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The Kampani Left, the Poison Stayed: Why Bhopal Looks Different in a Novel and a Netflix Series

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Abstract

This paper examines how the formal choices made by authors of two separate works based on the 1984 Bhopal Gas Leak, namely, Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007) and Shiv Rawail's Netflix series *The Railway Men* (2023), create formally distinct relationships with respect to holding corporations accountable for their actions. While both works address the same historical event, each author made different formal choices regarding who they selected as their protagonist, the time period in which they framed their stories, how they structured their narratives, and how they treated bodies that had been injured or disabled due to the gas leak. Using T.S. Eliot's "Objective Correlative," Rob Nixon's "slow violence," Mitchell & Snyder's "narrative prosthesis," and environmental justice literature relating to "sacrifice zones," this paper argues that literary fiction's accumulative, first-person internal monologue provides an accusatory representational format that the episodic structure and heroic genre conventions of commercial streaming television preclude. In *Animal's People,* the disabled survivor's body and the poisoned landscape of Khaufpur provide empirical evidence of continuing corporate criminal behavior, what the study provisionally refers to as the "Political Correlative". Unlike Eliot's "Objective Correlative," where the environment directs the reader inward to understand a character's psychology, the Political Correlative directs the reader outward to assign named political accountability. Conversely, in *The Railway Men*, the disabled survivor's body functions as a narrative prosthesis, and the poisoned landscape is used as atmospheric setting rather than an accusatory record. Because of the demands of the genre, the series is able to achieve closure. However, Sinha's novel cannot achieve closure because the crime being committed is ongoing. As streaming media becomes the dominant means through which global audiences learn about past injustices, the formal constraints imposed by streaming media will increasingly dictate which types of injustices can be represented, and which types of injustices cannot be represented.

Keywords: slow violence, sacrifice zone, narrative prosthesis, disability studies, corporate legal accountability, Political Correlative, Bhopal, *Animal's People*, *The Railway Men*, postcolonial ecocriticism

On the evening of December 2nd, 1984, methyl isocyanate gas leaked out of a pesticide manufacturing facility owned by Union Carbide in Bhopal, India, killing several thousand

residents and exposing more than half a million. Warren Anderson, the CEO of Union Carbide at the time, was never extradited to stand trial in India on criminal charges related to the incident. Dow Chemical, who bought Union Carbide in 2001, continues to deny all liability. The area around the factory remains polluted. Forty years after the incident, accountability that the Indian court systems called for is still missing.

Both cultural representations of the events of that night use differing formal techniques to portray the same historical events. *Animal's People*, written by Indra Sinha in 2007, focuses on Animal, a disabled survivor whose deformed spine was caused directly by toxic exposure as a child, and forms the epistemic basis for the novel. On the other hand, the Netflix series, *The Railway Men*, released in 2023 and directed by Shiv Rawail, provides an alternative account of the events of that night using the perspectives of four railway employees who evacuated survivors from Bhopal Junction. All of the employees' bodies are physically unimpaired; the series follows these employees through four episodes as they work towards resolving the emergency.

The argument made in this article is that the differences among the mediums, protagonists, temporal frames and ways of representing the disabled bodies are produced through structure; therefore, those differences will produce different levels of ability for each of the texts to provide examples of corporate responsibility. In addition to using Eliot's "objective correlative," Nixon's "slow violence," Mitchell and Snyder's "narrative prosthesis," and the environmental justice concept of "sacrifice zones," the paper shows how the cumulative interiority found in literary fiction produces an accusatory mode that is unavailable to commercial streaming television because of its episodic structure and heroic conventions.

The Critical Toolkit: Four Frameworks, Two Texts:

The current frameworks for analyzing disaster literature have been helpful; however, they have been applied differently to both of the selected works. This difference in application is what we are able to analyze.

T. S. Eliot defined the "Objective Correlative" in his essay *Hamlet and His Problems* as "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (Eliot 100). The correlative process moves inward, from the outside world into a character's internal psychology. When applied to *The Railway Men*, the correlative applies: the smoke, the dead bodies, the chaos of Bhopal Junction's atmosphere reflect the characters' increasing moral concern. When applied to *Animal's People*, however, the correlative does not apply. Khaufpur's polluted environment does not reflect inward toward Animal's psychological state. Instead, it reflects outward toward the Kampani. This distinction represents the initial structural observation.

The slow violence, as described by Rob Nixon, 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" (Nixon 2). This type of slow violence has been exemplified by Nixon's study of the Bhopal disaster. *Animal's People*, which was written twenty years after the toxic gas release in a dying city, has the same formal relationship to the disaster. The disaster is the present tense of *Animal's People*. On the other hand, the railway men are unable to relate to the disaster in the same way. Their

episodic nature requires a discrete emergency, i.e., a beginning, a middle and an end, and this is incompatible with violence that continues.

Mitchell and Snyder's "narrative prosthesis" describes disability as "a prosthetic contrivance upon which so many of our cultural and literary narratives rely" (Mitchell and Snyder 51). This is clearly evident in *The Railway Men*: the blinded and convulsing victims create the moral stakes that make the protagonists heroes. On the other hand, *Animal's People* clearly reject this. Animal's disability does not provide any support to other people's stories. Rather, Animal's disability simply, consistently, exists.

Steve Lerner's "sacrifice zone"– a community that "bears a disproportionate burden of environmental risk because they lack the political power to resist it" (Lerne 2)– identifies precisely the political geography of Khaufpur. The factory was built close to the residential slum areas as a result of the low cost of the land, and the inability of the residents to oppose it. This sacrifice zone position forms the basis for *Animal's People*'s formal structure. The same geographic positions exist within *The Railway Men*, however their long-term political significance will be realized outside of the time period covered by the series.

***Animal's People*: The Body That Cannot Be Metaphor:**

Bhopal's clinical record provides exact details regarding pathology; however, what it does not provide is the decision which led to the certainty of these effects - the selection of a site for the chemical plant located within a densely-populated community and without functional safety systems. This void is where the novel will exist.

The source of Animal's physical deformities was not present when he was born. As the long-term effects of being exposed to MIC in infancy became apparent in his skeletal development, his spine started to bend when he was about six years old. Today, Animal crawls on four limbs, and his head is approximately the same distance above the ground as an adult's waist. It would be easy to find a way to make this body symbolic - to view Animal's condition as a metaphor for post-colonial trauma, or for the human toll of capitalism. Sinha prevents us from doing so through Animal describing his anatomy as if he were looking at it from within himself; Sinha uses anatomical accuracy, humor and lacks sentimentality. Tobin Siebers's concept of "complex embodiment" emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between bodily experience and social representation (Siebers 25–26).

The self-naming of the animal has the same effect of refusing. Animal lives with the label that others have given him, but he also uses that label to extend himself: his companion is a dog called Jara; his understanding of Khaufpur is an animal-level understanding of what happens in Khaufpur. Rosi Braidotti's idea of "becoming-animal" as a way to resist the normative human subjectivity can be applied here; however, the posthuman position taken on by Animal is not just a theoretical one - it was created by the corporate decision to use a specific type of industrial process (Braidotti 104). Union Carbide changed where they would draw the line between acceptable and expendable bodies and then drew the line through Animal. (Braidotti 117–23)

Sinha uses formal logic to describe Khaufpur. The wells that were contaminated, the deformed foetuses preserved in the clinic's jars, the empty factory releasing residue into the groundwater are all examples of how Sinha uses formal devices to provide evidence of corporate crimes rather than reflect Animal's internal thoughts. Sinha uses formal devices to show how the landscape serves as an archive of corporate crime. Animal's state of mind is

not reflected in the factory that stands un-remediated on the outskirts of town. Instead, the factory provides evidence of the corporation's continued involvement with the disaster it created.

This testimonial architecture also enhances the novel's effect. Animal speaks to a tape recorder when he talks with a journalist ("Jarnalis") who comes to visit him. Every description of Khaufpur is spoken within the testimonial context. Therefore, the reader does not receive an aesthetic experience from the atmosphere; rather, the reader hears the record being made. Animal describes the landscape so that it can be heard. He uses the tapes as a literary replacement for a failed legal process. He directs his comments toward the world inhabited by the Kampani headquarters, explaining in excruciating detail the results of its apathy. (Sinha 3–4, 15, 30–31, 352)

***The Railway Men*: What the Screen Forecloses:**

The Railway Men (Netflix, 2023) is a dramatized account of the events that occurred during the night of December 2-3, 1984, as seen by four different railway staff members- a station master, a fresh recruit, a ticket checker, and an older, former locomotive engineer- who were all working together to help get as many people away from Bhopal Junction as possible. Although the story itself may be fictionalized, there is a historical precedent for it; on the night of the disaster at Bhopal, railway employees did indeed play a key role in saving lives. This series pays tribute to those efforts. However, there are three major stylistic decisions made by the filmmakers that will limit how they are able to depict certain aspects of the story.

First, the selection of the main characters. The four railway employees are non-disabled individuals that were present at the time of the event. All four of these people survived the physical effects of the disaster. The disabled body, i.e., the individual that has been permanently affected by the gas, does not appear as a source of testimony. Instead, the disabled body is depicted as the object of the main character's bravery. The disabled bodies of the victims (blinded, convulsing) are shown within the scene to create emotional ties between the viewer and the characters, and to illustrate why the main characters acted bravely. This is narrative prosthesis: disability being used in order to support a non-disabled story. (Mitchell and Snyder 49–50)

Second, the temporal frame. This story takes place over one evening. Nixon's "slow violence"- dispersed over many years and difficult to represent dramatically- cannot be depicted within a story line which ends before morning (Nixon 2). The sacrifice zone created by Bhopal, its ongoing contamination, its multi-generational health problems, and its deferred accountability for four decades are all excluded from the series' structural framework. By representing the catastrophe as an isolated incident, the series excludes from its structure the most pressing political aspects of the situation (Lerner 3–4, 312–13).

The third area where the series is in tension with history is in the use of genre. *The Railway Men* is a form of prestige heroism. This type of storytelling has a basic premise that humans have enough bravery to deal with crises. This is certainly true of *The Railway Men*, as the railway workers take action and save many lives, and the story progresses towards a resolution. However, the most important aspect of the Bhopal disaster is not individual acts of heroism; rather it is the failure of both institutional and corporate responses over the course of four decades. In 1989, a settlement of $470 million was reached between Union

Carbide and the Indian government. Many people believed that this amount was far too low. Union Carbide's former CEO Warren Anderson has never been extradited. The Bhopal site itself remains unremediated. These two structural aspects, the need for accountability and the closure of a narrative, are fundamentally at odds with one another. Therefore, since *The Railway Men* uses the heroism genre so successfully, it cannot use the accusatory mode. The use of the directional test on the series supports what I have just said. The smoke, the bodies, and the chemical haze all lead back to the protagonist's fear and moral urgency. The environment is atmospheric. It functions exactly as Eliot intended his objective correlative to function. It does not function as a political correlative. (Eliot 100)

The Formal Contrast: Accusation, Resolution, and the Politics of Medium:

In contrast to each other, *Animal's People* and *The Railway Men* use differing formal choices to portray the same disaster. In many respects, these two works are structurally opposed. *Animal's People* is focused on a disabled person who survived the incident; whereas, *The Railway Men* focuses on non-disabled people who witnessed the event. *Animal's People* take place within the ongoing present of a contaminated city; whereas, *The Railway Men* takes place during one night of an emergency. *Animal's People* move from the city outward toward the corporations responsible for the incident; whereas, *The Railway Men* moves from the outside world into the protagonists' minds to externalize their moral urgency. *Animal's People* does not have closure due to the fact that the crime continues to exist; whereas, *The Railway Men* ends with closure because it is required by the genre. All of the above structural oppositions are created by the medium used, the genre of work, and the commercial requirements of each type of work.

Literary fiction, especially that which is cumulative, first person and internal (interior) in its focus as *Animal's People* does, has a formal capacity for sustained accusation over time. Fiction can go back again and again to the same polluted source, each trip to the wellbeing additive and not resolving. This repetition is what matters. The web series cannot function in this manner. Its episodic structure creates momentum through advancement. An episode that goes back to the same polluted groundwater with no story advancement will fail on its own formal grounds.

The most unique contribution of this comparison to disability studies relates to the use of testimony. The survivor with a disability's experience in *Animal's People* is the novel, the epistemic base on which all perceptions are made. In *The Railway Men*, the survivor with a disability's viewpoint is not structurally possible. Instead, the audience views the accident via the non-disabled witness's understanding of suffering bodies. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's idea of "the stare", the sustained looking at a person with a disability that creates a spectacle of their body for the non-disabled gaze, applies in both cases (Garland-Thomson 3). The series positions the audience as if they were riding on the train with the railway workers and passing by people with disabilities. *Animal's People* provide the reader with only one possible viewpoint, which is within. (Garland-Thomson 79–81)

The Railway Men is able to reach a much greater number of people than *Animal's People*. Most individuals who learn about Bhopal will view the disaster as being an isolated event that was resolved due to bravery. However, there is another view of the disaster where the crime continues to occur; the wells continue to be poisoned; environmental justice remains unaddressed, this view is viewed by a significantly smaller number of people than the first

one. This is because the most popular means of distributing current culture today do not have the capability to deliver such content.

Conclusion:

The disaster at Bhopal continues to cause "slow violence" to those affected by it (Nixon 2). Warren Anderson, who was charged with crimes related to the disaster, passed away in Florida during October 2014; he did not answer to the charges before his death. As of this writing, the site in Bhopal remains contaminated.

Animal's People is there to show this. The formal choices, the disabled survivor telling the story, the testimonial architecture, the landscape as an accusing record, and the refusal to close the story, create the Political Correlative; that is, the formal choice by which the external world serves as continuing proof of a crime that remains unresolved. *The Railway Men* presents another kind of truth, the courage of everyday people in a very special time. Both types of truth exist. Only one can be formally represented through commercial streaming TV.

Streaming platforms, the main way we see historic injustices today, are formally determining which types of injustice can be shown and which types cannot. Slow violence (attritional, invisible, dispersed over time) was difficult to show before; it is even more so today. Not because the facts have changed but because the form used by the largest number of viewers cannot represent it. To make reparations for environmental justice, the crime must continue to exist in our minds, the gap between what happened and what was answered must remain open. Episodes where heroes win lead to resolution. On screen, wounds close. In Bhopal, they haven't. (Nixon 2)

The Kampani left. The poison stayed. That fact remains permanently in one written document, and that is what literature can do when law has failed to

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