

# Toxic Entanglements and Posthuman Ethics: A Baradian Reading of Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

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Narinder K. Sharma.  
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**Ajmal Musharaf**

Research Scholar, Department of English, Central University of Punjab, India

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4572-9588>

**Narinder K. Sharma**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Central University of Punjab, India

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3926-8973>

## Abstract

*Sinha's Animal's People* (2007) is a fictional account of the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster and retells the tale of a devastating industrial catastrophe. The novel is set in Khaufpur, an Indian town stricken by a chemical leak from a foreign-owned factory, which led to physical deformation, poisoning, and politically marginalizing generations of its inhabitants. In this way, the narrative deals with ethics, justice, and identity and also foregrounds that the boundaries between human and nonhuman and self and environment are intensely blurred. The disfigured narrator named Animal serves as a potent medium for inquiring into complicity, accountability, and the meaning of life amidst ecological catastrophe. In this paper, we attempt to analyse *Animal's People* through the lens of Karen Barad's agential realism, using some of the key insights, viz., intra-actions, or mutual entanglements of material and discursive forces. In this sense, this paper explores the way narrative critiques anthropocentrism and unsettles Cartesian subject-object binaries to acknowledge human and more-than-human agents.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Justice, Identity, Agential Realism, Entanglement, Anthropocentrism, Posthumanism, Material-Discursive Practices.

## Introduction

Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) is a fictional account of the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster and retells the tale of a devastating industrial catastrophe. The novel is set in Khaufpur, an Indian town stricken by a chemical leak from a foreign-owned factory, which led to physically deforming, poisoning, and politically marginalizing generations of its inhabitants. In this way, the narrative deals with ethics, justice, and identity and also foregrounds that the boundaries between human and nonhuman and self and environment are intensely blurred. The disfigured narrator named Animal serves as a potent medium for inquiring into complicity, accountability, and the meaning of life amidst ecological catastrophe.

In this paper, we attempt to analyse *Animal's People* through the lens of Karen Barad's agential realism, using some of the key insights, viz., intra-actions, or mutual entanglements of material and discursive forces. For Barad, the world is not composed of "preexisting independent entities that interact, but of phenomena that emerge through these entangled intra-actions" (Barad 33). Thus, matter is not passive; rather, it has "a congealing of agency" (Barad 151). This perspective decentred the human subject and reconfigures ethics as an inherently relational practice rooted in material entanglement. The novel has often been read as a postcolonial text with reference to the indictment of corporate globalization and state neglect. However, a Baradian reading shifts its emphasis to the co-constitution of bodies, toxic matter, and political structures.

This framework is particularly suited to analysing *Animal's People* because the novel is densely populated with instances of distributed agency, such as., chemical toxins, decaying infrastructure, and human bodies that collectively produce meaning and affect. Barad's theory, by way of foregrounding ontological entanglement and material-discursive intra-actions, allows the analysis to move beyond symbolic representation and engage subtly in the way(s) matter becomes ethically and politically potent in the narrative. In this context, *Animal's* twisted spine signifies more than plain victimhood or impact(s) of global capitalism because "bodies are not objects with inherent boundaries and properties; they are material-discursive phenomena that take shape through entangled intra-actions" (Barad, *Posthumanist Performativity* 823). Contextually, the human body becomes a space and canvas for the expression of suffering. This paper explores how narrative critiques anthropocentrism and unsettles Cartesian subject-object binaries to acknowledge human and more-than-human agents, offering "a more hopeful and sustainable vision for the future of our planet" (Youssef 61). Given that the novel has been interpreted through frameworks such as postcolonial ecocriticism (Youssef) and eco-crime (Toor), these approaches somehow rely on representational models of critique. On the contrary, Barad's agential realism offers a shift in emphasis, i.e., from narrating environmental suffering to ontologically situating it, and this is how it sees humans, toxins, and language as co-constitutive actors in a web of 'be-coming'.

While this study employs Baradian agential realism to analyse the novel, it, however, does so with certain constraints in the sense that the analytical focus remains primarily on close textual reading rather than empirical or anthropological fieldwork. In addition, the chosen lens may de-emphasize some culturally specific dimensions of trauma or localized resistance that other frameworks (e.g., subaltern studies or trauma theory) might foreground. This lens narrows the scope of ontological entanglements; however, it concurrently acknowledges the broader sociopolitical realities embedded in postcolonial ecologies. It is also important to note that the Baradian agential realism is rooted in theoretical physics and feminist theory; however, it also shares

a deep conceptual connection with environmental studies, contextualising slow violence and toxicity. Notably, scholars such as Rob Nixon and Stacy Alaimo highlight the entanglement of ecology and ethics. Thus, it is appropriate to integrate such insights to broaden the scope of the interpretive understanding of the narrative. It can also potentially expand the dimensions of postcolonial critiques to encompass biopolitical management of toxicity and environmental injustice.

### **Contextualising Barad's Agential Realism**

Karen Barad's agential realism arises from her challenge to representationalism, which assumes that language/knowledge merely mirrors a preexisting, independent reality. However, Barad differs from this idea and says, "We are part of the world in its differential becoming" (Barad 185). This emphasizes our embeddedness in a continuously intra-active universe. In this sense, the Baradian focus is on "flows, interchanges, and interrelations between human corporeality and the more-than-human world" (Alaimo 142). Hence, entities do not exist prior to their relations but emerge through intra-action, a concept Barad formulates to replace the traditional notion of interaction. Interestingly, interaction presupposes that independently existing individuals affect each other. However, Barad's intra-action highlights that boundaries between entities are not fixed but are enacted through the relations they partake in. It foregrounds the idea that the subject is not a preformed, autonomous agent dealing with an inert world. Rather, s/he is a material-discursive entanglement that emerges through iterative intra-actions with human and nonhuman forces alike. Second, Barad introduces the notion of the agential cut, which deals with the temporary delineation of boundaries within phenomena. Given that the world is fundamentally entangled, we perform cuts for practical reasons, which might encapsulate scientific, political, and ethical spheres. These cuts, in turn, determine what counts as subject, object, cause, or effect. However these cuts are consequential practices with ethical weight, which are not an abstract moral code but a commitment to account for the boundaries and exclusions we enact through our knowing and doing. Notably, Barad's ethics is

not anthropocentric. For her, responsibility does not emanate solely from human decisions; it is an entanglement effect. We are “responsible to and for the intra-actions of which we are a part,” she writes (Barad, *Posthumanist Performativity* 829). So, matter itself participates in ethical becoming; as a corollary, agency is not an attribute of humans alone but is distributed across networks of organic and inorganic bodies. This orientation challenges paradigms that treat matter as passive and humans as the sole agents of meaning. In this sense, the lack of a “strict or fixed boundary line dividing a scientific laboratory from the rest of the world [implies] humans can never observe the universe as though outside of it” (Gamble et al., 122-23). Interestingly, her idea of ‘ethico-onto-epistemology’ is a potent framework to decode the layered violence in *Animal’s People*. The novel is inhabited by human characters alongside material agents, such as., methyl isocyanate, corroding pipes, courtroom transcripts, and polluted aquifers. These agents are more than mere symbols, and they actively participate in the constitution of reality. In this light, Barad’s theory enables a reading of the novel in which matter truly matters as co-creator of ethical and political possibilities. In this way, the novel can be read not only as a postcolonial ecological narrative but also as a diffractive text that entangles fiction, ethics, science, and activism into a complex apparatus of becoming.

Thus, Barad’s framework affords us a way to reframe environmental harm as the activity of some of the agential cuts that privilege capital, profit, and state interests over life and livability. In the novel, these cuts are evident in the spatial zoning of Khaufpur, the bureaucracy’s dismissal of gas victims, and the Kampani’s calculated perpetuation of ignorance. Such measures are not merely political decisions; they are ontological practices that determine what counts to matter.

### **Entangled Flesh: Toxic Embodiment and the Materiality of Intra-Action**

In view of the preceding discussion on the conceptual framework, the novel under analysis demands reading this narrative not only in terms of human endurance but also in terms of the entwined vitality of chemical, biological, and discursive forces.

So, the Kampani’s poisons are not merely destructive agents; rather, they are embedded in the ongoing intra-actional processes that co-constitute subjective/objective realities and futures in Khaufpur. Lindström states, “It is capitalistic exploitation of biophysical resources that is responsible for the environmental pollution of Khaufpur” (23). As a result, it is a dense fictional landscape in which matter, bodies, and politics are embedded and code-mixed. In this sense, Khaufpur acts as an ecosystem for protracted ruins. In the beginning of the novel, Animal is described in the following manner: “Eyes squinting from pain, mouth twisted from coughing, back bent like a bow, breath a struggle, head sunk low like a beaten cur’s” (Sinha 3). In this way, his body, permanently disfigured by the gas leak, signifies a form of harm that unfolds gradually and extends across temporality. Notably, this harm is chronic and woven into the very fabric of the environment.

The Baradian lens allowed us to perform a deeper analysis of this harm. The chemical leak in Khaufpur is a bounded event because it persists as an ongoing phenomenon, which is materialized through the everyday lives and bodies of its inhabitants. In this sense, it constitutes “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). Intra-actions between methyl isocyanate, human tissue, groundwater, poverty, and legal impunity continuously reproduce illness, deformity, and despair. Animal laments, “No bird song. No hoppers in the grass. No bee hum. Insects can’t survive here” (Sinha 29). The leak’s persistence in water supplies and food chains underscores Barad’s claim that “causality is not a linear chain of events” (Barad 175) but rather a distributed material-discursive entanglement. Human bodies are not closed systems but are embedded in streams of substances, energies, and forces. In this novel, this embeddedness is made brutally literal. A Western doctor named Elli, who runs a clinic in Khaufpur, observes that many women have *poison* in their milk, and their babies are born with twisted limbs and gasping lungs. These bodies have been physically and materially shaped by their environments, and, in Barad’s terms, they are “not merely situated in the world but of it” (Barad, *Posthumanist Performativity*

828). Thus, embodiment is a dynamic, intra-active becoming.

The protagonist Animal exemplifies this toxic entanglement through his flesh. Interestingly, he was born a healthy child and was named Om. However, its transformation into an *Animal* after the gas leak is as much ontological as physical. He states, “When I walk on all fours, I see people from below. I know their feet. I know who is kind by how they walk; I know who will kick me” (Sinha 6). It is also interesting to note that his position is subversive. This is why he refuses to reclaim his humanity and thus undermines the conventional hierarchy of embodiment. His act of self-naming is defiant and signifies that he is not a human. This disavowal signifies the Baradian critique of human exceptionalism. As already established, in agential realism, boundaries between categories such as humans and nonhumans are not ontologically fixed but are enacted through agential cuts. The protagonist’s choice to embrace his nonhuman status is politically and ontologically charged and manifests an act that refuses to separate humans from animals, normal from the disabled, and subjects from objects. Thus, his body exhibits onto-epistemological diffraction, and it reroutes conventional meanings.

Importantly, the protagonist’s subjectivity takes shape and evolves through intra-actions with other characters, such as., Nisha, Zafar, Elli, Ma Franci, and even the city’s animals. In this way, his friendship with Jara, a street dog, was ontological. Their companionship constitutes what Barad calls a ‘mutual becoming,’ which happens to be a shared material and affective entanglement that blurs species boundaries. The Animal asserts that only one dog can understand another animal, and this is how he transcends anthropocentric frames. In this alliance, the category of the animal is reclaimed as a locus of multispecies solidarity and ethical reorientation. Furthermore, his narrative is structured as a series of tape-recorded testimonies addressed to an imagined Western listener (referred to as *Eyes*) and mediated through a translator. This narrative frame enacts Barad’s notion that “there is no outside of entanglement” (Barad 353). Even the act of storytelling becomes an intra-active event because it is shaped by linguistic, technological, and

geopolitical apparatus. The Animal’s voice, which is often abrasive and raw, becomes a locus of Baradian agency.

The novel also deals with spatial toxicity, which runs parallel to Barad’s emphasis on the materiality of space-time. Thus, the abandoned factories continue to operate around the world. Its rusting pipes, crumbling walls, and leaking chemicals form “a material-discursive apparatus” (Barad 142), signifying an active agent in the differential becoming of lives. Accordingly, the geography of Khaufpur is far from neutral. It is co-constituted by legal impunity, corporate abandonment, and the active agency of toxins. The Kampani’s court case, repeatedly delayed and manipulated, exposes how injustice is materialized through nonhuman agencies, i.e., unclean water, unbreathable air, and incurable disease.

The motif of care in Khaufpur is highly political and is unfolded within this entangled ontology. In this regard, Elli’s clinic is also fraught with ethical tension because her Western medical training often clashes with local knowledge systems and spiritual beliefs. As a result, the people of Khaufpur are openly suspicious of her motives: “They say she’s here to test drugs on us, that she’s sent by the Kampani” (Sinha 115). Thus, Elli herself becomes entangled in mistrust, uneven power relations, and chemical aftereffects. Thus, her interactions with patients are shaped by the material and discursive histories circulating through their bodies and shared environments. This suggests that ethics do not reside in abstract principles but in “how matter comes to matter” (Barad, *Posthumanist Performativity* 828). In one poignant scene, the Animal notices a girl born after the disaster who walks like a crab as her feet are twisted outwards. This moment encapsulates both the novel’s and Barad’s insistence on the continuity of entanglement. The disaster is not over; it persists materially in the bones of the new generation. The Kampani’s gas is not past; it remains an active participant in the lives it once maimed. There is no temporal closure, no spatial elsewhere untouched by intra-action. In this way, the novel enacts what Barad terms “a material practice of engagement with the world” (Barad 90). It diffracts the disaster and foregrounds the entangled agencies

that shape postcolonial ecological suffering. In this context, reading an *Animal's People* through the lens of agential realism invites us to synthesize the ontological status of pollution and pain and the ethical contours of response and responsibility.

### Entangled Justice: Law and Response-Ability

*An Animal's People* is also a commentary on broader structures of injustice, which include corporate evasion, bureaucratic apathy, and legal failure to measure “how colonial histories and neocolonial practices have shaped—and continue to shape—environmental experiences” (Huggan and Tiffin 5) within postcolonial contexts. However, the novel does not simply blame corrupt systems; it does more as it explores how accountability must be reconceptualized in light of pervasive material entanglements. Barad offers a potent framework for such a rethinking through her ideas of ‘response-ability’ and the ethical dimensions of intra-action. She insists that “responsibility is not about the right response to a radically exterior/ized other” (Barad 393). Rather, it is “about the inseparability of ‘self’ and ‘other’... about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are a part” (Barad 393). In other words, we do not become responsible by choosing to; we are responsible because we are entangled. This standpoint debunks conventional modes of responsibility, which presume that autonomous subjects act on a separate world.

The Kampani, responsible for the gas leak, holds an elusive presence throughout the narrative because it “skirts accountability through mechanisms of endless deferrals, leaving their impoverished victims few avenues for retribution” (Toor 2). This is why its executives never appear in person. They issue statements from afar through lawyers and corporate spokespeople, signifying that their spatial and emotional distancing is a key strategy for disavowal. In this way, the company acts as a non-agent with an intent to project that the disaster was the result of local accident or mismanagement. Legal documents, procedural delays, and jurisdictional ambiguities are used as tools for corporate agency displacement. This amounts to the Baradian agential cut, which is a deliberate demarcation of responsibility to obscure the underlying entanglement.

In Barad’s terms, the Kampani’s refusal to acknowledge its intra-action with Khaufpur manifests a boundary that is unjust. The leak’s toxic agents continue to intra-act with Khaufpur’s water, air, and bodies. So, these materials cannot be legislated away or silenced by legal fiction. Barad states, “matter has a life of its own” (Barad 152). In this way, the Kampani’s materials remain active participants in the unfolding of harm. The novel thus presents a situation in which the company may be absent in the courtroom, but it is ever-present in every breathless lung and stunted limb. This tension is evident in the novel’s courtroom subplot, where activists struggle to hold the Kampani accountable in the sense that documents vanish or are manipulated, expert witnesses are paid off, and victims’ testimonies are dismissed as anecdotes. Such tactics lay bare the necropolitical function of the law, with special reference to its capacity to sanction suffering through procedural deferrals. From a Baradian standpoint, it is imperative to foreground the failure to recognize the material-discursive apparatus that produces and sustains harm. Consequently, law, science, and commerce are not neutral arbiters; they are themselves part of the apparatus that enacts reality.

Interestingly, the people of Khaufpur enact the Baradian “response-ability,” which signifies the capacity to respond within and through entanglement. Zafar, a local activist, embodied this ethos. Although he is well-educated and has a more comfortable life elsewhere, he remains in Khaufpur, organising protests, gathering affidavits, and coordinating medical care. His commitment arises from what Barad terms “being bound up with the other” (Barad, *Posthumanist Performativity* 829). So, his activism is fundamentally relational and embodied, given the fact that he listens closely to survivors, strategizes with NGOs, and confronts police violence. His actions were shaped by a collective struggle. Similarly, his partner, Nisha, also runs a food program for children affected by the gas, and her labor is an ethical form of material engagement. She cooks, cleans, and comforts in a world where even food may be contaminated. In this way, her ethics were of care enacted within toxicity. Barad affirms, “ethics is not about the rightness of individual action but about accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part” (Barad 393).



Another example of response-ability is the act of narration itself. Animal, who initially claim they are not human and thus not bound by human morality, gradually assume a different sort of agency. Accordingly, his taped testimonies become a form of resistance. He claims the right to be heard, to exist, and to bear witnesses. In this sense, his narrative creates a space in which the community's pain, humor, anger, and hope can be adequately articulated. Barad says that "matter and meaning are not separate but entangled" (Barad, *Posthumanist Performativity* 822). Therefore, an animal's words are not mere representations; instead, they are performative acts that are aimed at reconfiguring the social field. His tapes travel, are translated, and become part of a global apparatus of witnessing. In Baradian terms, his speech is a material-discursive practice that intra-acts with power, memory, and matter.

The narrative also lays bare the idea that justice must be co-constituted through collective struggle. In one scene, the Khaufpuris organize a silent march, and the bodies themselves, scarred and defiant, become the message. This performance resonates with Barad's claim that "justice-to-come is not about setting things right but about being in touch" (Barad 180). Thus, this study asserts that justice is an ongoing intra-activity process. The spatial politics of the novel reinforced the theme of entangled justice. z However, these zones are not ontologically separate; they are materially connected through labor, waste, and supply chains. The water drunk in Jehannum is fed by pipelines that skirt contaminated wells in Khaufpur. In this way, privileges are intra-actively dependent on local toxicity.

Barad's framework compels us to view these connections as concrete material entanglements. The Kampani's executives, the slum dwellers, the chemicals, and the court rulings compose a shared apparatus of world-making. In this light, *Animal's People* is a novel about justice redefined—justice as response, as care, as collective material engagement with the conditions of shared becoming.

## Conclusion

The preceding discussion establishes that *Animal's People* is a powerful narrative of ontological and ethical entanglement, and it is through the

fractured yet resilient voice of the protagonist that the narrative foregrounds the inseparability of human and nonhuman agents in the material-discursive production of suffering, identity, and resistance. In this way, the narrative makes it impossible to restrict responsibility to human will or legal mechanisms alone. Rather, it shows how contaminated spaces, marginalized bodies, and storytelling practices collectively shape the lived realities of Khaufpur. A factory leak is an ongoing phenomenon that continues to intra-act with the everyday, blurring distinctions between past and present, victims and survivors, and humans and the environment. Barad states, "We are of the world's becoming and must be accountable for how we participate in it" (Barad 353). *Animal's People* also shows that justice, in such a world, must be reimagined as a process of "response-ability," which is embodied in Nisha's care work, Zafar's activism, the transnational efforts of NGOs, and most profoundly in Animal's own narrative. This analysis demonstrates how Sinha's novel stages multiple entanglements between bodies, materials, and discursive practices that resist reduction to human-centric ethics. Thus, the narrative foregrounds toxic embodiment, multispecies solidarity, and the performative agency of matter. Animal's deformed body, Elli's medical ethics, and the Kampani's invisible power all become sites of Baradian intra-action and foreground that the narrative is a diffractive apparatus for ethical rethinking. Notably, future research should take up comparative Baradian readings across other ecologically embedded South Asian texts for a broader posthumanist-ecocritical evaluation. Notably, future research may take up comparative analyses with other eco-dystopian South Asian texts, such as Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* or Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, using this framework to probe into transspecies ethics, polluted ecologies, and agential entanglements. A cross-textual study may potentially reveal deeper patterns of ontological vulnerability and ethical reimagination across different narrative ecologies.

In conclusion, a Baradian reading of the novel foregrounds its environmental and political critique on the axis of radical posthuman ethics. It also highlights the idea that ethically living in the Anthropocene requires recognizing our entanglement

and acting from within it with attentiveness, humility, and care. As the abstract promises, this analysis debunks anthropocentric binaries, foregrounds the agency of matter, and thus opens pathways for ecopolitical justice.

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## Author Details

### Ajmal Musharafa

Research Scholar, Department of English, Central University of Punjab, India.

### Narinder K. Sharmab

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Central University of Punjab, India. **Email ID:** narinderksharma.elt@gmail.com