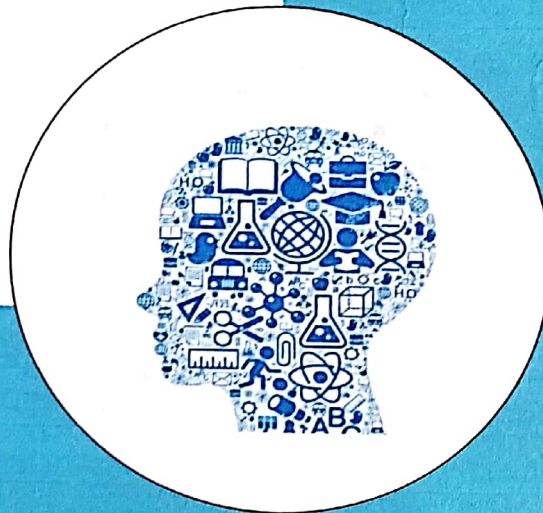


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A Study of Indra Sinha's Animal's People through the lens of Ecocriticism

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Abstract

This paper tries to explore Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People*, a fictionalized account of the Bhopal industrial disaster (1984) from the perspective of Ecocriticism which is a new dimension to the field of literary and theoretical studies for analysing and interpreting literary texts. It deals with how environmental issues, cultural issues concerning the environment and attitudes towards nature are presented and analysed. One of the main goals in ecocriticism is to study how individuals in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects. Indra Sinha's story centres around the story of , a nineteen year old boy literally named after the Hindi word *Jaanvar*, his permanently twisted body affects his psyche, his occasional misogynistic attitude results the permanently bent spine causing him to walk on all fours. It is a metaphor creating the trauma, both physical as well as mental which totally transforms protagonist's personality. His presence is the signifier of consequences of the toxic gas on the common people in general in Bhopal which clearly resembles Bhopal Gas Tragedy in general. Indra Sinha being one of the writers belonging to the postcolonial era has penned down story of the chemical leakage to highlight its environmental injustice witnessed by the characters in the novel. The present study exhibits the consequences to the innocent people in the novel.

Key words: Ecocriticism, Bhopal gas tragedy, Environmental Injustice.

Introduction

William Rueckert is believed to have coined the term "ecocriticism" in 1978, which he defines as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature." Rachel Carson is known as the one of the forerunner of environmental studies. She first time highlights the issues of environmental decay through the use of chemicals like DDT. Many poets and novelists have become eco-conscious or environment conscious. For many writers Literature became an important tool to highlight the environmental issues. Due to the eco-imbalance and the environmental pollution, the whole world is under the curse of global warming. The world is becoming the prey of the environmental imbalance and destructions. The healthy well balanced environment and atmosphere is the need of time. The environmental catastrophe did not remain confined to the natural sciences only rather it becomes Interdisciplinary. In postcolonial literature in general, deforestation, energy use, air quality, climate change, and animal sentience, are the formative concerns of the writers. This environmentally oriented study of literature brings about an ecological literacy and develops ecocritical perspective among the modern readers. Indra Sinha (1950) being one of the postcolonial writer of Indian and English descent commemorated 25 years of Bhopal Gas Tragedy through the publication of the novel *Animal People* in 2009. The US based multinational company 'Union Carbide India Limited' (UCIL). The pesticide plant was leaked 27 tons of Methyl isocyanate gas claiming 15000 lives, nearly 6 lakh people sustained injuries, affecting the subsequent generations. It was in the late 1990s that Greenpeace, upon testing the site of the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, found that toxicity had seeped into the soil and contaminated groundwater over the years the plant had been in Bhopal, affecting the lives and health of the people in the vicinity of the plant. Residents were complaining of cattle deaths and damage to crops even. The autopsies revealed that the human blood seemed to be turned purple red, the lungs turned ash colour. The gas leak caused thousands blinded, breathless and giddy. The psychological trauma caused by the incident lead to depression, anxiety, impotence, loss of appetite, nightmares. Large number of cattle, dogs and cats and birds were killed. Plant life was severely damaged by exposure to the gas. There was widespread defoliation of trees. Later toxicological studies carried out by the Indian Council for Medical Research confirmed the presence of hydrogen cyanide in the tissue samples kept from autopsies carried out at the time of the

disaster. Indeed the ICMR has said that the disaster is not due to MIC alone but its pyrolyzed products as well (ICMR Report, 2010, 7)

The novel *Animal's People* is set in the fictionalized town Khaufpur resembling Bhopal. ("Khauf" meaning "terror" and "pur" a suffix meaning "city" in Urdu) The story proceeds through the recordings in tapes. Twenty three tapes form the sections in the novel. These tapes talk about the people's sufferings, their world view, their protest against the Kampani's irresponsibility. The chemical fog and poisonous water caused terrible diseases. Khaufpur population is poverty stricken. The novel centers on a young man physically deformed by a large scale chemical spill. The permanent bent spine forces the boy to walk on all fours. He gains the epithet 'Animal'. This disfigured transformation turns him into a strong, often vulgar personality.

The opening lines of the novel indicate Animal's nonchalant attitude when he says, 'I used to be human once. So I am told. I don't remember it myself, but people who knew me when I was small say I walked on two feet like a human being.' He lives by scavenging like street dogs on the streets of Khaufpur. His jealousies turned him mad and made him shout also on people who are walking on two feet instead of four like him. Except Nisha and few others like Ma Franci, Zafar, Somraj, Elli, and Aliya, most of the Khaufpur is mocked at him and compared him with Jara, the female dog. Because of his physical disabilities, girls hardly sympathise with him but never love him. He loved Nisha but, she shows only her sympathy towards him, which hurts his heart a lot. When Nisha refuses his marriage proposal, he decides to commit suicide, "I ask myself do you want to die? comes the reply, yes (Sinha 334)" he consumed "thirteen golis" (Sinha 334) of 'datura' means "a highly poisonous plant (Sinha 369)" To his surprise, he still survives. They have lost faith in humanity itself making them suspicious about everything and everybody. Elli Barber, an American doctor, who intends to open the free clinic for natives was suspected to be associated with the Kampani's further gains their confidence. Ma Franci, a Roman Catholic nun from France, Animal's surrogate mother loses her capacity to speak Hindi or English. She was mentally affected serving the poor in Khaufpur. Aliya a small school girl was a granddaughter of the couple Huriya and Hanif Ali suffers due to the throat infection. Somraj, once a famous singer loses the ability to sing. Pyare Bai loses her husband, Huriya loses her daughter. Even the unborn children were not spared. Zafar the professional activist unites all to fight against Kampani's and the politicians. He loses his life in the hunger strike as he refuses to sip a drop of water. Nisha lost her mother on that night. She is a famous singer Somraj's daughter. Almost all characters in the novel seem to have been affected by the gas disaster. The city remains poisonous for decades after the accident with contaminated ecology. The lines of Animal "No bird sing. No hoppers in the grass. No bee humming. Insects can't survive here. Wonderful poisons the Kampani made, so good it's impossible to get rid of them, after all these years they are still doing their work." (29) The writer talks about the toxic wells, blindness and deformed babies, as the aftermath of the gas leakage. So many unborn children were aborted. So the very sight of a fetus in glass jar disturbs Animal. His life is forever tied to the event of that night. Thus, he introduces himself growling, "My name is Animal. . . . I'm not a fucking human being, I've no wish to be one" (23). These in real sense are the marginalized people living in slums or around the pesticide factory. They have been denied the right to life, dignity, equality. The government's feeble response to the measures like hunger strike, agitations to pressurize the government do not work at all. Indra Sinha emphasizes on the sufferings of the people by pointing out the toxic consciousness of the readers. Government seems to be indifferent to provide basic rights to the victims. Justice delayed is justice denied only. Thousands of people's health had been ruined by it.

Conclusion : Our ancestors have saved the ecology with eco spirit. People have realized the perishing condition of the land and the ecological awareness has been created worldwide through literature also. Literature can become a medium to reach the target audience within the specific time. The late twentieth century has woken up to a new threat: ecological disaster. The most important environmental problems that humankind faces *as a whole are* nuclear war, depletion of valuable natural resources, population explosion, proliferation of exploitative technologies, conquest of space preliminary to using it as a garbage dump, pollution, extinction of species. The duplicity of the politicians and the Government is exactly revealed in the novel. The compensation was given to the victims after a long period without knowing the fact that the money they have offered is of no help to the poor people in any way. Because the damage they have caused affected generation to come

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Moreover many years after the tragedy, the factory was not given orders to clean the leaked gas. As a result, soil, air and water were contaminated forever. Rabindranath Tagore had fear of scientific advancement in the nation. In his notable play Muktadhara he addressed the machine/dam, a symbolic development of science as a 'demon. Such man made disasters can be avoided with environmental awareness only.

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