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Animals in the Locality: Environmental Disaster, Disability and Human–Animal Spatial Identity Politics in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007)

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ABSTRACT

The concept of disability has often been chained to that of animality as humanness is regarded as inherently marked by independence and rationality, the lack of which in animate beings is randomly associated with animality. The animality/humanity dualism, championed by anthropocentrism and ableism, not only affects the identity of humans with special needs by grouping them as Others but also disregards the agency of animals/nonhumans and nature by denying human dependency on and similarities with more-than-human entities. This research in its exploration of the connection between disability and ambiguous identity will focus upon the dynamics of the animality/humanity dualism in the context of an industrial disaster and ensuing disability as represented in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007). By understanding animality/humanity binary through the lens of local/global spatial distinction, the article scrutinises the way the animal/human ambiguous sense of place of the protagonist is mediated by his spatial relations. Building on both critical disability scholarship on animalisation of disabled humans and bioregional exploration of local/global spatial boundaries, the research, therefore, contends that the impact of environmental disasters on certain human groups creates a local (deformed humans as animals)/global (elite humans) spatial binary. The resolvability of such binaries, as the research further argues, is coterminous with developing a local bioregion, which is both connected to and dissociated from global/international places and is built upon humans–nonhumans/animals/nature interrelations that allow an agentic and inclusive human–nonhuman sense of belonging in the region.

1. Introduction

The concept of disability is often chained to that of animality where humans with special needs are viewed through the lens of ableism. The lack of certain capacities, such as rationality and independence regarded as essential for humanness, is central to the ableist dehumanizing of disabled humans as well as to the devaluation of more–than-human animals. Moreover, such anthropocentric and ableist perceptions justify the marginalization of disabled humans and their exclusion from the ethical consideration of their equality with

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humans (Taylor and Orning, 2020). Thus, disability is perceived as the opposite of humanness, and it appears rational to associate the physical and psychological dependence of the disabled with the animality of nonhumans (Lundblad, 2020). Such divisions between humanness and animality, as environmental studies and critical animal studies argue, is akin to "racism", "misogyny" and "homophobia" (Estok, 2009, p. 208). Again, the animality/humanness dualism often allows many scientific studies and cultural productions to stereotypically represent the disabled and the nonhumans as objects that require human intervention, protection, and control (Jenkins, Montford and Taylor, 2020). In other words, the binaries between humans, nonhuman/animals, and human Others have not only championed anthropocentrism and ableism but also disregarded the agency of those termed as Others. Therefore, there has been a call to recalibrate human rationality and reason that have Othered nonhumans and disabled humans since human identity and sense of belonging in a place depend on their relationships with more-than-human animals, nature as well as disabled humans (Shepard, 1997, p. 80; Taylor, 2017, p. 110). This research in exploring that dynamics of the animality/humanity dualism in the context of an industrial disaster and ensuing disability will focus upon the identity and sense of belonging of disabled humans in relation to Indra Sinha's 2007 novel *Animal's People*. Set in the backdrop of 1984 Bhopal Disaster in which thousands of people in the city of Bhopal, India, died and crippled as a result of a gas leak from a pesticide plant, owned by an American company, the narrative spins around the uneven boundaries between humans and physically and psychologically challenged human Others, the objectification of the disabled and their identification with more-than-human animals. Against this background, this article configures the ambiguous identity of the disabled protagonist, named Animal, and will show the way he regains his agentic human-animal identity, negating the animality/humanity boundary. By understanding animality/humanity binary through local/global spatial dynamics, the article will show the way the sense of place in a bioregional local place, which is both connected to and dissociated from global/international places offers an agentic identity, resolving the dualism between humanity and animality.

Whereas traits associated with nonhumans and disabled humans, such as "dependency and vulnerability", should not be regarded as reasons to term them as Others, there has been a significant rise in demand within interdisciplinary scholarship to develop a culture where the animality of humans are recognized and the interdependency between humans and nonhumans are cherished (Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011; Tylor, 2017; Sarkar, 2017). Therefore, the human–nonhuman interrelations should "celebrate the interdependence, agency, and community—not only of humans, but of humans, animals, and the environment" (Taylor, 2017, p. 145). This inclusion of nonhumans/nature within human/culture discourse that will help in the formation of a "relational community" will not only delink the connection established between nonhumans and disabled human Others on the basis of their vulnerability and dependence, but will also question the "normalcy" of human rationality and anthropocentric reasons that have excluded disabled humans and nonhumans/nature for their supposed inferiority (Nocella II et al., 2017, p. xxii). Thus, the perception of physical/psychological differences of both certain human groups and nonhumans as part of human community is crucial in dismantling the dichotomies constructed along physical/ psychological ability, race, class, and sexuality among others.

Again, the anthropocentric perception of human/nature binary is central to environmental studies' understanding of neoliberal development and globalization marked by deforestation, climate change and ecological disasters (Plumwood, 1994; Arnold and Guha, 1995). Thus, the importance of incorporating nature/nonhumans into the human culture and the development of a new "environmental culture" that should dissolve "the nature/culture and

reason/nature dualisms that split mind from body, reason from emotion, across their many domains of cultural influence" is regarded as essential in challenging the process of Othering (Plumwood, 1994). Ecocriticism, or environment related cultural studies (Heise 2008), also imagines such "global" and "pluralist" communities, inclusive of both local and international spaces and their humans, nonhumans and animals (Roos and Hunt, 2010; Thomashow, 2002). However, in the age of neoliberal development the connection between spaces should be recalibrated as global intervention, masquerading as assistance, can exploit local resources and bring about ecological disaster (Evanoff, 2011). In this context, the research explores the dynamics of animality and humanity along the matrix of local–global/international spatial relations since animality/humanity dualism, commissioned by material and environmental conditions, such as poverty, disability, and industrial disasters, are played out across spaces, and such binary constructs, in turn, as the research will argue, determine human's relations with local and global spaces, their humans and nonhumans. Building on bioregional perception of human interrelation with local and global spaces the research will show the way the animal/human ambiguous identity is understood through local/global spatial distinctions and that an association with the protagonist's local place, its humans, nonhumans, nature and material and environmental situations offers an agentic identity that is inclusive of humanity and animality.

Bioregionalism, as a major branch of environmental studies that came to the prominence in the 1970s, perceives a place or region through an understanding of human relationship with society, culture, environment, nonhumans, and other life forms (Lynch et al., 2012). Moreover, the concept of "reinhabitation" is central to bioregional perception of places that have been damaged through environmental pillage and disasters. Thus, for humans, it is crucial, according to Berg and Dasmann (2003), to remain "fully alive in and with a place", which "means understanding activities and evolving social behavior that will enrich the life of that place, restore its life-supporting systems, and establish an ecologically and socially sustainable pattern of existence within it" (p. 232). In other words, becoming conscious of more-than-humans, environment and other life-forms of a place not only aids in the place's re-inhabitation but also concretizes human's ecological connections to the place. Therefore, bioregionalism on the one hand appraises natural, social, and cultural elements of a region, and defines, on the other, human identity as native inhabitants of the place, which can also be termed as a bioregion (Sarkar, 2017). Again. in the age of globalization and development, where the power of decision making remains in the hands of a few powerful, bioregionalism imagines an economic model that incorporates local people, their community, and their ecological experiences to develop policy on sustainable development of a place as the following shows:

> Under the present system local communities have become alienated from the decision-making process being conducted in what many have to come regard as self-serving world policy-making bodies and inefficient global institutions. […] The bioregional contention is that local problems can be dealt with more effectively at the local level by decentralizing decision-making authority and by protecting and extending local community rights. […] In a democratic global order, local communities would retain both the right to information about projects that will have a direct or indirect effect on them and the right to prior consent, meaning that no projects or activities can be carried out without the agreement of the local communities they will affect. (Evanoff, 2011, p. 194)

Thus, bioregional ethics aims to create a global system that is not only inclusive of the local community but also accepts independency of local individuals in decision-making and their agentic participation in local development projects. In this context, the way the agency of the

local people, who are treated as objects, in the local project of development in the form of running chemical factories in the city of Khaufpur is disregarded for the interest of local government elites and a global private company will be elucidated in the following section on the effect of environmental disasters on certain human groups in creating a local (deformed humans as animals)/global (elite humans) boundary.

2. Deformity as a Local Condition: The Disabled Others of the Local and the Global Objectification

The objectification of the residents of the city of Khaufpur and the victims of the gas disaster is sardonically narrated in the very beginning of Indra Sinha's 2007 novel *Animals' People*, where the protagonist, who is simply called Animal throughout the narrative, highlights the penchant of the West to represent the victims from the East in the lights of pity and exoticization:

> [T]his is what you had come for. 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. […] You have turned us Khaufpuris into storytellers, but always of the same story. Our raat, […] that night […]
>
> Your eyes full of eyes. Thousands staring at me through the holes in your head.
>
> Their curiosity feels like acid on my skin. […]
>
> What can I say that they will understand? have these thousands of eyes slept even one night in a place like this? […] When was the last time these eyes had nothing to eat? […] [W]hat do they know of our lives? (Sinha, 2007, p. 5–8)

Thus, the protagonist's questioning of the ethicality of representing the victims of the environmental disaster as objects of pity to the global market is grounded in his perception of a spatial boundary established between the West and the East that has not been traversed. Again, such representation of the disaster as an 'exotic' event and its victims as objects often aids in the marketing of their image as "commodity" (Huggan, 2016, p. 20). In this process, a distinction between "ours" and "theirs" is projected upon spaces, and therefore, spatial boundaries such as between a "familiar space" and an "unfamiliar" one is created (Said, 1995, p. 54). Therefore, Khaufpur as an exotic space of environmental disaster remains an unfamiliar space to the West, although its residents, their life as victims of the gas disaster, their poverty as well as physical deformity are commercialized in international representation.

Although recording the story of the night of the gas tragedy in exchange of money and representing it before the Western audience has enabled the victims to sustain their livelihood in the aftermath of the tragedy (Sinha, 2007, 3–13), their exoticisation as objects has rendered them as human Others that has also prevented their inclusion into and acceptance in society. As a participant in the process of objectification in narrating his story to the western audience in exchange of money, the protagonist Animal dramatically portrays his physical disability and unusual behaviour to heighten his inclination towards wildness. The habits of eating his own dead skin from his feet in hunger (Sinha 2007, p. 13), biting people and tasting their blood (Sinha, 2007, p. 15), and fighting with dogs for food from trash bins (Sinha, 2007, p. 17) have been sarcastically emphasized as if to "showcase abnormality" (Johnson, 2020, p. 61) in the name of animality. Animal's continuous assertion of being "a four-foot animal" (p. 38) throughout the narrative, nonetheless, is also rooted in his feelings of failure to identity with fellow human beings who exert cruelty on the disabled as objects without agency (Sinha, 2007, p. 115–6). Thus, if the deformed physicality and associated psychological

trauma, according to Animal, on the one hand, mark the animality in his nature (Sinha, 2007, 87), the existence and expression of his innate human qualities, on the other, such as his trustworthiness (Sinha, 2007, p. 39), feeling emotions like love (Sinha, 2007, p. 44) and lust (Sinha, 2007, p. 45), as well as his eagerness to learn and mastery of foreign languages (Sinha, 2007, p. 36) highlight his ambiguous sense of self reliant upon animality/humanity dualism. The cohabitation of two entities, as Animal imagines, as part of the dualist paradigm, shapes his identity: "From your [Animal's] hips, at the point where your back bends, rises a second you who's straight, stands upright and tall. This second you's there all the time, has been there all along, thinks, speaks and acts, but it's invisible" (Sinha, 2007, p. 139).

However, this ambiguity over animality and humanness, according to Animal, is a common condition for all the residents of Khaufpur, who are termed as Animal's people (Sinha, 2007, 183), as the ecological imbalance has affected the health and the sense of belonging of all the victims as the following shows:

> Ever since that night the Kampani's factory has been locked up and abandoned. No one goes there, […] It's a shunned place. […] Listen, how quiet it's. No bird song. No hoppers in the grass. No bee hum. 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. […]
>
> Sometimes moving through the jungle I'd get dizzy and feel a sharp metallic taste on my tongue, those were regions to avoid. […]
>
> Our wells are full of poison. It's in the soil, water, in our blood, it's in our milk. Everything here is poisoned (Sinha, 2007, p. 29–108).

Therefore, the industrial disaster has destructed the local region with toxicity that affects humans, nonhumans, animals and other living organisms in similar ways and therefore, creates a "vulnerable society" with environmental threats (Alaimo, 2010 qtd in Sarkar, 2017, p. 66). These people are the major victims of "slow violence […] that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Moreover, in such toxic environments, human and nonhuman bodies appear as "toxic bodies" (Alaimo, 2010), and therefore, the disability of Animal and other residents of the locality can be perceived as part of the chemically polluted environment as human bodies can bear engravings of environmental forces (Tuana, 2007). Moreover, these people's "administered invisibility" from the consideration of the local government (Nixon, 2011, p. 150–51) in offering them aid and justice heightens the crisis of their exploitation as objects and exclusion from local decision-making processes. Such exclusion and exploitation have Othered the victims of the tragedy, occasionally referred as "people of the abyss" (Sinha, 2007, p. 205), and, as a result, rendered the state and global/international aid attempts as untrustworthy to the residents of Khaufpur. Thus, the American doctor's attempts to settle in Khaufpur and open a free health laboratory to help the local people is met with suspicion and disbelief (Sinha, 2007, p. 183). The conspiracy theory that the American company responsible for the gas disaster aims to conduct a health survey through the free clinic to deny the allegations that "for twenty years their [the victims'] health's been ruined by […] [the company's] poisons" (Sinha, 2007, 69) further widens the chasm between the East and the West, an apparently unbridgeable gap of understanding, cooperation and trust. Therefore, while the local space of Khaufpur stands for non-agentic deformed humans perceived as objects or the "people of the Apokalis (sic)" (p. 206), the international/global space represents agentic elite human subjects who decide on the fate of the objects in the regions like Khaufpur. Nonetheless, the way the spatial distinctions and ensuing dualism between

humans and human Other/nonhumans/animals is resolved through a local bioregional alternative approach will be elucidated in the following section on developing a culture based on nature-culture cohabitation.

3. The Local Bioregional Ethical Place and Nature-Culture Cohabitation

The bioregional alternative to neoliberal globalization aims to focus on local development only for local people and the "decentralization of both political and economic power in the interests of non-elites" (Evanoff, 2011, p. 180-193). The way the decentralization of power from the hand of elites contributes to the formation of agency of disabled humans will be explained in the following para on Animal's agentic participation in the local development project.

Although Animal as a human Other from "the kingdom of the poor" (Sinha, 2007, p. 174) remains outside the political decision-making process on how to use the local land and its resources, the city with all its filth, poverty, damaged environment and diseases reminds Animal of his correlation to local environment, humans and nonhumans:

> Endless the way home is, there's moonlight on the ground, splashed all over, making familiar ways strange, it's glittering in the gutters, washing over small unlovely things, transforming them into precious objects. […]
>
> How well I know this city's zameen, its ground […] this is my home earth, discarded things are my city's treasure. (Sinha, 2007, p. 272)

Despite the gas tragedy that crippled many residents, Animal finds a sense of rootedness to Khaufpur which enables him to identify it as his home. Moreover, being a member of the human Others that are exploited and excluded from decision-making processes for local developments such as whether to allow a chemical plant installation in the locality, he can feel empathy for the Others in the city and finds his relation to living and non-living entities. Thus, his inclusion into the local support group for the gas victims as an active member, who runs errands to help the Others, offers him an agentic sense of belonging in the city of Khaufpur. Moreover, the sense of betrayal and despair, inflicted by both the international chemical company responsible for the tragedy and the local government elites, connects Animal with the poor disabled victims and enables them develop a local community based on a sense of Otherness. The protest organized by the local groups of victims against the local government's failure to prosecute the company, therefore, is viewed by Animal as the demand of the local community, who has the power of "nothingness" for their rights: "the power of nothing is unleashed, […]it will destroy what it touches because it is fuelled not just by anger but despair" (Sinha, 2007, p. 310). However, it is important to consider that while bioregional ethics intends to focus on the local self-sufficiency, it does not exclude global/ international help that aids in the local support (Sachs 337; Evanoff, 2011, p. 148). Therefore, although the humanitarian project of offering free medical facilities by the American doctor receives initial backlash, her intention to clean the city and thus to aid in the reclamation of their bioregion is perceived as an attempt to deconstruct the local (deformed humans)/global (elite humans) binary: "'Hardly surprising they are ill'[…]Look at this filth, litter and plastic all over, open drains stinking right outside the houses. Flies. Every bit of waste ground is used as a latrine, I've [the doctor has] seen people defecating on the railway lines. […] Organise people into teams to pick up the litter. Bring in pipes, water taps, build proper latrines…'" (Sinha, 2007, p. 105). This local community, therefore, is configured through cutting across local and global spaces where decisions and actions are governed not by the handful of international and local elites but by the residents of the region who inhabit the place and have been affected by its environmental destruction.

In such a local community, a culture is established which is inclusive of all human and nonhuman groups and various other entities. Such development of a local bioregional community based on nature-culture cohabitation not only absolves binaries positioned between nature and culture/humans but also questions what is considered normal in society. In other words, the processes and conditions through which "inclusive communities" can be reconfigured and "ecological diversity" is maintained should be envisaged to "challenge and interrupt perceptions of hegemonic *normalcy* and contest ableism." (Lupinacci J. and Lupinacci M., 2017, p. 64; emphasis original). Therefore, a community-based identity resolves Animal's ambiguous identity between his humanness and animality. His inability to kill and eat animals in hunger even in his stupor from overconsumption of Datura in his suicide attempt and his acceptance of his physicality signifies a shift in his attitude in perceiving himself as both human and nonhuman: "My nose discerns only the scent of parched earth, my only fellow beings are these silent sufferers rooted in dust waiting for rain "(Sinha, 2007, p. 343). Thus, when the local government elites are made to negotiate with the victims' support group and to allow them to draw an action plan to prosecute the company in the face of a mass protest and riot (Sinha, 2007, p. 356), Animal accepts his disability and decides to re-inhabit the place:

> See Eyes, I reckon that if I have this operation, I will be upright, true, but to walk I will need the help of sticks. I might have a wheelchair, but how far will that get me in the gullis of Khaufpur? 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 […]
>
> 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).

While previously Animal was intent on curing his disability to the extent that he even decided to side with the Company in receiving free treatment (Sinha, 2007, p. 137), his identification with the humans and nonhumans of his locality after his agentic participation in the local decision-making process provides him with an understanding of the necessity of developing a bioregional ethical place that includes all human and nonhuman entities in formulating an alternative culture. Such an alternative culture offers Animal a sense of place in the local place and an agentic identity, resolving the dualism between humanity and animality and their spatial distinctions. Although global intervention in the form of health treatment and genuine assistance is regarded beneficial, the bioregional ethical place of Khaufpur accentuates the interrelations between humans, nonhumans/animals/nature played across local space, which is both connected to and dissociated from global/international places and allows an agentic and inclusive human–nonhuman sense of belonging in the region.

4. Conclusion

This research has explored the dualisms between humans and nonhumans/nature/ disabled human Others through the lens of local-global/international spatial politics and has exemplified the way animal/human ambiguous sense of place of the disabled protagonist Animal is mediated by his spatial relations. The article has further shown the way developing an interrelation with local humans, nonhumans and nature in formulating a local community offers an agentic sense of belonging in a bioregional ethical place that ensures agentic participation of all inhabitants in the regional development process. In such a local community, as the article has argued, spatial distinctions and associated dualisms in identity

politics such as local (deformed humans as animals)/global (elite humans) are resolved in sanctioning an inclusive human–nonhuman sense of belonging in the region.

In sum, the study makes a significant contribution to disabled identity politics and their spatial relations in the context of environmental disaster and Othering of humans, nonhumans and nature, denying human dependency on and correlations to human Others/nonhumans/nature. Building on both critical disability studies' understanding of linking animality with disability and bioregional ethical perception of human interrelation with local and global spaces, this article has accentuated the traits of identity as fluid and communal across spaces.

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