

## POSTCOLONIAL TRANSCORPOREALITIES IN INDRA SINHA'S *ANIMAL'S PEOPLE* (2007)

---

ALEXANDRA BRICI\*

**Abstract** This chapter explores the methodological affordances of New Materialism in representing non-anthropocentric and non-eurocentric ecological epistemologies and practices. It argues that a new materialist framework, which affirms the agential and self-creative powers of materiality and highlights the enmeshment of human and nonhuman agents, can illustrate the combined effects of colonialism, global capitalism and the imposition of Western epistemological categories upon the Global South. By analysing Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007), I aim to demonstrate that a narratological methodology predicated upon New Materialist knowledge structures can explicate the consequences of Western systems of exploitation and extraction on the intermingled lives of humans and nonhumans, illustrating the interconnectedness of the struggles for racial, economic and environmental justice. The second aim of this paper is to contribute to scholarship on magical realism as ecological discourse advanced by Ben Holgate (2019), examining how Indra Sinha's novel explores "questions about [...] the place of embodied humans within a material world."<sup>1</sup> I investigate how conceptualisations of matter and material situatedness circumscribed by New Materialism can explicate how the bridging of ontologically distinct planes ("the real" and "the magical") that magical realism hinges upon explores the intermingling of human and nonhuman actors and makes visible the non-differentiation between human subjects and the environment.

**Keywords** Magical realism, New Materialism, transhuman, posthumanism, ecocriticism, postcolonialism

### 1. Introduction: New Materialism and Magical Realism

In their Introduction to the symptomatic collective volume *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency and Politics* (2010), Diana Coole and Samantha Frost synthesise the most important

---

\* Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, alexandra.brici@stud.ubbcluj.ro.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2024.29.2.12>.

<sup>1</sup> Diana Coole, Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

undercurrents of the varied and heteromorphic reconceptualisations of materiality in contemporary thought. These heteroclitic approaches towards “the most fundamental questions about the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans within a material world”<sup>2</sup> have in common an “emphasis on materialization as a complex, pluralistic, relatively open process and [an] insistence that humans, including theorists themselves, be recognized as thoroughly immersed within materiality’s productive contingencies. In distinction from some recent examples of constructivism, new materialists emphasize the productivity and resilience of matter. Their wager is to give materiality its due, alert to the myriad ways in which matter is both self-constituting and invested with—and reconfigured by—intersubjective interventions that have their own quotient of materiality.”<sup>3</sup> My analysis of Indra Sinha’s 2007 novel *Animal’s People*<sup>4</sup> is situated within a new materialist framework, without being tributary to any particular unified system subsumed under this term.<sup>5</sup> Since employing a systematic approach to the exploration of contemporary new materialist scholarship is outside the scope of my analysis, the prescriptive notions listed by Coole and Frost guide my investigation into how what we could call a new materialist turn in contemporary thought is instantiated in literary production. In this sense, I am interested in exploring how the novel can represent the agentic and self-generating capacities of matter and how this translates into new forms of environmental situatedness: specifically, the narratological instruments that the novel can galvanise in this type of representation. In this paper, I explore how Indra Sinha revitalises a magical realist formula in order to represent the self-organising powers of matter. As such, I aim to operationalise the view present amongst many theorists of New Materialism that the socioeconomic and the political should be treated as “immersed within materiality’s productive contingencies,”<sup>6</sup> showing how the constitution of the protagonist’s position inside his society and the construction of the community itself are contingent upon their material conditions and their relation to other nonhuman, material actors. In this sense, my analysis is not committed to applying new materialist theorisations *tale quale* or in a correlative manner. Rather, I contend that new materialist knowledge structures can shed light on how Sinha explores humans as interlaced with material agents and how he rethinks the relationship between humans and nonhumans.

Firstly, I aim to emphasise how a magical realist poetics based on the juxtaposition of the real and the “magical” allows the novel to stage its protagonist’s encounter with forms of material agency, an encounter that necessitates, in the grammar of the novel, an unusual form of perception. Magical realism constructs dyadic worlds in which the real and the magical

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Indra Sinha, *Animal’s People* (UK: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> In my view, one suggestive example in this sense would be Jane Bennett’s conceptualisation of *vibrant matter*, which could be considered a more unified approach to new materialist thinking. See Bennett, Jane, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Coole, Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, 7.

(each with equal ontological “charge”) constitute the two faces of the fictional universe. I aim to analyse how Sinha translates the real and the fantastic into the dichotomy between the human and the nonhuman in order to dismantle this binary altogether. Thus, the magical realist model, in which the boundary between the domain of the ordinary and that of the fantastic is blurred, while the fantastic engulfs reality, can be resemanticized to highlight the interweaving of the two dimensions — to create a fictional world in which the human and the non-human are coterminous.

Ecocritical and anticolonial discourse accompanies magical realism from its infancy, as Ben Holgate demonstrates. In Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), the banana company, the face of imperialism and exploitation in the novel, produces the first disruptions in the town of Macondo by preparing the crops for industrialised agriculture and, implicitly, disrupting the equilibrium of nature: they disturb the regularity of precipitations and alter the course of the river “from where it had always been” with means “reserved for Providence.”<sup>7</sup> Due to its emergence within post-/de-colonial literature, magical realism thematizes the effects of “ecological imperialism,”<sup>8</sup> through which the natural environment of the colonies is exploited for the economic profit of the colonising nation. However, as Holgate emphasises, this is not the only common root of these two modes: the intersection lies in the ontology that ecocriticism and magical realism presuppose. In the space between reality and the magical constructed in magical realism, the intersection of “apparently disparate or opposed” elements is possible, and humanity is depicted as an element of a much larger universe.<sup>9</sup> Thus, “biocentrism”<sup>10</sup> becomes one of the foundations of magical realist poetics. My analysis is predicated on Holgate’s theorisation of an enlarged universe that can make visible the enmeshment of humans and a form of materiality that is self-generating and *vibrant*, to use Jane Bennet’s term.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. The Slow Violence of Environmental Destruction

*Animal's People* is inspired by Indra Sinha’s experience as an activist for the victims of the Bhopal catastrophe, the world's worst industrial disaster to this day. On the night of 2-3 December 1984, a leaking tank at the Union Carbide pesticide plant in the city of Bhopal, India, resulted in the release of 27 tons of methyl isocyanate, an extremely toxic and flammable chemical compound.<sup>12</sup> At least 9,000 people died on the night of December 2nd, and it is

---

<sup>7</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, Gregory Rabassa, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (London: Pan, 1978), 187-188.

<sup>8</sup> Ben Holgate, *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse* (Routledge, 2019), 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Guneet Narula, “International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal | an International Coalition Working to Address the Grave Injustices Suffered by Half a Million Bhopalis,” 10 April, 2024, <https://www.bhopal.net/>.

estimated that around 25,000 people died in total as a result of the industrial accident, with a total of 500,000 people being exposed to this extremely dangerous substance.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, it came to light that the company Union Carbide, the owner of the chemical plant, was, in addition, dumping toxic waste near the factory years before the accident, burying it in the ground or simply dumping it at ground level, and five years before the accident, Union Carbide knew that the factory was contaminated with toxic compounds.<sup>14</sup> None of the safety systems that could have been activated in case of malfunction were functional that night. To this day,<sup>15</sup> the contaminated site of the pesticide factory has not been cleaned up, and the effects of the industrial chemical compounds, toxic waste, and heavy metals that have entered the underground water leave their mark on the third generation of inhabitants of the Bhopal region after the 1984 accident. The explanation for the cause of the event on that night, that the Union Carbide industrial giant maintains to this day, is that one of the employees deliberately caused the contamination of the methyl isocyanate tank in an act of sabotage, although it has been demonstrated that on the night of the incident, a valve connected to the methyl isocyanate (MIC) tanks was leaking.<sup>16</sup> This malfunction was not repaired.<sup>17</sup>

The protagonist of the novel, a young boy named Animal whose spine has been deformed because of the accident to the point where he walks on all fours, finds himself within a constellation of characters (inspired, through Sinha's activism in Bhopal, by the reality of the local community affected by the chemical disaster) rallying around the activist Zafar, "a sort of atheist Muslim Gandhi,"<sup>18</sup> in a struggle to reclaim justice and reparations for the survivors of the disaster. The activists are fighting against the company responsible for the disaster (in the novel, *Kampani*) and the corrupt political mechanisms of the Indian government. The narrative will be constructed around the monophony of the protagonist, Animal, the narrator of his story.

Rob Nixon introduces the concept of slow violence to describe how global systems of exploitation like capitalism and neocolonialism, both enacting processes of environmental destruction in the contemporary world, have nonlocal manifestations and effects that stretch across time. Slow violence is "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. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action

<sup>13</sup> "Bhopal's Second Poisoning – THE BHOPAL MEDICAL APPEAL," n.d., <https://www.bhopal.org/continuing-disaster/second-poisoning/bhopal-second-poisoning/>.

<sup>14</sup> "Bhopal's Second Poisoning – THE BHOPAL MEDICAL APPEAL."

<sup>15</sup> Adrian, "What Happened in Bhopal? | International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal" (24 August 2014), <https://www.bhopal.net/what-happened-in-bhopal/>.

<sup>16</sup> "Union Carbide's Chemical Trail – THE BHOPAL MEDICAL APPEAL," n.d., <https://www.bhopal.org/continuing-disaster/second-poisoning/union-carbides-chemical-trail/>.

<sup>17</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of the circumstances that lead to this accident see Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?* (Zed Books Ltd., 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Jesse Oak Taylor, "Powers of Zero: Aggregation, Negation, and the Dimensions of Scale in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*," *Literature and Medicine* 31, no. 2 (January 1, 2013): 177–98, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lm.2013.0014>, 179.

that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.”<sup>19</sup> In the novel, the victims are subjected to devastation processes that stretch considerably across time and space, thus their repercussions are made visible decades later; these are disasters whose victims cannot be counted, a violence that insinuates itself into the very fabric of these communities.

Occurring two years before the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, the disaster in Bhopal is considered to be the most terrible industrial accident in history. However, unlike Chernobyl, the word “Bhopal” means practically nothing to the Western world. Therefore, it remains an (ongoing) invisible trauma, unexorcised, with three generations of victims whose testimonies have not been recorded. Why does this major event from the history of the last century remain unknown in the Western world? In Rob Nixon's view, the invisibility of Bhopal is a symptom of the racialization mechanisms that produce the separation between those who are, in the words of Franz Fanon, *damné*[e]s and those who are (closer to being) saved. The relative proximity of Chernobyl to Western Europe transforms the disaster into a transnational threat that can affect “us”, compared to the Indian disaster (an eminently national event) which in our imagination occupies the place of an Indian problem happening “over there among the faceless poor of the third world”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in the hotbed of neoliberalism during the Thatcher-Reagan era, Chernobyl is assimilable to the threat of communism, opening the doors to intensified militarization and the deregulation and liberalisation of the economy in the West. Bhopal, as Rob Nixon demonstrates, is not part of the dominant narrative of communism vs. the “free world”, which further obscures the “impunity” with which Western companies operate in the global South.<sup>21</sup> Sinha's novel highlights the racialization mechanisms of global capitalism and neocolonialism, whereby industrial giants from the global North profit from the outsourcing of the consequences of natural resource exploitation: “these transnational companies internalize profits and externalize risks, particularly in impoverished regions of the global South.”<sup>22</sup> One of the risks that the North externalises is the proximity to toxic substances and the consequences of environmental degradation, which will be examined in the next section.

The impetus for the protagonist's narration is an Australian journalist who wants to write a book about the victims of the tragedy. As such, the novel opens with a metatextual reflection on the ethical value of documenting the lives of those affected by the tragedy with the help of Animal. The narrator, Animal, is sceptical towards the idea of recording the stories of the “wretched of the earth” in the words of Frantz Fanon. The Australian journalist's motivation to write a book is, from Animal's perspective, nothing but a cliché about how stories can change the world: “I said I am a small person not even human, what difference will

---

<sup>19</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

my story make? You told me that sometimes the stories of small people in the world can achieve big things, this is the way you buggers always talk.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, from the outset, the novel problematizes the power of literature to ethically engage in the representation of the unequal effects of global capitalism and neocolonialism to a Western audience. Animal knows that by documenting “the really savage things, the worst cases,”<sup>24</sup> the world recreated within the book written by the Australian journalist can only create a form of disaster porn, accusing the exoticizing, fetishizing gaze of the journalist (as well as ours, the readers’, and even Sinha’s authorial gaze). “On that night it was poison, now it’s words that are choking us,”<sup>25</sup> states Animal - the stories of these journalists can only amplify the precariousness and vulnerability of the inhabitants of the city of Khaufpur. Initially refusing the journalist’s offer, Animal returns to a recording device to exorcise the multitude of voices that roar in his mind. We understand that, because of “that night,” not only Animal’s physical constitution was affected, but also, his mental health, and he is suffering, we can assume, from a form of schizophrenia. The hallucinatory voices, sometimes benevolent, other times accusing and malevolent, are in any case external and undermine the monophonic narratological construction of the novel, as they produce a form of fractionation and splitting. I will return to how these voices construct the human-nonhuman relationship and the protagonist’s connection to the material and symbolic assemblage of the fictional universe in the last part of my analysis.

This metatextual reflection on the ethical value of this type of storytelling distances the novel from a romanticised and literature-centric stance. In the economy of the novel, the protagonist and concomitantly author of his own story does not purport that his testimony will materially change the conditions of those affected by the tragedy in Bhopal. In the postmodern tradition, the novel often returns to its self-representation and to the transmediations and translations that take place in order for the Western audience to have access to Animal’s testimony: the transcription of the tape recordings and the translation from Hindi to English. Sinha’s novel navigates the challenges of this type of storytelling with clarity, acknowledging its inability to be a perfect vehicle for the unaltered experiences of the Bhopal community, but rejecting the relativism of stating that storytelling is nothing but language divorced of its material conditions: Animal argues that at the core of his testimony lies “a truth,”<sup>26</sup> a reality, which the novel immortalises distortedly, through multiple filters.

### 3. Transcorporeality and Disability

The toxic substances produced by the *Kampani* contaminate the environment and the community of Khaufpur, the fictional city of the novel, who suffers increasingly because of the

---

<sup>23</sup> Sinha, *Animal’s People*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Indra Sinha, “Animal in Bhopal,” *Himal Southasian* (1 December 2009), <https://www.himalmag.com/archives/animal-in-bhopal>.

environmental destruction. The exploration of the effects of the tragedy brings to the fore the stories of multiple characters who suffer from various disabilities, highlighting how the poisoning of the environment has effects on multiple generations of Khaufpuris. The majority of the people who did not pass away during the night of the catastrophe developed cancer, various types of pulmonary or neurological diseases and miscarriages, to name just a few of the ailments that the novel represents. The toxic substances that cause these diseases will eventually end up polluting the underground water and the community's wells and affecting their crops. The most affected people are those closest to the *Kampani* site, the poorest community: those who live in a slum called the Nutcracker, where Animal himself lives. The symptomatic image in the novel that showcases the level of contamination of the people's bodies and environment is that of a mother who spills her "poisoned" breast milk back into the earth: "Says the mother to Elli, 'Our wells are full of poison. It's in the soil, in our blood, it's in our milk. Everything here is poisoned. If you stay here long enough, you will be too.'"<sup>27</sup> The image of the orphaned Aliya, discussed at large by Yorke<sup>28</sup> emphasises the "compound disadvantages" children in Khaufpur inherit, as she has lost her parents in the disaster and will later die by a fever caused by chronic poisoning and by lack of proper nourishment and medical care:

"Aliya's ultimate death is directly caused by fever, but is perhaps more determined by the pervasive physiological difficulties experienced by those around her, as well as generational and economic gaps directly attributable to the disaster. Her story is highly suggestive of the ways in which disability can be read as a directly-lived collective reality, as, in the context of a high precedence in individuals, individual disability experience is changed, and subsumes non-disabled players as well."<sup>29</sup>

Stephanie Yorke's excellent observations on how disability is constructed in the novel as a communal issue add to my analysis of how the protagonist comes to be integrated in this community. In this sense, analysing the *Kampani* catastrophe as a hyperobject, in Timothy Morton's terms,<sup>30</sup> supports our analysis of the interlaced effects of the industrial accident. Although it begins as a local event that could be virtually circumscribed within the physical site of the plant, its manifestations are nonlocal and are spread out in time, affecting two generations. In this sense, its manifestations are not only material, but also economic, social, political, affecting the fabric of the Khaufpur society itself. I will expand upon what Morton

---

<sup>27</sup> Sinha, *Animal's People*, 108.

<sup>28</sup> Stephanie Yorke, "Disability, Normalcy, and the Failures of the Nation: A Reading of Selected Fiction by Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Indra Sinha, and Firdaus Kanga" (2015), <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.711979>, 161-162.

<sup>29</sup> Yorke, "Disability, Normalcy, and the Failures of the Nation: A Reading of Selected Fiction by Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Indra Sinha, and Firdaus Kanga," 161

<sup>30</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Posthumanities, 2013), 1.

describes as the “viscosity” of the hyperobject, its ability to *stick* “to beings that are involved with [it]”<sup>31</sup> by engaging with Stacy Alaimo’s concept of transcorporeality.

The interdependent circulation of substances and the contagion of different material agents are explored by Stacy Alaimo through the concept of transcorporeality. In her 2010 volume, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Alaimo theorises this concept to articulate the interdependencies and interconnections of different bodily natures, emphasising a “transversal” dynamic between material agents. (Re)conceptualising the human body as a transcorporeal form underscores both how the body is situated inside a network of actants that mutually influence each other, and the fact that human body is inseparable from the environment, creating a dynamic that highlights “the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors.”<sup>32</sup> Transcorporeality describes the ways in which Indra Sinha outlines the placement of the body not only within human-biosphere interrelations but also within hyperobjects such as capitalism, colonialism, or medicine. Alaimo analyses the unequal distribution of “ecological benefits and harms” and how categories such as race, class, or gender account for socio-material inequalities, noting that “much of human history could be evaluated by assessing the environmental benefits versus environmental harms gained or suffered by different groups.”<sup>33</sup>

As Alaimo demonstrates, the injured bodies are not just bodies permeable to the substances and forces that traverse them - harmful chemical compounds, heavy metals - but also spaces for the negotiation and contestation of power.<sup>34</sup> Taking Alaimo’s argument further, disablement is in Sinha’s novel not only a space for the negotiation of power, but also one for neocolonial violence. The subject of the novel revolves precisely around such a nucleus: the young doctor Elli, who arrives in Khaufpur from the USA to open a medical clinic offering free services to the city’s residents, encounters the residents’ reluctance to benefit from medical aid. Zafar suspects that Elli is working for *Kampani* to demonstrate, through research, by collecting and manipulating data about their disabled bodies, that the residents’ precarious state is not caused by the factory disaster, but by their miserable living conditions: poverty, limited access to infrastructure, or even lack of hygiene, tactics that the company had previously used to demonstrate that the harm the accident had done was less significant than the inhabitants maintained.

The protagonist’s disability generates his liminal condition in the social network of the city of Khaufpur. The name *Animal*, a derogatory term coined by his peers in the orphanage where he grew up, gestures towards his exclusion from a normative notion of humanity. As Rosi Braidotti describes:

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.



“The human of Humanism is neither an ideal nor an objective statistical average or middle ground. It rather spells out a systematized standard of recognizability – of Sameness – by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location. The human is a normative convention, which does not make it inherently negative, just highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination. (...) It functions by transposing a specific mode of being human into a generalized standard, which acquires transcendent values as the human: from male to masculine and onto human as the universalized format of humanity. This standard is posited as categorically and qualitatively distinct from the sexualized, racialized, naturalized others and also in opposition to the technological artefact.”<sup>35</sup>

Although the name Animal signals the hegemony of a prescriptive notion of humanity and his subsequent exclusion from this category, the word for animal in Hindi, *jaanvar*, means “one who lives,”<sup>36</sup> which gestures towards a more inclusive and unifying notion, one that emphasises the interconnectedness of material actors. This interconnectedness, being inscribed in the name of the protagonist, foreshadows Animal’s condition as transhuman, which will later be explored allegorically in the last part of the novel.

Stephanie Yorke explores how disability itself becomes the basis for communal solidarity amongst the people. Zafar, the most prominent activist for collective justice for the people of Khaufpur, is at first met with scepticism and apprehension by the community, just like the young physician Elli, precisely because he is able-bodied. In relation to Animal, he is also the most zealous supporter of a humanist notion of normalcy, and his activism is directly founded upon his normative views of the human. His veiled dispute with Animal has to do with the protagonist’s animalness – in his view, Animal’s form is incomplete, underdeveloped, ultimately subhuman. His larval stage of development is caused by Animal’s lack of willingness to become human: in Zafar’s view, he uses his symbolic animality as a perfect excuse for his abrasive and caustic persona and his resentment toward Zafar, whom Animal will poison in an act of revenge. Only after Zafar chooses to go on a hunger strike to pressure *Kampani* and government officials to investigate the case of Khaufpur does he become “an equal shareholder in the community”, moving from a “an idealizing, valorising view of disability to an insider’s understanding of being sick.”<sup>37</sup> Although he will be integrated into the larger community of disabled people and be able to understand their ailments on a bodily level, Zafar will not deconstruct his anthropocenic paradigm until the very end, when he will proclaim, in an almost ceremonial tone, the humanity of Animal. Yorke’s analysis of disability in relation to community shows how, despite its monophonic construction, the novel explores “not only individual disability, but the sort of community experience that is so often elided from public discourse,”<sup>38</sup> by investigating disability in relation to (internal) relations of power and solidarity

---

<sup>35</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 26.

<sup>36</sup> Sinha, *Animal's People*, 45.

<sup>37</sup> Yorke, “Disability, Normalcy, and the Failures of the Nation: A Reading of Selected Fiction by Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Indra Sinha, and Firdaus Kanga,” 165.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

but also in relation to hyperobjects (Morton), like neocolonialism, imperialism, global capitalism and environmental degradation, bringing to the fore the emphasis on the protagonist's insertion into his community that is announced in the title of the novel. My analysis will add another form of discourse that the novel tackles, which is the renegotiation of the notion of the human, analysing how the author inserts this discussion in a magical realist form.

#### 4. Magical realism as (New) Materialist Discourse

The most magically-saturated episode of the novel coincides with the climax: the community violently revolts against the neo-imperial apparatus, exemplified by the *Kampani's* delegated higher-ups. In the generalised ataxia caused by the people's uproar, the foretold Apokalis, prophesied by the nun Ma Franci (Animal's surrogate mother) in her visions, is materialised and the protagonist finds himself alone and distressed by the knowledge of having poisoned the one who was supposed to be the people's Messiah. Amongst the fires, the sounds of gunshots and the groups of people in disarray, Animal makes his way outside the city centre and towards the Nutcracker slum, while the agential and productive capacities of materiality progressively come to the fore. As the protagonist physically distances himself from humans, in a symbolic repudiation of normative humanity nested in an industrialized landscape, towards the radical (and distinctly peripheral) material vibrancy of the forest, the semiotic and gnoseological attunement of the protagonist to the creative powers of matter is both geographically inscribed and psychosomatically prepared by the suicidal ingestion of a hallucinogen, *Datura*, a plant with psychoactive properties. The annihilation of the city centre is contiguous with the progressive manifestation of the underground forces that animate the nonhuman world. The protagonist's disavowal of humanity, prompted by his conviction that his reproachful actions are the ultimate proof of his subhuman nature, is followed by a desire to return "home," to the forest, and integrate in his original existential plane: "...aping greenly go thus trees through, oh I'll discover my true state, die or live, animal returning to its truly home."<sup>39</sup> The altered perception of Animal not only describes the agential properties of matter, but also its self-organising capacities. Matter does not only play a important role in the protagonist's environmental situatedness and existential status, but is also imbued with creativity and intelligence:

"Above my head a monkey sits on a branch, eating a fruit it's, spitting seeds onto the earth, the fur slides from its face, revealing the skull beneath, its flesh drips in furry glowing blobs, all bones is the monkey, one by one the bones fall and lie shining in the moonlight, earth opens a brown mouth sends out a green tongue it becomes a tree gobbles the monkey's bones, tree grows tall, shining fruits appear among its leaves, a monkey sits on a branch eating the moon."<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Sinha, *Animal's People*, 389.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

I describe this access as gnoseological, since, as I shall argue, the protagonist's renegotiation of his ontological status is constructed as a symbolic surpassing of the boundaries between life and death, culminating in the return to life by a symbolic rebirth. This existential journey through different ontological planes underscores the vibrancy of material things and is predicated on the porosity of the human consciousness and body.

The distinctly creative and self-organising capacities of matter become manifest by two corresponding textual mechanisms: first by anthropomorphisation, secondly by the metaphorical contamination of the protagonist's body with material elements, ultimately amounting to a picture of the interconnectedness of all things. In the first configuration, nonhuman actors are imbued with consciousness by anthropomorphisation. The moon glares at the protagonist, the trees, "joining branch to branch they're, dancing in a ring, each tree leaping to the next quicker than eye can follow", chant "que ta chair devienne sèche / we shall feast upon your flesh"<sup>41</sup>, introducing the choir of forest voices and presences that remind Animal of his material nature: like the lizard, which the famished protagonist decides to spare, who says: "Hey Animal, soon you'll be a shrivelled old sack, I will creep into your dry carcass and lay my eggs around your heart."<sup>42</sup> The coterminous nature of Animal and the forest is revealed to be dreadful: what should have been the insertion of Animal into his ideal, prelapsarian natural habitat becomes an entrapment in a phagocyte macro-organism that awaits his decomposition. Animal calls to no avail for his "brothers and sisters": "I am one of you, come to live with you. Show yourselves"<sup>43</sup> As it turns out, the complete integration into materiality by erasing the boundaries of body and self is not possible: or better put, it is a horrific prospect, possible only after death. The other configuration is the represented by the metaphorical hybridisation between the protagonists' body and material elements: "grass is growing from the backs of [his] hands" while "[his] head pressed to the earth [is] hearing a million things, stamping of ants, worms chewing grit, millipede legs whirring like drums in a parade"<sup>44</sup>. In this configuration, the protagonists' body is expanded and acquires universal proportions:

"[m]y misty thoughts go spinning and become the moon. The glare in my eye's my eye turning into the sun, my breath's a hot wind, riding it is a tiny god drunk with his own power whose body is covered with sores, from my middle parts come gusts of air, out of my head slides the universe."<sup>45</sup>

Prompted by his rejection by the animal kingdom and the impossibility of complete integration into nature, Animal transforms his own body into an alter-cosmos, surrendering his desire for integration toward the amplification of his individual resources that could envelop the whole outside

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 394.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 395.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 395.

world. The transcorporeal dimensions of these metaphors is diminished by the protagonists' repudiation of synthesis and subsequent replacement of his own body as the universe:

"My back shall be ice-capped mountains, my arse mount Meru, my eyes shall be the sun and moon, the gusts of my bowels the four winds, my body shall be the earth, lice its living things, but why stop there? I'll be my own Milky Way, comets shall whizz from my nose, when I shake myself pearls of sweat shall fly off and become galaxies, what am I but a complete miniature universe stumbling around inside this larger one, little does this tree realise that the small thing bumbling at its roots, scraping at its bark, clawing a way into its branches, is a fully fledged cosmos."<sup>46</sup>

The first part of the protagonists' delirium is predicated upon the frenzy and hysteria of the tensions surrounding Animal's relation to the natural world - these tensions are represented as a fight between Animal and the devilish creatures that mock and insult him. The second part of his hallucination involves an afterlife journey, introduced by the phrase "[t]hat night I died". The horrors of the first part of the hallucination, themselves represented by the flames that are burning up the Nutcracker slums and creating a hellish landscape, whereby anthropomorphised animals and plants become fiendish presences, are followed by the exploration of a luminous space, resembling a Garden of Eden, thereby underscoring the dantesque dimensions of Animal's pilgrimage through a symbolic hell and heaven. The exploration of this sublime afterworld is signified as a rebirth ("[s]o weak I'm, newly born into this life") indicated also by the entrance of Animal into this world through a cave, while the lack of hunger and thirst gesture towards the image of a Christian paradise. But the most defining feature of this paradise is a prelapsarian lack of separation between animals and humans: "among them are small figures on two legs, except some have horns some have tails they are neither men nor animals, or else they are both, then I know that I have found my kind, plus this place will be my everlasting home, I have found it at last, this is the deep time when there was no difference between anything when separation did not exist when all things were together, one and whole before humans set themselves apart and became clever and made cities and kampanis and factories"<sup>47</sup> In this luminous vision, which precedes the separation between animals and humans, the world is populated by hybrid beings which represent the original interconnectedness of all things. In this pre-anthropocenic deep time, Animal can find "his kind", hybrid beings who are *both*, signifying the turn from a "neither/nor" logic to an "and/both" logic. The world in which Animal lives is predicated on a neither/nor logic, whereby a normative definition of the human prevents him from living a dignified existence among humans. The subsequent failure of his integration in the animal kingdom highlights the ontological intermediary space that Animal occupies in his world. This paradise, antecedent to the separation between humans and animals, is also a subversion of the original biblical

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 397-98.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 400.

paradise, whereby what could be called the origin story of the myth of anthropocentrism in European culture is born. The symptomatic act whereby Adam names all the animals in the animal kingdom, a gesture symbolically reproducing divine creation on a lower scale, appoints man as the sovereign of the animal kingdom, ontologically superior and deciding over the life and death of his subordinates. By recreating the image of the Christian Garden of Eden, but populating it with the original hybrid creatures, Sinha creates an alternative history of the origin of man, one that can dismantle anthropocentrism. In the same logic of the biblical allegory, the view on the Fall of Man is distinctly decolonial - the separation of humans from animals will eventually lead to the Industrial Revolution and global capitalism, which will subsequently lead to the disappearance of both animals and humans. This configuration is not only anti-anthropocentric but also an anti-Eurocentric one.

The exploration of the protagonist's identity in the grammar of the novel, as both animal and human, is considered through a socio-material lens, and the hallucinatory episode in the forest becomes allegorical for the protagonist's liminal existence inside his community. In the fictional world of the novel, the magical plane disrupts the reality of oppression and precarity in order to reveal possibilities of material intermingling. By crossing the boundaries between humans and animals on the one hand and humans and environment on the other, this chapter reappraises two important issues at the heart of the novel: the nature of Nature, that is, the potentialities of materiality, its vibrancy, and the divide between humans and nature.

The resolution of the symptomatic conflict between animal and human, as it is exemplified in the novel in the double nature of the protagonist, is resolved in the figure of the transhuman. The protagonist, Animal, epitomises the transhuman as an intermediary form between human and nonhuman, and represents the subversion of the human-animal binary. In the hallucinatory vision from the climax, through the form of magical realism, multiple possibilities of material intermingling are being explored: first, there is the reintegration into an original, all-encompassing Nature, the mystical solution that the novel refuses. The rediscovery of a primordial relation to nature and the environment does not seem to be possible in the economy of the novel: here, nature is active and self-organising, for millennia nature has continued its self-generating processes against the destructive activities of humans - nature is not a welcoming receptacle, but an enraged and resentful actant. In spite of the gnoseological and mystical undercurrents of this part of the novel, the novel repudiates the possibility of the character finding his place of origin in nature and turns away from a possible *ekstasis* and reintegration in nature. Although images of transcorporeality and interconnectedness between humans and environment are prevalent in the novel, it seems to opt out of this solution in a seemingly anti-climatic manner. Secondly, the refusal of reintegration is also symptomatic for the protagonist's inability to become animal. Instead, the novel valorises the intermediary figure of the transhuman, opting to dismantle the human-animal binary itself. In my interpretation, the novel is constructed as a decidedly anti-essentialist manifesto against categorization. Following the logic of hybridisation, Animal finds his kind in the dual beings of paradise, which are both humans and animals.

## 5. Conclusions

The mode of magical realism is engaged by Sinha in order to represent various forms of material interconnectedness. By contaminating the real with the fantastic, the novel creates the image of a world devoid of ontological boundaries between the human and the non-human, where connections with the non-human agents that underpin our symbolic and material existence are made visible. Magical realism becomes one of the models that gives space to the most salient problematizations of the non-human turn (especially the status of humanity in relation to non-human agents). Although the last chapter of the novel is the most suggestive example for this new materialist ontology, the novel explores materiality outside the mode of the fantastic, as I demonstrated in my analysis of how Sinha represents the transcorporeality of the living experience of the community in Khaufpur.