

Animal's People as a Neoliberal Picaresque

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Abstract

The picaresque novel has its roots in late 16th Century Spain when the conquest of the Americas brought in unimaginable amount of wealth to the Spanish ruling classes whereas a vast majority of the people lived a life of poverty and squalor. Regarded as the starting point of modern Realism, the picaresque novel juxtaposed the oppression, hunger and violence of poverty with the opulent lifestyles of the rich. The picaro figure in his ribald street argot contrasted the petty crimes which the poor committed for their survival with the far graver crimes of the rich from which they were structurally exonerated. This paper will analyse how Indra Sinha's picaro in his novel *Animal's People* (2007) although situated in a different time and place in human history (India in contemporary times,) similarly exposes how the neoliberal political economy under globalisation perpetuates a system of inequity in developing countries. It will further investigate how he transcends his role as a traditional picaro to suggest restorative remedies and deliberates on the problems involved in such depictions and critiques of poverty in developing nations.

Keywords: Neoliberal, Picaresque, Satire, Bhopal, Orientalism.

“Don't you see, my poor little Animal, the Apokalis has already begun? It started on that night in Khaufpur.” (63 Sinha)

What is interesting about the above quote from Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007), a novel that commemorates the Bhopal Gas tragedy by fictionalizing the historical disaster and its aftermath, is its two possible interpretations based on the different meanings of the word 'apocalypse'- 'total destruction', and in religious connotations, 'a prophetic revelation'. With the first meaning, the quote can be interpreted as straightforwardly referring to the night of 2nd December 1984 when the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, fictionalized in the novel as Khaufpur, leaked copious amounts of poisonous gas which not only killed thousands of people instantaneously but genetically maimed future generations through its toxicity. With the second meaning, however, the sense of the quote

becomes that the night was revelatory of what is to come if present ways are continued. This makes it possible to see the quote and by extension, the novel as a warning against and an indictment of the conditions which made such a tragedy possible. The three-fold objective of this paper then would be to analyse these very conditions brought about by the neoliberal economic and governmental policies of the state, examine how the novel exposes, critiques and suggests restorative remedies, and also analyse the problems involved in such depictions and critiques. Taking the cue from Rob Nixon who describes *Animal's People* as Sinha's "invention of the environmental picaresque" (Nixon 244), I would read the novel as a 'neoliberal picaresque' which exposes the double standards involved in transnational capitalism and the complicit role of the state under such a system. I will further analyse how by making the 'pícaro' or the rogue figure the narrator and the central character, the novel pre-emptly doubts and criticism of it being "poverty porn"¹ (Mile 7), a characterization which has been applied to many such expose works of art, both fairly and unfairly. But before that, the following paragraphs would try to justify this reading by drawing parallels between the contemporary social conditions and the historical ones which gave rise to the picaresque form.

According to Chandler and Schwartz in *A New History of Spanish Literature* (1991) the picaresque novel of the late 16th century Spain represents the beginning of modern Realism. Reacting against the absurd unrealities and idealism portrayed in the chivalric and pastoral novels, it juxtaposed the basic drives of hunger, poverty and cruelty with the abundant, glorious and honourable lives of the upper classes. In doing so, it contrasted the petty crimes committed by these 'pícaros' for their subsistence with the far graver crimes which the society's elite committed and were structurally exculpated. The authors who were sincere reformers, attacked political, religious, and military matters and "reflected the poverty and unsound economic conditions of late sixteenth century Spain when a segment of Spaniards was living in a dream world after the glories of the conquest of the New World" (119)

A similar influx of wealth in Indian society is also seen after 1991 when India shifted from a socialist to a liberalized political economy. The reason for this shift was that the socialist setup of the earlier epoch, even though devised to ascertain an egalitarian development of India into a progressive and pluralistic nation after independence, was not able to achieve its goals due to failures in its implementation and rampant corruption. India had to face the burden of many economic crises and began experimenting with liberalized forms of the economy from the 1980s onwards and as the crises grew, had to resort to loan funds from global corporations in 1991. However, a collateral was not enough and the International Monetary Fund demanded a set of conditions "that India reduce its budget deficit, open its markets to foreign competition, diminish its maze of licensing requirements, cut subsidies, and liberalize investment" (Weinraub) to bail India out. This marks the inception of neoliberalism in India.

¹ The term was popularized by Alice Mile's critique of the movie "Slumdog Millionaire" (2009) suggesting that representations of poverty, oppression in the third world to the West can be exploitative. Similar criticism has been there in literary theory as well, which we shall see in the section dealing with this theme.

Noam Chomsky points out, “neoliberalism is the defining political economic paradigm of our time...associated initially with Reagan and Thatcher, (it) has been the dominant political-economic trend adopted by political parties of the centre, much of the left as well as the right.” (7) The difference between the classical liberal economic system advocated by Adam Smith, and the neoliberal system is that the former, in keeping with the rise of liberalism in the socio-political domain in the second half of the 18th century, advocated the abolition of government intervention in matters of economy, be it production, distribution or tariffs, claiming that the market would be a self-regulatory feature. Opposed to this, neoliberalism advocates the intervention of the state to create and preserve a socio-political system that favours the market. Thus, David Harvey points out, the state must “set up those military, defences, police and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights, and to guarantee, by force, if need be, the proper functioning of markets.” (2) The liberalization of the economy helped India to get out of dire financial straits and also gave a fillip and prepared the ground for entrepreneurialism in India but the conditions which were imposed upon India for this need not necessarily have been or be propitious for India. *Animal’s People*, set at the very inception of these neoliberal reforms in India, dramatizes the Bhopal gas tragedy and my reading of the novel as a neoliberal picaresque will focus on how the tragedy was exacerbated by the neoliberal policies of the state. In keeping with the picaresque tradition which is “autobiographical in nature” (119 Chandler) and is narrated by the ‘pícaro’ in ribald street argot in contrast to the ornate rhetoric of his social betters, Sinha presents *Animal’s People* as the narration of Animal in twenty-two tapes, recorded by a journalist in Hindi and as pointed out in the ‘Editor’s Note’, “apart from translating to English, nothing (had) been changed.” Thus, words like “company”, “internet” become “kampani” and “internest” and there is a retention of various Hindi terms and phrases. If in the picaresque tradition a social outcast’s lowly existence is juxtaposed with refinements of the exalted classes to critique the inequities of the society, in *Animal’s People* Sinha goes a step further by presenting a character who would rather identify with animals than with the inhumanity of humans. A victim of the gas tragedy which orphaned him when he was only a few days old and gradually ripped him and wiped away his memory, forcing him to walk on all fours, Animal is introduced at the beginning of the novel as a scavenger who has to compete for disposed food in garbage bins with stray dogs for survival(17).He says, “I used to be human once ...I walked on two feet just like a human being... I no longer want to be human... I’d feel raw disgust.” (Sinha 1) Again, “My name is Animal, I say. I am not a fucking human being; I have no wish to be one” (23)

The primary target of the above criticism against inhumanity is of course the transnational company, which because of the current systems globalization can internalize profits and externalize responsibilities of environmental and human health. Along with that, the novel also analyses the governmental policies which exacerbated the tragedy and its aftermath. Even though the Bhopal gas tragedy itself happened before the formal inception of the neoliberal regime in 1991, as pointed out earlier, India had begun implementing neoliberal policies advocating transnational capitalism by the 1980s.David Weir in *The Bhopal Syndrome* (1986) points out that “by moving into the Third World, the multinationals have encountered conditions quite unlike those at home. Malnutrition, illiteracy, poverty and short life spans are the norm” (24) and these conditions, as the novel correctly shows, were utilized not only to set up factories and benefit from the cheap labour and low maintenance costs

due to indifference to health hazards and environmental degradation but also while recompensing the affected in the horrific gas leak. This is indeed the most tragic part of the whole tragedy because, as Ingrid Eckerman points out in *The Bhopal Saga* (2005), “the poorest, who lived closest to the plant, were hit hardest; the shortest (the children) were hit worst.” (28) Thus, Animal recalls, “I was six when the pains began...(it) gripped my neck and forced me down... the fevers go bad...I was pressed forward by the pain...further, further forward I was bent. When the smelting in my spine stopped, the bones had twisted like a hairpin, the highest part of me was my arse.” (15 Sinha) This physical deformity of the narrator’s body is a constant reminder of the ruinous relationship between the transnational corporations and the people of the third world. It is almost as if the burden of maximizing profit had fallen on his shoulders and bent his back.

In the novel, Animal joins a protest group headed by Nisha and Zafar who campaign for compensation for poisoned and disenfranchised Khairpur’s. Zafar’s campaign attempts to make ‘the Kampani’ (14) accept responsibility for the toxic gas leak and to force them to assist in a proper decontamination of the factory and the town so that future generations stop being affected. However, the powerful transnational corporations exploit the lopsided world of deregulation whereby they remain incorporated within the national body to reap profits but engage in evasive geopolitics when it comes to matters of answerability, redress and remediation. The novel shows the powerlessness of the Indian courts to serve justice as Animal says “Trouble was that the Kampani bosses were far away in Amrika, they refused to come to the Khaufpuri court and no one could make them.” (43) Indeed, the Union Carbide company’s legal defence was that being an American company, the Indian courts do not have any jurisdiction over it. Nor should the case of compensation be fought in any American courts because the jury there, following American cultural values, living standards and expectations might overcompensate the victims in India at the cost of the transnational company. (Everest 155). Thus, Animal’s insistence on his identity as an animal is a satirical take on the multinational corporations which, driven by their short-term profit motives, deny to acknowledge even the humanity of people living in third world countries because of our underprivileged location in the hierarchy of the neoliberal world order.

Apart from the lopsided power equation in transnational capitalism, the novel also shows the other aspects of neoliberalism. Frustrated with how the company evades the law, Zafar in a dream sequence asks a crow to show the face of his enemy, the transnational corporation:

“Zafar looks down and sees a small figure standing alone on the shores...over the horizon appears a city of tall buildings...on its roofs are soldiers with guns. Tanks patrol its foot. Jets fly over...this building, the Kampani controls its factories all over the world. One floor... is reserved for the Kampani’s three and thirty thousand lawyers. Another is for doctors doing research to prove that the Kampani’s many accidents have caused no harm to anyone. In the director’s floor ...you’ll find generals and judges senators, presidents and prime ministers, oil sheikhs, newspaper owners” (Sinha229)

This dream vision sounds absurd because it locates all the apparatuses of the government- the president and prime minister, military, air force, judiciary and its different interests-oil and global factories among others in one locale, the company’s building. However, it reiterates David Harvey’s point that in contrast to the earlier classical liberalism, neoliberalism depends on the intervention of

the state and its various apparatus like the military, police and judiciary to ensure the proper functioning of the market. (Harvey 133) In real life as well, the USA threatened India to accept the low compensation settlement saying that should India continue its efforts to extradite the Union Carbide management to face Indian courts, it would carry out an economic assault on India through 'Special 301' trade provisions (Mukherjee 143). Against this leviathan exploitative power structure, the common individual is completely powerless, just like Zafar sees in his dream.

The novel also dramatizes how the multinational corporations with the backing of their western governments pressurize neoliberal country. Thus, when a judge for the first time takes a decision in favour of the people and agrees to their claim that the corporation's other assets in the country should be frozen until the top people from the corporation come to the Indian court to face the charges, he is transferred from the court before he could give that verdict. In real life, this nexus between the state and corporations is very apparent when we look at the fact that the CEO of Union Carbide, Warren Anderson could easily flee from India even when he was under house arrest.

Similarly, the novel fictionalizes another incident from the tragedy when the administration of sodium thiosulphate as an antidote to the poisoned victims was stopped by the police and other authorities because its use confirmed cyanide poisoning which affects future generations as well. The Union Carbide Company did not want cyanide poisoning to be established in the gas leakage as it would have compounded their legal liabilities and entailed much bigger amounts in compensation. Animal points out that on the night of the tragedy those people who were not killed instantly were administered sodium thiosulphate by doctors for relief but "the Kampani bosses from America had rung up their best friend the Chief Minister and told him to stop the thighs-of-fate...Some doctors moved into a shack ...and began giving injections...The police came, wrecked the shack, beat up the doctors. Zafar said that by giving thighs-of-fate somehow also proved that the illness could pass to future generations. The Kampani was afraid of this knowledge getting out, so they had the thighs-of-fate stopped" (112) Although shocking and unbelievable, the arrest of doctors for relieving poison victims is a historical fact in the Bhopal Gas tragedy as Dr. Anil Patel points out, "The whole issue of medical relief through Na TS (sodium thiosulphate), messy as it was, took an ominous turn on June 25 when workers of voluntary groups, including doctors, were arrested in Bhopal by police for using Na TS"

All these instances show how it is the poor who suffer the most in a neoliberal order. Narrated from the point of view of Animal, we get to see the plight of the worst affected in the slums. Almost echoing Eckerman's claim that toxic chemicals still lay exposed poisoning groundwater and affecting the next generation, in the novel a mother in the slum near the factory spills her milk on the ground saying "our wells are full of poison, it's in the soil, water, in our blood, it's in our milk." (Sinha107) On the other hand, Pyare Bai, who lost her husband, the sole breadwinner of the family after a long fight with the illness arising from the gas poisoning, was thus plunged further into debt and economic hardships. Animal points out, "The story of this one woman contains the tale of thousands." (83) Just like the picaro figure contrasts the basic drives of hunger, poverty and with the abundant, glorious and honourable lives of the upper classes maintained through structural inequity, corruption and exploitation, Animal points out how the Ministry for Poison Relief headed by the minister Zahreel Khan was in collusion with the global corporations. He says these "Government types are lying"

(110) and goes on to narrate how the minister came to the slums with journalists and drank a glass of water from the well to show the groundwater is not poisoned, but right after that went behind a house and used his fingers as an emetic by “sticking them down his throat” (110)

The worst part of the neoliberal order however is that apart from the government supporting the market economy, it also generates a class of social elites which secedes from the rest of the population. After generating wealth by exploiting the poor, they view them as expendable and support the neoliberal order which protect their financial interests by blatant military and nonmilitary measures. In the novel, Elli the American doctor who had come all the way to India to set up a clinic and help the gas victims talks about the ongoing court case and the protests against the company seeking proper compensation with an Indian doctor. His response is shocking: “Let go, I say, it’s been nearly twenty years. Let it rest. Maybe there are some people in the slums who want to keep the agitation going... Meanwhile the rest of us, citizens, city council, chamber of commerce, everyone, we all want to move on...those poor people never had a chance. If it had not been the factory, it would have been cholera, TB, exhaustion, hunger. They would have died anyway”(175). This doctor belongs to the same coterie of doctors who Animal went to, seeking medical help for his condition. He says “the doctor doesn’t examine you because to touch a poor person would pollute him. Barely looks at you, then writes a chit, tells you, take this to so-and so’s shop and say I sent you. The medicines are supposed to be given free, this is how they make money out of misery” (33) Similarly when Animal hears of an Indian lawyer defending the company in court because of the huge amount of money he is getting from the company, Animal wonders “what a twisted nonlabour is this from our own city to take the side of the Kampani?” (53).

Animal’s *People* then indeed becomes an apocalyptic warning call about how transnational corporations in a neoliberal order can erode national sovereignty in maintaining something as fundamental as the welfare of its people. However, what is also to be noted is that the novel also suggests recuperative and reformatory potential in such scenarios.

If the novel names the culprit and antagonist of such tragedies as the neoliberal logic of short-term profit, it also shows the effects it has—growing schisms between communities. The unsurmountable divide between the people working for the multinational corporations and the victims becomes clear when the company lawyers arrive in India to make a deal between the company and its victims and Animal, like a true picaro ironically juxtaposes the concerns and interests of both the parties. Whereas the victims’ concern is to seek reparation for the irreparable damages caused by the company costing thousands of life and limb, the company’s lawyer was only concerned about the pet grey hounds that he had leave back at home in America in his palatial mansion. This gulf which hinders understanding between communities exists even amongst conscientious characters. Elli who had come to India out of her goodness of heart to set up a free clinic for the gas victims, parallels the number of doctors who came from the world over to offer their help after the Bhopal tragedy. However, she is unable to understand why the people of Khaufpur suspect her of collecting and fabricating medical data for the company so that it can somehow reduce its culpability and reduce the compensation it has to pay. “Take a look...people in this city tolerate open sewers, garbage everywhere, poisoned wells, poisoned babies, doctors who don’t do their jobs, corrupt politicians, thousands of sick that no one seems to care about. But wait, let someone come along with an open-hearted offer of help, these same citizens

can't tolerate it, in fact find it so intolerable they must mount a boycott. People in this city must be either blind or mad. I don't get the way Khaufpuris think." (171-2)

It is in moments like these that Animal transcends his role as that of a picaro and shows restorative potential in such moments of crisis. His greatest achievement is establishing the solidarity between the Khaufpur is and Elli. It is because of him that people gradually start believing in Elli despite Zafar's call to boycott her clinic. In fact, the novel by making the central figure polyglot suggests recuperative potential in a world fractured by greed from the beginning. Animal mediates not only between humans from different walks of life, but also between non-humans and humans. He talks foetuses which had to be aborted after the gas leak tragedy and through his conversations with them, he registers one aspect of the horrors of the reality which otherwise always goes unnoticed.

In Animal's role as mediator between fissured communities, he is tutored by Somraj, the music maestro of Khaufpur who gave up singing after his lungs were destroyed by the poisonous gases that fateful night. When Somraj teaches Animal the philosophy of North Indian classical music, according to Upamanyu Mukherjee, "their sustained discussions of musicology provide us with a conceptual key to the novel". In his theory of music is the cosmopolitan philosophy of "the assertion of the fundamental relation between all human and non-human beings and their existence as a collective, as well as the simultaneous assertion of their individuality." (157) Somraj explains to Animal, "according to the old writers, peacocks, goats and even the grey herons ... sing notes of the scale, and if you listen carefully, you can hear the same notes in many other things which you wouldn't expect such as the creaking bicycle wheels and bhuttbhutt pigs because all things make their own music."(59) Indeed, this vision of collectively, is something that Somraj himself adheres to from the beginning of the novel. He does not jump to conclusions about Elli and questions Zafar's call to boycott her clinic just because she is from America and people assume she is a company agent come here to fabricate medical evidence to help the company evade the law.

Throughout the course of the novel, Somraj along with Animal illuminates our non-alienable bonds with each other in the cosmos. In the contemporary neoliberal scenario, where powerful global forces seek to eliminate these bonds, Somraj's vision of collectively becomes a site from where the struggle for justice and restoration can begin. Indeed, the people of Khaufpur develop a solidarity by going across caste, creed, religion and nationality for the purposes of resistance and recovery. Through collective resistance they foil the dubious deal that the company wanted to make with the politicians which would have given them affected victims hardly anything. The novel also ends with a positive note where Animal sings that "tomorrow there will be more of us." (366)

After the analysis of the exposés of the neoliberal system and the recuperative possibilities to combat its divisive effects in *Animal's People*, the last segment of the paper will analyse what risks such exposés entail and how *Animal's People* because of its form of a Neoliberal Picaresque thwarts them.

Citing an example of how British newspapers marketed India's fiftieth anniversary of independence in 1997 as a prime tourist event, Graham Huggan in the essay "Consuming India" (1997) draws attention towards the practice of selling India as a consumer item in the commercially viable alterity industry which projects the orient as an exhibit. Extending Charles Sugnet's argument how many western travel magazines engage in nostalgic myth making about colonialism, how in the

name of celebrating difference and otherness perpetuate glaring racial stereotypes, and how this perpetuates what cultural critics following Edward Said call ‘colonial discourse’, Huggan suggests that “the stories by Indian writers, Amit Chaudhary, Anita Desai...Arundhati Roy (which) “focus on domestic mishaps and comic scenes of mass confusion” (62) might not be very different from these magazines which “present an image of India as an object of metropolitan fascination- an India which while it cannot be fully comprehended, can certainly be consumed” (62) Pointing out the most commercially successful Indo-Anglian novels of the last few decades, he says their writers have capitalised on the ‘politico-exotic’ appeal of their novels. Emphasizing the “deliberately exaggerated hawking of Oriental(ist) wares by a narcissistic narrator (in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight Children*); the consciously melodramatic combination of Indian romance and political intrigue (in Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*); and the overwrought staging of a tragic tale of illicit cross-caste love (in Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things*)” (xi), he says these authors profit from “consumer needs” and it is this “commodity form” which have established their names as “reader-friendly, but also wryly sophisticated, Indo-Anglian novelists.” (xi)

If the writings of dedicated writers like Arundhati Roy, whose commitment to social causes is unambiguous in her non fictional writings, can be suspect of pandering to orientalist fantasies and fears, it shows representation can indeed be a tricky business. It becomes all the more so if the representation is of the problems encountered in the third world because then these representations seem like sustaining orientalist narratives of the former colonies as poverty stricken, corruption ridden, irrational and hence incapable of self-rule. Indeed, in her criticism of the film *Slum Dog Millionaire* as “poverty porn” Alice Mile points out how representations of the poor is exploitative as it capitalizes on the destitution, oppression and violence of poverty for an emotional arousal of the viewer while maintaining a safe distance to avoid any real involvement with the poor.

Considering this, Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* becomes suspect of pandering to westerners’ fantasies even more as the novel’s only publisher, Simon & Schuster publishes it only in the UK and the United States of America. This is indeed uncanny considering the book is about a tragic historical event in India by an Indian author. Nevertheless, rather than dishing out orientalist fantasies to the West for consumption or presenting India “as a nation in transformation, to whose self-destructive vitality British journalists can ‘objectively’ attest” to, (Huggan 248) *Animal’s People* by modifying the Picaresque tradition, not only exposes and critiques representative practices and its audience/readers by addressing them directly in the novel. The novel begins with an “editor’s note” which informs the reader that the story was recorded in twenty-two tapes recorded by an Australian journalist in Hindi. Animal begins his narration chastising the consuming tendency of the journalist, “with what greed you looked about this place. I could feel your hunger. You’d devour everything...like vultures are you Jarnalis (journalists). Somewhere a bad thing happens...you come drawn by the smell of blood... you were like all the others , come to suck our stories from us, so strangers in far off countries can marvel there is so much pain in the world” (4-5 Sinha) Animal points out how in all representative media and art his people are always reduced to gas victims without any other attributes of humanity, “You have turned us Khaufpuris into storytellers, but always of the same story” (4). He finally agrees to tell his story on the condition that “the book must contain only his story and nothing else. Plus, it must be his words only.”(9)

However, Animal does not stop at denouncing the producers of such orientalist narratives but extends his censure to the reader by addressing him directly as he says, “you are reading my words, you are that person. I have no name for you so I will call you eyes.” (13) He goes on to say, “What I say becomes a picture and the eyes settle on it like flies” (13) drawing a parallel between the readers consuming his poverty and flies which consume filth. Debating whether or not to narrate the story, he says to Chunaram, “have these thousands of eyes slept even one night in a place like this do ...shit on railway tracks? When was the last time they had nothing to eat?... what do they know of our lives...Their curiosity feels like acid on my skin.” (7) Animal is thus not only aware of the dangers of representation of third world poverty but his narrative technique takes the reader’s attention to our own voyeuristic tendencies. Also, the fact that the chastisement comes from the picaro figure in his street argot increases the satiric import of the novel and makes the reader aware and guilty of his exploitative consumption tendencies. The novel then can also be seen as a discourse on “representing disempowerment without disempowering.” (Mahlstedt 1)

Thus, by reinventing the picaro figure in *Animal’s People* Indra Sinha not only exposes the exploitative inequities neoliberalism brings in and shows reformative and recuperative possibilities, but also deliberates on the ethics of representation.

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