

Neocolonial Catastrophe & Environmental Injustice: Representation and Re-presentation of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy in *Animal's People*

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I. Introduction:

Neocolonialism is a term used to describe the continuation of economic, political, and cultural dominance of powerful nations or corporations over less powerful ones, particularly in the context of formerly colonized nations that have gained formal political independence. The concept of neocolonialism emerged in the mid-20th century by French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and Ghanaian political theorist Kwame Nkrumah as a means of analyzing the ways in which Western powers

continued to exert influence and control over former colonies in the post-colonial era (Stanard 5). In the economic realm, neocolonialism refers to the ways in which developed countries maintain economic control over developing countries through mechanisms such as foreign investment, trade agreements, and debt. Developed countries often extract natural resources and exploit cheap labour in developing countries, resulting in the transfer of wealth from the Global South to the Global North. This perpetuates poverty and inequality within developing countries and maintains global economic imbalances. In *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965), Kwame Nkrumah wrote:

In place of colonialism, as the main instrument of imperialism, we have today neo-colonialism... [which] like colonialism, is an attempt to export the social conflicts of the capitalist countries... The result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world. Investment, under neo-colonialism, increases, rather than decreases, the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world. (x)

In the political sphere, neocolonialism can involve the use of political and military power by developed countries to influence the policies and decisions of developing countries. This can include support for authoritarian regimes, interference in elections, and the imposition of

economic and political sanctions. The result is often the subjugation of developing countries to the interests of powerful nations, rather than allowing them to pursue their own political and economic goals (Serequeberhan 13). Cultural neocolonialism refers to the dominance of Western cultural norms and values over non-Western cultures, often through the media and popular culture. This can result in the erasure of non-Western perspectives and the reinforcement of Western stereotypes and biases. This reinforces the idea that Western culture is superior to non-Western cultures, perpetuating a legacy of colonialism that reinforces global inequality (Parenti 24).

In the same vein, Naomi Klein in her book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs The Climate* challenges the capitalist economic model, asserting that the relentless pursuit of profit and economic growth is a major driver of environmental degradation. She argues that the focus on short-term gains and the exploitation of natural resources are hindering efforts to address climate change and environmental crisis effectively. Klein discusses the role of powerful corporations and their influence on political decision-making. She suggests that the close relationship between big business and government often leads to policies that prioritize corporate interests over environmental concerns, contributing to the inertia in addressing environmental disasters (Klein).

II. The Bhopal Gas Tragedy, A Neocolonial Catastrophe:

Critics of neocolonialism contend that multinational corporations' investments in underdeveloped nations benefit only a select few, while causing harm to their populations in humanitarian, environmental, and ecological aspects. They argue that this type of investment results in unsustainable development and perpetual underdevelopment, with these nations functioning merely as sources of low-cost labour and raw materials. Advanced production techniques are often withheld from these countries, further impeding their economic development. Monopolization of natural resources, while providing an initial increase in investment, often leads to long-term increases in poverty, unemployment, and a decline in per-capita income (Avirgan).

The Bhopal gas tragedy was one of the world's worst industrial disasters, which occurred in Bhopal, India, on the night of December 2-3, 1984. The disaster was caused by a gas leak from the Union Carbide India Limited [UCIL] pesticide plant, which released thirty-two tons of toxic methyl isocyanate gas into the surrounding environment. The gas leak led to the deaths of at least 3,000 people immediately, with the total death toll estimated to be between 15,000 and 20,000 in the years that followed. The gas also caused severe and long-lasting health effects for hundreds of thousands of people,

including respiratory problems, blindness, birth defects, and cancer. The disaster also had devastating environmental consequences, contaminating soil and water sources in the surrounding area (Eckerman).

The disaster has been subject to extensive investigation, although the causes remain contested, with factors including the reckless inclusion of hazardous chemical production in a site originally zoned for “light industrial and commercial use” (Broughton), the disregard of warnings regarding unsafe storage methods, and the failure of multiple safety systems. The plant’s safety systems had been designed and implemented in the United States, where Union Carbide Corporation was based, but they had not been fully replicated in the Indian plant due to cost-cutting measures (Shelton 5).

The disaster exemplifies the tendency of American corporate elites to prioritize the lives and interests of the Global North at the expense of those in the Global South, as evidenced by the existence of a nearly identical and more rigorously regulated UCIL plant in West Virginia (“Dow and the Bhopal Tragedy”). Furthermore, the disaster is indicative of the systemic imbalances perpetuated by the multinational corporate structure that favours the interests of developed countries over those of developing nations. The persistence of toxic contamination in the soil and water supply of Bhopal is an example of the “slow violence” (Nixon) that occurs as a result of environmental deregulation under neoliberal

capitalism, which disproportionately affects marginalized and impoverished communities. Even forty years after the disaster, there is still ongoing environmental injustice and human suffering, with toxic agricultural chemicals continuing to contaminate the water supply, developmental abnormalities and health complications affecting newborns, and survivors advocating for just compensation and adequate medical support.

Ironically, the emergence of environmental activism in Europe and the United States during the 1960s actually prompted multinational corporations, such as Union Carbide Corporation [UCC], to seek less regulated avenues for pesticide development in Third World countries, just as India was attempting to bolster its agricultural output. This interconnection serves to underscore the neocolonial implications of the industrial and environmental policy decisions that came to define the Green Revolution which according to Biplab Dasgupta was “at the expense of local communities” (Shelton 7). The majority of victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy were located in impoverished slums situated in closest proximity to the Carbide plant, where “flimsy houses offered little protection from the weather - or from airborne toxics” (Fortun xiv). The displacement of labour and the subsequent migration to urban slums, such as those present in Bhopal, were already outcomes of policies that favored industry, indicating that “many of those living near the Carbide plant had already been victimized by the same processes that culminated in their 1984 expo-

sure” (Fortun 161). Thus, Allison Shelton comments: “... if Bhopali environmental identities before the disaster were already predicated on poverty, displacement, neo-colonial demands and degradation, then these aspects of the following generations’ environmental identities were exacerbated by their relationship to the consequential disaster itself” (Shelton 7).

III. Legal Injustice:

The Bhopal Gas Tragedy led to a long and complex legal battle that spanned several decades. The Indian government filed a lawsuit against UCC seeking compensation for the victims and environmental damages. The case was filed in the District Court of Bhopal in 1985, and UCC argued that the Indian courts had no jurisdiction over the case and that the case should be heard in the United States, where the parent company was based. The Indian government eventually reached a settlement with UCC in 1989, which was widely criticized for being inadequate and for not holding the company fully accountable for the disaster. The settlement resulted in UCC paying \$470 million in compensation to the victims, which many activists and lawyers argued was far too low given the scale of the tragedy and the long-term health and environmental consequences.

In 1991, the Indian government filed criminal charges against UCC and its CEO, Warren Anderson, for their

role in the disaster. However, Anderson never appeared in court and was declared a fugitive from justice. The Indian government made several attempts to extradite Anderson from the United States, but these efforts were largely unsuccessful. In 2010, a court in Bhopal finally convicted seven Indian executives of UCC of causing death by negligence, and sentenced them to two years in prison. The verdict, however, was criticized for being too lenient and for not holding UCC or its foreign executives accountable for the disaster.

The circumstances surrounding Warren Anderson's departure from India following the Bhopal Gas Tragedy are shrouded in ambiguity. Upon his arrival in Bhopal on December 7, 1984, four days after the disaster, he was arrested by Madhya Pradesh police and taken to the Carbide guest-house, where he was placed under house arrest. According to Lalit Shastri, a journalist who reported on the incident, Anderson was detained in the guest house of his own company instead of a police station, and later flown to Delhi, with the superintendent of police and district collector escorting him to the airport (Shukla et. al.). In his personal bond of Rs 25,000, Anderson pledged to return to India to face trial in the case whenever summoned, a promise he never fulfilled.

In his autobiography, *A Grain of Sand in the Hourglass of Time*, the then chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, Arjun Singh, accused Union home secretary RD Pradhan of

contacting him “on the instructions of the then Union home minister PV Narasimha Rao” (“Bhopal gas tragedy”), though Pradhan refuted this claim, stating that he was chief secretary of Maharashtra at that time and became home secretary in January 1985, a month after the tragedy. Forty years after the event, it remains unclear who instructed Singh to release Anderson, a decision that effectively ensured the Union Carbide chairman would never face an Indian court.

Numerous reports have suggested that the US government pressured the Indian government to release Anderson. According to Moti Singh, who was the Bhopal collector at the time of the disaster, Anderson was able to flee using a phone in the room where he was being held to contact individuals in the US. “Had we removed the landline phone from his room, Anderson would not have escaped. He possibly made calls to contacts in the US to help him leave India,” (“Bhopal gas tragedy”) Singh claimed. The US embassy purportedly exerted pressure on the Indian government as well. Swaraj Puri, Bhopal’s Superintendent of Police in 1984, told the Union Carbide Toxic Gas Leakage Enquiry Commission: “We arrested him on the basis of a written order but released him on an oral order” (“Bhopal gas tragedy”) that came “from higher-ups” (“Bhopal gas tragedy”).

IV. Representation of Environmental Injustice in *Animal's People*:

The legacy of colonialism has left many developing countries vulnerable to neocolonial exploitation by multinational corporations and powerful nations. In the context of environmental issues, this can lead to the exploitation of natural resources and pollution of the environment, often at the expense of local communities. For example, in the case of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, multinational corporations like Union Carbide Corporation [UCC] sought less restricted pesticide development in the Third World while India was looking to increase agricultural production. This led to the disaster that killed thousands of people and injured hundreds of thousands more.

Furthermore, the effects of environmental degradation and pollution often fall disproportionately on marginalized communities, such as low-income neighbourhoods and communities of colour. These communities are often located near toxic waste sites, chemical plants, and other sources of pollution. This unequal distribution of environmental harms is a form of environmental injustice. Thus, neocolonialism and environmental injustice are interconnected. The exploitation of developing countries for economic gain by powerful nations and multinational corporations can lead to environmental injustices and the unequal distribution of environmental harms and benefits. Addressing these issues requires an

understanding of the ways in which neocolonialism perpetuates environmental injustices and a commitment to social and environmental justice.

In *The Hindu* (2013), Indian environmental historian Ramachandra Guha writes: “In the West, the environmental movement [arose] chiefly out of a desire to protect endangered animal species and natural habitats. In India, however, it arose out of the imperative of human survival. This was an environmentalism of the poor, which married the concern of social justice on the one hand with sustainability on the other” (Guha). He posits that Western privilege generally safeguards human viability even when confronted with environmental threats, whereas in India, environmental hazards equally endanger humans, especially the poor. India’s impoverished population includes diverse communities, such as slum-dwellers and rural pastoralists, Dalits, Adivasis and Muslim migrants and immigrants. These communities are already marginalized by the caste system, colonialism, and/or partition and continue to experience conflict with numerous policies of the Indian nation-state that seeks validation as a legitimate industrial power in the context of the neoliberal capitalist global order. Therefore, Guha points to the unequal power relations — both economic and social in nature, and of national and transnational scope — that have created locales of environmental injustice and unsustainable living conditions for the poor communities in India.

Based on the Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984, Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* discusses the devastating impact of gas leak from a chemical factory on, not just the people, but also the ecology and the ensuing incessant struggle of the Khaufpuris for environmental and community justice. Smita Sahu in "The Emergence of Environmental Justice in Literature" says, "[*Animal's People*] discusses the devastating impact of gas leak from a chemical factory on, not just the people, but also on the ecology" (549). The polluted soil and groundwater due to the toxic outbreak in the city of Khaufpur is continuing to affect generations after generations and as a result, the children born as deformed, people after getting contaminated by the toxic chemicals, suffer from so many vulnerable diseases like Cancer and so on, even after eighteen years of the incident. Toxic wastes are still left there within the Kampani. No one is interested in taking responsibility for its cleaning. All the characters in the novel are somehow affected and effected by this technology and its advancements as the protagonist, Animal, has lost his ability to walk on his legs as the toxic from the Kampani's Factory has twisted his back, Ma Franci has lost her mental stability, Hanif has lost his eyesight as a consequence of contamination due to toxic leakage from the Kampani. Similarly after suffering from this industrial disaster, Somraj, once a famous singer of Khaufpur, has lost his voice permanently.

A. Animal, the De-humanized Being:

Animal, the protagonist of the novel, no longer views himself as a human, as can be seen in the opening sentence of *Animal's People*: "I used to be human once" (Sinha 1). His spinal column started to twist, forcing him to move with the help of his four extremities. It led the other kids in the orphanage where he was raised to start calling him "Jaanvar" ["Animal"] (Sinha 15). Animal is unable to recall his real name and chooses to self-identify as an animal because of the way he is treated and how he feels. When Zafar tells him: "You should not think of yourself that way, but as specially abled... Plus you should not allow yourself to be called Animal. You are a human being, entitled to dignity and respect" (Sinha 23), Animal retorts: "'My name is Animal', I say. 'I'm not a fucking human being. I've no wish to be one'" (Sinha 23). It is Animal's name that has become his self-identity. Name is not only an epistemological category for him but also his ontological reality - for him Animal is not merely his name but Animal is his being: "... when I say I'm an animal it's not just what I look like but what I feel" (Sinha 87). Animal represents the dehumanizing effect of the developing Global South caused by the developed Global North.

Animal covers this secret with outward arrogance, repeatedly expressing his hatred of being pitied, boasting about his extra-human cunning as he makes his way in the world as a con artist and thief, and hurling clever, vit-

riolic comebacks at those who regularly insult him. Nevertheless, in moments alone, he shows a tendency toward self-loathing and self-sabotage, divulging some of his deepest, self-pitying secrets: “Perched like a monkey [at the top of the abandoned factory]... I would look at the lights of the city and wonder if this pipe had been mended, that wheel tightened, I might have had a mother and father, I might still be a human being” (Sinha 32).

In spite of his continuous insistence that he is not a human, it becomes apparent that Animal’s resistance to acknowledge his humanity is, at least partially, a psychological defense against rejection by the human world. Animal tells the journalist: “Ask any people they’ll tell you I’m the same as ever, anyone in Khaufpur will point me out, ‘There he is! Look! It’s Animal. Goes on four feet, that one. See, that’s him, bent double by his own bitterness.’ People see the outside, but it’s inside where the real things happen, no one looks in there, maybe they don’t dare” (Sinha 11).

When Farouq accuses Animal for using his animal nature as an alibi: “You pretend to be an Animal so you can escape the responsibility of being human,’... ‘No joke, yaar. You run wild, do crazy things and get away with it because you are always whining, I’m an animal, I’m an Animal”” (Sinha 209), Animal retorts: “... I’m an animal, why?... By choice or because others named me Animal and treated me like one?” (Sinha 209).

The character of Animal in Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* was inspired by a friend's report of a boy walking on all fours in Bhopal. This incident prompted Sinha to imagine the daily life of such a boy and to consider his resilience and perseverance. "We [the characters Animal and Sinha] talked at once and had huge arguments. He didn't want a bit part. He wanted to tell it all," (Naravane) says Sinha. *The Atlantic's* 2014 retrospective photo taken in 2009 by Daniel Berahulak, which featured Sachin Kumar, a fifteen-year-old Bhopali local who crawled on his hands and knees due to a birth defect caused by toxins. While it is unclear whether Kumar is the same boy that Sinha's friend encountered, the photo serves as a poignant reminder that much of Animal's narration is not exaggerated, but rather reflects the extreme circumstances that the survivors of the Bhopal disaster faced. Sinha attributes the creation of Animal's character to the "collective spirit of the Bhopalis" (Naravane), which he believes "somehow got channeled into one character who presumably symbolized just how disadvantaged you can be" (Naravane).

B. Khaufpur, The City of Terror:

Sinha, in the very beginning of the novel states the condition of the Khaufpur city and its toxic nature: "No birds 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're still doing their work”(Sinha 29).

The very word “khauf” means terror in Urdu. By naming the city “Khaufpur”, Sinha portrays it as a city of khauf or terror where the citizens are forced to struggle with the terror of the ecological catastrophe that happened eighteen years ago and slow poisoning that is going on till date - as Zafar informs the judge in one of the court-hearings: “... thousands in this city have died since that night, for them was no justice. The factory is abandoned full of chemicals which as we speak are poisoning the water of thousands more” (Sinha 52). The company “... ran away from Khaufpur without cleaning its factory, over the years the poison it left behind has found its way into the wells, everyone you meet seems to be sick” (Sinha 33). Animal recalls an incident involving an elderly woman of Khaufpur: “Like all the folk living round here, she’s terrified that one night the factory will rise from the dead and come striding like a blood-dripping demon to snatch them off” (Sinha 41). The name ‘Khaufpur’ perfectly embodies the angst of a post-apocalyptic city and its inhabitants.

Kampani’s lack of responsible behavior and the ecological damage in Khaufpur brings out the harsh truth of industrial capitalism. After the disaster happened, Kampani did nothing to cleanse the contaminated water and soil of Khaufpur. Kampani fled away immediately after

the leakage, but Zafar, as spokesman of the people of Khaufpur, devoted his life for justice against the Kampani. This very incident indicates the insufficiency between production and environmental safety of Kampani. The novel depicts the factory as untouched and overgrown. Animal, after entering into the dilapidated factory, mentions the cracked abandoned tanks that still contain toxic chemicals. Khaufpur and its people were left to deal with their helpless situation and terrible diseases without hope of getting better. Lack of medical, legal and financial compensation and treatments are a serious problem to Khaufpuris who were poisoned by the leak.

By changing details from the Bhopal disaster - constructing the fictional city of Khaufpur, altering the names of people and relief efforts, and only giving a generic name for the responsible American company as “Kampani” - Sinha makes his novel more universally applicable. The micro narrative of community justice and the local issue of Bhopal becomes a macro narrative of environmental justice and a global issue of industrial and environmental disasters caused by the Western world.

C. Idea of Justice in a Post-Truth World:

The language used by the fictional editor in translating the tapes combines Hindi, French, English, and a language called Khaufpuri that may not have an English equivalent. There are certain lines and passages in

French which are not translated into English: “When the last echos are gone I hear the sound of old woman’s quavering / Quand j’étais chez mon père, / Petite à la ti ti, la ri ti, tonton lariton” (Sinha 42).

I perceive it as a conscious creation of an epistemological void - a space of uncertainty in the minds of the readers. Only those who know all three languages may be able to decipher the novel completely. It, therefore, symbolically suggests the inability of ‘knowing’ the actual catastrophic incident as various narratives of such tragedies are available in the post-truth world. Oxford Dictionaries popularly defined it as “relating to and denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (*Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*). Thus, Animal tells the journalist: “As to what happened, well, there are many versions going round, every newspaper had a different story, not one knows the truth” (Sinha 10). Even Zafar is concerned about how false truths can be manufactured through stats and numbers: ““To make such arguments you need facts and figures. You need case histories, a health survey... but before we can discover the truth the damage could be done”” (Sinha 69).

Words like ‘tragedy’ and ‘apocalypse’ try to plant the idea that the disaster is not a result of negligence but of an anomaly, whereas the narrative of ‘justice’ becomes pun-

ishing the culprit rather than emancipating the victims. Animal, thus, mocks the journalist: “You’ll talk of rights, law, justice. These words sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they don’t mean the same... such words are like shadows that man makes... always changing shape. On that night it was poison, now it’s words that are choking us” (Sinha 3).

The tapes of Animal’s speeches are first recorded in Hindi and later translated into English. It can be interpreted as an impact of linguistic supremacy of the Global North on the Global South. The protesting voice of the Khaufpuri people stays unheard to the powerful, to the Global North, until it reaches them in English. Animal, however, makes sure that “the book must contain only his story and nothing else. Plus it must be his words only” (Sinha 9). The fictional Editor’s Note (2007) reads: “True to the agreement between the boy and the journalist... the story is told entirely in the boy’s words as recorded on the tapes. Apart from translating to English, nothing has been changed.” Thus, in *Animal’s People*, the subaltern (Animal) can speak directly to the Eyes (or the readers) or the (neo-)empire talks back to its (neo-)colonizers (Kampani).

The journalist’s interpretation or retelling of Khaufpuri incidents could never have been nearly as authentic and enthralling as that of Animal. The reason, perhaps, is Animal’s inherent bond and authentic experience with his bioregion or life-place that “signals a deep and respectful attachment to place and its other-than-human

inhabitants” (Rangarajan 64) which the journalist lacks in spite of his good motives: “How can forgeriners at the world’s other end, who’ve never set foot in Khaufpur, decide what’s to be said about this place?” (Sinha 9).

Kirkpatrick Sale outlines the major premises of bioregionalism in his important work *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision* (1991), and his list of essential knowledge includes: “... rocks under our feet; the source of the waters we drink; the meaning of the different kinds of winds; the common insects, birds, mammals, plants, and trees; the particular cycles of the seasons; the times to plant and harvest and forage - these are the things that are necessary to know...” (42). In other words, especially in Animal’s uncensored Khaufpuri words: “What can I say that they will understand? Have these thousands of eyes slept even one night in a place like this? Do these eyes shit on railway tracks? When was the last time these eyes had nothing to eat? These cuntish eyes, what do they know of our lives?” (Sinha 7-8).

Journalists and media houses more often than not use words like “tragedy”, “apocalypse” and “justice” only for the sake of sensitization, to make news more palatable to the readers or the audience. Media coverages, articles and books largely talk about (often dramatize) tragic events but those hardly bring any practical and visible changes, as Animal says: “... many books have been written about this place, not one has changed anything for better” (Sinha 3). Animal severely criticizes the West-erners’ lust for toxic tourist spots which “... are located

far from the world of power elites, and are usually the neighborhoods where low-income and minority communities live, since industrial sites, toxic landfills, incinerators and the like are commonly set up in these areas” (Rangarajan 185). Animal claims: “You were like all the others, come to suck our stories from us, so strangers in far off countries can marvel there’s so much pain in the world. Like vultures are you *jurnaliss*. Somewhere a bad thing happens... and look, here you come, drawn by the smell of blood” (Sinha 5).

V. Conclusion:

A linguistic strategy that contributes to establish Khaufpur as the city of terror as well as a terrifying sense of place is the use of the present tense by Animal though he recollects stories from the past incidents. Along with the intimate first-person narrative that ensures the reader sympathizes with the plight of Animal and, therefore, with the plight of his people, Animal’s use of the present tense in telling past events allows the eyes [as well as the readers] to experience his story more intimately alongside him. The use of the present tense suggests the continuity of perpetual suffering of the Khaufpuris and that suffering will never become a thing of the past. Thus, Animal concludes: “Eyes, I’m done. *Khuda hafez*. Go well. Remember me. All things pass but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us” (Sinha 366).

Animal's People sheds light on the issue of environmental degradation in urban areas and serves as an example of the power imbalances present within society. Author Indra Sinha portrays the disaster depicted in the novel as a product of civilization and highlights the dominance of Western technologies in the Global South. The protagonist, Animal, exposes the ethical shortcomings of profit-oriented corporate capitalism, offering a critique of its harmful impact on marginalized groups such as the poor in the Global South, non-human beings, and the natural environment. Animal underscores the erasure of Khaufpur's rich cultural life, history, and progress by Kampaani, a corporation held responsible for the disaster. Sinha praises the resilience of ordinary Khaufpuris in resisting the authoritarian machinery of death. The novel draws a clear correlation between industrial capitalism, neocolonialism, and environmental pollution, demonstrating the ongoing relevance of these issues.

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