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**Critical disaster  
fiction: Seveso and  
Bhopal in *Una lepre con  
la faccia di bambina* by  
Laura Conti and  
*Animal's People* by  
Indra Sinha**

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*To all unacknowledged victims of disasters*

## **Abstract**

When a disaster occurs, it can be described in many different manners. Through the lens of ecocriticism, this thesis examines two novels about two industrial disasters: the Seveso disaster (1976, Italy) and the Bhopal disaster (1984, Madhya Pradesh, India). The novels are *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* (1978) by Laura Conti and *Animal's People* (2007) by Indra Sinha. While the latter is a globally appreciated best-seller that was translated worldwide, and the subject of numerous critical dissertations, the former is a less known work originally in Italian which received less scholarly attention. With this thesis, I intend to value both novels as examples of critical disaster fiction. The aim of this dissertation is to highlight how both these novels are particularly effective in providing a comprehensive understanding of the disaster. According to the core tenets of the discipline of critical disaster studies, a disaster should not be considered as a singular event, but a process which unfolds over time. Additionally, both novels object of analysis invite the readers to engage in the comprehension of the experience of disaster in all its complexity, including the social repercussions, impacts on the environment, and animal representation.

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## Introduction

As events, disasters are difficult to define. Providing an appropriate definition of the concept of disaster is not simple because disasters themselves are complex, multidimensional, all-encompassing occurrences (Oliver-Smith, 1993, p. 23). The complexity of disasters lies in the fact that they do not necessarily happen after the encounter of a human population and a potentially destructive agent (Oliver-Smith, Hoffmann, 1993, p. 3). Andy Horowitz and Jacob A.C. Remes go as far as to say that “there is no such thing as a disaster” (2021, p. 1), because these events are socially constructed “as both events and ideas” (2021, p. 3).

Disasters affect communities – made up of human and non-humans – when they are characterized by vulnerability. This means that a community can be hit more profoundly in the so-called aftermath of the disaster than by the physical force or destructive agent which occurred in that place (Oliver-Smith, Hoffmann, 1993, p. 3). Vulnerability is a pattern which is built over time and it is linked with the location, infrastructure, sociopolitical organization, production and distribution systems, and ideology of a society (Oliver-Smith, Hoffmann, 1993, p. 3). Additionally, to fully understand the extent of the disaster it is necessary to consider it not as a punctual occurrence, but as an event that takes place in the long run.

Critical disaster studies aim to offer a new scholarly approach to disaster, which considers vulnerability and risk as the core tenets of this discipline. Moreover, this field tries to connect disasters to cultural and literary studies (Bayoumy, 2024, pp. 2-3). Disasters are shaped by personal and public imaginations, and a critical perspective could highlight the fact that they are not isolated events, but processes which are influenced by politics and ideologies (Horowitz, Remes, 2021, pp. 3- 5).

In an attempt to tackle such complexity, this thesis, through the lens of ecocriticism, examines two novels about two industrial disasters which occurred in different periods and locations: the Seveso disaster (1976, Italy) and the Bhopal disaster (1984, Madhya Pradesh, India). These were both disasters which happened because of an accident in a factory, which led to the spread of a toxic substance (dioxin, in the case of Seveso, methyl isocyanate, among others, in Bhopal). The books are *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* (1978, written originally in Italian), by Laura Conti, and *Animal's People* (2007) by Indra Sinha. Both novels encourage the readers to develop a critical perspective on the disasters of Seveso and Bhopal. They underline different aspects of these disasters, such as their unfolding over time, the social vulnerability of the community and the impact on the ecosystem. While *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* is more

focused on the social consequences on the Seveso disaster, narrated from the point of view of a twelve-year-old boy, *Animal's People* addresses the long-term impact of the gas leak on the fictional community of Khaufpur narrated by a boy who has a significant disability which forces him to walk using both his hands and feet.

In this thesis my attempt is to describe why these two novels are particularly effective in the depiction of a critical perspective of disasters. These books are an example of how narrative disaster fiction can provide new insights in the interpretation of the impact of calamitous events and raise the readers' consciousness about issues of environmental justice. It emerges that the disaster of Seveso is not only about a cloud of dioxin which polluted the land, killed animals and made people sick with chloracne, but it is also a story of displacement, social differences and misinformation. Similarly, *Animal's People*, which is set around twenty years after the accident, reminds its readers that the Bhopal accident is not limited to the 7,000 humans who died in the first days, but it extended to the estimated 15,000 in the following years and the 100,000 people who became severely disabled because of the toxicity of the environment (Amnesty International, 2004, p. 12).

The choice of these two novels as examples of a particular effective way to depict disasters is partially connected with my own positionality. I originally come from Meda, the town where the factory which hit mostly the community of Seveso was located. I grew up playing in the park named "Bosco delle Querce", which was built above the impermeabilized tanks where the dioxin-contaminated material was stored. I have always known about the Seveso disaster, but it was during this master's degree in Environmental Humanities that I began to inform myself properly about what happened in those years and the consequences of the mismanagement of the disaster. I discovered Conti's work and I was fascinated by her ability to convey educational messages through a clean, ironic and straightforward style. I therefore started reading other novels depicting environmental disasters and found *Animal's People*, an internationally recognised best-seller, to be an excellent example of disaster storytelling that has some parallel elements to those in *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina*. Those elements are the ones which led to the chapters' partition.

The thesis is structured in four chapters which focus on different topics regarding both novels. The first chapter begins with an introduction on critical disaster studies, with insights taken from anthropology of disasters and disaster narratives. Later, it retraces the disasters of Seveso and Bhopal from a historical perspective. A summary of the plot of the novels follows the

historical reconstruction of the events. The chapter ends with a presentation of the authors and their possible characterisation as “writer-activists”, an expression coined by Rob Nixon (2013, p. 23) to define writers who focus on issues of environmental justice.

The second chapter introduces the concept of “slow violence”, elaborated by Nixon (2013, p. 2), which regards a type of violence which unfolds over time, without any spectacular characteristic. The first section is again an historical overview of the disaster which, however, focuses on the time *before* the accidents of Seveso and Bhopal, tracing how the foreign firms where the leak happened were already having a major impact in the pollution of the environment starting from decades before. The second part of the chapter introduces the concept of social vulnerability through examples taken from the books.

The third chapter is divided into two parts. Firstly, it discusses the role of incommunicability in both novels. In the case of Conti’s book, the object of focus is the lack of communication between different social categories. A particular focus is the one on the difficulty of the protagonist, who is almost a teenager, in connecting with the adult world. This incommunicability is intensified by the experience of displacement. In the case of Sinha’s book, the incommunicability is analysed as a matter of language: the novel is written in English, but it is enriched with many examples of code-switching, which entails the use of different languages in the same text (Gardner-Chloros, 2015, p. 186). The use of multilingualism is examined in relation to the different characters. Secondly, it explores the concept of invisibility as a device to explore the consequences of the disaster in its aftermath. In Seveso the invisibility of dioxin is connected to the issue of abortion, a scandalous and forbidden topic in Brianza at the time. The last part of the chapter explores the invisibility of people’s suffering in Bhopal/Khaufpur, as long as the long heartfelt need for justice of the inhabitants of the polluted city.

The thesis culminates with a chapter which focuses on the issue of animality. This category is crucial for both novels, as shown already by the fact that both titles contain a reference to animals. Moreover, it is stated that the disaster had an impact not only on humans, but also on non-humans. At first, the chapter analyses the representation of animals in Conti’s novel. The first focus is on the role of animals’ death in portraying the magnitude of the disaster. Later, the attention is directed to the relationship between humans and non-humans and the anthropocentric perspective of the main characters. The second part of the chapter is dedicated to *Animal’s People*, and it explores the factors which rendered the protagonist to consider

himself an animal. Among them, there are the factory, which provoked his twisted spine, the politics which allowed the factory to be built on that site and the people who labelled him as “Janvaar” (animal). Moreover, the boy carried out a process of self-identification with an animal which is illustrated in detail.

Finally, in the conclusions, I highlight the findings and the reasons why these novels are still topical in 2024.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations, unless otherwise specified, are taken from the two novels and only the page number is specified in round brackets. The editions used are the following:

- Conti, L. 1978. *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina*. Collana I David. Roma: Editori Riuniti.  
- Sinha, I. 2007. *Animal's people*. UK: Simon & Schuster.

In the case of Conti's book, translations from Italian are made by me.





## **Chapter 1. Environmental disasters in literary fiction**

### **1.1 Narrating the disaster**

A disaster is an event which entails a temporal and a spatial dimension that are often broader than the initial perception of the “time” and “place” of the disaster itself. This is because a disaster cannot be limited to a singular tragic event which had an impact on a specific community, but should, on the other hand, be examined as a process which unfolds over time. The process of the disaster has deep roots in the past history, and major consequences in the aftermath (Ligi, 2009, pp. 31-35).

In this chapter, the first part is dedicated to an introduction to the narration of disasters in literary fiction and the consequences it might entail for critical disaster studies. Then, the chapter explores the historical roots of the industrial disasters of Seveso (1976) and Bhopal (1984), in a chronological order. Finally, it presents two novels based on these tragical historical events, including the plot. It ends with the biography of the authors, Laura Conti and Indra Sinha, as well as their interdisciplinary backgrounds and personal involvement in the disaster.

Firstly, the choice of analysing novels about disasters is due to the importance of narration as a way to increase awareness and knowledge about a disaster and its complexity. As Rigby (2015) argues, the narrative of the catastrophe is crucial to the meaning people give to it in the aftermath. In literary fiction, the role of the narration of the disaster is extremely relevant, because it shapes the imaginary scenario of the disaster in the minds of readers who might have never heard about it before. Certainly, the impact varies according to the number and the other characteristics of the readers, in addition to the popularity of the book. This medium can be chosen by the author for different purposes, such as educational and informative purposes. They can also raise issues of justice and critique towards institutions and governments, as it happens – with many differences – both in Conti and Sinha’s books.

Both novels can be read through the lens of ecocriticism. The discipline of ecocriticism was born in the United States within the end of the ‘80s and the beginning of the ‘90s, even if the idea of literary criticism from an ecological perspective had already emerged earlier (Iovino, 2006, p. 13). According to Cheryll Glotfelty, simply put ecocriticism is “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (1996, p. xviii). Its subjects are “the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xix). Moreover, ecocriticism can also entail cultural activism, because the authors often seek to urge change and greater awareness of ecological issues. In

the end, ecocriticism is moved by a problematisation of reality (Iovino, 2006, pp. 14-16). Greg Garrard, talking about Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which he defines one of the founding texts of modern environmentalism, argues that the great achievement of the book lied in its capacity to turn a scientific problem in ecology into a "widely perceived ecological problem that was then contested politically, legally and in the media and popular culture" (Garrard, 2011, p. 6). In the same way, disaster narratives can question the typical way of perceiving the disaster and spread new perspectives to a broader audience. This is what happens in the novels of Conti and Sinha, which was my rational in selecting these works as object of ecocritical analysis.

As Jacob A. C. Remes and Andy Horowitz (2021, p. 1) argue, a disaster "represents an act of interpretation", which can vary widely according to the context. Remes and Horowitz are representatives of the research stream of critical disaster studies, which emerged as a response to an earlier tradition of disaster studies. The aim of critical disaster studies is to criticize the common concept of disaster as an objective given, which is well defined in space and time (Remes, Horowitz, 2021, p. 2). Disasters are more complex, because they are "grounded in a larger social, political, historical, and spatial context" (Button, Schuller, 2016, p. 1). This context reflects the roots of the historical processes, which are entwined with the economic and political ones, especially in the global economy. Particularly in the discipline of anthropology, a critical approach to disaster studies aims to problematize traditional axiomatic concepts and question disaster narratives, such as the one of disasters as an exceptional event (Button, Schuller, 2016, p. 2). It is possible to distinguish between hazards, meaning the physical agent, and disaster, indicating the process in which the aforementioned agent occurs, which must be taken together with the physical, social and economic factors which define the community (García-Acosta, 2002, p. 57). Not all hazards evolve into disasters, but this can happen when the circumstances have been shaped by vulnerability. The latter is a pattern which has been historically produced through global processes of injustice. As Button and Schuller explain: "The current geopolitical and economic world order, often characterized by the terms 'globalization' or 'neoliberalism,' or some connection of the two such as 'neoliberal globalization,' has produced both wealth and inequality at an unprecedented scale" (Button & Schuller, 2016, pp. 5-6).

In this scenario, disaster narratives can play a crucial role regarding the depiction of vulnerability. Not all communities experience a disaster in the same way or even the same degree. Moreover, disasters are particularly complex to understand, because they are made up

of cultural perceptions, which shape the reaction of the community (Oliver-Smith, Hoffmann, 2002, p. 13). Disasters are made in public imaginations which entail political issues which take place over time; consequently, the common perspective of disasters as unexpected and sudden events is misleading (Remes, Horowitz, 2021, pp. 4-5).

It is noteworthy that the goal of critical disasters perspective is to understand the processes which creates the disasters “as ideas, cause them as material facts, and define them as human experiences” (Remes, Horowitz, 2021, p. 5). Therefore, it aims to be interdisciplinary, because disasters often “present productive occasions for scholars across the humanities and social sciences to think together” (Remes, Horowitz, 2021, p. 6). On one hand, disasters in the narrative field can reiterate traditional narratives. A narrative strategy typical for disaster narratives studied in the field of ecocriticism is the apocalyptic scenario, which has deep cultural roots in the Western world (Garrard, 2011, pp. 85-86). Apocalyptic narratives tend to display spectacular, violent and grotesque images which empathize the moral dualism between friend and enemy (Garrard, 2011, p. 86). The adoption of apocalyptic rhetoric in the environmental and ecological discourse is not a novelty: Buell has argued that apocalypse is “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (1995, p. 285). On the other hand, there are novels which promote a critical disaster perspective, enlightening issues such as the fact that disasters are socially constructed, deeply political, and are not isolated events (Remes, Horowitz, 2021, p. 5). Both the novels that are object of analysis for this thesis, which narrate two truly happened industrial disasters, attempt to provide a new, broader, challenging perspective on disaster, which situates it in a well-defined historical context and pays close attention to the social factors that contributed to the disaster themselves.

The novels presented in this dissertation are *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* (1976), by Laura Conti, and *Animal's People* (2007), by Indra Sinha. They narrate two disasters occurred between the 1970s and 1980s in different places of the world: the Seveso disaster (July 1976), in Italy, and the Bhopal disaster (December 1984), in India. Both of them involve the release of a toxic chemical by a plant (in Seveso, dioxin, in Bhopal, methyl isocyanate), which caused immediate deaths of humans (in the case of Bhopal) and many long-term health issues, in addition to the impact of the chemical pollution on the local ecosystem and non-humans' lives (Lucchini et al., 2017). These disasters played a crucial role in shaping modern environmental regulations and raising public awareness about environmental protection.

It is also important to mention that both Seveso and Bhopal are industrial disasters, defined as the “release or spill of a hazardous material (hazmat) from an industrial source that results in an abrupt and serious disruption of the functioning of a society, causing widespread human, material, or environmental losses that exceed the ability of the affected society to cope using only its own resources.” (Keim, 2011, p. 265). Mark E. Keim also points out that industrial disasters can have different characteristics, and environmental contamination from toxic residues should not be considered less dramatic than a major explosion. In particular, Keim specifies that industrial chemical disasters, which involved the release of a toxic chemical, are “unique among environmental disasters” because of their potential long-term effects (Keim, 2011, p. 266). Moreover, Pier-Alberto Bertazzi identifies Seveso and Bhopal, along with Chernobyl, as “overt disasters”, a type of industrial disasters which leaves “no ambiguity about their sources and their potential or actual harm” (1989, p. 86).

In this thesis, I interpreted the works of Conti and Sinha as examples of critical disaster fiction. I use this concept to describe the examples of disaster fiction which lend themselves to be analysed through the perspective of critical disaster studies. According to Steve Asselin, disaster fiction is a literary genre which has its roots in the Long Nineteenth Century (from the French Revolution in 1789 to the beginning of the First World War in 1914), born from the fascination for the “mechanistic processes of Nature, or the ill-advised human interventions into Nature” (Asselin, 2017, p. XI) through the secularization of apocalyptic fiction. To distinguish the texts I analyse from this earlier and broader category, I use the term “critical disaster fiction” to identify the narratives of disasters, including both books and movies, which narrate disaster fiction proposing a critical approach, which embodies the political and epistemological assumptions of critical disaster studies, such as the fact that disasters are interpretive fictions, they are political, and they take place over time (Remes, Horowitz, pp. 2-6). Hence, novels which are part of critical disaster fiction question the power structures which contribute to increase risk and constitute the roots causes of vulnerability.

Firstly, critical disaster fiction opposes to the depiction of catastrophe and post-catastrophe scenarios through a Western gaze, which emphasizes individual struggles and overlooks global structural dynamics of power and wealth. This is the most common kind of disaster fiction in popular culture, and the most known example of this narration is the movie *The day after tomorrow* (2004, directed by Roland Emmerich), which depicts a rapid escalation of climate change leading to extreme weather events towards a new ice age. The sensational narrative of the movie contributed to raise public awareness about climate change, because of the power of

the film features and iconic representations such as the frozen waves which hit the city of New York, but it also reinforced the motif of catastrophe as a major disruptive event happening in a short period of time (Bulfin, 2017, p. 143). Another example of this Western-centred disaster fiction is the movie *The impossible* (2012, directed by Juan Antonio García Bayona), which portrays the effects of the disaster of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami on a Spanish family on holiday in Thailand. The movie is based on a real-life event and shows the destructive power of the tsunami provoked by an underwater earthquake. The very personal narrative of the movie helps the Western viewer to empathize with the characters, but this leads also to a lack of a comprehensive global overview of the disaster, which overlooks local Asian victims (Makhbubakhon, 2024, p. 16).

Moreover, Shokirova Makhbubakhon argues that both *The day after tomorrow* and *The impossible* have been object of many critics, because of the oversimplification of “geopolitical and political solutions to environmental problems”, the use of a predictable plot and the emphasis “on individual tragedies over structural problems” (2024, p. 19). Critical disaster studies aim to highlight alternative narratives which depict the complexity of disaster and its relationship with structural forces.

Secondly, novels such as the ones of Conti and Sinha oppose to the disaster narratives common in the media. The latter usually emphasize the tragedy of the disaster just after it occurred but do not face the long-term suffering and its consequences. In both *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* and *Animal's People* the media are depicted negatively. In the first novel, the journalists' insistence on photographing and asking questions to a pregnant woman are determining factors in her decision not to abort, and the attention received by the media is also the reason for her fiancé to abandon her, leading her to attempt an abortion alone, which will result in her death. In the second one, media are represented as rapacious collectors of tragic stories of the gas release's survivors to be sold and shown off. Regarding Bhopal, it has been said that the journalists' behaviour “reduced the trauma of the victims into a spectacle and their lives were transformed into a cruel joke. Under the circumstances, journalism became a farce and the disaster became a double tragedy for the victims” (Basumatary, 2019, p. 61). Conti and Sinha's novels depict real life disasters without fetishizing the event as a tragedy, but instead proposing a narrative which highlights the ramifications of disaster on the social, ecological and political sphere.

The two novels are both narrated by boys, though of different ages (12 and 19), in a first-person monologue enriched by many dialogues with other characters. They are both fictional characters which are the part of a community, albeit with different roles. The choice of the narrator in these novels is crucial because it also implies the choice of their specific perspective on the disaster. The age, gender, singularity or plurality of the narrator are among the factors which influence the perspective of the reader. Choosing a singular narrator, and narrating the facts from his point of view (as it happens in these novels) also implies a selection of the facts that characterized the disaster, because a single person cannot participate in all the events. Therefore, the perspective of the fictional narrator conveys the whole narrative and understanding of the event itself.

To begin with, narrating an environmental disaster entails several distinctive consequences in the way of portrayal of the historical and cultural circumstances. In the case of Conti's novel, the author provides an effective representation of the community of Seveso, with precise references to the local political leaders. Sinha makes a different choice, locating the disaster in a fictional city. It should be underlined that this choice does not influence the accuracy of the representation of the profoundly realistic community of the fictional city.

Moreover, the reasons behind the choice of narrating an environmental disaster in fiction might vary a lot. One could be the cultivation of the memory, in order to avoid the possible repetition of similar events. In this case, memory is linked to an idea of prevention. It is also something that aims to be transmitted as a vehicle for the comprehension of the community after the disaster. Moreover, narrating a disaster can also be a tool to make known to a wider audience what happened in a smaller or lesser-known context, to understand the responsibility for what happened, or at least, attempt to do so, to give a reason for the tragedy. As Susan Scottish Parrish, speaking about the power of novels to convey a disaster narrative, states:

Novels ask readers to inhabit a world, over a period of days or weeks, *as if it is real*. They ask readers to think as if they are other people, who certainly live in different bodies and very likely in a different condition, and who will certainly undergo some kind of crisis. [...] Novelists wanting to represent disaster rely on the feature inherent in almost all narrative – a vexed turning point – but they scale that feature up. By doing so, the reader is asked not only to identify with an individual's crisis but to see (through lengthy narrative immersion) how that crisis is situated within a larger set of social and material problems. [...] Novels are – and have long been – one of our best tools for getting a public to linger thoughtfully over how disasters feel and thus have

a motivation to ask the more challenging abstract questions: Why did this disaster occur, and how could it have been prevented? (Parrish, S.S. 2021, p. 134; emphasis in the original).

### 1.1.1 The Seveso disaster

The so-called Seveso disaster took place in a little city in the North of Milano, in the Brianza area, on July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1976. From the ICMESA plant, situated in the city of Meda, at the threshold of Seveso, a cloud of dioxin was accidentally released in the atmosphere. The cloud spread towards the south, therefore hitting mostly the community of Seveso, with devastating effects especially on the flora and fauna. There were not any human victims immediately in the aftermath; but many people developed illnesses later on. This event is considered by the newspaper *The Times* one of the ten top environmental disasters worldwide (Cruz, 2010).

The ICMESA was a chemical manufacturing plant which started its activity in Meda in 1947, even though the company already existed from 1924 under the name of ICMESA (Industrie Chimiche Meridionali S.A.). In 1976, ICMESA (now acronym for Industrie Chimiche Meda S. A.) was owned by the Swiss company L. Givaudan, & c.s.a. of Vernier-Geneva, which had been bought in 1963 by the multinational company Hoffman-LaRoche, based in Basel, Switzerland (Centemeri, 2006, pp. 14-16). The disaster shed light on the vulnerability of industrial facilities, and it highlighted the necessity of a better management of industrial safety and risk assessment. In fact, it contributed to the creation of the European Union's Seveso III Directive, a standardized safety regulation for industrial plants (*Industrial accidents*, 2024).

At the time of the incident, Seveso had a population of 17,000 inhabitants. Many of them were originally from Veneto (they migrated in the '50s) or the South of Italy (in the '60s). At the time of the incident, ICMESA had 112 factory workers, 45 clerks, and 3 managers. They used to work from Monday to Saturday mornings, on a continuous cycle. The accident happened on a Saturday morning, a day dedicated to the maintenance of the plant. The temperature in the reactor A 101, in department B, rose up to 500°C, provoking the failure of the rupture disk and therefore the release of the toxic cloud in the atmosphere. The cloud escaped at 12.37 and was seen and smelled by many people. Since the inhabitants of Seveso and Meda were used to the bad smells coming from the plant, they were not alarmed by this event (Centemeri, 2006, pp. 11-12).

The week that followed the fallout is known as “the days of silence”, because workers kept going to the firm and there was a general lack of awareness towards the seriousness of the situation. On Monday, 12<sup>th</sup> July, the *carabinieri* reported the cloud leak to the Desio command



headquarters. In the meantime, the first inspections were also being carried out by the substitute of the health officer Dr. Francesco Uberti, who noted the first deaths of small animals (Galimberti, 1977, p. 19). The technical director of the Givaudan, Dr. Sambeth, was informed about the incident the day after, and already hypothesized that TCDD could have been present in the cloud. The scientific certainty of the release of dioxin came on Wednesday, July 14<sup>th</sup>. Despite this knowledge, neither the managers of ICMESA nor the ones of the Givaudan gave any immediate communication about what had happened to the Italian authorities. On 15<sup>th</sup> July, the Mayor of Seveso, Rocca, and the one of Meda, Malgrati, had a meeting with Dr. Uberti and the managers of ICMESA, who recommended caution, but did not state which substance was contained in the cloud (Galimberti, 1977, p. 20). Meanwhile, animals kept dying and children started to show spots on their faces: the first signals of chloracne, a skin rash induced following prolonged exposure either by contact, inhalation or ingestion to certain halogenated compounds and in particular dioxins such as TCDD. More and more children were hospitalized in the following days. From July 17<sup>th</sup>, the issue spread through the newspapers. Nevertheless, the employees of ICMESA kept going to work until July 18<sup>th</sup>, when the Mayor of Meda ordered the closure of the factory as a precautionary measure. The confirmation that dioxin was present in the cloud was given to the Mayor of Seveso only on July 21<sup>st</sup> (Fratter, 1999).

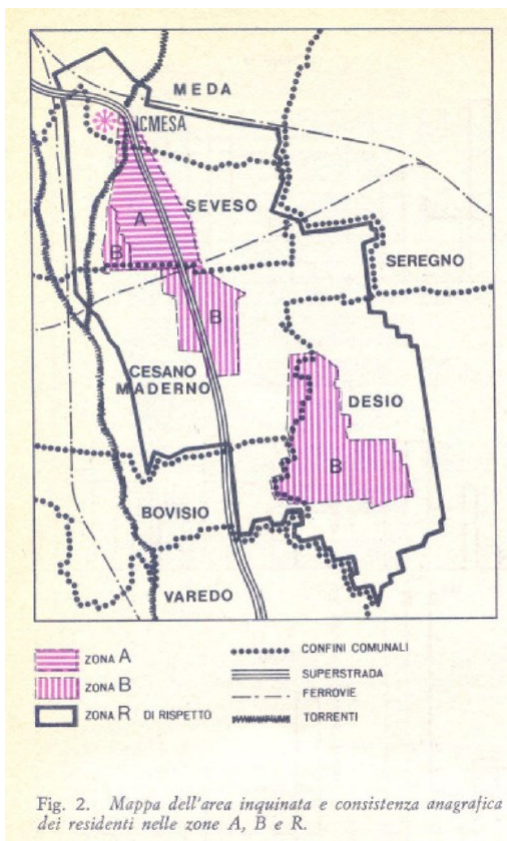


Figure 1. Map of the polluted area. (Cislaghi, Rivolta, 1976).

People were advised against eating vegetables from their local garden as well as the meat of their animals, and many children were sent away, to their grandparents, or on summer camps. On 22<sup>nd</sup> July, ICMESA plant was closed until further notice (Conti, 1977, p. 15). On Friday 24<sup>th</sup> the most contaminated zone was circumscribed, and it was decided to proceed with the evacuation. The military arrived on Monday and proceeded with health checks of the population living in the fenced area, which had become “zone A”. The people were given an allowance of 100,000 Italian lire per head of household and were transferred to the Leonardo Da Vinci residence in Bruzzano. In the following days, more people were evacuated, zone A was broadened, and zone B was established. The second wave of evacuees, which was composed by a more heterogeneous group, left Seveso on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, heading for the Hotel Agip in Assago (Centemeri, 2006, pp. 30-33).

The evacuation process was not easy. In Brianza, many people built their own home after decades of hard work, and having to leave them was painful, in some cases unbearable. Mario Galimberti, one journalist who followed the Seveso case, reports that people were confused because of the conflicting and partial information given (or not given) to them, and that there was a lack of compassion and solidarity in the communication of the order to leave the houses (Galimberti, 1977, p. 31). This suffering can be better understood if the domestic space is framed, as Ligi (2009, p. 52) suggests, as a microcosm, a built environment which is representative of a wider eco-systemic and natural space. This topic is going to be further explored in the second chapter.

Centemeri (2006, p. 34) reports that a total of 736 people were evacuated (676 from Seveso and 60 from Meda), for a total of 212 families. The evacuated and fenced-off zone covered an area of 108 hectares, with a perimeter development of 6 km. Among the companies that had to suspend operations there were an agricultural company, 37 handicraft companies, 10 businesses and 3 industries, including ICMESA. The economic fallout was beginning to be felt by the population, who feared being seen as “contaminated victims”. At that time, Brianza was in a phase of economic development and there were many foreign customers, mainly related to the furniture industry. International customers were calling with concern, asking for information and clarification, where they were not openly giving up their goods for fear of contamination (Galimberti, 1977, p. 28).

In August, a technical-scientific governmental commission was established to evaluate the possible decontamination procedures. It was the beginning of many discussions related to a

necessary clean-up and its terms, mostly its breadth. On 14<sup>th</sup> August, a third area was established: the so called “zone R”, from the word “Rispetto”, which could be translated as “buffer zone”. It was a space considered as polluted in a lesser extent. Meanwhile, inhabitants of zone B were not evacuated, but advised to follow some additional safety measures, such as washing their hands longer and more frequently (Centemeri, 2006, p. 39).

Questions began to arise concerning the possible birth of malformed foetuses, and thus the possibility of pregnancy termination for the so called “therapeutic reasons”. There was a lot of confusion about this topic, because the severity of the effects of dioxin on foetuses was not clear. The risk of babies born with deformities or severe illnesses such as harelip, as it happened in the war in Vietnam (1955-1975) because of Agent Orange, a pesticide used by the US army mainly composed by dioxin, existed. It must be stressed out that the Italian law for the voluntary termination of pregnancy was approved in 1978, and the Seveso case was one of the events which, in part, helped stimulate the debate on the issue (Legge 22 maggio 1978 , n. 194). At the time of the accident, the only possibility for a woman to abort was the “therapeutic abortion”, meaning that the woman had to prove that the idea of a malformed child was psychologically devastating. As Centemeri explains:

In legal terms, starting with a ruling by the Constitutional Court (No 27, 19 February 1975), the risk to the foetus was irrelevant to the possibility of abortion: instead, it was the risk to the woman's health (including psychological health) that could authorise a termination of pregnancy (p. 41).<sup>2</sup>

In the following months, distrust in institutions grew. The main reason behind this distrust was a lack of consistent information from the scientists, which was interpreted by the people as an uncertainty towards the true dangers of dioxin (Conti, 1977, p. 23). A peaceful protest happened on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1976, when the people from zone A, still hosted at the hotels, peacefully reoccupied a part of the area, asking the authorities for an immediate clean up. The decision to conduct the clean up was indeed approved by the regional government at the end of October, but, to do so, the building of an incinerator was planned. The idea of the incinerator had already been discussed at the end of August and approved by the City Council. Nevertheless, the population of Seveso showed very conflicting feelings towards the incinerator, which led to protests against its construction. The protests went on for months. It was only on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1977,

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<sup>2</sup> “Sul piano giuridico, a partire da una sentenza della Corte Costituzionale (n. 27, 19 febbraio 1975), il rischio per il feto era irrilevante ai fini della possibilità di abortire: era invece il rischio per la salute della donna (compresa la salute psichica) che poteva autorizzare un'interruzione di gravidanza.”

that the regional council approved four operational programmes to clean up the area. The clearance work began in the autumn of 1977, and they kept going on until the beginning of the '80s. Meanwhile, people were gradually allowed to return to their homes. In the subzones A1-A5, the houses were completely destroyed: in that area, in 1983 it was decided to build a park, under which two impermeable tanks, containing all the contaminated material, were set (Centemeri, 2006, pp. 42-47).

The tanks were built between 1981 and 1984. The environmental and forestry work began in 1984 and was completed in 1986, resulting in what is still today the Bosco delle Querce Natural Park. The park care was given to the Azienda Regionale delle Foreste. Initially, 5,000 trees and 6,000 shrubby plants were planted; later, many others were added. At the end of 1998, the park comprised 21,753 trees and 23,898 shrubby plants (Fratter, 2006, p. 31).

### **1.1.2 *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* and the crisis of the educative process**

The book *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* (*A hare with the face of a child*) was written by Laura Conti, a key figure in Italian environmentalism. She was a politician, antifascist, educator, doctor and also writer, who was very much involved in the Seveso case. In July 1976, she was regional councillor for the Communist Party (PCI) and one of the leading figures of nascent Italian environmentalism. She followed the events of Seveso and captured the unravelling of the disaster and how it hit the Seveso community in her essay *Visto da Seveso: l'evento straordinario e l'ordinaria amministrazione*, published in 1977 (Iovino, 2017, pp. 196-197).

She published the novel *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* in 1978, two years after disaster. As Conti herself explains in the preface of the book, her idea was initially to write a work of scientific dissemination about the Seveso disaster in the form of a diary written by a 12-year-old boy of Seveso. At first, she took inspiration from *Minuzzolo*, a book of the Italian writer Carlo Collodi (more famous for *Pinocchio*) but soon she realised that she wanted her main focus to be the lack of information given to children and teens who lived in the polluted area of Seveso. Therefore, she wanted to write a novel which highlighted this issue:

On the other hand, the teens of the polluted area desired information from the adult world about what was messing up their lives, and they were rudely silenced. If they wanted information, they had to steal them, eavesdropping behind the doors: adults, in fact, feared to speak about

dioxin to accept answering their questions; and they had fear, because the pollution put their values in crisis (p. 9).<sup>3</sup>

Conti insists on the drama of the interruption of the chain of transmission of traditional values caused by the dioxin, because of the loss of the instrument of that transmission: the house. This is the reason that led Conti to structure the book as a novel about “the crisis of the educative process” (p. 10).

The book is not divided in chapters, but the story proceeds as a long flow of narration: a monologue of the young protagonist, with many direct speeches. It is written in Italian, but it contains some expressions and ways of speaking typical of Seveso. As Conti explains in the preface, her protagonists face “cultural poverty”, and their Italian is “a place of encounter of cultures foreign to one another in which the grammatical and syntactic characteristics of the Italian language are levelled until the structure of discourse becomes as elementary as possible” (p. 13)<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, the language mimics the real one used in Brianza in those years. The phrases are mostly coordinate, instead of subordinate; the subjunctive mode is not normally used and there is a general lack of verbal variety. This is exemplified by a lack of use of the simple past (Italian *passato remoto*), to whom it is preferred the present perfect (Italian *passato prossimo*) and imperfect (Italian *imperfetto*). The conditional mode is employed only to express the optative, the mode of desire, such as in the expression: “Sarebbe bello!”. The use of a little variety of verbal modes reflects the simplicity of thoughts of the narrator, the young Marco. Conti also reports a lexical poverty, mostly evident by the use of circumclussions, meaning the use of more words instead of just one, which is the proper expression: the use of “vado fuori” instead of “esco”, for example. The use of these expressions and ways of saying is also quite common in contemporary times.

On the other hand, the vocabulary becomes richer and more complex when words related to bureaucracy are involved. The same happens with technological neologisms, foreign vocabularies of consumerism and welfare, such as “designer”. The author also notices the

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<sup>3</sup> “Invece i ragazzi dell’area inquinata desideravano dal mondo adulto informazioni su quello che sovvertiva la loro vita, e furono messi sgarbatamente a tacere. Se vollero informazioni dovettero rubarle, origliando dietro le porte: gli adulti, infatti, avevano troppa paura di parlare della diossina per accettare di rispondere alle domande; e avevano paura, perché l’inquinamento metteva in crisi i loro valori.”

<sup>4</sup> “quasi un Italiano da stranieri, un luogo d’incontro di culture estranee l’una all’altra nel quale le caratteristiche grammaticali e sintattiche della lingua italiana vengono piattate fino a che la struttura del discorso si fa più possibile elementare.”

frequency of use of idiomatic expressions, which are a mean for express statements without too much commitment or seriousness. Moreover, some swear words, which Conti defines as a “scurrilous or obscene vocabulary”, are so common that have lost their original scurrilous or obscene meaning (pp. 13-14). The use of these expressions is also quite common in contemporary times.

Conti transposes this language into her writing, to give voice to the protagonist, who is also the narrator, in a realistic manner. She explains all these details about language in the preface, to clarify to the reader her stylistic choices, arguing that this language, despite its poverty and simplicity, could be the best one to describe a rich and dramatic experience (p. 15). The elementary language becomes a tool for the reinterpretation of the disaster through the eyes – and the ears – of two children, who are not given explanations about what is happening, but are deeply involved in the tragedy, as it emerges, for instance, in this sequence:

The moment I was about to get on the bus [Mum] hugged me:

- I recommend: don't talk too much.
- But about what?
- Nothing, nothing. You don't know anything, it's better that way.

I got on the bus pissed off, I didn't even wave at the window, I was thinking about Sara who said that mothers are all stupid. According to my mother I hadn't understood a thing, not even when I was leaving for Rapallo in that strange way, alone, while she complained and whined that she was forced to make me leave alone. How could I not understand anything, how could I not know anything: it wasn't like I was a moron, but she thought I was a moron and thought it was better that way (pp. 42-43).<sup>5</sup>

The book was republished three times: the first two, by the same publishing house, “Editori Riuniti” (Rome). The first time, in “I David” series, no. 30 (Conti, 1978); the second time, in “Nuova scuola letture” series (Conti, 1982). The third edition was published by “Fandango

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<sup>5</sup> “Al momento che stavo per salire sulla corriera [la mamma] mi ha abbracciato:

- Ti raccomando: non parlare troppo.
- Ma di che cosa?
- Niente, niente. Tu non sai niente, è meglio così.

Sono salito sulla corriera incazzato, non ho neanche salutato il finestrino, pensavo a Sara che diceva che le madri sono tutte sceme. Secondo mia madre io non avevo capito niente, neanche nel momento di partire per Rapallo in quella maniera strana, da solo, mentre lei di lamentava e piagnucolava che era costretta a farmi partire da solo. Come facevo a non capire niente, a non sapere niente: non ero mica deficiente, ma lei pensava che ero deficiente e pensava che era meglio così.”

Libri” in 2021. Moreover, an eponymous television adaptation was made from the novel in 1989: it was a series directed by Gianni Serra with Franca Rame and Amanda Sandrelli (Serra, 2013).

The protagonist of the book is a boy of 12 years old, named Marco. He is the son of a furniture artisan, a highly common job in Meda and Seveso. The co-protagonist is Sara, his friend, daughter of immigrants from the South of Italy. The fact that Sara is originally from Sicily is very relevant for the plot: her family is “big”, in comparison to Marco’s, who is an only child; her family speaks and behaves differently. She has much more freedom than Marco, whose mother is not happy with this friendship, because she thinks Sara is dirty, messy, and undisciplined. She believes that overall the girl has a bad influence on her son. The two children’s origin and family reflect the differences within the society of Seveso itself.

Sara lives quite close to ICMESA. When the disaster happens, both children observe the mutations in the colour of the plants, and the animals dying near her home. One fundamental animal for the story is Sara’s cat, called Carmelina: the first part opens with the cat being ill and Sara giving her to Marco in order to save her from the order of killing all the animals nearby ICMESA. Despite this attempt, Carmelina, which Sara considered as her little sister, will die soon.

Marco is then sent away to Rapallo, to his aunt, in order to protect him from a potential contamination. After a few days his parents, believing that there was no need to worry anymore, take him back home, but soon the order of evacuation comes both for the inhabitants of zone A (including Sara and her big family) and of zone B (Marco and his parents). They are transferred to the hotels, and start experiencing quite a different lifestyle, made of inactivity and boredom, which soon becomes unbearable. Children are not used to spend so much time indoors, and parents are deprived of the possibility of working. Men, in particular, are deeply worried about the lack of income caused by their long absence. Meanwhile, Sara develops one form of chloracne, which is first denied by the doctor, who initially suggests that these are just growth pimples, until the symptoms become quite serious.

For the whole book, the two teens are the protagonists, but there is another story unfolding: the one of Sara’s sister, Assuntina, who is pregnant with her fiancé. He tries to persuade her to end the pregnancy, because of the risk of malformation of the foetus. Across the whole novel, there is a strong tension between the people who are in favour and against abortion. The latter, who are mostly representative of a Catholic system of values, reinforced by the local Church, try to

push the women not to interrupt the pregnancy, proposing also families who could adopt the child, if born with malformations. The clash is also present within those who should help women: a doctor, for example, makes Assuntina listen to the heartbeat of her foetus, a fact which, as Conti reports in a final note of the book (p. 120), seem to have truly happened. On the other hand, the feminists who come to explain to the women their rights lack tact and understanding. They are progressive women coming from the city (Milano) and they do not understand the fears of the people of Seveso, who are even terrified of the very word “abortion”. Seveso people have a reaction of rejection towards the feminists, defined with the denigrating term “zingare” (“gypsies”). Assuntina is under significant stress because she cannot decide what to do, and she is not given adequate knowledge to make such a decision. Meanwhile, she is confused because of the unwanted attention from journalists, which make her feel under pressure. Soon, her fiancé breaks up with her, because he says she attracted too much the attention of the media. Desperate, she goes back in her hometown in Sicily, where a relative is supposed to help her with an illegal abortion. But even her aunt can’t help anymore, saying that Assuntina is already at the 5<sup>th</sup> month, so it is too late and too dangerous for the health of the mother to attempt an abortion. Assuntina aborts on her own, alone, with two knitting needles, and consequently loses her life. Therefore, Assuntina and Sara’s mother decides to return back to Sicily and leave that polluted place which somehow led to her daughter’s death. Sara and Marco say goodbye briefly, because the girl is leaving with her mom.

The two protagonists seem to be extraneous to the problems of adults, but they are actually immersed in them, which have deep effects on their own lives from the beginning (Marco going to Rapallo and coming back) to the end (Sara leaving for Sicily). Adults make decisions without involving them, for the supposedly noble aim of protecting the children; but in this way they are preventing them from having proper information about what was truly happening in Seveso. The novel pictures the two young protagonists in an age of transition: they are 12, neither children nor adults. They experience the beginning of their adolescence in uncertain circumstances, without being considered adult enough to share the talk of grown-ups. Nevertheless, they are able to grasp much more about the “adult world” than what the adults around them imagine. They understand the disaster from a different point of view from the one of their parents, who are mostly concerned with economic loss, inactivity, lack of work or issues of honour and family pride. The children’s point of view is not limited to the issues of health and economic loss, but widens to the comprehension of the tragedy of unborn babies, animals dying, pollution of the plants and land. Marco and Sara are simultaneously innocent



and capable of complex and profound thinking, despite the simple vocabulary they possess. Their way of perceiving the disaster is comprehensive of more categories, expanding to all living creatures and going beyond the barrier of the human tragedy.

### **1.1.3 The Bhopal disaster**

Bhopal's disaster is known for the devastating impact it had on humans and non-humans. The chemical accident occurred in the night between December 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1984. A chemical leak, made up of 27 tons of methyl isocyanate (MIC) and other deadly gases, brought to death thousands of people, both immediately and in the aftermath (Amnesty International, 2004). Other sources write about more than 40 tons of methyl isocyanate released from the plant (Broughton, 2005). Unfortunately, data about the death rate are not homogeneous, since they vary greatly according to the source. Amnesty International, in the book *Clouds of injustice: Bhopal disaster 20 years on* (2004), published twenty years after the disaster, identifies 7,000 human victims in the first days, and a further 15,000 in the following years. The Bhopal disaster is also known to have left around 100,000 people severely disabled. Moreover, Amnesty International affirms not to have found evidence of any systematic attempt by the Indian government to keep a record of gas-related deaths in the 20 years since 1984 (Amnesty International, 2004, p. 12).

Bhopal is the capital of Madhya Pradesh, in the heart of India. The accident involved the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL), the Indian subsidiary of the multinational Union Carbide Corporation (UCC), originally from the United States (Mukherjee, 2022, p. 72). The plant used methyl isocyanate (MIC) as an ingredient for manufacturing pesticides (in particular, one called Sevin): this chemical compound is highly toxic and can cause severe respiratory and eye irritation, pulmonary illnesses, and even death, as it happened in Bhopal. MIC exposure resulted also in chromosomal abnormalities and persistent genetic damage in the locals exposed. Moreover, this toxicant had long-term effects for decades. Within the toxic cloud released in Bhopal, there was not only MIC, but also several by-products such as hydrogen cyanide, nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide, phosgene, mono-methylamine and many other contaminants through exothermic reaction with water and atmospheric air and moisture (Ganguly, Mandal, & Kadam, 2018, pp. 1-2).



Figure 2. A map of India in which I underlined the city of Bhopal. Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Medium-india-political-wall-map-vinyl-moi4781121786238-original-imaezawqex9x5dbb.jpg>.

One of the main problems after the leak was the lack of knowledge concerning the type of gas released, an information which was intentionally not disclosed by the American firm. Consequently, there was a lack of proper medical information also among doctors, who tried to make do in spite of the circumstances. Often, they provided symptomatic relief, suggesting to apply wet cloths to the eyes and face against inflammation, a simple but effective approach. Moreover, it must be stressed out that the urgency of treating such a massive number of people lead to depersonalized treatment. As a consequence, many people were given pills without enough instructions on dosage or possible side effects (Jasanoff, 1988, pp. 1114-1116).

Already before the accident, it was known that MIC carried toxicological properties. It must be stressed that the Union Carbide manual warned the workers about the fact that MIC could irritate eyes and chest, and was potentially deadly in case of overexposure. But the workers were not sufficiently informed about the lethality of MIC; some just thought that it was just a powerful irritant. The lack of proper knowledge about the toxicity and reactivity of this

chemical by the people who were in charge of working with it is a significant example of the fact that the plant was operating under deeply unsafe conditions. The underestimation of the risk by the Union Carbide was major, given also some leaks and incidents which happened before (Jasanoff, 1988, pp. 1115-1116).

The compensation for the survivors was difficult to obtain and considerably lower than other environmental disasters. The legal battle for compensation was long and hard: the Union Carbide firstly argued that since it was an American company, it could not be charged and not even tried in India (Mukherjee, 2010, p. 142). The Indian government was acting on behalf of the victims and it sued Union Carbide Corporation (UCC) in 1985 in the Federal District Court at New York. They claimed that the UCC owed \$3.3 billion in reparations to the victims. But, in 1986, the US Court dismissed those claims and asked the Indian government to approach Indian courts. The case was transferred in Bhopal District Court, and in December 1987 the Bhopal District Judge ordered UCIL to pay an interim compensation of ₹350 Crores. This order was challenged by UCC at the Madhya Pradesh High Court the year after, and the compensation was reduced to ₹250 Crores. Both UCC and the government challenged the order of Madhya Pradesh high Court at the Supreme Court. An agreement was reached in 1989, settling the compensation to \$470 million, intended to cover all claims related to the disaster. The sum was far lower than the initial proposal (Supreme Court Observer, 2023).

Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2010, p. 142) highlights the fact that US government used their contacts and financial power to pressure Indian and Bhopal government to accept this agreement. The compensation was, in fact, deeply inadequate: according to the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal, on average each survivor was given \$500 for life-long debilitating injuries, which means “less than 5 cents per day – the cost of a cup of tea – to pay for decades of medical bills” (Adrian, 2014). Making a comparison with the compensation given by the oil company Exxon after the spill from its tanker *Exxon Valdez* in 1989, Mukherjee states: “Naturally, Bhopal’s human victims wanted to know why they were valued to the tune of around \$30,000 less than a sea otter by another multinational company” (2010, p. 145).

The legal battle did not end in 1989: in 1991 the Indian Government requested the Supreme Court to reopen the settlement proceedings, but their petition was rejected. In 1994, the Union Carbide Corporation sold its entire stake in Union Carbide India Limited to McLeod Russell Ltd, an Indian company. The government of India filed a curative petition, which is the last chance available for a party to ask the Court to reconsider a case, against the 1989 settlement

and demanded additional funds of over ₹7,400 crores from the company (Supreme Court Observer, 2023). In 2023, the curative petition was dismissed, declaring that the settlement amount of \$470 million established in 1989 was sufficient to meet the claims of the victims (Anand, 2023).

It must be noted that, because of this long legal struggle, one main outcome of Bhopal gas disaster has been the development of many movements for environmental justice, which are differentiated but interconnected. Suroopa Mukherjee (2022) reports examples of oral history through interviews towards activists and founders of different movements for justice after Bhopal's disaster. Within them, there are women who challenged social norms regarding gender, by being politically active and often not wearing the traditional burqa. The aim of their battles is often related to the sphere of family care, for example having justice for their children who have malformation or daughters who have been refused by the family of their husbands after having taken the dowry. These women highlight how their role changed, in many instances, after their husbands died, often because of the consequences of the disaster. They became the centre of the family and therefore their role as activists was deeply shaped by the aftermath of the disaster. As Suroopa Mukherjee herself states:

A chemical disaster such as Bhopal is not merely an “accident.” Its legacy is a trail of death, destruction, lack of proper relief measures, and denial of justice. A social movement takes on the onus of pressuring the government to come up with welfare schemes. But in the case history of Bhopal, the accident and its prolonged aftermath were two sides of the same coin. (Mukherjee, 2022, p. 81).

Even almost 40 years after the disaster, the legal issues are still very topical, especially given the last sentence of the Supreme Court. People of Bhopal nowadays are still suffering the consequences of the incident, because their bodies are still poisoned by the toxic residues. When Union Carbide abandoned Bhopal, it did not clean up the factory site. People nowadays are still living nearby the plant and drinking the polluted waters.

If we assume the definition of disaster as a social event given by Quarantelli and Wenger in the *Nuovo dizionario di sociologia* (De Marchi, Ellena, Catarinussi 1987, p. 675, in Ligi, 2009, p.17 and p. 33), we must assume not only that disasters are extended over time and space, but also that the severity of the crisis does not have to be measured according to the physical intensity of the phenomena. Therefore, the approach should be more focused on other factors, related to the capacity to communicate effectively with the population the entity of the disaster

and in the management of the aftermath of the disaster itself (Ligi, 2009, p. 37). In Bhopal's case, other than the workers, the victims of the incident were the people living in the slums around the plant, who were ignorant about the dangerousness of it. Moreover, people live in the slums still today, in a contaminated environment: the problem, therefore, is not only about the lack of knowledge, but the inability to leave the polluted place, because of many reasons related both to economic availability and, more broadly, social vulnerability. This topic will be further discussed in the next chapters.

#### **1.1.4. *Animal's People*: environmental picaresque?**

The novel *Animal's People* was written by Indra Sinha, British writer of Indian and English descent. It was published in 2007 and it was shortlisted for the 2007 Man Booker prize. It was also the winner of 2008 Commonwealth Writer's Prize. The novel is a fictional reworking of the Bhopal disaster, around twenty years after, and it follows the legal disputes involving the American company where the accident occurred and the poor community living around the former plant. Besides being set in India, the city where the vicissitudes take place is not Bhopal, but the imaginary "Khaufpur", a name which, translated from Urdu, means "city of terror", while the Union Carbide is the "Kampani" (Nixon, 2013, p. 60).

With these non-specific but evocative denominations, Sinha wanted to highlight the fact that the novel could be set also in other locations of the Global South. The author wanted to represent the tragedy of a community poisoned by the chemical industry. He affirmed that it could have been set in Central or South America, West Africa or the Philippines (Nixon, 2013, p. 48). In an interview Sinha states: "I knew Bhopal too well. To write freely, I had to imagine another city" (Thwaite, Sinha, 2007).

Nixon (2013, p. 48) argues that Khaufpur is both specific and nonspecific. Within the traits of his specificity, it is possible to identify the language. The book is originally in English, but it is richly blended with Hindi and French words. The whole book is a monologue narrated by a boy, who, according to the narrative fiction, is recording on tapes which were transcribed by a journalist who agreed to publish, according to the boy's will, only his story in his own words. The reader is induced to believe that the protagonist, Animal, spoke originally in Hindi and that the author later translated it in English, keeping some Indianized English expressions such as "jarnalis" (journalist). The narrative fiction of the "recorded tapes" is reinforced by an "editor's note" at the beginning of the book which explains the agreement between the journalist and the boy. The twenty-three chapters correspond to hypothetical recordings and are of various length.

Animal's narration is messy and chaotic, and contains both flashbacks and direct speeches. The language used by the narrator is blunt and vulgar, but Animal also possesses a natural linguistic ability that make him able to comprehend and communicate in different idioms. When he speaks, he refers to the reader as *Eyes*, following the suggestion given him by the *Kakadu Jarnalis* (the journalist), who urged him to record his story on tape and to speak as if he was doing so to just one person, imaging the eyes of this person.

Animal is a 19-year-old orphan who lost his parents during the chemical accident. He was born a few days before that tragic night, and after an infancy as a physically able child, his spine twisted, leaving him to walk on four legs, like an animal, from which his name derives. He has a strong desire for sex, which sometimes leads him to make actions that he himself considers morally reprehensible, such as spying on women in secret. Animal considers himself as a lonely creature, destined to remain alone: he rejects sympathy but also he denies his own humanity. When someone else asks him his real name he says he doesn't even remember it. He has a strong affection towards Ma Franci, the nun who brought him up and who is unable to understand the language spoken by everyone else except from Animal. Animal affirms that after the incident she became unable not only to speak Hindi, but also to understand that people around her are not speaking nonsense words, but simply another language. She also has apocalyptic visions. She is a mother figure for Animal, who takes care of her when she is in need.

Animal gradually falls in love with Nisha, a young girl he meets on the streets and who looks at him, from the start, as if he was a human, and not a burden of some sort. She is the girlfriend of Zafar, a good-looking man of Muslim descent who has a strong leadership character. He is admired by people of Khaufpur, who consider him as a saint, for his fight for justice against the American company. Animal is given a job by Zafar: "to keep my eyes and ears open and report to Zafar if anything unusual was going on in the basis" (p. 27). Animal is jealous of his romantic relationship with Nisha, and he imagines they have sexual intercourses, so he gives Zafar a poison which should theoretically affect his libido. Later he regrets his actions, seeing the greatness of character of Zafar, ready to sacrifice his life for truth and justice.

Within the other main characters, there is Nisha's father, Pandit Somraj, who was once a famous singer, known as "the Voice of Khaufpur". The chemical accident affected the health of his lungs, making him unable to sing again. Moreover, during that night he lost his wife and little son. He is considered by Animal a man of stoic nature and authority.

The plot runs around the fact that the “Kampani”, responsible for “that night”, has refused to face the court for almost twenty years. Meanwhile, the soil and water are still contaminated, and people keep dying or being ill as a result. The judge finally says he will consider Zafar’s request to force the company to come to court. Meanwhile, Doctor Elli, an American woman, who is usually referred by Animal as “Elli doctress”, arrives in town: people look at her with curiosity, because of her blue jeans, which reveal the shape of her legs. She speaks Hindi and builds a clinic with the aim of curing ill people of Khaufpur. But Zafar is suspicious and thinks she has been sent by the Kampani, probably to collect false data about the health state of the inhabitants. Therefore, Zafar suggests boycotting the clinic: the inhabitants are not happy, but they follow his suggestion. Only Animal becomes friend with Doctor Elli, with the secret hope of being cured and able to walk on two legs, and therefore win Nisha’s heart. Doctor Elli is frustrated by the fact that people are not coming to her clinic, and she believes behind this boycott there is Somraj. The two will first see each other as enemies, also in musical terms (Elli plays the piano and from her window the music is heard and disturbs Somraj’s singing lessons, and viceversa). Later, they will develop an affection, which will eventually lead them to marriage.

Later, Zafar recognises he was wrong about Elli and calls off the boycott. Meanwhile, the lawyers of the Kampani arrive and Animal overhears a conversation between Elli and one of them which makes him think she is on the company’s side. In order to raise their issue, Zafar and Farouq, a Muslim man who has often mocked Animal, but also saved his life, undertake a hunger and water strike. With the passing of days, their conditions become serious. Animal becomes quite nervous because he thinks the pills he gave to Zafar have contributed to worsen his health before the strike. He tells him the truth and Zafar forgives him and asks him to take care of Nisha if he dies. Meanwhile, a violent protest takes place at the factory, which goes on fire and is overcome by burning gas.

At this point, Animal confronts Elli and discovers one of the lawyers was her ex-husband, who promised her to delay the agreement if she will come back to America, and she agreed. Disappointed, Animal confesses to Nisha his love for her, but she rejects him. Desperate, he escapes in the forest after taking an overdose of the pills given to Zafar previously. He hallucinates for days but later he is rescued by Zafar and Farouq, who are not dead as he thought. He discovers that the agreement between the government and the Kampani did not take place, because a mysterious woman wearing a burqa released gasses from the factory in the room where they were having the meeting. Animal discovers Ma Franci has died, together

with Huriya Bi, grandmother of Alyia, a little girl who used to play with Animal and who already died because of an illness caused by the pollution just before the protest. The two were the only victims, because they warned people about the fire taking place at the factory.

The story concludes with Animal deciding that he will not go to America for an operation to heal his back, despite Doctor Elli having found sponsors to do so. He embraces his uniqueness as a “four-foot” and refuses the surgery. Animal is a representative of his own community, or, more broadly, of the whole polluted environment (comprehensive of sick humans and non-humans) in which he lives. He is a victim of the gas, as many others, but also a victim of practices of neocolonialism from the American firm (Mukherjee, 2010, p. 6). He is deeply embedded in his own environment, as shown by his affection and care for Ma Franci, or for the little girl Alyia, and his link with the dog Jara. He is always in conflict with what he personally thinks of himself – a creature destined to loneliness – and himself as a valid part of the community in which he lives. He is so much embedded in this community that Doctor Elli, who acts from an external, foreign, perspective, calls the inhabitants of Khaufpur “Animal’s people”, from which the title of the novel derives. Animal is also living a personal struggle of self-acceptance which resolves at the end of the novel, when he finally allows himself to truly feel part of the community where he lives, recognizing his role and validity as a four-foot being. Therefore, he is a representative of the community and the polluted environment not only as a victim, but as a being with a value and a uniqueness.

Animal is a complex character. He is a clever boy, and in the course the novel he encounters many different situations and people which make him grow in a more self-conscious being. He is narrating the stories in an autobiographical style, following the flow of his thoughts and the numerous flashbacks. Hence, his story could be fit in the genre of the picaresque novel, or, as Nixon (2013, p. 55) argues, the “environmental picaresque”. The *picaro* is usually a smart boy, a roguish adventurer of low social status who has to face many challenges and adventures. As Nixon specifies: “Animal joins a long line of picaros: canny, scheming social outliers governed by unruly appetites, potty-mouthed and scatologically obsessed, often orphaned outcasts who, drawn from polite society’s vast impoverished margins, survive by parasitism and by their wits.” (Nixon, 2013, p. 55).

Nevertheless, Sinha is not welcoming towards putting books in genres. He urges to give up the search for genres and instead focus on the works of art which do not fit in these categories. Sinha insists on the possibility of reading a literature without -isms: “Aren’t all these ‘genres’



just another strategy for demystifying uncomfortable novels, sanitizing and deodorizing them so that decent people can discuss them without catching some dreadful infection?" (Ipekci, Sinha, 2023).

He also argues against the definition of "postcolonialism" as commonly interpreted. The literary critiques tend to locate *Animal's People* in relation to postcolonial ecocritical studies, because it portrays a literary representation of both local and global injustices, but the author has a different opinion. According to Sinha, post-colonialism is literally about the immediate historical consequences of colonialism and the very first literature produced in that period. The prefix "post" is interpreted by Sinha literally, as an indicator of a precise historical period, the one when the colonial nations left their colonies, such as the end of the British rule in India. He finds the term "out of date" and "misleading" if used to describe a contemporary book: "Writers are writing modern books but academics are still bleating about postcolonialism". On the other hand, he argues that what should be pointed out today are other issues, such as capitalism (Ipekci, Sinha, 2023).

## **1.2 The writer-activists**

Laura Conti and Indra Sinha are two authors with different cultural and professional backgrounds, in addition to the different places they are originally from. What they have in common is their commitment to a search for environmental justice which denounces the culpability of the multinational firms (the Switzerland Hoffmann-La Roche and the American Union Carbide) in the creation of a pattern of vulnerability which affected the local population of Seveso and Bhopal respectively. The authors both share a deep concern for human rights and a common worry about the consequences of chemical disasters on the environment. For this reason, in this thesis I will refer to them as "writer-activists", an expression used by Nixon (2013, p. 23) to define novelists (including Sinha) who engage in the "environmentalism of the poor", which focuses on the roots of environmental injustice, such as the neoliberal order and capitalism. The choice of the term "writer-activists" to define both Conti and Sinha can be justified by the importance of their literary contributions in increasing the awareness about the responsibility of the disasters of Seveso and Bhopal respectively, albeit at different levels, for the inevitable differences between the two disasters and the different resonance of the two books.

It should be further noticed that Conti can be identified as an activist also because of her political commitment and her background as a partisan during the Second World War. On the

other hand, Sinha doesn't find this term as the best one to describe himself, as he reports in an interview mentioned later in this chapter. Despite this, his role should not be limited to the one of a novelist, not only for the great impact of his book in increasing the knowledge about Bhopal's disaster, but also for him being co-founder of the Association Bhopal Medical Appeal, which helps providing free medical care to the survivors who are still hit by the pollution of their own environment. Moreover, the definition of "writer-activists" as Nixon (2013, p. 15) intends it entails a critique to capitalism which can be found both in Conti's political beliefs (as especially her political positioning in the Communist Party show) and in Sinha's ones (as he reports in an interview with Ipekci, Sinha, 2023). For a better understanding of this way of referring to Conti and Sinha, the biographies of the two authors follow.

### **1.2.1 Laura Conti**

Born in Udine on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1921, Laura Conti is one of the most important figures regarding environmentalism in Italy. She is even called "the mother of Italian environmentalism" (Fasanella, 2022). She lived in Trieste, Verona and later Milano, where she studied at the Medical Faculty. In 1944, she also joined the organization "Fronte della gioventù" of Eugenio Curiel, Italian antifascist. It was a youth organization of partisans who were against the fascist regime. In July of the same year, she was followed and later arrested because she was attending a secret meeting with socialists students. In September, Conti entered the Bolzano concentration camp, waiting to be deported to Germany. At the camp, she was part of the clandestine resistance committee of the lager, representing the socialist party (*Laura Conti*, n.d.). During this painful stay, Conti was also able to secretly write and share, thanks to a well-organized clandestine network, with a person outside the camp an article on the death in the camp and the SS abuses (Fieramonte, 2021, p. 28).

On 1<sup>st</sup> May 1946, she went out of the Bolzano camp. In 1949, she graduated in medicine. Later, she started her political activity in the Socialist Party (PSI) and, from 1951, in the Communist Party (PCI). While she was carrying on her political activity, she worked as a doctor in Milano and she started her career as a writer and divulgator. She published *Assistenza e previdenza sociale* in 1958 for the publishing house Feltrinelli. For the Istituto Feltrinelli, she was the curator of *Stampa clandestina della Resistenza* (1961), about the experience of Resistance against fascism in Italy. Her first novel, *Cecilia e le streghe*, was published by Einaudi in 1963 and received praise, including the victory of the award "Premio Pozzale". She published other books, some related to sexual education, some to scientific divulgation and ecology (Conti, 1978, p. 7).

Between 1960 and 1970, she was elected councillor to the Province of Milan and, between 1970 and 1980, councillor to the Lombardy Region. Her role in the environmental debate was pivotal, as much as her role of environmental divulgator. According to Conti, within the interests and needs of the working class the ecological sphere should have also been included. Her idea of ecology and her interest in the environment were reinforced by her political commitment in the communist party: hers was an “ecologia di classe” (class ecology), as Stefania Barca defines it (2011, p. 548).

She is also one of the founders of the Italian environmental organization Legambiente, which promotes sustainability and ecological policies through environmental campaigns, programs of environmental education and monitoring of the impact of humans on the environment. Conti’s environmentalism has strong scientific bases, because of her studies. She is considered a forerunner for her ability to perceive and unmask the associations between environmental risks and globalisation, consumerism, and capitalist society. In 1986, in recognition of her divulgation efforts, she received the “Minerva” prize for scientific and cultural research. She died on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1993, because of a sudden illness (Fasanella, 2022).

Thanks to her medical knowledge, during the Seveso case, she was a fundamental intermediary for the Seveso community. She firmly believed in the need for a truthful, objective information, and the necessity to provide it to the people. This was already her approach when teaching to students in the hinterland of Milano, which, as she writes in the preface of *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina*, shared the “cultural poverty” with the protagonists of her book (Conti, 1978, p. 13). In the case of Seveso, her concern was profound as well as her involvement in the aftermath of the could release.

In her book *Visto da Seveso* (1977, p. 25), she is critical towards the confusion created by the reticence in proceeding with evacuation. For Conti, the inclusion of citizens in the decision processes about public health and the environment was pivotal. (Barca, 2011, p. 546). The prudent and responsible behaviour of the authorities of waiting for more certainties before giving the order to evacuate was interpreted as an uncertainty about the dangers of dioxin. Conti knew the consequences of the exposure to this substance and criticizes the way it was (not) explained to the people. She expresses her critiques towards the metaphor, used by the councillor Vittorio Rivolta, of an “circumscribed fire” (“un incendio circoscritto”) to talk about the contaminated area. This metaphor was reported in the first official document of the Lombardy Region. According to Conti, talking about dioxin as a “circumscribed fire” makes

the reader think about a danger averted, while the toxic contamination of dioxin is precisely the opposite: a contaminant which has delayed and not immediately visible effects (1977, p. 32).

The heterogeneous background of Laura Conti allowed her to grasp the reality of Seveso better than others did. This is particularly valid in terms of the women of Seveso and the issue of abortion. Conti went to Seveso and met the local community. Barca speaks about her behaviour in Seveso as a “participant observation”, where she had a “double identity of scientist and militant” (Barca, 2011, p. 543). There was a proposal made by the deputy Emma Bonino to make a special derogation and allow voluntary abortion just for the women of Seveso, because of their being exposed to dioxin. Despite being in favour of an Italian law for voluntary abortion, Conti was not in favour of this proposal. She argued that this proposal would have pushed away the women of Seveso, who were mostly Catholic (Conti, 1977, p. 35). If the proposal had been accepted, it would have been a right granted by the Regional Council, a secular institution, because of a proposal made by a radical leftist. The proposal of therapeutic abortion, even if it exposed women to the “violence of a psychiatric diagnosis” (Conti, 1977, p. 35), was approved also by Democrazia Cristiana (DC), a party deeply inspired by Catholic values, and the main opponent of the Communist Party. This would have led the women to be less sceptical about it. Moreover, the approval of a special derogation for allowing voluntary abortion could have been interpreted by the women of Seveso only as a precedent for a possible subsequent law on free abortion. Conti (1977, p. 36) insists also on the fact that, with a special law, the women of Seveso would have been differentiated by all the others in Italy, increasing their sense of uneasiness and therefore distancing them even more. The distance of the feminists of the city is well pictured in her book *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina*.

### **1.2.2 Indra Sinha**

Indra Sinha is the son of an English writer, Irene Elizabeth Phare (who wrote under the name of Rani Sinha) and an Indian naval officer. He was born in 1950 in Bombay (today Mumbai), India, and he attended schools in England and India before moving to Britain with his family in 1967. He began his career as an adman in London. He also translated Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra* into English, the first new translation published in the West since Sir Richard Burton's. He wrote advertisements for Amnesty International, and later he started writing novels. It was 2005 when he decided to leave advertising to become a full time writer. Because of his previous career as an adman for Amnesty International, he developed an interest in making visible social and environmental injustices around the world.

Within the first books, there are already examples of non-fiction which raise issues of injustice towards vulnerable groups. *The Cybergypsies* (1999) is a non-fiction memoir with references to the 1988 Halabja gas attack against the Kurdish people that occurred towards the end of the Iran–Iraq War. *The Death of Mr. Love* (2002) set in Bombay, was based on the 1959 real-life murder of a playboy by the commander Nanavati. Today this cosmopolitan author lives in Southern France (Ipekci, Sinha, 2023; *Indra Sinha Biography – Literature*, 2007).

Sinha co-founded the Bhopal Medical Appeal, a charity organization that offers medical care to people affected by the consequences of Bhopal’s disaster (*Indra Sinha Biography – Literature*, 2007). He attempted to write about Bhopal already in 1996, writing a screenplay titled *Green Song*. But it was only later, through the stories told him by friends about real people they have seen – such a boy who ran on all fours – that the characters would gradually shape in Sinha’s mind. He wrote the book between 2001 and 2006, with two years of pause, while he was working as a volunteer for the Bhopal justice campaign. This period gave him other ideas about the plot and the corruption of politicians (Thwaite, Sinha, 2007).

Talking about *Animal’s People*, Nixon enlightened the role of the writer-activists and the fact that some of them have launched themselves environmental movements, and others, such as Sinha and Arundhati Roy, “affiliated themselves with well-established struggles, helping amplify causes marginalized by the corporate media” (Nixon, 2013, p. 23). This is undoubtedly truthful, but Sinha, as previously anticipated, does not feel that he belongs to the category of the writer-activist. In an interview, when compared to Arundhati Roy, he points out that she has risked much more, being more engaged – a true activist. On the other hand, he situates himself in the domain of literature, and therefore states:

The writer’s job is not to change the world. The writer has only one duty, which is not to be boring. I think that whoever writes honestly and fearlessly about what she or he sees and feels passionate about has the chance to make an impact. (Ipekci, Sinha 2023; *Indra Sinha Biography – Literature*, 2007, p. 8).



## **Chapter 2. Disaster from a temporal and social point of view**

The novels analysed in this thesis both convey the message that violence occurs throughout space and time. In this chapter, the first part is dedicated to an explanation of the “slow violence” paradigm, as Nixon (2013, p. 2) has stated it, followed by an historical parenthesis regarding the past and the post of the events of Seveso and Bhopal. The second part of the chapter is dedicated to the paradigm of social vulnerability and how effective these books are in depicting it.

### **2.1 Environmental disaster: a process of slow violence**

The concept of violence is often connected to an idea of something spectacular and instantaneous. In contrast, Nixon developed a definition of another type of violence, which “occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.” (Nixon, 2013, p. 2). This last sentence is particularly relevant to understand that this violence is mostly a less noticeable process, made invisible throughout the construction of a pattern of vulnerability linked with the normalization of pollution and toxicity. Vulnerability is a concept emerged from the 1950s in disaster studies, which examines those aspects of society which reduce or exacerbate the impact of a hazard (Oliver-Smith, 2002, p. 27). In the 1970s, anthropologists and cultural geographers started to highlight the role of national and international factors in creating or exacerbating disasters’ risk. Moreover, they called for the need of rethinking the concept of disaster from a political-economic perspective (Oliver-Smith, 2002, p. 27). It should be remembered that vulnerability is “a core element of a disaster”, because it “conditions the behaviour of individuals and organizations throughout the full unfolding of a disaster far more profoundly than will the physical force of the destructive agent” (Oliver-Smith, Hoffmann, 2002, p. 3). In fact, vulnerability is built over time by many causes, deeply linked with ideological, social and economic systems, which interact with specific sets of unsafe conditions that, combined with a hazard, can encourage a disaster to happen (Oliver-Smith, 2002, p. 28). In both Seveso and Bhopal, a foreign multinational firm was responsible for the spread of pollution and toxicity in the territory, diminishing the claims of the local inhabitants. In addition, Hoffmann-La Roche and Union Carbide shared an attitude of negligence towards safety measures. In order to understand the depiction of vulnerability in the novels, it is useful to give an historical contextualization regarding the characteristics which created vulnerability in the communities of Seveso and Bhopal.

### **2.1.1 Slow violence in Seveso**

The concept of “slow violence” is particularly relevant for the Global South, because of a long historical process of marginalization and exploitation linked to the paradigms of colonial capitalism, further intensified by neoliberalism. The latter is a theory of political and economic practices which proposes that the wellbeing of humans can best be achieved by “liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). It follows that the state creates the conditions for an institutional framework in which the markets are left free, and the social good is “maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (Harvey, 2005, p. 3). Under neoliberalism, market deregulation has contributed to expand the gap between “enclaved rich and outcast poor” (Nixon, 2013, p. 8), and the latter are mostly located in impoverished regions of the Global South, where multinational companies tend to externalize risks (Nixon, 2013, p. 52).

Despite this, the concept can be also expanded to events taking place in the rest of the world, with appropriate differences. Within the characteristics of the contemporary neoliberal order, according to Nixon, there is the “widening chasm” which separates rich and poor, the unsustainable ecological degradation which impacts mostly on the poor, and “the way powerful transnational corporations exploit under cover of a free market ideology 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, 2013, p. 46).

In the case of the disaster of Seveso, in this chapter I argue that “slow violence” could be the right term to describe that context. The reason behind this lies in the fact that the pollution generated by the plant was not an isolated phenomenon exclusively linked to the release of dioxin in July 1976. The company Givaudan and Hoffmann-La Roche was indifferent towards their impact on the environment and on the health of its inhabitants for a long time. This pollution involved humans, non-humans and the land.

An exemplary case of the evasive and irresponsible attitude of the firm was the death of thirteen sheep occurred on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1953. The animals had drunk the contaminated waters of the local stream, the Certesa, where ICMESA used to pour its polluted waters. In those circumstances, the consortium veterinary Massimo Malagarini did not obtain any clarification regarding the deceased sheep, due to the reticence of the company representative. A few months later, in July



1953, health officer Del Campo ascertained the harmfulness of the river water, pointing to the factory's discharges as the cause. In his report, he added that there were “all the extremes” to classify the Meda factory as an “insalubrious industry” (Fratte, 2006, pp. 59-62). The municipality of Meda and Seveso asked for clarifications, also because the pollution of the Certesa was common knowledge among the citizens: the stream was known for its bad smells and different, unnatural colours. The answer of ICMESA was one of denial and rejection of accountability: in a note signed by the entrepreneur Rezzonico, the plant dismissed the accusation of unhealthiness, pointing out that the water was already polluted upstream of the plant by other firms (Centemeri, 2006, p. 19).

This episode is significant because it shows that there were already some issues related to the local pollution by the firm well before 1976. This is further confirmed by the fact that people living nearby were used to the periodical death of small-sized animals, such as poultry and rabbits. There was even a form of economic compensation that the plant used to give to the animals' owners. Another significant precedent occurred when, in 1965, the analysis conducted by the Province found that the quality of the water of Certesa were under safety levels, both from a chemical and a biological point of view, due to pollution and high toxicity. The need for the construction of a water purification plant was highlighted and later imposed to ICMESA (Fratte, 2006, pp. 68-71).

Despite the beginning of the implementations of some of these measures, an inspection carried out in 1966 found that the plant still did not give satisfactory results in terms of purification. Again, in 1969 a report of the Provincial Hygiene and Prophylaxis Laboratory stated that the company's discharge situation had to be reviewed, because the pollution was not limited to water tributaries, but it extended to possible discharges into basins outside the plant (Fratte, 2006, pp. 68-71).

After the death of the sheep, ICMESA took upon themselves to improve the equipment for odour and noise elimination. It should be highlighted that the worries of the citizens were not limited to the water pollution, but they extended to gas emissions and fumes, due to the incineration of waste from open-cast fires. As Centemeri (2006, p. 19) reports, already in 1962 there was a written statement by the Mayor of Meda, in which it was reported to ICMESA that in a session of the Municipal Council some councillors had denounced the occurrence of several fires of waste materials. Again, the firm dismissed the accusations by limiting the incident to a single fire, which developed for unknown reasons and was promptly extinguished.

A year after, the Mayor of Meda called into question ICMESA again, for clarifications on yet another fire. In that case, the firm's owners passed the blame on to shepherds who allegedly ran away after lighting a fire (Centemeri, 2006, pp.19-20).

The production of 2, 4, 5, trichlorophenol, the chemical which can eventually lead to the formation of TCDD, started in ICMESA between 1969 and 1970. It was known that the processing of this product could involve risks for the workers' health and for the nearby environment. Moreover, the risk was accentuated because the production procedure used by ICMESA deviated from that of the original patent. It is also reported that there was a lack of attention towards the basic safety measures (Centemeri, 2006, p. 16). Between 1971 and 1976, the year of the disaster, the production of trichlorophenol grew from 6,371 to 142,820 kg per year. But the local administration was not aware of the true danger of this firm, which used to answer in evasive terms when asked for clarification (Centemeri, 2006, p. 17-18).

These events show that significant clues of toxicity were already happening decades before, without the firm taking any responsibility for them. Consequently, in Seveso a pattern of vulnerability was built over time through a process of slow violence. This violence entailed what Max Liboiron calls a "normalization of pollution" (Liboiron, 2021, p. 88), meaning that people became so used to the bad smells of the firm that they were not perceived as unusual anymore. Hence, toxicity became part of the land. Moreover, this vulnerability did not only hit the human community, but it extended to non-humans too. The pollution, both the one of the TCDD cloud in 1976 and the one of previous toxic releases, caused harm to various animal species, including both domestic animals and local wildlife (Marazza, Pezza, 1979, pp. 201-202).

According to Nixon, "violence, above all environmental violence, needs to be seen—and deeply considered — as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or labor, or resources, but also over time" (Nixon, 2013, p. 8). The fact that the pollution involved humans (both workers of the firm and citizens) and non-humans in an extended period of time is the reason why this sentence can depict well the Seveso community in its entirety.

In fact, vulnerability involved the employees of the plant in the first place, because they were working in unsafe conditions. Italo Ghezzi refers that the plant extended its facilities "not according to a rational planning", but instead by "adapting itself to the contingent needs of the market" (1979, p. 149). This expansion, conducted with the sole purpose of increasing profit, included the addition of the production of trichlorophenol, without sufficient security checks.

In the plant, there was no temperature control automatism, which would have been a significant safety measure. Instead, there was just a safety valve, which in case of overheating of the reactor, would have released the gases into the surrounding atmosphere (Ghezzi, 1979, p. 149).

Moreover, both before and after 1976, the attitude of the owners of the firm was often one of evading accountability. When the dioxin was released, not only the risk was minimized, but also the foreign owners made some problematic statements. Centemeri (2006, p. 52) refers that both the president of Hoffmann-LaRoche, Adolf Jann, and the director of Givaudan, Guy Waldvogle, already in August 1976 said they were ready to cover all the costs of the damages caused by the toxic cloud. Nevertheless, they did not acknowledge the responsibility of the multinational firm. In addition, in an interview conducted on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1976 on the Swiss television, Jann said that Italians, and in particular women, are “particularly emotional people”, who tend always to “exaggerate and complain”, without understanding that “capitalism means progress, and sometimes progress can bring some inconveniences” (Centemeri, 2006, p. 52). The insistence on the need for progress is deeply problematic, because it implies that economic growth is indispensable and unavoidable, even when it brings severe accidents, which are diminished as “inconveniences”. Moreover, the belief in progress is “crucial to theories of social evolution and an ideological linchpin of capitalism” (Eriksen, 2016, p. 142). But it is noteworthy that economic growth cannot go hand in hand with any kind of human sustainability, and this tension contributes to generate chronic crises (Eriksen, 2016, p. 13).

Furthermore, the reference to capitalism is significant because it reinforces the idea that it is this political economy which had influenced the production of hazards and disasters. As Button and Schuller further explain: “disasters since the advent of capitalism can be seen as deeply interconnected with global forces, whether they be in the form of colonialism or late state capitalism, or neoliberal forces” (2016, p. 4). Increasing the distance and speed with which benefits and harms could travel, neoliberalism has exacerbated the “uneven development of risk and vulnerability” and made disasters and the processes which give rise to and shape them increasingly global (Button, Schuller, 2016, p. 6). Button and Schuller identify the Union Carbide and the case of Bhopal as an example of this logic of maximization of profits and accumulating wealth for the U.S. headquarters, while the risk was externalized in India, where the workers’ salary was minimized and safety was underrated (2016, p. 6). But also the case of Seveso can be put into this category, because a multinational foreign firm located its polluting firm in another country, maximizing their profits and uncaring about risks for humans and the environment.

Furthermore, the words of Jann are defined by Centemeri (2006) as an example of the “colonialist attitude” (p. 52) of Swiss society. The choice of the term “colonialist”, which the author herself writes with quotation marks, may seem inappropriate, given the location of Seveso in the Global North and the lack of an historical process of colonization of the land. Despite this, the term might be suitable to describe the case of Seveso, since the company which owned ICMESA was a multinational based in another country. Moreover, Hoffmann-La Roche did not have shown enough caution in terms of safety measures towards neither the local community nor the territory of Brianza, which was at the time an area in fast economic expansion, characterised by mostly individualistic values. Conti (1977, p. 83) defines Seveso as a “precapitalistic socioeconomic situation” which “didn’t notice that its little archaic island was immersed in the conditioning mechanism of capitalism, and was conditioned by that”. This was reflected, according to Conti, by the fact that people were angrier at the Lombardy Region than at Givaudan, and about the ambivalent feeling towards abortion.

Moreover, there was a difference in the attitudes of the factory workers (mostly originally from the South) and the artisans of Brianza towards the evacuation from homes. While the factory workers were more concerned with a quick compensation, a new job opportunity, a new house; the artisans had a strong attachment to their own houses, their own objects (Conti, 1977, p. 84). Conti pointed out that when they were complaining about the loss of their homes, they seemed to be “defending not an interest, however legitimate, but rather an ideal” (Conti, 1977, p. 84), and were judging negatively the factory workers who did not had the same feeling. This topic, as much as the elements of vulnerability of the area related to the social sphere, are explored throughout the narration of *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina*.

### **2.1.2 Slow violence in Bhopal**

The disaster of Bhopal can be more easily examined as a consequence of a process of slow violence than Seveso, because Nixon himself (2013, p. 46) quotes this event and Sinha’s book as examples of construction of vulnerability over time. In order to understand the reasons behind the disaster, it is useful to have a few historical information about the history of the plant itself.

The company built the plant in the city of Bhopal because of its central location and access to transport infrastructure. The main outcome of the Bhopal plant was the pesticide Sevin. It must be noted that initially, the site was not intended for hazardous industry, but only for light industrial and commercial use. But because of the pressure from competitive chemical

industries, UCIL (Union Carbide India Limited) decided to implement the manufacture of raw materials and intermediate productions in the same place, despite the risks of a more hazardous factory in a densely populated area (Broughton, 2005, pp. 1-2).

Firstly, it must be stressed that for the production and manufacturing of Sevin, other less dangerous methods alternative to the use of the hazardous MIC (methyl isocyanate) existed. Despite this, other methods seemed to be less efficient and produced more wastes requiring treatment, therefore the company settled on the choice of MIC (Jasanoff, 1988, p. 1115).

Secondly, inside of the plant of Bhopal more MIC was produced than what it could immediately be processed. Consequently, the chemical was stored in large quantities for weeks in big tanks (Amnesty International, 2004, p. 41). The Union Carbide Corporation (UCC) also had a plant in Institute, West Virginia, USA. S. Ravi Rajan (2016, p. 150) reports that UCIL wanted to build a smaller plant, more adequate to the needs of the company at the time, than the one in the United States. Nevertheless, the design engineers of UCC in the USA insisted on a large-scale storage which would have carried a less expensive – but riskier – process (Rajan, 2016, p. 150).

Moreover, between the plant located in India and the one in the USA there were several differences regarding safety measures. While in the USA the high production of MIC matched with a high processing capacity, that was not the case in Bhopal, resulting in large quantities of MIC stored for long periods of time, as previously mentioned. Furthermore, in Bhopal there were not enough emergency measures to avoid the possible consequences of a MIC leak, such as emergency caustic scrubber, which instead were present in the plant in Institute (Amnesty International, 2004, p. 42).

There were also some tools, such as a refrigeration unit, which were present but had been turned off in Bhopal. In addition, the workers were not sufficiently trained and were not provided with an adequate protective equipment (Amnesty International, 2004, p. 43- 44). The reasons behind the unpreparedness of the employees of the factory could be many. Broughton links the cuts made by the firm with the crop crisis during the 1980s, which led to less investments in pesticides. The author argues that UCIL made plans to “dismantle key productions units of the facility for shipment to another developing country” (Broughton, 2005, p. 2). Nevertheless, the plant kept operating using unqualified and underpaid workers to operate highly risk-ridden technological systems, without regard to the low safety standards. Furthermore, workers did

not have the means to mobilize adequate political support to ensure better working conditions. (Rajan, 2016, p. 151).

Another striking difference between the factory in India and the one in the USA was the presence of an emergency plan to make the local population aware of the possible risks. In Bhopal, there was no system to inform adequately the people living near the plant. People had no clue of the risks they were facing simply by living adjacent to the plant (Amnesty International, 2004, p. 43- 44). There was a general unpreparedness due to the lack of a proper crisis management by the firm and the public authorities too. The UCC repeatedly tried to deny the seriousness of the risk (Jasanoff, 1988, p. 1116). Regarding the differences between the plant in India and the USA, Edward Broughton (2005, p. 2) writes about a “double standard for multinational corporations” which varies according to the place where the plant is located. Overall, Amnesty International insists on the fact that there was “overwhelming evidence to suggest that UCC management was aware of safety problems at the Bhopal plant for some time before December 1984” (Amnesty International, 2004, p. 44).

Moreover, before the release of December 1984, some leaks had already occurred. Sheila Jasanoff (1988, p. 1116) mentions three gas leaks which took place between 1981 and 1984; one of them even involved the death of a worker. Those leaks did not go unnoticed by the local press, which published several articles denouncing the bad safety conditions of the plant and the risks for workers and for those who lived nearby. In particular, Rajkumar Keswani was a journalist who wrote several articles about the leaks in a failed attempt to produce a governmental response (Jasanoff, 1988, p. 1116).

Overall, there was a “disturbing pattern of ignorance” among both those exposed to the risk, such as workers and local inhabitants, and a “more or less informed indifference” of those with the power of preventing the accident from occurring, such as managers and state officials (Jasanoff, 1988, p. 1117). Both definitions can be interpreted as an example of construction of a pattern of vulnerability across Bhopal.

Moreover, vulnerability contributes to render the hazardous event a chronic disaster. Ravi Rajan (2002, p. 238) comments on the fact that the latter is produced through the combination of the concepts of missing expertise and categorial politics. Missing expertise is a phenomenon “wherein the production of the potential for risk is not matched by a concomitant creation of expertise and institutions with the wherewithal to help mitigate a crisis, should one ensue” (Rajan, 2002, p. 237). This is the case of Bhopal, because of the government’s inaction and

lack of capacity of crisis management. This entails the lack of a systematic operation to evacuate people and the failure in ensuring basic public health for the people affected. Regarding non-human animals, their carcasses were not disposed for weeks after the leak. Moreover, vulnerability has been shaped by the failed attempt of the government to provide compensation for the human survivors (presented in the first chapter), mostly due to corruption (Rajan, 2016, pp. 154-155).

Categorical politics are the “forms of political intervention that are driven solely by framing social problems via some overarching structural analysis, and that either ignore or dismiss phenomena that are not visible through their theoretical lens” (Rajan, 2002, p. 238). An example are the corporate politics of Union Carbide, which tried to downplay the extent of the disaster and divide public opinion. The company also blamed the victims, suggesting that the high mortality was not due to MIC only, but a combination of factors, such as the undernourishment and the diseases, especially tuberculosis, which affected the victims even before the toxic leak (Rajan, 2016, p. 152).

The aftermath of the disaster left Bhopal polluted by the MIC and other hazardous chemicals, which were dumped in the factory site. The contamination of that area expanded to the soil and underground waters, which were the major source of irrigation for local agriculture. Hence, the consumption of agricultural products in the affected area strengthened the severe consequences of the pollution, due to increased levels of chemical consumption (Ganguly, Mandal, & Kadam, 2018, pp. 6-7). In Bhopal, slow violence was characterized by a pattern of toxicity of the land and the life of its inhabitants, which made the disaster a chronic one, through a normalization of the enduring pollution (Rajan, 2016, p. 149).

There were, though, some positive developments in the aftermath of the disaster. For example, an increase in environmental awareness, which led to the passing of the Environment Protection Act in 1986, which entailed the creation of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (Broughton, 2005, p. 4). Furthermore, the Bhopal disaster stimulated the birth of activist initiatives, which tried to build a different approach to politics, including critics towards the growing social and economic vulnerability (Rajan, 2016, p. 156).

In Sinha’s novel, activism plays a crucial role. Sinha traces a picture of the vulnerability of the city two decades after the disaster, including the story of everyday struggles and resistance of the locals towards the injustice caused both by the firm and the corrupted government. Activism

plays a crucial role in *Animal's People*, which examines the struggle for justice twenty years after the poisonous leak.

## **2.2 Social vulnerability and the impact on the community**

As mentioned above, Nixon insists on the fact that typically slow violence is “not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon, 2013, p. 2). This habit to violence is related to our way of perceiving an event. Speaking about disasters, it should be stressed that it is the way disasters are defined that changes the perception of the people towards them. As Remes and Horowitz argue, “by defining certain experiences as exceptional and others as normal, conventional thinking about disaster has too often set limits on our social imaginations.” (Remes, Horowitz, 2021, p. 8). One way to challenge conventional thinking is shifting the parameters of “what is commonly perceived as violence” (Nixon, 2013, p. 144).

One way to do this is proposing a disaster narration which displays social vulnerability across time and space, and enlightens the impacts on the community hit by the disaster. Both *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* and *Animal's People* do that, albeit in different ways, which are presented in the following pages.

### **2.2.1 Seveso and the fragmentation of the social body**

The narration of Conti's book is carried on in the present perfect (Italian *passato prossimo*), so it is as if the boy was recollecting his thoughts about the Seveso accident soon after it. There are some mentions to the past, but the protagonist is only 12, so he does not recall the pollution before the disaster with precision, even though there are mentions to the death of animals due to the fumes of ICMESA (p. 23). The vulnerability depicted in the book *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* is the one of a society strongly divided between social groups, such as people from Seveso and immigrants from the South of Italy, man and women, adults and children. The forced displacement in the hotel makes all the differences emerge and co-live in a single space, where the suspect and prejudices towards one another prevail. The loss of the house, the centre of the family life, plays a crucial role in the Seveso disaster.

Firstly, it must be acknowledged that the disaster of Seveso happened in a heterogeneous society. The people living there were originally from different places: there were many immigrants from Veneto, and many other people from the South of Italy. Conti depicts these differences already from the first pages of *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina*. The strong social division connected to the origins of people is reflected in the location of the houses. Marco, talking about his friend Sara, who is originally from Sicily, immediately writes that her



family stays “in a little house in the immigrants neighbourhood” ( “in una casetta nel quartiere degli immigrati”, pp. 21-22). This is also the neighbourhood hit more strongly by the dioxin cloud, because it is the one closer to ICMESA.

The choice of a young boy from Seveso as a narrator allows Conti to describe the social differences through his naive gaze. When Marco talks about Sara and his family, he does not share the same prejudices of his parents. He truly enjoys Sara’s company, her big family and messy house. But, in his narration, he speaks freely, therefore reporting also the opinions – much more biased and filled with prejudices – of other people from Seveso towards the people from the South, defined with the derogatory term *terroni*, or simply *meridionali*. The following passage describes the immigrants’ neighbourhood:

The factory in front of Sara's house, where her father works, sends up terrible stench every now and then, and my mother says that the *terroni* who live around there speculate. When a rabbit or chicken dies on them, they take it to the factory gatehouse where they pay them through the nose, with the idea that the animal died from the poisonous fumes. The fact is that the masters are Swiss, they have a lot of money, and in order not to have any trouble they pay without begging, so people take advantage of it (p. 23, emphasis added by me).<sup>6</sup>

From these sentences, it emerges a brief description of the ICMESA’s masters, included their nationality, which immediately is followed by their higher economic status. Moreover, it emerges that the issue of the death animals was something already going on for quite some time, enough to be normalized. The mechanism of compensation has become such a habit that there are some people from outside, such as Marco’s mother, who started to believe that the inhabitants maliciously abuse the system. She also mentions that the people who live around the firm are probably speculating, and that “they were getting paid even the chicken died of old age” (“si facevano pagare anche le galline morte di vecchiaia”, p. 33), and her neighbour agrees with her.

The novel is more focused on the narration of the immediate aftermath of the Seveso disaster, and allusions to the pollution before 1976 are rare. Conti’s choice to limit the assumptions towards a long-time pollution might be interpreted as an attempt to represent the truthful

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<sup>6</sup> “La fabbrica davanti alla casa di Sara, dove lavora suo padre, ogni tanto manda delle puzze terribili, e mia madre dice che i terroni che abitano là intorno ci fanno la speculazione. Quando gli muore un coniglio o un pollo lo portano alla portineria della fabbrica dove glielo pagano a peso d’oro, con l’idea che l’animale è morto per i fumi velenosi. Il fatto è che i padroni sono svizzeri, hanno un mare di soldi e per non aver grane pagano senza farsi pregare, così la gente ne approfitta.”

perception of Seveso's inhabitants, and the fact that they were so used to pollution that they did not even perceive that anymore, or they denied it (such as the protagonist's mother does, accusing the people from the polluted neighbourhood to be just speculators). The only significant passage which alludes to a long-term pollution is referring to the fact that trouts used to be present in the local river but they disappeared because of toxicity. The only ones who remember the presence of trouts are "the olds of the village" ("i vecchi del paese", p. 33). All the other adults seem to have normalized toxicity, to the point of denying it: the reason why the situation after the 10<sup>th</sup> of July is different is due to the obligation of displacement from the authorities. The people who are not displaced but live close to the site of the firm are described to be secretly still working, even if it is prohibited. Similarly, Marco's dad is uninterested in the potential toxicity of his woods, which he is selling illegally, for the pursuit of profit. Other allusions to the pollution before 1976 are statements by Marco's mother, such as the ones quoted above. It is noteworthy to mention that when she makes these assumptions, she also downplays their seriousness. For example, the fact that animals die because of the fumes of the firm is an "idea", something not certain, which entails her suspect.

Additionally, Marco often reports his mother's opinion about Sara and her family, as it happens again here:

My mother says Sara grows up as a tramp, because she sees her every day going always around dirty and torn and everyone knows that every now and then they send her home from school because she has lice, but then if she knows that in the summer she goes around also in the evening, and so she says she can't grow up as a good girl. Generally, it is true that good girls do not go around in the evening, but Sara is different (pp. 21-22).<sup>7</sup>

In the last sentence it emerges that also Marco has his own biases towards girls, but his friendship with Sara makes him see her differently. Throughout the narration, there are many passages from which it is shown that Sara herself is very aware of her being *meridionale* and she fears a possible judgement from Marco because of this.

For example, she is angry when he locks his bike visiting her home, because she says he doesn't do the same in other neighbourhoods (p. 26). But Sara is also "mischievous" ("dispettosa", p. 30) and "naughty" ("maliziosa", p. 40), because she believes herself braver than Marco, and

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<sup>7</sup> "Mia madre dice che Sara vien su come una vagabonda perchè la vede di giorno andar sempre in giro sporca e stracciata e tutti sanno che ogni tanto la mandano a casa da scuola perchè ha i pidocchi, ma se poi sa che d'estate gira anche di sera, allora dice che non può venir su una ragazza perbene. In genere è vero che le ragazze perbene non vanno fuori di sera, ma Sara è diversa."

likes to challenge him. At the same time, Sara fears that Marco looks at the dirtiness and messiness of her house in a judgemental way, while he actually says that he prefers her house from his own, which is always deeply clean and ordered, and therefore boring for a kid (p. 27). The difference between his and Sara's garden is depicted in this passage:

She [Sara] is always afraid that I will look at the mess and dirt in her garden and house. She doesn't understand that I get bored in the garden of my house: all the gravel stones are clean and in place, not even a flower has time to fade and fall to the ground because my mother does nothing but clean and clean, in the garden as in the house, and when I am on holiday she makes me clean the garden. [...] I have a lot more fun in Sara's garden overgrown with weeds, with robinia trees all around which surround the fence and then under the fence send out roots, and thorny bushes grow from the roots (pp. 27-28).<sup>8</sup>

There are many passages in which Marco subtly underlines the differences between his family and Sara's one, which extend to his and her land of origin. *Meridionali* are offended if they are defined "starving to death [...], despite the fact that, if they came up from their country it is because in that country they did not have food"<sup>9</sup> (p. 26). The differences between the people of Brianza (*brianzoli*) and the people originally from the South is also portrayed through female bodies: while Sara's mother is always dressed in black and has a big, fat body, Marco's mum is very neat, always caring about her appearance (p. 29). In addition, he says that Sara, as all girls from the South, has long hair (p. 26), which are cut short when she is hospitalized (p.89). Sara herself fears prejudices and claims that the nun who cut her hair in the hospital did that just because she is from the South (p. 89).

In another passage, it is said *meridionali* eat red chillies that sting, "but *we* don't because they burn the tongue" (p. 27)<sup>10</sup>. This *we* is an explicit statement of the social rift between the inhabitants of Seveso, the same rift reflected in the location of the neighbourhood of the immigrants. Immigrants are also from Veneto, but in this book the stronger social barrier is the one between *brianzoli* and *meridionali*. It existed even prior to the disaster, but it is

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<sup>8</sup> "Ha sempre paura che io guardo il disordine e la sporcizia del suo orto e della sua casa. Non capisce che io, nel giardino di casa mia, mi annoio: tutti i sassolini di ghiaia sono puliti e a posto, neppure un fiore fa in tempo a appassire e cadere a terra perché mia madre non fa che pulire e pulire, in giardino come in casa, e quando sono in vacanza il giardino lo fa pulire a me. [...] Mi diverto molto di più nell'orto di Sara invaso dall'erba grama, con le robinie tutt'intorno che circondano la staccionata e poi sotto la staccionata mandano le radici, e dalle radici crescono cespugli spinosi."

<sup>9</sup> "morti di fame [...] eppure se sono venuti su dal loro paese è perché al paese non avevano da mangiare." The expression "morti di fame" is a denigratory term denoting someone who is starving to death, and so they are willing to do anything to have food.

<sup>10</sup> "Ma *noi* no perché bruciano la lingua" (emphasis added by me)

strengthened by that. *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* is particularly effective in describing the differences between the people from the North and the South, because these differences emerge throughout the narration via the comments of Marco, which are usually quite spontaneous and ingenuous. In the case of the red chillies, a simple difference in the food habits makes it emerge a stronger social division, with the use of “we” from the narrator.

When the consequences of the dioxin cloud firstly hit the immigrants’ neighbourhood, with the death of animals and ill children, the *brianzoli* such as Marco’s mum and her neighbour diminish the entity of the disaster, framing the people living there as individuals used to speculate, and blaming them for making a lot of children but do not take care of them. On the other hand, Marco’s mother prohibits him to go to play at Sara’s house, without telling him explicitly the reason (pp. 33-34).

This cultural differentiation is forcibly interrupted by the order of evacuation, which locates everyone from the contaminated areas in the same hotel. At first, the forced displacement is intolerable for Marco’s family: his parents decide to go eating at the hotel restaurant where there are paying clients, and not the other one (where the Lombardy Region is paying for the displaced people), so they do not have to mix with all the other displaced families. The scene is described with a subtle irony by the author, who underlines how quickly Marco’s parents change opinion, as soon as they realize how much money it would cost for them to eat at the proper fancy restaurant of the hotel every day (pp. 54-55).

Being at the hotel and having to eat together with all the families entails a disruption of the social order, which was based on the location of the houses, which in turn depended on the origin of the people. In this sense, Conti’s novel is particularly effective in depicting the disaster as a social issue that cuts across cultural and class divisions. In the hotel, the inhabitants of Seveso find themselves living a collective experience of pain due to the disaster. The displacement upsets the social order of Seveso society, which is revealed to Marco. He finds himself for the first time in a situation in which he can see and hear all members of his community, while before his parents usually prevented him from listening to their discourses and many times avoided giving explanations.

The difficulty of the life at the hotel for Marco’s family is strongly linked to the suffering of being forced to leave their houses. There is a strong nexus between the place and its inhabitants, which is characteristic of every community and affects the perception of the disaster (Ligi, 2008, p. 38). The ICMESA disaster made people lose their houses, the ones they had built

themselves, after so many years of hard work. Conti herself, in the introduction of the book, underlines that during the assemblies people were not much protesting for some kind of discomfort; instead, they were asking to return to the homes they built with their own hands. These requests were accompanied by symbolic body language: people raised their hands to show the scars of their own hard work (p. 10).

The loss of the house represents the loss of the microcosm of people's lives. With the term microcosm, Ligi (2009, p. 51) identifies the space which best express "the richness and complexity of the man-place network". The domestic space can represent a microcosm inside of the bigger ecosystemic and natural space where it is located. A polluted environment is therefore interpreted as an attack to the cultural institutions of house and property (Ligi, 2009, pp. 52-52). This description fits very well the case of Seveso, where the forced displacement mixed people and put in crisis their traditional values, which were transmitted through tangible elements. The society of Seveso is well described by Conti in the preface of the book:

A society of artisan traditions, therefore extremely individualistic, found itself living a collective experience: the different levels of well-being, conquered through the exercise of wholly individual and family virtues, such as industriousness and frugality of life (accompanied, moreover, by astuteness and competitive spirit) had constituted a value of life precisely because of what they testified to, and suddenly found themselves flattened in the uniformity of the exodus from their homes, of the modern luxury hotel offered by the Region to the displaced (p. 10).<sup>11</sup>

Another feature which subtly emerges in Conti's narration is how the life at the hotel affects the usual family balances, including traditional gender roles. In Seveso society in the 70s, fathers used to do most of the work outside family home, while mothers were often taking care of most of the care-work, and therefore spent more time with the kids. This division of labour between men and women is undermined by the forced cohabitation of displaced families in the hotel. For example, fathers have trouble taking care of their kids. They are not used to spend so much time in the family, because of work, so when the mothers are absent because they are taking care of the ill kids and have lunch upstairs, the fathers in the dining room "were not able

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<sup>11</sup> "Una società di tradizioni artigiane, dunque estremamente individualiste, si trovava a vivere un'esperienza collettiva: i diversi livelli di benessere, conquistati con l'esercizio di virtù tutte individuali e familiari, come la laboriosità e la frugalità di vita (accompagnate peraltro dalla scaltrezza e dallo spirito concorrenziale) avevano costituito un valore della vita proprio per quello che testimoniavano, e si trovavano d'un tratto appiattiti nell'uniformità dell'esodo delle proprie case, dell'albergo modernamente lussuoso offerto dalla Regione agli sfollati."

to keep up with them, and make sure they ate everything” (“non erano capaci di stargli dietro, e badare di fargli mangiare tutto”, p. 59). Children are not used to stay in a closed environment and the burden of taking care of them falls all on the mothers. The only thing that keeps children calm is television, but there are fights about the channels to watch, since there are only three televisions. The fights are conducted between children, youngsters, and men. Moreover, in the hotel there are “men’s bar” (“il bar degli uomini”, p. 82) and “women’s living room” (“il soggiorno delle donne”) p. 80). These spatial division reflects the gender differences of Seveso’s society in the 70s.

Men also have a “meeting room” (“sala di riunione”, p. 72), where they speak about business: even though it is not explicitly mentioned, from their dialogues it seems that these men are the ones who own an artisan workshop. Artisans of wood are usually from the North, because the people from the South, in Seveso, were mostly factory workers, as Sara’s father (p. 23). Within the men of the meeting room, there is also Marco’s father, who is willing to sell his woods illegally despite the risk of contamination for the buyers. The experience at the hotel allows Marco to truly know his father, because he was not used to meet him so often. The life at the hotel gives Marco a new perspective on him: “In the hotel I saw my father how he was with others, outside the house, I heard how he talked: when we were at our home, instead, I hardly ever saw him, he was always at work” (“Nell’albergo vedevo mio padre com’era con gli altri, fuori di casa, sentivo come parlava: quando eravamo a casa nostra invece non lo vedevo quasi mai, era sempre al lavoro.” p. 94). The topic of the incomprehension between adults and kids, with particular reference to Marco’s father and him, will be further explored in the next chapter.

In the end, it should be highlighted that the life at the hotel is an unusual form of displacement, because people, not used to that luxury, quickly become bored by the lack of work. The hotel life which deeply affects the community in the aftermath of the disaster also because it entails a disclosure of the “power structures and social arrangements, and cultural values and belief systems” (Oliver-Smith, Hoffmann, 2002, p. 26). In *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina*, the forced co-living at the hotel is represented as the moment in which the social differentiations become gradually more evident to Marco’s eyes. He starts noticing the different behaviour of his dad, the way in which he pretends to treat the Mayor well, while talking on his back, to obtain what he wants. Therefore, the hotel, which is the location of the aftermath of the disaster, becomes the place where the social structure of Seveso is clearly revealed to Marco, because he can finally listen to everybody and he is not anymore protected by the walls of his house or the silences of his mother.

Oliver-Smith and Hoffmann comment that in disasters “every feature of society and its relations with the total environment may be impacted (2002, p. 7). In the case of Seveso, the differences between people – being them due to their culture, their origins, or their gender – contribute to make the post-dioxin society more fragmented. The disaster and the forced displacement of some of Seveso’s citizens, instead of alleviating these differences, reinforce them. Marco's mother remains distrustful of southerners, his father keeps doing his business, as much as possible, to earn more money without taking too much interest in his son. In addition, new social divisions arise, such as the one between families with ill and non-ill children: however, this is the only occasion when mothers at some point rebel and declare that they have the right to be in the dining room with their ill children, even if the sight of them is unpleasant to other diners.

Despite this event, the social body remains deeply fragmented, which renders every family unit to think just of themselves, picturing an individualistic society which is incapable of fighting together the real responsible for their forced displacement: the Givaudan and Hoffmann-LaRoche. In this case, disaster had reinforced conflicts among locals, as shown by the example of the refunds from the firm. Conti’s novel ends with Sara’s departure and therefore it does not cover the issue of reparations, but this topic is worth mentioning because it shows how a fragmented and individualized society is more vulnerable. Centemeri explains that the managers of Hoffmann-LaRoche almost immediately offered to pay for the individual damages, such as the loss of the house due to displacement. People accepted this individualized refunding, which was conducted privately, as if it was almost a secret affair. But in this way, the representatives of the firm never admitted that those damages were resulting from their culpable attitude. The issue of reparations became filled with rumours and gossip about the differences between the amount given to the compensated people, who were often accused of profiteering (Centemeri, 2006, p. 141). Although this issue is not present in the novel, from the comments and accusations of Marco’s mother it is already possible to catch a glimpse of those rumours, which roots lied in the accusations of speculation moved to the people who lived near ICMESA.

### **2.2.2 Bhopal and power of the people who “have nothing to lose”**

*Animal’s People* is set around twenty years after the disaster. The book shows how the people are still suffering deeply the consequences of the gas leak, both because of the physical consequences on their bodies and the pollution of the environment, which has never been cleaned by the factory, the Kampani. The place where the plant used to be is the “kingdom” (p.

30) of Animal, the protagonist, who is “the boss” (p. 30) of that place. He adds that the cleaning never happened, which already underscores the temporal dimension: after twenty years, nothing has changed and the population has remained vulnerable to pollution, despite the fact that the factory is no longer in operation. Already from the beginning of the book, it emerges that the Kampani site is still poisonous, and people are afraid that “one day the factory will rise from the dead and come striding like a blood-dripping demon to snatch them off” (p. 41). The site is still very dangerous because it poisons the waters, and if it would catch fire (as it happens in the end) the gas would be again released in the air.

Despite the fear, what strikes the foreign Doctor Elli is the fact that “people tolerate it” (p. 151): they are so used to injustice and toxicity that they normalized it. Being an outsider, Elli often looks at the pollution of the city of Khaufpur and the corruption of the government without understanding the capacity of people to bear them. People’s tolerance is deeply embedded with a construction of social vulnerability made by the factory through the denial of their responsibility. This denial is articulate, because it is built around the lack of information, the refusal to come to court, and the complicity of the corrupted government. For example, Animal reports that not only the Kampani stopped providing the treatment to contrast the poison which affected the health of the Kaufpurians, but also the doctors who kept giving the antidote despite the order to stop were brutally beaten by the police (p. 112). This recalls an event truly happened in Bhopal: Pablo Mukherjee (2010, p. 142) writes that in 1984 police arrested and occasionally beat volunteer doctors who were administering free medicine to the victims. The reason behind this arrest is that the treatment these doctors were giving included sodium thiosulfate, which is an antidote to cyanide poisoning. Hence, giving that treatment was indirectly supporting the idea that cyanide was among the killer gases released by the firm. But the Union Carbide denied that cyanide was present in the plant, which fuelled people’s suspicions that the plan was hiding the facts. It was later discovered that the major source of contamination was not cyanide (a better known lethal agent), but the less known, but still extremely deadly, MIC (Jasanoff, 1988, pp. 1116-1117).

Moreover, as previously mentioned, the Kampani, as the real Union Carbide, refused to come to court and did have “not even bothered to send lawyers” (p. 51). In *Animal’s People*, both issues are faced throughout the narration. The novel follows the story of the legal dispute, with the arrival for the first time of the lawyers of the Kampani, in an attempt to make a secret deal with the government, and not to show up to court. What surprises the citizens of Khaufpur is that the lawyers look “ordinary” (p. 195): their appearance is normal, they do not seem evil



people, one of them, which Animal will later discover is Elli's ex-husband, is even good looking. As Animal states, talking about them: "You can't tell they are evil bastards, these servants of the Kampani" (p. 263).

As reported by Mukherjee, the legal battle which followed the Bhopal accident has to do with issues of accountability and compensation (2010, p. 142). The citizens of Khaufpur struggle to gain a right compensation because the company refuses to accept accountability, as the struggle to take the Kampani into court shows. The novel depicts with irony the habit of the American company to escape liability with some ways of saying which became common in the language of Khaufpurians. Here are two examples of these bittersweet ways of saying:

'Trade secret', Faqri informs me.

'Don't give me that.' Trade secret is a big joke in Khaufpur. It's what the Kampani said after that night, when doctors asked for medical info about the poisons that were wreaking havoc in the city (p. 230).

'Kampani style lie' says he, meaning that an untruth endlessly repeated does not become true (p. 234).

Moreover, the vulnerability created by the lies of the firm goes hand in hand with the corruption of the government. In the book, the government's representatives are uncaring, disinterested, insensitive to the needs of their people. When Elli goes to the minister to ask clarification about the fact that people are not coming to her clinic, he pretends to be busy, but when she enters abruptly in his office, she discovers him watching cricket. In the same episode, while she is waiting for the minister, she points out to his secretary that this is a serious business, because people might die. The answer of the secretary is the following: "Madam, we are dealing with claims that go back twenty years, what difference will a few days make?" (p. 169). This uncaring attitude about further delays is shocking for the American doctor, but it was already mentioned in another episode, when the judge arrives late at the court, when Animal thinks: "eighteen years late, what's a few more minutes?" (p. 51). Again, a question is posed without the need of an answer. While in the case of the secretary he was simply trying to diminish Elli's worries, in the second example the question is posed by Animal himself in a satirical tone, characteristic of his way of speaking.

There are other episodes in which it is shown that the politicians are not to be trusted by the population. A significant one is when, after having reached an agreement with Zafar and Farouq to interrupt their fast in exchange of a promise not to make a deal with the American lawyers, the politicians do not keep their word, trying to meet in secret with the representatives of the Kampani (pp. 357-359). The deal is not reached thanks to the trick of releasing stinking but harmless gas into the room where the meeting was taking place, scaring both lawyers and politicians.

In general, the government is depicted as deeply corrupted. It must be noted that there are not many explicit mentions of Indian government, and neither of India as a geographical reference. Instead, the evidence that the novel takes place in India appears mostly by the Hindi words used frequently, the mentions to Hindu and Muslim residents and to typical Indian food. Also, the way the city is described make it clear that it is a place located in India, as well as the name itself of Khaufpur derives from Urdu. At the end of the book, the list of non-English terms provided for the understanding of the English-speaking reader, which entails many Hindi and Urdu terms, is titled “Khaufpuri Glossary”, with a reference to the imaginary city (pp. 367-374).

Sinha built an imaginary city because, as he says in an interview, he “knew Bhopal too well. To write freely, I had to imagine another city” (Thwaite, Sinha, 2007). Khaufpur is divided into neighbourhoods, usually defined “slums” by the narrator, and the “biggest and most desperate” of all is the Nutcracker. This slum is called by Animal “Kingdom of the Poor” (p. 177), borrowing an evangelic expression previously used by Ma Franci. The Nutcracker is the area where people are mostly physically and mentally exhausted by two decades of pollution and the fear that the factory could go on fire again.

All the community who lives in Khaufpur is poor and feels like, after the disaster, they do not possess anything anymore. Oliver-Smith and Hoffmann explain the consequences of disasters on the society in the following paragraph: “Disasters unmask the nature of a society’s social structure, including the ties and resilience of kinship and other alliances. They instigate unity and the cohesion of social units as well as conflict along the lines of segmentary opposition” (2002, p. 9).

The book describes the long-term consequences of the disaster on the social structure of the city. While in *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina*, the disaster brings the community apart, highlighting the differences between people from the North and South, men and women, adults and children; in *Animal's People* the loss caused by the tragedy brings the community closer. Zafar talks about the power of the people who “have nothing to lose” (p. 111), a recurrent expression in the book. Kaufpurians have lost everything in “that night, which no one in Khaufpur wants to remember, but nobody can forget” (p. 1). In the narration of Conti’s book, the disaster is less impactful and deadly, but the reason for the suffering of the people, as explained in the previous part, is the loss of the house, together with the uncertainties due to the invisibility of dioxin, which are going to be further explored in the next chapters. Instead, the citizens of Khaufpur have lost not only houses, but also dear ones, and are still deeply affected by the poisons even twenty years later.

The choice to temporally place the novel two decades after the poisonous MIC release can be labelled as an original and significant choice of disaster narration. This temporal setting, in fact, highlights how the disaster of Bhopal/Khaufpur is chronic and not punctual. It therefore contributes to reinforce the key concept of slow violence, i.e. the long-term trend of violence in the form, in this case, of a lack of environmental justice and for the victims. As Nixon argues, “the past of slow violence is never past, so too the post is never fully post: industrial particulates and effluents live on in the environmental elements we inhabit and in our very bodies” (Nixon, 2013, p. 8). In an interview, Sinha agreed with Nixon labelling of the novel as a literary representation of “slow violence” (Ipekci, Sinha, 2023, p. 3) and adds that “the refusal to clean it up is one of the cruellest and most shameful of Carbide’s Dow’s and crimes” (Ipekci, Sinha, 2023, p. 11). Taking into account the longitudinal evolution of this disaster contributes to shed light on the systemic forces, the asymmetrical power relations and the long-term impacts on human communities and the environment (Button, Schuller, 2016, p. 3).

It must be noted that according to Zafar, the strength to keep going on with the fight against the Kampani is given exactly by the lack of any possession. He is the leader of the movement which fights for justice in Khaufpur, and often uses the power derived from nothing as a slogan to push people not to give up. When the judge decides to adjourn the case, he gives hope to Zafar and his group of activists. Outside the court, Zafar makes this speech:

The Kampani and its friends seek to wear us down with a long fight, but they don't understand us, they've never come up against people like us before. However long it takes we will never give up. Whatever we had they have already taken, now we are left with nothing. Having nothing means we have nothing to lose. So you see, armed with the power of nothing we are invincible, we are bound to win (p. 54).

The unity of the citizens of Khaufpur overcomes also the differences, especially the religious ones. The community is mostly made up of Hindu and Muslim people, who are co-living peacefully and helping each other. The differences still persist, especially if people from two different religions want to marry each other, as shown by the worries of Nisha (Hindu) related to her desire to marry Zafar (of Muslim descent), as well as the story of two locals, Pyarè (Hindu) and Aftaab (Muslim). But in the case of Nisha, her father is not against this union, and he himself will marry Elli, a foreign woman with a very different cultural and religious background. Who is actually trying to divide the communities of Hindu and Muslims are the politicians, as the following passage explains: "So many times the politicians have tried to stir trouble between the communities in Khaufpur. Always the Khaufpuris say, we have suffered together, we will not be divided" (p. 302). Also the policemen try to divide the crowd which entered the plant's site to protest saying that the people who have organized it were "Hindu extremists" to divide the community (p. 311). The government's attempt to create divisions between the community is a strategy employed to distract them from their common enemy, which, in this case, can be identified both with the Kampani and the corrupted members of the government. But the answer of the crowd is exemplary of the feelings of the Khaufpuris: "There are no Muslims or Hindus here, there are just humans" (p. 312).

The co-living of the different religions is also what allows to play a trick which will be quite relevant for the plot: the use of burqa as a strategy for non-Muslim women to hide themselves. Burqa is a traditional garment for women of Islamic religion, which allows the body to be completely covered, including the face, with just a little space for the eyes (Student, 2022). In the book, three times a non-Muslim woman uses it to confuse herself in the crowd and go unnoticed. The first person to use this trick is a Christian woman, the nun Ma Franci: when the priest comes to take her back to France against her will to stay in Khaufpur, the nun pretends to go praying, and soon her friends come to say goodbye. The priest is amazed by the beautiful example of the affection of these Hindu and Muslim women for the nun. Animal, unaware of the planned trick of Ma Franci, describes the scene in this way: "Père Bernard is charmed that

these old ladies, among whom are Muslim women in burqas plus Hindu in saris, are so fond of the old nun” (p. 144). When the women go out, Ma Franci goes with them, under a burqa in order not to be seen by père Bernard, who is later shocked by her disappearance. Later, Animal finds the nun at Huriya’s house, who is “Ma’s best friend in Khaufpur” (p. 104).

When Animal tells the story of Ma Franci’s escape to Elli, she comments that she will remember this trick. Firstly, she uses it in the book to go to the hotel to meet her ex-husband (p. 320). It must be noted that Elli already dressed in local clothes to not be noticed, like when she wears dresses typical of an “Indian woman” (p. 213), in order to avoid attract attention when she goes to participate to the Muslim celebration of Muharram. Also the first days when she opens the clinic, she avoids wearing her blue jeans, preferring a shalwar kameez (p. 135) considered more appropriate and less revealing. The ability of Elli to change her clothes in relation to the situation, and in particular her use of the burqa in a previous situation are factors that make the reader deduce that she is the mysterious woman who entered the hotel and sprayed the smelly, but innocuous, gas in the room where the politicians and the American lawyers were staying. No one knows anything about her, except for the fact of being tall, being young from her way of walking and wearing a black burqa (p. 360). It is never explicitly mentioned who the mysterious woman actually is, but from the precedents and her height and age, it is possible to deduce that it is Elli.



### **Chapter 3. Incommunicability and invisibility**

In both novels, there are several episodes characterized by a difficulty, if not an actual lack of communication, between characters. In this chapter, the first part is dedicated to the analysis of incommunicability as a tool to encourage the reader to consider new perspectives on the societies affected by the disaster in its aftermath. The incommunicability is declined in a variety of ways, such as incommunicability between characters due to the will of hiding something, or due to the linguistic incomprehension. Through incommunicability, Conti and Sinha highlight the barriers to communication that arise in the wake of disaster, ultimately offering deeper insights into the impacts of displacement, in the first case, and of linguistic differences in a post-colonial context, in the second case, on the characters and communities involved.

The second part of the chapter uses the category of invisibility as a device to explore new themes related to disaster. Invisibility is metaphorically interpreted as the denial of existence of toxicity. In the first novel, invisibility of dioxin reflects on the complex social and cultural dynamics that shaped the community's response to the disaster. In the second novel, invisibility is linked with the negation of the poisonousness of the gas on the short and long term by the firm. The last part explores some examples of the consequences of slow violence of the characters who live in Khaufpur.

Through these two modes of analysis, the authors not only illustrate the challenges of understanding and communication in the face of catastrophe but also invite readers to explore the deeper, often hidden, layers of meaning within each narrative.

#### **3.1 Incommunicability**

The lack of communication between characters in the novels can provide some insights related to the aftermath of disaster. In the case of Seveso, incommunicability between children and adults as portrayed in the novel can be labelled as a narrative strategy to interpret the post-disaster as a revealing moment for the protagonist. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, Marco has to face his mothers' lies and silences, his aunt's hypocrisy and his father's disinterest in the consequences of his illegal business. These characteristics, according to the narration, seemed to be already present before, but they become clear to Marco only when he experiences the consequences of disaster such as his aunt's fear of contamination and the displacement. Moreover, during the forced stay at the hotel Marco, who is at the very beginning of his adolescence, discovers certain aspects of the sexual sphere, a taboo-topic in the society of Seveso in the '70s.

In *Animal's People*, incommunicability is interpreted more literally, in a linguistic sense, and it contributes to show that in the society of Khaufpur, it is not necessary to speak the same language in order to be able to communicate. The chapter proposes a comparison between two female characters, one, the nun Ma Franci, who is able to have exchanges even without speaking the language, the other, doctor Elli, who despite her effort in learning Hindi, has trouble understanding the inhabitants of Khaufpur and their way to live the disaster's aftermath.

### **3.1.1 Incommunicability between adults and kids in *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina***

Writing about the importance of disaster narratives, Button and Schuller (2016) argue that they “play a formative role in the creation of the subjectivity of those affected by calamitous events” (p. 6). In *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina*, the problems of communication faced by Marco gradually shape his own subjectivity into a being who is more familiar with the layers of incommunicability which characterize the society in which he lives. After the disaster, and as a consequence of the long stay at the hotel, he becomes more aware of the thoughts and beliefs of the people who surround him, including his parents, and of the complexity of Seveso's society.

The first character with whom he faces incommunicability is his mother. As previously mentioned, his mother is not happy of him being friend with Sara. But it is in the moment in which, after the release of the dioxin cloud, his mother prohibits him to go play in her neighbourhood, that Marco starts to become aware of her double standards. His mother, a few moments before, has talked with her neighbour about how the toxic cloud might have been just another way for the people living there to gain more money from the firm. But soon after, she tells her son to gift his shoes and comics which he had lent to his friend who lived in that neighbourhood, because she fears contamination. It should be noticed that she does not give an explanation to her child, but merely states that he must obey her.

Marco's first reaction is anger, because he actually knows more than her about the cloud, because he has been to the immigrants' neighbourhood, and seen dead animals. Moreover, he has hosted Sara's cat during the night in his room, without his mother knowing. Marco's anger is then directed at both of his parents, for their decision to make him go to Rapallo, at his aunt's house, without asking him his opinion and neither explaining him the reason behind this choice. Angry with both his parents, he thinks they are “sending me like a package” (“mi spediscono come un pacco”, p. 37) even though he doesn't like his aunt.



She is the second adult figure towards which Marco experiences incommunicability. She comes to take him at the station but pretends to have a cold to avoid hugging him, and she somehow makes him forget his luggage at the station, she forces him to shower and in the end gives him new clothes. At first, Marco is confused by her behaviour, but soon he understands that she acts like this for the fear of contamination. Marco's process of understanding is narrated in the following paragraph:

I was forced to put on the stuff I had found on the chair, then I looked in the wardrobe and saw that they had prepared more stuff to put on, shorts, swimming costumes, jumpers for rainy days. I was beginning to understand: aunt Irma was afraid that I had poison on me, on my clothes and shoes and hair. It was a lie that she didn't want to give me a cold, it was a lie that we had to fetch my bags tomorrow. For fear of the poison she had made me take the shampoo, the bath: what did she think? That I had the plague? (p. 45).<sup>12</sup>

These thoughts are further confirmed by the fact that his cousin is thinner than him, so Marco deduces that they must have bought the new clothes only for him. Marco is surprised by this treatment, but he soon understands that this is the same behaviour of irrational fear that his mother had towards him and the objects he had lent to his friend who lived in the contaminated area. He is angry because he doesn't understand why adults do not just say out loud that they are scared of the poison, instead of pretending and inventing excuses. Moreover, the narration of the brief trip to Rapallo shows how his aunt is not at all interested in Marco and his family's health, but she is just egoistically focused on her fear of getting contamination. The disaster makes it emerge all her hypocrisy in being exclusively worried about her own self, but pretending to be caring, as in the act of giving new clothes to Marco, done with the sole purpose of eliminating the old, contaminated clothes, without giving him any explanation.

Furthermore, incommunicability between Marco and his mother, and later his aunt, is not only descriptive of the incomprehension between adults and kids in Brianza in 1976, but it is also a literary tool that the author uses in order to show the process of understanding of a boy. He is not a kid anymore, but at the same time he is not considered old enough to be informed about these decisions. His narration depicts the prejudices of his mother and his aunt, as well as their

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<sup>12</sup> "Ho dovuto per forza mettermi la roba che avevo trovato sulla sedia, poi ho guardato nell'armadio e ho visto che avevano preparato altra roba da mettere, calzoncini corti, costumi da bagno, golfini per i giorni di pioggia. Cominciavo a capire: la zia Irma aveva paura che avevo il veleno addosso, sui vestiti e sulle scarpe e sui capelli. Era una balla che non voleva attaccarmi il raffreddore, era una balla che domani dovevamo andare a prendere le mie valigie. Per paura del veleno mi aveva fatto fare lo sciampo, il bagno: cosa pensava? Che avevo la peste?"

fear and confusion. Both his mother and aunt Irma cover their fears with insincerity, his mother telling the aunt that the fear of contamination is not legitimate because they live far from the area where the plant is located, his aunt pretending to be ill to avoid physical contact (pp. 44-47).

Marco is quite perceptive, and he is also an empathetic person. He is sad for the way his mother is being treated by his aunt, as if she was “a dirty person who carries illnesses” (p. 47). He will be sorry also later, when his mother is forced to leave her home and, full of rage, she wears her most beautiful mink fur coat, despite the heat and the mocking from the policemen. His immediate thought is: “Poor mum: without make-up, her eyes puffy, her face red and sweaty, her hair dishevelled, she looked like a poor old woman even though she had mink” (“Povera mamma: senza trucco, con gli occhi gonfi, la faccia rossa e sudata, i capelli spettinati, aveva l’aria di una povera vecchia anche se aveva il visone”, p. 51). These passages show Marco’s empathy and his love for his parents, despite their lack of a transparent communication towards him.

While Marco lives with two parents who usually pay attention not to talk in front of him about things they don’t want him to know, in Sara’s house she is free to listen to many people, including her many older brothers (who are communists and also discuss about politics) and the relatives who come to visit from Sicily. According to Marco, this is the reason why she knows so many things he doesn’t, despite him being better than her at school (p. 77, p. 100). But his permanence at the hotel allows him to listen to adults, youngsters, and strangers, and therefore learn. The displacement which followed the release of the cloud becomes for Marco an opportunity to increase his knowledge and to comprehend the things that usually his parents avoid telling him. For example, speaking to Sara’s brothers, he learns about dioxin and its links with the Vietnam war, with references that the adult reader can easily catch:

The young people talked a lot about the poison, and so I learned that it was not a new poison, but a poison that was already there before and was called dioxin. Sara’s brothers and their friends seemed to already know a lot about dioxin because they were communists, and so many years ago the Americans had dumped dioxin right on the country of O Ci Min who was the man with the goatee and Chinese eyes on the poster in their room (p. 60).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “I giovani parlavano molto del veleno, e così ho saputo che non era un veleno nuovo, ma un veleno che c’era già prima e si chiamava diossina. I fratelli di Sara e i loro amici sembrava che sapevano già molte cose sulla diossina perchè erano comunisti, e tanti anni fa gli americani avevano buttato la

The chats with older boys also allow Marco to become more aware of issues of sexuality, a taboo topic for his parents. He confronts with them in relation to masturbation of both boys and girls. It must be noted that these chats with older boys are not necessarily leading to correct information. The decision to include examples of how teens deal with sexuality in the novel, along with the fear of boys to lose masculinity and the question if also girls “touch themselves” (p. 81) is a strategy that Conti, one of the pioneers of sexual education in Italy, uses to illustrate how sex-phobic Seveso’s 1970s society was.

The life at the hotel also allows Marco to know more his father. The figure of Marco’s father is representative of the typical *brianzolo* artisan. But what is depicted are mostly his negative characteristics, such as his greed in his will to gain money from the contaminated woods left in his laboratory, his hypocrisy with the major in order to obtain what he wants, his disinterest into the health of ill people. He is also completely disinterested in politics, because politics is “for factory workers and for students, who have free time” (p. 62) and he rarely spends time with his son, because he is always working, also during the weekends (p. 63).

The difficulty in communication between Marco and his father emerges from their sporadic dialogues, in which the boy is both willing to learn from his dad, and honestly worried when he understands that his father wants to sell illegally his woods, in order to gain more money. The money would come from the firm because of the damage caused, and will also be given to him by a man from Veneto, who will sell them in Germany (p. 85). In this case, incommunicability is a device to illustrate the typical relationship of children with their parents in the ‘70s, and how the disaster has influenced them. At the same time, Marco aspires to be praised by his dad, and when it happens, he is happy because “it hardly ever occurs to him” (p. 83) to seem satisfied of his son. But he also feels that what his father wants to do is morally wrong. The tension between the desire to please his dad and the consciousness of the dishonesty of the action he is planning is described in this paragraph:

I said that maybe I could help too, but dad told me not to talk nonsense, that it wasn't boy stuff, and the best help I could give was to keep quiet and not talk to anyone about the things he was discussing with mum. But anyway, I had already realised that about those things, about the trucks or the cars to sneak off to get the stuff in Area A, they were also talking about it at the other tables, and in the men's meeting room. They talked about that, and the business, and the

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diossina proprio sul paese di O Ci Min che era l'uomo col pizzetto e gli occhi da cinese del poster nella loro camera.”

customers they were losing: they didn't talk about the sick children and the hare-lipped children, maybe dioxin is a poison that only hurts children and that's why they didn't care (p. 72).<sup>14</sup>

The incommunicability of Marco with the adult world is also a narrative device which allows the reader to discover, together with the main character, the meaning of abortion and of the female body, as long as other information related to the sexual sphere. When Sara explains to Marco that her sister Assuntina has quarrelled with her boyfriend, because he wants her to do “a thing” (p. 77) that she doesn't want to do, Marco makes a lot of questions to his friend. Sara doesn't want to reveal too much, so she tells him that he cannot understand because he is a man. Marco, confused, thinks: “If it is my parents, I cannot understand because I am a child. If it's Sara, I can't understand because I'm a man.” (“Se sono i miei genitori, non posso capire perchè sono un bambino. Se è Sara, non posso capire perchè sono un uomo”, p. 77).

The discussion with Sara gradually helps Marco to understand more about abortions, even if sometimes there are misunderstandings, such as when he thinks that “the operation” is aimed at curing the foetus, instead of killing it (p. 100). Sara's reaction is laughing at him, a fact which again makes Marco angry because he feels he is always treated like “a child, or a stupid: from my mother, from my father, from Irma, and now even Sara” (“da bambino, o da pirla: da mia madre, da mio padre, dalla Irma, e adesso anche Sara”, p. 100). Again, Marco's misunderstandings in his attempt to know what “operation” Assuntina wants to do are an example of the sexophobic society of Seveso, which never gave explanation about these things to teens. Marco's path of comprehension of the meaning of abortion is conducted alone, through listening and learning from other during his permanence at the hotel. This topic will be further explored in the second part of this chapter.

### **3.1.2 Incommunicability in *Animal's People*: a matter of language**

*Animal's People* is a novel written mostly in English language, characterised by broken syntax and vulgar words. The novel is enriched with many expressions in other languages, including Hindi, Urdu, Bhojpuri and French. Furthermore, the chapters which form the novel are supposed to be tapes originally recorded in Hindi by Animal, as reported in the editor's note at

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<sup>14</sup> “Ho detto che forse potevo aiutare anch'io ma il papà mi ha risposto di non dire sciocchezze che non sono cose da ragazzi, e il migliore aiuto che potevo dare era stare zitto e non parlare con nessuno delle cose che lui discuteva con la mamma. Ma tanto, io mi ero già accorto che di quelle cose, dei camion o delle macchine per andare di nascosto a prendere la roba nella Zona A, ne parlavano anche agli altri tavoli, e nella sala di riunione degli uomini. Parlavano di quello, e degli affari, e dei clienti che perdevano: non parlavano dei bambini malati e dei bambini col muso di lepre, forse la diossina è un veleno che fa male soltanto ai bambini e per questo non gli importava.”

the beginning of the book. The fiction of the journalist (called by Animal *Kakadu Jarnalis*, because of his trousers, p. 3) who gives Animal the tapes to be recorded is the narrative strategy which allows the story to start. The journalist doesn't understand Animal's language, and Animal at first records the tape without speaking about "that night" or narrating his history as it would be expected, but talking freely about whatever it comes to his mind, including filthy songs, as in some kind of stream of consciousness. When the journalist makes the tapes translated, he is fascinated by Animal's unrestrained tongue, since "he has never found such honesty as in that filth of yours", as another character, Chunaram, comments (p. 7).

Incommunicability is therefore a device to begin the narration. Moreover, there are many occasions in which the characters add non-English words to their speaking. Hence, it is possible to define *Animal's People* as an example of literary multilingualism, because it entails code-switching, meaning "the use of several languages or varieties within the same text" (Gardner-Chloros, 2015, p. 186). When only a single word is presented, the translation may not always be provided within the text, but the reader can find it at the glossary located at the end of the book. In other cases, especially if the word recurs multiple times in the novel, the translation is given by Animal only the first time. In the case of sentences, usually the translation in English follows in-text.

The use of code-switching can have multiple functions in multilingual literature (Gardner-Chloros, Weston, 2015, p. 186). According to Roman Bartosch, in Animal's way of speaking the frequent use of "linguistic malapropisms", such as *jamisponding*, which means "spying" like James Bond, and which "serve as a constant reminder of neocolonial and globalist influences on the environment of Khaufpur" (Bartosch, 2012, p. 15). The use of different layers of language – and of meaning – is therefore a tool to remind to the reader the linguistic diversity and complexity of the reality of the postcolonial India.

It must be noted that literary multilingualism can also be expanded beyond traditional definitions and include also non-linguistic sounds, such as noises and incomprehension (Huss, 2021, pp. 155-157). In fact, in the novel there are several written expressions which resembles noises, plus, in the editor's note, the following sentence clarifies the supposed multisounding of the original recordings, as well as Animal's sarcasm: "Some tapes contain long sections in which there is no speech, only sounds such as bicycle bells, birds, snatches of music and in one case several minutes of sustained and inexplicable laughter."

Mark Huss (2021, p. 156) insists on the fact that the reader plays an active role to make multilingualism happen. It could be added that in the case of *Animal's People*, the presence of languages which are spoken in India, plus one European language (French), could have been chosen by the author in order to give familiarity to readers both from Europe and India.

The heterogeneity of languages reflects the heterogeneity of the characters. One of the aims of code-switching in this novel is to reflect the different characters' mother tongue. For example, Ma Franci speaks only French, because, after the night of Bhopal, she has lost the ability not only to speak other languages, but also to understand that other people are speaking languages. Instead, she believes everyone around her is speaking gibberish. This is the reason that leads Animal to learn French, in order to be able to communicate with her, because of his affection for the nun, shown for example in this statement: "Few people in the world I love, this old lady is one of them" (p. 142).

Despite her lack of linguistic understanding, Ma Franci feels at home in Khaufpur and doesn't want to leave the city. In addition, she has many links with local people, especially Huriya Bi, who, according to Animal, "Ma's best friend in Khaufpur she's, not a word of each other's speech do they understand, yet sit cackling like a pair of old hens" (p. 104). Huriya Bi is going to die together with her to warn all the people of the risk they are facing, when the gases of the factory spread again in the air because of a fire. It is interesting how during the night in which she dies, the nun is heard "calling out in loud, clear and perfect Khaufpuri" (p. 363). It is not further explained how or why Ma Franci remembered that language after so much time.

While Ma Franci does not speak any language except from French, but is still able to have friends and affection towards the community, there is another female character who is not able to comprehend the locals, despite having learned Hindi. Elli has studied the language on purpose, to be able to communicate with people, but they do not come to her clinic, and she is unable to figure out why. There are many passages where her lack of comprehension is explicit, as the following: "I swear I don't understand Khaufpur" (p. 151), "I give up with this town, I don't think I will ever understand it" (p. 166).

When Elli understands that people fear she is linked with the Kampani, she is hurt and does her best to try to meet their needs and to fill the gap between her and them, including going with Animal in the Nutcracker. The trip is very important for Elli to understand people's fears, but after that they still are not coming to her clinic. The frustration Elli feels is exemplified when she shouts out loud: "HEY, ANIMAL'S PEOPLE! I DON'T FUCKING UNDERSTAND

YOU!” (p. 183). These shouted words correspond to an outburst of anger but are also indicative of Elli's difficulty in understanding Khaufpur, not in a linguistic way, but in a broader sense.

Oliver-Smith and Hoffmann (2002, p. 7) say that in “disaster contexts, aid often gets delivered in inappropriate forms and according to unsuited principles”. The genuine offer of help from the American doctor is not understood by the people of Khaufpur: but Elli does not comprehend that she “quite logically appears suspicious to those who have been deceived time and again by the American corporate power that has crippled their community” (Singh, 2015, p. 149). In fact, when Union Carbide arrived in India, it was promising to accelerate the country's drive towards self-sufficiency, paired with the eradication of poverty and hunger thanks to the production of its fertilizers and insecticides (Mukherjee, 2011, p. 219). Elli is the one who thinks that Khaufpurians perpetuate “illogical refusals” even though she is the privileged one, who, “as one afforded the rights of humanity, Elli has the ability to declare their incomprehensibility” (Singh, 2015, p. 149). Animal says that she also insists in the fact that the people of Khaufpur are “as clever as the Amrikans [...] but they have all the money so they have good lives and our are a little more than shit” (p. 247). This reconstruction reflects her simplistic perspective, which emerges from the fact that she does not seem to understand that the slow violence of the Kampani, which is still occurring at the moment of the narration, is too deep to be resolved by her generous gesture. The incommunicability between her and Khaufpurians emerges also in her belief that her and Animal are equals, a fact that the boy immediately denies. He wants to be paid to carry her to the Nutcracker, as he does with tourists, and Elli comments:

‘I thought we were friends’ she says, looking kind of hurt.

‘What has that got to do with it?’

‘Friends don’t charge each other for favours.’

‘We are friends,’ says I, ‘but not equal friends.’

‘Crap. Of course we’re equal.’

‘No, we’re not. You are rich and I am poor.’

‘What has that to do with friendship?’ (p. 175).

Elli seems to be unaware of the consequences that the structural differences between United States and India have also in personal relationships. Animal is conscious of her incapacity to comprehend and communicate with locals, as it emerges when he says: “You are a good-hearted

doctress but nothing do you fucking understand” (p. 185). In conclusion, Elli’s incommunicability is a powerful reminder that even if she believes in equality, she does not understand “the power of market forces and ideologies in the construction of global spaces and identities” (Singh, 2015, p. 147), which mark the differences between her and Khaufpurians.

Elli and Ma Franci have something in common: they are both relying on Animal to translate the world around them. In the case of Ma Franci, the translation is literal, since the woman otherwise seems perfectly capable of moving around Khaufpur and coping with her own needs; in the case of Elli, it is a metaphorical translation, an aid to understand that world so incomprehensible for her Western way of thinking. It is Animal who shows her around the “Kingdom of the Poor”, in his attempt to discover more about the doctress’s past, but also in the hope that she might cure his twisted back. These factors make him “the translator par excellence in Khaufpur’s cosmopolitan world of local activists, visiting Australian journalists, American doctors and French nuns” (Mukherjee, 2010, p. 151). Animal has an exceptional linguistic ability, which allows him to quickly learn new languages and to sense linguistic meanings even when he is unfamiliar with the words (Mukherjee, 2010, p. 151). Therefore, he can chat in a polyglot mixture of languages. In addition, as previously mentioned, his ability goes beyond languages and expands to his capacity to empathize and comprehend other’s imaginaries. Mukherjee adds:

This combination of linguistic precocity and intense recognition of the inner life of others enables Animal to adopt a ‘transpersonality’, whereby he can experience the objective existence of his entire environment of Khaufpur as a network composed of related subjects, including himself (Mukherjee, 2010, p. 152)

It is interesting to note that this capacity for Animal is also a source of pain for him, as when the words of Elli, who describes the “Paradise Alley” neighbourhood as an “earthquake” (p. 105), allow him to see that environment as she sees it. Her gaze has the power to “fundamentally alter Animal’s way of interpreting his own community” (Singh, 2015, p. 147), so that he realises “how poor and disgusting are our lives” (P. 106).

In conclusion, the capacity of Animal to be a great communicator and mediator between different people is also painfully and destabilizing when he understands that Elli sees Khaufpur just as a disaster zone, as journalists see it as a source of tragic stories which have not any meaning other than to provoke the pity of foreign and richer readers. About Elli’s influence on Animal’s perceptions, Julietta Singh adds:



Elli's discursive power is crystalized as physical pain in Animal's body, issuing a cause and effect relation between her declarative power and Animal's physical embodiment of it. Through Animal, Elli and the Kampani are critically linked by virtue of their mutually harmful effects upon his body (Singh, 2015, p. 148).

### **3.1 Invisibility of contamination and denial of toxicity**

In this part, the focus is on the concept of invisibility, which, according to Ligi (2009, p. 61) is a central theme in anthropology of disasters. Ligi intends invisibility as "the incapacity to 'see' with your eye the threat" and it expands, in the case-study presented by Ligi, which refers to radioactive contamination, to the incapacity to have a "overall sensorial perception" through the bodily experience (Ligi, 2009, p. 61). In the case of Seveso and Bhopal/Khaufpur, the gas leak was perceived through a bodily experience, through the view of the dioxin cloud and its smell, and through the smell of boiled cabbage of MIC. However, invisibility can be interpreted differently, taking on a metaphorical significance that reflects the denial of the existence of toxicity, which made people incapable to see the threat. According to this definition of invisibility, both gases were rendered invisible in different ways. Dioxin was not measurable, plus there was a lot of disinformation on the media and from the authorities, so it was not considered that toxic as it really was, and the safety measures invoked by some groups were considered an exaggeration or even a conspiracy by other people (Centemeri, 2006, p. 64). The invisibility of MIC was built through the negation of its toxicity by the firm itself, and the denial of the poisonousness of the site of the firm. This interpretation is explored separately in the following paragraphs.

#### **3.1.1 Invisibility of dioxin in Seveso and the issue of abortion**

Conti's narration of the Seveso disaster delves into a significant characteristic of dioxin: its invisibility to the human eye. In the book, the protagonist does not see the dioxin cloud, but can only acknowledge its late effects, such as the death of animals in his friend's garden. The fact that, after the release of the cloud, it was impossible to define a proper contaminated area, because at the time there were not enough knowledge about the ways to identify the spread of dioxin (Conti, 1977, p. 37), made people suspicious about the true dangers of this gas. The novel narrates how the impossibility to properly measure the levels of pollution, plus the mild safety measures imposed in the non-evacuated areas, lead displaced people to suspect that behind the division of the territory in different areas, and the consequent evacuation of certain areas and not others, there might be a conspiracy of the big industry against the artisanal sector, as explained in this passage:

One evening a young man in the basement coffee room said something that I also thought:

- But if dioxin is not so dangerous, who was it that had an interest in spreading the word that it is so dangerous?

A big and thick, white-haired man:

- It's the big industry: in order to find low-wage workers, it needs to make the artisanship go down the drain. Who threw out the dioxin? Industry. Who is it that goes down the drain? The artisan. It's as simple as that (pp. 79-80).<sup>15</sup>

These statements reflect Conti's thoughts about the culture of Brianza in the '70s: one that is extremely "modern on the technical profile" but still preserves "archaic social features" (Conti, 1977, p. 83). According to Conti, the technology of production developed in a backward social relationship, so it derived a strong hate against the big industry. The author also reported that artisans believed that big industry had always tried to kill the Brianza artisanal industry, and that dioxin was just its latest strategy (Conti, 1977, p. 83-84).

In the novel, people discuss animatedly on the criteria that led to the zoning. The greatest concern of the artisans is that those who have not been evacuated are stealing customers from them (p. 78). Artisans are worried because they think people in zone B, who have not been evacuated but are located not far from the ICMESA site, are working overnight, even if they are supposed not to, and therefore making "unfair competition" with them, who are forced to live at the hotel (p. 82). This is the reason that pushes Marco's dad, along with other artisans in the hotel, to enter in zone A secretly, taking their timber and reselling it to secondary buyers, without caring neither for their own safety, nor for the one of the possible buyers.

The clearest evidence of dioxin's presence is the onset of chloracne, a disease developed by several children within the group of refugees at the hotel. While adults might deny the presence of dioxin, they cannot deny the reality of sick children, despite the fact that in the initial days, Marco's mother has also assumed that maybe one of the first affected children might have just been scalded by hot water (p. 33). Later, the sick children returned from the hospital come in

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<sup>15</sup> "Una sera un giovane, nella sala del caffè del seminterrato, ha detto una cosa che pensavo anch'io:

- Ma se la diossina non è tanto pericolosa, chi è che ha avuto interesse a mettere in giro la voce che è tanto pericolosa?

Un uomo grande e grosso, coi capelli bianchi:

- È la grande industria: per trovare operai a salario basso, ha bisogno di fare andare in malora l'artigianato. Chi è che ha buttato la diossina? L'industria. Chi è che va in malora? L'artigiano. È semplice."

the hotel with their families: Marco says they resemble “mummies”, not only because of bandages, but also for their being unusually quiet and calm (p. 58-59). Soon, the mothers with sick children are asked not to bring them in the dining room. Initially, they adhere to the request, but as the numbers of affected children grow, the mothers find the courage not to listen to the recommendation made to them earlier (p. 59). Therefore, there has been an attempt to invisibilize the children, who visually represent the uncomfortable consequences of dioxin. This attempt has failed because mothers “grew strong” and said that “if that was the hotel for the people poisoned by the cloud, the lucky ones who did not had sick children had to get used to it” (p. 59).

This short parable highlights how even within the group of displaced people, there are internal inequalities and different treatment. In the novel, it strongly emerges how those who do not have children affected by chloracne prefer not to see the sick children, confine them to their rooms and make them disappear from their eyesight, partly out of fear of contagion, partly because seeing them implies admitting the consequences of dioxin – hence, its toxicity. Even Sara’s mother doesn’t want to admit to herself that her child has chloracne, and so she doesn’t bring her to the doctor provided by the Lombardy Region, but to a standard doctor, who denies she has dioxin and tells her she just has pimples because she is growing. Sara does not develop chloracne immediately, but after a few months; this event resembles the fact that in Seveso, cases of chloracne appeared in October, suggesting that the toxicity was inside people’s bodies (Conti, 1977, p. 131).

Through the narration, dioxin is portrayed not only a polluting gas, but as a catalyst for disclosing uncomfortable topics. Hence, the denial of the toxicity of dioxin is a common strategy used by the inhabitants of Seveso to deny the reality of its consequences. Also, Conti (1977) states that “negation of danger is very often an expression of anguish” (p. 116). As Iovino (2017) argues, dioxin possess “the ‘epiphanic’ power to expose the practices of social and material control” (p. 201).

One of the key controversial issues which is made manifest by dioxin is the issue of abortion. On one hand, there are the feminists from the city who try to educate women on their rights and to show to people the possible consequences of the exposure of the foetus to dioxin, including the development of the harelip in the newborn (p. 69). On the other side, there are the women of Seveso, grown up with a Catholic value system, who do not even dare to mention

the word “abortion”. When the feminists come to the hotel and show the pictures of children with harelip to the boys, including Marco, men arrive and they chase them away, as if it was forbidden to speak about that topic. Hence, Marco wonders “what is indecent” (p. 62) in the poison. It is not the poison that is indecent, but the abortion, which is a possibility entailed with the truth of the presence of dioxin. In a note at the end of the book, Conti stresses, in a bitterly critical tone, the fact that in Seveso society the finger was often pointed at the free choice of women to have abortions instead of at Givaudan, whose toxicity supposedly caused several miscarriages (p. 120).

“Abortion” is a word rarely mentioned explicitly in the novel. This is very relevant because, as Oliver-Smith points out, “if something is defined as real, whether it is a disaster or, for example, witchcraft, its ‘reality’ is established by its social consequences” (Oliver-Smith, 2002, p. 37). Abortion is not defined, not explained; instead, it is denied as something so shameful that is unmentionable. At first, Marco does not know anything about it, and he is even mocked by Sara for thinking that “the operation” is meant to cure the baby. During the permanence at the hotel, listening to the feminists secretly and talking with his friend Sara, he gradually discovers the true meaning of the “operation” Assuntina does not know whether or not to do, not without a certain degree of dread. He also discovers that his own parents often withheld many truths and issues related to sexuality from him. The most shocking discovery for Marco is that his mother, when he was eight years old, performed an abortion in Switzerland too (p. 108).

Conti’s intention was to depict a “sexophobic society” which was forced to abandon sexophobia, as the author explains in the preface (p. 12). The topic of abortion was scandalous and forbidden in Brianza. The fact that the society of Seveso in the 70s was sexophobic is further exemplified in the book by Marco's guilt about touching himself, and his fear that he might get sick from doing that, and by the discussions with the other boys at the hotel about the meaning and implications of masturbation. In the end, the prohibition to speak about sexuality entails a prohibition to talk about abortion: the admission of the existence of dioxin is therefore a kind of legitimization to abortion (p. 12). The double meaning of the word “dioxin” is exemplified in this paragraph from the preface of *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina*:

These were impracticable paths in a profoundly Catholic society, which was horrified by abortion but was urged to practise it and even to decriminalise it: many times the phrase ‘dioxin

is not toxic' was uttered to say 'abortion is not admissible' without even explicitly mentioning the forbidden, scandalous subject (p. 12).

Therefore, denying dioxin is a way to make abortion invisible. As Iovino (2017, p. 204) argues, dioxin forces this society to reveal its "irrational fear" for the other. The ones who pay the price for this disinformation are mostly women, as the story of Assuntina shows: she faces the pressure to make an abortion from her fiancé, and from the feminists who are willing to help her but they seem not to truly understand her; on the other side, there is the hospital head doctor who denies her an abortion, the doctor who makes her listen to the heartbeat of the baby, and the well-intentioned priest who introduced her to a couple willing to adopt the child if it was born malformed. Assuntina is not given the privacy to make her choice: she becomes a source of attention by the media, and she is photographed by the journalists, who are waiting for her out of the hotel when she decides to go to abort in Switzerland. The woman is "trapped in a cognitive dissonance that makes her feel torn between the awareness of her right and the fear of exclusion" (Iovino, 2017, p. 209). In the end, Assuntina dies, and, because of the dioxin, her family does not have any object left of her, which would help to keep her memory alive. She is the one who, in conclusion, becomes invisible, as Sara explains:

So Assuntina, if she doesn't die, goes to jail, and the factory doesn't have to pay a penny. And if she dies, the factory still doesn't pay a penny, and we are left without even a photo of Assuntina. And nothing remains, of Assuntina: as if she had never even been born (p. 117).<sup>16</sup>

### **3.2.2. The invisibility of people's suffering and need of justice**

In Khaufpur, as well as in Bhopal, the consequences of the exposure to the toxic gas keep affecting the locals even twenty years after the disaster. It is a story of context characterized by "bloodless, slow-motion violence", which makes it "more likely to be buried, particularly if it's relayed by people whose witnessing authority is culturally discounted" (Nixon, 2013, p. 16). The time and the lack of resolution of the legal case render invisible the consequences of the gas exposure on the people, whose suffering is unrecognized. Even a doctor, Elli's friend, cynically underlines how these marginalized people "would have died anyway" (p. 153), and if it was not for the factory, it would have been some other illness. This comment reveals a

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<sup>16</sup> "Così l'Assuntina, se non muore, va in galera, e la fabbrica non deve pagare nemmeno un soldo. E se muore, la fabbrica non paga un soldo lo stesso, e noi restiamo senza nemmeno una foto dell'Assuntina. E non rimane niente, dell'Assuntina: come se non era mai neanche nata."

broader societal apathy, as well as a resignation to the fate of the people affected by the gas, who are still seeking for justice. As Nixon (2013) explains, the victims of the gas “lack the political contacts to gain admission to the inner circle of certified sufferers and thus to potential compensation” (p. 47).

The novel portrays the vulnerability of the inhabitants of Khaupur through the representation of different characters who are still suffering the consequences of the poisoning. One example is the character called “I’m Alive”, who derives his name from the fact that he’s one of the few survivors of his neighbourhood, besides the many pains he faces every day. Another sad image of poverty and resignation in the face of pollution is the one of a mother who is pressing her breasts to remove the milk she has, because she does not want to give it to her child. Asked for clarifications about her behaviour, she answers: “I won’t feed my kid poison [...] Our wells are full of poison. It’s in the soil, water, in our blood, it’s in our milk. Everything here is poisoned” (p. 107). The toxicity has become so pervasive and ubiquitous that it can be found even in the mother’s milk, which is usually associated with life and nurturing. This image is particularly effective in depicting how the poison is already having an impact on the future generation. Hence, the contamination is already compromising not only the past and the present, but also the future.

According to Nixon, in the society of Khaupur, it is like “the events – like the poisons themselves – are suspended in medias res, in a state of environmental, epidemiological, political, and legal irresolution” (Nixon, 2013, p. 47). The effects of the poison are visible for the locals, but also for who wants to see them, such as Elli, who demonstrates a strong desire for justice over the novel. The representatives of the Kampani, instead, decide to render those sufferers as invisible. The absence of attempts to discern the factors contributing to their pain emerges from this dialogue between one of the lawyers and one of the victims, with a journalist as a translator:

Then Gargi says that if the Kampani has any honour it must stand trial, and it should pay just and proper compensation for all the wrongs it has done.

‘What’s she saying now?’ the lawyer asks.

‘Sir,’ says the journalist, ‘she is asking for money’.

The buffalo reaches in his red-lined coat, gets out his wallet. ‘Buy yourself something nice’, he says. Old Gargi’s standing there with five hundred rupees in her hand (p. 306).

This passage is particularly relevant because it shows the wilful inability of the multinational's lawyers to understand the locals' requirements of justice, as well as the incapacity of the media to convey the truth. Faced with a demand for a just compensation and long-term commitment, the lawyer makes a gesture of charity, trivializing Gargi's call for commitment and taking a stand with a quick and superficial action. The suffering and the needs of Gargi are invisible to the lawyers' eyes, who wilfully ignores them. A key role in this process of incomprehension and annihilation is played by the translator. The journalist, reducing the request for justice to a simple demand for economic help, annihilates the true meaning of Gargi's words. This journalist represents the media, which, instead of being a source of reliable information, misrepresent the locals and their fight for justice.

These issues are related to the denial of suffering and of justice of the locals by the media and the company. But it should be underlined that the incident at the firm has also denied the city of Khaufpur and its inhabitants of their past. It must be highlighted that from the first page it is mentioned that the night of the disaster (called simply "that night", p. 1) was a watershed between a present of pain and a past that has been forgotten. It is as if the city before the disaster did not exist and never existed: the "disaster erased our past", making it invisible (p. 152). Also some characters, such as Somraj, whose lungs were affected by the gas, and who, in the night of the disaster, had lost his wife and one kid, have chosen to forget their past, as much as they can. Somraj is now a man who hardly ever smiles, never sings, despite being "the voice of Khaufpur" before the disaster. His voice has been lost in that indefinite past. Even Animal says that he does not remember when he used to walk upright, even if Ma Franci told him he used to do that as a little kid (p.1).

Within the consequences of the poison on Animal, there is also the fact that he suffers from hallucinations, which seem to be the result of the exposure to the gas. He repeatedly hears 'voices' talking to him and advising him what to do or what to think, often making filthy comments, and influencing him in his choices. Animal is conscious that the voices are inside his head (p. 2), and he uses the word "roundabout of madness" (p. 55) to speak about the moments in which the voices he hears are so loud and confused that they overlap each other and make him lose his self-domain. Unlike his twisted spine, the voices are something Animal himself seems very conscious about, while for the others they are inaudible and invisible, even if Ma Franci knows about them, and for this reason brings him to a doctor. But Animal, being the translator, is able to take advantage of the situation to ask if his back can ever be straightened, getting a negative response.

The voices heard by Animal are sometimes materialized in something physical, such as the aborted foetus, the so-called “Khā-in-the-jar” (p. 59), which he meets in the doctor’s office and later in Elli’s one. Another voice which Animal hears just once is the one of his friend Aliya, who died soon before the night when the fire spread again in the site of the firm. It is very different from the others, it is like a ghost calling from far away, and gradually disappearing. Her death is also the representation of an innocent victim, and therefore of the profound impact of the disaster in the long term.

Evoking the imaginary ghost of an unborn child is a way to insist on the all-encompassing impact of the poisonous gas. Khā-in-the-jar represents a creature which was never born, because of the poisonous gases released by the factory. Mukherjee refers: “Animal and Kha mirror each other in that they have both been placed beyond the pale of normative humanity by the Kampani’s poison gas” (2010, p. 153). Therefore, Animal’s imaginary conversations aim to show how deeply the disaster has affected Khaufpur, hitting even children in the womb and transforming them in deformed creatures with huge malformations. Moreover, the foetus is enclosed in a jar, and repeatedly asks Animal to free him from this forced prison. On the other hand, the recall to Aliya’s invisible voice is a strategy to reinforce the concept of slow violence: the firm’s poisons hit children in 1986 as well as twenty years later. Moreover, when Alyia dies, she does not have a mother, but only her two grandparents who will also encounter death during the night when the polluted site of the firm caught fire. This is the representation of a chronic disaster which not only impacts different generations, but also erases entire families.





## Chapter 4. Animality

Zoocriticism is a field of studies which is concerned with animal representation in artistic works. It is also deeply connected with the issue of animal rights in cultural production (Huggan, Tiffin, 2015, p. 17). This chapter, relying on zoocriticism, analyses the role of animals and animality in Conti and Sinha's books. It must be noticed that in both novels, animality plays an important role from the beginning, recalled even in the titles of the books. Despite this, it should be noticed that the two novels' main focus regarding animality differs.

In Conti's work, animals are crucial for the plot, particularly for understanding the impact of the disaster on the environment in its entirety. The cloud of dioxin of Seveso did not only hit the human community, but also expanded to the non-human one. The disaster did not cause human victims in the immediate aftermath, so the animals were the most visible example of the impact of the disaster. In the book, animals are representatives of the vastness of the impact of the cloud, as well as the interconnection of humans with non-humans, as the following paragraph will explain. Therefore, *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* can be rendered as a literary work which calls for environmental justice, which "reflects justice not only in human communities but also towards other species, ecosystems, landscapes, and environment as a whole" (Sahu, 2014, p. 548). It should be noted that the book maintains an anthropocentric perspective, as it does not call specifically for animals' rights. However, it contributes to raise questions regarding the animal's role and destiny in the aftermath of the disaster, and hence lends itself to a zoocritical reading. Furthermore, showing the impact of toxicity, it advocates for the right of a pollution-free environment for human and non-human inhabitants.

*Animal's People* too is a novel which calls for environmental justice, set in a place where justice has been denied for a long time. The book is not only concerned with the impact of the disaster on humans and non-humans, but specifically it addresses the animality of the protagonist, which is pervasive from the start. In fact, the book begins with Animal's denial of his humanity: "I used to be a human once. 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" (p. 1). In this chapter, the analysis focuses on the factors which made the protagonist an animal and how they are connected to the disaster and its aftermath. The first one is the factory, which is responsible for the gas leak which twisted his spine, forcing him to walk on all fours. The factory is deeply connected with the neoliberal order which allowed its presence in Khaufpur. The second one is the people around him, who started calling him *Janvaar* (which in Hindi means animal, p. 15) because of

his unusual way of walking. In the end, he himself identifies as an animal with particular features which render him as a creature with unique characteristics.

Both novels give the readers, in different ways, an insight into the concept of animality and its relationship to disaster. Oliver-Smith and Hoffman discuss about the “ownership” of a disaster, which is “the right to claim that it occurred, who its victims were, and the ‘true account’ of events, origin, consequences, and responsibilities” (2002, p. 11). This chapter seeks to describe the fact that also animals – and humans rendered as animals – are owners of the disasters within the narratives of the novels.

#### **4.1 Seveso and the dead animals**

In *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina*, the theme of death, and in particular animal death, is relevant throughout the novel. The story starts with Sara entrusting her dying dioxin-contaminated cat to Marco, and proceeds with the death of an increasing number of animals, whose polluted bodies are physically present in the territory. The representation of the dead, of about-to-die, animals in the novel can be interpreted in different manners, presented in the following paragraphs.

##### **4.1.1 The magnitude of the disaster represented through animals’ death**

First, the dead animals are both domestic and wild, and therefore they represent the severity of the impact of dioxin and the fact that the disaster is all-encompassing. The death happened because of dioxin poisoning, in the case of small sized animals, and because of an act of killing, ordered by the municipality, in the case of bigger animals, as this conversation between the two protagonists shows: “– All dead, I have told you. Dead, or killed: all chicken and rabbits. /– And also the sparrows, pigeons and flies. [...] – Even cicadas have died” (p. 28).<sup>17</sup>

The death of every animal, including insects, is representative of the extent of the impact of the disaster. The toxicity of dioxin expanded to every living being, which provoked an abnormal state of silence, which Marco describes in the following way:

There was silence, it was strange: one could not hear the chickens, one could not hear the sparrows twittering as they steal their grain and they protest, there were no more chickens nor sparrows. There were no more pigeons either, which usually fly away flapping their wings when you make the little door squeak. The chicken coop and rabbit cages were still stinking, but there

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<sup>17</sup> “– Morti tutti, ti ho detto. Morti, o ammazzati: tutti i polli e tutti i conigli. / – E anche i passeri, i piccioni e le mosche. Morti tutti. [...] – Sono morte anche le cicale.”

were none of the usual flies that always buzz around that dirty, messy garden. It was like watching television when the sound is broken (p. 27).<sup>18</sup>

In this paragraph, the insistence on silence and the absence of various types of birds can be compared to the opening of one of the pioneering texts of modern environmentalism, namely Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. The author, in the opening section entitled “A fable for tomorrow”, emphasises the element of silence (also found in the title of the novel) in the face of animals’ death, as the following paragraph reports:

There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example – where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh (Carson, 1962, p. 2).

In both passages, the contaminated environment is labelled as “strange”. The perspective is the one of a human, even if in Conti the narrator is internal (Marco), while in Carson it is external. In both cases, the reason for the silence is the absence of birds, which is caused by pollution (dioxin or DDT). This comparison is interesting, because it could be that Conti had deliberately decided to pay a tribute to Carson. It is also possible that the reference was not necessarily intended, but this helps to mark the silence given by the death of animals, especially birds, as a literary trope to indicate a place of toxicity. The latter appears repeatedly in the novel, also in relation to the pollution of the local river, as in the following paragraph:

It is a river where there are no more fish, poisoned who knows how long ago, the old people in the town say there used to be trouts but now the river is dead. It carried dead cats, dead dogs, and one dog got into a vortex and kept turning, turning, it seemed he didn't want to leave, then the current carried him away too and I went home (p. 33).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “C’era silenzio, era strano: non si sentivano le galline, non si sentivano cinguettare i passeri che gli rubano il grano e loro protestano, non c’erano più nè polli nè passeri. Non c’erano più nemmeno i piccioni, che di solito quando si fa cigolare la porticina volano via battendo le ali. Il pollaio e le gabbie dei conigli puzzavano sempre, ma non c’erano le solite mosche che sempre ronzano in quell’orto sporco e disordinato. Era come guardare la tele quando il sonoro è guasto.”

<sup>19</sup> “È un fiume dove non ci sono più pesci, avvelenati chissà da quanto tempo, i vecchi del paese dicono che una volta c’erano le trote ma ormai il fiume è morto. Portava gatti morti, cani morti, e un cane capitato in un vortice seguiva a girare, girare, pareva che non voleva andar via, poi la corrente ha portato via anche lui e io sono andato a casa.”

This passage is characterized by duplicity. On the one hand, there is the description of the river as it must have been in the past, according to the stories Marco has heard from those older than him. The disappearance of the trouts, an animal element that indicates the vitality of the river's ecosystem, occurred so long ago that the boy does not remember it. This long-lasting pollution is a sign of the slow violence of the factory on the Seveso territory. On the other hand, there is the description of the river in the precise moment in which Marco observes it: full of dead animals. Those animals that were wither killed by the poison, or because of the preventive orders of the Province.

Furthermore, the dead bodies of the animals are representative of the disorganization of the authorities in the aftermath of the disaster. The orders given to the inhabitants were unsystematic and confused: people had to kill their animals, but there were no sufficient instructions on what to do of the bodies. So, the carcasses were located wherever a fridge could be placed (Conti, 1977, p. 92). In *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina*, the dead contaminated animals are told to be situated in fridges of the school gym. Another episode in the book which denounces the mismanagement of the disaster from the authorities is when a man who has a sack containing the corpses of contaminated animals tries to pass the latter on to the provincial envoy, who runs away (p. 26).

Moreover, animals are employed to conduct experiments to monitor the level of toxicity. In the novel, it is reported that rabbits are left free to eat the grass in specific fences, in order to evaluate, with their possible death, if the ground is still contaminated by dioxin or not. But the “people from Milan” (“I milanesi”, p. 86) leave their dogs in the fences containing rabbits, leading to the death of dogs too, because they ate the contaminated rabbits. This episode of animal exploitation highlights the lack of concern towards the health of animals and the arbitrary use of animals for human purposes.

In conclusion, all these examples are a significant representation of the magnitude of the impact of the disaster on all forms of life. They serve as an illustration of the consequences of the contamination on various species, and as an emphasis on the inadequate response to the disaster from the authorities.

#### **4.1.2 Humans and animals: over the liminality**

Conti's novel also the mentions the birth of abnormal animals, a phenomenon associated with the contamination from dioxin. The information is given to Marco by Sara, who speaks about the deformed calves, born from cows of the Seveso seminary, some of which died shortly after

birth. Quoting Giulia Baquè, who writes about the human and nonhuman resilience in the landscape disaster, it is possible to speak about a “liminality” which “takes the characteristics of a blurring of boundaries between the human and then nonhuman” (2022, p. 24). Baquè, who is referring to the consequences of the earthquake and nuclear accident of 2011 in Japan on the people of Tōhoku, also adds that liminality is “related to the space of trauma” (p. 24) and that “life in the zone permits the blurring of bodily boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. [...] they are often described as cooking and eating vegetables grown in the area. Radiation then is entering their bodies, breaking the physical boundaries of the human body and once again those between human and nonhuman” (p. 29).

These words can fit also in the Seveso case and in particular in the description Conti provides in *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina*. In the book, the ones who are able to embrace liminality between the human and non-human are children. Marco and Sara seem to be able to cross the boundaries between humans and non-humans without the requirement of an excessive effort. The association between the deformed calves and the possible deformed fetuses is possible because, as Sara underlines, humans are mammals as the cows are. The girl cannot even pronounce the word “mammals” properly, but despite this, she seems perfectly capable of understanding the connection between the species.

It must be noticed that adults in the book are not capable of doing the same linking. They seem to be scared of the consequences of this association. For example, Marco’s mother reaction to the death of her chicken is one of denial: she cannot accept that dioxin also reached their house, but mostly, she seems not to accept that she, a human, could face a similar destiny. The death of the chicken means that also their home is contaminated, and it is shocking for Marco’s mother, also because it could entail that her life is worth as much as the one of the animal. Therefore, she insists on the fact that the chicken was very old, and it is her son Marco who tells the reader that she is lying (p. 50). The different approach of adults and children in the book when facing the margins of a possible shared destiny with nonhumans is quite significative. Children are able to blur the physical boundaries between humans and non-humans (Baquè, 2022, p. 29). This capacity is particularly important for the character of Sara.

Despite the great relevance in the representation of animals in this novel, the narration is still anthropocentric. Animals’ behaviours and their death are examined through their relationship with humans. For example, Sara gives great importance to the survival of her cat, Carmelina, and she tries to hide her from her father in order to prevent him from killing her, according to

the orders given by the municipality. This attitude of care is mostly concerned with her domestic animal, that is for her the substitute of the little sister she never had. For other animals, such as poultry and rabbits, she doesn't share the same affection, as when she says: "For chickens I don't give a damn, they are not like us, for rabbits I'm sorry but whatever, but Carmelina I don't want them to kill her." ("Per i polli non me ne frega niente, non sono mica come noi, per i conigli mi dispiace ma pazienza, ma Carmelina non voglio che la ammazzano.", p. 23). This statement is an explicit reference to Sara's speciesism, which places a different value on animals depending on the species to which they belong. It should also be remembered that the chickens and rabbits that belonged to the families of Brianza in the 1970s were mainly bred for food, as a statement from Marco, who is unsure whether to kill or not the deadly cat, remembers:

I wanted to smother it with a pillow, it was a small thing to throw a pillow over it, and squash it. Killing animals is not a sin, in our house every week we kill a rabbit or a chicken, from the rabbit hutch and the chicken coop that are behind the shed at the end of the garden, and Tina takes care of them. But killing a cat seemed different to me, perhaps because rabbits and chickens are bred for eating and cats for company. And then who knows how Sara would scream if I killed her Carmelina (p. 24).<sup>20</sup>

Often, Marco and Sara try to find a justification to their choices in relation to animals into the principles of their religion, Christianity. In the paragraph above, for example, Marco is unable to kill the cat because it is a domestic animal, even if he knows that it is not morally wrong, and that he is conscious that his family is used to kill animals weekly for eating them. At the same time, Sara states that her cats and dogs are Christians, because she has baptised them, but she did not baptise chicken and rabbits as well, because "those are for eating and you can't baptise the roast, otherwise you have to baptise the salad as well" ("quelli sono da mangiare e non si può mica battezzare l'arrosto, se no devi battezzare anche l'insalata", p. 113). Huggan and Tiffin (2015, p. 155) argue that humans tend to dissociate slaughter involving animals from that involving humans, and that this dissociations are confirmed in the everyday language. In this passage, the "roast" is employed to talk about the poultry, highlighting this linguistic difference. Nevertheless, it seems that the girl is perfectly conscious of the destiny of her

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<sup>20</sup> "Volevo soffocarla col cuscino, era una cosa da niente buttarle sopra un cuscino, e schiacciare. Ammazzare le bestie non è peccato, in casa nostra ogni settimana si ammazza un coniglio o un pollo, della conigliera e del pollaio che stanno dietro la casa in fondo all'orto, e li cura la Tina. Però ammazzare una gatta mi pareva diverso, forse perchè i conigli e i polli si allevano apposta per mangiarli e i gatti invece per la compagnia. E poi chissà come strillava Sara se le ammazzavo la sua Carmelina."

chicken, because in Seveso it was a common habit to have some animals in the backyard to supplement the diet with eggs and meat.

It is interesting to note that Conti herself was not against animal consumption for food, as reflected in her statements made in the book *Discorso sulla caccia*, which was, however, first published in 1992, several decades after the publication of *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina*. In the book, where she writes about the fact that hunting might not be necessarily ethically worse than breeding, despite being herself one of the promoters of a referendum against hunting decades before. About vegetarianism and veganism, she argues that for a number of medical reasons she explains, it would be preferable for human's health to follow an omnivorous diet (Conti, 2023, pp. 108-110).

Animals in *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* are not represented as active characters. Instead, they are mostly shown when they are dead, or about to die, in order to represent the breath of the disaster, but without a proper characterisation of the single animal. As Huggan and Tiffin explain, the tendency in literature when putting emphasis on the importance of animal subjects is to “focus attention on the human reactions to such loss or losses” (2015, p. 16). Regarding this, it must be highlighted that Conti’s book is still portraying animals through an anthropocentric gaze. The only animal who possesses a subjectivity could be the cat Carmelina, but it should be remembered that her relevance in the narration is mostly related to the fact that she is anthropomorphised. Carmelina has the same name of Sara’s unborn sister, and the girl renders the cat as her own little sister. The cat is therefore a tool to emphasize Sara’s reaction to the aftermath of the disaster, which includes the social repercussions on her older sister’s situation of pregnancy.

It is interesting that the only place in which liminality between humans and non-humans is experienced spontaneously is the dream dimension. In Marco’s dreams, he often pictures a kind of interspecies mix-up, which is a reflection of the information he gradually acquires from adults about the diseases that dioxin can cause. It is worth remembering that these interspecies dreams begin with the very night that the boy spends while the cat Carmelina lies dying next to his bed (p. 23). That night, he dreams the cat was actually a kid who was Sara’s sister, and who was drowning. The dream intensifies and when he learns about harelip he starts dreaming about creatures who are partly human and partly hare, from which the title of the book derives.

It must be stressed that the prevailing emotion he feels while dreaming is that of fear: his dreams are in fact nightmares, where he projects the worries he feels during the day. It should



be remembered that Donna Haraway argues that humans are always in interspecies relationships, immersed in “co-constitutive relationships in which none of the partners pre-exist the relating, and the relating is never done once and for all” (Haraway, 2003, p. 12). Marco’s nightmares represent a multi-species imagery in which the victim is simultaneously a cat, a hare, and a child. The cat relates to Carmelina and is connected to the dead animals that the child saw during the days immediately following the release of the toxic cloud. The hare and the little girl, on the other hand, are the result of the progressive and frightening awareness of the significance of the abortion, plus the vision of the pictures of the possible malformations of the foetus caused by the contamination, such as harelip. Therefore, the dream dimension is the one where the barriers between species are cancelled, and children, cats and hares are equally victims of the firm’s toxicity. In fact, they could also be labelled as the three categories most affected by the dioxin: the children, including born (because of chloracne) and unborn foetuses (victims of possible malformations), the domestic animals, and the wild ones. One could argue that in this labelling there is a missing category which has been deeply affected by the Seveso disaster: the one of women, object of societal pressure in relation to the lack of freedom of choice about abortion. But it is important to highlight that the “child” is a girl child (in Italian, “bambina”), as the cat was a female too. Moreover, Iovino (2017, p. 195) reports that those most affected by the accident were animals, children, foetuses and women.

In addition, it is worth noticing that this disruption of the interspecies barriers happens only during dreams, and only with children (including Sara). The dream is also the time in which social barriers disappear to let the emotions flow, leading to the formation of new imaginary and fantasies. In this sense, it is interesting to note that it is children and a child’s dreams that break through the barriers between species, as if in this moments, or life-stage, one is less moulded and less subject to cultural constructions, despite still being influenced by them (shown in the fact that Sara says she cannot baptize the food she is going to eat).

In the end, it seems that in Conti’s novel the animals are still represented through an anthropocentric perspective, which renders them as dead victims of an all-encompassing disaster. Nevertheless, their death is the proof of the impact of the dioxin, denied by some people, but not by children, whose curiosity contributes to raise questions regarding the human-non human relationship and the boundary between humans and non-humans.

## **4.2 Animal's denial of humanity**

As mentioned above, the first chapter of the book starts with the protagonist's denial of his own humanity. The time before and after "that night" marks the disparity of time in the life of Animal and of the city of Khaufpur. The accident not only provided him a twisted back which forces him to walk on all fours, like an animal, but also gave him "his new identity as a nonhuman being" (Mukherjee, 2010, p. 149). His own self-identification with an animal implies a general mistrust towards feelings and emotions, and as a consequence he lives in constant suspicion and distancing from other humans. But as an animal, he is also unique and different from every other creature, including other non-human animals, because he is not part of any other species. The reasons for identifying the protagonist with an animal endowed with unique characteristics are presented in the subsequent paragraphs.

### **4.2.1 The factory and the neoliberal order**

Firstly, the factory is the responsible for Animal's twisted back, because of the poisons released on "that night", and the lack of fairness in communicating the types of gases released and consequently the possible antidotes to the poisons. As already pointed out, the factory is responsible for the creation of a pattern of vulnerability, which affected the human inhabitants of Khaufpur as well as the non-human ones. As Maitrayee Mistra argues, "the embodiment of 'slow violence' is depicted through natural environment surrounded by the non-humans as well as the disabled character of Animal and Animal's people at Khaufpur" (2024, p. 106).

When Animal enters the site of the abandoned factory, which has never been cleaned up from the poisons, he describes it in this way: "No bird song. No hoppers in the grass. No bee hum. Insects can't survive here. Wonderful poisons the Kampani made, so good it's impossible to get rid of them, after all these years they're still doing their work" (p. 29). It is clear from this passage how poisons also affected the sphere of the non-human. Moreover, as in Conti and Carson, also in this paragraph it is possible to find a mention to the absence of birds, along with other animals, such as insects, and to silence.

Animal's condition renders him different from all the other people; but he is also just one of the numerous characters who developed a disability and encountered a loss due to the tragedy. Animal is a character which is "unique but not exceptional" (Nixon, 2013, p. 57). His very peculiar kind of deformity renders him as unique, as he himself states proudly also at the end of the book: "Stay four-foot, I'm the one and only Animal" (p. 366). But he is also part of the poorest community of Khaufpur, which is generalised as one homogeneous group even by

Doctor Elli in her frustrated cry: “HEY, ANIMAL'S PEOPLE! I DON'T FUCKING UNDERSTAND YOU!” (p. 183). This is also the sentence from which the title derives. It must be stressed out that Khaufpur’s community is not homogeneous, but what is common to everyone is the pattern of vulnerability created by the factory. It is worth remembering that during the night of the contamination, Animal not only was affected physically, but he also lost his parents and therefore his family. As Basumatary (2019, p. 67) writes, “Animal is an embodiment of the tragedy of human rights of an individual”. It could be added that, having the characteristics of both a human and a non-human, Animal is the embodiment of the vulnerability which involves every being who lives in Khaufpur.

Secondly, Animal’s deformity has been indirectly caused by the practices of neoliberalism which allowed the Kampani to pollute indiscriminately. Animal represents the “dehumanizing effects of global capitalism”, which affect those who “have not been afforded basic human rights or recompense from the Western corporate power that has disabled them and poisoned their environments” (Singh, 2015, p. 137). The denial of human rights he suffered is exemplified by his “grotesque” body, opposite to the one of the stereotypical hero (Basumatary, 2019, p. 67). As Nixon argues, “his twisted body is the physical manifestation of extraterritorial, offshore capitalist practices” (2013, p. 57). Moreover, Animal is not the only victim, since the whole community of Khaufpur has been denied of its rights. In the following sentence, the comparison of Khaufpurians with non-humans is an example of the Kampani’s disregard for human rights: “You were making poisons to kill insects, but you killed us instead. I would like to ask, was there ever much difference, to you?” (p. 306).

The person who is speaking is Old Gargi, who is talking with a lawyer who is named by Animal “the buffalo” (p. 306) – curiously, another animal metaphor to highlight his big body. The metaphor reiterates the idea that being an animal, and in particular an insect, is a derogatory comparison. But it is interesting that the person who is making this statement is not one of the lawyers, who is in a position of superiority in terms of power and privilege, but an old lady who has been affected by the pollution of the firm for at least twenty years. As Huggan and Tiffin explain, it is “not surprising that human individuals and societies reject animal similitudes and analogies and insist instead on a separate subjectivity” (2015, p. 153). Gargi’s words are filled with anger and contempt, plus some sarcasm. Mukherjee (2010, p. 144) underlines the fact that the mission statement of Union Carbide was characterized by the insistence that human beings were their “most precious asset” and their “number one priority”.

Since the value of the lives of the people in Bhopal/Khaupur was disregarded, they are consequently dehumanized. The statements of the firm not only excluded the safety of animals and the environment, but also they seemed to be limited to certain categories of humans, which did not comprehend the underprivileged inhabitants of the Global South.

In conclusion, it is relevant to mention that right before Old Gargi's comparison with insects, the "buffalo" mentioned his desire to conclude the agreement as soon as possible, in order to go back home, where his "two Italian grayhounds" (p. 306) who sleep on his bed are waiting for him. It is possible to suggest that the privilege is not only an issue of humans and non-humans, but it expands to place of origin (Global North/Global South) and breed, in the case of the dogs, or ethnicity, in the case of humans. Nixon explains the power of this novel in the narration of dynamics of inequality in the following way:

In reading *Animal's People* as, among other things, an exposé of these neoliberal double standards, we can recognize Khaupur as both specific and nonspecific, a fictional stand-in for Bhopal, but also a synecdoche for a web of poisoned communities spread out across the global South. (Nixon, 2013, p. 48)

It could be noted that also Seveso can be considered among the "poisoned communities" mentioned here. This comparison is reinforced by the fact that in *Animal's People*, there is one passage in which Seveso is mentioned, along with other names of cities where an environmental disaster has occurred. The following paragraph contains the words of Zafar who is almost dying because of the hunger and water strike he is making:

'Is Khaupur the only poisoned city? It is not. There are others and each one of has its own Zafar. There'll be a Zafar in Mexico City and others in Hanoi and Manila and Halabja and there are the Zafars of Minimata and Seveso, of Sao Paolo and Toulouse and I wonder if all those weary bastards are as fucked as I am' (p. 296).

#### **4.2.2 "Janvaar, jungle janvaar"**

Animal gained his name from other humans, precisely the orphanage kids, starting from when he bit a boy who previously kneed him in the face during a game (p. 15). They started calling him "Janvaar, jungle janvaar" (meaning Animal, wild Animal, p. 15), and the attempt of the nuns to stop the kids using this nickname failed. The protagonist tells how from that moment, everyone has always referred to him as Animal, and he has forgotten his previous name, as well as he has forgotten his previous life as a two-leg human. "That night" has been a moment when

time has been divided “into before and after, the before time breaks up into dreams, the dreams divides into before and after” (p. 14).

Meanwhile, he is surrounded by people who repeatedly re-affirm his humanity and are “keen to point out their common bonds” (Mukherjee, 2011, p. 224). The leader of the activists against the Kampani, Zafar, at first denies his animality, and invites him to think of himself as “especially able” (p. 23). As Mistra (2024, p. 107) illustrates, Zafar’s proposal to find himself a new name is refused by Animal. Another character who often critiques Animal’s claim of non-humanity as an excuse to avoid social responsibility is Farouq, one of the activists who is often joking with Animal. This is their most emblematic conversation regarding this topic:

‘Trouble with you, Animal,’ continues Farouq [...] ‘if you think because you’ve a crooked back and walk with your arse in the air no one should dare to criticise you. I’m an animal, always you’re bleating, I’m an animal, I don’t have to do like the rest of you, laws of society don’t apply to me because I’m such a fucking animal.’

It irritates him that I choose to be an animal not human, it’s like grit in his eye. ‘Wasn’t me who gave myself the name of Animal’ I reply. ‘Plus, who was it just now called me four-foot? Oh, I do believe it was you.’ (p. 87)

Mistra (2024, p. 107) points out that the characters who question Animal’s name are “residents of Khaufpur but are *not* disabled like Animal” (emphasis in the original). Both Zafar and Farouq, in different ways, are an example of this attempt to convince Animal to give up his own self-identification. But unlike him, they are in a privileged situation, because the leak did not affect their health. In conclusion, the people who have surrounded Animal have been influential on his choices of self-identification as an animal. The life of the protagonist as an animal has been imposed by him by the mocking of others, and the boy has decided to welcome this new name and make it his own, at the point in which he refuses to change it.

#### **4.2.3. Animal’s self-identification**

As mentioned above, the nickname Animal was given to the narrator by the kids of the orphanage, and the boy had decided to fully embrace this identity. As he himself explains: “I’m not a fucking human being, I’ve no wish to be one” (p. 23), “when I say I’m an animal it’s not just what I look like but what I feel” (p. 87). When asked to behave as a “free human”, his reply is always a reaffirmation of his choice to be an animal (p. 166). He also reaffirms his animality through a denial of belief in religion. His lack of faith in a superior entity is not explained through a proper theological reflection, but it is portrayed as a direct consequence of his being

an animal. The absence of knowledge of the religion of his parents is another factor which contributes to his lack of religiosity.

Animal is “an absolutely exceptional figure who teeters between the human and the nonhuman” (Singh, 2015, p. 138). His animality is reflected in his close relationship with a non-human animal, the dog Jara, which he renders as a “friend” (p. 17). They meet on the streets, when they are both rivals in the attempt to snatch some leftover food from the streets. When they encounter for the first time, they are described as sharing some characteristic, such as being both thin and hungry. Jara and Animal are able to communicate with each other through gazes, such as when he asks her to stay with Ma Franci, and he says “I swear if she could have nodded she would have done” (p. 329). Jara is also the one who follows Ma Franci when she goes in the Nutcracker to warn the people to escape to avoid death. Animal narrates that the dog “gives me a reproachful look, then follows Ma, looking back over her shoulder as if to say, goodbye then” (p. 340). Moreover, it is Jara who finds Animal after his dramatic experience in the jungle.

Jara's deep bond with Animal reflects their mutual understanding that transcends human-animal boundaries. This connection also ties into Animal's self-identification as a non-human being, which is further emphasized through the song he composes with the help of Doctor Elli, reported below:

*I am an animal fierce and free  
in all the world is none like me  
crooked I'm, a nightmare child  
few on hunger, running wild  
no love and cuddles for this boy  
like without hope, laugh without joy  
but if you dare to pity me  
I'll shit in your shoe and piss in your tea. (p. 172)*

The first two verses will again be repeated at the end of the novel, as a re-affirmation of his animality, after the refusal to do the operation to twist his back. This refusal is the result of a gradual process that leads the boy to a progressive knowledge of himself. At first, his love for Nisha is the most urgent push for his desire to do an operation to walk on two legs: Animal has the secret hope that Nisha would accept him if he did not have a disability. In the moment in which, after Zafar's supposed death, Nisha refuses his requests to marry her, Animal makes a

suicide attempt, eating the poisonous datura, unconsciously provoking a fire in the site of the firm and later sneaking into the forest.

The experience in the jungle is characterized by hallucinations: Animal tries to find a connection with the non-human world, after having been refused by the human one. But even in the forest he doesn't feel at ease: the trees remain silent, while a lizard, released by Animal who captured it for food, reaffirms his humanity, saying: "if you were an animal you would have eaten me" (p. 346). The prayers of Animal asking his non-human "brothers and sisters" (p. 346) to show themselves are of no use. This is a key episode in the plot, because the protagonist "must also come to terms with the specific kind of relationship with other nonhumans – that he is simultaneously distinct from them and related to them" (Mukherjee, 2011, p. 228). After this experience of deep isolation due to the refusal from both the human and non-human world, which has been also linked with a Christian allegory of resurrection, Animal ends up accepting his own uniqueness (Mukherjee, 2011, p. 228). He develops a "sense of distinctive belonging" (Mukherjee, 2011, p. 228), which makes him feel part of his own community. This is the reason which lies behind his decision to refuse the operation to twist his back. The operation would allow him to walk upright, but it will force him to always use sticks to move. Strengthened by a renewed awareness of his own uniqueness and sense of belonging, Animal decides not to do the operation, and to conclude with the reminder that "we are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us" (p. 366).

In the end, *Animal's People* uses the theme of animality for multiple purposes, mainly a challenge to the disregarding association between animals and humans. The dehumanization of the protagonist and the inhabitants of Khaufpur operated by the firm is a device of the neoliberal order to avoid affording to them basic human rights. But Animal's embracement of his own identity, at the end of the book, includes also his feeling part of a community, made up of humans and non-humans (mainly represented by the dog Jara), all victims of the Kampani. Therefore, animality is not a degrading comparison anymore, but rather an assessment of an unavoidable consequence of the disaster which affects the whole community and potentially strengthens their union and therefore their fight against the Kampani.





## Conclusions

By analysing these two novels, my primary aim is to show how *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* and *Animal's People* depict the complexity of disaster. Conti and Sinha are able to convey, with their books, the vastness of the impact, in terms of time and space, of an industrial disaster. In addition, their novels illustrate the issue of incommunicability and invisibility in the disaster narrative as devices to better understand some problems which mostly emerge in the aftermath of disasters. Conti and Sinha's storytelling is also powerful in combat the barriers of human exceptionalism and in proposing animality as one of the central themes of the stories. Furthermore, the choice of fictional novels as forms for conveying disaster narratives makes the text potentially more appealing to a wider and more diverse audience than a possible disaster documentary. The fictional narrative engages the readers and makes them empathize with the fictional character, and at the same time, thanks to Conti and Sinha's writing quality, allows them to discover a wider and critical perspective on the concept of disaster. Moreover, the reason for the choice of these two novels as object of analysis lies also in the relevance of the disaster of Seveso and Bhopal in the present time.

Regarding Seveso, the works for the construction of a section of the highway Pedemontana Lombarda are going to move part of the contaminated soil, a fact that has generated much criticism from local environmental groups. The Pedemontana construction project will also impact the "Bosco delle Querce", which will undergo an export of two hectares (Bassani, 2024). According to the website of the municipality of Seveso, on-site operations are expected to be completed by the end of 2024, a timeframe which includes both preliminary remediation operations and all-control and authorisation phases until the clearing targets for each area are reached (*Pedemontana, Bonifica Al Via*, n.d.). The environmental groups complain that the operation of land clearing which will undergo in order to build the highway is "not regenerative", which is an "unforgivable paradox", if compared to the land clearing which led to the creation of the natural park (Bassani, 2024). I believe that the powerful narrative of Laura Conti can be a tool to remind today's citizens of Seveso and Meda, along with every possible reader from outside Brianza, the implications of this disaster in its full scope and the potential risks for the present and the future.

About Bhopal, it should be remembered that 2024 will mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the disaster, but despite this, justice is still denied to the victims, as shown by the decision to dismiss of the curative petition filled by the Indian government in March 2023 (Anand, 2023). This ruling sparked dismay and condemnation from many organisations advocating for

justice in Bhopal. In addition, it should be remembered that the inhabitants of this city are still paying the consequences of the ongoing disaster. The results of a study published in 2023 regarding the effects of in utero exposure to Bhopal disaster show that the impacts of the latter extend far beyond the mortality and morbidity experienced in the immediate aftermath. The impacts are “multigenerational”, because men who were in utero at the time of the disaster were more likely to have a disability fifteen years later, along with higher rates of cancer and lower educational attainment over thirty years later. Moreover, it is added that these long-term consequences could be also the result of the lack of mitigation of the effects of the exposure to the gas through health, disability and education services (McCord GC, Bharadwaj P, McDougal L, et al. L, 2023, pp. 1-5).

Both novels have proved to be promoters of a more elaborate understanding of the concept of disaster, which takes into account the temporal and social extent of these events. In particular, *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* can be labelled as a novel which could increase the knowledge about the social vulnerability which characterized the society of Seveso in the ‘70s, as well as giving insights on the features of the same society nowadays. The second novel, *Animal’s People*, carries on a powerful denunciation of the lack of environmental justice in Bhopal, despite the passing of time. Moreover, the novels have been analysed in relation to the concepts of incommunicability, which can be used as a category to depict the relationship within the characters; and of invisibility, which is a characteristic that can be attributed to dioxin, which becomes something non-mentionable but capable of revealing the contradictions of the society of Seveso, and to the suffering of the people of Khaufpur/Bhopal, who have been denied of their past and are forced to live in a constantly polluted present. Finally, it has been illustrated that both books stimulate new questions regarding the role of animals in the disaster and the implications of characterising humans as animals.

This thesis has only examined two examples of critical disaster narrative. Both novels presented some similarities, such as the fact that the disasters involved can both fall under the category of the “technological” ones; and that both novels were narrated by boys, albeit of different ages. It could be interesting to make other critical analyses towards other novels which depict the representation of other types of environmental disasters, and to make comparisons regarding the forms and techniques employed by different writers. In addition, for future research on the representation of Seveso and Bhopal, it is possible to consider other artworks related to these disasters. In the case of Seveso, for example, other media had

contributed to narrate the disaster, such as the song “Canzone per Seveso” by the Italian singer and songwriter Antonello Venditti. Further research could also be addressed towards the representation of the disaster in graphic novels. Indeed, two graphic novels have been released over the past few years: *Il caso Seveso* (2016) and *Strada senza uscita* (2024). Since the last one has been produced with the support of the local environmental group which opposes to the highway Pedemontana, it could be interesting to make a comparison between the two graphic novels.

In the case of Bhopal, it could be worth examining the impact of the music project “Breathe Fire”, conceived and written for the Bhopal Medical Appeal (the same association which Indra Sinha contributed to found). The project’s aim is to spread awareness of the “ongoing disaster in Bhopal and, ultimately, help shame those in positions of power into doing the right thing” (*‘Breathe Fire’. . . a Song for Bhopal. – THE BHOPAL MEDICAL APPEAL*, n.d.). The project invites any musician to take the lyrics and the chords of the song and record their own version of it, in order to inform the listeners about what happened in Bhopal and the consequences the population still suffers today.

In conclusion, this thesis wants to highlight the role of Conti and Sinha’s novels in shaping the imaginary of the readers and increasing their knowledge about how to conceive the idea of disaster. Regarding *Animal’s People*, Nixon writes about the difference between those who gain “official recognition” of their suffering and those who do not because their narratives are not “deemed to fail the prevailing politico-scientific logic of causation” (2013, p. 47). According to my analysis, both *Animal’s People* and *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* can be regarded as powerful narratives which give value to the sufferers – made up of humans and non-humans – without idealising the tragedy, but giving a truthful picture of its complexity.

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## THESIS

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## FIGURES

Figure 1. From Cislighi, C., Rivolta, F. 1976, November-December. “Demografia di zona inquinabile”, in *Sapere*, p. 39.

Figure 2. From Wikimedia Commons, India Political Wall Map, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Medium-india-political-wall-map-vinyl-moi4781121786238-original-imaezawqex9x5dbb.jpg>. Last access 2024, September 26<sup>th</sup>.