



Disaster as Cultural Memory: A Comparative Ecocritical Study of Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and Haruki Murakami's *After the Quake*

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Abstract:

Post-apocalyptic fictions are often read as mirrors of culture, showing socio-political tension and ecological anxiety in a form that continues to be remembered long afterwards. This paper undertakes a comparative study of Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007) and three stories from Haruki Murakami's *After the Quake* (2000) — "ufo in kushiro," "super-frog saves tokyo," and "honey pie" — to examine how Indian and Japanese post-apocalyptic writing confront trauma and environmental memory through distinct cultural and historical contexts. Sinha's novel is narrated by a young man who was left physically disabled by the Bhopal gas leak and who is residing in Khaufpur, a fictional city. Through him, Sinha explores environmental injustice, corporate wrongdoing, and the resilience of people whose voices usually go unheard. Murakami's short stories take place in the weeks right after the Kobe earthquake of 1995, and register catastrophe less as a direct event than as a psychic aftershock, working through fragmentation, allegory, and the slow transformation of ordinary life. Reading Sinha through Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence and Murakami through Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma and belated address, the paper argues that Indo-Japanese post-apocalyptic literature converts disaster into cultural memory through markedly different narrative strategies — lived testimony and political critique in Sinha, allegorical displacement and quiet transformation in Murakami — while arriving at a shared vision of survival, ethical responsibility, and the reimagining of the future in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Post-apocalyptic Narratives, Environmental Justice, Indo-Japanese Literature, Cultural Memory.

Introduction

A disaster rarely stays put as a single event. It settles into bodies, into landscapes, into the way a community talks about itself afterwards. Post-apocalyptic fiction is less about endings than about what continues once something has broken — and about what a society decides it now owes the people left standing. Two disasters sit behind this paper. The first is the Bhopal gas tragedy of December 1984, when a Union Carbide pesticide plant released toxic methyl isocyanate gas over the city, killing thousands outright and leaving generations more with chronic illness that has never really gone away. The second is the 1995 Great Hanshin earthquake, which flattened large parts of Kobe and, in Japan's memory, sits alongside the Tokyo subway sarin attack two months later as one half of a single, unresolved wound.

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) and Haruki Murakami's *after the quake* (2000) could not be more different in their approaches to these events. Sinha gives us one continuous voice: Animal, a young man whose spine was twisted by the gas that killed his family, speaks the whole novel into a tape recorder, narrating the poverty, corruption, and slow poisoning of the fictional Khaufpur — a city that is unmistakably Bhopal wearing another name. Murakami never takes his reader to Kobe. His six linked stories unfold in the weeks between the earthquake and the sarin attack, and in none of them does a character actually live through the quake firsthand. Instead, the reader watches people hundreds of miles away, in Tokyo or Hokkaido, come quietly apart while the disaster plays out on their television screens.

This is the difference in form that makes the two texts worth setting side by side. They have the same way of treating catastrophe as something that survives its own moment and hardens, eventually, into cultural memory. However, they arrive there by almost opposite or different routes

— Sinha through direct political accusation and testimony, Murakami through fragmentation, allegory, and the strange logic of the domestic. Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence and Cathy Caruth's work on trauma supply a shared vocabulary for the comparison, one that lets the differences between an Indian industrial disaster and a Japanese earthquake remain differences while still bringing out what both literatures are doing underneath: turning catastrophe into an ethical claim on whoever happens to be reading. There is also a reason this particular pairing has not, as far as this study can tell, been attempted very often. Postcolonial ecocriticism has tended to keep Sinha's novel in conversation with other Indian or South Asian environmental writing, and Murakami criticism has mostly stayed inside debates about Japanese postmodernism, magical realism, or his relationship to writers like Kobo Abe and Kenzaburo Oe. Placing an Indian industrial-disaster novel next to a Japanese earthquake story cycle risks looking arbitrary unless the comparison is doing real conceptual work — which is exactly what Nixon and Caruth, read together, are meant to provide here. The aim is to ask what it looks like when two very different literary traditions try to solve the same underlying problem: how to give catastrophe a narrative form durable enough to be remembered once the news cycle has moved on, without flattening Bhopal and Kobe into interchangeable instances of "disaster."

Theoretical Framework: Slow Violence and Trauma

Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) gives Animal's People a vocabulary it needs. Nixon describes slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually 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" (Nixon 2), a definition he develops with Bhopal itself as one of his central examples. Bhopal was never really a single night. The methyl isocyanate leak is only where the story starts; the slow violence runs on through poisoned

groundwater, through children born disabled decades later, through a legal case that is still, in effect, unfinished. Sinha's novel takes this seriously in its form. Animal's twenty-three taped confessions are not really about the night of the leak — they are about everything that followed it, which is exactly the kind of extended, cumulative shape Nixon argues slow violence is usually denied in narrative.

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) does something similar for Murakami. For Caruth, trauma "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event" but instead in the way its "unassimilated nature — the way it was precisely not known in the first instance — returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 4), which is why it resurfaces afterwards in nightmare, in repetition, in speech that circles a wound without ever quite naming it. This fits Murakami almost too well. His characters experience the Kobe earthquake as an aftershock, not as an event — an absence reorganising their lives from a distance. Its meaning arrives obliquely: through a wife who leaves without a word, through a giant frog who needs help fighting a monster, through a warning about a box that a frightened child might be sealed inside. None of it is the earthquake, exactly, and all of it is.

Together these two frameworks let the comparison hold two very different temporalities at once — the slow, cumulative, and politically legible unfolding of industrial poisoning in Khaufpur, against the sudden but psychically displaced unfolding of aftershock in post-Kobe Japan — without flattening either into the other.

It is worth pausing on why these two theorists, specifically, and not some single unified theory of disaster narrative. Nixon writes largely against the visual bias of environmentalism — against a media and political culture that registers harm only when it looks like an explosion, a spill, an

image that can run on the evening news. His entire argument depends on disaster having a long tail, on damage that keeps accruing well after the cameras leave. Caruth, by contrast, is not really interested in visibility at all; her subject is the structure of an individual psyche encountering something it cannot process in real time. Nixon's is fundamentally a political and ecological argument; Caruth's is fundamentally a psychoanalytic one. Using both risks a certain unevenness, and this paper does not claim that slow violence and trauma theory are simply two names for the same phenomenon. What they share is a resistance to the idea that disaster is legible only at the moment it happens — and it is that shared resistance, rather than any deeper theoretical identity, that makes them useful together here.

Animal's People: Corporate Violence, Bodily Trauma, and the Politics of Voice

Animal's People is narrated entirely by Animal, a nineteen-year-old who has walked on all fours since the gas leak twisted his spine as a child. The choice of narrator already makes an argument. Animal's body is where the disaster's long afterlife becomes visible, and his refusal of a spine-straightening operation that would let him stand upright again — he would rather stay Animal — reads almost like a refusal to let the disaster's evidence quietly disappear into a cosmetic fix. Early in the novel, he sets the terms of his own testimony this way: "I used to be human once" (qtd. in Jones and Frederick 380), a line that frames everything that follows as speech coming from a body already reshaped by industrial violence, not recollection offered from safety after the fact. The novel's ecology is never separate from its human suffering, and scholarship on the book has picked up on this consistently. Jones and Frederick, in their ecocritical reading, point to how thoroughly the poisoned land itself goes silent in Animal's account. He describes fields stripped of birdsong and insect life — "No bird sing. No hoppers in the grass. No bee humming. Insects can't survive here" (qtd. in Jones and Frederick 383) — and the line matters because it refuses any real boundary

between human and nonhuman victims of the Kampani's negligence. The same slow harm that twisted Animal's spine has also silenced the fields around Khaufpur, and Sinha moves between the two registers as though they were one continuous injury, which is more or less what Nixon's framework predicts a genuinely slow-violence narrative should do.

Sinha is equally interested in how slow violence escapes accountability, and much of the novel is really about deferral — the Kampani's refusal to appear, to compensate, to admit anything. Justice never actually arrives in Khaufpur; it is always on "hold," and the novel dramatizes that condition formally, through Animal's own suspended, tape-recorded testimony, given to an outside journalist because no closer authority is listening. Animal knows he is being spoken about rather than spoken to, and at one point he turns that around deliberately, telling his listener that he is done addressing the journalist and is now speaking straight to "the eyes that are reading these words" (qtd. in Jones and Frederick 379). This is a small but meaningful shift: it collapses the distance between Khaufpur and wherever the reader happens to be sitting, and makes the reader — not a court, not a corporation — the one finally in a position to witness what slow violence has done. What emerges is a novel built to give slow violence the sustained narrative shape it is usually denied. Sinha is not asking anyone to witness a single catastrophic night. He is asking the reader to sit with what a poisoned place and a poisoned body look like twenty years on — and in doing that, he turns Bhopal from a historical date into a claim that stays open.

It matters, too, that Animal is never alone in the novel. Around him Sinha builds a whole community of people still living inside the disaster — Ma Franci, the French nun whose mind seems to have stopped the night of the leak; Zafar, the earnest activist trying to fight the Kampani through legal and political channels that keep failing; Elli, the American doctor whose free clinic draws suspicion precisely because, to Khaufpuris, compassion from the same country as the

corporation responsible cannot possibly seem innocent. None of these characters exists just to make Animal look better by comparison. Together they map out the different, often contradictory, ways a community metabolizes slow violence — through faith and dissociation, through organised resistance, through a wary, complicated relationship to outside help. If we only focus on Animal as the narrator, we risk making the novel's message seem smaller and lonelier than it really is. Sinha is not just interested in one twisted body; he is interested in what an entire city does with an injury nobody official will admit to.

after the quake: Earthquake, Fragmentation, and the Everyday Uncanny

Where Sinha writes disaster as sustained, embodied testimony, Murakami writes it as absence — something acting on his characters from off the page. None of the three stories discussed here is set in Kobe or shows the earthquake directly; each one instead follows a character far from the epicentre whose ordinary life is quietly rearranged by news of a catastrophe they never actually saw. That is Caruth's belatedness, more or less, translated into plot: trauma arriving not as event but as delayed reorganisation of a self.

"ufo in kushiro" opens with Komura's wife spending five days glued to earthquake coverage on television before she disappears without explanation, leaving behind only a note that compares living with him to living with an empty box. Komura cannot locate his own grief inside a disaster he did not witness, and the story sends him instead on an odd errand to deliver a small package to Hokkaido, where his companion Shimao offers him something closer to a warning than comfort: "you're just at the beginning." The line refuses him — and the reader — any fantasy of a single, cathartic reckoning with loss. In Caruth's terms, the real work of confronting what has happened has barely begun even once the initial shock has passed.

"super-frog saves tokyo" pushes the displacement further, into outright allegory. Katagiri, an unremarkable debt collector, is visited by a six-foot talking frog who wants his help fighting a giant worm whose buried rage threatens to trigger a catastrophic earthquake beneath Tokyo. Katagiri protests that he is "an absolutely ordinary guy," and Frog's answer inverts the objection: Tokyo, he insists, can only be saved by exactly this kind of person. It is a small but deliberate move away from institutions and toward the unremarkable citizen as the real site of historical agency. Frog eventually gives his life in the fight, leaving Katagiri with something close to a creed — that a life's worth is decided not by how it wins but by how it loses. Read through Caruth, the whole episode plays as a displaced restaging of the earthquake and the sarin attack that followed it two months later: catastrophe returning not as memory but as fantasy, shaped specifically to let Katagiri, and by extension the reader, approach something otherwise too large to look at directly.

"honey pie," which closes the collection, resolves this pattern into something gentler. Here the earthquake surfaces mostly as a recurring nightmare troubling the young daughter of Junpei's love interest, who dreams of an "Earthquake Man" trying to force her into a box. Junpei's response — his quiet resolve to keep her and her mother out of any such box, whatever comes, even if the ground should crack open again — bends Caruth's model of repeating, unclaimed trauma toward something like a claimed, chosen future. The disaster cannot be undone, but an adult narrator can still decide to stand between it and a child too young to have understood it the first time. Across all three stories the pattern holds: the earthquake is everywhere and shown nowhere, working instead through a failed marriage, an allegorical monster fight, and a child's bad dream. This is trauma more or less as Caruth describes it — not a scene the mind can look at head-on, but a force that keeps returning sideways, through forms displaced enough to let the psyche approach what it cannot yet fully claim.

It is also worth noticing how consistently this displacement runs through domestic and romantic relationships rather than through public or civic life. Komura loses a wife; Katagiri is drawn into his ordeal partly through his failing professional relationships and his general sense of being overlooked; Junpei's story turns on his decades-long, unresolved feelings for a friend who is now raising a daughter alone. Murakami seems to be suggesting, across all three stories, that a national disaster does not stay national — it seeps into the smallest, most private structures people build for themselves, the marriages and friendships and unspoken loves that were never going to make the news. This is perhaps the clearest point of contrast with Sinha, whose community in Khaufpur remains stubbornly public and collective even at its most intimate. Murakami's characters, by comparison, absorb the earthquake almost entirely alone, each in a private relationship that quietly buckles under a weight nobody named out loud.

Comparative Synthesis: Divergent Strategies, Convergent Meanings

On the surface, the two works share almost nothing formally. *Animal's People* is one continuous, embodied testimony, addressed straight at the reader and explicitly political in its target — the Kampani, and behind it the whole machinery of corporate impunity that let Bhopal happen and then kept happening. *after the quake* is six formally separate stories, told in the third person, in which the earthquake is never witnessed and works instead as pressure from off the page, its meaning scattered into allegory, dream, and the texture of ordinary relationships. Sinha's mode is testimonial and accusatory; Murakami's is elliptical, almost consoling. Nixon's slow violence gives Sinha a way to name a specific, locatable, still-unaccountable perpetrator; Caruth's trauma theory gives Murakami a way to talk about a disaster whose effects are diffuse and national rather than corporate, resistant to being pinned on any one addressee.

However, the two projects converge in what they both refuse to do. Neither writer treats the disaster itself as spectacle. Sinha's narrative starts years after the leak and stays there, dwelling in the slow aftermath rather than the cinematic night itself; Murakami sets his stories specifically in the interval between the earthquake and the Tokyo attack, always adjacent to catastrophe, never inside it. Both, in other words, turn away from the more sensational possibilities of post-apocalyptic writing toward something closer to an ethics of aftermath — the sense that the real work of disaster fiction is not depicting destruction but tracking what destruction does to the people and the ecologies left to carry on. This shared refusal is easy to overlook precisely because it operates negatively, as an absence rather than a technique — neither author advertises what he is not doing — but it shapes both books at a structural level, determining what gets a scene and what gets only a glancing reference, what counts as the story and what is treated as mere backdrop to it.

There is also a shared instinct to locate cultural memory in the unglamorous citizen rather than in any official record. Animal, disabled and poor, is Sinha's chosen vehicle for indicting a multinational corporation precisely because he holds no institutional power of his own; his testimony stands in for a justice the courts have failed to deliver. Katagiri, "absolutely ordinary" by his own description, is Murakami's chosen vehicle for saving Tokyo precisely because he is unremarkable — his willingness to fight matters more, not less, for having no institutional backing behind it. In both texts, the real reckoning with disaster happens away from governments and corporations, in the private and often involuntary choices of people the official record tends to overlook.

This also says something about what the post-apocalyptic label is doing when applied to texts like these. Neither book fits the genre's more familiar shape — no ruined cities, no roaming survivors, no world remade from scratch. What Sinha and Murakami share instead is a commitment to the

idea that a disaster's real aftermath is measured in years and in relationships rather than in a single dramatic before-and-after. If post-apocalyptic fiction is usually organised around the spectacle of a world ending, these two texts quietly relocate the genre's real interest to something smaller and slower: the world not ending, and having to be lived in anyway, by people who did not choose what happened to them and cannot fully explain it even to themselves. That, more than any shared setting or shared form, is what finally holds Khaufpur and post-Kobe Japan together as a single literary problem.

Conclusion

Set beside each other, *Animal's People* and *after the quake* suggest that Indo-Japanese post-apocalyptic fiction converts catastrophe into cultural memory through strategies fitted to the particular disaster — and the national conversation — that each text is answering. Sinha's testimonial, pointedly political narrative gives slow violence, ordinarily invisible and undocumented, the sustained shape Nixon argues it needs before it can even be recognised as violence. Murakami's fragmented, allegorical stories give trauma, ordinarily unspeakable and belated, the displaced shape Caruth argues it requires before it can be approached at all without shutting down.

What the comparison ultimately suggests is that post-apocalyptic writing is not one genre with one formal signature but something more like a flexible technology — adaptable across very different cultural and historical contexts — for doing a shared kind of work: reimagining resistance, survival, and ethical responsibility once catastrophe has already happened and cannot be taken back. Khaufpur and post-Kobe Japan are separated by geography, language, and the very different disasters that produced them. Even so, both stories quietly point to the same idea: disasters leave

behind more than just damage. They also leave behind a duty — the duty to remember what really happened, to protect the people who are most at risk, and to stay committed to a future that the disaster tried to destroy but could not.

We should also be honest about what this comparison cannot do. Using two borrowed theories to read these two texts risks forcing them to answer questions they were not really written to answer — Sinha was not writing with Nixon's ideas in mind, and Murakami almost certainly was not thinking about Caruth's theory either. The real value of this comparison is not claiming the authors deliberately used these theories. It is showing that the theories accurately describe what the fiction is already doing on its own — which is really just what literary theory normally does: pointing out a pattern that the story already contains, before criticism comes along to explain it.

Future work on this pairing might extend the comparison in either direction — toward Sinha's other writing on Bhopal, including his journalism and activism, which shares *Animal's People's* refusal to let the disaster's legal case close; or toward the remaining stories in after the quake not treated here, several of which push the collection's quiet allegorical method even further from direct representation. There is also room to bring a third literary tradition into the conversation, particularly writing that has emerged from more recent industrial and climate disasters, to test whether the strategies identified here — sustained testimony on one side, displaced allegory on the other — hold up as a broader pattern in twenty-first-century disaster fiction, or whether Sinha and Murakami represent something closer to two ends of a spectrum with a good deal still uncharted between them. What this study can claim with more confidence is narrower but, hopefully, still useful: that reading these two specific texts together clarifies something about each that reading either alone tends to miss — the political urgency underneath Sinha's testimony, and the psychological precision underneath Murakami's apparent gentleness.

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