

Environmental Catastrophes and Human Resilience in A Breath of Fresh Air and Animal's People

Dr. Pradeepkumar S¹, Dr. Anilkumara S. R.²

¹Assistant Professor of English, Dept of Education in Social Science and Humanities, Regional Institute of Education (NCERT), Mysuru - 570006

Email: pradeepbisalavadi@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor of English (Contractual), Department of Education in Social Sciences and Humanities (DESSH), Regional Institute of Education (RIE), NCERT, Mysuru - 570006

Email: anilkumarsr978@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper explores the environmental and social consequences of industrial disasters, as in Amulya Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air* (2002) and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2008). Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air* centres on Anjali, a 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy survivor. The tragedy has indeed altered her life; consequently, Anjali grapples with her son's declining health and the enduring impact of environmental disasters. The novel also explores personal relationships, societal norms, and the role of women in a conventional society. Similarly, Sinha's *Animal's People* examines the aftermath of a similar industrial disaster through the eyes of Animal, a young man deformed by the toxic effects of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. The novel depicts the struggles of marginalised communities due to corporate negligence, the enduring fight for justice, and also the resilience of those living on the periphery of society. This paper highlights the interconnection between environmental degradation, systemic inequality, and human resilience through Eco-criticism as the theoretical base. By comparing Anjali's and Animal's struggles (and, of course, discussing the important characters), the analysis intends to discuss the ethical imperatives of ecological justice.

Keywords: Bhopal Gas Tragedy, Industrial Disasters, Eco-criticism, Human Resilience, Social Inequality, Environmental Degradation.

Environmental Catastrophes and Human Resilience in *A Breath of Fresh Air* and *Animal's People*

It is undeniably true that industrial disasters have enduring environmental, social, and personal consequences on marginalised communities. The 1984 Bhopal Gas Tragedy was one such example. In October 2002, *Outlook India* wrote: "Bhopal isn't only about charred lungs, poisoned kidneys and deformed foetuses. It's also about corporate crime, multinational skullduggery, injustice" (*Outlook* 2002). Literature has played a vital role in documenting these tragedies; Amulya Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air* (2002) and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2008) are two such literary works that depict the aftermath of the Bhopal disaster. Malladi's novel follows Anjali, a survivor of the gas tragedy, as she navigates the personal and social repercussions of the disaster, particularly the deteriorating health of her son and the constraints imposed by traditional gender roles. In contrast, Sinha's *Animal's People* presents the perspective of Animal (a young man physically deformed due to toxic exposure), whose narrative offers a powerful critique of systemic inequality and environmental injustice. By employing an eco-critical approach, this study examines the interplay between ecological degradation and socio-political structures and attempts to unravel the toxic truths embedded in these narratives.

Since both *A Breath of Fresh Air* and *Animal's People* are deeply rooted in the events of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, it is essential to provide a historical record of the disaster to understand the socio-environmental concerns these novels address fully. "On December 3, 1984, about 45 tons of the dangerous gas methyl isocyanate escaped from an insecticide plant" (Britannica). A massive leak of methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas from the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) pesticide plant "killing at least 3,800 people" (*National Library*



of Medicine). The disaster exposed significant loopholes in industrial safety and corporate accountability. Investigations later revealed that the plant's safety systems were malfunctioning or deliberately shut down to cut costs, making the tragedy an avoidable consequence of corporate negligence. This dreadful tragedy serves as a foundation for the narratives of both novels. The novel intensifies the voices of the forgotten victims, exposing vulnerable communities and the systemic injustices faced by marginalised survivors. Indra Sinha, in an interview, expresses his resentment and indignation in the following way:

Do you honestly believe victims of the gas tragedy will ever get justice? What is justice?

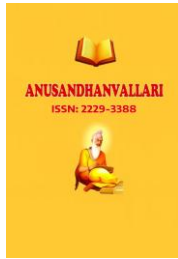
What justice for the dead? What justice for someone who has already spent twenty three years barely able to breathe, living on compensation that works out at seven rupees a day? What justice for kids born brain damaged or deformed, whose lives are blighted before they take their first breath?. (Indra Sinha)

His words accurately expose the empty nature of justice. Victims continue to suffer without adequate medical care, financial support, or corporate accountability. Considering this, the novels not only narrate the lived experiences of disaster survivors but also call attention to the ethical imperatives of ecological justice, and *A Breath of Fresh Air* and *Animal's People* challenge readers to confront the lasting impact of industrial negligence.

Amulya Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air* (2002) centers on Anjali, a 1984 Bhopal Gas Tragedy survivor. The tragedy has altered her life irreversibly, forcing her to grapple with her son's declining health and the lasting impact of environmental disasters. The novel focuses on personal relationships, societal norms, and the role of women in a conventional society, offering an investigation into environmental justice. This paper examines how Malladi constructs the environmental fallout into the characters' lives by employing an eco-critical and ecofeminist approach. The toxic gas leak serves as a metaphor for pollution and contamination.

The novel has three pivotal characters (Anjali, Sandeep, and Prakash). Prakash, a military officer, agreed to fetch his wife Anjali from Bhopal Railway Station in December 1984; however, his irresponsibility led him to spend the evening with the wife of a superior officer. Unbeknownst to Anjali, this night becomes catastrophic. Thousands of unsuspecting individuals, including Anjali, are exposed to the lethal methyl isocyanate gas from the Union Carbide factory. This tragic incident is captured by the author with a meticulous and evocative narrative: "I became aware of it for the first time when I inhaled and felt my lungs being scratched by nails from the inside, like someone had thrown red chilli powder into my nose". (3)

The disrupted breath becomes a metaphor for the broader environmental crisis, emphasising the vital role of clean air (it is fundamental to human existence yet ironically often overlooked by many). This narrative urges readers to consider the relationship between human breath and environmental health, fostering an ecological consciousness that transcends individual experiences. As Anjali recovers in the hospital, she learns of Prakash's infidelity. He attempts to shift the blame, arguing that her mental faculties have been affected by the gas exposure. In a Foreword to *Ecofeminism* by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, Ariel Sallet writes: "We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, It is the same masculinist mentality which deny the right to our own bodies and sexuality" (8). This is undeniably true considering the way Prakash exhibits his patriarchal attitude. However, unyielding, Anjali serves him a divorce notice, marking a pivotal moment in her emancipation from both a toxic marriage and a society that often fails women. Years later, Anjali remarries Sandeep, a teacher. However, the tragedy continues to shape her life as she has bronchial asthma due to the toxic exposure: "Her breath was laboured and each time she inhaled, she made a hissing sound . . . when she clutched at her chest, trying to breathe" (76). Along with her disease, their son, Amar, embodies the lingering consequences of the Bhopal disaster. He is born with congenital anomalies, a result of the methyl isocyanate gas embedded in Anjali's body: "I would always vent that no one bothered to tell me that the Bhopal



gas tragedy had left its mark on my womb. I wish someone had told me that having a child would be dangerous to the child, that any child I had would be affected by that night in Bhopal" (71). Amar's battle with pulmonary fibrosis and cardiac ailments emphasises the lasting scars of environmental negligence.

Malladi's narrative juxtaposes Anjali's past and present, bringing her face-to-face with Prakash again. Their unwelcome encounters stir unresolved emotions, but the novel ultimately focuses on Anjali's perseverance and growth. Amid emotional turmoil, Amar's declining health takes centre stage, culminating in his hospitalisation. In his final moments, he expresses a simple wish—to step outside and inhale a breath of fresh air. The writer describes the final scene of the novel in the following way,

"I want to go outside, Mummy."

I wanted to cry out, "Wait, wait, my son, please wait. Just a minute more, an hour more, a lifetime more."

"Outside beta?" I managed to say through the constriction in my throat.

"I want some fresh air."

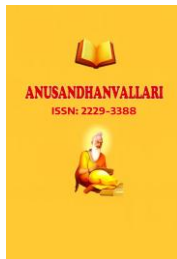
I didn't hesitate. I carefully removed the IV needle from the back of his hand and separated the electrodes, which were counting the beats of his heart, from the chest. The machine made the insidious beeping that implied death. I ignored it and carried him. He was so frail like he had been when he was a baby.

I put him in the wheelchair, wiping my tears away because I didn't want him to see me crying. (164)

Anjali grants him this last request, and he dies in her arms. This distressing scene captures the tragic irony of the novel's title: for Amar, fresh air remains an unattainable dream, a devastating reminder of the catastrophe that has shaped their lives.

Animal's People (another novel selected for the article) chronicles Animal's narrative to a journalist. The very opening lines of *Animal's People* indicate Animal's physical deformity resulting from the poisonous gas, which serves as a haunting reminder of the irreversible impact of the tragic incident. Animal says, "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 human being" (1). Like this, Animal's narrative to the journalist begins with lamenting his helplessness to recall when he walked on two legs like a human being, but the toxic fumes have distorted his body, leaving him to walk in the world on all fours. He recounts that painful experience in the following way: I was six when the pains began, plus the burning in my neck and across the shoulders. Nothing else do I remember from that time, my first memory is that fire. It was so bad I could not lift my head. I just couldn't lift it (15). The lingering picture of the Animal's suffering symbolises the dreadful impact of the chemical disaster on his life. The intense imagery of the excruciating pain, depicted as a relentless pain gripping his neck and shoulders, effectively conveys the agony and trauma inflicted by the toxic gas.

As the title suggests, the novel chronicles how the innocent people were affected by the toxic gas in Animal's point of view. The study begins the analysis of "Kha-in-the-jar"; the haunting presence of the fetus disturbs Animal's thoughts as it is a silent victim of the Kampani's poisonous legacy. This fetus encased in glass symbolises the unborn children who bear the brunt of the toxic consciousness that pervades Khaufpur: "Your back is twisted," says he with great bitterness, "but at least you are alive. Me, I'm still fucking waiting to be born." "Sorry, forgive," says I. "Your situation is worse than mine" (58). The spectre of Methyl Isocyanate gas, as detailed by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, casts a dark shadow over the unborn children of Khaufpur. The tale of Nisha also represents the environmental tragedy caused by company (Kampani). The loss of Nisha's mother and brother on that fateful night becomes emblematic of ecological injustices perpetrated by the Kampani. The corporation's actions not only steal lives but disrupt the natural familial bonds that form the foundation of human relationships. Her father, Somraj Tryambak Puneekar, is



another significant character in the narrative, embodying a complex interplay between personal tragedy and a deep-rooted connection to the ecological and social struggles the people of Khaufpur face. His was known as "Aawaaz-e-Khaufpur," the voice of Khaufpur, but as Nisha says that her father's breath is also stolen" (33). The stolen breath becomes a metaphor for the environmental degradation and pollution inflicted upon Khaufpur by the Kampani: "... until that night took away his wife and baby son and fucked up his lungs. . . ." (33).

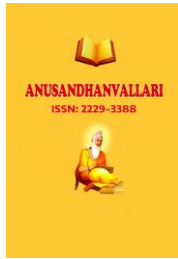
Ma Franci, another central character in *Animal's People*, embodies a touching narrative of her commitment to service. The "venomous gas" is the reason for Ma Franci's mental and physical afflictions, resulting in the loss of multiple languages except for her native French. Her loss of mental balance, induced by the toxic aftermath, becomes symbolic of the collective insanity that can arise when humans neglect their responsibility towards the environment. Ma Franci's decision to stay in Khaufpur despite being called back to France shows her commitment to serving the impoverished. Another significant character, Aliya, also represents the environmental injustice and health impacts that marginalised communities face due to industrial pollution and disasters. Vandana Shiva States in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*, "Resource intensive industries disrupt essential ecological processes by their excessive demands for raw material " (7). As the writer says, Aliya's illness, caused by "excessive demands' of the corporate world. When an American Doctor, Elli, opens a free clinic at Khaufpur for the poisoned victims, she asks Aliya's grandparents to bring her to the free clinic for treatment, "Aliya has an infection. I need to find out what it is... . Everything is free. Bring her to the clinic" (181). But, their anger towards the corporate world's dishonesty, inhumanities, and brutalities made them doubtful and not believe any foreign person. So they refuse to visit Elli's clinic, "Doctoress madam, I'm so embarrassed, we can't bring the child" (182). In this way, Aliya and her grandparents' physical and mental trauma presents the picture of a frightful and poisoned society created by an industry.

Elli, the doctor from America, thinks that the whole city looks like it is flung up by an "Earthquake" (109) as everywhere it is covered with shit and plastic. Thus, she decides to get involved in the hunger strike. Elli's involvement in the hunger strike, her collection of reports on the illnesses caused by the toxic gas, and her efforts to convince her ex-husband, Mr Frank, to stop or delay the Kampani deal all demonstrate a comprehensive approach to addressing the environmental and social consequences of industrial negligence.

Zafar, a central character in Sinha's *Animal's People*, is a formidable force against corporate exploitation and the government's negligence. His evolution from a scholarly pursuit to an activist's life is a personal transformation that captures his sacrifice, empathy, and dedication to justice. Zafar's decision to abandon the comfort of academia and embrace Khaufpur's poison victims is proof of his commitment. By choosing to live among the victims, dress like them, and share in their daily struggles, Zafar moves beyond the conventional role of an activist; he becomes a symbol of genuine empathy and solidarity. He points out the injustice done to innocent people by the Kampani to the court in the following manner: "The factory is abandoned, full of chemicals which as we speak are poisoning the water of thousands more" (53). At the end of the novel, despite Nisha's pleas and warnings, Zafar decides to embark on a hunger strike. His sacrifice transcends a mere protest; it becomes a tragic testament to the personal toll exacted by the pursuit of justice.

Thus, in *Animal's People*, Indra Sinha's narrative unfolds the characters who emerge as champions for the impoverished residents of Khaufpur, advocating for a life free from the shackles of pollution. In an interview with *The Guardian*, he says,

When people ask, 'Why is the disaster continuing? Why has the factory not been cleaned? Why have Union Carbide and how not faced justice?', the answer is this: Union Carbide's victory are still dying in Bhopal because India itself is dying under the corrupt, self-serving rule of rotten leaders. (*The Guardian*)



Every word he uttered in the above lines advocates his desire for an eco-friendly world. Thus, through this novel, the characters such as Zafar, Animal, Nisha, Farouq, Somraj, Elli, and Ma embody the spirit of compassion, resilience, and a sincere desire for a pollution-free existence in their community.

In conclusion, the narratives of *A Breath of Fresh Air* and *Animal's People* serve as powerful literary testimonies to the enduring consequences of industrial disasters. Through the personal struggles of Anjali and Animal, both novels illustrate how environmental catastrophes are not just isolated events but rather ongoing crises that shape individual lives and societal structures. Malladi's novel highlights how an ecological disaster changes an individual's and her world's course. At the same time, Sinha's work exposes the bleak realities of corporate negligence and the relentless fight for justice. The application of eco-criticism and ecofeminism in analysing these texts helps one to comprehend the intricate connection between environmental degradation and systemic inequalities, revealing how power structures determine who bears the brunt of ecological collapse.

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