

The Power of Nothing(s): Parahumanity and Erasure in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

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Abstract

Indra Sinha's 2007 novel *Animal's People* is a fictionalised account of the Bhopal industrial disaster with a physically disfigured and twisted protagonist who is vulgar, comical, and often deeply touching in his observations about life and the plight of his neighbors. While the novel has received much attention for these aspects, including being awarded a Commonwealth Writer's Prize and shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, scholarly attention has largely ignored the intertwining of Animal's dual animal/human nature with the destruction of the chemical spill that twisted his body. This article employs a theoretical frame based on Monique Allewaert's concept of parahumanity, as well as a variety of work in posthumanism to explore the ways in which Animal's denial of a singular category of being is representative of a creative force. This force rises from the destruction of the chemical spill and serves as a means of survival for Animal and the people of Khaufpur. However, for this generative force to come into being the past must be reckoned with. Animal presents this reckoning as he consistently declares his inhumanity while maintaining traits that firmly cement his conditioned human nature, including his quest for sex, love, and his occasional misogynistic attitudes. 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.

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Indra Sinha's 2007 novel *Animal's People*, a fictionalised account of the legacy of the Bhopal industrial disaster (1984), centres on a young man who has been physically altered by a large-scale chemical spill that killed thousands and left countless more ill or disfigured. Left with a permanently bent spine that necessitates walking on all fours, he is constantly teased by other children in his youth and dubbed with the epithet 'Animal'. Rather than separate himself from this derogatory name, he embraces it and all that being an 'Animal' entails, all but shunning his humanity and forming a strong, often vulgar personality in the process. In many ways, the character presents a case of what critic Monique Allewaert terms parahumanity.¹ Allewaert suggests that parahumans exist on a horizontal plane alongside humans and animals, thereby subverting enlightenment organisational thinking that places a definite border between the two. Animal falls beneath the theoretical umbrella of parahumanity due to his inability to maintain a humanist or posthumanist ethic, owing to his failure to deconstruct his own psychological and

¹ Monique Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) 6.

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sociological divide between his desire for sex, love, and the ability to walk upright, which he believes would reclaim his humanity, and his constant claims that he is nothing but a mere animal incapable of such pursuits. In this way, Animal reflects an outwardly imposed, traumatic resetting of his being that allows for personal and social reinterpretation. This reinterpretation can occur because of the multiple erasures that create the unique setting of the novel, including those of Animal's humanity, the safety of Khaufpur– Sinha's fictionalised Bhopal, and the responsibility of Kompani – the novel's stand-in for Union Carbide. The gas spill that disfigured Animal stripped him of his humanity, but through embracing the change, he is able to reconstruct his being and eventually arrive at a place of acceptance. However, this acceptance is tainted by internalised binaries that, although challenged by Animal, are never escaped. On a larger scale, the novel offers a redefinition of identity and acceptance of perceived deficiency as untapped potential for combatting neocolonial exploitation and injustice on a personal as well as a communal level.

The novel's opening lines first introduce Animal's nonchalant and seemingly confident dismissal of his humanity: '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.'² With this bit of narration a precedent is already set, in which Animal's humanity is a past condition that has been removed by the trauma, both mental and physical, of the moment of the chemical spill, an event Animal refers to only as 'that night' (AP 14). In presenting this narrative model, these lines establish the night of the gas spill as the source of most of the erasures that are presented within the narrative. Animal reflects on this fact to what he perceives as the numerous 'eyes' of the audience, telling them that 'my story has to start with that night,' although he was too young to remember the spill. He claims that when such an event occurs 'time divides into before and after, the before time breaks up into dream, the dreams dissolve into darkness' (AP 14). Beyond relying on Animal's narration as a source for evidence of the terror caused by the spill, the characters themselves serve as living reminders of the effects of the gas. Animal is the most striking example as his body and its mode of locomotion ensure that not only his life is forever tied to the event, but also his presence serves as a signifier for large scale disaster, the invisibility of the poor, and large scale corporate greed and irresponsibility.

While Animal is the most pressing example of physical signification of the spill, other characters also bear its legacy. Somraj, once a famous and admired singer, lost the ability to sing due to 'that night'. Ma Françi, a Roman Catholic nun and Animal's surrogate mother, lost her capability to speak or understand either Hindi or English, leaving her only her native French, which Animal alone understands among the Kaufpuris. Other characters suffer more indirectly from the long-term effects of air, soil, and water pollution: the tragically named I'm Alive is miraculously untouched by the spill physically, but must still confront the mental toll of being surrounded by persistent illness and death. As well as signifying multiple losses for the characters, the harmful lingering effects of the disaster are also illustrative of what is termed 'slow violence' by critic Rob Nixon. Nixon defines the term as 'a violence that occurs gradually

² Indra Sinha, *Animal's People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007) 1. Further references to this text will be included in parenthesis in the text preceded by AP.

and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.’³

While the initial violence of ‘that night’ was shockingly evident in the thousands of deaths it caused, its after effects are largely unaccounted for. Only the people of Khaufpur, the government agents they appeal to for justice, outside sympathisers aiding in their struggle, and reporters such as the ‘Kakadu Jarnalis’ who serves as the framing agent for the narrative, seem to care about or even be aware of the ever-increasing death toll. Of those parties, only the citizenry of Khaufpur must face the realities of their own corporeal insecurity daily. This point is exemplified in Animal’s trademark scatological manner as he explains the virtues of communal defecation to Elli, eventually arriving at the observation that ‘then there’s the medical benefit. Your stools can be examined by all. You can have many opinions about the state of your bowels, believe me our people are experts at disease’ (AP 184). Instead of being sources of wonder or pride, the bodies of Khaufpuris have been transformed by toxic pollution into what Jesse Oak Taylor describes as ‘loci of accretion, sites where chemicals interact and build up over time, producing new form and unknown reactions.’⁴ Paramount among these ‘unknown reactions’ is Animal’s twisted body, the physical appearance of which drives the deep-seated internal conflict over his lost humanity that the ‘eyes’ of the audience are privy to throughout the novel.

The central theme of Animal’s inner turmoil is his being identified as a literal animal, whether by another or by himself. As narrator, he does not shy away from discussing how his public image has come into being, beginning with the emergence of his physical condition which serves as his first conscious moment of remaking following the erasure of ‘that night’. At the age of six he begins to experience pain so severe that ‘nothing else do I remember from that time, my first memory is that fire’ (AP 15). In this way, Animal’s first memory is of being torn from his perceived humanity and redefined as something other. As he develops and ages other children inevitably notice his new bodily structure and form of locomotion. After biting a classmate during a game he is rechristened as ‘Animal’ and later his name is affirmed while swimming with other children: ‘A girl about my own age, she pushed me and left the prints of her muddy fingertips on my body. The mud dried pale on my skin. She said, “Like a leopard!”’ (AP 16). After other children join in painting the spots on his body they reiterate the use of ‘Animal’ and ‘The name, like the mud, stuck’ (AP 16). Although the origins of the name are in childhood play, it is reinforced and transforms from a playful nickname to a concrete identifier for the human being as it is used by everyone within Khaufpur, and the reader never learns Animal’s given name due to the erasure of ‘that night.’

The motivation for the thorough adoption of Animal as the protagonist’s name is rooted in the dichotomy between human and animal, specifically as it was developed in the West during the Enlightenment. This underlying doctrine is hinted at when Animal says about his name ‘the nuns tried to stop it [his nicknaming] but some things have a logic that can’t be denied’ (AP 16). The logic of which he speaks is the strict and definite separation between what is ‘human’ and what is ‘animal’. This dichotomy is often called upon when distinctions must be made between what

³ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011) 2.

⁴ Jesse Oak Taylor, ‘Power of Zero: Aggregation, Negation, and the Dimensions of Scale in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*,’ *Literature and Medicine* 31.2 (2013) 187.

is 'civilised' and what is 'savage'. This separation grows from the anthropocentric thinking of the Enlightenment and the subsequent development of humanism as a highly influential ideology. Michel Foucault's theorisation of humanism is especially useful in advancing the idea of the topic being put forth in this analysis. He asserts that 'it is a theme or, rather, a set of themes that have reappeared on several occasions, over time, in European societies; these themes, always tied to value judgments, have obviously varied greatly in their content, as well as in the values they have preserved.'⁵ As he points out, the exact parameters of humanism have fluctuated over time, but they have always been predicated on value judgments about what defines and constitutes humanity and, more importantly for understanding Animal, what does not.

In developing her concept of 'parahumanity' in *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics*, Monique Allewaert traces a historical development of personhood in Anglophone politics and philosophy beginning with Thomas Hobbes, who defined it according to performance 'as an entity with a capacity to act or represent, whether on one's own behalf (natural persons) or on behalf of others (artificial persons).' This view gives way to John Locke's reliance on consciousness as the core criterion that consists of 'a collection of substances, parts, actions, and memories that are organized into a "vital union".' Finally, she interrogates William Blackstone's legal slant on personhood that combined, or possibly confused, the idea with that of the body, as she explains:

If in Locke the body and the person endowed with consciousness are formally analogous but distinct, Blackstone all but conflates the body with the person. A natural person is an individual and organic human body that appears 'such as the God of nature formed us,' but an artificial person is the product of human laws and is conceptualized through the somatic metaphors of the corporation or body politic, which imaginatively endow the artificial person with the bounded, centralized, and organized form Blackstone saw as the fundamental characteristic of the natural person.⁶

The conflation of the 'natural body' with the 'artificial body' demonstrates the fragility that is inherent in any definition of humanity or personhood. Furthermore, the ideological definitions of humanity that emerged – many of which have remained in intellectual circulation – have shifted the focus of their value judgments from the species level to interspecies concerns among humans, such as the construction of gender or race. Katherine N. Hayles offers a brief interrogation of what she terms the 'liberal humanist subject':

Feminist theorists have pointed out that it has historically been constructed as a white European male, presuming a universality that has worked to suppress and disenfranchise women's voices; postcolonial theorists have taken issue not only with the universality of the (white male) liberal subject but also with the very idea of a unified, consistent identity, focusing instead on hybridity; and postmodern theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix

⁵ Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment,' *The Foucault Reader* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage, 2010) 44.

⁶ Allewaert 11.

Guattari have linked it with capitalism, arguing for the liberatory potential of a dispersed subjectivity distributed among diverse desiring machines they call ‘body without organs’.⁷

These perspectives on the development of the concept that we (often flippantly) refer to as ‘humanity’ illustrate the contingency of the term and the flimsiness of many of its foundational theories, theories that may have reached their limit of efficacy. For this examination of *Animal’s People*, the vital distinction to make is between ‘humanity’ and the rhizomatic possibilities that could supplant it, especially those beyond the realm of bodily modification or unification with machine. The posthuman subject is not a robot or cyborg, but instead an individual possessing a new set of schema for interpreting and being in the world. The Parahuman is an amalgamation of humanist and posthumanist concepts arranged along individual subjective lines influenced by oppressive exterior forces. Cognition and socially motivated negotiation of identity are of paramount importance in both theoretical frameworks, as well as in the novel.

The need for a new formulation of individual subjectivity is apparent in the dichotomy between animal and human, which is a conventional reference point that fills the vacuum of identity created by the erasure of the chemical spill in *Animal’s People*. However, in perpetuating such a potentially harmful binary, the people of Khaufpur and Animal himself are only expanding the subjugation he suffers as a third-world subject and victim of transnational capitalism run amok. If reliance on humanist modes of thinking only reinforces false dichotomies and serves to subjugate Animal as a non-human that walks on four legs, then a new mode is necessary to allow him to recreate his identity. In response to the theme of literary humanitarianism that is associated with novels of mass disaster, Jennifer Rickel offers posthumanism as that mode. Literary humanitarianism is deeply flawed as a narrative strategy as it robs the subject of agency in relating their story. Rickel more specifically identifies the treatment of trauma as the main failing of the model, positing that, ‘by approaching political violence as unspeakable and prescribing testimony to treat its symptoms, literary humanitarianism dislocates suffering from complex histories and politically and economically situated conflicts.’⁸ The posthumanist mode, she claims, is how the novel avoids this fate, by calling into question ‘the very possibility of dehumanization’ and focusing upon ‘what it means to be human and what it means to be implicated as a dehumanized figure in a literary humanitarian narrative structure.’⁹ Rickel argues that Animal’s narration of the novel challenges the primacy of a humanitarian reading of the novel that is predicated on the dehumanisation and he and of his fellow Khaufpuris. Acceptance of such a reading would not only reinforce a ‘testifier-witness dialectic between narrator and reader’ as Rickel argues, but it would also accept the nebulous, problematic concept of humanity as a condition that was present but erased by violence of the chemical disaster.¹⁰

⁷ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) 4.

⁸ Jennifer Rickel, ‘“The Poor Remain”: A Posthumanist Rethinking of Literary Humanitarianism in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*,’ *ARIEL* 43.1 (2012) 89.

⁹ Rickel 90.

¹⁰ Rickel 89.

Reading *Animal* as a posthumanist figure is certainly possible, although the term ‘posthumanism’ is just as contentious as ‘humanism’ and is the subject of ongoing debate. Hayles defines the posthuman subject as ‘an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction.’¹¹ This formulation can be applied to *Animal* in light of observations made about him by others, notably Nixon’s application of Kristevan abjection:

If we associate abjection with the rupturing of systemic order and sealed identity from within, then Sinha has created in his picaresque *Animal* a potent compression of disturbing, porous ambiguity, a figure whose leakiness confounds the borders between the human and the nonhuman as well as the borders between the national and the foreign.¹²

The rupturing of identity experienced by *Animal* in the aftermath of ‘that night’ has led to the ‘continuous construction and reconstruction’ of the ‘boundaries between the human and the nonhuman’ as well as the social boundaries between himself and others.

It is crucial to note at this juncture that this reconstruction is not taking place physically through bodily modification, especially in light of *Animal*’s ultimate refusal of surgery that could potentially grant him the ability to walk upright (more on that later). Such a change would be more constitutive of a transhuman or cybernetic posthuman approach, both of which emphasise the physical alteration of the body in order to transcend its naturally prescribed limits. While such approaches are useful in certain scenarios, they could only be applied to *Animal*’s situation clumsily due to their disregard for physical embodiment. *Animal*’s story is gripping because he embodies the suffering imposed upon him by the chemical spill; he embraces his corporeality to the extent that he enjoys eating chunks of dried skin from his heavily calloused feet (AP 13). Hayles proposes that not only is embodiment an intersection between humanism and posthumanism, but that it has been ‘systematically downplayed or erased in the cybernetic construction of the posthuman in ways that have not occurred in other critiques of the liberal humanist subject, especially in feminist and postcolonial theories.’¹³ However, such downplaying is not the case in less transgressive constructions of posthumanism, such as that suggested by Cary Wolfe, who echoes Hayles’ criticism of humanist threads within posthumanist thinking in claiming that ‘posthumanism in my sense isn’t posthuman at all – in the sense of being “after” our embodiment has been transcended – but is only *posthumanist*, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself.’¹⁴ Although Wolfe finds common ground with Hayles on this point, he is also quick to point out that her scholarship tends to ‘associate the posthuman with a kind of triumphant disembodiment’ that disregards the coupling of embodiment with the posthuman.¹⁵ For posthumanism to be applied to a character such as *Animal* and a novel such as *Animal’s People* with its multiple examples of body-centered violence and slow violence, it must be in a

¹¹ Hayles 3.

¹² Nixon 55.

¹³ Hayles 4.

¹⁴ Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) xv.

¹⁵ Wolfe xv.

form that does not privilege a leaving behind of the human body, such as would be examined in a cybernetic context.

Wolfe formulates the most promising conception of posthumanism for an examination of *Animal's People*. His posthumanism is concerned not just with the human body and embodiment in an insular sense, but also with the comingling factors that have been present in the development of humanity over the course of our history. His posthumanism 'names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatics, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore,' a moment that requires 'a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repression and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon.'¹⁶ The grounding in historical embodiment he suggests couples with the physical embodiment that is also a hallmark of his interpretation to form a view of the posthuman that accepts both the weight of non-human development and one's own body. Neil Badmington echoes this sentiment in claiming that posthumanism does not and cannot 'mark or make an absolute break from the legacy of humanism', and instead must 'take the form of critical practice that occurs *inside* humanism, and should consist not of the wake but the working-through of anthropocentric discourse.'¹⁷

To challenge the inherent anthropocentrism present in the construction of the human being, we must 'attend to the specificity of the human—its ways of being in the world, its ways of knowing, observing, and describing' along with influential factors that exist, organically or artificially, outside of humanity narrowly defined.¹⁸ In fact, Wolfe suggests that the human is 'fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality' that can be considered 'radically "not-human",' but have nevertheless 'made the human what it is,' among which are forms as diverse as agriculture, the Internet, and language.¹⁹ This construction of posthumanism can be applied to *Animal's* condition when taken in combination with Foucault's theorisation on the 'body politic,' which he refers to as 'a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge.'²⁰ As a physical representation of the injustice and horrors of 'that night', *Animal's* body is certainly the most conspicuous object of knowledge within the narrative owing to his experience of the disaster and its physical and political aftermath. Furthermore, the 'body politic' is useful not only for discussing *Animal*, but also for working toward the historical and material grounding required of the posthumanism synthesised here from the work of Wolfe and Badmington.

A posthumanist reading relying on Wolfe's conception would also necessarily need to address autopoiesis, the term originally developed by Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J.

¹⁶ Wolfe xvi.

¹⁷ Neil Badmington, *Alien Chic: Posthumanism and the Other Within* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 121.

¹⁸ Wolfe xxv.

¹⁹ Wolfe xxv.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995) 28.

Varela to describe the autoproduction or self-creation of oneself, specifically as a system embedded with ever more complex systems.²¹ Such a task is required given Wolfe's reliance on the process as a means of breaking from humanist thinking.²² Beyond a basic definition of autopoiesis, Maturana and Varela also hold that autopoiesis is always conserved across systems, specifically in the case of environments and their inhabitants: 'If we turn our attention to the maintenance of the organisms as dynamic systems in their environment, this maintenance will appear to us as centered on a compatibility of the organisms with their environment which we call adaptation.'²³ This adaptation is present in Animal's body's twisting in response to the violence enacted on Khaufpur and the erasure of its former state as a result of the toxic spill. Such massive change momentarily stalled its self-creating, autopoietic function, but only temporarily, as illustrated in the way that nature is reclaiming the interior of the abandoned factory. Trees and other plants grow within despite the unsettling of absence of insect life due to lingering poisonous chemicals.

Animal's autopoietic function was also temporarily halted by the initial event, and then six years later when as a child his body suddenly underwent the painful transformation that twisted him into his animal-like shape. However, at the time the narration of the novel begins it is well in place. He is keenly aware of his status as it has been defined according to humanist rationale, but it does not prevent him from attempting to reconstruct his being from within, such as when he observes that 'people see the outside, but it's inside where the real things happen, no one looks in there, maybe they don't dare' (AP 11). He recognises the false dichotomy that has created his animal/Animal label, but at the same time he rejects it and seeks to create himself apart from it. The same seems to be true in the novel's close, when Animal makes his final decision regarding the surgery that could restore his ability to walk upright:

I'll never do it and heres why, if I agree to be a human being, I'll also have to agree that I'm wrong-shaped and abnormal. But let me be a quatre pattes animal, four-footed and free, then I am whole, my own proper shape, just a different kind of animal from say Jara, or a cow, or a camel. (AP 208)

In saying this, he is denying the dichotomy of human vs. animal, returning to his initial definition as animal Other and subverting it. To admit that he needs the surgery to be human is to deny the humanity he believes he embodies and accept that his current physicality is something else, something abnormal. In refusing to do so, he maintains an autopoietic agency that allows him to recreate himself despite the multiple exterior powers that have physically and mentally shaped him. After all, he is '*an animal fierce and free*' (AP 172).

However, the autopoietic claims made by Animal in the course of the novel, especially at its close, betray any posthumanist thinking that he may express as they are imminently tainted with humanist logic. For instance, he reveals that he has saved the money he has earned from working for Zafar and others in order to pay for the surgery that he has now decided to forgo. In fact, up

²¹ Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Organization of the Living* (Boston: Reidel, 1980).

²² Wolfe xxiii-xxiv.

²³ Maturana and Varela 102.

until this final admission, his yearning to walk upright has been a driving plot point, beginning early in the novel: “My name is Animal,” I say. “I’m not a fucking human being, I’ve no wish to be one.” This was my mantra, what I told everyone. Never did I mention my yearning to walk upright’ (AP 23). That he has abandoned this aim, while seemingly reflective of a posthuman turn, does nothing to remove the motivation of romantic love that drove much of his agonising over his quadrupedal nature. During his first encounter with Elli, Animal admonishes himself through the many voices that often cloud his thinking, bluntly stating that ‘you got angry because when you looked at her you thought sex, when she looked at you she thought cripple’ (AP 72). All that has changed with respect to this drive toward romantic involvement at the novel’s close is that his attitude has become more positive and he sees this change, along with his saved up money, as the missing pieces to achieving his goal: ‘now that cash, plus a little persuasion from Farouq’s friends, will go to buy Anjali free and she will come to live with me’ (AP 366). Animal may have come to question the human/animal dichotomy that created his name and outer persona, but he still subscribes to deeply humanist thinking internally, representing the deeply rooted nature of the ideology. He seems to have realised that he does not have to buy into his separation from humanity, but he also wants to secure the comforts that only being human provides, namely a romantic relationship, albeit one gained through monetary exchange and strong-armed bullying.

A more fruitful term for analysing Animal and the erasures that allow him to recreate his identity is Allewaert’s parahumanity. Parahumanity is meant to ‘challenge the hierarchal organization of life-forms that was common to colonial anthropologies and natural histories’ while also working to ‘put animals, parahumans, and humans in horizontal relation ... without conflating them’ and adopting a double signification of the prefix ‘para-’ in which it ‘can describe a perversion of that prior category’.²⁴ The body within this category of life is recast as ‘an organization of matter and parts and also fantasies about this organization of matter and parts,’ that is the ‘prima facie site through which personhood is produced and negotiated as well as where the overlapping economic, biological, and social systems that compose place are produced and negotiated.’²⁵ As should be evident, this formulation of life includes many of the criteria of both the human and posthuman that have been discussed to this point. Parahumanity seeks to redefine the conception of the body while also incorporating humanist ‘fantasies’ about its structure and physicality, fantasies that contributed to the models of personhood described earlier, models that ‘registered a deep skepticism about the desirability of the category of the human’ in the Afro-American populations that are the focus of Allewaert’s study.²⁶ Incorporating these fantasies was necessary in order to identify the category of human as defined by Enlightenment-influenced organisational thinking in hope of suspending it ‘so as to prohibit any simple return to it’.²⁷ This idea comes into play in Animal’s thinking as he recognises and even incorporates some concepts of the human ideal into his psyche – namely romantic love and sex – while leaving others in suspension in order to avoid them – the definition of man as strictly

²⁴ Allewaert 86.

²⁵ Allewaert 17.

²⁶ Allewaert 86.

²⁷ Allewaert 86.

bipedal. The dual meaning of ‘para-’ supports this seemingly contradictory identity construction that allows for Animal’s parahumanity to be a perversion of previous forms of humanity. The potentiality of parahumanity also allows for this construction: ‘parahumanity is not, then, a suspension of the category of the human that involves not-choosing. It is a parasitism and a paradox in which choosing keeps the nonchosen in play as a potentiality.’²⁸ By this logic, Animal is free to construct an identity meticulously chosen from the available models, owing this mutability to the ‘copresence of a series of negotiations that allow both construction and intimacy as well as dissolution and alienation’ that parahumanity fantasises.²⁹ It could even be suggested that Animal presents an example of a new, as yet unformulated state that could be termed, rather awkwardly it must be said, ‘paraposthumanity’ in which he perverts the tenets of that system while still maintaining aspects of it as they aid in the construction of his identity.

Perhaps the best encapsulation of Animal’s parahumanity is within the musical anthem that he composes for himself with the aid of Elli:

I am an animal fierce and free
in all the world is none like me
crooked I’m, a nightmare child
few on hunger, running wild
no love and cuddles for this boy
like without hope, laugh without joy
but if you dare to pity me
I’ll shit in your shoe and piss in your tea. (AP 172)

The primacy of the name ‘animal’ in the song is invested with a dual meaning that could refer to the name of the character or the definition of the living organism, either of which relies on a strict definition born of dichotomous thinking. Reference to himself as ‘this boy’ also relies on gender specific definition that is in keeping with his desire for romantic love and shows an autopoietic bent toward widely accepted definitions of gender and love. The closing warning against pity is reflective of a parahuman parallel structure in which there would be no need to pity another living thing. Furthermore, it shows awareness of the human/animal dichotomy and suggests its transcendence in which to pity him would be to subscribe to harmful binary thinking. Animal, shunning both humanist and posthumanist means of restructuring his identity following its erasure by the events of ‘that night’, falls back onto a third mode, Allewaert’s parahumanity, which allows him to better tailor himself to the multifaceted environment he inhabits, maintaining his adaptation and means of self-creation.

Animal is an imperfect creation for an imperfect novel. Sinha draws attention to the tragedy of Bhopal through the events and characters of Khaufpur, but the novel as a form is largely a static creation; readers consume it, spend some time thinking about it, and then likely turn away from it. However, it can be contended that like Animal’s unique parahuman system of identity construction, the novel shapes the tale of transnational exploitation and violence in fits and starts

²⁸ Allewaert 111.

²⁹ Allewaert 99

and with the ability to absorb or deny attributes according to its needs. After all, the novel is a mere snippet of the timeline of the disaster focusing on only a handful of the characters affected, as any report or study of the real life disaster would necessarily be limited in scope. The novel's narrative is incomplete, but it presents a portrait of personal recreation in the form of Animal's life that illustrates the power of literature to live beyond the page by positioning itself at the heart of the matter without claiming to be all encompassing. Animal's final words reinforce this view: 'All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us' (AP 366). The novel ends, we are no longer privy to the in and outs of Animal's struggle to define himself, but the story continues, both in the ethereal fictional space of the created world and in our reality, where the poor continue to die of conditions not far removed from those depicted in the novel. It may feel as if Animal's people, as well as the reader, are left with nothing, but that nothingness contains untold potential for transformation.

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