

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165

The Criterion

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 15 ISSUE-6 DECEMBER 2024

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Exploring Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*: A Perspective of Eco-criticism

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14606000>

Article History: Submitted-28/11/2024, Revised-19/12/2024, Accepted-30/12/2024, Published-31/12/2024.

Abstract:

Indra Sinha *Animal's People* is the narrative of eco-criticism, war and environmental catastrophe. The novel *Animal's People* is the fictional creation of Bhopal Gas Tragedy of 1984 which made generations to suffer. *Animal's People* also talks about the corporate apathy of 1984 Gas Disaster, loopholes of the ruling government. *Animal's People* a literary text of environmental concern asks to take care of Mother Nature and pays attention to the worth of clean air and water. Impact of toxic MIC is horrific even after the 40 years of environmental damage, toxicity of MIC still exists at the spot of tragedy and in its vicinity due to toxic MIC leaves became black, trees were drooped, air got loaded with black toxic chemical, people were lost and railway transport stopped. This paper Exploring Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*: A Text of Eco-criticism explores the way the gas tragedy destructed the environment, how the lives were turned upside down overnight, how the Khaufpur city got flooded with dead bodies, none was there to identify them. The Bhopal Gas Tragedy is considered as the worst industrial disaster globally. *Animal's People* voices out to save the Mother Nature from environmental damage.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, trauma, environmental justice, survival, chemical hazard.

Eco-criticism as a literary approach studies both environment and literature. Further eco-criticism focuses on the complex relationship between man and nature. Eco-criticism started emerging as the branch of literary theory in 1990s to make people aware about the vulnerable environment through literary texts. Eco-criticism incorporates literature, culture and environment together to study environmental concerns. Joseph Meeker firstly coined the term Eco-criticism in his "Literary Ecology" in his *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in*

Literary Ecology (1972). William Reuckert has first used the term Eco-criticism in his essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism" in 1978. Association for the study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) is a biennial conference organised in USA to deal with the research contributions of scholars and researchers who study literature keeping environment parallel to it. ASLE publishes the research works related to environment and literature under the title Inter-disciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE). Eco-criticism is frequently known by several other names as "Ecopoetics", "Green (cultural) studies" and "Environmental Literary Criticism". Ecocritics use the various methods to study literature and environment together they are bound to explore the way environmental degradation affects society. Eco-criticism creates awareness about the vulnerable ecosystem. The key principle of eco-criticism is to find out the value of environmental justice further eco-criticism offers the window to find out how the damaged environment is posing threat for marginalized communities and the way literature can be used as a portal for raising concerns about environmental crisis. Eco-criticism is divided into three types: pastoral eco-criticism, wilderness eco-criticism and ecofeminism. There has been a call to recognize the questionable existence of environmental justice. Cheryll Glotfelty's working definition in *The Eco-criticism Reader* is that "eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between Literature and Ecology and one of the implicit goals of the approach is to recoup professional dignity for what Glotfelty calls "undervalued genre of nature writing".

Indra Sinha is a British author of Indian and English descent. *Animal's People* brought literary fame to him it was nominated for the Man Booker Prize of 2007. His *Animal's People*, also the winner of Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 2008 for Europe and South Asia. His most famous novel *Animal's People* is based on environmental crisis of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Sinha has been in long association with Bhopal chemical leakage survivors to rescue them from the trauma of the Gas Disaster. Sinha has been a prominent voice for the victims of Bhopal Gas Tragedy since 1993. He is an outspoken critic of the Dow Chemical Company, owner of union carbide factory whose negligence has claimed millions of lives. In July 2015, Indra Sinha was awarded an honorary Doctorate in Literature by the University of Brighton for his "major contribution to literature and demonstrating the powers of words in changing people's lives"

The novel *Animal's People* sets in 'Khaufpur' which is the fictional name of Bhopal in the novel. *Animal's People* is the voice of those who suffered Bhopal Gas Tragedy. After the establishment of UCIL trade unions of Bhopal started complaining about pollution in the

vicinity of UCIL. A worker of UCIL met his last end after inhaling phosgene. One of the journalists after witnessing these small chemical disasters started investigating about the flaws in the functioning of UCIL. In order to make people aware he published his report in Bhopal's local newspaper under the title "Wake up people of Bhopal, you are on the edge of a volcano" but there was zero quick response from government, authorities did not wake up from their slumber even not after a series of small toxic MIC leakage and due to the negligence in the functioning of UCIL toxic MIC leaked into the air of Bhopal in the night of 2 – 3 December 1984. Bhopal Gas Tragedy is the world's worst Industrial disaster in which more than 500,000 people died due to exposure to toxic MIC. Methyl Isocyanate (MIC) is a colourless liquid used for making pesticide but due to its toxic effect the use of MIC is barred now. The use of MIC gives detrimental health effects as ulcers, photophobia, pulmonary disorders, anorexia, hampered audio and visual memory, impaired mental abilities. The pain of inhaling MIC did not end up here people started suffering from chronic pulmonary disorders, decreased pregnancy rates and enhanced mortality rate. After the split of MIC Bhopal was into a burning gas chamber. The Bhopal Gas Tragedy was India's first chemical disaster and nobody was prepared for that. Government's apathy was also responsible for the chemical disaster. UCIL was established in collaboration with Union Carbide Company of USA and Indian government Warren Anderson was appointed as the CEO of Union Carbide Company of India that time. The impact of massive chemical disaster which happened in night was painful people who had slept remained slept those who woke up could not understand from where this toxicity is released in the air? Some were severely injured in stampede, some turned out to be blind and lost. Photos of chemical disaster represent the remnants of painful stories. Mass funerals were going on to dispose the dead bodies. An iconic picture of a semi buried girl taken by photographer Pablo Bartholemew represents the extent of damage done by the chemical disaster. The photo represents the way a minor met her last end that none came to identify her. The photo is remnant of trauma of those people who lost their lives in Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Bartholmew won the 1984 World Press photo of the year for his iconic picture of The Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Medical system got crashed after the chemical disaster. Trees in the vicinity area were drooping, land became barren and animal carcasses were scattered on land people were facing a shortage of food.

Animal's People is the catastrophic narrative. *Animal's People* collocates three genres of writing: apocalyptic tropic, picaresque and post-colonialism. The protagonist of the novel

Animal's People is the 14 year old boy who was born after the chemical disaster he got his name Animal as he walks on his four legs. People who survived horrific chemical disaster were deformed, distorted, degraded and diminished. Chemical disaster brought disbelief in the life of people

Ellie who came to India to help victims of the chemical disaster people were not ready to trust outsiders, survivors of the chemical disaster were mentally torn apart not able to accept anybody who comes to them. Toxic chemical disaster made people suspicious they have different approach towards life they were lost and indecisive. Ellie shouts in frustration "Hey Animal's People! Do not [...] understand you!" (Sinha: 183)

Animal's People voices out for ecological consciousness too to save the nature it also unfolds stories of those whose lives were ruined by the ruthless corporates. Indra Sinha published his novel in 2009 on the Memorial Day to remember the 25th year of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Smita Sahu, in her article "The Emergence of Environment Justice in Literature", says, "The novel discusses the devastating impact of gas leak from a chemical factory on, not just the people, but also an ecology". (594)

The story of *Animal's People* comes out in the form of tapes recorded by the protagonist Animal. Each section represents a different tape recording. *Animal's People* is the fictional replica of Bhopal Gas Tragedy. The release of toxic MIC has brought uncountable deaths and the atmosphere of sufferings is well depicted in *Animal's People*

The chemical disaster has not spared even the voiceless animals. The toxic MIC is still contaminating the land, water and air of Bhopal. Initially the protagonist of *Animal's People* refused to talk to journalists as he believed that justice would not be given to his voice. The hazard of environmental crisis is evident in his words, "no bird sings, no hopper in the grass, no bee humming. Insects cannot survive here. Wonderful poisons the company made, so good it is impossible to get rid of them, after all these years they are still doing their work". (29) Animal's narration discloses an urge for environmental injustice and existing corporate apathy. Animal directly talks to the readers "so, from this moment I am no longer speaking to my friend the Kakadu Jarnalis, name's Phuoc, I am talking to the eyes that are reading these words, now I am talking to you" (12). Animal's conversation reveals the way his life is distorted after the chemical disaster but still he hopes to have certain positive changes to happen which will keep his life on the right track "I used to be human once, so I am told. I do not remember it myself, but people who knew me when I was small say I

walked on two feet just like human beings” (1) The dismantled spine of Animal is the effect of toxic chemical MIC. When he was six-year-old all of sudden a pain started arising in his neck he was not able to lift his body “further, further, forward I was bent”. (15)

The sudden chemical disaster had brought an impending environmental crisis to overcome additionally the trauma of toxic MIC release had made people to suffer from emotional loss, families were torn apart they were broken victims of chemical disaster were physically, emotionally and financially drained it was like meeting an of life. A nun whose name was Ma Franci had come to India from France 40 years ago. Ma Franci was able to speak many languages but the sudden trauma of chemical disaster had left her numb her linguistic abilities were in questionable state she forgot all her languages excluding French. She became mentally detached. The orphanage where Ma Franci lived was badly hit by the chemical disaster the life of orphans were badly affected.

Chemical disaster had hit people from the various sections of society the orphans were also suffering in their own way being alone “the orphanage was run by less religious franchises it was in Jyothinagar near the factory and on that night, it was badly hit. Many the children died.” (37) Elli, an American doctor who wants to give best possible medical care to the people of Khaufpur she examines Aliya who suffer from serious throat infection due to toxic MIC. Elli asked Aliya from how long she had been facing this disease? She said forever Ellie was not able to save her life even after the proper medical treatment. That is really unfortunate.

Different incidences from *Animal's People* reveal the extent of contamination which had been done due to the toxic MIC release once Elli watches a woman with a child pouring her milk on the ground Elli enquired that woman and she replied “ I will not feed my kid poison...our wells are full of poison...or wells are full of poison. It is in the soil water, in our blood. It is in our milk. Everything here is poisoned. If you stay here for long enough. You will be, too.”(107) Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* remains highly focussed on the disastrous impact of toxic gas tragedy. *Animal's People* is the voice of those who gone unheard further it appeals to have an ecological consciousness to save the Earth for sustainable future. *Animal's People* answers why Eco-criticism is so important? According to the opinion of Doctor Suresh Fredrick who defines Eco-criticism, “Eco-criticism speaks for the voiceless Earth. This approach is the Earth centric and all the approaches are ego-centric.” (Fredrick 31) *Animal's People* has the global message that environmental crisis can be fatal if not

stopped. Animal the protagonist of the novel himself represents an absolute environmental collapse. The disfigured body of Animal represents a fragile environment and the broken psyche which emerges in the people of Khaufpur after the chemical disaster and it makes them realise that how their life has turned into a puzzle after the sudden chemical disaster the city fell apart: “on that night it was a river of people, some in their underwear, other in nothing at all, they were staggering like it was the end of some big face, falling down not getting up again, at Rani Hira Pati ka Mahal, the road was covered with, dead bodies.” (32) Environmental crisis brought both physical injuries and mental damage. The reasons behind the chemical tragedy were the lack of scientific implementation in the functioning of UCIL. There were certain malpractices which were running in the company and government and which led to the toxic MIC to get mixed in the air of Bhopal. The reports which appeared after the chemical disaster revealed exactly what had happened before the release of MIC there was an immense pressure which got developed in the pipes of Union Carbide Production Unit of India in order to mitigate the pressure workers of UCIL added up water into the pipes but this step did not curb the problem as a result of an increased pressure valve got open and the whole night was turned into an unforgettable, horrible nightmare and forty tons of toxic MIC was released into the atmosphere. There were no proper guidelines given to the workers of UCIL how to handle if anything serious happens? People were also not aware how toxic MIC is? What precautions have to be taken on the release of it? The toxic MIC took a toll on people's lives a beautiful city was turned into a graveyard how horrible the death was? Even it is scary to imagine. Animal, the protagonist, a deformed and disfigured human being he himself is the face of the sufferings of people of Khaufpur. The voice of Animal is the voice of humiliation which Animal and other people have faced from the brutal hands of Company. The narrative of *Animal's People* provides an account of hollow promises made by the Government and the Company to provide the best possible help to the people of Khaufpur but nothing turned out. The brutality of the chemical disaster had left the people numb. The whole ground of Khaufpur was packed up with dead bodies; even the vultures were also not alive to feed the dead flesh it depicts the reversible behaviour of the Nature. The Bhopal Gas Tragedy is considered as the global industrial catastrophe which brought deadly end to both flora and fauna. People who survived this terrible chemical disaster were suffering more due the loss of their loved ones their bodily strength became vulnerable, nervous system and pulmonary tract was collapsed, women were becoming barren, new born were disfigured. The future was gloomy. Khaufpur was named as the “world capital of fucked lungs.”(16) People were isolated after coming out from the

trauma of chemical disaster they started developing anxiety, phobias and slipped into depression.

After the chemical disaster MIC also got mixed into the ground water which made potable water highly poisonous to consume and led to several terminal disorders like carcinoma, liver damage and blood pressure. Underprivileged communities had no choice excluding to drink contaminated water, which left them dead or diseased. Health Care System had totally collapsed after the chemical disaster hospitals were out numbering with patients, there was an increased demand for medicines and beds health infrastructure was not able to meet the high demands of medicines and other things, even the medical staff was not well equipped to tackle such an impending calamity, doctors were also psychologically shaken after examining serious, bed-ridden patients, there were uncountable deaths only. Ingrid Eckerman in his book – the Bhopal Saga wrote about those painful stories which felt death to be a better option than a suffering life, “death would have been a great relief, it is worse to be a survivor”.

On 23 Sept 2023 survivors of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy went to Harvard T.H. Chan school of Public Health for a 42 day tour across US to voice out for those who are gone in the Bhopal Gas Tragedy and those who are suffering from the Gas Tragedy. They made a global appeal to have sensitive approach towards environment additionally to raise funds to support victims of the Gas Massacre. The Bhopal Gas Tragedy had given several lessons to learn the way expanding industrialization is catastrophic without safety measures. The problems emerged due to toxic MIC were increased in multiple folds locally. International bodies and National government should behave like responsible corporates and industrial units have to be placed on the outskirts of cities in accordance to safety measures

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