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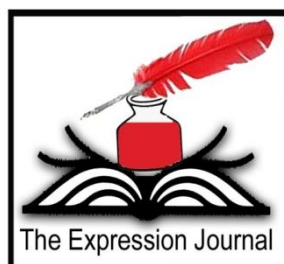
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## **Social Perception Surpasses The Self-Perception: Ostracism in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People***

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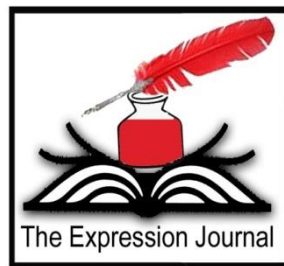
### **Abstract**

Many fictional works, including the epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata, have portrayed characters who were differently challenged as helpless victims, dependent on a society that excludes them and has a set definition of normality. This exclusionary perspective reflects a cultural mindset that resists fully integrating individuals with impairments. Such stigmatization—and its consequences, including the marginalization and erasure of disabled individuals from public life in Indian society—is powerfully illustrated in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*. The stigmatic social set up presented in the novel seems to demand the disabled to seek medical intervention to address this disability. In other words, the society keeping in mind the inhuman perception, wants the person with disability to undergo the normalising process in order to make him acceptable in the society. It is because of this that Animal, despite his strong forewarning inner voices, decides to meet a doctor to cure his condition. The purpose of this paper is to explicit the argument that owing to the deep-rooted nature of the stigma associated with disability, the character in *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha is very often forced to abandon the efforts to resist and ultimately surrender to the demands of the society. Also, this research paper showcases the extent to which the disabled character in the fiction succeeds in the process of resisting the social ostracism. It brings to light the wounds and pains that the disabled person is forced to undergo particularly when he faces failure in the attempts. As the person with disability is perceived in a stigmatic social order, he has wide implications in not only defining the limits of his abilities but also in the day-to-day activities and his interactions with the 'normal' members of the society.

### **Keywords**

Disability, Ostracism, Impairments, Social Perception and Self-Perception.

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The representations of disability in early fictional writings that include epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata share characteristic traits like presenting the people with disability as helpless victims at the mercy of a stigmatizing society, which sustains a discourse of normality that is not mentally prepared to take into account of people with impairments. Stigmas of disability and the resultant elimination and marginalization of the disabled in the public sphere in Indian culture are evident in most of the post independent Indian fiction. *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha deserves a special mention in this regard due to the fact that there are several circumstances, where the protagonist, who is with physical impairments, gets ostracized by the society in spite of his desire to live a life with one another forgetting his nonconforming stature of physique. In all these situations, it is observed that the self perception of the disabled is controlled over by the inhuman social perception on disability.

The story of Animal in *Animal's People* is one that exemplifies the diverse encounters of a disabled person to survive despite being thrown to a stigmatic social order. One of Animal's main concerns probably is the realisation that no one is ready to accept him as he is. It is arguably from this realisation that he resolves to construct his own notion of normality, which often clashes with the notion of normality of his society. Fighting against the stigmatic order becomes challenging for him as he is often reminded of his deformed physique that dissuades him from presenting a formidable front in a stigmatic world. It is therefore clear that the impact of social stigma makes the disabled turn their attention towards their own bodies. The withdrawal of people with disabilities into themselves owing to their keenness in observing their own bodies as compared to the normal others is apparently one of the desired outcomes of the stigma as far as the dominant 'normal' class is concerned, as it ensures their unavailability in the public sphere.

Animal, the deformed victim of the 1984 Bhopal chemical gas disaster, accentuates his determination to act against the grain in different situations, where he is to make others understand that he is in no way inferior to any other normal people. For instance, he says that he is good at kabbadi, which is considered normally to be a tough game for people like him. He says, "You'd think such a tough game I'd have difficulty playing, but with my strong shoulders and arms I was good at catching opposing players and wrestling them to the ground." (Sinha

15). In another instance, Animal proves to be equally good in swimming like the normal people as he puts it, "I'd have been about eight or nine, we'd gone to swim." (Sinha 16). It becomes increasingly obvious that the desires, which emanate from the self perception of the persons with impairments, stand unsatisfied as it happens always in the case of Animal. Escaping from the embarrassment situations seems to be impossible for the disabled persons due to the society's stigmatic perception on disability.

The stigmatic social set up presented in *Animal's People* seems to demand the disabled to seek medical intervention in the matter of addressing disability. In other words, the society wants people with disability to undergo the so-called normalizing process in order to make them acceptable in the society. With an intention to enjoy the due respect as the 'normals' do, Animal, despite his strong forewarning inner voices, decides to meet a doctor to cure his condition. "You will be disappointed, whispers a voice, Ask! Shouts another" (Sinha 57). In support of Animal's voice, the Doctor also confirms, "madam I must be plain with you, whatever could have been done for this boy, the time is long past. He will have to get used to his condition. There is absolutely no hope, this boy will never walk or stand up straight again." (Sinha 57). The realization that his condition cannot be reverted back to normal makes him even more worried, as his survival depends on the society's willingness to accept him with his disabled stature. Smita Sahu identifies that Animal is torn between the two opposing feelings of repulsion and desire. It is confirmed that Animal could not live a normal life because of his monstrous and hunchbacked figure, which also become the ground for his constant humiliation and embarrassment. She says, "We find his thoughts being dominated by a desire for sex all the time. It is only because Animal has been denied his basic human right of living a life of dignity and respect that he rejects his human identity" (622).

Disabled people are often prevented from speaking their heart out, owing to reasons like social stigma and inferiority complex. It is probably because of this fact that Animal lists certain jobs and tasks as unsuitable for him even while he has an inner liking for them. This eventually creates an aversion in his mind towards those activities. He says, "I'd feel raw disgust in my mad times when the voices were shouting inside my head. I'd be filled with rage against all things that go or even stand on two legs. The list of jealousies was endless; women carrying pots on their heads, waiters balancing four plates per arm. I hate watching my friends play hopscotch. I detested the sight of dancers ... I eyed Farooq's bicycle and wondered if it too deserved a place in my list of hates." (Sinha 2) Thus a person with disability is left to live a life below his own expectations because of the social stigma attached to disability.

There are instances that present imagined wish fulfillments as the only possible resolves for the unfulfilled desires of Animal in the stigmatic world. Both his carnal desires and his self-esteem are presented to be achievable only in his dreams. Animal's is thus emanated from a realization of the impossibility of either achieving normalcy or fulfilling his human desires. Thus viewed, his dreams derive from desperation, and the final surrender to the lacunas and insufficiencies that he is destined to live with. What he is unable to achieve in real life, including his union with his sweet heart is presented to have been achieved only through his dreams. He even dreams of Dr. Ellie, the physician from England, straightening his back in an act of employing a medical miracle, and others helping him achieve all the success he and riches he feels missed because of his disability. It is apparent that Animal's unrealistic dreams are deeply connected to the stigmatized worldview he internalized after being subjected the status of an outsider in his own society.

Animal, because of his difference in physique, goes through agony of embarrassment in several situations that gradually makes him feel compared with animals and other creatures but not with human beings. He does not even seem to show his willingness to do that at all. It could be understood that he does not want himself to be considered as incomplete while doing so. As he puts it, "If I agree to be a human being, I'll also have to agree that I'm wrong-shaped and abnormal" (Sinha 208). He starts developing an opinion that he is better looked at as animal by the society. Instead of being known as an incomplete human being Animal prefers to be called as an animal, apparently because he is moving on all the fours unlike normal human beings. This self-imposed degeneration of his status from human to animal is a metaphorical resistance to the inhuman ways in which the disabled people like him are treated by the 'normal' society. He relegates to his incomplete world by saying "let me be a quatrepattes animal. Four-footed and free, then I am whole, my own proper shape, just a different kind of animal from say Jara, or a cow, or a camel." (Sinha 208). It is clear that the self-imposed animal identity of Animal is a reactionary gesture against the society that dehumanized him as well as an act to hide his inner longing to be a normal human being.

The disabled are found in a condition to be disabled throughout their life just because they are born in India as stated by Elli, the physician from England. Although Animal is not for undergoing operation to correct his physique initially expecting the society to accept him as how he is, he agrees with the idea of going for an operation in America as he is made to believe that a correction by operation would make him alright. Ellie says, "I assure you that if you had been born in Amrika, you would not be running around on all fours" (Sinha 140). Here he seems to feel that it is not the fault of him to be born in this country but his desire to be a normal person persistently disturbs him. It is understood that *Animal's People* presents the stigmatized and 'abnormal' subjectivity that battles multifaceted forms of social ostracism on the one hand and his own struggles to grapple with the desires to be treated as normal, on the other. It is not only in this particular novel, where we understand that the disabled person undergoes a lot of sufferings to get him accepted with his disability but also it is found in most of the Independent Indian fiction in English that have characters with disability.

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