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# Reframing the Subaltern Body: Disability, Voice, and Agency in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

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**Abstract:**
This paper, titled "Reframing the Subaltern Body: Disability, Voice, and Agency in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*" (2007), studies *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha through the critical lens of literary disability studies and explores how disability reshapes and transforms subaltern identity and enables forms of agency within conditions of utmost marginalization. Set against the backdrop of the Bhopal gas disaster of 1984, the novel features Animal, a physically disabled protagonist and narrator who is socially ostracised for his bodily difference and places him at the intersection of disability, poverty, environmental violence, and post-colonial neglect. The paper takes recourse to disability-studies theorists such as Lennard J. Davis and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, alongwith subaltern and postcolonial frameworks, and asserts that Sinha challenges dominant narratives that portray the disabled as subaltern, passive, voiceless, or merely symbolic of suffering. Instead of portraying disability as a site of lack or defect, the novel represents it as a complicated space of resistance, narrative authority, and ethical critique. Animal's self-identification, derisive voice, and denial to conform to normative humanist ideals distort ableist assumptions and reclaim agency through storytelling. The paper further explores how disability is socially and culturally produced, shaped by corporate violence, state apathy, and biomedical power and also exposes the limitations of humanitarian discourse that seeks to "fix" or "cure" rather than listen to disabled subjects. By centralising Animal's embodied experience and narrative authority, *Animal's People* appears as a powerful intervention that reinvents the subaltern not as silent but as actively negotiating, resisting, and reshaping the terms of visibility and voice. Above all, this paper asserts that Sinha's novel contributes significantly to postcolonial disability discourse by reframing disability as a site of political agency and epistemic authority within subaltern contexts.
**Keywords: Disability, Subaltern, Animal, Voice, Agency, Post-colonial.**

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**Introduction:**

Disability studies re-evaluates disability as a socially created and culturally produced problem shaped by stigma, exclusion, and power relations and not as an individual defect or medical tragedy. Disability studies scholars such as Lennard J Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Mike Oliver, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder move away from ableist traditions that perceive disabled bodies as symbols of moral lack, monstrosity, or narrative devices and reframe disability as a lived experience embedded within material, social, and political contexts. Literary disability studies, in particular, investigates how canonical and contemporary texts deploy disability either as a metaphorical crutch or as an embodied experience, and it insists on reading disabled characters as agents with voice, desire, and resistance rather than as passive objects of pity or cure. This critical framework is crucial for reframing the disabled subject as subaltern: it shifts attention from bodily difference to structures of marginalisation, environmental violence, and epistemic silencing that produce disability in the first place. *Animal's People* powerfully represents this reframing by granting narrative authority to Animal, a poor, orphaned, and disabled boy, a survivor of the Bhopal disaster, whose twisted spine becomes not a symbol of moral failure but evidence of corporate crime, environmental injustice, and social exclusion. Animal's denial to be a 'human', 'normalised' or 'cured', and his contention on naming the forces that have crippled him, distort the ableist ideology that equates bodily normalcy with humanity and worth. For instance, from the outset of the narrative, he says, "How many times did I tell Ma Franci, 'I no longer want to be human,' never did it sink in to that fucked up brain of hers, . . ." (1). Through Animal's derisive voice, sexual desire, anger, and political consciousness, Sinha challenges sentimental or tragic portrayals of disability and replaces the disabled subaltern as a knowing subject who exposes the violence of corporate-friendly development and resists the narrative erasure imposed by dominant, able-bodied discourses.

**Background of the Novel:**

*Animal's People* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Europe and South Asia and the novel was also shortlisted for the 2007 Man Booker Prize. It is the result of Sinha's long association with the survivors of the Bhopal gas tragedy, drawing on his fifteen years of working with those affected by the Union Carbide gas disaster. So, the novel fictionalises the real events from the Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984 and its deadly aftermaths on its survivors. The setting of the novel is Khaufpur, a fictional city (Bhopal) where a person, who was a victim of a chemical factory explosion caused by the 'Kampani', becomes crippled as his spinal cord gets affected in the gas explosion. Ever since that tragedy, he has been unable to walk on his feet. Throughout the novel, he is referred to as 'Animal' due to his disability. The disaster has dangerous repercussions that render Animal physically deformed. His identity is shaped by societal ostracisation and an ongoing struggle for dignity. Sinha's text shows how disability intersects with socio-economic oppression, as Animal and his people in Khaufpur live at the peripheries as destitute, deprived of justice and recognition. Nevertheless, Animal claims back his identity, rejecting to fulfill normative expectations of the "human" rather than submitting to victimhood. His refusal to walk upright becomes a symbol of defiance against both ableist norms and systemic injustice. It is evident when he asserts, "'My name is Animal.' '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" (23). This study examines how the novel departs from older conventions that represented disabled people as broken persons who need to be cured or fixed. Animal decides to retain his disability instead of going for surgery in America. As he remarks, "Stay four-foot, I'm the one and only Animal" (366). Therefore, the novel critiques corporate exploitation, governmental neglect, and Western humanitarianism's paternalistic approach through Animal's derisive and unfiltered voice.

**Theoretical Framework:**

The term "subaltern" originates in the work of Antonio Gramsci and was later developed collectively by the Subaltern Studies thinkers, particularly Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. It refers to social groups who are socially, politically, economically, and culturally marginalised and excluded from hegemonic power structures. Subaltern individuals are not simpl y subject to oppression; they frequently find themselves silenced within prevailing representation al frameworks. Spivak's seminal question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", foregrounds a critical iss ue: the problem extends beyond the subaltern's capacity to speak for themselves, encompassing whether their expressions are acknowledged, understood, and deemed meaningful within the disc ourses of the powerful and established institutions. Subalternity, thus, is a position of structural invisibility, epistemic violence, and exclusion from the production of knowledge. Accordingly, disabled people, marginalised within ableist societies, are excluded from every sphere of life and hence rendered subaltern. Lenard J. Davis argues that disabled bodies are culturally framed as deviant and abnormal, positioned outside the norms of full humanity and citizenship. In his Introduction to the *Disability Studies Reader*, he writes:

> The concept of a norm, unlike that of an ideal, implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm . . . So with the concept of the norm comes the concept of deviations or extremes. When we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants. (3).

Mitchell and Snyder show how disability in literature often functions as a "narrative prosthesis," a symbolic device that stands in for moral lack or social decay rather than as a lived identity. In a chapter titled "Narrative Prosthesis" in *The Disability Studies Reader*, they write, ". . . while stories rely upon the potency of disability as a symbolic figure, they rarely take up

disability as an experience of social or political dimensions" (222). The novel critically resists these representational habits by centering a disabled subaltern who is not reduced to metaphor or mute victimhood. Animal's twisted spine—caused by corporate chemical violence—marks him as socially abject, frequently mocked, pitied, and excluded within Khaufpur, reflecting Garland-Thomson's account of stigma attached to non-normative bodies. It is reflected when Animal says, "Ask people they'll tell you I'm the same as ever, anyone in Khaufpur will point me out, 'There he is! It's Animal. Goes on four feet, that one. See, that's him, bent double by his own bitterness'" (11). Yet, unlike conventional subaltern figures who are spoken for, Animal insists on narrating his own story in an unsympathetic, profane, and resistant voice, thereby unsettling Spivak's formulation of subaltern voicelessness. For instance, when the corrupt Chunaram persuades Animal to speak to a foreign journalist as he bears the imprints of the chemical explosion, Animal first refuses to tell anything. He thinks, how can the foreigners, being outsiders, understand and feel anything about the dreadful experiences of Khaufpuri people. He questions, "How can foreigners at the world's other end, who've never set foot in Khaufpur, decide what's to be said about this place?" (9), and then begins to voice his story only from his side with no filters at all. He says, "It's my story. If he doesn't agree, I will not tell it'" (8). He further says, "Tell mister cunt big shot that this is my movie, he's in and in my movie, there is only one star and it's me" (9). Sinha refuses to turn Animal into a mere allegory of postcolonial ruin; instead, Animal's desires, resentments, sexuality, and survival strategies foreground disabled agency, challenging what Mitchell and Snyder identify as the instrumentalisation of disability in narrative. This text also unmasks the ableist and neo-colonial reasoning of cure-oriented humanitarianism through medical camps and foreign doctors who seek to "fix" Animal's body, mirroring Anita Ghai's critique of Indian disability discourse that honours normalisation and charity over rights, dignity, and individuality. By permitting Animal to remain

essentially disabled while politically expressive, the text reframes the disabled subaltern not as an object of pity or rehabilitation but as a speaking subject whose embodied difference initiates counter-knowledge against ableist ideology and corporate-humanitarian power.

Historically, postcolonial literature has engaged with voices from the margins—those suppressed by colonial power, capitalist exploitation, corporate abuse, and state violence. However, within this discourse, disability has often been overlooked or treated merely as a metaphor, or as an extension of social deprivation, rather than as an embodied and political experience. *Animal's People* provides a powerful site for examining the intersections of disability and subalternity. It foregrounds disability as a direct consequence of industrial and corporate violence, thereby resisting its reduction to metaphor. Through Animal's self-narration, it reconfigures the disabled subject as an agent who critiques dominant humanitarian and developmental discourses. His assertive declaration, "My job is to talk, yours is to listen. So now listen" (14)—further underscores his narrative authority and resistance to epistemic marginalisation.

**Analysis:**

Both Disability Studies and Subaltern Studies examine prevailing power structures; the former opposes ableist ideologies that portray disability as deviance, while the latter criticizes hegemonic historiography that silences marginalised voices. Lennard J. Davis's critique of normativity points out how modernity produces the 'normal' body through statistical, medical, and economic regimes, portraying disabled bodies as deviant and weak. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of the 'Normate' further explains how power operates visually and culturally to maintain able-bodied dominance. However, when these ideas are read alongside subaltern studies, especially Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—a significant issue emerges: even when marginalised people speak, are their voices truly their own,

or are they shaped by dominant frameworks? Spivak argues that subaltern voices are often mediated or appropriated by elite discourse. In *Animal's People*, this tension is clearly visible. Animal speaks, but his narration is fragmented, rough, and resistant to moral coherence. His narration rejects clarity, challenging the idea that simply speaking leads to recognition or justice. From the beginning, he asserts his independence by declaring, ". . . I'm not clever like you. I can't make fancy rissoles of each word. Blue Kingfishers won't suddenly fly out of my mouth. If you want my story, you'll have to put up with how I tell it" (2). This paper thus approaches Animal's agency not as a stable or celebratory condition but as an unstable, contradictory practice— shaped both by and against dominant discourses. The following sections elaborate on this argument in detail.

**Disability, Dehumanisation, and Ableist Humanism:**

Animal's statement that he is "not human" has often been interpreted as a symptom of internalised oppression. While this reading is valid, it risks reducing a larger political issue to an individual psychological condition. Rather, the novel exposes how humanism itself, rooted in ideals of bodily integrity, rationality, and productivity, can exclude certain bodies. Disabled bodies like Animal's are rendered less-than-human not through personal failure but through structural ableism embedded in postcolonial governance, medical systems, and global capitalism. The novel critiques what might be termed "ableist humanism": a system that offers care and empathy selectively, only to those bodies that are deemed as perfect and curable. Animal's body, visibly deformed and resistant to cure, distorts this system. His dehumanisation is not incidental but part of a larger structure, showing how disability increases the marginalisation of subaltern lives. In this sense, Animal is not outside humanity; rather, humanity is shown to be a normative category that actively excludes certain (disabled) bodies. By calling himself, "Animal",he does not simply accept this label but uses it to challenge and question it. In doing so, he politicises his

socially inscribed dehumanisation, and at the same time, he is perceived as "especially abled" (23) due to his unique perspectives and skilled negotiation of his environment.

**Narrating from the Margins: Epistemic Authority and Resistance:**

Although *Animal's People* appears to respond to Spivak's question affirmatively by allowing the subaltern to narrate, it complicates the politics of voice by refusing narrative stability. Animal's storytelling is deliberately nonlinear, contradictory, and frequently obscene. As he remarks, ". . . Blue Kingfishers won't suddenly fly out of my mouth"(2), rejecting any expectation of refined or aesthetically pleasing narration. This stylistic excess is not merely a formal choice; rather, it functions as a mode of resistance to epistemic disciplining. His narrative resists translation into the sentimental, juridical, or humanitarian idioms through which suffering is often rendered legible to global audiences. In doing so, the text critiques the institutional and discursive mechanisms that demand coherence, authenticity, and moral clarity from marginalised voices. Crucially, Animal rejects the role of the 'representative victim.' He mocks journalists, activists, and even readers who seek to extract consumable narratives of suffering. Alluding to an Australian Journalist he states, ". . .You were like all the others, come to suck our stories from us, so strangers in far off countries can marvel there's so much pain in the world. Like vultures are you jarnaliss…You have turned us Khaufpuris into story tellers, but always of the same story . . . that night, always that fucking night" (5).This critique shows how global media and humanitarian discourse turn suffering into consumable stories while real conditions remain unchanged. In this context, Animal's refusal becomes a form of resistance, as his speech challenges dominant ways of understanding marginalised voices. Agency here is not rooted in clarity or self-discipline but through disruption, excess, and contradiction, illustrating how marginalised voices can reclaim their narratives in ways that defy conventional expectations.

**Disability, Environmental Violence, and the Social Model:**

The novel brings out the social model of disability by locating the cause of Animal's impairment in corporate negligence and environmental disaster. Disability is thus framed not as an individual tragedy but as a collectively, politically produced condition. The narrative opens with a statement, "I used to be human once. So I am told. I do not remember it myself, but people who knew me when I was small say I walked on two feet just like a human being" (1). This statement underscores that Animal was not born disabled; rather, his condition is the consequence of the gas explosion. The disaster unveils the uneven distribution of risk and agony in postcolonial spaces, where marginalised communities consume the costs of global capitalism. Animal's disabled body thus becomes an archive of violence—a living testimony to systemic oppression. His body bears evidence in ways that legal documents and chronicles cannot, illustrating the lived experiences of suffering and resilience that are often overlooked in historical narratives.

**Refusal and Non-Recovery: The Politics of Crip Resistance:**

A critical intervention of the novel lies in its rejection of recovery and its refusal of normative embodiment. In the novel, humanitarian discourse often presents cure as a form of rescue and redemption, treating medical intervention as the only pathway to fix humanity. Animal's rejection of corrective surgery disrupts this logic. At the ending of the novel, he decides to remain as disabled and refuses to be normal and sings affirmatively.

"I am Animal fierce and Free

In all the world is none like me."

This refusal should not be seen as irrational or self-destructive. Rather, the novel presents it as a political act that exposes the violence of compulsory normalisation. Drawing on crip theory, this paper asserts that Animal exemplifies a form of resistance embedded in non-recovery. Crip theorists like Robert McRuer and Alison Kafer challenge the ableist assumption that disability

must be fixed or cured. Crip theory understands refusal itself as a form of agency. Alison Kafer, in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), critiques the "curative imaginary" (27), where the future is imagined only without disability. Animal's refusal of cure disrupts this imaginary by insisting on a future that includes disability rather than erasing it. His resistance is not intended toward becoming able-bodied but toward disclosing the violence of a world that demands cure while denying justice—particularly in the context of Bhopal-like environmental catastrophes, where corporate and state responsibility are constantly delayed. His agency is not expressed through ideals such as independence, productivity, or empowerment—values often linked to neoliberal thinking—but through survival, anger, and refusal. In this way, the novel questions even progressive disability discourses that tend to value 'successful' disabled subjects while marginalising and excluding those who remain resistant, unresolved, or non-conforming.

**Conclusion:**

By centering a 'disabled', subaltern narrator, whose agency is unstable and ethically unsettling, *Animal's People* resists both humanitarian sentimentality and liberal normalisation. This study has argued that disability in the novel functions not as a metaphor for postcolonial damage but as a material, political condition produced by intersecting regimes of ableism, environmental violence, and global capitalism. The novel does not offer a redemptive model of resistance. Animal neither achieves justice nor secures recognition in conventional terms. Instead, his agency lies in denial—of correction, of narrative consistency, and of moral clarity. This challenges dominant standards within both subaltern studies and disability studies, insisting scholars rethink and revisit agency beyond voice, visibility, or recovery. In reframing the subaltern disabled body as a site of epistemic disruption rather than symbolic suffering, *Animal's People* makes a significant intervention into postcolonial disability discourse.

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