

Disabling/ Debilitating Environment: A Biopolitical Reading of Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

Anoushka Sinha
Assistant Professor (Guest), University of Delhi
anoushkasq@gmail.com

Abstract

Departing from the medical and social models of theorizing disability, in this paper I attempt to pursue and explicate a geopolitical model of disability, based on critically examining the interconnected role of various social institutions in creating and perpetuating disabling/ debilitating circumstances that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. For my research, I critically approach the novel *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha for its historically relevant plot, which brings into question the collective amnesia of official memory, surrounding the events of the 1984 Bhopal gas leak. Through the course of my essay, I also complicate the unquestionable virtuosity granted to the human species, by unfolding the processes of slow violence generated by human institutions, multiple incidents of which are scattered across the novel. Finally, I examine the intersection of debilitation, disability and desirability, and its correlation to the biopolitical logic of devaluing certain bodies over others.

Keywords: disability; debilitation; biopolitical; desirability, expendability

Introduction

For long, disability studies has been theorized through a psycho-somatic framework which locates physical/cognitive impairment in the body/mind of an individual. Scholarly debates have mostly revolved around critiquing the medical model of disability that completely designates impairment to the realm of personal tragedy, in need of hyper-medicalization. On the other hand, the social model of disability is advocated as an appropriate methodology that puts into perspective how social barriers perforate via lack of access, resulting in social exclusion and propagation of ableist stereotypes, and henceforth constitute disablement, which becomes the product of an ignorant and discriminative societal approach. With the emergence of a globalized framework of human rights and the 2006 United Nations, *Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities*, the discourse around disability demanded equal opportunity, representation in social institutions, affirmative action, the need for diversity, and a disabled-friendly accommodative and accessible world, that criminalized discrimination; the call by disability rights collectives was for inclusion, pride and humane treatment – not to be categorized as freaks, monsters and animals or lower than human. This liberal-centric discourse that defined disability justice around the concept of inclusion, was limited to a geographical minority – the global North. In short, the discourse of inclusion, access and pride was limited to developed nations, while developing nations dealt with gross geopolitical violations, created and sustained through a nexus of institutions of varying power differentials.

The question I grapple with – can geopolitical history become a prominent disabling factor for specific populations? – forms the crux of what this paper aims to address. For the course of my study, I analyze Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) that offers a critical insight into a post-globalized neoliberal world and its multiple economies of power and control. Taking cue from recent scholarly developments in both, critical disability studies and critical animal studies, I aim to conceptualize how a geopolitical model of disability brings into attention the systemic oppression, specific to certain demographics, as a key source of producing and maintaining debilitating

environments that foster disability. Furthermore, evaluating the inherent ableism prevalent in the historically eugenicist construction of the “human”, I try to move away from exceptionalizing the category, and instead think of new possibilities offered by the protagonist of the novel – Animal – who continually centers his pursuit of freedom in not being categorized as human.

Understanding the Biopolitics of Disability

David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder explore the formation of “ablenationalism” in *The Biopolitics of Disability*, wherein they analyze how seemingly beneficial neoliberal policies of inclusion legislated for people with disabilities, and implemented mostly in first world nation-states as a criterion of development, evidential of progress, are predicated on a demographic documentation of disability. Such a documentation aims at accumulating “evidence of a nation’s moral commitment to the “less fortunate””, precisely through emphasis on the claim of eradicating disabilities, which boils down to eradicating people with disabilities, as a marker of national development (15). An implicit negation and expulsion of the disabled forms the crux of ablenationalism, which is predicated on the biopolitics of normative citizenship, centered around the desirability of able-bodied heteronormative, institution abiding citizens. Contesting the normative ideals enforced through “neoliberal inclusionism”, Mitchell and Snyder argue how the framework of liberal rights (United Nations *Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities* [2006]) and the institutionalized discourse of access/ diversity is predicated on an ideal biopolitical body that defines the notions of being and belonging, and simultaneously of being but not belonging (2, 11). In other words, biopolitics in the age of neoliberal capitalism becomes a means of policing citizenship, and in the process, perpetuating various forms of carcerality, not limited to physical prisons but extending as prison culture in the everyday. Therefore, when it comes to disability, the geo-political location becomes pertinent to the kind and degree of oppression inflicted, which in turn inhibits development, or rather the rhetoric of development formulated on ableist notions. This is reflective of how first world nations (like the USA) claim to be disabled-friendly precisely through elimination of disabilities via medical intervention and accumulation of data in the form of intellectual property, only to eliminate, visually, the spectacle of disability.

Simultaneously, the routine visual performance of liberal ideals of empowerment with regards to disability provides a safety valve for the continuance of geo-political violations meted out on the marginalized elsewhere. Moving away from the neoliberal commodification of identities into normative citizenship that is inextricably bound to ableism, Mitchell and Snyder advocate for “peripheral embodiment”, wherein disability relegated as expendable and excess offers an alternative way of being, unstifled by the performance of inclusionism.

The “critical event”¹ of 1984 Bhopal Gas Disaster introduces a possibility of interrogating the globalization of rights in a context of neoliberal capitalistic expansion, as the debilitating effects of the Union Carbide gas-leak continue to affect generations of people till date. Jasbir K. Puar’s conceptualization of debility helps in understanding sovereign power’s exercise of what she calls the “right to maim” propagated through the biopolitics of disability. In her book, *The Right to Maim*, Puar traces the “Ferguson to Gaza” framework that emerged in 2014, which noted similarities between the extremity of police brutality targeting black people in the United States and the military suppression of Palestinians by Israel (x). The settler-colonial supremacy exercised by both the US and Israel is reflective not only in their violent responses during protests, but rather in the systemic framework of debilitating specific populations in a regularized manner so as to not kill, but maim – “making power visible on the body” (Puar x). Building on this racialized logic to biopolitics, Puar complicates the human rights claim of right to life as maimed bodies of targeted populations inhabit the liminal space between living and dying – one of being debilitated. Herein, she draws a fine line of distinction between disability and debility by contextualizing the standardization of normative corporeality through globalization of human rights that drives “neoliberal disability tolerance” in the façade of inclusionism (Mitchell and Snyder 4). Building on Mitchell and Snyder’s work on the biopolitics of disability, Puar’s intervention addresses how debilitation becomes

¹ Events of socio-political significance that transpire at an intersection of several social institutions – family, community, bureaucracy, judiciary, medicine, the state and multinational corporations – foregrounding “their mutual implication” (Das 6).

instrumental in reinforcing the neoliberal demand of capacitation in the form of access, pride and inclusionism, which upholds the foil of liberal rights for certain bodies, only to perpetuate the mutilation of other bodies elsewhere without any accountability. The consequences of such a premeditated debilitation must be viewed through a “temporospatial frame” that takes into account the geo-political location, demography, and power differentials pertinent to that specific location, which in turn determines the target population (Puar xvi). It is crucial to note the violence that ensues debilitation is perpetual; the continuity of violence and its slow unfolding ensures precarity of the target population, and in doing so, reiterates the continuation of an ableist status quo. Finally, Puar’s interconnected triangulation of the concepts of disability, debility and capacity helps in critically assessing the contemporary biopolitics of disability: “Disability is not a fixed state or attribute but exists in relation to assemblages of capacity and debility, modulated across historical time, geopolitical space, institutional mandates, and discursive regimes.” (Puar xiv).

Rob Nixon in his seminal work *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* provides an essential framework of analyzing anthropocene disaster in the context of contemporary neoliberalism. Nixon historically situates the rise of development-centric neoliberalism post the dissolution of the Soviet Union, wherein economic institutions like the World Bank and the IMF advocated for market-driven, liberalized aid to countries in the global South². The call for such developmental aids was based on complete privatization of basic resources and hence, little scope was left for governmental safety nets for vulnerable populations. Drawing parallels between 1984 Bhopal Gas Disaster and 1986 Chernobyl Explosion, Nixon emphasizes the widening chasm between the deplorable scene of contamination and the abdication of responsibility by transnational corporations, which disproportionately affected the inherently marginalized – the poor. Historical culpability is shrugged off as “corporate amnesia emboldened by a neoliberal regime of deregulation” becomes the norm and complicity in environmental catastrophe is deferred through an institutional nexus that capacitates debility as Puar explained in her work (Nixon 51). Nixon

² Arturo Escobar discusses in greater detail “how the “Third World” has been produced by the discourses and practices of development since their inception in the early post–World War II period” (4).

conceptualizes how violations and debilitations that follow the two catastrophes unfold over a period of time, through generational deformities in populations that overtime become a defining aspect of that specific location. He terms this process as “slow violence” that is “spectacle deficient”, and echoing Puar’s theorization of debility, facilitates “biological citizenship” (47). Through his reading of *Animal’s People*, Nixon discusses in detail the form of environmental picaresque, which the novel critically employs to present to the reader the aftermath of an environmental disaster and the ensuing slow violence that continually debilitates the urban poor. Animal, the protagonist, who embodies an abject persona, exposes the limits of corporate disenfranchisement, as the alternate corporeality in existence through his survival stands as a testimony of slow violence. Nixon articulates that “discrimination predates disaster”, asserting how Union Carbide effaced any safety insurance in the zeal of multiplying profits – this reinstates Puar’s understanding of the racialized logic to biopolitics (59). Furthermore, Nixon highlights the varied temporalities of slow violence that affects the people of Khaufpur (fictional city based on Bhopal): the pernicious cycle of death and debilitation marked by sudden deaths on the day of the gas leak, followed by an increasingly poisoned atmosphere and intergenerational genetic mutations/ disabilities. Finally, he concludes how *Animal’s People* disrupts the collective amnesia of public memory by creating an archive of slow violence experienced by the local population of Khaufpur (and by extension Bhopal) through displaced temporalities, and in doing so, registers their pursuit of social justice and survival.

Animal, the protagonist of *Animal’s People*, introduces the conundrum of what constitutes as being human, or belonging to the human species with his indomitable self-identification as an animal throughout the course of the novel. Michael Lundblad in the recent issue of *New Literary History* grapples with this conundrum: the question of the human. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, Lundblad points out how both critical disability studies and critical race studies have theorized frameworks of discrimination against people with disabilities and people of color/ indigenous populations, on the basis of their dehumanization that is justified through historically

eugenicist narratives. Despite the recurrent insistence of a majority of disability scholars and activists to distinguish disablement and animalism into rigid categories, Lundblad proposes to challenge the binary of human/ animal, as it ends up centering the human as a morally superior species. In doing so, normative modes of communication, corporeality and human functioning are privileged over deviant modes of communication by people with cognitive/intellectual disabilities and non-human animals; such an hierarchization of the human over animal extends into determining what kind of life deserves to flourish while the other is annihilated. Following the argument established by Mitchell, Snyder and Puar, Lundblad brings attention to “the biopolitics of disposable lives” as opposed to the exclusionary inclusionism normalized by the binary of human/ animal (ix). The biopolitics of expendability critically assesses how certain lives become more expendable than others, and hence are oppressed/ killed/ debilitated with impunity. Taking a posthumanist approach, Lundblad introduces the concept of “disanimality” which he defines as “a disruptive affect, a feeling of discomfort, a site for critique, but also an opportunity for critical disability, animality, and human-animal studies to come together in more productive ways” (qtd. in Lundblad xiv). The conceptualization of “disanimality” questions the systemic oppression that thrusts disabled people and non-human animals to the lowest in biopolitical hierarchies; furthermore, it questions the assumed morality attributed to humanism that deems certain lives more deserving of living than others.

Through the course of this paper, I attempt to explicate the geo-political model of disability as opposed to the institutional reiteration of the medical model, wherein impairment is restricted to a corporeal realm, and not seen as a result of structural oppression. The question that whether disability exists inherently in a body or is a sociological product of a disabling environment is complicated by the recent introduction of global human rights – while the global North propagates the rhetoric (and performance), rather than praxis, of liberal rights and hails it as capacitation, the global South looms in intergenerational debility in varied forms across regions and demographics; corporate disposability and subsequent expansion is based on perpetual exploitation of the global south. Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, a novel based in the

backdrop of 1984 Bhopal Gas Disaster interrogates the intersection of historically and politically shaped cultural spaces, and the paradigm of global human rights as translated through institutional aid. In my paper, I explore how the novel complicates the mandates of categorizing disability as merely somatic – as an embodied character of impairment. Undertaking an interdisciplinary approach, referencing from critical disability studies and critical animal studies, I assess the medical and legal trajectory following the catastrophe, as presented in the novel, which ultimately culminates as an inevitable institutional failure. Lastly, I critically examine the novel as a quasi-archival record narrated in first-person by Animal as a survival narrative of alternate corporeality in the face of biopolitics of expendability.

Disabling/ Debilitating Environment: Towards a Geopolitical Model of Disability

The quasi-autobiographical narrative of *Animal's People* alluding to the 1984 Bhopal Gas Disaster, is set in the fictional city of Khaufpur (the city of terror), centering the life-narrative of a nineteen-year-old protagonist, known to the reader as “Animal”. The fictional “Editor’s Note” that prefaces the narration, declares the text an English translation of the tapes recorded by Animal in Hindi. Interestingly, the emphasis on a realistic first-person narrative provided by the journalistic endeavour of an Australian reporter is reflective of the voyeuristic tendency of the global North to excavate stories of suffering from the global South, and in that process, claiming themselves as progressive developed nations. This distance between the privileged reader and Khaufpuris is a reminder of the absconding “Kampani” (referring to Union Carbide Ltd.) and the suffering manufactured onto remote geographies of developing nations; it is this very suffering, or rather the debilitation that maintains the intended distance between developed and developing. Animal notes how this voyeuristic gaze of pity is exonerated with the desire of knowledge – to study the debilitated subject, hence exercising control through gaining knowledge of the experience of debilitation. Defying such an ethnocentric documentation desired by the first world, Animal resists a story of misery demanded from him, and instead narrates the story he desires to archive in which he is not striving for social justice, but operates everyday through his

seemingly ruthless self-interest. He addresses the prospective readers of his archive as “Eyes”, underlining their inherent voyeurism, but also pointing out their desire to seize the debilitation of Khaufpuris by acquiring knowledge: “On that night it was poison, now it’s words that are choking us” (Sinha 11).

The exonerating impulse of this journalistic storytelling is mirrored in the arrival of Elli Barber, an American doctor who suddenly enters the scene of debilitation with the hope of free medical treatment for Khaufpuris. Belonging to the generation of genetic disability post the 1984 gas leak, people of Khaufpur attain numerous health issues that affect their everyday lives in the form of slow violence; born a few days before the disaster, slow violence unfolds on Animal’s body as his spine grows twisted, making him walk on all fours. Igniting suspicions regarding being affiliated to the Kampani, Elli offers to “fix” Animal’s spine through a corrective surgery that can be actualized only in America. The role of a seemingly benevolent and charity-oriented figure represented by Elli, should be analyzed with regards to the critique of the medical model within the biopolitics of disability, as already discussed by disability scholars. The medical model of disability and its function of capacitating an ableist biopolitics, unravels strongly in the novel through the description of unborn children stored in jars as potential objects of study. These embryos/ fetuses resulting from miscarriages, are a pertinent and regularized feature of the damage caused to the reproductive health of Khaufpuri mothers; in a particular scene in the novel, a breastfeeding mother squeezes out her breast milk refusing to feed “poison” to her child, while in another Elli exclaims to a Kampani lawyer how a number of women experience irregular menstruation (Sinha 121, 359). The imaginary conversations that ensue between Animal and the fetuses trapped in jars, illustrate the shared experience of being gawked at out of curiosity, and then pitied for their “monstrous” and “freakish” appearances. Rather than simply relegating such ableist behavior as stereotyping disability, it is crucial to situate the logic of such responses to their biopolitical ends, and beginnings.

The paralyzed condition of frozen embryos and fetuses in jars, slips into the liminal condition of being unborn, neither birthed nor dead, rather studied. The implications of such a biomedical study, the “objects” of which are located in the debilitated atmosphere of Khaufpur, is to be understood within the paradigm of the biopolitics of

disposability – what kind of life has a “right” to live and more significantly, who decides that? In Khaufpur, wherein the demography mostly comprises of urban poor living in slums, disabled people coexisting with the violence of a neoliberal Kampani are hardly treated with care, acceptance, access or pride as campaigned by the first world logic of liberal rights. This suggests how the framework of universal rights is utterly flawed and actualizes only when the capacitation of certain bodies gain hyper-visibility, made possible through the systemic debilitation of others. Therefore, Elli is a reminder of the figure of the savior in postcolonial thought, wherein providing advanced healthcare services, in this case a corrective surgery to Animal, gives her the opportunity to research/ medicate/ normate Animal; ultimately, the aim is to gather biomedical data that is privatized into intellectual property accessible as a medication mostly to wealthy nations. The demand of justice that overwhelms the novel, in terms of historical culpability and more importantly, in terms of knowledge of the chemicals drained into the atmosphere that continues to severely impact the health of Khaufpuris, is never realized; the litigation follows a Kafkaesque trajectory as the legal system and the local government facilitates the Kampani in absolving its corporate culpability. The only apparent “reparation” comes from a pitiful medical gaze that treats Khaufpuri bodies as potential research projects, the benefit of which never accrues to them.

Animal: A Wayward Life

Towards the end of the novel, a disillusioned Animal having lost companionship and any hope of legal justice for the debilitated Khaufpuris, cries out: “... I am filled with revulsion for human life and human society, I want no more of it” (Sinha 379). The inevitable failure of social institutions (medical, legal, political, neoliberal-corporate) is intrinsically linked to the standardization of the human as a morally superior species. However, Animal throughout his life-narration despises the standards and norms of humanity, be it flouting any religious belief or practice of ethics and etiquette (Sinha 22-23). Rejecting any description of being “especially abled”, Animal resists the containment offered by the exceptionalisation of his disability (Sinha 31).

On the contrary, he embraces his animalistic form, taking pride in its etymological meaning: the Hindi word “jaanvar” translates as “one who lives”; he repeatedly emphasizes how not only he resembles an animal but also *feels* [emphasis mine] like one (Sinha 44, 100). What complicates his stubborn insistence of identifying as an animal, is the want and need to be desired, evident in his explicitly rogue nature of sexual dreams and desires. Animal's desire to be desired arises at an intersection of his genetic disability and the ableism inextricably linked to desirability. The reader encounters an aporia in Animal's thought-process when Elli recommends a medical intervention to straighten his spine; initially lured and hopeful at the thought of being “humanized” through the corrective surgery, Animal succumbs to the ableist logic of being a desirable body.

The nature of Animal's sexual encounters in whatever proximity are undoubtedly offensive, as most often than not they breach the privacy of women, but these offensive acts also highlight the biopolitics of desirability – what constitutes as a desirable body in an economy of debilitation. Animal is never welcomed into this biopolitical field, as his corporeality immediately designates him as excess, and by that virtue, expendable. This is reflective of how desirability, disability and disposability intersect in the backdrop of debilitation to police corporeality. When Animal's forlorn desire to find a partner in Nisha reaches its predictable climax of rejection by the latter, he realizes that his attributed undesirability is linked to him not being human-like. In the final tape of the novel, Animal rejects Elli's call to America to execute the corrective surgery so as to walk upright like a human, and by extension, to fit into normative desirability. Instead, he decides to retain his animalistic physique and live with it. It is this final act of rejecting the capacitation offered through the attainment of a desirable corporeality, which foregrounds Animal's wish to survive and desire in his disanimality. Lundblad's conceptualization of disanimality provides an apt framework to interrogate the moral hierarchy of the human and its associated institutions, while taking into account the errantry of aberrant forms of life as embodied by Animal. In that sense, the novel can be read as a story of survival of Animal's “waywardness”, which Sadiya Hartman beautifully describes as “a practice of possibility” and further expands:

It obeys no rules and abides no authorities. It is unrepentant. It traffics in occult visions of other worlds and dreams of a different kind of life. Waywardness is an ongoing exploration of *what might be*; it is an improvisation with the terms of social existence, when the terms have already been dictated, when there is little room to breathe, when you have been sentenced to a life of servitude, when the house of bondage looms in whatever direction you move. It is the untiring practice of trying to live when you were never meant to survive. (202-3)

Conclusion

Keeping in mind Animal's waywardness, I have departed from the medical and social models of theorizing disability, to analyze in greater detail how geopolitical social histories effectuate demographic debilitation, and in turn, perpetuate disabilities. I have borrowed the interconnected framework of disability, debility and capacity from Puar, to reflect on a prospective model of analyzing disability in relation with debility, based on a geopolitical model. Furthermore, I have critically assessed the scene of anthropocene disaster, to evaluate the role played by multiple social institutions – medical, legal, political, neoliberal-globalized – to create the conditions of debilitation for target populations, in order to dominate through the biopolitics of disability and expendability. Apart from highlighting the aforementioned arguments, my reading of Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* examines the waywardness of peripheral embodiments exemplifying alternate corporeality, theorized by Mitchell and Snyder, which refuses to succumb to the racial and ableist assumptions that structure contemporary biopolitics. The fictionalized story of 1984 Bhopal Gas Leak, narrated by the errant character of Animal, not only exemplifies a survival narrative in the face of neoliberal debilitation, but also provides a possibility of imagining disanimality, wherein the critical frameworks of disability and animal studies converge to challenge the unquestionable and indomitable category of the "human" as morally superior.

Works Cited

- Das, Veena. "Suffering, Legitimacy and Healing: The Bhopal Case". *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 137-74.
- Escobar, Arturo. "Introduction: Development and the Anthropology of Modernity". *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 3-20.
- Hartman, Saidiya. "Wayward: A Short Entry on the Possible". *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2020, pp. 202-3.
- Lundblad, Michael. "Animality/ Posthumanism/ Disability: An Introduction". *New Literary History*, Volume 51, Number 4, Autumn 2020, pp. v-xxi.
- Mitchell, David T. and Sharon Snyder. "Introduction". *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment*. University of Michigan Press, 2015, pp. 1-32.
- Nixon, Rob. "Slow Violence, Neoliberalism and the Environmental Picaresque". *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011, pp. 45-67.
- Puar, Jasbir K. *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- Sinha, Indra. *Animal's People*. Simon and Schuster, 2007.

Author's bio-note :

Anoushka Sinha currently teaches at the University of Delhi. Her research areas include Critical Disability Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies informed by theoretical works in Social and Cultural Anthropology.
