
Neocolonialism and Environmental Disaster: An Ecocritical Study of Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

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Abstract:

Indra Sinha contemplates that colonialism still exists and finds new ways to exploit colonised land and people democratically. This paper is an effort to explore *Animal's People* (2007) in the colonial and postcolonial paradigm and unfolds that the novel is a narrative about Bhopal Gas Tragedy that occurred in December, 1984 due to the leakage of poisonous gas named, Methyl isocyanate. It has also observed how literary activism addresses the negative social and environmental effects of gas leakage while posing as neo-colonialism. It questions a multinational company named The Union Carbide India Limited (an American-based chemical production company) for the injustice done to humans and non-humans alike and seeks justice for the poor people of India. The study shall foreground Sinha's critique of capitalism, environmental toxicity, corporate colonialism, bio-colonisation, violation of human and animal rights, and environmental harm done to the Third World Nations. The paper is an attempt to understand how Sinha makes his readers aware of the recurrence of many more such events shortly and proposes equilibrium between environment and human beings, between the East and the West, and insists that environmental disaster has not only affected Indian people but it has also global repercussions.

Keywords: Colonialism, neo-colonialism, postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental disaster, and environmental justice.

Understanding the impact of Bhopal gas tragedy on humans as well as non-humans through different writers' pen

The 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy is an expression of neocolonialism and has an unfathomable effect on the human and non-human beings. The release of methyl isocyanite (MIC) from American-based company has devastated city's people in bulk. India is a postcolonial country, "in the temporal as well as the economic and political senses" (Feldner, 516). Although, it got freedom on 15 August, 1947 from the Britishers but like Africa and other postcolonial countries, it is still "in continuing subservience to European and North American Governments and Corporations" (Feldner, 516).

Mukherjee portrays the vivid consequences and effects of tragedy that takes place on the colonial land and to the colonial people, he mentions that, "Between 5000 and 10,000 people were killed almost immediately" (134). But this monstrous tragedy had not stopped there as suffering and pains of people were consistently increasing. It was observed that the Bhopal gas tragedy has, "affected an estimated 200,000 people out of the 900,000 who lived in this rapidly expanding central Indian city" (Mukherjee, 134). The range of tragedy has not only been limited to human beings rather it has more drastic effects on plants, animals and air but due attention has not been paid to the damage done to the non-human part and nature. Mukherjee explicates the pathetic condition of the animals

and birds whose dead bodies are scattered in the city. He states that no attention is being paid towards marginal and non-humans of the Bhopal as he elucidates that, “The horrific damage to animal and plant life remains largely uncharted” (134), as “countless animals and plants” (Mukherjee, 136) were damaged. Mukherjee also reminds the reader of the air pollution or the presence of gas particles due to the release of poisonous gas as he says, “it was highly toxic” (136-137). It is also observed that people died of suffocation, brain stroke, liver infection and lung disease under the impact of poisonous gas. The incidents of pre-mature birth and post birth deaths are also found in abundance.

The present study endeavours to engage in an intensive and extensive study of Sinha’s novel. The conceptual tools such as the theories of postcolonialism and ecocriticism will be used as the predominant methodological and theoretical framework to argue and analyse the literary, socio-political and ecological issues of the postcolonial India as constituted in the novel *Animal’s People* (2007) by Indra Sinha.

Neo-Colonialism: as a new dominating tool for First World Countries

Neo-colonialism is an extension of colonialism, but in a new form whereby First World Nations (developed countries) control the Third World Nations (developing countries) through indirect means from distant ruling centres. The term was first used post WWII in order to refer to the unequal economic and power relations between colonisers and colonised as Mukherjee traces, “theories of neo-colonialism that emerged in the 1950s in the context of the end of formal European rule in Africa” (6). The wealthy nations have drained the wealth of colonised countries in the past through colonialism and at present through foreign debt means like, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and trade. Neo-colonialism depicts the present existing international economic relations and intervention of powerful countries in the affairs of less powerful countries. But the prominent thing about neo-colonialism is that it remains successful in ‘manufacturing the consent’ (Herman and Noam Chomsky), moulding and controlling the psyche of the people of the Third World Nations that the whites are their supreme rulers and they can provide better models of development through multinational companies and transnational corporations to the poor Third World Nations and eradicate their poverty. But, as the developing countries had started taking loan from the developed countries, the developed countries in return started influencing those countries like India, many African and Latin American countries in their internal affairs, use their natural resources to which Simal-Gonzalez refers, “Contemporary overconsumption of material commodities generates an excess” (210), and capture culturally and ecologically enrich postcolonial geographical space which twice or even thrice their wealth and in return harm the environment of the Third World countries.

Buell describes this fractured policy in *Toxic Discourse* as, “eco-inequality on a global scale” (644). Mukherjee (2010) also enumerates this financial greed, “the economic dynamics of capital is etched onto the political, cultural, material and ecological fabric of our world” (13). It is pertinent to mention that they exhort the natural wealth of the colonised countries but they have no accountability to the poor people of that particular geographical space which they have chosen for their business and marketing purpose as per International Business Laws (ILB). Ferdinand describes colonialism as one of the worst marks in the human history on this earth and expresses that, “the colonial fracture separates humans and the geographical spaces of the Earth between European colonisers and non-European whites” (6). So, it is concluded from the Ferdinand’s statement that the end of physical colonialism means the opening up of other forms of colonisation to which Ghanaian thinker and leader Kwame Nkrumah highlights, “This withdrawal (colonialism) . . . led not to the end of the world imperial system, but to new forms of its entrenchment” (Qtd. in Mukherjee, 6), which refers to the presence of neocolonialism in new world order.

Environmental Disaster and *Animal’s People* (2007) by Indra Sinha

Indra Sinha is an influential English writer of India and British descent. His hybrid-self is well noticed from his mix identity as he is a child of Indian father and British mother. But he is prominently known for his prominent novel, *Animal’s People* (2007) for which he has received Commonwealth Writers’ Prize in 2008. The novel was also shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in 2007. Sahu in an article comments on *Animal’s People*, “The novel discusses the devastating impact of gas leak . . . not just on the people, but also on the ecology” (549). The global environmental degradation has colonial roots because postcolonial, anthropocentric development discourses, and acculturation processes have changed the outlook of indigenous people and their relationship with the environment. The limit of environment exhales from technological, industrial, agricultural commercial practices, privatisation, laissez-faire policies, neo-marketing and corporate colonialism, which affects the nature of the whole world in the age of globalization as Huggan & Tiffin narrate, “Postcolonial study has come to understand environmental issues not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination, but also as inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism” (6). The ideas of colonialism and postcolonialism have been widely expressed from the perspectives of the colonisers and the colonized in English literature; whereas colonialism reflects thematic concerns related to binary differences like race, colour, power, knowledge, inferior and superior from the point of view of white colonisers in order to exploit others. The end of physical

colonisation paves new way for the exploitation of Third World Countries in the guise of neo-colonisation which tries to neutralise the postcolonial resistance forces about which postcolonial critic Shohat exposes that, “Contemporary cultures are marked by the tension between the official end of direct colonial rule and its presence and regeneration through hegemonising neo-colonialism” (106).

Animal's People is a narrative about Bhopal Gas Tragedy which occurred in December, 1984 due to the leakage of poisonous gas named, Methyl isocyanate and its effect on local ecology including humans. Animal a pivotal character to whom Sinha (2007) describes as, “I used to be human once . . . I don't remember . . . when . . . I walked on two feet just like human being” (1), narrates the painful sufferings of the people of fictional town Khaufpur (based on Bhopal). The novel portrays the injustice done to the people of Bhopal by The Union Carbide India Limited (an American based chemical production company), to which Sinha denotes as Kampani in the novel), in order to grow cash crops in Asia and other continents. To this Huggan and Tiffin claim that the, “history of human oppression of other humans is replete with instances of animal metaphors and animal categorizations frequent deployed to justify exploitation” (134-135). Although, *Animal's People* on a superficial reading seems to be an account of human tragedy, but intensive reading of the novel foregrounds Sinha's critique of capitalism, “politics of environmental toxicity” (Mukherjee, 134), corporate colonialism, violation of human and animal rights and environmental injustice done to the Third World Nations.

Sinha's transformation of his nineteen-year-old central character Animal who proclaims, “I used to be human once” (1), from human to non-human like image, constitutes his postcolonial blurred identity after the Bhopal gas tragedy. It also pertains to Sinha's mixed and fragmented self, because of his birth from two different descent parents to which Mukherjee describes that, “capitalism is under the impulsion to eliminate all spatial barriers” (13). The study brings into light the mission of colonial history to dissolve one's self in order to break his bond with his own land, cultural heritage, language, tradition, and history for the purpose of economic exploitation through its more radical and ideological form known as neo-colonialism to which Nkrumah (1965) elaborates:

In place of colonialism as the main instrument of imperialism we have today neo-colonialism . . . More often, however, neo-colonialists control is exercised through economic or monetary means . . . The result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world. (ix-x)

The sort of ecological imperialism can be observed easily in the novel from the evacuation of local ecosystem as explained by Sinha, “No bird sing . . . No bee humming. Insects can't survive here. Wonderful poisons the Kampani made . . . impossible to get rid of them” (29). Sinha proposes a counter-narrative to the western attitude of difference through the portrayal of Ma Franci, a French nun who has forgotten all the languages, except French and tries to create equilibrium between environment and human beings, between east and west and insists that disaster has not only affected Indian people but it has global reach also. The novelist portrays that colonialism still exists and it is finding new ways to exploit colonial land and people in different ways. The still continuing presence of colonial ideologies is visualised by the writer as, “white palace of gone rulers on hill, lake looks pale” (Sinha, 133). The writer objects to Imperial discourses particularly neo-colonialism which aims at controlling the native resources and endorses Said's idea of imperialism which, “means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory” (9).

Sinha makes his readers aware about the reoccurrence of many more such events in the near future. Deloughrey and Handley try to redefine the field of postcolonial ecocriticism as they explain that it is a, “balance between ecocriticism's important critique of anthropocentrism and postcolonialism's concern for social justice” (121).

Third World Countries serve as a dumping station for First World Countries

Due to industrialisation, modernisation, urbanisation, tourism and increase of population the whole globe is facing a dilemma pertaining to waste management. The most contemplative part regarding waste management is hazardous toxic waste management like radioactive, chemical waste, corrosive waste and explosive waste. But once again on this grim issue, the Euro-north American metropolitan centres escape safely to take the responsibility of their waste and they are using their former colonies as a dump yard for them. Mukherjee points out a very important document which came into public domain on 12 December 1991, called ‘Summers Memo’, which unveils the global politics of First World Nations regarding waste management, “a memo from the then president of the World Bank . . . leaked to the world press, causing outrage amongst ecologist and environmental activists” (34). It is necessary to highlight that Lawrence Summers was the then president of World Bank and the year 1991 reminds people about the introduction of Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation, 1991 policies. The essence of the whole of ‘Summers Memo’ is the dumping of the waste of European countries in the African and Asian countries with an irrational logic that these countries are underdeveloped and under-populated to which Guha denotes ‘environmentalism of poor’. The postcolonial objection to this logic is that the profit of the multinational companies goes primarily to the west, then, why should Eastern countries bear the filth of the First World Nations? Though they are not responsible for it.

Since then, ‘Summers Memo’ becomes curse for deprived and backward countries. Now the question arises is, has anything done in return by the policy makers, bureaucrats and politicians of the previous colonised countries

to counter the Summers memo. The research work explores that they themselves are also involved in such heinous acts to some extent as 14 March 2007, Nandigram village (West Bengal) incident had shown the alliance between multinational corporations and local government. The people of village had agitated against the development plan of state, because state government had already been kept his motive of forceful acquisition of fertile land before the people as government proclaimed, “plans were announced to acquire at least 4000 hectares of productive agricultural land to set up a ‘special economic zone’ (SEZ)” (Mukherjee, 3). This act of government worried people of Nandigram as they were going to be homeless. State police, bureaucrats and, “the thugs of the ‘irregular’ force, whom they appeared to fear even more than the police, ‘harmads’” (Mukherjee, 3), instigate violence on the people of their own country in the form of, “Killing, burning, looting and raping” (Mukherjee, 3), on the name of advancement and under the pressure of the owners of the MNCs of First World Nations because the whole benefit goes to the First World Nations and contribute in their GDP, and in contrast to this, all the irregularities, tragedies, casualties and problems, be it on the part of human/non-human and environment have to be faced only by the people of Third World Nations as it is evident in the *Animal’s People*. Mukherjee explicates this First World idea as, “That somewhere out there in the east, quite detached from ‘us’, dwell tribes of crazed poverty-stricken crowds . . . whose very existence is useful to ‘us, because we can dump our political and environmental toxicity on them” (34). Similarly in the case of Bhopal gas tragedy, it is observed that European whites have thrown the filth of their neo-colonial policies in India whose tragic fire is still striking in the mind of the residents of city.

Now the research question arises from the above discussion is, do international companies establish themselves on their own in the Third World Nations? Or do they have support at the local level from elites, bureaucrats and politicians? Or who have given them the right to sell toxicants and pesticide products for growing cash crops in the developing or under-developed nations? An answer to this question defines the signing of a business deal of the West Bengal government with the Salim industrial group of Indonesia to use that acquired Special Economic Zone of 4000 hectares for setting up a huge chemical hub. It is observed that, to build a chemical hub, numbers of primary, high and secondary schools were destroyed, temples, masjids, houses, markets and shops were demolished. Now, again the question arises is, do we call it development or destruction? It is an intentional erasure of local indigenous environment and culture in the name of development on the façade of neo-colonial policies.

Conclusion

Having considered the above research ideas the work highlights the postcolonial ecocritical issues in the context of neocolonialism which harms the environment in Sinha’s novel. The research paper explains the dominance of first-world countries over formerly colonised areas which had been undergone a process of decolonization. But colonial order, including institutions, regimes of accumulation and regulation, forms of governance, patterns of thought, and understanding, continues to exert a strong, and in some cases, defining influence beyond the formal transfer of power that affects the formerly colonised marginal people, their environment, and other factors. The research work also critiques the environmental racism and over-indulgence of former colonial nations and the absence of the voice of subalterns and former colonies in the framing of environmental policies at the global level to which Ferdinand supports in his book *Decolonial Ecology*. The paper at one level traces out the effects of Bhopal Gas Tragedy in *Animal’s People* but on other way, it shows the resistance of the people of Bhopal (India) in particular and by the people of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Carribean World in general to the cultural and epistemic values of the former colonisers that promote free markets in the guise of neocolonialism. It seeks justice and participation of marginal in the regulations of new laws and environmental policies.

The paper explores that the narrative is balanced on a fault line between the scales of the local and the global, the single and the universal, conflict between Bhopal and Khaufpur, between the place and its people, between the real and imagined city.

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