

A Dilemma of Identity: Exploring Bodily Identity Crisis in *Animal's
People*

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Abstract

Our societies or social groups are defined by the ideas, beliefs that we share and have in common. We see society as something that binds people together. But from the studies of structuralists like Claude Levi-Strauss and Edmund Leach, combined with arguments of others, exposes that societies are actually based on ideas of homogeneity and identity, through generations and how one is alienated if he/she is different from the main stream. This paper titled 'A Dilemma of Identity: Exploring Bodily Identity Crisis in *Animal's People*' explores in depth how Indra Sinha's novel, *Animal's People* shows how an individual suffers to form an identity for oneself due to his twisted body structure that resembles the body of an animal, how he is alienated from the society and how it is reinforced by the people around him. This thesis

explores whether the protagonist of the novel is finally able to create an identity, whether he is successful or not.

Keywords –Identity, Body, Crisis, Society, Feeling

Introduction

The answer to the question “what is identity?” would be this: It is how one explains the query who are you? And differs from person to person. In prevalent and traditional approach, identity is based on the shared elements between a people in a particular society, but not all people like to be the same. Identity crisis is a period of intensive analysis of exploring oneself, discovering various ways to stand out. The concept of identity crisis was first seen in the works of psychologist Erik Erikson, and he insisted that the building up an identity is the most important part of a person’s life. The formation of an identity is not just limited to adolescence, but identity is something that is not fixed, it is ever changing. When we suffer from the lack of an identity, we see ourselves from a different perspective. We analyze and explore ourselves. Habermas in 1973 said that there are two types of identity crisis, which he called ‘legitimation crisis’ and ‘motivation crisis’. “A legitimation crisis is the inability of a social entity to fulfill demands and expectations it has placed on itself, It refers to an inability to justify actions that are called for and motivation crisis, on the other hand, refers to a lack of “action motivating meaning” (Habermas 68). The motivation crisis is characterized by a lack of commitment to goals and values, the person can’t make consistent choices and decisions An identity crisis arises when the person struggles to make such commitments. Thus, motivation crises combine the lack of commitments with the personal desire and struggle to make commitments. An example of a motivation crisis would be the crisis of the adolescent who engages in protracted self-questioning

and seeks new sources of meaning, fulfillment, and value. The legitimation crisis refers to the problem of the multiply defined self that has become incompatible. It is characterized by problems in meeting the demands that follow from commitments, the situation makes it impossible to choose and act consistently with all the person's values and goals. An example would be a person whose spouse and parental home are of different religious faiths in a way that makes the person feel committed to both. If one says that not everyone experiences an identity crisis, then the question can be reframed as, Why do some people and not others have identity crisis?. What comes next after a lack of identity, is how to solve it, the process of identity formation and is rather a difficult path.

In this work we can see the identity of a character in a state of transition and Identity crisis in this novel can be analyzed only in relation to its main character named Animal. Animal due to his twisted body structure, rejects to be identified as a human and takes joy in being different. One of the significant subjects in postcolonial fiction has been the look for one's identity. Identity, which can be characterized as a person's feeling of uniqueness, is key to a person's development in all ways and it is this uniqueness that provides everyone self-confidence and inner strength. Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* is a work that explores this problem in depth and how our protagonist is in dire search for his identity and how it affects his interaction with others. The identity of our hero is affected after the incident that took place in Khaufhur, that also affected others in the same village. He clearly talks about everyone's life and not just limiting to his. Here animal's twisted body structure is both a moral lesson of the gas tragedy and also something he must overcome to form an identity. Animal due to his body structure, that is deformed thanks to the incident, does not consider himself as a human, because humans walk on two legs with a straight spine, but he walks on all four with a twisted spine and defines

himself as unique. “I’m the only one there is of this type” (*Animal’s People* 208). But people who knew him from his childhood says he used be like a human, as Ma franci says. “I used to walk upright” (*Animal’s People* 1). Early in the novel, from the first line, it’s clear that animal is facing an identity crisis, that he is going through a period of existentialism and is clearly visible for the following lines. “I used to be human once. So I’m told. I don’t remember it myself, but people who knew me when I was small say I walked on two feet just like a human being” (*Animal’s People* 1). Ma franci also tells how he used to enjoy swimming in the lakes in his human days and animal dreams that he would be able to do it again. “I still dream of diving straight as a stick into deep water leaving my crooked shadow behind” (*Animal’s People* 14). Animal considers himself as a four legged creature due to his twisted body structure, in the past he was like a human being, he walked on two legs, but since he cannot remember it, he is struggling to find a proper identity.

Due to his twisted body structure, animal is having conflicting emotions all the time, one which he tries to control, but fails most of the time. People make fun of him due to his twisted body structure and as a result he is clearly lacking in self-confidence and at the same he has feelings towards Nisha. The reason why he is facing an identity crisis is due to the people around him, who mock him and harass him and deny him the qualities that a human being deserve. Tobin Siebers, a scholar who emphasis on the effect of physical structure through beauty talks in detail the essence of human reactions and the society’s need to fix an impairment in his book *Disability Aesthetics* (2005). “Aesthetics tracks the emotions that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies, taste and disgust are volatile reactions that reveal the ease or disease with which one body might incorporate another” (Siebers 542). The reaction that Siebers telling can be seen here in the way people react to on seeing animal and how animal react to their

reaction. “He would start attacking them and earning the nick name animal or jungle jaanvar” (*Animal’s People* 15). He even began feeding like a animal, in days of poverty where he would eat almost anything. “In gone times I have felt such hunger, I’d break off lumps of the dry skin and chew it” (*Animal’s People* 13) and most of time he would scavenge through garbage for food like a street dog would, where his main competition is from the street dogs.

One the other hand animal is in constant flux is with the religion, as to which religion he belongs to. He says that religion is only applicable to humans and him being animal, is devoid of any of any religion, prayer and customs and beliefs as he says. “ I’m not a Muslim. I’m not a Hindu. I’m not a Isayi, I’m an animal . I’d be lying if I said religion meant a damn thing to me” (*Animal’s People* 14). One of the main reason why he doesn’t want religion is because of the concept of rebirth, he doesn’t want to live another life after this, if it’s going to be like this, full of pain and sorrow. “ Whoever I talk to, seems the main reason for having a religion is to cheat death and live again, here or in heaven. Well I don’t want another life, thanks, not if it’s anything like this one” (*Animal’s People* 207). When his body started to transform, to mutate, he had to adjust to it and learn new ways to cope up with life, as he had to learn how to walk on all four just like an animal. “On my hands I learned to walk, my legs grew feeble” (*Animal’s People* 15). Slowly he was taking up the identity of animal by learning to walk on all fours and the villagers made sure of this transformation by calling him an animal and one time he attacked a boy, and the attack was similar to how a wild animal would pounce on its prey and this act of violence earned him the name jaanvar, jungle jaanvar. “I fastened my teeth in his leg and bit till I could taste blood he was yelling in pain, he was pleading, I wouldn’t stop and the other kids started shouting. Jaanvar, jungle jaanvar” (*Animal’s People* 15). No matter how hard he tried to make

him feel like a human, the people around him kept referring to him as an animal as they called him. “like a leopard” (*Animal’s People* 16).

But not everyone treated him as an animal, as an outcaste. The first one to show some concern to him was Nisha. It was she who saw him as a human and the way she called him his name was not in any way mocking him, but a simple way of calling a person’s name. The second person to show him some kindness was Zafar. Zafar and Nisha only see animal as a physically challenged person, Zafar boosts up his confidence by telling him that. “You are a human being, entitled to dignity and respect”(*Animal’s People* 23). To help him overcome his mind and promote future development Zafar even finds a job for himself and one character tells animal to stop labeling himself as an animal and start to consider himself as a human. It is Zafar who encourages him to choose a name of his own, any name he likes. “You can choose your own name, jatta for example or jamil, go ahead pick one, whatever you like, we’ll call you that henceforth” (*Animal’s People* 23). One of the most important element to human identity is having a name and this is exactly what Zafar is trying to do, trying to add the first human element in him.

As a result of instilling human identity and consciousness in him Nisha takes the task of teaching him how to read and write, at first he learned to read and write his own spelling and could gradually read sign boards. “I learned to spell my own name, jaanvar, animal” (*Animal’s People* 35). Even when he refused to take up any other name than jaanvar or animal Nisha said that jaan means life and jaanvar means one who lives. She is giving him something to be proud of. “life? You’re full of it, I’ve never known anyone with so much jaan as you” (*Animal’s People* 35). And as he started to accept and behave like a human, along with acceptance came emotions and feelings, feelings for Nisha, and this is when he realized that he is a human, as

animal's don't have emotions. "I denied to myself that I was beginning to have feelings for Nisha" (*Animal's People* 39).

But according to Faroqu. Animal considers himself to be an animal so that he can avoid all the responsibilities of his life and live carefree, without working hard, but in dire poverty and then keep complaining about his life. But animal does not agree to this viewpoint, he strongly rejects it and according to him, the reason he behaves like this is, "if I agree to be a human being, I'll also have to agree that I'm wrong shaped and abnormal. But let me be a quatre pattes animal just a different kind of animal from say a cow or a camel" (*Animal's People* 208).

What we can understand or more precisely see from this is the pain and sadness that animal has to cope with in his life. The reason why he is facing such kind of pain and emotions is because of the image of the human body that he has created in his mind and the image to which he hold on dearly. For him human body is basically upright and people walk on two legs and not on four like him and as a result he has come to consider himself closer to an animal more than a human being due to his physical resemblance to the animals. One of the major characteristics of a work belonging to postcolonial genre is the feature of transition and here the identity of our main character animal is always in a state of transition, between an animal and a human and it is clearly evident from the conversation he has with Nisha, "I'm not a man" (*Animal's People* 47). He doesn't want be categorized as a human, but we can see him longing for human affection, love and feeling at the same time and the only reason he wants to be human is due to the love he feels towards Nisha, it's for this reason and only this, that he wants to be human. Identity as everyone knows is what provides everyone with a sense of power and control and value and animal due to his twisted body structure is clearly lacking lacking all these qualities and he wishes to be a human so that he can marry his love Nisha and lead a human life and not eat from

pile of garbage, but he takes pride in being an animal, as he different from everyone around him, he is the only one and he makes a song to feel proud of his physical appearance, an appearance that resembles an animal, “I’m an animal fierce and free, in all the world is none like me, crooked I’m a nightmare child, fed on hunger running wild and no love and cuddles for this boy” (*Animal’s People* 172). One part of his mind constantly tells him to stop labeling himself as an animal, but no matter how hard he tries, he just can’t find the mental strength, “I should cease thinking of myself as an animal and become human again” (*Animal’s People* 207) and once he asks Zafar if he runs past the cameras what will it show a human or an animal. “If I galloped past those cameras, I asked, what will it show, a miserable animal or a miserable boy” (*Animal’s People* 115).

Faroqu says that the only way he could ever become a human and society will only accept him as a human being is, if he acts like a human being, “To be accepted as a human being, you must behave like one” (*Animal’s People* 209). The people around him accepts him to be a human, but it is animals himself who provides way to be called as an animal due to his animal like behavior as Farqou says, “You look a lot like human being to me” (*Animal’s People* 209). The people around him accepts him to be a human, but it is animals himself who provides way to be called as an animal due to his animal like behavior as Farqou says, “You look a lot like human being to me” (*Animal’s People* 209). The emotions that he felt for Nisha, the ones he kept repressed finally emerged and he says to Nisha, you love me and the reason we can never be together i.e. because of my twisted body, “Because I am an animal, that’s the real reason isn’t it, that you can never marry me?” (*Animal’s People* 332). He knows he could never be a human and marry Nisha, “Because it’s true. If I were human maybe I could be your lover. No chance of that now!” (*Animal’s People* 333). Who would ever think of marrying someone who resembles a

hyena “idea of marrying such a creature as me, who goes on fours and is first cousin to a hyena” (*Animal’s People* 333).

What adds sparks to his hope of being a human once again is when a character named Elli, an American doctor comes to his place to setup a free clinic and all the hopes that was lying dormant in his heart resurfaced, and upon meeting Elli, he is filled with a newly found desire, to be normal like those around him and as a result he starts to dream of a new life as a human and wishing his current self as an animal to disappear forever, and after this surgery he would return to be normal as a “young, upright and a handsome man” (*Animal’s People* 187). Elli for him was the light that appears at the end of a dark tunnel, but that light went out fast. The hope of being normal tangled in the struggle with the Khaufpur and Kampani people, as Elli was an outsider, from Kampani. here animal takes the decision to remain as he is now and not to have a human like posture because, if he undergoes the surgery he would be needing the help of sticks and wheelchair to move, but how far will that help him move around, will that get me in the gullis of khaufpur? And he says right now he can hop, jump and do everything, “Right now I can run and hop and carry kids on my back, I can climb trees, I’ve gone up mountains, roamed in jungles” (*Animal’s People* 366).

And as of now life is not bad as he could do all this and if he changes his body posture to that of a human, he would like all others, most importantly not even an healthy one and he decides to stay, live and die like an animal. He decides to stay four foot, in this way, he is the only one of his type, he has his own identity that keeps him special and in the end he embraces the animal identity over the human one which he longed for, “I am animal fierce free, in all the world is none like me” (*Animal’s People* 366). We can conclude that in the end of *Animal’s People* that, animal actually creates an identity for himself, animal in the end rejects the social

stigmas regarding the way he looks and in doing so animal is empowering him and creating a unique identity for himself.

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