" (Sinha: 23), despite his physicality and behaviour.

Holoch argues in her essay that "Sinha's text utilizes the profane to strip away the artifices separating the international readership the novel targets from the subaltern figures upon whom it centres." (Holoch: 127) In *Animal's People*, there are several explicit descriptions of acts that can be seen as grotesque such as when Animal masturbates while spying on Nisha, or the various references our protagonist makes to his uncontrollable erections. These detailed explanations, which could be argued to be unnecessary, are actually, according to Holoch, a tool Sinha employs to reach the primitive side of the Western readership. Whether the readers react with humour or a sense of repulsion, the story is engaging the Eyes by offering an uncensored experience of the story, which by being so scandalous draws the reader in. "Sinha's novel deploys profanity and the grotesque to provide a dramatically uncensored version of the victims' experiences, incorporating bodily fluids, sexual references and abundant profanity, often to startling and sometimes humorous effect." (Holoch: 128) This profanity and grotesque is depicted through the body, whereby displaying the characters' experiences in an explicit, non-watered-down way, gives the reader a feeling of having a more 'real' experience.

In other words, what the novel does is "leverage its profane representations to give readers a sense of our own vulnerability and permeability, a permeability that connects us with the subaltern citizens whose experiences we often marginalize or ignore." (Holoch:128) Therefore, it bridges the gap between the marginalized and the non-marginalized, and further making us empathize with the characters. Thus, "As Animal's desire becomes our desire, his voyeurism our voyeurism, his debasement our debasement, how we respond to the questions his experiences raise – including in which subaltern women's bodies bear the burdens of masculine desire – becomes increasingly uneasy." (Holoch: 136) This uneasiness adds to our engagement in the story, and by making us question Animal's situation, it forces us to reflect

on our own, and how we would act if we were in his position, which successfully reduces the differences between him and us.

Finally, Holoch argues that “*Animal’s People* uses the experience or condition of abjection to show that, behind the structures of highly stratified postcolonial or neo-colonial environments, we are all united by commonalities of desires, of embodiment, of other basic human experiences and needs” (Holoch: 141) making us less capable of passing judgement on others without judging ourselves, since the novel connects us to these marginalized characters on a basic level and shows that they are not that different from us after all.

In conclusion, ‘the body’ in *Animal’s People*, serves as a tool to redefine the concept of ‘human’ since it allows Animal to position himself in a unique space outside the conventional categories of human and non-human, and also to reclaiming power over the term that someone would use in a pejorative way and use it in his favour. On the other hand, the representation of the body in an uncensored way, which portrays profanity and ‘the grotesque’, is done in a way that enables the readers to find themselves connected to the characters, and removes the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the Western world of the readers and the marginalized position of Animal’s people.

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