



From Catastrophe to Ecology: Reading Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* Through Cheryll Glotfelty's Ecocritical Lens

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Abstract

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) revisits the horrors of a toxic disaster modeled on the Bhopal gas tragedy, yet its narrative extends beyond the familiar terrain of post-disaster human suffering. The novel uniquely entwines ecological devastation with bodily trauma, environmental memory, corporate violence, and community resilience. This article reads *Animal's People* through Cheryll Glotfelty's ecocritical framework, placing the text within the broader discourse of environmental humanities that interrogate the relationship between nature and culture, ethics and exploitation, and the human and nonhuman. Using Glotfelty's foundational idea that literature must be studied in relation to the physical environment, this article examines how *Animal's People* exposes the interconnectedness of ecological catastrophe and human vulnerability. The study argues that Sinha's narrative critiques anthropocentric frameworks, foregrounds toxic landscapes, and reveals the socio-environmental inequalities that determine who is most affected by ecological collapse. By shifting the focus from catastrophe to ecology, the article highlights the novel's call for environmental justice and its reimagining of post-disaster agency.

Keywords: Indra Sinha; *Animal's People*; Ecocriticism; Cheryll Glotfelty; Toxic ecology; Environmental justice; Post-disaster fiction.

Introduction

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* is a powerful fictional reimagining of the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster, one of the world's worst industrial catastrophes. Rather than presenting a linear account of the tragedy, Sinha shifts the narrative center toward the lived experiences of "Animal," a survivor whose body has been permanently deformed by the toxic gas leak. Telling his story through taped recordings, Animal becomes both narrator and witness to the enduring effects of environmental devastation. The novel not only recounts personal trauma but also reconstructs a post-disaster ecology that reveals the long-term environmental degradation suffered by the fictional town of Khaufpur.

In its approach to disaster, *Animal's People* resonates with Cheryll Glotfelty's foundational call in ecocriticism: to study the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty xix). Ecocriticism challenges the anthropocentric orientation of traditional literary studies and urges scholars to assess how texts represent ecological systems, environmental degradation, and the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman worlds. By applying Glotfelty's ecocritical principles, this article proposes that *Animal's People* foregrounds a toxic ecology where human bodies, local environments, and the socio-political mechanisms of global capitalism are entwined in complex, unequal, and often violent relationships.

Through this lens, the novel emerges not merely as a narrative of catastrophe but as a sustained reflection on ecological ethics, environmental justice, and the politics of survival. Sinha's narrative strategy—rooted in oral storytelling, corporeal memory, and environmental witnessing—enacts a critical shift from human-centered trauma to an ecological understanding of disaster. This paper thus examines how *Animal's People* aligns with and expands Glotfelty's ecocritical vision.

Ecocriticism: A Glotfeltyan Framework

Cheryll Glotfelty, in her seminal introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xix). She positions the natural world not as a passive background but as an active presence shaping literary production and meaning. Glotfelty argues that environmental issues—pollution, climate change, resource depletion, ecological collapse—must be central concerns of literary inquiry. She further emphasizes that ecocriticism exposes environmental injustices arising from power imbalances and corporate exploitation.

Glotfelty's work laid the foundation for later ecocritical perspectives such as ecofeminism, environmental justice studies, and postcolonial ecocriticism. Her insistence that literature “reflects and shapes environmental attitudes” (xxv) is particularly insightful in the case of *Animal's People*, where narratives of survival and resistance emerge from an ecologically devastated landscape.

Glotfelty's ecocritical framework is relevant for three reasons:

1. **It recognizes environmental disaster as a narrative force** influencing people, space, and identity.
2. **It challenges anthropocentrism**, urging us to consider nonhuman suffering and ecological degradation.
3. **It aligns literature with environmental justice**, focusing on marginalized communities disproportionately impacted by ecological harm.

Using these principles, this article explores how Sinha's novel reveals the interdependent ecology of human trauma, environmental toxicity, and corporate crime.

From Catastrophe to Ecology: Reframing the Disaster

Although *Animal's People* is centered on a catastrophic event, its narrative focus extends beyond the immediate aftermath of the gas leak. The novel portrays a long-term ecological crisis: poisoned soil, contaminated water, genetic deformities, and disrupted ecosystems. In Glotfeltyan terms, the disaster is not an isolated historical moment but an “ongoing ecological imbalance” (Glotfelty 122).

Animal's deformed body becomes a living ecological text—an archive of environmental harm. His spine has been twisted “by the poisons into an S-shape” (Sinha 15), and he walks on all fours, embodying a “human-animal hybridity” that reflects the novel's critique of anthropocentric worldviews. Through Animal, Sinha reminds readers that ecological catastrophe is inscribed onto human bodies, especially those of the marginalized.

The setting of Khaufpur further illustrates the movement from catastrophe to ecology. The city becomes a wasteland, its air, water, and land permeated by toxins. The “Kampani” factory remains an abandoned ruin, a symbol of corporate negligence and environmental crime. Yet Khaufpur's ecology is not static; it evolves through cycles of decay, resistance, and survival, mirroring Glotfelty's insistence that ecocritical readings must account for ecological processes, not merely environmental settings.

Thus, the novel reframes disaster as ecology—an evolving set of relationships that shape the lives of humans and nonhumans alike.

Toxic Landscapes: Environmental Degradation and Corporate Crime

One of the most striking features of the novel is its detailed depiction of toxic landscapes. Sinha describes poisoned rivers, barren fields, and contaminated wells with visceral imagery. These landscapes are not merely aesthetic spaces but political ones. They reflect the consequences of industrial capitalism and corporate irresponsibility.

Glotfelty argues that literature must expose environmental exploitation carried out “in the name of economic progress” (xxv). In *Animal’s People*, the Kampani’s actions exemplify such exploitation. The corporation refuses to accept blame, denies compensation, and obscures the extent of environmental damage. The toxic factory site becomes a haunting presence in the narrative—a specter of ecological violence.

The novel’s depiction of the ongoing toxicity aligns with the principles of environmental justice, which emphasize that ecological harm disproportionately affects marginalized communities. The poor residents of Khaufpur continue to suffer while global institutions debate legal liability and corporate accountability. Sinha’s novel makes visible what Glotfelty calls the “environmental underside of globalization” (134).

The ecological degradation in the novel is thus inseparable from political structures. Pollution, disease, and ecological collapse are symptoms of a global system that privileges profit over environmental and human well-being.

The Body as Ecology: Corporeal Memory and Environmental Trauma

A central ecocritical insight in Glotfelty’s work is that human and environmental health are interconnected. *Animal’s People* foregrounds this interconnection by portraying bodies that carry ecological memory. The toxic gas has altered the genetic and neurological structures of survivors. Animal’s deformed body, Farouq’s asthma, Zafar’s agitation, and the children’s chronic illnesses all trace their origins to environmental exposure.

Animal’s narrative voice—raw, corporeal, and visceral—compels readers to confront ecological trauma in embodied form. He refuses pity or moral judgments, insisting, “My bones remember” (Sinha 112). His body functions as a living archive of environmental violence, revealing what Glotfelty describes as “the inseparability of body and environment” (98).

This reading positions the body as an ecological site where environmental degradation becomes material. Animal’s transformation into a “beast” challenges anthropocentric boundaries and signals a posthuman sensitivity aligned with newer ecocritical directions. By presenting a narrator who is both human and animal, Sinha destabilizes binary thinking and foregrounds the broader ecological entanglements that shape identity.

Voice, Witnessing, and Environmental Testimony

The narrative structure of *Animal’s People*—a series of taped recordings addressed to an international audience—creates a platform for environmental testimony. Animal becomes a voice speaking not only for himself but for the community of Khaufpur and for nonhuman entities affected by the disaster.

The narrative performance exemplifies Glotfelty’s idea that ecocritical literature should “give voice to the voiceless earth” (xxiv). Though Animal is human, his hybrid identity enables him to speak for a damaged landscape. His narration includes descriptions of dying animals, poisoned lakes, and sterile soil—elements of ecological loss that rarely find expression in traditional disaster narratives.

By broadcasting his story to the world, Animal resists the silencing imposed by corporate power and international legal systems. His voice becomes a form of environmental activism. In this sense, the novel performs what ecocriticism advocates: it merges aesthetics with environmental ethics, literature with ecological responsibility.

Community, Resistance, and Ecological Ethics

Despite the devastation, Khaufpur is a site of collective resistance. Characters like Zafar, Nisha, and Elli Doctor embody different forms of ecological responsibility. They organize protests, demand justice, and provide medical support for afflicted survivors. Their actions reflect what Glotfelty identifies as literature's capacity to inspire environmental awareness and collective action (xxvii).

The community's resilience challenges fatalistic interpretations of ecological disaster. Khaufpur refuses to be reduced to a victimized space; instead, it becomes a site of political solidarity and environmental activism. The townspeople engage in legal battles, public demonstrations, and everyday acts of survival that resist ecological oppression.

Furthermore, the novel emphasizes interdependence. Humans, animals, and the environment are portrayed not as separate entities but as connected members of a shared ecology. For example, Animal's bond with Jara the dog reflects a cross-species ethic rooted in mutual care. Such relationships reinforce the novel's departure from human-centered frameworks and align with eco-centric values central to Glotfelty's ecocriticism.

Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Colonial Legacies and Environmental Inequality

Although Glotfelty's ecocriticism emerged within an American environmental framework, its principles can be fruitfully extended into postcolonial contexts. Sinha's novel highlights how toxic industries are disproportionately located in former colonies where labor is cheap, environmental regulations lax, and resistance easily suppressed.

The exploitation of Khaufpur mirrors global patterns of environmental racism and corporate imperialism. As critics have noted, disasters like Bhopal are not merely industrial accidents but "colonial continuities" embedded in global capitalism (Shrivastava 198). The Kampani's refusal to accept responsibility reflects a postcolonial hierarchy where Western corporations exert power over marginalized communities.

Thus, *Animal's People* situates ecological catastrophe within broader structures of inequality. Its representation of environmental devastation in a postcolonial space underscores the need for ecocriticism to address global power dynamics and environmental injustice.

Toward an Eco-Ethical Reading: Nature, Culture, and Moral Responsibility

The novel's ecological vision demands a rethinking of traditional moral frameworks. As Glotfelty asserts, ecocriticism is not limited to analyzing literary representations of nature; it also interrogates ethical questions regarding environmental responsibility (xxv).

Animal's People raises urgent ethical questions:

- Who bears the responsibility for environmental harm?
- How do power, privilege, and economic inequality shape ecological outcomes?
- What does justice mean in contexts of irreversible environmental damage?

Sinha does not offer simple answers. Instead, he constructs a narrative where ethical responsibility is contested across political, corporate, and personal domains. The novel's moral complexity encourages readers to adopt an eco-ethical perspective that recognizes the interconnectedness of human choices, ecological consequences, and social justice.

Through its shifting narrative positions and morally ambiguous characters, the novel reinforces the idea that ecological ethics is not abstract but grounded in lived experience.

Conclusion

Reading *Animal's People* through Cheryll Glotfelty's ecocritical framework reveals the novel as a profound engagement with ecological devastation, environmental justice, and post-disaster survival. Sinha's narrative expands the literary imagination beyond human-centered suffering to encompass toxic landscapes, nonhuman agency, and ecological ethics. The novel challenges anthropocentrism by foregrounding the inseparability of human and environmental health, presenting bodies as ecological texts, and exposing the political structures that perpetuate environmental harm.

Through the voice of Animal and the collective resilience of Khaufpur's community, Sinha advocates for an eco-conscious worldview that aligns with Glotfelty's call to integrate environmental awareness into literary studies. The novel not only critiques corporate exploitation and ecological injustice but also envisions possibilities for resistance, healing, and ecological reimagining.

Ultimately, *Animal's People* demonstrates that literature has the capacity to bear witness to environmental catastrophe, challenge global power structures, and inspire ecological responsibility. By reading the text through Glotfelty's ecocritical lens, we shift the discourse from catastrophe to ecology, discovering within the ruins of Khaufpur a powerful narrative of survival, ethics, and environmental consciousness.

Works Cited

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