

# Animal's Gaze in Sinha's *Animal's People*

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## Abstract

The article critically studies Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* by critiquing Animal, a deformed young man born in the aftermath of the Bhopal disaster. Narrated by Animal himself via tapes transcribed by an Australian journalist, the novel explores themes of animality, identity, and representation. The article draws on a variety of scholarly perspectives, including ecocriticism, postcolonial criticism, posthumanism, and others to uncover the complexities of Animal's character. Drawing on the insights of Julietta Singh, Justin Omar Johnston and Andrew Mahlstedt, among many other scholars, the paper critiques common interpretations of Animal as the voice of the oppressed and offers a new perspective on his character. The paper argues that Animal's voyeuristic gaze is not compatible with typical animal behavior, but rather affirms Animal's compromised morality as a deformed human being. Despite his efforts to establish his animality, Animal's actions betray macho human tendencies and challenge the idea that he is the appropriate figure to represent animals and ecology at large.

**Keywords:** Human-animal relationships, eco-criticism, identity crisis, animal studies, scopophilia, Animality, and Posthumanism

## 1. Introduction

*Animal's People* is Indra Sinha's (2007) novel narrated by an Australian journalist on behalf of a deformed young man known as Animal born few days before the Bhopal disaster in 1984. Raised by a senile French nun and lived all his life as a destitute in the streets of the fictional Indian city of Khaufpur, Animal is the original narrator of this grotesque novel. The narrative, told mainly in the first-person singular by Animal, reconstructs the lives of the untouchables, or in other words, the subalterns in an ecologically compromised environment. After all, a chunk of the inhabitants of the fictional town, like those of the real population of Bhopal, were exposed to deadly toxic gases from a chemical industrial site owned by the 'Kampani' (a local term for company) days before Animal was born.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology of this paper is a critical and thematic analysis, primarily centered on the literary analysis of Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007). This analysis is further developed through a literature review on ecocriticism, postcolonial criticism, and posthumanism. The study employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from scholars such as Julietta Singh, Justin Omar Johnston, and Andrew Mahlstedt.

## 3. Literature Review

Many scholarly analyses of this novel draw upon various critical perspectives such as eco-criticism, postcolonial criticism, Anthropocene discussions, language studies, and psychoanalysis, among others. For eco-critics, the novel serves as a poignant critique of aggressive and inhumane capitalism, highlighting multinational corporations' pursuit of profit at the expense of ecology and the planet's well-being. Nabila Ahmed (2015) explores the novel's ecological underpinnings, illustrating how Sinha grants voices to nature and animals. Similarly, Shunqing Cao (2020) approaches the novel from an eco-critical perspective, interpreting Animal's disability as a symbol of the dissolution of boundaries between the human and non-human worlds. Cao's analysis delves into the intersection of disability and vulnerability, emphasizing how "disabled and vulnerable bodies" seem to relinquish human agency and traverse between human and non-human realms (Cao, 2020, p. 68). Consequently, Khaufpur and its inhabitants serve as the objective correlative for the aggressive transgression on mother earth, illuminating how Animal's disability signifies the blurring of distinctions between human and non-human spheres (Mansour, Shdough, & Banat, 2024, p. 535).

For the post colonialist scholar, the narrative is a comment on the aggressive attitudes and practices of the surrogate colonialist powers, represented by the Company and its agents, in exploiting the metaphorically colonized, represented by the populace of the fictional city of Khaufpur. Justin Omar Johnston (2016), taking his cue from Freud, Edward Said, and an essay by Melvin Kranzberg asserts that the novel "critiques [the] pseudo-scientific treatment of postcolonial death as a sacrificial cost in the larger scheme of human progress" (Johnston, 2016, p. 131). In this respect he points to statistics published about deaths in the wake of the Bhopal Union Carbide disaster assuming that the number of those who died would have been more or less the same due to poverty and lack of resources had the company not been

there. Johnston further adds, "Sinha explores a deep postcolonial ambivalence toward humanist forms of activism" (2016, p. 131). Here, he refers to Zafar's attempts at persuading Animal to change his name to something human and decent implying that nonhuman is banal.

Rob Nixon (2009) sees in *Animal's People* a strong critique of neoliberalism and its inhumane ways and multiplicity of standards when dealing with the poor in developing and least developing countries. Nixon stipulates that the setting and characters of the novel could belong to anywhere in the world where there is poverty, injustice, and oppression. Indeed, what happens in the novel can be an allegory of what is happening to people in many troubled and failing countries around the world. Simply replace the names of the streets and districts of Khaufpur with other names relevant to the new region in question and soon the readers or the 'Eyes' will find themselves looking at despair in that place where 'occupation', 'dictatorship' 'theocracy' 'bad leadership' replace the 'Kampani'.

Julietta Singh (2015) interestingly examines the novel from a post-humanist perspective arguing that the characters in the novel who attempt humanitarian activities through supporting Khaufpur's needy are living examples on the dehumanizing function of humanitarian actions. In Singh's words, "the figure of the humanitarian emerges as one that stands in opposition to the mastery of others but also unwittingly works alongside it" (2015, p. 138). Singh goes as far as placing Animal in this category when he spends his earnings and savings to free Anjali, the prostitute with whom he could not have intercourse as his mythical 'lund' fails him. Thus "Animal too becomes a kind of perverse humanitarian at the end of the novel", says Julietta Singh (2015, p. 150). Lastly, in an insightful essay, Andrew Mahlstedt (2013) explores the invisibility of Animal and his community, as well as the voyeuristic nature of readers' perspectives. He contends that Sinha's presentation of the story through the narrative's 'Eyes' serves as a reminder that while readers may "look," they may not truly "see." Mahlstedt challenges the voyeuristic gaze of readers, highlighting the stark contrast between their perception and the lived experiences of Animal's community. His argument suggests that unless readers have experienced extreme deprivation and hardship, such as defecating on railway tracks and enduring days without food, they cannot fully comprehend the narrative (2013, p. 64). Mahlstedt's assertions imply that most of the novel's readers, unless they come from the lower strata of the world, will not be able to see the narrative the way Animal and his cohorts experience it.

#### 4. Animal's identity and subjectivity

As can be seen, most if not all the scholarship I examined critiques the novel as a whole, whereas in this paper I just want to confine my critique to Animal's character. After all, though the novel is Sinha's, the narrative is mostly Animal's. I am aware of the invisible interferences of those who brought the narrative to the readers in English, such as the unidentified translator/s and the Australian journalist, since there is not much to talk about them other than their role in presenting Animal's tapes to us, my focal point will be Animal per se.

Indeed, the novel's ambivalent narrator, bizarre settings, and unnatural narrativity invite diverse readings, highlighting the subjectivity of the narrator and the nature of his voice. Animal's deep identity crisis, oscillating between asserting his animality and grappling with his humanity, prompts questions about his true nature. Sinha's portrayal of Animal blurs the lines between animal and human characteristics, leading to varied interpretations among critics, ranging from seeing him as a humanist figure to a self-cannibalizing animal character.

In this paper, my contention is that Animal's characterization bears little resemblance to animality. Apart from his walking on all fours due to early exposure to harmful chemicals and his habit of defecating in public spaces in his neighborhood, labeling him as an animal not only diminishes actual animals but also reflects the author's entrenched biases about animality. If public defecation is considered a sign of animalistic behavior, then nearly all the poor of Khaufpur could be deemed animals. Animal celebrates the communal act of open defecation that the affluent residents of the town cannot participate in with "There's a lot to be said for communal shitting" (Sinha, 2008, p. 184). However, numerous reasons emerge to refute Animal's animality out of respect for animals. One reason is Animal's linguistic ability, allowing him to communicate with people and other beings, both living and dead, by reading their thoughts. This proficiency may classify him as a supernatural communicator. One could argue that Sinha aims to affirm that animals do indeed possess such communicative and linguistic capacities of their own. Merleau-Ponty, echoing his post-humanist philosophy, asserts "language does not belong to humankind but to the sensible world of which we are but a part" (1973, p. 95). Somraj in the novel supports this notion and discusses the didactic nature of language exhibited by frogs, the wind, and silence, among other things. So where did Sinha deviate from his intention for Animal? The answer lies in Animal's gaze. While Justin Omar Johnston (2016) rightly argues that Animal's attempt to poison Zafar, whom he sees as a rival for Nisha's affection, "plays into a heteronormative narrative of male sexual competition," he overlooks the significance of Animal's gaze in shaping his heterosexual fantasies (2016, p. 138). Indeed, Animal's gaze reveals his masculinity, portraying him not just as a man, but also as a lascivious one deriving pleasure from voyeuristically observing women in his immediate vicinity.

To further elucidate the divergence from animal traits, Animal's own speeches in the novel shed light on his complex character. For instance, he declares, "I am a small person not even human" (Sinha, 2007, p. 3), expressing a profound identity crisis that challenges conventional notions of humanity. His crude analogy likening his condition to the transformation of once-identifiable good food into excrement reflects his struggle with self-perception and societal categorization. Animal sporadically reminds the 'Eyes' and himself of his animality with lyrics like "I am Animal fierce and free / in all the world is none like me", underscoring his defiance of societal norms and his embrace of his perceived animality (Sinha, 2007, p. 366). However, despite Animal's insistence on his animality and his refusal to become human by walking erect when offered the chance for an operation in a hospital in America, he concludes his tapes with "all things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us" (Sinha, 2007, p. 366). Animal's poignant reflection on the enduring plight of the poor highlights his deep empathy and connection with his community. Interestingly, by

referring to himself and the residents of Khaufpur as 'people' thanks to Sinha's unnatural narrative technique, Animal consciously and subconsciously dispels the confusion surrounding his identity and subjectivity, showing his playful yet profound understanding of his human existence amidst his animality

### 5. Animal's Gaze: Departure from Real Animal Behavior

Following the examination of Animal's gaze, it is imperative to consider film theorist Laura Mulvey's insights from the mid-1970s regarding male scopophilic desire. Mulvey (1975) argues that male desire necessitates a female object, projecting active male desire onto passive female bodies. She elucidates that a female character "stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions" (1975, p. 7). Sinha mirrors this projection of male desire onto female characters within the novel, presenting certain women as objects of desire for Animal, the readers, and the silent Eyes of the narrative. These women include Nisha, Somraj's daughter and Zafar's girlfriend; Elli, the American doctor engaged to Somraj; and Anjali, a prostitute in a local Khaufpur brothel. These healthy young women, who captivate the male gaze and attention, occupy significant roles in the narrative.

Several other female characters in the narrative do not attract male attention due to factors such as age or compromised health and physique. This aligns with Julia Kristeva's (1982) assertion that the beauty of the perfect woman's body is constructed by the male gaze, leaving those not gazed upon as unfortunate and undesirable. Indeed, Animal's penetrating gaze at women's bodies reflects the inherited dynamics of the normative male gaze. A critical examination of Animal's perception of the few female characters in Khaufpur reveals his view of these women as that of a typical oversexed man, contrary to the novel's title and claims that the narrator is an animal.

To Animal, Nisha embodies the epitome of feminine allure. He falls in love with her, fantasizing about her and comparing her to Sonali Bendre, a desirable movie star known in Khaufpur:

Then she smiles and you notice for the first time that she's not all that plain, her face is quite sweet. You watch for her smile and notice that it pushes her cheeks up into two mango shapes, why should this shape be so pleasing, I don't know. Then one evening she puts kajal round her eyes and brushes her hair, looks quite transformed, and suddenly Sonali Bendre is not so desirable as this one who's been under your nose for so long, who's all dolled up to go somewhere you're not going, can never go (Sinha, 2007, p. 46).

Animal notices the sweetness of Nisha's breath, describing her backside as a "neat little bum" while observing her in an internet café (Sinha, 2007, p. 96). He even masturbates while watching Nisha undress through the branches of a tree overlooking her bedroom window. His subsequent feelings of shame after ejaculating are akin to Shakespeare's sonnet 129: "Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame". Animal reflects on his shame but quickly forgets it, focusing instead on Nisha's beauty: "With her long hair loose and falling down her back, Nisha looked very charming" (Sinha, 2007, p. 254). Animal's scopophilic pleasure extends beyond Nisha to Elli, who becomes a potent sexual and pleasure-giving signifier for him. Describing Elli in a highly sexualized manner, Animal remarks:

This foreigner is tall, taller than Nisha, plus to my mind très baisable, wah, what a sexy. Midriff's bare, she carries herself like someone who knows what she's about. Like in the song, *zulfein hain jaise kandhon pe baadal jhuke hue*, dark hair rests like a cloud on her shoulder, in the sun it's giving off bright flashes, like gold. The main thing I notice about her is that her blue jeans are so tight you can see everything. I half close my eyes and it's as if she has naked blue legs. She sees me watching her with my eyes screwed up and gives me a smile. I'm just about to wink back when Farouq nudges me with his foot and says, "Look who's got his hopes up." (Sinha, 2007, pp. 66-67)

Farouq's remark, "hopes up," serves as a double entendre hinting at Animal's sexual arousal. Animal's gaze at Elli's naked body transforms into that of a satyr, with Elli's body triggering his libido: "There's a furnace in my groin" (Sinha, 2007, p. 79). Animal takes pride in the fact that "at least one part of [him] can stand upright" (Sinha, 2007, p. 79). Ironically, Animal's encounter with Anjali's yoni brings him back to his real humanity and transforms him into a pseudo philosopher. Animal's refusal to touch Anjali's vagina and his desire only to observe it in detail stem from curiosity. Suddenly, and unexpectedly from such a character, he shows such a homage to the vagina that tantamount to worshiping. He realizes that the vagina is "more powerful than all the world for it contains the whole world plus heaven and hell beside, in its depths is the whole of the past plus all that will be" (Sinha, 2007, p. 244). Animal's sudden shift in orientation or unwarranted growth following the intimate encounter with Anjali apparently leads Juliet Singh (2015) to dispute the significance of Animal's sexuality and virility in accentuating his humanity. Singh argues, "although sexuality is often imagined to be a crucial marker of the human's abiding animality, in the novel sexuality turns out to be among Animal's least 'animal' aspects" (2015, 137). However, I disagree with this assessment because sex remains a driving force in Animal's life until the novel's conclusion. His jealousy nearly drives him to kill Zafar, and he relentlessly pursues and desires young, beautiful women, refusing to leave them without attempting to satisfy his sexual desires through his scopophilic gaze.

Indeed, Animal's gaze is two-fold: Freudian with Nisha and Elli, and Lacanian with Anjali, the young prostitute. Freud (1905) contends that the scopophilic gaze can be either an active or a passive process in which the subject and object of the gaze are separated. This is what we see in the case of Animal's gaze at both Elli and Nisha. Animal derives great sexual pleasure and achieves sexual gratification through masturbation while looking at them separately on various occasions from a distance while unnoticed by any of them. For him, these two women are sexualized objects; and according to Freud's elaboration on scopophilia, Animal is at the risk of developing scopophilic perversion.

With Anjali, however, Animal assumes a Lacanian gaze that reconstructs his ego and makes him identify with the object of his gaze. He sees in Anjali's vagina the miracle of creation. Regardless of the sensibility of his perception, and despite Animal's agnostic views of creation and the creator, his reflections are ironically humanistic as he centers creation in the human yoni of a beautiful young prostitute. Animal's gaze at Anjali's vagina takes place in the presence and consent of the subject of the gaze, hence the unity of the subject and the object of the gaze. This transformation of Animal's personality from a male with a satyr's gaze to a male with a liberal philosophic view of creation at large reveals his complex character, marked by contradictions that bear signs of perversion and signs of normality similar to those of other men like Zafer, Farouq, Somraj, and others.

When discussing the real animal gaze, it is undeniable that animals have their own unique and meaningful ways of observing the world. Jacques Derrida (2008), Silvan Tomkins (1995), Susan Fraiman (2012), and many other post-humanists have delved into the nature of the animal gaze and its impact on themselves. However, research has yet to reveal instances of an animal's gaze at a naked human body leading to the animal experiencing climax. In fact, Derrida himself felt a sense of shame upon realizing that his cat was observing him naked in the bathroom, highlighting the complexity of interspecies interactions. Derrida's experience reflects Freud's notion that subjectivity is not solely determined by how we perceive ourselves, but also by the gaze of others, including animals.

This idea is echoed by Lacan (1998) in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, where he writes, "the gaze surprises me and reduces me to shame" (1998, 84). The discourse on the animal gaze from Freud (1905) to Bion (1962) primarily revolves around humans' capacity to contemplate their subjectivities rather than the direct impact of the gaze on the animal itself. However, it is important to acknowledge that animal gazes can communicate various messages to the humans they observe, such as interest, threat, bonding, seeking help, or asserting dominance, depending on the animal and the context of the encounter.

Contrary to the typical animal gaze, Sinha's portrayal of Animal suggests a departure from natural behavior observed in real animals when it comes to interactions with humans. In Sinha's depiction, Animal's gaze at women/humans is sexually oriented, in contrast to the real animal gaze at humans, which is devoid of sexuality as far as we know. Sinha's portrayal of Animal, while initially appearing unique, represents a deviation from the typical animal behavior. Instead of depicting Animal as a true representative of animal instincts, Sinha portrays him as an ill-mannered human masquerading as an animal, exhibiting behavior that aligns more with human tendencies, particularly regarding sexuality. This portrayal tarnishes the perception of animals, suggesting a libido-focused nature that contradicts the reality observed in most animals. Unlike humans who often engage in sexual activity for pleasure rather than solely for reproductive purposes, animals typically mate seasonally and with the primary goal of propagating the species. However, the Animal character in the novel disregards these natural tendencies, engaging in sexual behavior without regard for reproductive goals, mirroring human behavior rather than authentic animal instincts.

## 6. Conclusion

In spite of Animal's voyeuristic gaze, which betrays his human masculine tendency, one can argue that Sinha intended to create his Animal character to direct readers' attention to the absence of animal representation in the human world. Despite animals' capacity for language as a universal faculty, their speech remains incomprehensible to humans. Animal possesses the ability to converse and make himself understood to various characters and objects in Khaufpur, including his neighborhood friends, the French-speaking Ma Franci, Elli, the dead Fetus Kha in the jar, as well as scorpions, dogs, and other objects. Ironically, he is not understood by the elite others in the city, including the Australian journalist who serves as Animal's final and real narrator. Animal's true voice is only understood by individuals who lack the agency to represent him effectively and make his voice heard. Even the well-intentioned American doctor lacks the potential to represent Animal and convey his voice to the rest of the world. Sinha, aware of the politics of representations, filters or sublimates Animal's voice through two filters: first, the local translations of the original tapes into English mixed with other non-English expressions and second, the Australian production. This process aligns with Frantz Fanon's (2004) assertion that the oppressed cannot represent themselves; instead, they must be represented by their betters. The debate about Animal's representations has persisted in the West since the mid-19th century. However, readers will never know the exact speech/language Animal deposited on his tapes. It is possible that he deposited a variety of sounds, cries, beats, silences, howling, and a mixture of voices, deciphered by unidentified translators into something comprehensible to the Australian journalist and English readers. This representational narrative may not precisely capture what Animal intended to convey. It is the best representation that capitalist writing in English could offer to depict Animal and his people. This representation seeks to depict an animal with feelings, desires, and hopes not unlike those of normal humans. However, a limitation exists in that the representation of Animal is confined to a male perspective. This raises questions about how the story would have been presented had Animal and the journalist been female. Animal's gaze in my view should complicate the scene, especially for critics who interpret the novel through an animal-centric perspective. Considering the discussions surrounding the novel, Animal emerges as a representative voice for the invisible and oppressed members of society, encompassing those who are economically, socially, legally, and environmentally marginalized. Additionally, critics with post-humanist and ecological agendas view Animal as a symbol of interspecies connections, embodying traits that blur the lines between animals and humans, as Animal himself insists.

While these readings offer valuable insights, they raise a question about Animal's characterization, especially his voyeuristic gaze. It is still difficult to comprehend how a character who aims to represent the marginalized, the oppressed, the interspecies, and the voiceless would commit acts that violate the privacy of decent women, by secretly observing their nakedness in their private settings. This inconsistency in Animal's characterization is further accentuated by the sharp contrast between Animal's gaze and the typical behavior associated with animal gazes, which are usually characterized by investigation, recognition, or the preservation of location and domain

assertion. In the novel, it transpires that Animal's gaze is distinctly male-centered and lacks the innocence and curiosity typically attributed to the animal gaze. Thus, despite Animal's role as a symbol of the marginalized as seen by several of Sinha's scholars, his actions challenge conventional understandings and raise important questions about representation and agency in Sinha's novel.

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