The Postcolonial Picaro in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* – Becoming Posthuman through Animal's Eyes

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1. Introduction

"We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us" (Sinha 366). With this gloomy prophecy, Animal, the protagonist of Indra Sinha's 2007 novel *Animal's People*, concludes a series of tapes recorded for a Western journalist who seeks an authentic report of one of the poor inhabitants of the slums of the city of Khaufpur, India. Animal's prophecy raises a number of questions. Is Animal actually referring to Christian eschatology or does the reappropriation of 'Apokalis' hint at quite another concept instead? What would be the aesthetic and ethical implications of such a reference to religious imagery? And who, after all, is 'we'? In this essay, I will point to ways of destabilising the rhetorical power of the apocalyptic trope, and thus, of negotiating the meaning of discourses of catastrophe as avenues of thinking about a posthumanist perspective on disaster. Posthumanism, Neil Badmington writes, "marks a careful, ongoing, overdue rethinking of the dominant humanist (or anthropocentric) account of who 'we' are as human beings" (374). In the first part of this essay, I will argue that *Animal's People* offers fictional means of such forms of rethinking which require the unsettling of dichotomies of 'us' and 'them', and about human and animal. I will maintain that the theoretical perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism instigates to appreciate the tensions that come with such negotiations. In this context, the 'Apokalis' can be read as an event of unthinkability (Wolfe 123), and it is within the imaginative experience of fiction that this notion can be grasped and, as will be shown, even celebrated.

In the second half of this essay, I will discuss this fictional experience of unthinkability by focussing on the novel's aesthetic power. *Animal's People* juxtaposes apocalyptic tropes and picaresque, postcolonial laughter. By staging the disaster of the 'Apokalis' in picaresque terms, the novel cleverly and effectively deconstructs the very apocalyptic trope it is concerned with. It does so mainly by virtue of three elements, which I will discuss in more detail below. First, it endorses the narrative with a sense of alterity that benefits the reading experience. Second, it creates an aesthetic tension between the writing of catastrophe and the genre of the picaresque. And thirdly, it finally deconstructs the dichotomy underlying this tension. Ultimately, *Animal's People* thus allows for an 'Animal' perspective on the narrative of disaster in a world that consists of numerous voices, several truths and one imperative to ethical behaviour.

By narrating the stories of the inhabitants of the fictional city of Khaufpur, Sinha's novel features a moving and insightful account of the 1984 Bhopal disaster in India and

its juridical and social aftermath. At the same time, it tells the story of a young subaltern individual fighting for its right to ignore common ways of telling the story of this tragedy. Thus, the narrative of *Animal's People* thrives on the tension between narrative convention and the limitations of understanding, especially in an intercultural context. After a first reluctance to speak to the journalist, Animal tells the story of "[o]us raat, cette nuit, that night, always that fucking night" (Sinha 5), when a chemical plant near the slums of Khaufpur exploded, and the people's struggles for survival ever since. But he also tells of his love for the beautiful Nisha and a group of young Indians who demand justice for Khaufpur. He tells of the medical doctor Elli Barber, who has come to help and who is boycotted by the wary inhabitants, and of the scams that he and his friends designed for tricking tourists; of the seemingly mad nun Ma Franci and of the embryo corpse with the severe deformities that he calls "Khã-in-the-Jar." Ultimately, Animal maps a rich and colourful picture of the numerous lives of Khaufpur's poor – "Animal's People" –, and the vibrancy of this picture opposes the bleak context of the disaster that sealed Khaufpur's fate.

By engaging with the conflict between narrative convention and understanding, I want to explore the aesthetic and ethical potential of Sinha's narrative and situate it in the hermeneutic context of postcolonial ecocriticism. I believe that *Animal's People* allows us to address the tension between the discourse of catastrophe and the trope of picaresque survival head-on. That is to say, it shows how literature engenders an experience and negotiation of conflictive discourses and that fiction therefore maintains worthwhile ethical momentum. Thus, reading literature can be understood as an aesthetic contribution to transcultural and, as will be shown, posthumanist debates because texts function as a semiotic and reintegrative force in the struggle for meaning (Zapf 88). I will focus on the aesthetic potential of fiction to engage with the tensions that narratives, and thus our way of engaging with ecological reality and disasters, can help to emplot.[1]

2. Disaster Narratives in Postcolonial Ecocriticism

Postcolonial ecocriticism, it is often argued, provides an overdue synthesis of studies in social and environmental conflicts: it concerns, as Anthony Vital puts it, "the complex interplay of social history with the natural world" and stresses that "different languages [...] permit varieties of understanding" (Vital 90). However, I understand postcolonial ecocriticism not so much as a means of harmonising two perspectives that would be insufficient without the other but as a theoretical field that engages with texts that offer an insight into a variety of irresolvable tensions.

While it is plausible to assume that "[t]he real, material crisis [...] is also a cultural crisis, a crisis of representation" and that the "inability of political cultures to address environmentalism is in part a failure of narrative" (Kerridge 4), postcolonial ecocriticism repeatedly interrogates *whose* narrative is being told. As will be shown, in the case of

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[1] The concept of emplotment has been formulated in the works of Hayden White and Paul Ricœur. For a discussion of the relevance of this concept for ecocritical scholarship, see Gurr.

narratives of catastrophe and apocalypse, this question gains new relevance. 'Culture' is never a monolithic entity but the result of contingent and complex processes, and the narratives that shape a culture struggle for being heard. And arguably, it is the subaltern and nonhuman whose voices might be most difficult to discern. How, then, does the alleged imperative nature of ecological thinking go together with an awareness of the discursive and power-related epistemological implications of such discourses, most notably in the postcolonial context and with regard to disasters such as the Bhopal/Khaufpur catastrophe? How can we, in fact, account for the "colonial/imperial underpinning of environmental practices" that Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin point to (3) and engage with the problem of unheard voices? Apparently, it is by virtue of the postcolonial perspective that ecocriticism can opt for "a more contingent, collective and cautious hermeneutics," instead (De Loughrey & Handley 29). But how can this be done?

At the same time that the postcolonial perspective has helped to destabilise ecocriticism's share in totalising narratives about the environment, it has shown that ecology, as Huggan and Tiffin maintain,

> tends to function more as aesthetics than as methodology in eco/environmental criticism, providing the literary-minded critic with a storehouse of individual and collective metaphors through which the socially transformative workings of the 'environmental imagination' (Buell 1995) can be mobilised and transformed. (13)

This turn to aesthetics is remarkable but instead of pressing the point, Huggan and Tiffin argue for a "materialist understanding of the changing relationships between people, animals and environment" (12). I argue that such a materialist understanding is not capable of answering the question of fiction's potential in the context of environmental crisis. When Pablo Mukherjee claims that "eco-/environmentalism should be able to materialize postcolonial criticism, while postcolonialism should be able to historicize eco-/environmentalism" (18), it seems to me that this claim is persuasive by virtue of its rhetorical appeal and not because such balance can easily be achieved. That is to say, it is only if we assign 'nature' a status more 'real' than the other naturalisations postcolonial studies have criticised that we can take the natural world as the yard stick by means of which a strictly materialist viewpoint can be determined.

Disaster and catastrophe seem to be exactly this kind of irruption of the real that is needed if we want to grant 'nature' a status outside of discursive entanglements, and Kate Soper's claim that "it is not language which has a hole in its ozone layer" comes to mind here (Soper 151). However, the mediations of catastrophes, and our assessment of them in general, *do* rely on discursive negotiation. *Animal's People* nicely comments on this by engaging with two 'apocalypses' rather than a single one: the narrative of Khaufpur's disaster is accompanied by a televised account of the attack on the US World Trade Centre in 2001. By deconstructing the claims for totality of both narratives, *Animal's People* hints at the necessity to accept a model of reality that allows for contingency and for what Wolfe has called the posthumanist "increase in the vigilance, responsibility, and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited." (47). It is therefore that I understand postcolonial ecocriticism as a

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theoretical field that is capable of grappling with the irresolvable tensions of posthumanist humility.

In contrast, DeLoughrey and Handley maintain that postcolonial ecocriticism rather points to the fact that narrative and language "displace the production of difference and alterity" (24-5). However, by maintaining the harmonising potential of fiction, they gloss over a potential of literary experience that I understand to be crucial. This potential lies in a way of reading which considers the ability of postcolonial literature[2] to stage otherness and to allow for an experience of otherness. This notion of otherness is clearly opposed to what Graham Huggan calls the 'marketing of the margins' in postcolonial criticism – an interest in the exotic and, thus, a form of othering in itself:

> The 'otherness' or alterity of literature is precisely *not* the sense in which the term is used by Huggan, because it is not amenable to the domestication gesture of exoticism, resists commodification, and always exists as a disruptive excess in relation to existing cultural norms. (Mukherjee 10)

Understood that way, otherness can and should not be overcome and appropriated; on the contrary, encountering alterity renders reading an ethical act. Literature, as it were, does not teach any facts or enable us to eventually read the subaltern (or the environment, for that matter). Instead, literature "opens new possibilities of meaning and feeling" (Attridge 59) and thus at least potentially succeeds in "staging the fundamental processes whereby language works upon us and upon the world" (130).

3. Experiences of Posthumanist Alterity: The Apocalypse and the Picaro

As said above, in the second half of this essay, I will employ Attridge's notion of alterity in order to discuss how *Animal's People* juxtaposes apocalyptic tropes and picaresque, postcolonial laughter. By staging the disaster of Bhopal/Khaufpur in picaresque terms, the novel cleverly and effectively deconstructs the very apocalyptic trope it is concerned with. Moreover, it unsettles the human-animal dichotomy that is one of the dualist forms of thinking which environmental philosophers such as Val Plumwood claim to underlie environmental crisis as well as colonialist discourses (120). *Animal's People* celebrates those moments of unsettledness, and by eventually emplotting the condition of subaltern Animal, the novel suggests a form of narrative posthumanism.

To say that catastrophe and apocalyptic rhetoric loom large in the plot of *Animal's People* would be pure understatement. In fact, the whole narrative revolves around the idea of catastrophe and the tension between the trope of survival and the eschatological idea of ultimate demise. "I used to be human once," Animal begins his story, and Animal's malapropism 'Apokalis' stands for the event that had turned him into a

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[2] I am aware of the problematic idea of a unified 'postcolonial literature', and I follow Mukherjee who explains that 'postcolonial' denotes first and foremost not "a clean historical break" but a reading praxis that engages with the "condition of intensified and sustained exploitation of the majority of humans and non-humans of the former colonies" (5). However, I will, for the sake of brevity and clarity, simply refer to *Animal's People* as an example of postcolonial literature.

posthuman creature struggling with its own humanity. At the same time, however, Animal negotiates responsibility for others and the meaning of humaneness. The novel thus presents a posthumanist coming-of-age: it is humanist in its ethical impetus but it is posthumanist in that it "opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism" (Wolfe xv). The latter aspect becomes visible through the Khaufpuris' ongoing struggle for survival and justice twenty years after the terrible accident in the local chemical plant has poisoned the slums and the people living there. Those who did not die suffer terrible lung diseases and disabilities. Animal suffers from a severe form of what seems to be scoliosis, that is, his spine is twisted in a way that forces him to walk on all fours. In an act of bold reappropriation, Animal takes on the name that the neighbouring children mocked him with and decides that by taking on the name 'Animal', he can put aside humanity as well. In fact, however, Animal initiates a complex process of negotiating what it means to be (post)human.

Alterity in *Animal's People* is fostered by the novel's literary composition. The mediated form of the narrative – Animal records his story on a tape which is said to have been translated into English, and his narrative is framed both by a fictional 'editor's note' and a meanwhile offline webpage – already hints at the question of authorship and authenticity prevalent in postmodern as well as postcolonial criticism. Moreover, the intertextual references of the novel point to the context of (other) animal narratives, for example Kafka's "Report to an Academy." Just like Red Peter, the simian narrator of Kafka's text, who in becoming an almost human character forgot all about his true 'ape-ness', so Animal claims that he no longer remembers his own humanity. Since these literary entanglements engender a sense of "semantic overburdening" (cf. Wolfe 117) which eventually leads to the new, posthumanist stance of the narrative, there is good reason to follow Animal's track through the text's aesthetic properties.

I will focus on the three aspects mentioned above in order to show that it is the aesthetic potential that allows the text's posthumanist stance to be experienced: the general narrative mode (that I will describe by referring to Meeker's and Bakhtin's notions of the picaresque), particular tensions between tropes of catastrophe and Animal's irreverent picaresque laughter, and the novelistic staging of otherness and posthuman ethics by means of what Bakhtin calls the 'discourse in the novel', that is, a "phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice" (Bakhtin 261). By virtue of these elements, the novel radically questions our ways of seeing and reading postcolonial environments. Ultimately, it offers means to unsettle the logocentric dichotomies of nature and culture, or human and animal, and it thus allows for a negotiation of posthumanist and ecocritical claims.

In *The Comedy of Survival*, Joseph Meeker has emphasised the role of literary form, and comedy in particular, for an ecocriticism that is interested in the function of literature in an ecological context, and he claims that "[l]iterary form must be reconciled if possible with the forms and structures of nature [...], for both are related to human perceptions of beauty and balance" (*Comedy* 7). Although I agree with Ursula Heise who calls this equation too essentialist to be taken at face value (70), I do believe that literary form contributes in significant ways to the ecological potential of literature. It is with

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Bakhtin that I understand *Animal's People* as "an intentional and conscious hybrid" of different layers of language and meaning which interact dialogically (Bakhtin 366). Arguably, this approach to the novel lends itself to being applied to postcolonial criticism and, as will be shown, to ecocritical readings as well. That is to say, unlike Meeker, who claims that "[s]yntax must [...] change, and we will have to rethink the meanings of subject, predicate, object, noun, and verb" according to ecological models (*Minding* 5), I follow Bakhtin who stresses the fluidity and 'carnivalised' dialogics of each novelistic text.

Much of the energy and wit of *Animal's People* grounds on this carnivalised speech: translation and Indian heteroglossia inform much of the text, and the comic effect of Animal's narrative creates a stark contrast to the tragic tone of apocalyptic tropes. Animal's speech in particular is deeply heteroglot, and his 'jamisponding' (which means 'spying' like James Bond) as well as numerous other linguistic malapropisms serve as a constant reminder of neocolonial and globalist influences on the environment of Khaufpur. Rob Nixon argues in the same vein when he maintains that *Animal's People* ingeniously unmasks those "neoliberal double standards" by means of which the chasm between rich and poor, but also the effects of market capitalism on a seemingly worthless environment, are cemented (Nixon 444, 446). By freeing himself from ethical and, quite literally, humanist concerns, Animal withstands the temptation of moralism, however, and he looks through the do-gooding of others, most notably the rhetoric of Zafar, the 'hero' of Khaufpur's poor. Animal moreover initially rejects the journalist's wish to record an 'authentic story' that will ultimately help to make Khaufpur's inhabitants be heard – "You will bleat like all the rest. You'll talk of *rights*, *law*, *justice*. Those words sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they don't mean the same" (Sinha 3, italics original). He even calls into question the role of narratives in general, attacking our orientalist, exoticist interest in stories of 'Third World' suffering: "You," and this of course also addresses the reader, "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" (Sinha 5).

The irreverence of Animal is complemented by numerous scurrilous remarks that instantly destruct all rhetorical pathos: "Where was god the cunt when we needed him?" or, during a discussion with a once-famous singer: "'In Inglis', he says, there is a word SILENT, which means khaamush, has the exact same letters as the word LISTEN. So open your ears and tell me, what can you hear?' I could hear nothing save a frog calling, [...] happily looking for another frog to fuck" (Sinha 48). I agree with Nixon who argues that Animal can take this license of bawdy speech and bold reader insults because he is an 'environmental picaro' (Nixon 451). Nixon qualifies Bakhtin's notion of the picaro by directly linking it to the postcolonial "environmentalism of the poor" (462f.) and to neocolonial phenomena such as "slow violence" which hovers between "the unequal power of spectacular and unspectacular time" (445). While Nixon shares with Bakthin an interest in the interplay of temporal and spatial representation, he puts special emphasis on the bodily and embodied dimension of environmental picaresque and the fact that "slow violence is driven inward, somatised into cellular dramas of mutation,

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into unobserved special effects" (445). However, while it is true that Animal's physical form may serve as a "bodily shorthand for Khaufpur's transnational plight," and that in many scenes, "his posture is precisely that of a beast of burden" (Nixon 450), I wish to put emphasis on the moments of Animal's resistance to such forms of being-read. His insistence to be non-human and, thus, "fierce and free" (e.g. Sinha 217, 366) points to his status as 'other'. Notably, Bakhtin has maintained that in the novel, "the rogue, the clown and the fool" share a distinctive feature: "the right to be 'other' in this world": "everything they do and say cannot be understood in a direct and unmediated way but must be grasped metaphorically" (159). Read in this way, the narrative can be understood as a comment on narration as such, and unlike Heather Snell who calls the novel a "thinly disguised fictionalization" (1) of the 1984 Bhopal disaster, we can thus understand *Animal's People* as a complex metafictional negotiation of the postcolonial, but also of the posthuman condition.

That the novel is not only concerned with the one catastrophe of Khaufpur which for the nun Ma Franci so strikingly resembles the Christian apocalypse must be noted in this context, too. Tape five begins with a description of the 9/11 attacks on the US American World Trade Centre. Notably, for Animal, these events are the unreal, remote ones. "*Fucking brill*iant! Bollywallah special effects, for*get* it!" (Sinha 60, italics original) is Animal's enthusiastic reaction – not because he enjoys American suffering but because the youth of Khaufpur understands 'Amrika' only in filmic, that is, fictional terms: "In Amrika bombs, explosions, buildings falling, such things are normal. I'm telling you, yaar, see *Fight Club*" (60). Ma Franci sees the apocalypse begin in Khaufpur, but readers, especially American ones, will surely rather connect this rhetoric to the American events and the panic after 9/11. In staging these events as simulacra, however, and by engaging with the terrible reality of Khaufpur instead, the novel implies the necessity of accepting different assessments of what we hold to be real.

Both catastrophes, as it were, are staged as apocalyptic events, and in both, it is an eschatological rhetoric that provides for the narrative frame. However, Animal constantly deconstructs the totalitarian claim of this frame, and his bawdy and picaresque narration relegates disaster to the background. But while Animal's relations of sexual desire and his nasty eloquence certainly evoke laughter, it does not relieve the 'foreign ideal reader' labelled as Eyes because Animal's ironic dissociation does not allow for a dissolution of difference:

> Sinha's novel struggles with readerly co-optation even as, paradoxically perhaps, its protagonist desperately seeks to make room for presumably foreign ideal readers. It is with an eye toward this tension between resistance and accommodation that *Animal's People* might be read as a sustained attempt to articulate the limitations of laughter in postcolonial contexts. (Snell 2)

The emphasis on this tension is maintained because the novel performs its own fictionality and emphasises readerly complicity in othering and orientalism. In so doing, it also deconstructs the totalising claim of apocalyptic rhetoric. The catastrophes in *Animal's People* cannot be taken as frames of a universalist irruption of the real but as an instance that makes visible utter difference and alterity. Against the imaginative horizon

of apocalypse, which seeks to 'unveil' what is yet to come and thus purports dualistic thinking and maintains forms of transhistorical truth (Garrard 86), Animal proposes a timeless and comic form of survival: 'now-o'clock', for in "the Kingdom of the Poor, time doesn't exist" (Sinha 185).

Critical readers are made aware of this impasse because the novel's constant performance of its fictionality is informed by the negotiation of the role of narrative and (authentic) representation and authorship. Indeed, Animal's picaro mentality sees "the underside and the falseness of every situation" (Bakhtin 159). By virtue of the conflict of the chronotopes of tragic eschatology and picaresque comedy, reading *Animal's People* means an experience of tension which results in profound alterity. It manifests in an otherness from human and humanist concerns, but also an otherness from the role of reading and literature's "position in the circuits of the global neo-colonial cultural market" (Mukherjee 9). In that it unsettles roles, rhetoric tropes and certainties in general, the novel approaches the posthumanist stance of the unthinkability of a "we [which is] always radically other" (Wolfe 89). It problematises the very process of understanding and narrating, and thus, *Animal's People* argues for an ongoing narrative negotiation of what disaster means.

It is Animal who orchestrates the numerous voices and tropes that are contained in the novel, and thus, quite literally, the novel stages an 'Animal' agency whereby the boundaries between human and nonhuman animals are deliberately blurred. Animal's focus excludes the materialist, legal, religious, and toxic narratives of disaster and replaces them with an 'animal religion': "with us animals, our religion's eating, drinking, shitting, fucking, the basic stuff you do to survive" (Sinha 88-9). Animal's embrace of animality can thus be assessed in the posthuman context. Since it is this deliberate decision that allows for a number of readerly experiences –the gaze from 'crotch level' (Sinha 2), alterity, and the abyss of language – the novel's form brings together conflictive discourses and emplots them in Animal's posthumanist coming-of-age. The reader effectively becomes the 'Eyes' that Animal seeks to be seen with while at the same time, the novel questions the adequacy of the gaze in perceiving the truth.

4. Conclusion

Lawrence Buell stresses the referential function of literature by pinpointing realism's share in the environmental effect of texts. However, *Animal's People* is not realist, but it rather mocks the claims to authenticity and realism by offering a picaresque parody of these claims. It constantly plays with the reality of the environment and its sociocultural entanglements, and it repeatedly emphasises the readerly share in constructing realism at the cost of the unheard voices of the poor and of animality in general. The realist effect of this can be described as a form of 'transformative mimesis' (Ickstadt), that is, a postmodern engagement with the real that knows its own boundaries and has let go of any certainty and belief in representation.

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Animal's People impressively augments the negotiation of the complex reality of postcolonial ecologies and picaresque alterity in its attempt at coming to terms with narratives of catastrophe. Maybe it even provides means of learning to listen to those animals that have nothing but "the gift of the gab" (Sinha 26). Instead of giving us insight into the material reality of apocalyptic disaster, Animal shares his animality with us, the Eyes that have seen and learned that there is complicity in telling stories just as there is complicity in neocolonial ecological and economic practices. "On that night it was poison, now it's words that are choking us" (Sinha 3), Animal recounts – and he has learned how to deal with it: "in the end the only way to deal with tragedy is to laugh at it" (301).

Let me return to the questions raised at the beginning of this essay, mainly the question what the 'Apokalis' is, exactly. Animal is neither referring to Christian myth nor to any other deterministic narrative from 'outside', but he reappropriates the catastrophe as an instance of rupture, an emergence of what I have described as the posthumanist condition. Fusing the picaresque with postcolonial mimicry and subversion, Animal reduces the totalising claims of apocalyptic rhetoric to a discursive element of novelistic heteroglossia. Moreover, Animal turns the narrative of disaster into an account of unthinkability whose experience forces the question onto us whether we could be "Animal's People," too: are we the "Eyes" that stare their shallow humanist stare, or do we share the experience of the Apokalis? This question, the question what "we" denotes, has to remain unanswered, for the answer is not in the fiction, it is in the readers.

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