Trans-corporeality and Indian Literature: An Ecocritical Perspective

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Abstract

Ecocriticism and environmentalism have historically been addressed in Indian literature from a postcolonial, indigenous standpoint. Through its posthumanist concepts of embodiment, the agency and new materialism shares ecocritical concern. Indian literature and new materialism have rarely engaged in meaningful dialogue despite sharing an interest in substitute possibilities for human and non human involvement. Through a new materialist analysis of Kiran Desai's text Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard, where human and nonhuman characters encounter one another to imagine posthumanist potential of 'being' in the world, this study aims to bridge the gap between these two domains. Examining the facets of India's material reality reveals the agency-realist character of interactions between individuals and other non human in the story's rural postcolonial setting. This analysis broadens the application of new materialism to Indian literature and increases the likelihood that new materialist theory can be applied to address ecocritical discourse from a postcolonial standpoint.

Keywords: ecocriticism, materiality, non human, postcolonialism

Introduction

In Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self (2010) Alaimo expands on Barad's idea of the universe as interconnected and emergent in various respects. Alaimo's idea of trans-corporeality imagines a malleable human body in an unexpected connection with nonhuman materials, much like Barad's agential realism. They investigate different conceptions of the human and nonhuman through their analysis of environmental racism, material memories, environmental disease, and genetic engineering. "The human as substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments," according to trans-corporeality (Alaimo, 2012: 476). Alaimo contends that we cannot isolate the human body from its surroundings. The permeable borders of the body allow the nonhuman world of matter to pass through. In this dual interchange, the nonhuman and human worlds shape and affect one

another. The trans-corporeal body concept stresses how nonhuman entities—both organic and inorganic—can pass through the permeable border of a person's skin to enter the body and perform unforeseen alterations. Trans-corporeality "not only tracks how solutes travel across and within the human body, but also how they do things—often undesirable or unexpected things" (Alaimo, 2010:146). Because nonhuman chemicals infiltrate the body and change it from the inside, human encounters with hazardous waste, chemical pesticides, silica dust, and numerous other agents lead to high cancer rates, difficulty reproducing, and chronic sickness. The negative impacts of nonhuman matter on both human and nonhuman bodies are given priority in Alaimo's work, but the idea of trans-corporeality goes beyond disease. A "material ethics [...] that is centred neither in individual humans nor in an external nature, but rather in the flows and interchanges between them" is what trans-corporeality is valued for, according to the author (Alaimo, 2010: 136). Instead of absolving us of duty, these exchanges and flows strengthen our obligation to take care of ourselves, one another, and other animals. When harmful drugs enter the body and cause alterations, they appear to make people passive rather than active. But these compounds come into existence as a result of exploitative human behaviours, which disperse them among populations of both humans and nonhuman animals. While conceding that the human is "a site of emergent material intra-actions inseparable from the very stuff of the rest of the world," Alaimo, like Barad, calls for us to investigate our place in the universe (2010: 156). Trans-corporeality forces us to think more critically about how material human actions affect both humans and nonhumans. We must accept responsibility for our intra-actions in light of this knowledge and ethics of permeability, but not as passive guardians of "nature," but rather as active agents responsible for the world's ongoing emergence.

***Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*: Analysis**

The 1998 book *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* by Kiran Desai initially reads like a classic magical realist parody of contemporary India. I contend, however, that beneath the book's humorous surface is a profound investigation of the interaction between human and nonhuman matter inside India's material environment. The protagonist of the book is Sampath, a drab middle-class young guy who resides in the Shahkot village. Sampath leaves the cramped limitations of rural life when he loses his job at the neighbourhood post office and moves into an abandoned guava orchard. Sampath's life among the trees eventually attracts attention, and Shahkotians start to look up to him as a guru due to his enigmatic understanding of everyone's darkest secrets. The more Sampath withdraws from social contact, the more individuals desire him out, either for his

"teachings" or to financially take advantage of him as his fame increases (nobody knows that he knows these secrets since he spent most of his time at the post office perusing everyone's correspondence. Sampath's parents eventually arrive to his tree, only to find that their son has vanished and that in his place is a guava with a marking that closely resembles Sampath's. I contend that Sampath's abduction and subsequent transformation are a perfect example of how difficult it is for a human to interact with a nonhuman world. In addition, I contend that Desai challenges the distinction between human and nonhuman bodies in this and other interactions between characters and their settings. The opening page of the text establishes a connection between humans and non humans. Shahkot suffers from a severe drought in the months before Sampath's birth, leaving the entire hamlet in need of help. As the drought continues, everyone looks for a cause. Worldwide human and nonhuman activities swiftly turns into a list of potential explanations for certain local weather conditions. A volcanic eruption in Tierra del Fuego, coastal currents in West Africa, "unexplained molecular movements observed in the polar ice-caps," and even attempts by the Iraqi government to "steal monsoon by deliberately creating low pressure over desert provinces and deflecting winds from India" are all suggested as causes of the drought (Desai, 1998: 1; emphasis in original). 1 Even though the last reason for India's delayed monsoon is ludicrous, it nevertheless serves to highlight how human activity has a direct impact on climatic and natural phenomena. The extensive drought that begins the book in the particular setting of postcolonial India is an illustration of historically proven "natural" calamities brought on by exploitative British colonial forestry practises. By the middle of the nineteenth century, in what would become "a century of forest exploitation" in northern India, "about 70% of the [Ganga-Jamna] Doab's forest had been felled" (Mann, 1995: 212) due to the rapid destruction of India's forests (Knudsen, 2011: 315). Because the post-independence governments were devoted to rapid industrialization and permitted extremely aggressive commercial forest exploitation, the devastation of India's forests persisted even after independence. Within this historical framework, colonisation has a material impact on the present-day effects of climate change, which includes Shahkot's drought. Suddenly, the absurd notion that a country's leadership could intentionally alter weather patterns no longer sounds absurd at all. The "ecological balance" and "natural regenerative processes" that once controlled India's climate and ecosystem were severely disrupted by British imperialism, even though Iraq may not have hijacked the monsoon by causing low pressure zones (Mann, 1995: 213). Through the numerous intra-

actions that make up a single climatic event, past and present, human and nonhuman, are inexorably linked. The protagonist of the book, Sampath, experiences this intertwining of humans and nonhumans firsthand.

Sampath participates in shaping the nonhuman world, both biological and inorganic, through his everyday interactions with the partially dismantled fence of barbed wire that encircles the post office, long before he leaves Shahkot. Every time he goes through one of the fence's numerous openings on his route to work, strands of his hair catch on the structure and require him to pry them free. He wonders if he is an especially sympathetic supporter of the rising crow population of Shahkot because the tufts of hair he sheds with each passage are "claimed by the crows as a superior sort of nesting material" (29). Animals use "things" in a similar way that humans pillage their environment, including both organic and inorganic elements. In this instance, human hair is used by Shahkotian crows to line the nests where they would raise their young. Sampath's unintentional influence on the subsequent generation of crows serves as an example of the unexpected connections between seemingly unrelated events. Sampath pays more attention to the crows than other people, but little does he know that his everyday trip is a part of what Barad refers to as a "phenomenon". The term "phenomenon" is used by Barad in the Bohrian context of the theologically smallest unit of matter, or "relata-within-relations," as opposed to the Kantian understanding of "the way things-in-themselves appear" (Barad, 2007: 412). When it comes to Sampath and the crows, the circumstance of the expanding crow population initially appears to be caused solely by the crows' reproductive habits, the availability of sufficient food, suitable nesting sites, sufficient nesting materials, favorable weather conditions, the absence of predators, and a population of disinterested humans. But if we're going to investigate the limits of this specific phenomena, we need to widen our scope to incorporate the 'fence' too.

The fence's primary purpose at first is to keep the post office apart from the rest of the village, but it soon gets involved in intra-actions that go far further than the fence's original designers had planned. "The residents of Shahkot, never ones to respect such foolish efforts, [...] set to work as swiftly as they could to dismantle this unfortunate obstruction," the residents of Shahkot write after the fence appears (27). The peasants' "sudden need for wire" (27), which didn't exist before to the construction of the fence, is met by the barbed wire. "Intentions are not pre-existing determinate mental states of individual beings," writes Barad (2007: 22–23). In contrast, intentions develop as a result of interactions with both human and nonhuman agencies. We'll get back to the issue of intention, but first, let's look at the fence, whose metal is

appropriated for a variety of purposes and so becomes entangled in a never-ending web of phenomena. Shahkotians desire metal for a variety of purposes, including to hang drapes, latch gates, and care for their gardens. These requirements are soon intertwined because "there was a plant that would not stand up straight." a goat that made an attempt to consume the plant. The dog that tried to eat the goat "(27). A person's desire to grow a straight plant is suddenly complicated by another person's desire to shield the goat from the dog's desire to bite the goat. The overall plant-goat-dog intra-action also goes all the way back to the fence, without which these specific intra-actions would not have developed. The fence serves as a support for the plant, a barrier for the dog, and protection for the goat. It is the agent that carries out all of these tasks. The fence phenomena eventually becomes enfolded in the plant-goat-dog phenomenon, which is then enveloped in the crow population phenomenon. The fence story is hilarious, but it also serves to highlight the intricacies of intra-actions and transcorporeality among different species.

As the story moves on, Sampath's engagements only deepen. Sampath's involvement with the nonhuman world eventually manifests as physical alterations as the orchard's agencies penetrate his essence when he finally moves into the guava orchard. It becomes increasingly obvious as time goes on that his ongoing interactions with the orchard result in audible, physical changes. Sampath's body starts to alter as a result of its sojourn in the trees, much like the "environmental genetic body" that "absorbs what it touches in the air, soil, and water and is changed at the molecular and morphological level by these absorptions" (Shostak, 2003: 2338). His "green veins in his arm," "a certain woodiness [to] his heel," and "the mahogany of his skin" point to a unique botanical aspect that seems to have taken over his formerly clearly human physique the longer he relaxes under the guava tree's branches (110–11). Sampath's gradual development of tree-like characteristics refers to the idea that "the human body is coextensive with the environment," in contrast to Alaimo's focus on how chemicals, pollutants, dust, and radioactive substances permeate the borders of the human body (Alaimo, 2010: 119). More significantly, his perception of human embodiment as an expansion of the nonhuman bodily arrangement of the orchard concerns the issue of accountability. Sampath's guava tree is surrounded by more and more people, who leave behind signs of their presence in the orchard such as "ugly advertisements defaced the neighbouring trees [and] a smelly garbage heap spilled down the hillside [...] and grew larger every week" (181). Sampath gets so involved with the vineyard that his own condition quickly starts to resemble the orchard's escalating destruction. Sampath's cheeks lose color as the orchard deteriorates, and he develops intense worry for his future and the future of the orchard's

resident monkeys. In fact, "angry that "these people were trampling on him,he starts to think of himself as one would think of a place. They were encroaching on him, seizing him, and contaminating the area around him. He was being defiled by them, and how dare they! He was being utilized by them for their own gain "(166–67). Sampath has grown to identify himself with the garden during the period of his stay in the guava tree. His ongoing interactions with nonhuman beings force him to see the place's deterioration as an offense against his physical being. An "enfolding, in which the 'outside' is always already within, inhabiting and transforming what may or may not still be 'human'" is the result of the orchard and Sampath's inward efforts" (Alaimo, 2010: 154). Ironically, Sampath is blind to his own contribution to the quick decline of the orchard. Sampath's father, Mr. Chawla, makes the decision to improve Sampath's quality of life in order to persuade him to stay in the tree once he first recognizes the financial value of his son. In addition to a pulley system to transport meals, lukewarm water for showering, and disposable cooking pots. He gives Sampath a string cot to sleep on, an umbrella for cover, cushions, blankets, and bedding (77–80). Sampath accepts these amenities "as if he were a raja" (77), expressing his relief at his new exalted position (78). He doesn't even pause to consider how his actions might affect the orchard's occupants. His home's guava tree receives "a steaming shower [of bath water] that [...] [comes] down like molten lava" every morning "(79). Without taking into account how and where Sampath's throwaway bedpans are actually being thrown of, this torrent of scalding water would be sufficient to harm the tree and its nearby surrounds. Sampath, however, holds only his guests accountable for the orchard's deterioration and pollution. Sampath, who is consumed by his own desires, refuses to see how his presence in the orchard—not only in his capacity as the Monkey Baba, but also by the not-so-simple practice of residing there—contributes to its changing condition. Sampath is unable to separate himself from the intricate, multi-layered intra-actions that define the orchard's ongoing becoming, making him both the offender and the victim. Trans-corporeal beings are by nature "neither essentialist, genetically determined, nor firmly bounded," according to Alaimo (2010: 63). Because humans and nonhumans interact constantly and act in unforeseen ways, it is impossible to know with certainty what makes up the human body. Sampath's quick decline and growing resemblance to a tree both demonstrate how his body is constantly and "intra-actively (re)constituted as part of the world's becoming" (Barad, 2007: 206). By refusing to distinguish between the two, this intra-active reconstruction implies the human in the nonhuman. Human interactions with matter have a direct impact on real people's health, joy, and wellbeing in addition to having an impact on the nonhuman world. Reading Sampath as an agency involved in ongoing

intra-actions with the orchard rather than merely seeing him as a man in a tree forces us to think about our own human position in complicated material embodiments. Sampath fights to survive in the constraints of a life clearly delineated by the human and steadfastly cut off from the plant and animal kingdoms in which he captivates himself. Sampath's final transformation into a guava with "a brown mark, somewhat like a birthmark" (207), which replaces him, appears less surprising and more like the logical outcome of his coextensive relation with the nonhuman realm. Sampath believes that his body's "struggle [...] to become more than [it] is' culminates with his becoming the guava (Grosz, 2010: 152). Sampath wants to eradicate humanity entirely, refusing to submit to an exploitative notion of humanity that separates it from the nonhuman world. His final change is marked by deliberate action rather than chance.

Conclusion

In its most basic, hilarious yet imaginative form, Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard recounts the tale of an indolent young man who stumbles onto fame and ultimately changes into a guava. However, a deeper look also exposes a nuanced picture of the interaction between organic and inorganic, as well as human and nonhuman, entities. I contend that Sampath's desperate attempt to flee "the mysterious ceremonies of another species" brings him to the guava vineyard, where he voluntarily ingratiates himself with the animal kingdom and finds a sense of belonging. Sampath learns about his complex interaction with the biological and inorganic through sustained interaction with the orchard, which he views as an intra-active phenomena of physical, material existence. I address the necessity for human obligation and accountability in producing phenomena across organic and inorganic bodies by looking at Sampath's intra-actions with nonhuman forces. My new materialist reading of the novel leads me to propose that it also becomes a sensitive depiction of how bodies try to become more than they are, in addition to being a hilarious story of accident and enchantment.

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