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Unhealed Trauma of Bhopal Gas Victims: Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

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Abstract

This paper aims to study and examine the depiction of trauma and its aftermath, specifically focusing on the traumatic effects experienced by the victims of the Bhopal Gas Disaster as depicted in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*. Grounded in trauma theory as articulated by scholars such as Caruth, Felman, Laub, Vickroy, Balaev, Brison, Dawes, and others, it explores the physical and emotional trauma carried by the victims of this catastrophic event. This study provides a detailed analysis of the text to reveal the disastrous experiences, adverse circumstances, and challenges faced by those poisoned victims of the disaster, all of which are caused by the inhumanities and brutalities of the corporate world. The study also includes the importance of formulating a new self rather than being confined to the young protagonist's crisis and other traumatic phases of the victims' lives. Additionally, the study is based on the concept that through the vast power of literature or literary works, change and progress are possible from the reader's points of view towards their responsibilities and awareness of the subjects and problems related to the trauma, inhumanness of the corporate world, and other social aspects.

Keywords: Trauma, Bhopal Gas Disaster, Victims, Indra Sinha, *Animal's People*

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Introduction

The word 'trauma' originated from ancient Greek, meaning 'wound'. The trauma study, developed in 1990s, relied on Sigmund Freud's theories on traumatic experiences and memory that involve an expression of extreme experiences through language. During 1990s, prominent scholars Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman analyzed the concept of trauma in literature. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth opines that,

> In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (11).

However, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), Felman and Laub provide new perspectives about how language, trauma, and existence are interrelated in the witnessing process through speech. There is no doubt in the precept that literature has always been playing a vital role in the presentation of traumas through speech and language. Elissa Marder opines that, "Over the last fifteen years or so, the emergence of groundbreaking new work on trauma in literature and critical theory has made a profound impact both within and beyond the field of literature" (1). The representation of physical and psychological trauma in language and the role of flashbacks or memory in shaping the individuals' identities are the major concerns that define the area of trauma studies. The perspective of trauma in a literary work is enough to make the narrative a source of critique. The present study analyzes Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* to present how traumatic experiences have been shaped through language to demonstrate the impact of trauma on society and human awareness. It also shows how they learn to deal with the pain with a positive attitude in the race of life. The pain which creates a unique identity in society educates them to live for each other.

Literary works represent the hardships, agonies, sufferings, responses, and efforts of humans expressively and have the power to illustrate the inner world of people. Heidarizadeha's study puts on a view, "There is a space for memories, introspection, retrospection, foreshadow, flashback and awful remembrances that are coloured by pain, wound and trauma. Now is the time of producing the plot of anxiety in modern world" (788). Literary works that dealt with trauma display a deep range of variability regarding how much importance is connected to revive the memory of the past in the reformulation of the traumatized mind and self. It also

suggests that sometimes direct contact with the natural life and world provides a potion or remedy for the traumatized minds. Balaev highlights that,

> The term "trauma novel" refers to a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on the individual or collective levels. A defining feature of the trauma novel is the transformation of the self-ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world (150).

Balaev's assertions focus on the facts that the trauma novel presents how a traumatic incident disturbs the connection between the self and others by challenging aspects like fundamental hypotheses about social relations and moral laws. Alongside, it deals with extreme fear or enduring loss on a personal and communistic phase and also highlights the strategy of coming to terms with the facets of memory that explicate new understandings and conceptions of the inner self and the world. Similarly, Indra Sinha's novel, *Animal's People* (2007) is a fictionalized account of the repercussion and the aftermath of the Bhopal Gas Disaster (1984). It focuses on the issues and problems of the contemporary world which are caused by the trauma and inhumaneness of the "Kampani" (Sinha 31). The novel revolves around on the reappraisal and the redefinition of identity, victimization, exploitation, inhumaneness, and injustice, not only on a personal level but, on a communistic level also. The purpose of the study is to influence and motivate the readers to take measures for unhealed traumas. It inspires the readers for the actions which are necessary to heal the traumatized self. The study analyzes the condition of the traumatized narrator or protagonist and other poisoned victims in fiction and discusses the influence of the situation and place in the act of the victims of formulating a new self through their struggles of decades for justice. The study is based on the concept that through the vast power of literature or literary works, change and progress are possible in reader's points of view towards their responsibilities and awareness of the subjects and problems related to the trauma, inhumaneness of the corporate world, and other social aspects.

There is no doubt that a literary piece can motivate the readers better than any other medium regarding the rights concerning the life and formulation of a new self through the analysis of traumatic events and interpretation of characters, their conditions, their struggles, pain, and others. And Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* is one of the literary pieces surrounded by the real traumatic accident, problems of the

poisoned victims who are targeted by the brutality and inhumaneness of the corporate world for ages, and their struggle for inaccessible justice. To put it concisely, *Animal's People* is the story of corporate inhumaneness and unhealed traumas.

Sinha's *Animal's People* showcases the challenges of the victims of the World's Worst Industrial Disaster. In this novel, the author has put emphasis on the traumatic accident and the actual physical and mental struggles of the deprived labourers through the pitiful conditions of the characters. The author portrays how the victims and their families have to suffer a lot due to man-made traumas. The trauma creates such a terror among the poisoned victims that it destroys and divides their identity too. The novel further describes and demonstrates the place of the trauma because it helps in examining and defining both, the meaning of the actual trauma and its experiences along with the personal histories. The novel presents the fact that even after so many decades of Independence due to the non-harmonious circumstances, in order to live an adequate standard of living and to formulating and developing a new self, the narrator and other victims have no other choice apart from continuing their struggle for certainty and justice. It also illustrates the role of the traumatic event that disrupts the identity of the characters. The first line of the novel illustrates the physical and mental state of the protagonist, which has been ruined because of that traumatic accident. Animal, the protagonist, narrates the traumatic event, unhealed physical wounds, and mental trauma of the self to the journalist. He says, "I used to be human once. So, I'm told. I don't remember it myself, but people who knew me when I was small say I walked on two feet just like a human being" (Sinha 1). In this way, the introductory lines indicate the disabled physical structure and mental wounds of Indra Sinha's protagonist, who has been ruined by the poisonous gas disaster. Scholars like Geetha and Maheshwari emphasize the pain of the protagonist of Sinha's novel, "Animal didn't remember when he walked on two legs. The toxic gas twisted his spine and still he was walking on four legs. Animal said that some people around the world pitied on their stories and the cruel incident" (Geetha and Maheshwari 114).

Studies based on Sinha's *Animal's People* observe that it is the story of a disabled protagonist, poor victims, and injustice. It also deals with the facets like ecocritical perspectives, subaltern's voice, traumatic experiences of the gas victims, and so on. Geetha and Maheshwari put the focus on the facts that in *Animal's People*,

> Khaufpur remained poisoned for decades after that accident and the plight of its people continues to contaminate the ecology of the town. The novel

> replicated the bleak picture of modern Bhopal, where toxic chemicals still lay exposed. The novel also revealed the environmental degradation issues in the urban area that represented a distinct rhetoric of environmentalism (113).

According to Chattopadhyay and Nayak, "The novel *Animal's People* is about a triumph of human spirit despite physical impairment and extremely straitened circumstances affecting most persons in the novel" (29). In addition to these assessments, a collection of studies has been conducted on *Animal's People*. Scholars like Rath, Spencer, Multani, Johnston, Basumatary, Sahu, Jones and Frederick, and Bartosch, in their assessments, observe that Sinha's novel deals with the demonstration of a traumatic event, a pseudo translation of the voice of a subaltern, the story of parahuman, the inhumaneness of the corporate world, the abuse of Human Rights and the postcolonial and posthumanism perspectives. Rath observes,

> Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007) is often read as an example for an authentic subaltern voice. It presents, within its fictional frame as pseudo-translation, the English version of the life story of a very poor, mentally unstable and physically deformed young Indian as told and recorded by himself in Hindi (161).

According to Spencer, *Animal's People* centers on a physically disfigured young man who is often teased by his friends as well as other people and classifies with the epithet 'animal'. He also opines that, "What Animal and the novel as a whole ultimately suggest is that rather than being seen as wastelands, sites of erasure can serve as spaces for invention" (Spenser 1). Multani opines that Sinha's novel deals with social aspects such as Human Rights and the inaccessible judicial system. Multani also states that *Animal's People* depicts the picture of the inhumanities of the corporate world. According to Johnston, "Animal's posture provides an approach to the Bhopal disaster from a different line of sight, one lowly and inverted" (121). Basumatary presents the facts that *Animal's People* is a story of injustice and corruption. He also states that Sinha's novel deals with the theme of violence, injustice, and discrimination. Smita Sahu, in her article, opines that, "The novel discusses the devastating impact of the gas leak from a chemical factory on, not just the people, but also on the ecology. . . . It is an attempt to recreate the historical environment of Union Carbide's poisoning of Bhopal and its aftermath" (549-50). Stanley Jones and Suresh Frederick write about "ruthlessness of corporate companies" and "the 'sense of place' in the novel" (377-78).

Likewise, Roman Bartosch opines that *Animal's People* deals with postcolonial and posthumanism perspectives.

The previous studies focus on the facts that Sinha in this literary piece in one-way presents the traumatic events, struggles, postcolonial aspects, and painful lives of the characters. Moreover, the author presents the fact that industrial trauma is a curse to the lives of humans and human society both. The ever-expanding systematization, chemicalization, and mechanization have increased troubles and traumas to human lives and the environment through accidents/disasters, injuries, and losses.

The Unhealed Trauma

Animal's People is a novel dealing with the story of poisoned victims of the Gas Disaster. They struggle not only to heal their unhealed traumas for decades but also for their identity quest. The novel is a work of profound humanness. It explores and touches the issues like trauma, injustice, and inhumaneness. The traumatic events seem to become a nightmare for those who passed through it and experienced it. The tragic experiences of Sinha's characters support the fact markedly in the novel. The novel produces a diverse display of imagery of trauma through a large number of responses and experiences only known through the physical symptoms, mental conditions, and consciousness of the victims. In addition, the story also includes their sufferings due to the fragile legal system of the nation that failed to provide the basic liberty required to live an adequate standard of living to these victims and deprived sufferers. The title of the novel itself provides an interesting perception into the novel, as it gives us a prospect of the way the protagonist and the people of 'Khaufpur-the city of fear', identified themselves.

Though the tragedy presented in *Animal's People* happened four decades ago, its aftermath plays the role of toxin in the lives of the poisoned victims. The tragedy not only infected the environment but also spoiled the lives of Khaufpuris as well as the protagonist named Animal. The tragic life of the deprived victims makes them learn how to face the situation full of toxic substances and to fight for the rights concerning life with unity, "'At once playful, pitiless and moving, *Animal's People* stands as a testament to the courage and resilience of Indian's poor' *TLS*" (Sinha I).

In many ways, Sinha's characters present a case of what Cathy Caruth describes in her observation on trauma,

> . . . it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This

> truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language (4).

Animal narrates the story of physical and mental wounds of self and the traumatic lives of other poisoned victims. He presents the true picture of the poisoned night that still stifles and chokes their lives. Animal voices against the inhuman practice and injustice because these ills are responsible for his physical and mental trauma as well as misfortune. It is also responsible for the mishaps of other deprived and malformed people of "the poisoned city" such as Ma Franci's insaneness, Somraj's misfortune, Animal's little friend, Aliya's fever, Hanif 's impaired vision, Shambhu's sickness, and others (Sinha 296). The victims of Khaufpur start their protest in a non-violent way, but soon after the meeting with the CM, they realize that the government was in favour of the bureaucrats instead of listening to the voice of the poisoned and powerless victims. The poisoned victims continue their struggle for justice and compensation despite the negative attitude of the goverment. Animal presents the bitter and real picture of their lives which is full of wounds. Through his narration, Animal interprets the traumatic surroundings and situations along with the story of the identity formation of the self and formulation of a new of the traumatized people.

This novel follows Laurie Vickroy's observation of trauma too. Vickroy in her book, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002) opines that trauma is defined as a response to the circumstances and events so intensely that they harm normal emotional responses and bring long-term psychological turmoil and disruption. *Animal's People,* through the narration of traumatic events, presents the tale of the long-term psychological sufferings, struggles, and helplessness of other victims of Khaufpur to the readers. The narrator starts narrating the story of his emotional crisis and misery.

> Now I am talking to you . . . . I'm looking right now at my feet, which are near the hearth, twisted they're, a little bent to one side. Inside of left foot, outer of right, where they scrape the ground the skin's thick and cracked. In gone times I've felt such hunger, I'd break off lumps of the dry skin and chew it (Sinha 12-13).

The protagonist's words present the picture of mental agony. It portrays inhumanity as well as a traumatic picture of a poison-affected victim with long-term psychological disruption. For decades, the victims are deprived of leading a stable life. But instead of behaving like a helpless, to heal the trauma throughout the narration, the protagonist

and other victims fight for compensation, justice, and the dehumanization of the corporate world.

To fight for unhealed traumas and justice for himself and for other victims of Khaufpur, the protagonist joins the social worker Zafar, who is not a victim himself but raises money to help those who are sick. The novelist creates a scenario to focus on the activities of the non-governmental organizations that work seriously in comparison to the governmental organizations. The non-governmental organizations that work to upgrade the minimum standard of needs, justice, and rights for healing the agonies of victims.

This novel connects to Brison's observation of trauma: "The undoing of the self in trauma involves a radical disruption of memory, a serving of past from present and, typically, an inability to envision a future. And yet trauma survivors often eventually find ways to reconstruct themselves and carry on with reconfigured lives" (39). The protagonist presents the story of the traumatic and pathetic situation of the nation. He gives an account of pending court cases. He tells about the scenario of the hunger strike by Zafar and his groups, including poisoned victims, where the people are being deprived of justice. But instead of being disheartened, trauma victims struggle to find ways to reconstruct a new self of themselves. Animal narrates the traumatic story of Khaufpuris to the readers with the hope of a better situation and life. He presents this phase of the hunger strike as the way chosen by the victims to heal their long-term traumas.

Zafar and the rest of the victims along with the protagonist decide to protest at the CM's house, "As ever, all eyes are on Zafar. Gone are all doubt and indecision, this is Zafar the Great, war leader and legend. 'The politicians are going to betray us, but we will wreck their plans. We'll bring thousands to protest, right there at the CM's house'" (Sinha 260). Then the crowd starts protesting before CM's house. The crowd screams, and at once the CM comes out and replies to protesters that, "'YOU HAVE NO CAUSE TO WORRY. THIS I PROMISE'" and then he vanishes (Sinha 268). As a consequence of this, the protesters blast their anger while pelting stones before the house of the CM. For this violent behaviour of victims and other protesters, the cops start firing. Instead of losing hope in this stressful situation, Khaufpuris decide to face these problems with a positive attitude towards life as they learn to deal with it. Animal further narrates about Khaufpuris' anger and disheartenment, "'The hearing has been postponed. They've postponed the hearing'. 'NO DEAL! NO DEAL, NO DEAL!'" (Sinha 305). When the hearing is postponed all Khaufpuris become frustrated and dispirit. This news turns most of Khaufpuris

into violent protesters. People become riotous, and the attitude of Khaufpuris make the cops brutal. They shout at the protesters, order them to go back to their homes. After narrating about such a stressful situation, the protagonist concludes the story with the news of the victory regarding their struggle for a new self, justice, and compensation against the "Kampani" (Sinha 31). He narrates that due to the disappointing situation of the protesters and being rejected by Nisha, whom he loved, he decides to leave Khaufpur. He then goes to the jungle with the decision to spend the rest of his life as an animal. Then Zafar and other Khaufpuris go to the jungle in search of him and after finding him Zafar informs him that on CM's request they not only break their fast, but, now the situation is also under controll and the CM has also promised "not to do anything or make any deal without their consent" (Sinha 356).

At the end of the novel, the protagonist not only accepts his impairment and imperfection, but, refuses the proposal of his operation which is organized by a non-governmental organization. Further, he also makes the readers cheerful and soothing with the statement that, "Nowadays there's no shortage of food, I eat my feet for pleasure" (Sinha 13). This way, Animal concludes his story with the hope of a better future. He concludes with the lines, "Eyes, I'm done. Khuda Hafez. Go well. Remember me. All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us" (Sinha 366). He completes and concludes the story of his traumatic life with the hope that the story narrated to the readers may bring some improvement in the condition of the poisoned victims.

It also presents the story of their struggle to construct a new self and to heal the traumas. But this is not the complete picture of the miseries and misfortune of the poisoned victims' of Khaufpur, as this phase mainly covers the story of the protagonist only. In addition, his story revolves around the tragic lives and struggles of other victims of the chemical explosion of the industry too. The victims are not only troubled by unhealed traumas but deprived of justice also due to the irresponsible nature of the corporate world and the government towards their tragic and pitiful condition. His story also supports the fact that how the traumatized victims' brain reaches for tenacity/solidity through the narration and re-narration of the traumatic tale simultaneously holds on into a profound creative while healing the traumas to reconstruct a new self of themselves. According to James Dawes, ". . . Indeed, for those in need of rescue and care, the hope of being able to tell the story is sometimes the only hope" (394).

This novel presents a case of what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub opine in their observation on trauma, crises, and literature in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992). It supports the fact that traumas inscribed in human narratives help to decipher traces of trauma and also in the treatment of trauma survivors. In *Animal's People* the story of Ma Franci, a nun from France, loves Animal like a mother and cares for other Khaufpuris also, even if, she herself is a victim of that disaster. Though, she loses her power of understanding the language of the people of Khaufpur because of the chemical explosion, but continues her mission of helping the sufferers with the belief that language is unable to handicap her mission. She shares with Animal how she is interrupted by the Padre who comes from France to take her away with him due to her illness, despite being aware that she wants to live the rest of her life in Khaufpur, "Son, these wretched people can't let me be, . . . A padre is coming. I am supposed to go with him . . . . 'I don't want to go back', she says. 'What will I do there? It's been so long, hardly can I remember that place'" (Sinha 103). Ma Franci shares her problem with the protagonist with hope for the betterment of her situation. However, with the narration of Ma Franci's deprivation, the protagonist shares the story with readers to bring a ray of hope in the lives of the survivors of trauma.

Similarly, through the narration of the hapless and unfortunate condition of Somaraj, the protagonist presents another example of the industrial mishap as well as their deprived conditions and traumas. Somraj, who is also one among other deprived victims of the industrial disaster, hates and voices against the "Kampani". He not only loses his voice, but his son and wife also. Animal further narrates that Nisha, the daughter of Somraj tells him about the misfortune that she and her father have to face, ". . . he used to be a singer, . . . His name was known throughout India, . . . they called him Aawaaz-e-Khaufpur, the voice of Khaufpur. Nisha told me that in his younger days her dad was always singing on the radio plus he gave concerts and the like, until that night took away his wife and baby son and fucked up his lungs" (Sinha 33). Instead of being disheartened due to all these tragic situations, Somraj stands against the corruption of the corporate world like a strong pillar. He also continues to help other poor and helpless poisoned victims through his non-governmental poison relief committee, ". . . he ran a poison-relief committee which did what it could for the locals who were still coughing their lungs up so many years after that night" (Sinha 33). Not only Somraj but, his daughter Nisha along with the social worker Zafar continuously stand with poverty-stricken victims of Khaufpur and raise voice against the inhumanness of the corporate world and unhealed traumas.

Shambhu and his wife, other characters of the novel, also suffer not only due to their poverty but also because of the irresponsible attitude of the government. Someone advises Shambhu's wife to take him to the government hospital for treatment. In reply, one of the victims states that ". . . what welcome do we people get at the government hospital? They won't give him this good gas, they'll send him off with a chit for aspirin" (Sinha 147). Shambhu's wife, in order to save his life, decides to take her husband to the non-governmental free clinic of Khaufpur. The government has failed to provide minimal health facilities and justice to the victims. And non-governmental organizations take the promise seriously of improving the traumatic condition of the poor and poisoned victims. Thus, Shambhu's condition not only presents the inhumanness of the "Kampani" (Sinha 31) but, also reflects the trauma, tragic, and hapless condition of those poor victims, who have to live without the right to an adequate standard of living. Although they are unable to raise their voice against injustice and inhumanity due to their tragic situation.

The protagonist's narration also includes the tragic picture of other poisoned and troubled victims such as, his little friend Aliya and her grandparents, Hanif and Huriya, next Aftaab and his wife Pyare and lots of poor victims, who still have to suffer a lot due to the disaster that happened at Khaufpur. Even after the passing of a few decades of that tragic night, they have to face agonies and miseries, not only for the leakage of the poisonous gas from the industry but also for the irresponsible attitude of the "Kampani" (Sinha 31) and the government:

> The case against the Kampani had been dragging on endless years. It stood accused of causing the deaths of thousands on that night, … Khaufpuris were demanding that the Kampani must pay proper compensation to those whose loves ones it killed, whose health it ruined, plus it should clean the factory and compensate the people who had been drinking its poison (Sinha 31).

Despite being deprived and frustrated, the victims raise their voice against inhumanity, with Zafar and his groups. Thus, Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, through the characterization of the deprived poor and poisoned gas victims of Khaufpuris, presents the picture of the unhealed traumas, injustice, and long-term mental agonies. The story also presents the fact that there is a huge gap between the concept and realistic situation. Moreover, Animal's story helps to trace the unhealed traumas of victims, which prove to be helpful to bring betterment in the deprived condition of the poisoned survivors. The protagonist portrays the story of the psychological

disruption, unfavourable situations, and hardships of the day-to-day life of the underprivileged poisoned Khaufpuris. His narration draws a line of connection and interrelationship between the representation of traumatic events and literature. The protagonist also presents the story of profound loss as well as the physical and mental trauma of self and other poisoned Khaufpuris. The characters project themselves in a way that shows not only their pain and concern for the justice and basic rights essential for everyday life but a veritable awareness and intuitiveness regarding the importance of the formulation of a new self along with a thinkable insight into the society of the deprived. Besides, the narrative style and the language of Sinha's *Animal's People* emphasize the importance of egalitarianism.

Conclusion

This paper has examined *Animal's People* and demonstrated the process of painstaking rectification of an individual's personal traumatic history. The study has presented the observation that the memory of the traumatic past plays an important role in the reformulation of traumatized minds. Sinha's disabled protagonist does not depend on an able society in his struggle to emerge from his profound loss and intense fear. *Animal's People* critiques the modern-day justice system as well as draws the reader's attention to the fact that law and justice are functions only as a shadow cast by the corporate organizations. The details of the trauma of the poor victims, the place of trauma, injustice, and corruption present an interrelation between a traumatic event and narratives. The study has presented how the representation of unhealed traumas of victims in *Animal's People* and the significance of collective perspectives help to find ways to reconstruct and carry on with reconfigured lives.

With reference to the theory of trauma and literature by different theorists and scholars, this study has highlighted the convention of matter-of-factness and realism and exposed the psychological and physical trauma and emotional process that help to develop social awareness. The study has also included the importance of the formulation of a new self rather than being confined to the young protagonist's crisis and other traumatic phases of the victims' lives. Subsequently, it has presented the struggles of the deprived humans of Khaufpur as a ray of hope for the next generations of Khaufpuris as well as interpreted the fact that people have to fight by themselves for themselves to be the privileged from the underprivileged.

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