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# Agential realism and trans-corporeality in contemporary South Asian literature

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## Abstract

South Asian literature has a history of engaging with ecocriticism and environmentalism from a postcolonial, locally specific perspective. New materialism shares this ecocritical commitment through its posthumanist conceptions of embodiment and material entanglement between human and nonhuman material agencies. Despite their common interest in alternative possibilities for human and nonhuman engagement, new materialism and South Asian literature have rarely come into meaningful contact with each other. My article seeks to bring both fields together by examining Kiran Desai's novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* from a new materialist perspective, in which human and nonhuman characters interact with each other in imagining posthumanist possibilities of being in the world. I mobilise Karen Barad's agential realist theory and Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality to argue that Desai's light-hearted comic satire raises important questions about environmental and human exploitation. Examinations of the local, national, global, and historical aspects of India's material reality reveal the agential realist nature of human and nonhuman interactions within the novel's rural postcolonial context. This reading expands the scope of new materialism into South Asian literature and furthers the possibility of using new materialist theory to engage with ecocriticism from a postcolonial perspective.

## Keywords

ecocriticism, Kiran Desai, new materialism, postcolonial literature, South Asian literature

This article explores Kiran Desai's novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) through a new materialist lens. I begin by focusing specifically on the new materialist formulations of Karen Barad's agential realism (2007) and Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality (2010), then extend Barad's and Alaimo's theories into a discussion of Desai's

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novel. I mobilize these theories to recast *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* in an ecocritical light, in which the ethical implications of human engagement with the nonhuman play out primarily through the novel's protagonist. While scholars such as Jill Didur (2011) and Angelo Monaco (2017) read Desai's later novel *The Inheritance of Loss* from an ecocritical perspective, little attention has been paid to *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard.* One of the few critical considerations comes from Erin M. Fehskens, who thoughtfully analyses the text as a "critique of the return of multinational corporations to India" (2013: 7). According to Fehskens, the encroaching pressures of "impoverishing and extractive practices" (2013: 9) culminate in a choice between two possibilities: act out the "exploitative consumption" represented by the novel's implied cannibalism, or "escape into a radically reoriented posthuman affiliative community and way of being in the world" (2013: 7). I propose that a new materialist reading of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* explores the latter option and offers new perspectives on the possibility of the "posthuman alternative" (2013: 7) that Fehskens imagines. In a more anthropocentric reading of the novel, Carmen Escobedo de Tapia casts nonhuman "nature" as "the idyllic and true place to turn to", prioritizing a "pastoral view of nature" as the passive setting for human fulfilment (2018: 176). However, an agential realist perspective demands that we decentre the human and focus on the way places, plants, animals, and people participate in "flows, interchanges, and interrelations between human corporeality and the more-than-human world" (Alaimo, 2010: 142). Sampath is not a "romantic personification of nature" (Escobedo de Tapia, 2018: 189), nor does he simply "find his identity by feeling oneness in and with nature" (Escobedo de Tapia, 2018: 190). As the only character who acknowledges the human as "coextensive with the material world" (Barad, 2007: 172), Sampath challenges the boundaries between "human identity" and "nature" by dissolving them altogether. In doing so, he demonstrates the possibility of a different, less anthropocentric engagement with the wider world.

I argue that Desai's novel interrogates the human-nonhuman hierarchies that justify human exploitation of the nonhuman world by raising the intimate question of where the human body ends and the nonhuman world begins, and whether that boundary can ever be definitively drawn. Furthermore, I posit that *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* participates in the ongoing history of South Asian ecocriticism that is deeply rooted in experiences of the "very material structures of Victorian imperialism" that led to "cataclysmic disaster events" (Mukherjee 2013: 28). These events, including drought, famine, epidemics, and climate change, are the "*historical* consequences of the economic and sociopolitical specificities of modern British imperialisms" (Mukherjee, 2013: 39; emphasis in original). South Asia's material experiences of colonization have sparked much of the environmental activism and ecocritical scholarship of the last five decades. Desai engages with this history by deliberately locating her novel in the nexus of seemingly "natural" disasters that are in fact part of the "necessarily interlinked devastation of the humans, non-humans, soil, water, air and crops of postcolonial India" (Mukherjee, 2010: 11). By drawing connections with these and other postcolonial experiences, new materialism can expand its scope and address more clearly the environmental and ecological consequences of global injustice, exploitation, and oppression for both human and nonhuman agencies. Reading *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* through an agential realist

lens works to centre the ecological impact of colonization in South Asia within the scope of new materialism's often exclusively Western-oriented environmental focus.

## Agential realism, intra-actions, and the world's becoming

In exploring new materialist theory, I turn first to Barad's theory of agential realism. For Barad, realism "is not about representations of independent reality but about the real consequences, interventions, creative possibilities, and responsibilities of intra-acting within and as part of the world" (2007: 37). Unlike other forms of realism, which often assume that individual entities with set properties pre-exist material interactions or observations, agential realism focuses on "performative alternatives to representationalism" that change the focus "from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality […] to matters of practices or doings or actions" (Barad, 2007: 28). Agential realism does not describe the world as it appears so much as examine the flowing, shifting possibilities of material reality as it shapes itself through constant intra-actions. According to Barad, matter's agential nature lies not in what it *is*, but in its continual *becoming*. This continual becoming emerges as the result of what Barad terms "intra-actions" between what we might consider "entities", but which Barad calls "agencies". Unlike "interaction", with its idea of separate "things" that exist before their interactions, "the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action" (Barad, 2007: 33). The term intra-action "*signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*" (2007: 33; emphasis in original). By entanglement, Barad does not mean discrete entities that simply mix together and can thus theoretically be unmixed. Entangled agencies are inextricably interconnected with each other because their entire existence as determinate agencies results from their intra-action. Before their intra-action, the individual agencies do not exist; it is only through the course of their intra-actions that agencies are distinguishable from each other. Because all agencies are constantly part of countless intra-actions, their attributes and characteristics are continually emerging and changing. These changing attributes may seem like little more than different perceptions of the same configuration, and thus simply matters of perspective. However, perception itself is a material practice based on specific intra-actions, with each current intra-action altering one's imminent possibilities. Barad notes that with each intra-action, the spectrum of subsequent possibilities shifts, allowing for new possible intra-actions (2007: 177). These intra-actions in turn both close off and open wide yet more possibilities for the world's emergent becoming. This idea carries vast implications: because intra-actions are continually occurring, "[t]he world and its possibilities for becoming are remade with each moment" (Barad, 2007: 396). The question Barad then raises is who must take responsibility for the world's endless reconfiguring, and how.

At its core, agential realism is what Barad terms an "*ethico-onto-epistem-ology* — an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing and being" (2007: 185; emphasis in original). While Barad builds their theory primarily on physicist Niels Bohr's work in the mid-twentieth century, they expand agential realism beyond the confines of the human-devised laboratory setup and into the realm of ethical responsibility. In an agential realist context, the lack of a "strict or fixed boundary line dividing […] a scientific laboratory

from the rest of the world" means that "humans can *never* observe the universe as though from outside of it" (Gamble et al., 2019: 122–123; emphasis in original). This impossibility, much like the impossibility of separating a laboratory from the world at large, stems from the fact that "humans (like other parts of nature) are *of* the world, not *in* the world, and surely not outside of it looking in" (Barad, 2007: 206; emphasis in original). Thus emerges the ethical aspect of agential realism. By locating humanity as part of the world itself — both *forming* and *formed by* the nonhuman world — Barad demands a new conception of responsibility and accountability. If we are part of the world, it is impossible to completely separate or distinguish human and nonhuman agencies from each other, as they are entangled through their continual intra-actions. These human-nonhuman intra-actions determine the world in its (and our) continual emergence. In other words, everything we are and everything we do are both causal and consequential. At the heart of Barad's agential realism lies the understanding that we are all continually changing, endlessly entangled, intra-active, and emerging agencies participating in the world's endless possibilities of becoming.

## Trans-corporeality and the outside within

Alaimo's work *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010) builds in some ways upon Barad's conception of the world as entangled and emergent. Like Barad's agential realism, Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality conceives of a mutable human body in an unpredictable relationship with nonhuman matter. Their examination of environmental racism, material memoirs, environmental illness, and genetic engineering explores alternative ways of conceiving the human and nonhuman. Trans-corporeality acknowledges "the human as substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments" (Alaimo, 2012: 476). According to Alaimo, we cannot separate the human body from the environment in which it exists. The nonhuman world of matter travels across the body's permeable boundaries in a dual exchange in which the human and nonhuman shape and influence each other. This idea of the trans-corporeal body emphasizes the fact that nonhuman agencies, both organic and inorganic, traverse the permeable boundary of human skin, infiltrating the body and enacting unpredictable changes within. Trans-corporeality "not only traces how various substances travel across and within the human body but how they *do* things — often unwelcome or unexpected things" (Alaimo, 2010: 146; emphasis in original). Human interactions with toxic waste, chemical pesticides, silica dust, and countless other agents result in high cancer rates, reproductive difficulties, and chronic illness, as nonhuman substances permeate the body and reconfigure it from the inside. While Alaimo's work prioritizes the detrimental effects of nonhuman matter on human and nonhuman bodies, the concept of trans-corporeality extends beyond the realm of illness. The value of trans-corporeality lies in its ability to promote a "material ethics […] that is centered neither in individual humans nor in an external nature, but instead in the flows and interchanges between them" (Alaimo, 2010: 136). These flows and interchanges, rather than excusing us from culpability, enhance the responsibility we have to ourselves, each other, and the nonhuman. Harmful substances permeate the body and enact changes, seemingly placing the human in a passive rather than active role. However,

these substances emerge through exploitative human practices that distribute them across human and nonhuman populations. Like Barad, Alaimo demands that we explore our place in the world while acknowledging that the human is "a site of emergent material intra-actions inseparable from the very stuff of the rest of the world" (2010: 156). Rather than diminishing our role in agential intra-actions, trans-corporeality requires us to examine more critically the way material human practices impact the human and nonhuman alike. This knowledge and ethics of permeability requires that we take responsibility for our intra-actions, not as custodians of "nature" but as active agencies accountable for the world's perpetual emergence.

## Human and nonhuman agency in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*

On the surface, Kiran Desai's novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) reads like a light-hearted magical realist satire of modern India. However, I argue that below the novel's comedic surface lies a deep exploration of the relationship between human and nonhuman matter within India's material context. The novel tells the story of Sampath, a lacklustre, middle-class young man living in the village of Shahkot. When he loses his job at the local post office, Sampath escapes the stifling confines of village life and takes up residence in an abandoned guava orchard. His life in the trees soon draws attention, and Shahkotians begin to regard Sampath as a guru due to his seemingly inexplicable knowledge of everyone's deepest secrets. (Nobody realizes that he knows these secrets because he spent his time at the post office reading everyone's mail.) The more Sampath withdraws from human interaction, the more people seek him out, either for his "teachings" or to exploit him economically as his fame grows. Finally, one morning, Sampath's parents arrive at his tree only to discover that their son has disappeared, and in his place rests a guava bearing a blemish that mirrors Sampath's distinctive birthmark. I argue that Sampath's disappearance/transformation exemplifies the complicated nature of his (human) relationship with the (nonhuman) world. Furthermore, I posit that Desai uses this and other engagements between characters and their surroundings to question the boundaries between human and nonhuman bodies.

The human and nonhuman are interconnected from the novel's very first page. In the months preceding Sampath's birth, Shahkot is plagued by a severe drought that leaves the entire village desperate for relief. As the drought persists, everyone searches for an explanation. Human and nonhuman activity around the world quickly become possible causes for specific local weather conditions. Theories attribute the drought to a volcanic eruption in Tierra del Fuego, West African coastal currents, "*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*" (Desai, 1998: 1; emphasis in original).[1] While this last explanation of India's delayed monsoon borders on the absurd, it nonetheless illustrates the very real fact that human activity directly impacts climatic and environmental events. In the specific context of postcolonial India, the widespread drought that opens the novel is an example of historically documented "natural" disasters resulting from exploitative British colonial deforestation practices. The rapid destruction of India's forests was so

pronounced that by the middle of the nineteenth century, "around 70% of the [Ganga-Jamna] Doab's forest had been felled" (Mann, 1995: 212) in what would become "a century of forest exploitation" in northern India (Knudsen, 2011: 315). Even colonial officers recognized the devastating impact that deforestation had on climate and rainfall (Damodaran, 1995: 145), as both localized and widespread deforestation "disrupt[ed] normal weather patterns creating hotter and drier weather thus increasing drought and desertification" (Chakravarty et al., 2012: 15). While drought and other disasters are often portrayed as "natural", the reality was that "Indians […] saw disasters as an inseparable part of British colonialism" and even "imagined colonialism and empire *as* natural disasters of hitherto unimaginable proportions" (Mukherjee, 2013: 23; emphasis in original). Even after independence, the destruction of India's forests continued, as the "post-independence governments, committed to rapid industrialization, allowed increasingly aggressive commercial forest exploitation" (Beinart and Hughes, 2007: 276–77). Shahkot's drought exists within this historical context, in which colonization materially affects the day-to-day realities of twentieth-century climate change. Suddenly, the seemingly laughable idea of a nation's government changing weather patterns through deliberate action seems not laughable at all. While Iraq may not have stolen the monsoon by creating low pressure areas, British imperialism did in fact radically disrupt the "ecological balance" and "natural regenerative processes" that once governed India's climate and ecology (Mann, 1995: 213). Past and present, human and nonhuman, are inextricably entangled through the countless intra-actions that constitute a single climatic event. This entanglement of human and nonhuman persists throughout the novel and manifests in the life of its protagonist, Sampath.

Long before he escapes Shahkot, Sampath participates in configuring the nonhuman world — both organic and inorganic — through his daily encounters with the partially dismembered barbed wire fence that surrounds the post office. Whenever he passes through one of the fence's many gaps on his way to work, chunks of his hair get caught on the fence and he must tear himself free. The tufts of hair he loses with each passage are "claimed by the crows as a superior sort of nesting material", leading him to question whether or not he is "an especially generous supporter of the increasing crow population of Shahkot" (29). Just as humans plunder their surroundings, both organic and inorganic, animals also utilize "things". In this case the Shahkotian crows use organic matter such as human hair to line the nests in which they will raise their young. Sampath's inadvertent contribution to the next generation of crows illustrates the surprising relationships between seemingly disparate events. While he gives the crows more thought than others might, little does Sampath realize that his daily commute is part of what Barad calls a "phenomenon". Barad uses the term "phenomenon" not in the Kantian sense of "the way things-in-themselves *appear*" (Barad, 2007: 412; emphasis in original), but in the Bohrian sense of the ontologically smallest unit of matter, or "relata-within-relations" (Barad, 2007: 429). As Barad notes, "the primary ontological units are not 'things' but phenomena — dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations of the world" (2007: 141). Fundamental to agential realist phenomena is the fact that a phenomenon encompasses all the agencies engaged in an intra-action, including those that may at first seem completely unrelated. For Barad, "[*p*]*henomena* […] are neither individual entities nor mental impressions, but entangled material agencies"

(2007: 56; emphasis in original). In the case of Sampath and the crows, the phenomenon of the growing crow population at first seems to include only the following material agencies: crow reproductive practices, the availability of adequate food, appropriate nesting sites, adequate nesting materials, favourable weather conditions, a lack of predators, and a disinterested human population. However, if we truly want to explore the boundaries of this particular phenomenon, we must cast our net further to include, among other things, the fence itself.

The fence initially serves only to separate the post office from the rest of the town, but it soon engages in intra-actions that expand much further than the original fence-builders intended. Once the fence appears, "the residents of Shahkot, never ones to respect such foolish efforts, […] set to work as quickly as they could to dismantle this unfortunate obstruction" (27). The barbed wire becomes part of the villagers' "sudden need for wire" (27), a need which, before the fence's inception, apparently never existed. As Barad notes, "intentions are not pre-existing determinate mental states of individual beings" (2007: 22–23). Instead, intentions emerge through intra-actions with human and nonhuman agencies. We will return to this question of intention, but first we must consider the fence, which becomes entangled in continually enfolding phenomena as its metal is appropriated for countless uses. Shahkotians want metal to carve words into trees, hang curtains, latch gates, and tend their gardens. Soon these needs become entangled, as "there was a plant that would not stand up straight. A goat that tried to eat the plant. A dog that tried to bite the goat" (27). Suddenly one person's need to grow a straight plant becomes entangled with another person's need to protect the goat that wants to eat the plant from the dog that wants to bite the goat. Furthermore, the entire plant-goat-dog intra-action extends back to the fence itself, without which these particular intra-actions would not have emerged. The fence is the agent that performs all of these functions, acting as support for the plant, protection for the goat, and barrier for the dog. The plant-goat-dog phenomenon becomes enfolded in the fence phenomenon, which in turn is enfolded in the crow population phenomenon. While humorous, the story of the fence illustrates the complex nature of intra-actions on not only local but also national levels, as we will soon discover.

Let us first return to the question of intention. From an agential realist perspective, the Shahkotians' rebellious reaction towards the fence speaks to wider intra-actions with geographical location, governmental neglect, oppressive authority, and colonial history. Shahkot's specific material conditions, such as geography, ecology, and weather leave it subject to drought and extreme heat. The drought, in turn, partly results from India's colonial history, in which British exploitation of India's forests "functioned at the expense of the climate, the water supply of entire regions and ultimately of the indigenous population" (Mann, 1995: 203). Furthermore, the village's particular social configuration means that the authority responsible for building the post office fence did so not with Shahkot's population in mind, but to "establish it as a place sacred to official order and duty" (27). The post office itself is a relic of colonization, serving as yet another physical, material reminder of the British occupation of India (Headrick, 2010: 52). These reminders — whether the symbolic image of the post office or the materially felt, deeply harmful climatic impact of exploitative colonial practices — galvanize Shahkot's people into action. Geography, ecology, and meteorology; social structure, politics, and history:

all of these factors matter. Intention does not simply exist but emerges from "a complex network of human and nonhuman agencies, including historically specific sets of material conditions that exceed the traditional notion of the individual" (Barad, 2007: 23). The villagers' intentions to destroy the fence are not mere flights of fancy. All of these agencies and conditions intra-act with each other to emerge as the Shahkotians' seemingly natural disregard for the fence and the authority that built it. This disregard, in turn, leads them to dismember the fence, which creates an opening for Sampath to pass through, during which passage the fence catches his hair, and the crows subsequently collect the abandoned tufts to build their nests to raise their young. When layered over each other, Sampath's route to work, the fence's original purpose, the Shahkotians' response to that purpose, and the configuration of Shahkot itself all intra-act to create the possibility of crows finding, using, and benefitting from Sampath's abandoned tufts of hair. Thus, Sampath's hair, innocently caught on the cut edge of a barbed wire fence, becomes the agent that entangles the local crow population with India's national history. Suddenly the boundary we draw around the crow phenomenon is vastly wider yet also far more intimately human than we initially imagined, and the entanglement of human and nonhuman matter emerges on a grand scale. Thus, the question arises: with our knowledge of how intra-actions matter, how can we then ignore the significance of all our minute intra-actions with the world at hand? More importantly, how can we assume that intra-actions affect everything around us but leave us untouched? Like ripples in a pond, each agential intra-action reverberates across countless bodies and creates new patterns in unexpected ways. Barad notes that "[b]odies do not simply take their places in the world […]. Bodies ('human', 'environmental', or otherwise) are integral 'parts' of or dynamic reconfigurings of the world" (2007: 170). In Sampath's case, these dynamic reconfigurings express themselves to him on a daily basis, shaping his conception of his embodiment and his place in relation to the nonhuman. He wonders if his daily hair loss will "make him prematurely bald […]. Or perhaps his hair, inspired by empty patches, [will] spring back thicker and more resilient than ever?" (29). These questions indicate his awareness that "'environments' and 'bodies' are intra-actively co-constituted" (Barad, 2007: 170). In other words, human and nonhuman bodies constantly reshape each other through their intra-actions. Sampath believes that his intra-actions with the fence have the power to shape his physical body enough to determine his hair growth pattern. For Sampath, his body is not a determinate, bounded entity moving through an inert material world. Instead, his body and the world emerge through their intra-actions with matter in all its organic and inorganic configurations. This interchange between the human and nonhuman questions the boundaries we draw between "us" and "the world", and emphasizes the flows and currents that cross those boundaries. More importantly, these movements remind us that our actions and intra-actions matter. While Sampath's place in the crow phenomenon appears benign, it serves as a reminder of matter's performative nature in all its forms. Other intra-actions, like environmental exploitation or unrestrained human consumption, constitute far more sinister phenomena with wider implications for human and nonhuman nature. Like Sampath and his hair loss, our intra-actions with the nonhuman world shape us; at the same time, like Sampath, the Shahkotians, and the crows, we shape the nonhuman through our actions, intentions, and intra-actions. These entanglements intra-act with countless agencies and engage in endless phenomena

of which we are often completely unaware. When we blur the boundaries dividing the human and nonhuman, we highlight the nearly infinite possibilities, positive and negative, of our material engagements in the world.

For Sampath, these engagements only deepen as the novel progresses. When Sampath finally takes up residence in the guava orchard, his entanglement with the nonhuman world gradually coalesces into visible bodily changes as the orchard's agencies permeate his being. As time passes, it becomes clear that his continual intra-actions with the orchard bring forth visible, bodily changes. 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), Sampath's body begins to change from its sojourn in the trees. The longer he lounges in the boughs of the guava tree, the more he begins to resemble the tree itself, with "green veins in his arm", a certain "woodiness [to] his heel", and "the mahogany of his skin" speaking to a peculiar vegetal quality that seems to have overtaken his previously overtly human body (110–11). While Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality focuses on how chemicals, pollutants, dust, and radioactive substances permeate the boundaries of the human body, Sampath's slow development of tree-like attributes speaks to the idea of "the human body as coextensive with the environment" (Alaimo, 2010: 119). More importantly, his experience of human embodiment as an extension of the orchard's nonhuman bodily configuration raises the question of responsibility. As more people begin to frequent the space beneath Sampath's guava tree, they litter the orchard with evidence of human activity: "ugly advertisements defaced the neighbouring trees [and] a smelly garbage heap spilled down the hillside […] and grew larger every week" (181). Sampath becomes so entangled with the orchard that his own state soon mirrors the orchard's increasing devastation. As the orchard deteriorates, the colour fades from Sampath's cheeks and he becomes consumed with anxiety over his future and the future of the monkeys who also inhabit the orchard. Indeed, he begins to think of himself as one would think of a place, seething over the fact that "these people were trampling on him. They were invading him, claiming him, polluting the air about him. They were dirtying him […] And how dare they? They were using him for their own purposes" (166–67). Over the course of Sampath's habitation in the guava tree, he has come to equate himself with the orchard itself. His constant intra-actions with the nonhuman push him to view the destruction and degradation of the place as outrages enacted against his material being. The orchard's and Sampath's intra-actions culminate in an "enfolding, in which the 'outside' is always already within, inhabiting and transforming what may or may not be still 'human'" (Alaimo, 2010: 154). Ironically, Sampath fails to recognize his own role in the orchard's rapid deterioration. When Mr Chawla, Sampath's father, first realizes his son's monetary value, he decides to encourage Sampath to remain in the tree by making his life more comfortable. He provides Sampath with a string cot to sleep in, an umbrella for shelter, cushions, blankets, and even a pulley system to deliver meals, hot water for bathing, and disposable clay pots in lieu of a toilet (77–80). Sampath receives these comforts "with great relief" (77), accepting his new elevated position "as if he were a raja" (78). Not even for a moment does he question his own impact on the orchard and its inhabitants. Every morning the guava tree where he lives is doused in "a steaming shower [of bath water] that […] [comes] down like molten lava" (79). This deluge of scalding water

alone would be enough to affect the tree and its immediate surroundings, without considering how and where Sampath's disposable bedpans are actually being disposed of. Nonetheless, Sampath blames only his visitors for polluting and destroying the orchard. Blinded by his own wants and needs, Sampath refuses to acknowledge that he himself is contributing to the orchard's changing state, not only through his role as the Monkey Baba but also through the not-so-simple act of dwelling there. Sampath is both perpetrator and victim, unable to disentangle himself from the complex, layered intra-actions that constitute the orchard's continual becoming. In a bitterly ironic twist, Sampath is destroying himself by contributing to the destruction of the orchard that sustains and constitutes his internal and external being. Here arises the question of accountability and responsibility. Who is responsible for the orchard? Who is responsible for Sampath? How can Sampath or anyone else take responsibility for one without the other when the two are inextricably entangled? How can Sampath's parents, for example, safeguard their son's wellbeing while simultaneously contributing to the orchard's rapid deterioration? Mr Chawla focuses solely on exploiting his son as a monetary resource, while Sampath's mother Kulfi, despite her well-meaning desire to feed her son, dedicates herself to catching and cooking one of the very same monkeys that Sampath views as friends and companions. Even the people who seek wisdom and guidance from the Monkey Baba do so by trampling the orchard and fighting with each other over how best to dictate the conditions in which Sampath lives. Sampath himself is no passive victim of detrimental environmental exploitation, but an agential being whose intra-actions with the human and nonhuman contribute to his own bodily degradation as well as that of the orchard. As Alaimo notes, trans-corporeal bodies are inherently "neither essentialist, nor genetically determined, nor firmly bounded" (2010: 63). What comprises the human body can never be definitively determined, because the human is in constant exchange with the nonhuman, and the two intra-act in unexpected, unpredictable ways. Sampath's increasing treeness as well as his rapid deterioration express the way his body is continually and "intra-actively (re)constituted as part of the world's becoming" (Barad, 2007: 206). This intra-active reconstitution implicates the human in the nonhuman by refusing to separate the two. Human intra-actions with matter not only affect the nonhuman world, but directly influence the health, happiness, and wellbeing of real human beings. Reading Sampath as not simply a man in a tree, but as an agency engaged in continual intra-actions with the orchard pushes us to consider our own human role in complex material embodiments. Like the fence-hair-crow phenomenon comprised of local, national, and global intra-actions, Sampath and the orchard form a phenomenon whose boundaries extend beyond the bodies of man and tree. Instead, the agencies engaged in disrupting Sampath's peaceful existence within (and as *part of*) the orchard encompass the Chawla family (including Sampath), Shahkot's local government officials, the band of monkeys, pollution, capitalism, and religion, to name only a few. Such a wide-reaching, intricate webwork of intra-active agencies engage with each other not only in Sampath's life, but in the lives of every human and nonhuman agency that constitutes the world. This network inevitably leads back to human accountability, entwined as we are in "myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (Haraway, 2016: 1). Bearing in mind this complex tangle of relationships, how can we imagine that we are not deeply responsible for the endless material intra-actions that shape the world's

emergent becoming? An awareness of phenomena and their intra-active agencies makes it uncomfortably clear that "an environmental ethics [must] den[y] the human the sense of separation from the interconnected, mutually constitutive actions of material reality" (Alaimo, 2010: 157). What Sampath, and the rest of humanity, must cultivate is an understanding of the world's entangled phenomena, from which the human is incapable of standing apart. Such an understanding would demand a more thoughtful accounting of the human-nonhuman intra-actions that lead not only to the devastation of a local guava orchard but to the production of specific national, international, and global crises. In the orchard, Mr Chawla exploits his son for profit while his son exploits the orchard as a dwelling place, both culminating in the orchard's visible deterioration. On a grander national scale, ecological and humanitarian crises emerge through the colonial exploitation of India's forests, people, and resources, as well as projects enacted by postcolonial governments, such as the Narmada Dam (Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997: 4), the National Forest Policy of 1952 (Beinart and Hughes, 2007: 277), and the neoliberal corporatization of agriculture (Mukherjee, 2010: 2). Awareness of the complex intra-actions that shape both local and national crises can lead us to deeper understandings of the entangled relationship between the human and nonhuman and highlight the connection between ecological exploitation and social injustice. Unfortunately, the absence of such understanding within the novel pushes Sampath to contrive his own solution to intolerable exploitation.

The process that began with an impromptu escape at the start of the novel culminates in Sampath's final transformation from human to fruit in a dramatic response to the "question of what is natural *or* human" (Orlie, 2010: 134; emphasis in original). For Sampath, the question is not what is natural *or* human, but what is natural *and* human. This merging of human and nonhuman troubles easy assumptions about what matters by making the nonhuman an intimate part of the human. Without the epistemological distance between human and nonhuman, ethical engagement with the material world demands more consideration. After all, if the nonhuman external is already humanly internal, exploitation of one constitutes exploitation of the other and culminates in wilful self-destruction. Through continual intra-actions that "reconfigure the very boundaries of the human" (Alaimo, 2010: 154), Sampath internalizes the external world and reconfigures the boundaries of his own human body. From the novel's start, Sampath struggles to inhabit the same world as the people around him. Much to his father's dismay, he is unambitious and often daydreams, spending hours watching insects crawl along tree bark or marvelling at the way sunlight "scatter[s] him like water" (143). Unlike Sampath, every other member of the Chawla family focuses on specific narrow aspects of their lives, whether it be money, love, or food. Like many of us, these people "simply are not very aware of [their] experience, of what is taking place within and about this body, on this earth" (Orlie, 2010: 127). Focused as they are on their own individual lives, the other Chawlas cannot comprehend the degree to which the human and the nonhuman are intertwined. Conversely, Sampath struggles to exist within the confines of a life neatly bounded by the human and determinedly isolated from the world of plants and animals in which he immerses himself. When he finally vanishes, to be replaced with a guava bearing "a brown mark, rather like a birthmark" (207), it feels less like a shocking magical transformation and more like a logical conclusion of Sampath's coextensive relationship with the nonhuman world. For

Sampath, becoming the guava is the culmination of his body's "struggle […] to become more than [it is]" (Grosz, 2010: 152). Rather than capitulating to an exploitative conception of humanity that divides it from the nonhuman world, Sampath seeks to obliterate it completely. The final moment of his transformation speaks of deliberation rather than happenstance:

> He picked [a guava]. Perfect Buddha shape. Mulling on its insides, unconcerned with the world […] Beautiful, distant fruit, growing softer as the days went by, as the nights passed on; beautiful fruit filled with an undiscovered constellation of young stars. He held it in his hand. It was cool, uneven to his touch. The hours passed. More stars than sky. He sat unmoving in this hushed night. (204)

Sampath no longer views the guava as something to consume or exploit, as one would with food. He even tempers his anthropomorphic impulse through the horizontal connections he draws between divinity, fruit, stars, and human tactile experience. Each level of matter and being enfolds and is enfolded by the rest. Rather than layering humanity over the fruit, he seeks to enter the guava and live through its embodied existence, feeling the passing of time as the fruit ripens. Surrounded by the "hushed night" with its distant stars, Sampath recognizes the same "constellation of young stars" within the guava itself (204). In a kaleidoscopic move, the night enfolds the stars, which are somehow enfolded as seeds within the guava itself, which in turn expands into the heavens while simultaneously condensing the world into its flesh. Divorced from human notions of boundaries and distance, the guava and the stars merge into entangled bodily systems that dwell within each other in a microcosm of the material world's universal entanglement. Sampath, who observes these enfolded phenomena, cannot help but become enfolded as well, resting as he does among the guavas beneath the night sky whose stars are in fact a constellation of seeds within a guava. In his meditation on the fruit, the night, and the heavens, Sampath seems to take the idea of trans-corporeality, with its "flows, interchanges, and interrelations" (Alaimo, 2010: 142), to its furthest, most fantastical conclusion. Instead of simply settling for life among the trees, however entangled that life may be, he performs one final intra-action. His "cool greenness" (46) and "cool awake sap" (47), his "green veins" and "the woodiness of his heel" (111), all intra-act with the world around him, and what remains in the morning is the guava bearing his birthmark. When faced with the impossibility of living in a world divided strictly along anthropocentric, human/nonhuman binaries, Sampath chooses to withdraw as completely as he can. Whether this withdrawal is from humanity, as his apparent transformation seems to imply, or simply a midnight departure from Shahkot and its human residents' exploitative habits, Sampath nonetheless renounces the familiar human-nonhuman hierarchies that characterize much of our existence in the world. While Desai does not necessarily expect us to follow suit by transforming our human bodies, Sampath's extreme withdrawal suggests the need for a different kind of human-nonhuman relationship. As Donna Haraway notes, human and nonhuman "critters are in each other's presence, or better, inside each other's tubes, folds, and crevices, insides and outsides, and not quite either" (2016: 98). Perhaps Desai is implying that in a context built on responsibility, accountability, and respect for the entwined nature of the human and nonhuman, such a deep

renunciation of humanity as Sampath's would no longer be necessary. In the meantime, Sampath seems to have no other choice than to enact his own "ontologically inventive" (Haraway, 2016: 98) solution by severing himself wholly from the exploitative and destructive human practices that characterize our current way of being in the world. Nevertheless, even this withdrawal cannot be complete, for entangled agencies can never be unentangled. Marked at birth by the monsoon that heralded his coming, the guava-that-was-Sampath is left with the brown spot on its body that marks its human-nonhuman intra-actions.

On the surface, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* tells the simple, humorous yet fantastical tale of a dissolute young man who stumbles upon fame and eventually turns into a guava. Upon closer examination, however, it also reveals a complex portrayal of the relationship between the human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic. I argue that Sampath's desperate struggle to escape "the enigmatic rituals of another species" (65–66) leads him to the guava orchard, where he develops a sense of belonging by wilfully merging himself with the nonhuman world. In doing so, Sampath comes to understand his complex relationship with the organic and inorganic through prolonged engagement with the orchard as an intra-active phenomenon of material, bodily existence. By examining Sampath's intra-actions with nonhuman agencies, I explore the need for human accountability and responsibility in producing phenomena across organic and inorganic bodies. Through my new materialist reading, I suggest that the novel becomes not only a humorous tale of accident and magic, but also a sensitive portrait of "the struggle of bodies to become more than they are" and the ways in which "the world itself comes to vibrate with its possibilities for being otherwise" (Orlie, 2010: 152, 153). Furthermore, reading *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* through a new materialist lens explores these possibilities by widening the scope of new materialism in literature. As a field primarily located within the context of North American and Anglo-Eurocentric discourse, new materialism often falls short when it comes to examining the "histories of exploitation, attachment, engagement, and struggle" (Huggan, 2013: 532) that exist beyond the confines of Western environmentalist discourse. While recent scholarship has sought to address this parochialism by calling for greater engagement between new materialism and indigenous studies specifically (Rosiek et al., 2020), there has still been little done to expand focus into the realm of postcolonial literature. An exception is Mukherjee's article, "Toxic lunch in Bhopal and chemical publics" (2016), which mobilizes Barad's agential realism in an examination of the Bhopal disaster. Similarly, I believe that Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality could function as a useful tool for bringing new materialism into conversation with international issues of environmental racism and ecological injustice. These and other new materialist theories can bridge the gap between exclusionary Western discourse and the very real environmental and humanitarian impact of colonization that persists in the vast majority of the world today. Despite its comic facade, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* contributes to the body of literature that "works to challenge the disembodied character of European ways of representing the living world" (Huggan, 2013: 525) by centring South Asian material experiences in environmentalist and ecocritical discussions. As Sharae Deckard notes, "concern with the environment, not only as landscape and setting, but as the social and ecological interrelation of human and non-human natures, looms large in South Asian fiction" (2019: 172). This concern arises from the historically

rooted experiences of environmental pollution, exploitation, and devastation at the hands of both colonial and neoliberal powers. Desai's novel, like much of South Asian fiction, uses absurdity and humour to address the very real "ecological imperialism […] and environmental degradation" of twentieth-century India (Deckard, 2019: 172). Sampath's engaged, entangled, and intimate relationship with Shahkot and the wider world presents us with the possibility of an agential realist, trans-corporeal solution to the crushing material pressures of economic, historical, and political exploitation that characterize not just India but contemporary global history. I argue that by broadening new materialism's scope to encompass situated postcolonial experiences of materiality and history, we are adhering to the ethic-onto-epistemological essence that defines the work of new materialists such as Barad and Alaimo. More importantly, we are pushing new materialism to honour its commitment to matter's universal entanglement by addressing global experiences of materiality, agency, and trans-corporeality.

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## Note

1. Subsequent references are to this (1998) edition of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

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