

AN IDENTITY CRISIS IN INDRA SINHA'S ANIMAL'S PEOPLE

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Abstract

Identity crisis, as we know refers to an internal conflict and a search for one's lost identity. In his fictional novel, *Animal's People*, Indra Sinha tries to portray the internal conflict of the central character 'Animal' and his search for his lost identity. Having been denied the basic human rights of living a life with dignity and respect, he has little choice but to lead an animal existence. Crude, foul-mouthed and bawdy, Animal fights back against the injustices thrust upon him by the events of a single night and tries to overcome the ambivalent feelings of repulsion and desire.

Keywords:- Identity crisis, internal conflict, repulsion and desire.

One of the major themes in postcolonial fiction has been the search for one's identity. Identity, which can be defined as an individual's sense of uniqueness, is central to the development of an individual. It is often explained in terms of the relationship of the self with the other, signifying that without the other there can be no self, and thus no identity. But what happens when a person begins to doubt his mere existence as a human being? In the novel under consideration we find the identity of one such individual being questioned. The central character of Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007), is a deformed figure, who refuses to be acknowledged as a human being and takes pride in his uniqueness. "I'm the only one there is of this type" (208).

Animal's People (2007), is a stunning tale of an unforgettable character, his search for his human identity and his undying spirit. Animal, the boy protagonist, serves as the narrator guide who gives us a glimpse into not just the lives of the people of Khaufpur, after the catastrophe strikes them, but also into his own personal world that has been left crippled as a result of the Kampani's negligence. As Fernando says, identity cannot be associated with just one factor rather it is something that is flexible and changing. In the novel too we find the identity of the protagonist in a state of constant transition. His character is marked by a destabilizing ambivalence. According to Homi Bhabha there is an 'in-between' space that lies at the interface of the self and other which is marked by ambivalent feelings of repulsion and desire (Waugh 354-355). It is such an ambivalent feeling that marks Animal's character.

The novel is a fictionalized account of the world's biggest industrial disaster, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. The Bhopal Gas Tragedy was an industrial catastrophe that occurred in 1984 at the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) pesticide plant in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India. The leakage of Methyl Isocyanate (MIC) gas and other toxins in the air flooded the city of Bhopal, causing great panic as people woke up with a burning sensation in their lungs. The leakage

caused many long term health effects in the surrounding areas. Thousands died immediately from the effects of the gas and many were trampled upon in the panic. The tragedy killed a lot of people but those who were waiting to be born, were left with a life worse than death. It is the life of one such victim and the search for his identity that Indra Sinha tries to bring forth through his novel. Wrapped in a shawl, Animal, the boy protagonist of the novel, was left at the doorstep of his house on that fateful night. As a result of being exposed to the poisonous gases, his spine gets deformed, causing him to walk on all fours for the rest of his life. Constantly being subjected to people staring, mocking and humiliating him Animal begins to shun his very existence from an early age. He tells Ma Franci, the crazy old nun and his foster mother, “I no longer want to be human” (1).

The story is narrated to us by Animal through a series of tapes which he is recording for some foreign journalists who wish to write a book on his life. At the very onset of the narrative we sense a feeling of loss of something that ‘was’.

“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.” (1)

The early events of his life have transformed his body and put a question mark on his identity. Animal’s declaration of himself as an animal brings into light the basic question of ethicality revolving around the lives of the marginalized and the poor. Reduced to a deformed figure, Animal can only identify himself with other four legged creatures, who look at the world of humans from the ground up.

“The world of humans is meant to be viewed from eye level. Your eyes. Lift my head I’m staring into someone’s crotch. Whole nother world it’s, below the waist.” (2)

Throughout the novel we find Animal afflicted by ambivalent feelings regarding his identity. An orphan of that night, the only ‘other’ he can identify himself is with his dog Jara or the other victims of ‘that night’ for instance kha-in-the-jar, which is a parapagus. However, as the title suggests, the novel is a story of ‘Animal’s people,’ i.e. the victims of ‘that night’. The people of Khaufpur are tied together as a result of the catastrophic events of ‘that night’, an event which changed Animal’s identity forever. It is the ambivalence of living with human feelings inside an animal body that marks the character of Animal. Ma Franci, Animal’s adopted mother, understands his pain of being “..trapped in a human body, that is hell...” (210). When Chunaram tells Animal to record his story for the ‘jarnalis’, he replies, “What can I say that they will understand? Have these thousands of eyes slept even one night in a place like this?” (7) At instances like these we find Animal sharing the pain and sufferings of his fellow Khaufpuri’s. They are all victims of that fateful night, suffering incessantly from the effects of the poisonous gases.

As is often seen, it is the poor and the underprivileged sections of the society that are subjected to various kinds of injustices as a result of such industrial catastrophes. The Bhopal tragedy specifically affected the poor living in the shanty’s near the factory. If these people suffered only because of their underprivileged position and were denied the basic human rights that are said to define humanity then they have no choice but to lead an animal existence. Paradise Alley, ‘the boulevard’ of Khaufpur, is a place beyond imagination. In Elli’s words it seems like a place that “was flung up by an earthquake” (105). For the first time the reality of “...how poor and disgusting” their lives are, hits Animal (106). He realizes the pitiable and inhuman conditions in which their life is wrapped in but refuses to acknowledge this in front of

Elli. Despite his rejection of the human identity and a feeling of alienation from the other people of the town, it is his humanity that binds him with his fellow brothers. The postcolonial attitude of outsiders towards the indigenous people is brought out in Animal's speech when he tells Elli,

“What really disgust me is that we people seem so wretched to you outsiders that you look at us with that so-soft expression, speak to us with that so-pious tone in your voice” (184).

At another instance he tells Elli,

“Hope dies in places like this, because hope lives in the future and there's no future here, how can you think about tomorrow when all your strength is used up trying to get through today?” (185)

Animal is torn between the two opposing feelings of repulsion and desire. His grotesque, hunchbacked figure is a reason for his constant humiliation and embarrassment, something that does not allow him to lead a normal life. While on the other hand his heart is filled with feelings for Nisha. We find his thoughts being dominated by a desire for sex all the time. It is only because Animal has been denied his basic human right of living a life of dignity and respect that he rejects his human identity. At the age of six his spine began to twist forcing him to walk on all fours, just like other animals. When the teasing began, he would fight back aggressively earning for himself the nickname of Animal or 'jungli Jaanvar' (15). Leading a life of extreme poverty, there were days he would have to live without food. “In gone times I have felt such hunger, I'd break off lumps of the dry skin and chew it” (13). Often he would have to search for food in the garbage heaps facing competition from other street dogs. It is on one such day while he's feasting on a plate of rice and fish thrown in the garbage that he meets his fellow companion Jara. The two develop an instant bond of lifelong friendship.

Animal slowly learns the ways of the world. He learns that “if you act powerless, you are powerless; the way to get what you want is to demand it” (19). It is Nisha and Zafar, who look at him as an 'especially abled' human being rather than an animal. Zafar tells him, “You are a human being, entitled to dignity and respect” (23). He finds a job suitable to his abilities and helps him in making a living for himself. Farouq too tells Animal to stop thinking of himself as an animal and behave like a human being. According to Farouq the only reason Animal behaves in this way is so that he can shun his responsibilities. However the real reason according to Animal is,

“...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'm whole, my own proper shape, just a different kind of animal from say Jara, or a cow, or a camel” (208).

It is the agony of being a human trapped in an animal body that Animal has to live with. His rejection of his human self is linked to the way he perceives the other human bodies. Having been denied a straight, upright human body, he feels comfortable identifying himself with other four-legged animals. As is often observed in postcolonial texts, the identities of the characters are in a state of constant flux. In the novel too we can see how Animal's identity is always in a state of transition. While on the one hand, he refuses to be called a human being and tells Nisha, “I'm not a man...” (47), on the other we find him longing for a life of love, dignity and respect. His love for Nisha instils a desire in him to be human again. Identity, as we know, is a question of empowerment (Friedman). Because of his deformed shape, Animal feels disempowered. He longs to lead a normal life and get married to Nisha. “Over and over I'd tell myself, if only I could stand up straight, it might be a different matter....” (47). When the American doctor Elli

comes to the village of Khaufpur to set up a free clinic, Animal is filled with a new surge of hope, a feeling which he had so far suppressed in some corner of his heart. He had always believed, “Hope is a crutch for weaklings” (75) and in the “kingdom of the poor” there is no place for hope (172). But on meeting Elli, his heart is filled with a new found desire; to be normal again. It is this intense desire to be human again that raises his hopes of being called to America for an operation, a feeling which only grows stronger with each passing day. He starts wishing for his old self, the ‘Animal,’ to disappear and in its place a “young, upright and handsome” man to return to Khaufpur (187).

As can be seen the animal identity is something that has been thrust upon him as a result of his twisted spine. He tells Farouq, “And I’m an animal, why? By my choice or because others named me Animal and treated me like one?” (209) However, despite his animal status, the teasing and mocking, we find Animal being cared for by his friends. Zafar, Nisha, Elli, Ma Franci, Huriya and even Farouq all care for him in their own way. Even at the end when he disappears into the jungle, almost the entire Nutcracker colony comes to look for him. The disaster of that night drew out all humanity from Animal’s body. When the policeman Fatlu’s men attack him, the thoughts that go through his mind bring out the disconcerted state of his mind, “...niether man am I nor beast I don’t know what is being beaten here. If they kill me what will die?” (313)

In the end Animal runs away from everything around him to find an escape from this sordid life, but even in death he is unable to stop thinking of himself as an animal. Having lived an animal life now he wants to die like a beast out in the open. Under the effect of the datura Animal begins to hallucinate and starts communicating with a lizard, which tells him, “You are human, if you were an animal you would have eaten me.” It is perhaps this desire to be a human that haunts him all his life. His dream of going to America for an operation that will cure him is finally going to come true. Elli has spoken to the doctors in America and his friends have offered to arrange for his passport and the necessary expenses. But now Animal no longer wants to fulfil this dream as he feels he may still need the help of crutches or a wheelchair after the operation. The freedom which he enjoys now, being an animal, will be taken away if he’s restricted to a wheelchair. He has finally come to terms with his ambivalent feelings and once again begins to revel in his unique identity. “I’m an Animal fierce and free, In all the world is none like me” (306).

Workscited

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