



GOMBE SAVANNAH

**JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND
COMMUNICATION STUDIES (GOSAJOLLCOS)**



**DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES
AND LINGUISTICS
GOMBE STATE UNIVERSITY**

**Volume 6 Number 1
JUNE, 2025**



Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies (SAJOLLCOS)
Vol. 6 No. 1: June, 2025 — ISSN: 2787-0286 & 2811-2261 (Online & Print)

**SAVANNAH JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND COMMUNICATION
STUDIES (SAJOLLCOS)**

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VOLUME 6, NO. 1, JUNE 2025

ISSN: ONLINE: 2811-2261, PRINT: 2787-0286

**A Publication of Department of Languages and Linguistics
Gombe State University, Gombe State**

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(SAJOLLCOS) Gombe State University, Gombe State. Volume 6, No. 1 June, 2025.



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ISSN: 2787-0286 Print & 2811-2261 Online

Printed in Nigeria @Six-Sweet Printers and Publishers

GSU, Gombe, Gombe State.

Phone No: +2348039511789

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Gombe Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies (GOSAJOLLCOS) is a peer-reviewed journal of the Department of English, Gombe State University. The journal is committed to the development of communication arts through researches in Language, Linguistics, Literature, Theatre Arts, Cultural Studies, Creative Arts, Media and Communication Studies. It has both print and online versions. The Editorial board hereby calls for thoroughly researched papers and articles on the subject areas already mentioned. Submissions of papers are accepted all year round but publication is expected to be done in May/June annually. All manuscripts should be accompanied with the sum of ten thousand (**₦10,000**) naira only. On acceptance of any manuscript, contributors will pay the sum of twenty five thousand (25,000) naira only as publication fee.



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Traumatic Embodiment and Resistance among Persons with Disabilities in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

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Abstract

The paper examines traumatic embodiment and resistance among people with disabilities in Indra Sinha's Animal's People. The novel is set against the backdrop of the Bhopal disaster in India and documents the impact of the disaster on survivors and particularly the repercussions of the gas leak on human health. The protagonist, Animal, is a survivor of the gas leak. He is fragmented and narrates the tragic account of the incident that strips him of his humanity. The study foregrounds characters with disabilities as resilient and as agents of resistance. The study reveals that disability is not a limitation but rather a variation of human identity. Drawing reference from India, it unveils the lived experiences and challenges of differently-abled individuals and ways in which societal norms and ableist assumptions perpetuate trauma. The study employs trauma theory as a critical lens for analysis and reveals that traumatic wounds are often fragmented, unresolved and constantly stimulated to relive repressed emotions. Consequently, storytelling and acts of resistance emerge as vital defense mechanisms for characters with disabilities to defy and reconstruct fragmented identities. The study concludes that disability is not static but a fluid aspect of human identity, and the representation of people with disabilities as agents of resistance help to affirm agency and visibility.

Keywords: disability, trauma, pain, ableism and resistance

Introduction

Disability and trauma are universal and interconnected phenomena in literary narratives. The intersection of these concept serves as a powerful lens through which writers examine the complexities of human suffering, resilience and identity. Despite this

significance, differently-abled individuals are portrayed in degrading terms as beggars, flawed characters or monstrous figures to elicit pity. This portrayal reduces differently-abled characters to subhuman, symbolic figures, asexual, rather than as humans. This is evident in the manner of portrayal of



differently-abled individuals across cultures. From classical to contemporary literary works such as Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, J. M. Barries' *Peter Pan*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Aminata Sow Fall's *Beggars Strike*, Okey Ndibe's *Arrows of Rain*, Wale Okehiran's *Dreams Die at Twilight* and Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*, individuals with special needs are rendered as villains or passive objects of traumatic embodiment to reinforce dehumanizing stereotypes.

Although literature has long engaged with different social and psychological issues, there is minimal evidence of studies that explore the intersection of traumatic embodiment and resistance among people with disabilities. It is imperative to state that while disability can be a source of trauma due to social stigma, systemic exclusion and complexities, it is crucial to note that not every person with disability experiences trauma just as not everyone who experiences trauma has a disability.

Moreover, the exploration of traumatic embodiment and resistance among people with disabilities remains underrepresented in literary discourse. Trauma is an emotional or psychological response to distressing occurrence and sometimes emanates

from the consequences of disability condition. While disability is entrenched in social construction of identity and ableist structures, it is vital to distinguish between trauma as a social construct and the lived experience of disability.

Trauma discourse in literature is concerned with how literature interprets trauma as a psychological construct, and how trauma is repeated in individuals and transferred in repetitive manner or recall. Cathy Caruth in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* submits that "trauma involves a repeated suffering from a *painful experience*...(Italics mine, 53). This implies that traumatic experiences remain in the unconscious memory, and is constantly stimulated leading to trauma re-enactment.

In addition, Cathy Caruth posits that what returns to haunt the victims in narratives of trauma "is not only the reality of the event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (6). This implies that trauma is not fully known at the moment of its occurrence but persists in the long run to manifest in diverse ways as psychological distress. Thus, the re-enactment of trauma can be seen in the way in which an unresolved event resurfaces in the lives of survivors which often reflect through fragmented memories and intrusive thought.

Similarly, Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, sees trauma as "compulsion" to repeat painful experiences through memory recall



(Freud 705). He argues that trauma manifests as a repetitive compulsion, an involuntary reliving of the event often embedded in both memory and body. Freud proposes that traumatic experiences can cause a rupture in functioning of the mind. This submission is crucial to the understanding of Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, where the protagonist Animal's body functions as both a literal and metaphorical symbol for traumatic embodiment.

Colin Davis and Hanna Heretoga in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* state that the discourse of trauma has become so widespread in our society that it creates common ground for making sense of both personal and collective experiences...(Davis and Heretoga 4). Trauma is no longer seen as a rare occurrence but as something that is present in our lives and society. Trauma can surface in an unexpected way, often through indirect symptoms, silences and repetitive patterns of thought and affect. It is not always explicitly remembered but its effects can be seen in the ways individuals and communities navigate their lives. To this end, this paper examines traumatic embodiment and resistance among people with disabilities in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*.

Synopsis of Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

The novel is set against the backdrop of the Bhopal disaster in India and depicts the repercussions of the gas leak on humans and ecology. *Animal's People* tells the story of the

protagonist, Animal, a 19-year old boy, whose spine is twisted due to the gas leak and as a result walks on all fours, like a dog. The novel creates characters who are grossly disabled in a society that cares very little about their condition despite having knowledge of the historical event that occasioned their disabilities. Disability is a central idea of the novel creating so much traumatic embodiment in the characters' lives but the conditioning of disability and trauma seems to be heightened in the lives of certain characters who are disadvantaged by caste system, are more exposed to suffer abuse and neglect just like the protagonist.

Embodied Trauma and Resistance in Sinha's *Animal's People*

The protagonist, Animal, is an embodiment of trauma. His body is marked as a limitation. Animal's hunchback is not just a physical condition but serves as a symbolic embodiment of emotional burdens and a referent to his 'otherness'. He is not seen as fully human and so is placed at the margin due to his condition. In the novel, his body becomes the message and a testament of pain and suffering which makes him live in denial. He was born few days to the gas leak explosion that claimed the lives of his parents and relatives. He has lost touch with his immediate family and history as a result of the disaster. He cannot trace his origin or his religion which marks the beginning of his displacement. Animal has a disability that affects his legs and spine, causing his body to be altered and



crooked, which makes him walk on all fours like a dog. He says: 'when the smelting in my spine stopped the bones had twisted like a hairpin' (Sinha 23). This marks the beginning of his trauma and the same time a terrifying disabling experience which makes him feel disgust towards humans. It further reveals Animal's personal tragedies of pain, abandonment, loss of individuality and humanity, consequently resulting in his unfulfilled dreams.

Animal's People opens up on a note of nostalgia to recount the tragic metamorphosis of Animal from a sweet little kid into an animal-like being; as a result of the toxic chemical plant explosion that leaves many residents of Khaufpur disabled, fragmented and alienated from the mainstream society. The chemical plant explosion is a metaphoric representation of the destructive impact of industrialization on the natural world, its species and humans in general. Animal's body and scar become a physical and emotional marker of his reoccurring trauma.

The novel reflects how Animal resolves his childhood trauma and formulates new identity as resilient, dynamic and as an agent of resistance within the binaries and complexities of exclusion and marginalization. Animal recalls his traumatic experience through memory and the course of remembering the actual event is disheartening. He says:

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...Most people round here don't know their age, I do, because I was born a few days before that night, which no one in Khaufpur wants to remember, but nobody can forget (Sinha 9).

The protagonist suffers from a severe physical deformity caused by a man-made disaster. The aftermath of the disaster alters his physique and strips him of his sense of humanity stating that he 'used to be human once'. He is portrayed as an unstable and fragmented character. This is a major characteristic of trauma, which involves a repetitive suffering from a painful experience. He rejects rigid classification of identity and detaches himself from the site of the toxic gas leak. In the novel, the traumatic experiences of the protagonist are buried in the unconscious and the compulsion to repeat repressed emotions is constantly stimulated. Hence, the formation of identity is difficult for victims because trauma remains. Thus, victims are constantly reminded of their traumas.

I was six when the pains began, plus the burning in my neck and across the shoulders. Nothing else do I remember from that time; my first memory is that fire. It was so bad I could not lift my head. I just couldn't lift it. The pain gripped my neck and forced it down. I had to



stare at my feet while a devil rode my back and chafed me with red hot tongs. The burning in the muscles became a fever, when the fevers got bad, I was taken to the hospital, they gave me an injection. It did no good. After that my back began to twist. Nothing could be done. It was agony, I couldn't straighten up, I was pressed forward by the pain (Sinha 23).

The above quote presents a vivid imagery of the psychological and emotional wound inflicted on the psyche of the protagonist due to the explosion. His first memory recall is that of fire which resonates his childhood trauma and repressed pain from the unconscious to the conscious. Similarly, Caruth observes that victims of trauma lack coherent memory and relive fragments through dreams, symbols and language (4). Animal's fragmented self and non-linear narrative voice reflect the fragmented process of trauma. Animal suffers from physical and mental disability. He is hunched and crawls on all fours with hands twisted and experiences both physical and emotional pain. His physique becomes a constant reminder of his personal tragedy and trauma that remains. He experiences emotional trauma and constantly harassed and mocked by his peers. He endures constant humiliation and emotional abuse as a result of his deformity. He says:

One day we were lying on the grass in hot sun, drying off. A

girl about my own age, she pushed me and left the prints of her muddy fingertips on my body. The mud dried pale on my skin. She said, "Like a leopard!" So, then they all dipped their fingers in the clay and covered me with leopard marks. "Animal, jungli Animal!" The name, like the mud, stuck (Sinha 24).

Memory is predominately used to dissolve traumatic experiences harboured in the mind that haunts the victim. The protagonist's personal trauma is recollected through shattering experience of terror, grief, pain and shock inflicted by the catastrophic event in his past and reality which is his first memory of fire and his encounter with Ma Franci. Animal's memories of the toxic gas leak disaster are fragmented reflecting the traumatic nature of the event.

Caruth sees trauma as a blow to the psyche which has the ability to break into one's defences with much brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively (187). As a result of this, Animal struggles with depression, anxiety, mood swings, hallucination and self-hatred. He says:

How many times did I tell Ma Franci, "I no longer want to be human," never did it sink in to that fucked-up brain of hers, or maybe she just didn't believe me, which you can understand, seeing it used to be when I caught sight of myself—mirrors I avoid but



there's such a thing as casting a shadow—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 (Sinha 9).

Animal's childhood trauma affects his psyche and identity leading to self-hatred. The impact of the toxic gas leak shapes him into a bitter and furious person. The explosion affects his psyche and leaves a lot of psychological burden manifesting through feelings of anger, bitterness, disgust against humans. He is constantly haunted by the memories of the traumatic occurrence through dreams, nightmares and intrusive memories. He rejects rigid classification by stating that he no longer wants to be human. In addition, the narrative portrays that trauma exists not only in the memory but in the body, and the act of telling fragmented story is crucial for survival. This agrees with Lori Laub's submission on the importance of storytelling for traumatic victims.

Animal sees himself as damaged as a result of his dual existence which leads to identity crisis, diffusion and dissociation from humanity. He constantly struggles to reconcile his human and animal-like personality. Hence, by choosing to adapt animalistic persona, he develops hatred for anything that walks on two legs.

The list of my jealousies was endless; Ma Franci, the other nuns at the orphanage,

Chukku the night watchman, women carrying pots on their heads, waiters balancing four plates per arm. I hated watching my friends play hopscotch. I detested the sight of dancers, performing bears brought by those dirty buggers from Agra, stilt-walkers, the one-leg-and-crutch of Abdul Saliq the Pir Gate beggar. I envied herons, goalposts, ladders leaning on walls. I eyed Farooq's bicycle and wondered if it too deserved a place in my list of hates (Sinha 9).

In addition, Animal takes us through his journey from abjection to self-discovery and acceptance. Animal's birth marks the genesis of his trauma which comes with a lot of shattering moments of pain and disillusion. Animal is caught in between two worlds; that of human and animal. He says: "My name is Animal, I say. I'm not a fucking human being..." (Sinha 32).

Animal's memory plays a crucial role in uncovering his trauma. His experiences of terror and his recollection of the events are marked by vivid disturbing images resulting in his emotional detachment from the initial event that caused his disability. As a child, the gas leak separates him from his family and haunted by the horrific event of that night. He says that 'on that night I was found lying in a doorway, a child of a few days, wrapped in a shawl. Whose was I? Nobody knew. Mother, father, neighbours, all must have



died for no living soul came to claim me...' (Sinha 22).

...I was not expected to live. When I did, they circumcised me, if I was Muslim, it was necessary, if I was Hindu what difference did it make? After this I was given to the nuns. I grew up in the orphanage. I do not know what religion I should be...I don't fucking forgive. I'm not a Muslim, I'm not a Hindu, I'm not an Isayi, I'm an animal, I'd be lying if I said religion meant a damn thing to me. Where was god the cunt when we needed him? (Sinha 23).

Animal's detachment and displacement are both emotional and psychological. The toxic leak that occurs on 'that night' had great impact on the protagonist's life, causing him to lose not only his physique but also his sense of identity and self. He lost his sense of purpose, his connection to his community as a result of that, he sees life from an existentialist perspective. He feels displaced within his own culture and community and builds walls of emotional detachment to protect him from harm. Animal dissociates from his childhood traumatic experiences which shatter his sense of self and belonging. His physique contributes to his sense of otherness. He sees the world and God as cruel and feels trapped in his circumstance. His experiences point to his detachment from history, religion and humanity which is

meant to define his personality. He questions the existence of God just like Nietzsche and sees life from an existentialist perspective. Animal struggles with anxiety, constant tension and depression. Animal's first memory is that of fire which he recalls from the explosion; at one point or the other, he tries to relive his repressed emotions and pains through the use of alcohol and drug. Other times, he is portrayed as forgetful, in denial and hears voices. He describes this voice as madness which results in the splitting of time. Animal's childhood trauma begins on that night of the explosion:

Soon after this I have a roundabout of madness. What happens when I go mad, the voices in my head start yelling, new voices come gupping all kinds of weird and fantastic things, words that make no sense... (Sinha 65).

Subsequently, the protagonist's mental health is affected resulting in emotional trauma. He struggles to recall events and hears voices with a distorted reality. Animal's mental condition is marked by forgetfulness, hallucination just like a neurotic patient. This portrayal reflects the ways in which trauma can fracture identity and blur the distinction between actual event and perceived experiences.

They started when I was small, after I had the fever that bent my back, at that time most were friendly, told me stories, gave advice that



saved me from quarrels etc., but they can also be nasty. They'll tell me to do bad things, or else they will say some evil thing is about to happen which often it will, during these bouts I'll be light, full of glee, I might do crazy things, I'll shout out whatever the voices say. In this particular madness, the voices are yelling and arguing, they make so much noise I cannot hear what's going on around me (Sinha 65).

Furthermore, Animal is portrayed as a fragmented character. He suffers from physical, mental and psychological disorders acting out through hallucination and hearing of strange voices which cause a twist in his psyche. He is seen "acting out" and "working through trauma". He acts out through repetitive compulsion of trauma relived through flashbacks and nightmares. Other times, he is seen working through trauma by dissociation. Animal constantly denies his existence as human and proclaims his animality saying "My name is Animal," I say. "I'm not a fucking human being, I've no wish to be one." This was my mantra, what I told everyone..." (Sinha 32). The protagonist's name "Animal" is disruptive; it evokes pity on the surface level, yet also unsettles normative expectations. Animal navigates his trauma not merely through forgetting or silence, but by asserting agency and resisting

stereotypes that renders him as a pitiable figure.

Animal's oral narration and testimony of the event through the tape recording is fragmented and filled with vivid images revealing the deep psychological wounds caused by his childhood trauma. The emotional and psychological detachment is reflected in his voice. The tape recording accounts for all the inhumane treatment melted on the protagonist, exposes his thoughts and repressed emotions, sufferings and the struggle of the disabled residents towards justice. The night creates so much trauma for the people that haunt them physically and psychologically making it impossible to forget, thereby making remembering difficult. He constantly relives his past in the present through dreams, intrusive memory and flashbacks.

Remembering comes with a lot of difficulties. For Animal, the process of revisiting the past is his first step towards healing and recovery. The act of remembering is an unconscious state that enables victims of trauma to move on which leads to dissociation. Hence, it is a way of working through trauma. The protagonist reveals the inner workings of his mind ranging from different levels of deep thought from preconscious, conscious to his unconscious state. Thus, it is within the state of the unconscious that memory is revisited and restored. Animal says:

My story has to start with that night. I don't remember anything about it, though I



was there, nevertheless it's where my story has to start. When something big like that night happens, time divides into before and after, the before time breaks up into dreams, the dreams dissolve to darkness. That's how it is here. All the world knows the name of Khaufpur, but no one knows how things were before that night. As for me, I don't remember any time before my back went bad (Sinha 22).

Animal's traumatic embodiment forms an integral part of his identity, relationship and worldview. He also relives trauma through narrative voice during the tape recording. He is seen struggling to articulate his experience and that of disabled bodies in Khaufpur. His narrative voice reflects deep distress and trauma he carries within. Animal's decision to remain silent and dissociate from the recall of the event is a defense mechanism. In the novel, Animal and the other 'deformed' individuals develop the culture of silence and dissociate from the terrific memories of the explosion. For twenty years, Animal detached himself from the memories of the catastrophic event buried in his subconscious mind. In recollecting these fragmented memories, he is seen struggling to speak which reflects his shattered psyche. He tries to unlock his repressed memory by confronting his past. This struggle represents the tension between remembering and

forgetting as he confronts his traumatic experiences. He says:

My story you wanted; said you'd put it in a book. I did not want to talk about it. I said is it a big deal, to have my story in a book? I said, I am a small person not even human, what difference will my story make? (Sinha 11)

My story has to start with that night. I don't remember anything about it, though I was there, nevertheless it's where my story has to start... (Sinha 22).

The act of storytelling is an important pathway towards healing from trauma. It enables survivors to process their emotions and take control of their narrative. Through the acts of storytelling, Animal reclaims his identity and resist systemic biases against his condition. Dori Laub posits the importance of storytelling in the process of healing from trauma, he holds that 'the survivor did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive' (96). Yet some victims find it impossible to retell because remembering comes with its difficulty and repetitive pain. Also, in the process of the protagonist Animal revisiting his traumatic memories through the act of narration and flashback, he inflicts psychological pain and exposes all repressed emotions.

What's changed? Everything. As to what happened, well, there are many versions going round, every



newspaper had a different story, not one knows the truth, but I'm not talking to this tape for truth or fifty rupees or Chunaram's fucking kebabs (Sinha 19).

Moreover, Animal and his fellow deformed residents are marginalized and alienated from the society. India has a caste system, the caste a person belongs to determines his fate. Individuals with disabilities are grouped as Dalit, the untouchables and as low-class beggars. As a result of this traumatic practice, differently-abled residents in the novel are ostracized and conformed to a restricted environment near the Kampani factory where it begins.

The orphanage was run by les religieuses françaises, it was in Jyotinagar near the factory and on that night, it was badly hit. Many of the children died, nuns too. Those who survived were sick. Afterwards Indian nuns came and the French nuns one by one were taken back home. Ma refused to leave. She said Khaufpur had felt the fist of god, the Apokalis had begun, her place was with its suffering people. So, she stayed and in a loud voice prayed day and night (Sinha 46).

Ma Franci is one of the survivors of the gas leak explosion. She is deeply traumatized, having witnessed the horrific death of numerous children and nuns at the orphanage. The toxic inhalation caused severe

neurological damage, resulting to aphasia, which impairs her ability to communicate. As a result of the shock, she develops a severe mental disorder, post-traumatic psychosis, a condition marked by hallucination, delusion and a with a distorted sense of reality. She is often haunted by the recall of that night through flashbacks and dreams. Her condition serves as a metaphor for trauma inscribed onto her body and psyche.

...On that night when poisons came from the Kampani's factory, those who weren't then and there killed found themselves in a bad way with fainting, fits, pain, bloods coughed up, can't see, hardly can breathe etc. This thighs-of-fate was a medicine which was helping people get relief. News quickly spread, from all over the city people came to wait in line for injections, but suddenly the treatment was stopped (Sinha 127).

The quote above addresses the impact of ecological grief and trauma, particularly the repercussions of the gas leak on human health resulting in widespread disabilities and long-term psychological trauma. The exposure to toxic gases from the factory results in intergenerational health issues, ranging from respiratory disorders and blindness in the lives of affected characters in the novel. This leads to re-enactment of original trauma. Despite these conditions, government neither pays attention nor compensates the



affected victims. They are left to suffer and when a non-governmental organization offers assistance, the doctors are attacked.

Some bigwig let slip that the Kampani bosses from Amrika had rung up their best friend the Chief Minister and told him to stop the thighs-of-fate. There was a huge row. Some doctors moved into a shack near the factory and began giving the injections. The police came, wrecked the shack, beat up the doctors (Sinha 127).

Moreover, the novel portrays differently-abled individuals and, by extension, the society as disabled by its own prejudice and exclusion resulting from different social challenges. Hence, disability and trauma are not a new trend; characters with special needs in the novel are portrayed as consequence and product of a disabling society. Animal and other characters with disabilities live in slums, ghettos and on the street of Khaufpur. They are seen as abject, dregs and parodies of the society that must be cleansed just like in Aminata Sow Fall's novel *The Beggars' Strike*.

In addition, the toxic waste affects a lot of residents in Khaufpur and leaves many with different forms of disabilities and reoccurring trauma. Trauma within the context of the novel ranges from personal to collective. Most of the affected characters try to repressed their emotions and dissociate from the actual event. The exposure to toxic

gases creates intergenerational health effects, including birth defects, respiratory disorders and neurological damage in the lives of affected characters in the novel. The chemical leak affected a lot of pregnant women, a fetus is affected resulting in congenital anomaly. For Somraj, a famous singer in Khaufpur loses his magical tune and wit on 'that night', Ma Franci also suffers from aphasia, a neurological disorder caused by toxic air inhalation which affects her ability to process and communicate due to brain damage. Her memory is wiped off of Hindi and English on the night of the explosion. She becomes mentally unstable, forgetful, hallucinates and suffers from a distorted reality and psyche. Other traumatic characters include; Aliyah's mom, Aftaab, Sahara, Rafi and Nefisa.

Also, sexual deprivation is another form of traumatic experience for individuals with disabilities. Ifeyinwa Okolo observes that "sex rarely occurs in the same sentence with deformity, probably because a lot of people tend to define individuals with disabilities using their challenges...yet, people with disabilities, just like everybody else, are wired sexually" (n.p). Individuals with disabilities are socially perceived as asexual due to the misconception that they are sexually inactive, and therefore virgins.

Yes, it's the first time, except in sleep. Often, I'd dream of making love with I won't say her name. I never told anyone because if people got



to know, what would they do, laugh at me, pity me? Animal, don't have those kinds of hopes...Animal mating with human female, it's unnatural, but I've no choice but to be unnatural (Sinha 90).

The social attitude of excluding differently-abled individuals as sexual beings reinforce trauma for the marginalized group. Sexuality for differently-abled individuals of all genders are marked by negative stereotypes and misrepresentations which lead to their erasure. Similarly, this attitude is reflected in Petina Gappah's novel *The Book of Memory*.

The analysis reveals that trauma arises from institutionalized complexities rather than psychological imprint on the individual. Rather than portraying disability as a symbol of deficit or abjection, the paper portrays individuals with special needs as active agents of resistance and transformation. Animal's refusal to conform to normative role serves as a resistive strategy used to subvert ableist structures. The study reveals traumatic embodiment not as a marker of weakness, but as a tool for resistance, redefinition and the assertion of agency.

Conclusion

The paper presents traumatic embodiment and resistance among people with disabilities as a counter-discourse. Trauma is portrayed not just as a psychological experience, but as an embodied and collective condition entrenched in systemic injustice and social abuse. The analysis reveals that trauma arises

from institutionalized complexities rather than psychological imprint on the individual. Rather than portraying disability as a symbol of deficit, Sinha rewrites it by portraying individuals with disabilities as active agents of resistance. The findings demonstrate that storytelling, dissociation, silence, forgetfulness and acts of defiance are not passive responses but deliberate defense mechanisms through which people with disabilities pursue healing and reclaim agency. The study thus theorizes traumatic embodiment not as a marker of weakness, but as a space for resistance.

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