



## Where is De-human? Reconfiguring ‘human-ness’ in *Animal’s People*

Sowmya Vaidyanathan, Environmental Activist, Masters Student, Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Pennsylvania, United States.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1560-6083>

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.12628378

### Abstract

Written in the wake of what Lawrence Buell refers to as ‘toxic discourse’, Indira Sinha’s *Animal’s People* deals with the anxiety of living in a poisoned world. The inhabitants of Khaufpur—the disaster zone in the novel—or the victims of the apocalypse have been irreversibly altered to varying degrees to the point of losing their individual ‘human’ identity. I argue that this loss of humanness operates on two different levels. The first is through the slip into a largely unclassifiable ‘nonhuman-ness’, as seen in individual characters in both novels. The second is seen through the creation of ecological ‘collectives’ that bind humans and non-humans—communities that Sinha refers to as ‘people of the Apokalis’. With this in mind, this paper questions what makes the inhabitants of Khaufpur non-human, and posits that while the slip into the nonhuman is constantly in flux as a result of the apocalypse and its aftermath, the status of the ‘people’ in the zone is a more stable category because of the way it defines itself based on these entanglements, rather than the ‘species’ identity of its constituents.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, De-human, Reconfiguration, Human-ness, Indra Sinha, *Animal’s People*.

### Introduction

What does it mean to be human in the Anthropocene, when the end of the world has already occurred? Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2007) is heavily invested in this question. The novel operates under the framework that ideas of “the end” are deeply entangled with the Anthropocene—the epoch where human actions have significantly impacted the earth’s climate (Crutzen 480). However, in the process of controlling nature, human activity destroys the environment, and in turn, the human being itself. Against the larger backdrop of the perils of human influence on the environment, *Animal’s People* explores the vulnerability of human beings in an environment that seeks to strip away both their humanity and their humanness.

Something is unsettling about the Anthropocene in the text. While it is supposed to be “the age of humans”, the human-made disaster created by a factory explosion—a reference to the Bhopal Gas Tragedy—creates a zone that destabilises humans through exposure to toxic contaminants in the environment. In other words, the Anthropocene in *Animal’s People* is de-humanising (I deliberately write ‘de-humanisation’ with a hyphen to separate it from the word ‘dehumanisation’. The latter refers to a “deprivation of human characters and attributes” (OED) that is a result of acts of cruelty arising from the view that another person is ‘less than human’, the word de-humanisation looks at how ‘humanness’ can be removed from the human being.); there is simultaneously an expansion of human power over the non-human, and a contraction in who falls under the category of “human”. Here, the ‘humanness’ in question is one’s physical or psychic characteristics that define their identity as a ‘human



being'. Through the de-humanising potential of Khaufpur, *Animal's People* explores how the boundary between the 'human' and the 'non-human' is destabilised in the Anthropocene. The removal of these human attributes through de-humanisation, while painful and often unsettling, isn't necessarily accompanied by a narrative of loss. Instead, the text—rather than taking away the agency of a being—seeks to reconfigure the category of the human being altogether. Here, it moves towards a system wherein the beings within the zone are moulded into a larger 'multispecies' collective—or, borrowing from Donna Haraway's terminology, an assemblage of "odd kin" (Haraway 2).

### **Toxic Materialities**

*Animal's People* is invested in the idea of de-humanisation arising out of exposure to toxic material. In the aftermath of an explosion that takes place in a factory close to Khaufpur, toxic chemicals leech into the town's soil and waterways, afflicting the town residents with various illnesses. This kind of poisoning that slowly accumulates into the bodies of the Khaufpuris can be best described by what Rob Nixon refers to as "slow violence", which is a kind of suffering that is spread out over time and space with no definitive point of impact (Nixon 30). It is difficult to recognise because the violence is often "out of sight" but its effects are gradually felt (2). The inability to see this kind of environmental damage makes it all the more powerful and dangerous, as experienced in Khaufpur, where the invisible violence makes it nearly impossible for the Khaufpuris to receive justice.

The extended effects of the poison are dehumanising, as seen through the ways Khaufpur residents are denied clean water, air, medical care, or justice for the explosion (referred to in the novel as the 'Night'). Through the ignored plight of the survivors and the injustices faced at every level from the legal to the environmental, one sees the denial of parameters necessary to a life fit for a 'human'. At the same time, the experience of being a victim of Khaufpur's slow violence is also de-humanising, wherein the toxic environment, through the changes it produces within its subjects, is capable of stripping them of their humanness. For some, this change isn't directly physical. For instance, Ma Franci is afflicted with aphasia after the Night, which makes her lose a large portion of her memory and her ability to communicate. Before the explosion, she was able to converse in English, French, Hindi, and Khaufpuri. However, her aphasia makes her lose the ability to speak in any of these languages, and she is left with only a garbled amalgamation of the languages and the life she used to live. She is rendered mentally handicapped, but refuses to allow this change to strip her agency away; she chooses to live alone and still acts as a guide to Animal.

### **De-Humanized Bodies**

While non-physical changes produce de-humanised subjects that still 'appear' human, the stripping of humanness becomes visible when it produces a physical change in the body. Animal is an example of this. After being exposed to the Kampani factory explosion, he begins experiencing debilitating pain in his spine and he is forced to walk on all fours like an animal. After coming in contact with the toxic fumes, he loses his ability to stand upright. This physical change takes away his humanness, in his and the rest of Khaufpur's eyes. Animal's non-human status remains unspecified and vague throughout the novel. While he categorically denies being categorised as a human, he refuses to classify himself as anything other than an 'Animal', which is both his status and his name. He sees himself as a non-human creature unlike any other. Early on, Animal tells the reader his mantra; "My name is Animal. I'm not a human being, I've no desire to be one." (Sinha 23). This mantra is particularly striking, for his name in itself is not his official name, but a nickname that stuck



as a result of cruel insults by children in the orphanage. His real name has been long forgotten, even by the nuns in the orphanage he grew up in. Animal's name contains a paradox. It reveals exactly who he is—an animal, set apart from human beings. At the same time, the name Animal in itself resists any kind of stable categorisation. 'Animal' is an ambiguous word, as well as a taxonomical term that contains nearly nine million species—none of which can classify Animal.

Animal thus attempts to define himself by negating other species categories. He is often confronted with the question of what kind of animal he is, to which he doesn't ever have a definitive answer. While looking through a book of animals of India, he notices that the book, "in all of its hundreds of pages and pictures", has no animal that is just like him (223). Furthermore, he changes the idea of what species he is when it benefits him. When jokingly antagonising his friends, he claims that he is "not a cat, or a dog like Jara, nor camel, goat, leopard, bear etc" (208). When he is spying on Elli, an American doctor who sets up a free clinic in Khaufpur, he calls himself a "bat-eared ape that climbs only in the dark of night" (208). While these moments in the novel are meant to be humorous, they point to an important aspect of Animal's species status, which is that while he is decidedly not a human, he cannot definitively say what he is. The only thing that he knows for certain is that he is 'one of a kind'. Animal retains this idea of wanting to be unique even to the end of the novel when he realises that he no longer wishes to be an "upright" human; "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" (366). This sentence marks a shift in Animal's perspective, from straddling the blurred line between the human and the non-human, to using his situatedness as a de-humanised subject to transcend the category of the human altogether. Thus, Animal shifts from being an unclassifiable 'animal', to Animal: a species of his own that resists being categorised as anything else.

The corporeal changes in the people of Khaufpur because of the events of the Night reveal the links between illness, disability, and de-humanization. In her chapter on deviant agents and environmental illnesses, Alaimo writes that "the chemically reactive manifest a corporeality that is always already trans-corporeal, as they help us to envision the invisible movement of xenobiotic substances across human bodies and more-than-human nature" (Alaimo, 125). In *Animal's People*, one can view the idea of "chemically reactive" through Alaimo's idea of Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS), which is a condition "in which exposure to "normal" twenty-first-century environments and substances causes a range of reactions, including rashes, tremors, convulsions, breathing difficulties, headaches, dizziness, nausea, joint pain, "brain fog," and extreme fatigue" (114). Although Khaufpur is far from a normal twenty-first-century environment, the ailments of the Khaufpur residents fall under the bracket of MCS, because of the toxins that enter their bodies daily in Khaufpur.

A moment in the text which stresses this kind of relationship is when Animal, while "jamisponding" (i.e spying on other people), comes across a poor breastfeeding woman in a place called Paradise Alley. This woman, who is being treated by doctors, keeps shooting spurts of pale breastmilk into the ground below her. When asked why she responds that she "won't feed [her] kid poison" (Sinha 107). To this, an old woman appears "out of the shadows", and informs the doctors that "We have looked upon the milke and it semeth to muche thinne and watry. Plus it enclyneth to reddenesse, which is unnaturall and euill. Likewyse, it tasteth bitter, ye may well perceyue it is unwholesome" (107). The old woman is likely a relative of the sick breastfeeding mother, who speaks in a faraway, ancient dialect resembling Middle English, warning the doctors about the younger woman's condition. In



this description of her milk, the words "unnatural" and "evil" stand out. The unnaturalness of the milk, along with the image of the woman shooting the milk into the ground reduces the clearly ill woman to something monstrous, abject, and non-human.

Moreover, the mother is aware of why her illness exists. To Elli, she says; "Our wells are full of poison. It's in the soil, water, in our blood, it's in our milk. Everything here is poisoned. If you stay here long enough, you will be too" (108). Here the woman's body is poisoned by the ground below her and the water she drinks, which de-humanizes her. She then feeds the same milk to her baby, and sends it back into the earth, effectively poisoning her future too. This moment reveals a strange kind of transcorporeality, wherein the body, the environment, and toxicity, are violently entangled together (Alaimo 3).

### **De-Humanized Dead**

*Animal's People* also looks at how de-humanization isn't just a problem of the living, through the character of Kha-in-the-Jar, a fetus that Animal sees and befriends in a doctor's office. Kha is a fascinating toxic de-humanized subject. While he is described as a "monster" by Animal, he's also referred to as "kha", which is the Khaufpuri term for brother (57). Kha is kept in a jar, and pointed out to Animal by a doctor who says that he is one of the many babies who was aborted after the Night, because of the strange modifications that the toxic chemicals produced. Although Kha technically never 'lived', he too has been de-humanized by the poison. This idea of the 'non-living' 'being de-humanized can be read in Mel Chen's writing on toxicity. She writes that 'toxicity straddles boundaries of "life" and "nonlife", as well as the literal bounds of bodies, in ways that introduce a certain complexity to the presumption of integrity of either lifely or deathly subjects' (Chen, 279). The toxicity that produced Kha is the same factor that prevented his birth, and his subsequent humanity. As a result of the toxic fumes in Khaufpur, Kha developed 'monstrosities' 'in vitro, and is presumed to be a non-human before his birth. In other words, his suspected monstrosities are what lead to his 'non life'. However, he is given a dignified 'non-life', where he occupies a position on the "Board of Poisoned Children", which consists of many other children who never lived as a result of the Night, referred to as the "children of poison" (59). Kha, along with the rest of the board, often advises Animal, and Kha (and his jar) are one of the very few things that survive the fire that is set to the building that he's in, towards the end of the book. Thus, despite his de-humanization, Kha still occupies a very real space in the zone of Khaufpur.

Unborn fetuses such as Kha and the Board of Poisoned Children, along with Animal, Pandit Somraj, Ma Franci, and the rest of Khaufpur are all a part of a multispecies ecological collective that the novel refers to as 'People of the Apokalis'. It needs to be noted that when the word 'people' is used, it doesn't necessarily just mean human beings. The phrase first makes an appearance in a vision of half human half animal 'people' that Animal hallucinates upon poisoning himself. However, the term could apply to anyone who was affected by the tragedy in Khaufpur. This kind of community is similar to what Michael Edelstein proposes in *Contaminated Communities*, where he defines the term as any residential area located within or proximate to the identified boundaries for a known exposure to pollution (Edelstein, 22), and the {discovery of a toxic threat [that] provides a basis for a new and shared identity that effectively defines a community" (22). Even if they don't share the same 'environment', whether that is geographical, social, or political, the very process of being entangled in toxicity is what holds the community together. Individually, the residents of Khaufpur are a heterogeneous group all at different stages of de-humanization, but together this distinction



doesn't matter as the 'People of the Apokalis' don't privilege the human over any other species.

### **Conclusion, or Overcoming De-Humanization**

The residents of Khaufpur are all a part of a multispecies ecological collective that the novel refers to as 'People of the Apokalis'. This is similar to what Michael Edelstein proposes in *Contaminated Communities*, where he defines the term as any residential area located within or proximate to the identified boundaries for a known exposure to pollution (Edelstein, 22), and the "discovery of a toxic threat [that] provides a basis for a new and shared identity that effectively defines a community" (22). Even if they don't share the same geographical, social or political 'environment', they are held together by being entangled in Khaufpur's toxic landscape. In other words, while the residents of Khaufpur are a heterogeneous group all at different stages of de-humanisation, together they form the 'people of the Apokalis', which doesn't privilege humans over any other species.

In Charles Darwin's famous last paragraph from *On the Origin of Species*, he describes a "tangled bank", where life forms "so different from each other, depend on each other in so complex a manner" (Darwin 452). An eerily similar image is found in *Animal's People*. Towards the end of the novel, Animal swallows capsules of poison and has strange, realistic dreams. In this haze, he imagines an afterlife for himself that he refers to as "paradise" (Sinha 351). In this vision, he sees "animals of every kind", as well as small figures who "are neither men nor animals, or else they are both" (352). In this dream, Animal feels as though he's found his 'home'. He describes this paradise as a place in "the deep time when there was no difference between anything when separation did not exist when all things were together, one and whole before humans set themselves apart" (352). Here, he is drawn to this entangled space, where nothing sets apart the human from any other species, and where the idea of 'species' itself is put in flux. Animal in the real world stands out because of his inability to categorise himself, however, in this vision of Paradise, these categories no longer matter.

Bruno Latour in *Love Your Monsters* writes about the "process of becoming ever-more attached to and intimate with a range of non-human natures" (Latour 20). The only way to survive in the 'bank', sacrifice zone or not, is to become entangled in it—i.e. make 'kin' across species boundaries. This idea of kin-making invokes Donna Haraway's conception of the *Chthulucene*, which is an era that occurs in the wake of the disasters created by the Anthropocene, where the remaining few 'earthlings' stick together in "mixed assemblages" (Haraway 103). According to her, the Chthulucene "entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities—in assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as humus" (116). The entanglement of entities into mixed assemblages rings true in *Animal's People*. In a 2007 article published by The Guardian titled "Bhopal: A Novel Quest for Justice", Indra Sinha writes about how the depiction of Khaufpur goes beyond the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. He writes; "Khaufpur is every place in which people have been poisoned and then abandoned. It could be Seveso, Halabja, Minamata, Caracas or Sao Paulo" (Sinha). The ambiguity in Khaufpur's location is reminiscent of the novel's very last lines; "We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us" (Sinha 403). Here, the emphasis on the collective pronoun conceives a kind of community created in 'mixed assemblages' as well as a grim reminder of the effects of the Anthropocene.

The question of what it means to be a human being after the end of the world is both difficult to answer and central to the Anthropocene. *Animal's People* attempts to answer this



question by reconfiguring humanness altogether and shifting the power that a human occupies in a dynamic space. It conceives of spaces such as Khaufpuras zones that produce a collective ecological identity—an assemblage of odds—rather than focus on the individual, to deal with the trouble that comes from de-humanisation. It asks, at the very least, to acknowledge ways of being in the world outside of the human.

### References

- [1] Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010.
- [2] Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- [3] Buell, Lawrence. *Toxic Discourse*. *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1998, pp. 639–665.
- [4] Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. *Natural History Museum*, 2019.
- [5] Crutzen, Paul J. and Stoermer, Eugene F.. ““The ‘Anthropocene’” (2000)”. *The Future of Nature: Documents of Global Change*, edited by Libby Robin, Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, pp. 479-490. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300188479-041>
- [6] Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- [7] Edelstein, Michael R. *Contaminated Communities: Psychosocial Impacts from the Contamination of Home and Place*. Routledge, 2018.
- [8] Latour, Bruno. “Love Your Monsters”. *Breakthrough Journal*, 2.11 (2011): 21-2
- [9] Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- [10] Sinha, Indra. *Animal's People: A Novel*. Simon and Schuster, 2009
- [11] Sinha, Indra. *Bhopal: A Novel Quest for Justice*. *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 10 Oct. 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/oct/10/india-bhopal>.

**Author (s) Contribution Statement:** Nil

**Author (s) Acknowledgement:** Nil

**Author (s) Declaration:** I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



The content of the article is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.