

The Challenges of Environmental Justice in Global Literature

On December 3rd 1984 in Bhopal, India, 40 tons of methyl isocyanate gas leaked from the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) pesticide plant. The deadly leakage killed at least 3,800 people overnight and caused a tumultuous aftermath of long-term health concerns to the more than 600,000 people exposed (Broughton, 1). Some of the long-term health effects caused to the people exposed to the gas leakage that transition from early into late effects include: premature death, increased pregnancy loss, chronic conjunctivitis, increased chromosomal abnormalities and restrictive airway disease (Broughton, 2). Numerous articles and books have been written about the Bhopal gas tragedy, however, none but one have taken it upon themselves to challenge this anthropogenic hazard in an insightful, yet provocative manner. “You were making poisons to kill insects, but you killed us instead. I would like to ask, was there ever much difference, to you?” (Sinha, 306).

The fictional novel, *Animal's People* by the author Indra Sinha revisits the physiological and environmental effects of the Bhopal chemical disaster. Sinha accomplishes this through a series of characters by indirectly referring to the night of the disaster as *ous raat*—that night and the UCIL as *kampani*. The main character, Animal, narrates the storyline of the novel as he explores and rejects the idea of humanity. As a baby left behind in the city of Khaufpur (Bhopal), Animal becomes a victim of *ous raat* and develops severe physiological damage to his spine which in turn forces him to walk on all fours. As a result of his body dysmorphia and bullying he considers himself an Animal, therefore it is why his name falls short of sounding human-like. Animal narrates his journey of humanity and self-discovery as he and two other key characters, known as Zafar (a peaceful protestor) and Elli Barber (an American doctor), fight for the delayed compensation of the damages made by the chemical disaster that affected the citizens of

Khaufpur. Thus, Sinha utilizes the Bhopal chemical disaster in his novel to raise awareness on the challenges that arise with a common phenomenon found in global environmental literature, environmental justice. Through the novel, *Animal's People*, Sinha shows readers the challenges that environmental movements face through his three characters, Animal, Zafar, and Elli. The challenges Sinha addresses in his novel regarding environmental movements include, the visibility of the affected communities in written and mediated works, class, situations and circumstances of poverty, scientific resources, cultural and discriminate power structures, and foreign saviors.

Throughout the novel, *Animal* explores what it means to be human and in his exploration finds that to be human means to care and advocate for the unsustainable lives of others. Similarly, through *Animal*, the novel emphasizes the challenges that environmental justice poses through the lack of written and mediated visibility. *Animal's* character also shows how class and poverty can prevent people from obtaining justice. For instance, *Animal* begins the novel by challenging a foreign journalist's expectations by saying, "many books have been written about this place, not one has changed anything for the better, how will yours be different? You will bleat like all the rest. You'll talk of *rights, law, justice*... On that night it was poison, now it's words that are choking us" (Sinha, 3). Undoubtedly, *Animal* has witnessed on many occasions, foreigners attempting to look for the perfect tragic story with no actual benefit to the people affected by the accident. This showcases how the kind of visibility that people get can have an impact on their overall movement. Similarly, it is important to note that despite *Animal's* physiological state, he is mentally aware of the ways in which the citizens of Khaufpur are not being helped but rather taken advantage of. Surely, the damage from the chemical disaster has already been made, however, the justice from the *Kampani* that is denied to the citizens of

Khaufpur remains lingering . The article, *Animal's Eyes: Spectacular Invisibility and the Terms of Recognition in Indra Sinha's Animal's People* by Andrew Mahlstedt, points out that “if rights, law, and justice are practically invisible for slum-dwellers like Animal's people, then Sinha's novel addresses this question by connecting justice, rights, and law with visibility, dramatizing the way that spectacular invisibility defines the narrative of the poor, a plight exacerbated under recent globalization” (71). Mahlstedt is pointing out that Sinha is showing the audience that one challenge is the circumstances that the people of Khaufpur face, such as class and thus, poverty, allows for the people of Khaufpur to become invisible. The poor are then stripped from their human rights in their inability to fight against the *kampani*. Likewise, the issue of visibility and poverty only show one of the many challenges posed in the fight for environmental justice and globalization as a whole.

Animal continues on page 185 as he says, “Hope dies in places like this, because hope lives in the future and there’s no future here, how can you think about tomorrow when all your strength is used up in trying to get through today?” (Sinha, 185). It should be noted that Animal is pointing out that in poverty-stricken communities, the people’s lives are guided by the bare necessities of human survival due to their environmental circumstances. The poor do not have the financial resources, another challenge, to plan for a ‘better’ future, they are living preoccupied with the moment of now. Once again, Animal is questioning one of the many environmental justice issues that affect people from gaining justice in the first place, the restrictions of poverty. In the article, *Powers of Zero: Aggregation, Negation, and the Dimensions of Scale in Indra Sinha's Animal's People* by Jesse Taylor, the text states “to aspire for something in this sense is not merely to hope for its occurrence but to hope for it in the context of having some agency in bringing it to pass”. Taylor is mentioning that the idea of hope

to the Khaufpur citizens not only is limited to the monetary compensation of the *kampani* but rather, in also gaining power to fight for the compensation for themselves. Thus, Sinha's novel challenges us to look beyond what is seen with the naked eye, in terms of poverty as an obstruction to obtaining environmental justice, by inviting us to examine what is lurking within the environmental circumstances of the poor as well as their intrinsic motivations.

The novel also offers the audience the stereotypical non-violent protestor, Zafar, in order to show what environmental justice advocates face. Through Zafar's character, the lack of scientific resources, cultural imbalances, representation in the media, and discriminate power dynamics show up as some other challenges environmental movements across the globe face. For instance, as Zafar role plays with the people of Khaufpur on how the *kampani* 'thinks' in regards to Elli's sudden emergence and her free clinic, Zafar says, "To make such arguments you need facts and figures. You need case histories, a health survey. Now do you see?" (69). Not only is Zafar explaining to the audience that in order to establish a legal claim when it comes to protesting, scientific evidence must be presented, but rather that when it comes to scientific evidence, the people of Khaufpur are powerless. As a poverty-stricken community, their lack of quantified resources proves to be a challenge and setback in their fight for environmental justice. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, the author Rob Nixon mentions that, "both the causes and the memory of catastrophe incurred typically pass untallied and unremembered. Such discounting in turn makes it far more difficult to secure effective legal measures for prevention, restitution, and redress" (Nixon, 9). Once more, with the absence of western scientific evidence, the people in the novel lose all affinity from the legal precedents that the American judges present. Additionally, it is critical to note that there is an undermining cultural power imbalance as both the Khaufpuris and the Americans will treat 'evidence' in their

own manners. The *kampani* abuses this rhetoric to the extent in which they use the ‘lack of evidence’ to their advantage in countering any protests filed against them. Thus, by doing so, the *Kampani* is deliberately using this power to reject the people of Khaufpur.

Similarly, Zafar raises another challenge in regards to environmental justice as he says “We are the ones who are asking for justice, let’s not ourselves break the law. Friends, the Khaufpuri media, or some of them, may be sympathetic to us, but in the world the Kampani is powerful. We must be impeccable, or else we make it easy for them to say, ‘these Khaufpuris are terrorists’...” (Sinha, 282). Once more, Zafar shows the audience that premeditated power from the *Kampani*’s media as an intangible discriminate force, can falsify an entire population's identity. Furthermore, the quote also shows that regardless of what country (India or America) the media is corresponding to, it in itself has its own cunning power which can either empower or hamper an environmental movement. Though only touched on lightly, the media in the novel is shown to prove as another realistic setback in the fight for environmental justice. In connection to the portrayal of the environmental protests in the media, Nixon poses a question, “how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody...?” (Nixon, 3). In this question, Nixon argues that the way in which the people are represented in the media poses an immediate indeterminate result of an environmental movement. Through this question, Nixon also reinstates the people of Khaufpur as the ‘star nobody’s. Thus highlighting the transparent unbalanced power dynamic that the Khaufpuris are facing in the resolve for equity from the *Kampani*. Moreover, Sinha embellishes the audience through the character Zafar to understand the counterproductive challenges and forces that arise in environmental movements.

Animal's People offers yet another character, Elli (an American doctor), to show how the foreign savior complex is paradoxical in achieving environmental justice. First, it should be noted that the foreign savior complex is originally known as the white savior complex. The savior complex is when an outsider, typically from a highly developed industrial country, goes to a developing country and offers their aid in a self-fulfilling manner. The character Elli is a reflection of the savior complex as she offers her doctoral expertise to the Khaufpurians which they reject. Elli says, "Take a look. It's not just blacked out streets and killer traffic, people in this city tolerate open sewers, garbage everywhere, poisoned babies... But wait, let someone come along with an open-hearted offer of help, these same citizens can't tolerate it... People in this city must be either blind or mad. I don't get the way Khaufpuris think" (Sinha, 151). This quote offers a glimpse of how Elli and saviors more broadly, view developing countries. Saviors don't see the issues that poverty-stricken communities are living through, but rather the environmental conditions in which these poor citizens are living in. Thus, in their sanctified visualization of what the world should look like, a view coming from their own highly developed country, they fail to understand the existential complicated issue that situates the poor Khaufpurians in the first place, poverty.

In *Animal's Eyes*, when Elli tells another doctor that the way the Khaufpurians are living is not right, Mahlstedt states, "Elli envisions Western-style development as the simple path of resolving the problem of poverty, how she sees is shaped by what she knows already, by her expectations and the unselfconsciously received narratives of poverty and development that pervade the social imaginary of the narrating classes of the globe" (Mahlstedt, 66). Thus, Mahlstedt is echoing the previous sentiment on sanctified views by further adding that this issue is not uncommon, rather it is a global narrative. This narrative of development and class, is an

issue that poses an adverse challenge in global environmental movements. The narrative is embodied from the very same saviors that travel to developing countries to offer superficial aid that only vaguely medicates the issue of poverty by providing medical assistance or educational institutions, but fails to eradicate this global issue. As Elli continues in her frustration of why the Khaufpuris refuse her help, Animal responds, “‘Don’t be angry with the poor,’ says I. ‘Since when did they have power to change anything’” (Sinha, 151). This quote shows how the Khaufpurian’s involuntary living conditions prove to be a setback in protesting for their human rights. Moreover, Animal point-blank re-iterates the ignorance that hinders Elli’s preconceived vision from seeing the true issue, the issue of the conditions that poverty perpetuates. Therefore, the savior complex that Elli embodies is once more a challenge when it comes to environmental justice.

In *Powers of Zero*, Taylor says that “Elli's outsider status is crucial, both because of her specialized knowledge and because of the perspective she brings (she is, after all, the only character for whom "Amrika" is an actual place rather than a dark fantasy). And yet, she cannot remain outside the situation if she hopes to be effective” (Taylor). This quote shows how Elli, as a character in the novel, is important because she, like all saviors, is not resolving the Khaufpurian’s complicated issues. On top of this, the incorporation of Elli’s character in the novel shows that her specialized education and knowledge of a language means nothing when it comes to resolving the issues of another country. This is so because the boundaries of culture are preventing any sort of understanding between her and the people of Khaufpur. Thus, environmental justice cannot be solved by the foreign saviors but rather it must be proved from within the communities themselves. The novel’s use of Elli’s character as a savior is to show that knowledge and education alone could not resolve the issue of poverty. As well as that the

methods that saviors bring from another country could not resolve these environmental movements, rather, a blend of methods from these countries must be made.

Thus, the novel in its entirety, teaches three main ideas in global environmental literature that deal with the challenges of environmental justice. The first, is that the long-term health effects of anthropogenic disasters are still affecting people long after the incident and are irreversible, thus it is important for us to familiarize ourselves with these issues if we are to brand ourselves as educated global citizens of the world. Moreover, global environmental literature is a way of understanding these anthropogenic realities so as to help us think critically about the consequences of our actions. Secondly, environmental justice is not only concerning itself with the people directly affected by a disaster, but rather that it is a reflection of the way global humanity deals with these concerns. Environmental literature emphasizes that humanity must keep humans in their environmental protection plans in the same high level of regard as the species of Animals and plants. Third, the novel challenges the idea of monetary compensation as the only direct solution to the people afflicted by the chemical disaster. Rather Sinha, like many other environmental literature authors, invites us to re-examine the circumstances that money can never buy back. That is: health, happiness, and love. Sinha's *Animal's People* does not offer any solutions to the issues of environmental literature as he ends his novel with, "All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us" (Sinha, 366).

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