

## **When “Nothing” Means “Everything” Power and Resistance in Indra Sinha’s Animal People**

By

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### **Abstract**

It has been widely understood that literature in itself can represent a valuable tool in resisting certain ideologies and beliefs. Literature produced from Third-World countries tends to encounter certain ideologies imposed by the West. Indra Sinha’s *Animal People* serves a prime example to support this claim. The article examines Sinha’s novels and read it through postcolonial lenses. Postcolonial literature offers an effective means in deciphering how neoliberalism is still in full effect. Sinha, in his fictional work, exposes such case. More importantly, the author introduces the notion of “the power of nothing” which is to be seen as a counter-hegemonic move initiated by the poor to encounter the oppression and cruelty imposed by the West, manifested by the actions of a multinational company that operates in India. The article exposes how cultural and economic hegemony overlap with each other and form a force over the indigenous poor people. A force that is too powerful to be challenged. However, as the article shows, Sinha challenges such forces by attributing certain characteristics to his different characters in the novel. “The power of nothing” is an asset that proves to be more than noting to have.

**Keywords:** hegemony, neoliberalism, oppressed, political violence, resistance

### **1. Introduction**

*The Oxford Dictionary* defines the word “hegemony” as “leadership or dominance, especially by one country or social group over others.” It is interesting to observe how the concept of hegemony has been used excessively in academia, more specifically in literature, in analyzing the dominance of a country or social group over others, since Antonio Gramsci developed this concept in his prison diaries, *Prison Notebooks*. Although I should note that hegemony is a Marxist concept, it is Gramsci who invested heavily in this concept making it very popular. The study of this concept, in academia has been useful in exposing, not necessarily the military power of a country or social group, but also different forms of economic, cultural, and ideological dominance. Douglas Litowitz, in his article “Gramsci, Hegemony, and the Law,” explains how there are two forms of hegemony. The first is associated with the law, the police, the army, and National Guard. While the second he asserts is more implicit and insidious, he writes, “It involves subduing and co-opting dissenting voices through subtle dissemination of the dominant group’s perspective as universal and natural, to the point where the dominant beliefs and practices become an intractable component of common sense” (Litowitz 2003. 515). It is the second type, he claims, that is more suitable in reflecting the theme of hegemony. It is logical to say that the second type is lawless and inhumane. Unfortunately, we do see this type practiced in our world, especially through the injustice that Western countries impose upon the global South.

Raymond Williams, in his book *Marxism and Literature*, explains how hegemony is a

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cultural theory that is constantly changing and shifting. He writes, “[Hegemony] has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own.” He, then introduces the notion of counter-hegemony, he affirms, “we have then to add the concept of hegemony the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony, which are real and persistent” (Williams 1977. 113). I will be reading Indra Sinha’s novel *Animal’s People* (2007) in relation to Williams’s idea of what is hegemony and what is counter-hegemony. *Animal’s People* can be read as a novel resisting the hegemonic power of the West over the poor. This is evident through the theme of “the power of nothing.” The power of nothing in its basic definition is the poor’s only weapon in fighting the exploitation of their lands, farms, and bodies by capitalist’s corporations. It drives from the fact that they have nothing to lose to fight such forces. Sinha outstandingly situates the novel as a means of fighting and limiting the hegemonic power of the West.

In this paper, I will argue how the “power of nothing,” in *Animal’s People*, is a counter-hegemonic move by the poor urban global South as a reaction to neoliberal capitalism. I will try to prove how the “power of nothing” had initiated simply because the poor were forgotten and regarded external to capitalism. The following is going to be the structure of my paper: 1) Give a brief summary of *Animal’s People* 2) Historically contextualize the novel 3) Examine how hegemony is depicted in the book, through the Kampani’s use of violence over the locals. 4) Analyze how the poor’s resistance to neoliberal capitalism can be seen as a form of counter-hegemonic. I will end my paper by commenting on to what degree did the power of counter-hegemony, in the novel, succeeded in limiting, challenging, or defeating the power of hegemony.

*Animal’s People* tells the story of a nineteen-year-old man called Animal. In this book, Animal narrates, in a series of tapes, his life story along with the story of the sufferings of his people. Animal, almost since his birth, has been walking on both his hands and legs; this is how he got the name Animal. His back has been twisted as a result of the chemical leakage from the Kampani factory. Many people had died and many suffered serious injures from the explosions that happened that tragic night; almost all the inhabitants were affected by various degrees. Khaufpur, the setting of the novel, is a very poor city filled with ill poor people, and there is no proper place in the city where people can be treated. Zafar, who only comes to Khaufpur after the disaster, becomes the advocate of the poor in Khaufpur. He is an activist, who the people of Khaufpur respect highly, since he is the one who is voicing their demands and needs. Zafar form a network of people to help the cause of the city in seeking justice, it includes: Animal, Somraj, Faroq, and Nisha.

An American doctor, Elli Barber, comes to Khaufpur in order to treat the poor free of charge. Upon her arrival to the city, the locals grew suspicious of her time of arrival. Through Zafar’s demand, the locals decided to boycott the clinic, believing that she is working with the Kampani. Animal strikes a relationship with Elli; he was hoping that she would be able to fix his twisted spine, so he can walk normally, just as the doctor wants Animal to help her in gaining the trust of the locals. Gradually, the doctor managed to gain the confidence of the Khaufpuris. Since Animal’s job was to spy on Elli, he once saw her kissing on the Kampani lawyers. He decided not to tell anyone about what he saw. Elli managed to convince Animal that she hates the Kampani as much as all people in Khaufpur do, and what she did with the Kampani lawyer was for the best of the community. With the arrival of the Kampani lawyers, the city is anxious awaiting the result of the court case that the people of Khaufpur had filed against the Kampani. Zafar and Faroq went on a hunger strike. The verdict did go in favor of

the locals. At the end of the novel, a woman knew that the Kampani and local officials were about to meet to proceed with their secret agreements. She emptied a bottle of stink bomb juice into the air conditioner. The Kampani lawyers choked and almost died. Finally, I should note that through his narration, Animal reflects many issues, how people treat him, the poverty of the city, his sexual desires, and so forth.

*Animal's people* is a fictionalized account of the Bhopal disaster that happened in 1984. Indra Sinha wrote this novel in response to the excessive harm that Union Carbide did, and still doing, to the citizens of Bhopal. As a consequence of the chemical leakage, more than 25.000 people had died and over half a million were exposed to deadly toxics and chemicals that horrible night. A large number of the victims suffered from untreatable illnesses. All the evidences gathered after the disaster pointed to the abandonment of safety measure and routine maintenance from Union Carbide as the prime reason for the disaster. The Union Carbide refused to take the blame of what happened, stating that the factory's safety measures were in complete function. Since that horrified night the people of Bhopal are demanding for compensations, and proper treatment from all the health issues that resulted from that night. The chairman of Union Carbide, Warren Anderson, is still a wanted man in India for he crimes that he did to the locals. The Indian government charged Anderson and other executives for the murder of civilians. Union Carbide refused to act upon this decision claiming that the Indian government has no jurisdiction over the company.

There is no doubt that the story of Bhopal had inspired Sinha to fictionalize it in *Animal's People*. In his fictional story there are a lot similarities between how the Kampani reacted and how Union Carbide reacted after the disaster. Both companies declared their innocence of what happened. Also, the way locals in Khaufpur and Bhopal are longing for justice to be served after the tragedy is quite similar. Decades have passed and still the people have not received proper compensations. Sinha portrays the same thing in his novel, as twenty years had passed and people of Khaufpur are still seeking justice. The two transnational companies left India immediately after the disaster, knowing that the people do not have the power to bring them to justice. In the following paragraphs, I will elaborate on how Sinha portrays the Kampani as a product of neoliberal capitalism, i.e, how the Kampani represents the power of hegemony.

## **2. Body of Paper**

In *Animal's People*, Western hegemony comes in the form of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as David Harvey defines it in his book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2005. 2). However, since neoliberalism is a product of capitalism, there is no doubt in the harm and injustice that this theory proposes to our world, Harvey touches on this aspect, he writes that, “The process of neoliberalization has, however, entailed much ‘creative destruction’...[on] divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart” (Harvey 2005. 3). Its damage is clear and undeniable, and is more evident in the Third World Countries. It is the perfect place for the advocates of neoliberalism to practice their inhumane actions without fearing any sanctions or punishments. Unfortunately for humanity, the beneficiaries of neoliberal capitalism, even though they are the minority, they are the people who possess a lot of power, and control the media, education, and financial

institutions.

*In Animal's People*, Sinha outstandingly situates his novel in an attempt to uncover the brutality of neoliberal ideologies that have devastating consequences on the poor's lives. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon writes:

[*Animal's People*] gives focus to three of the defining characteristics of the contemporary neoliberal order: first, the widening chasm—within and between nations—that separates the mega-rich from the destitute; second, the attendant burden of unsustainable ecological degradation that impacts the health and livelihood of the poor most directly; and third, the way, under cover of a free market ideology, powerful transnational corporations exploit the lopsided universe of deregulation, whereby laws and loopholes are selectively applied in a marketplace a lot freer for some societies and classes than for others. (Nixon 2011. 46)

Through closely examining the effect on neoliberalism on the poor locals of Khaufpur, we notice the total destruction that the Kampani had caused to the city. As Jennifer Rickel puts it “The novel suggests that neoliberal economic policies and national-international power dynamics, which allowed for corporate violence against Animal's people and continue to produce systemic inequalities in Bhopal and elsewhere around the

world, should be of primary concern to readers”. (Rickel 2012. 92) The hegemony of Western ideologies over the global South is manifested, in the novel; through the actions of the American cooperate before and after the chemical explosions. Through the actions of the Kampani, I can sum up their hegemony over the natives into two types, the first is economic hegemony, and the second is cultural hegemony. Although the two overlap with each other, I want to divide them because it will be easier to examine how hegemony comes in different forms. Also, by separating them it will unmask how capitalism damages not only the economy of a region, but also its culture as well.

The impact of the economic hegemony of the Kampani on the Khaufpuris is immense. While, in the novel we, as readers, are only exposed to the events that took place after the gas explosions, it is fair to say that the economic hegemony had started before that tragic night. Through the establishment of the transnational company in Khaufpur, it would definitely had access to natural resources in the city. Having access to natural resources would limit the food, water, and land resources for the native inhabitants. Which would, consequently, result in the poverty for the locals. Thus, this would force the people to search for jobs that would enable them to survive. People would be cornered forcibly to accept jobs with minimum wages in order to live. This cycle would have devastating effects on the economy of the city. I am assuming that this is what happened in Khaufpur upon the arrival of the Kampani, simply because this is a fraction of the negative impact of global capitalism on the Third World Countries.

The economic hegemony of the Kampani, even after that tragic night, is still in complete effect. The city remained severely poor as a consequence of the chemical leakage, even though the Kampani had left. Khaufpur was so poor to the extent that it did not have a proper hospital. Animal once stated that “of course there are government hospitals but people won't set foot in them unless they're desperate” (Sinah 2009. 24). Moreover, there was a scarcity of food in the city; people barely have the money necessary to buy food. Shambhu's wife complained that there was not enough money to buy food nor enough to treat her husband, she said “no money for food there's, where will I find money for [gas oxygen]” (Sinah 2009.



147). Also in another episode, Animal was talking to Elli explaining the difficulties that the poor encounter in search for food, he utters, “What happens if you can’t afford food? When can’t you remember the last time you ate something? I’ll tell you. When it’s light there’s binding a cloth tight round your belly to squeeze out the pain, when it turns dark you’ve to drink plenty of water to fill your miserable gut” (Sinah 2009. 185). These were only a few examples of the devastations that the Kampani had made to the economy of Khaufpur. It seemed that almost all people in Khaufpur were poor and unable to possess the basic life needs. The economic hegemony of the Kampani continued even after they abandoned Khaufpur, this is manifested through their refusal to compensate the locals for the deadly consequences. The Kampani came to the city and turned it into an impoverished place and made sure that the city remained in the same state after they left Khaufpur.

Cultural hegemony in *Animal’s People* is portrayed through the total destruction that the Kampani made to the cultural life of Khaufpur. Before I analyze how cultural hegemony is depicted in the story, I have to introduce here Gramsci’s definition of cultural hegemony. He defines it as “The “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (Gramsci 1971. 145). I should note that for Gramsci “consent” is mainly accomplished by force from the dominant power over the subordinates. In other words, consent and force are merely combined together to achieve cultural hegemony. In *Animal’s People*, the cultural hegemony was obvious when Elli was telling Animal that a Khaufpuri friend once told her how Khaufpur used to have a unique and high culture, “Famous it was for poets, politically progressive, a heaven for refugees including a large community of Afghans...He complained how all these things are forgotten because nowadays when the world hears the name of Khaufpur it thinks only of poison” (Sinah 2009. 152). This is a clear example of how Khaufpur was once a highly regarded place in the region. People from other places were coming to Khaufpur to embrace its civilization.

The Kampani did not only function, in Khaufpur, as a corporate that produces whatever goods or products that it was supposed to produce. Its role in the society of Khaufpur was far more deeper and greater than merely a chemical factory functioning in India. The Kampani brought along with-it destructive ideologies from the West that erased the city’s high culture. The Kampani was an institution that possessed significant power to change the social order in Khaufpur. It had succeeded in implicitly enhancing its position in the city by manipulating the subordinates’ attachment to their lands and culture. The Kampani was portrayed as typical multinational companies that operate in the Third World Countries. Their explicit justification in establishing factories in these regions is help raise the economy of the country by providing job opportunities to the locals. Whereas their actual and implicit goal is to perform a cultural and economic hegemony upon the indigenous people. By establishing a complete hegemony, their chances would sufficiently increase in changing the ideologies of the natives. In the following paragraphs, I will explain how the community of Khaufpur formed a counter-hegemonic move against the brutality and injustice of the Kampani. First, I will address the notion of “the power of nothing” in *Animal’s People*, then I will try examine it as a counter-hegemonic move.

Having nothing to lose was one of the recurring themes that Sinha had incorporated in his story. With no enough money, poor health, and erased culture, the people of Khaufpur had nothing to lose, since they basically had been stripped out from the basic life needs. “Global geopolitics may in the short term be skewed against [Khaufpur,] but time is on their side: the Kampani has everything to fear from those with nothing to lose” (O’Loughlin 2014. 58). From

reading the novel, we notice how gradually this theme became apparent, and dominant in the novel. Zafar, the poor's advocate, first came up with this concept, when he said, "We have nothing, and this makes us strong. Not just strong, but invincible. Having nothing, we can never be defeated" (Sinah 2009. 54). Zafar continued throughout the whole narrative to popularize this concept, in an attempt to make the whole community believe in this power. In another incident, he remarked, "The Kampani don't know what they're up against, people who have nothing have nothing to lose, we will never give up, out of having nothing comes a power that's impossible to resist. It may take long, but we will win" (Sinah 2009. 111). Zafar's enthusiasm in adopting the value of possessing nothing increased dramatically, he believed that this type of resistance would make them defeat their enemies and win eventually.

Progressively, the other characters began to believe in this "power of nothing" and it became the fuel that sparked their hopes in gaining justice. This is evident through the character of Animal. At first, he did not hide his skepticism from the validity of the "power of nothing" and whether it could really restore justice and peace to the city. At one point, he stated, "Since when did [the poor] have power to change anything?" (Sinah 2009. 151). However, as the plot developed, we notice how Animal began gradually to believe in this power, and its capability. The pessimism had changed to optimism. At the end of the novel, he declared that "Zafar is Zafar and by nothing I mean nothing, but maybe he is right. There is a strength that comes from having nothing because you have nothing to lose" (Sinah 2009. 319). Also in another incident, he made a similar remark in appreciating what came from "the power of nothing", he affirmed, "So after all, we won. The power of nothing rose up and destroyed our enemies" (Sinah 2009. 359). The transformation of Animal's character represented the belief, among the Khaufpuris, that the resistance that came from "the power of nothing" was, to an extent, successful.

Sinha portrayed "the power of nothing" as the means that the poor initiated in countering the Western hegemony. Going back to Williams' analysis of the concept's hegemony and counter-hegemony, he writes, "The reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive" (Williams 1977. 113). Taking Williams' idea into account, we can say the cultural hegemony from the Kampani is not total nor exclusive; it is vulnerable and could be challenged. There is a space where the indigenous people can resist this power. This is clear especially after the Kampani had abandoned Khaufpur. Within this space, the community of Khaufpur, pushed by Zafar, formed a counter-hegemonic move attempting to restore their cultural pride. Both Gramsci, and Williams argue that a cultural hegemony of a dominant group over a subordinate group is not always static or fixed, it is constantly being challenged and opposed. That is what the Khaufpuris had done; they challenged the dominance of the Kampani. However, the logical questions that I will try to answer are: how did this counter-hegemonic power succeed in uniting the people of Khaufpur? Did the cultural counter-hegemonic move formed by the Khaufpuris succeed in demolishing the cultural hegemony made by the Kampani?

To answer both questions, I feel the need to recall what Animal said at the end of the novel "So after all, we won. The power of nothing rose up and destroyed our enemies" (Sinah 2009. 359). Regardless of the fact that whether the Khaufpuris have gained some materialistic profits or not at the end, it is fair to say "the power of nothing" had generated some valuable ideals among the natives. Animal's words summed the satisfaction of how collaboratively they defeated their enemy. For one thing, the counter-hegemonic move had brought together the locals in times of hardships to help each other fighting for their own cause. It reinforced the sense of unity among them. All the people in Khaufpur, with no exception, collaboratively

resisted together the exploitation of their lands and bodies. In this counter-hegemonic group, we observe that includes people from all social classes. There is Zafar, the educated and wealthy, Somraj, the clever and wise, Nisha, the enthusiastic and active, and Animal and Faroq, who both regarded as low-class citizens. In other words, this resistance broke the barriers between social classes within Khaufpur. They were all united for one cause, which is to restore their true identities.

Moreover, this resistance proved that, for Khaufpuris, dignity comes first. They did not allow the Kampani to erase their dignity. This is evident when almost all the Khaufpuris boycotted Elli's clinic believing that she was working for the Kampani. They risked their own lives only to prove that they do not want to be the product of the Kampani. Even if the Kampani wanted to correct their wrongdoings, the people of Khaufpur were refusing to deal with anything related to the American corporate. Also, another advantage the community had developed is their sense of loyalty. All the Khaufpuris showed utmost loyalty to Zafar, since he was the most outspoken person in Khaufpur. When he ordered that no one approaches the clinic, all people followed his orders. They trusted Zafar; they knew he was honest, and straightforward in fighting against the tyranny of the Kampani, unlike the corrupted government officials of Khaufpur. There is no doubt that the counter-hegemony, i.e. "power of nothing," had succeeded in bringing together the Khaufpuris; they formed their own community. In their "little community" they proved that they could live together peacefully and orderly, without the intrusion of the West.

Undoubtedly, "the power of nothing," in *Animal's People*, had thrived in challenging the hegemonic culture that the Kampani had created. Not only this power had challenged it, but it also had recreated, reshaped its own authentic culture. All people joined together to form a fierce force. "Authentic breaks within and beyond [culture], in specific social conditions which can vary from extreme isolation to pre-revolutionary breakdowns and actual revolutionary activity, have often in fact occurred" (LaCapra 2018. 114). I do not want to exaggerate and claim that the Khaufpuris had completely succeeded in restoring their own culture, because fully restoring it might take more than a couple of decades, and also the damage done by the Kampani was severe. But at least a revolution had started to demolish the legacy of the Kampani. Unity, order, and harmony had been restored among the indigenous people. Sinha wanted to demonstrate that collaboratively the poor, from possessing nothing, could defeat the Western cultural hegemony. They managed to fight the ideologies that the Kampani tried to cement. By grouping together, the Khaufpuris reinforced the notion of collectivism above individualism, since individualism is the essence of capitalism.

As for countering the economic hegemony of the Kampani upon Khaufpur, it is a more complex situation. The Khaufpuris were struggling for decades in order to overcome the miserable economic state of their city. The novel begins with poverty overshadowing the people of Khaufpur, and it ends with the city almost at the same state. The economic damage that the Kampani had done was, to an extent unrepaired. One of the aims of "the power of nothing" was to revive and flourish the city of Khaufpur economically. They relied on the lawsuit that they have initiated against the Kampani in order to obtain financial compensations from the American corporate, but justice had failed them. Gaining financial compensations was the explicit goal that "the power of nothing" had vowed for. Unfortunately, the novel ends without achieving this goal. The economic counter-hegemony did not succeed in challenging the economic hegemony set by the Kampani. The legacy of neoliberalism was too great to be challenged by the poor. We did not see any concrete evidence that the city is going to raise by itself financially.

Two main reasons, I believe, had accounted for the failure of countering the economic hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. The first reason was due to the fact that the poor did not have the power enough to bring the administrators of the Kampani to justice. To revive Khaufpur economically, the locals were hoping that they could manage to prosecute the Kampani's officials. Their failure in bringing them to justice had a severe effect on the Khaufpuris. If they would have managed to attain the financial compensation it would definitely reflect positively to the economy of the city. The second reason was due to the fact that since the water and soil were severely contaminated in Khaufpur, people could not self-rely on themselves in providing water and food. The chances that Khaufpur going to be able to produce goods and flourish economically are almost impossible, simply because the chemical poisonings need millions of years to vanish. Thus, the Khaufpuris were put in a difficult situation, they were left poor, their land had been severely contaminated, and they were denied the deserved financial compensation. In other words, they were left poor, and denied any opportunity to overcome their poverty by the Kampani. "The power of nothing" did not manage to overcome the economic difficulty of Khaufpur. It is sad to say that the economic hegemony practiced by the Kampani was too strong for the indigenous people to counter it.

### 3. Conclusion

To conclude, "the power of nothing" was initiated to fight the oppression that the locals had to face from the Kampani. The community of Khaufpur had gathered together to react against the harm caused by neoliberal capitalism. They knew that they were stereotypically portrayed as savages and corrupt. In other words, they tried to fight against the ideologies left over from colonialism. By creating "the power of nothing" they wanted to establish a community beyond the reach of capitalism, they sought to have their own identity, their own voice. Even though, the counter-hegemony, represented through "the power of nothing" could not achieve its explicit goal, which was to obtain financial compensation from the Kampani, it still gained some fundamental advantages. "The power of nothing" managed to bring together the people of Khaufpur, and this itself was a significant step in challenging the capitalist ideologies. This power proved that the poor living in the urban global South have all the means necessary to life peacefully together, away from the cruelty of the capitalist system. The counter hegemony *in Animal's People* succeeded in breaking the cultural hegemony practiced by the American corporate. They realized that the corrupted Western ideologies needed to be challenged. Sinha wanted to urge the poor to, at least, unite with each other to fight the capitalist's hegemony in the region.

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