

A Study of Sounds in Animal's People

Zhihan Tan

School of Foreign Languages, Beijing Forestry University, Beijing 100083, China

Abstract: Indra Sinha, a British-Indian writer, based his novel *Animal's People* on the 1984 Bhopal gas leak disaster. Focusing on the experiences and observations of "Animal", a disaster survivor, in the fictional "Khaufpur" (meaning "city of hell"), the novel is a classic work of contemporary postcolonial trauma literature. Told through tape-recorded oral narration, the novel takes sound as the main narrative device running through the whole text, forming its unique narrative feature. This paper will analyze the sound in the novel from two perspectives: first, exploring how the narrative medium of tape recording helps ethnic minorities break free from the representation and coercion of Western humanitarians and official forces, and regain the narrative power of their own stories; second, attempting to interpret the ritual chants of Muharram and the songs of Somraj, a master of Indian local music, to explore the mixed characteristics of local multiculturalism they carry and the profound significance of music in crossing civilizational barriers and resolving conflicts. The sound narrative in the novel is not a mere formal innovation, but a way of resistance for disaster survivors to break the predicament of being silenced by power—it subverts the spectacular consumption and scrutiny of the suffering of the Third World by the West in the postcolonial context, and provides a unique narrative path for marginalized groups to speak out.

Keywords: *Animal's People*; Sound Narrative; Trauma Writing.

1. Introduction

Indra Sinha, a British-Indian writer. His 2007 novel *Animal's People* stands as his most representative work, shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Rooted in the real 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy in India, the novel sets the fictional disaster-stricken town of Khaufpur as its backdrop, centering on a disabled survivor known only "Animal" by those around him. It chronicles the decades-long traumatic aftermath, daily struggles, and persistent resistance of the disaster survivors, establishing itself as a classic text in contemporary postcolonial trauma literature and disaster writing, and a vital case study for academic research on third-world disaster narratives.

The novel's most distinctive narrative feature is its exclusive reliance on the protagonist's taped oral narration: the entire text consists of Animal's unscripted monologues directed at a cassette tape recorder, with sound and auditory perception running through the narrative as its core. Disfigured and permanently hunched due to toxic gas exposure, Animal speaks in a raw, unpolished vernacular, free from formal literary refinement, candidly recording his physical suffering, condemnation of the responsible corporate forces, and observations of the people and world around him, forming the central individual voice of the work. Beyond this personal narration, the novel meticulously depicts two distinct sets of culturally and locally specific sounds: first, the chants and ritual noises of Muharram in Khaufpur, including mourning marsiya recitations rooted in Shia tradition and the Hindu-influenced fire-walking ritual, reflecting the town's unique hybrid cultural identity; second, the singing of Somraj, the master musician hailed as the "the Voice of Khaufpur," whose performances based on traditional Indian ragas embodied the town's original vitality, until his lungs were damaged by the toxic gas, robbing him of his powerful voice and turning him into a living symbol of the community's trauma.

Existing scholarly research on *Animal's People* has largely focused on trauma writing, environmental justice,

postcolonial identity, and body politics, treating the taped narration merely as a narrative framework while overlooking the profound implications of its diverse sonic elements. Few studies have systematically examined the connection between the novel's sound system and its narrative, cultural, and ethical dimensions. In truth, sound serves as a foundational medium in the novel: it enables the marginalized survivor to speak for himself, preserves local cultural memory, and implies the possibility of cross-cultural dialogue. Therefore, this paper takes sound as its central research object, drawing on detailed textual evidence and narrative logic to explore the significance of sound in narrative expression, trauma representation, and cultural presentation. It aims to examine the grassroots resistance and humanistic expression conveyed through sound in the novel, fill the gaps in current research, and further interpret the core of its trauma narrative and postcolonial ethical connotations.

2. How the narrative medium of tape recording helps to regain narrative power

The novel disrupts the conventional literary narrative paradigm from its very opening, explicitly establishing the novel's unique narrative origin. According to the editor's note, the story "was recorded in Hindi on a series of tapes by a nineteen-year-old boy in the Indian city of Khaufpur..... Some tapes contain long sections in which there is no speech, only sounds such as bicycle bells, birds, snatches of music and in one case several minutes of sustained and inexplicable laughter." [5]. This introductory passage not only sets the distinctive auditory narrative tone of the work but also places the cassette tape recorder—a narrative medium—at the heart of the storytelling. The clear narrative chain of the novel unfolds as follows: the protagonist "Animal" records his oral testimonies on tapes; the tapes carry the sounds to disseminate his story; and these sounds are ultimately transcribed into written text for readers. This is exactly what Roland Barthes wrote about "toilette of the dead", that "We talk, a tape

recording is made, diligent secretaries listen to our words to refine, transcribe, and punctuate them, producing a first draft that we can tidy up afresh before it goes on to publication, the book, eternity.” [4]. This narrative approach, centered on sound and mediated by tape, is far from a mere formal innovation. Instead, it serves as the crucial pathway for Animal—a disaster survivor, a disabled marginalized figure, and a minority subject in a postcolonial context—to break free from the dual endorsement and manipulation by Western humanitarians and local official forces, thereby reclaiming the right to tell his own story. Trapped in a long-standing state of silence, misinterpretation, and being spoken for, the tape becomes the only expressive tool fully under Animal’s control, enabling him to dismantle the narrative monopoly of power and safeguard the self-expressive space belonging to the survivors of Khaufpur.

Animal’s choice of cassette tape recording and oral narration over written writing stems first from his expressive predicament caused by physical trauma, and more importantly, constitutes an active resistance to passive gaze. Disfigured by the toxic gas leak, he remains permanently hunched, unable to stand upright and meet others eye to level. As he himself puts it: “The human world is supposed to be seen from eye level... but when I look up, all I see are people’s thighs.....If you want my story, you’ll have to put up with how I tell it” [5]. Physical disability makes conventional forms of expression such as writing or visual appearance ineffective; oral narration emerges as his most direct, authentic, and physically unconstrained mode of communication. More significantly, this choice embodies a rejection of the violence of the gaze. As Duan Yan [2] observes, the gazer assumes the collective subconscious power of humanity to watch the gazed-upon who bear marked flaws, thereby establishing hierarchies of superiority and inferiority between subject and object, and fostering fear and enmity between self and other—ultimately accomplishing the dehumanization of the disabled. Animal clearly perceives the oppressive power inherent in such gazing. He refuses to appear visually to readers, rejecting his transformation into an object of admiration or judgment. Instead, he uses cassette tape recording to shield against visual gaze, shifting readers from being detached viewers to passive listeners, thereby completely reversing the power dynamic of the expressive relationship. He refers to all potential readers collectively as “eyes,” a term that plainly signals their status as outsiders and strangers to Khaufpur. Even without explicitly labeling them “Westerners” the meticulous explanations he provides of Khaufpur’s customs and daily details reveal his deliberate attempt to maintain a distance and subtle rejection, a posture that essentially serves as a preemptive defense against external interpretations overstepping their bounds.

The value of the cassette tape lies in its role in freeing Animal from the endorsement and manipulation by external forces, safeguarding his narrative autonomy against the commodification and stereotypical consumption of his suffering. For a long time, the disaster in Khaufpur and the suffering of its survivors have had their narrative controlled by Western journalists, humanitarians, and local official forces. Western powers, imbued with Orientalist prejudices, have reduced the suffering here to an exotic spectacle ready for consumption. Local officials, meanwhile, have sought to downplay the disaster’s culpability and obscure the survivors’ true plight. Both groups have spoken on behalf of Animal and the people of Khaufpur, yet they have never truly listened to

them or allowed them to speak for themselves. Heather Snell [6] notes in her research that Animal’s narrative, disguised as a transcription of tapes and using “Tape” instead of “Chapter” as headings, precisely reflects his refusal to offer those exotic tidbits to cater to the consumptive expectations of readers like journalists. He understands that both the sentimental endorsements of Western humanitarians and the perfunctory whitewashing by local officials essentially dilute and distort the survivors’ true suffering, transforming the minority’s trauma into a tool to satisfy external needs.

To break this endorsement dynamic, Animal uses the cassette tape to deliberately maintain a delicate narrative tension between “familiarity” and “strangeness.” Heather Snell [6] further cites Veit’s argument that so-called “familiarity” is, in fact, a tool for external gazers to impose their will on the other, fostering deep-rooted misunderstandings and biases. Absolute “strangeness,” on the other hand, risks romanticizing and exoticizing Khaufpur’s suffering, reducing it to a curiosity to satisfy external appetites—both outcomes Animal fiercely seeks to avoid. The cassette tape emerges as the ideal medium to balance this tension. On the one hand, by refusing to appear visually and shielding visual information, he completely avoids the familiarizing misunderstandings brought about by external gaze, preventing his disabled body and Khaufpur’s suffering from being labeled. On the other hand, he insists on narrating in the raw, straightforward, and even slightly vulgar local vernacular, abandoning the refinement and ornamentation of written language. This breaks external romanticized imaginings of India and disaster survivors, and rejects assimilation and commodification. This uncompromising oral expression is fully controlled by Animal in terms of rhythm, content, and tone. The silences, background noises, laughter, and musical snippets on the tapes are not trivial distractions; they are integral parts of his autonomous narrative, authentic expressions that external forces cannot edit, alter, or replace.

Through the independent medium of the cassette tape, Animal successfully constructs a unique self-consciousness and cultural expression space for the survivors of Khaufpur, thoroughly freeing himself from the condescending gaze of Western humanitarians and the deliberate erasure by official forces. He truly achieves speaking for himself and his community. The cassette, a low-threshold, unregulated tool for marginalized groups, allows Animal to bypass any intermediaries, directly transmitting his pain, anger, struggle, and perseverance. It shatters the fate of the minority being silenced and spoken for in a postcolonial context. This medium choice not only lets him retain narrative sovereignty over his own story but also ensures that the hidden true traumas and neglected collective voices of Khaufpur survive intact, bypassing power censorship and external misinterpretation. By asking readers to listen rather than watch, Animal compels them to set aside stereotypes and curiosity, truly understanding the marginalized’s living conditions and grasping the arduous resistance waged by survivors in a postcolonial context to claim the right to speak.

3. Cultural Hybridity in Khaufpur’s Sounds

Alongside the cassette tape that carries Animal’s personal story, the novel is filled with the sounds of religious ritual and community singing, all coming together to create Khaufpur’s

distinct soundscape.

“ From all sides are blaring chants and laments for Imam Hussein. Every doorway seems to pour out a different song, it’s like walking through dense clouds of music. *Marsiyas*, these laments called, there are dozens of them. Some are in Hindi, others in Arabic and Persian, but whichever language they are in you catch the same meaning, at least I do. It’s like every good thing in the world is dying and the people of the world, they see but do not care. The mourners are defiant, never will they give in to evil powers. For me, who am neither Muslim, nor Hindu, nor Isayi, this is a music that could also comfort Isa miyañ dying on the cross or go with Sri Rama into exile from Ayodhya. It’s all one to me, what I like is the defiance, I like it a lot. Somraj does too, but for different reasons, his head is turning this way and that, as if the sounds are butterflies and his ears are nets. We are near the big masjid and the *marsiya* from inside is coming out full blast through big speakers.

Standing alone on the field of battle,

O Hussein, never shall I forget Hussein! showing
no fear, the *zibh-e-Azeem* of Abu Abdillah

Ya Hussein! Ya Hussein! Ya Hussein!” [5].

The sounds of the Muharram festival reveal the unique, blended religious culture of Khaufpur, refusing to fit into narrow labels of one single faith. Muharram is a Shia Muslim festival that honors the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali in the Battle of Karbala, and at its heart are *marsiyas*—poems of mourning that form a core part of the ritual. These poems carry the message of standing against injustice and fighting for fairness, carrying deep moral and communal meaning. In the novel, these *marsiyas* are recited in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, a sign of how Islamic traditions have been preserved and shared across cultures in Khaufpur. But the Muharram celebrations in Khaufpur also include a fire-walking ritual, where participants walk barefoot over hot embers—a practice tied closely to Hindu traditions. These two distinct ritual practices, from different religious backgrounds, flow naturally together in the festival: the quiet, rhythmic recitation of the mourning poems mixes with the quiet intensity of the fire-walking ritual, creating a one-of-a-kind blended culture that makes Khaufpur’s community identity unique.

For *Animal*, the sounds of Muharram are tied to his community, even as they reflect his own place as an outsider. He says openly that he follows no religion and worships no god; he respects the martyr Husayn, but he does not devotionally worship him. He does not take part in the rituals with faith, yet he is surrounded by these sounds as part of daily communal life. He even believes he will die on the ninth night of Muharram, the night of the fire-walking ritual—partly because his disabled body makes him especially vulnerable to the fire, with little ability to move to safety, and partly because he feels lost and hopeless about his future as a castout survivor. Even without religious belief, the sounds of Muharram are part of who he is, and part of the unshakable foundation of Khaufpur’s community. These collective sounds hold the scattered community together, becoming an emotional anchor for everyone affected by the disaster. From this blended ritual soundscape, the novel turns to another form of music that carries Khaufpur’s living spirit: traditional community singing.

While Somraj’s traditional singing stands as a living symbol of Khaufpur’s vitality, and his loss of voice shows how the disaster broke not just bodies, but the town’s cultural spirit. The novel makes clear that in Khaufpur, the most

important “ instrument ” is the human voice; music is not played on fancy tools, but sung aloud as part of daily life. Rooted in India’s long classical music history, North Indian Hindustani music carries influences from Persian and Islamic culture, focusing on spontaneous expression and deep emotion. At the center of this tradition is the *raga*, a melodic structure tied to mood, timing, and cultural feeling. Somraj, known as the “ Voice of Khaufpur, ” mastered this tradition, and his singing held the town’s energy and soul, serving as the heart of local culture and community pride. But the toxic gas destroyed his lungs completely, taking away his ability to sing and share his music. The loss of Somraj’s voice is not just a personal tragedy; it marks the way the disaster crushed Khaufpur’s cultural heritage and its will to thrive. With this core voice silenced, the town loses a vital part of its spirit. It is in this broken cultural landscape that a Western piano arrives in Khaufpur, sparking a quiet tension between local and foreign culture, and eventually, a quiet reconciliation.

Another kind of sound, or to say, music, comes from Elli. According to *Animal* “The piano I expected to be a flat instrument when it came out of that box, maybe like a santoor, but I see now that the piano is the box itself, which has been raised off the floor and is standing on three legs of polished wood. She [Elli] lifts a curved flap and there are the keys. I’ve to stand up on the sofa chair to see them, a long row of black and white, far longer than Pandit-ji’s harmonium” [5]. The Western piano brings a foreign presence to Khaufpur, creating a quiet clash between local musical traditions and outside culture, yet it also becomes a way to cross divides through the universal pull of music. As Bowman [1] observes, the instruments people use often shape how they see themselves and others, and identity grows from the way people connect with music and the tools that make it. This idea rings true in the novel. The piano brought by Elli, the American doctor, is a rare, foreign object in Khaufpur, carrying the distance and unfamiliarity of Western culture, and mirroring Elli’s own position as an outsider who struggles to fit in. At first, Elli tries to win the community’s trust with words, eager to prove she is there to help as a doctor, but the locals respond with quiet resistance. Frustrated, she turns to the piano, playing it in the evenings while Somraj teaches his students, using the instrument to express her irritation and sense of being shut out. In these moments, the piano stands for the gap between Western and local ways of being.

But music transcends language, borders, and cultural differences, which is a truth Somraj understands deeply. Even when Elli’s piano playing disturbs his lessons, he responds with calm kindness, never with anger. His reason is simple and direct: they are both people who understand music. This shared connection to music eventually breaks down the walls between them: at a community picnic, group singing dissolves the tension and silence, Elli connects with the local people, and Somraj and Elli let go of their quiet conflict. With Elli’s guidance, *Animal* even learns to play simple notes on the piano, slowly opening up to the foreign doctor. As Sarah Wylie Krotz [3] notes, music holds many layers of meaning in the novel, and its ability to connect and clash captures the quiet tensions of life in a postcolonial world. The novel’s focus on sound and music makes this clear: local singing and the Western piano move from tension to connection, and the blended sounds of Muharram tie it all together, showing that sound and music can move past religious, racial, and cultural divides. For marginalized communities in a postcolonial world, they become a powerful way to hold onto cultural

identity and connect with others, keeping Khaufpur's unique blended identity alive through sounds.

References

- [1] Bowman, W. (2005). "After the Silence of Aesthetic Enchantment: Race, Music, and Music Education." *Action Criticism and Theory for Music Education*, 4(3), 11.
- [2] Duan, Y., & Wang, A. J. (2020). "Globalization, Disability, and Species: Animal Narrative in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*." *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 41(3), 96-104.
- [3] Krotz, S. (2009). "Productive Dissonance: Classical Music in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 34(1), 182-203.
- [4] Roland, B. *The Grain of The Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*. Northwestern University Press, 2009
- [5] Sinha, I. *Animal's People: A Novel*. Simon and Schuster, 2007.
- [6] Snell, H. (2008). "Assessing the Limitations of Laughter in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*." *Postcolonial Text*, 4.4.