

New Materialist Human–nonhuman ‘Intra-action’ and Disentanglement of Partition’s Unspeakable Memory: A Posthuman Reading of Geetanjali Shree’s *Tomb of Sand*

Rabeya Khatun, Ph.D Research Scholar (JRF), Department of English Literature, Language and Cultural Studies, Vidyasagar University, Midnapore (West Bengal), India.

krabeya17@gmail.com

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Abstract

*Posthumanism and new materialism radically decentralizes, interrogates and reconceptualizes the universalized privileging notion of human anthropocentric autonomy and subsequently eradicate the anthropocentric binary between human and the non-human. This binary is dismantled through the concepts such as Karen Barad’s new materialist onto-epistemology of ‘intra-action’ and Stacy Alaimo’s posthuman ‘trans-corporeality’. Each concept highlights the embeddedness and mutual interdependence of human and the non-human, and through this intra-action of interference a new diffractive configuration emerges. Trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth present the notion of unspeakability of the traumatic memories. Partition genocide rendered the traumatic memories of survivors unspeakable due to the overwhelming intensity of psychological pain. The article reads Geetanjali Shree’s *Tomb of Sand* through the concept of ‘intra-action’ to recalibrate a new, complex diffractive entanglement of speakability that undermines the utter despondency encompassing the inexpressibility of partition memory. The present paper focuses on the role of non-human objects in generating the sequestered memories of partition violence that distorted the speaking power of the partition survivor, Ma, in the novel. It also incorporates Rosi Braidotti’s posthuman notion of interconnectedness of human and non-human to facilitate the role of intra-acting agencies, which reflect how the trope of contiguity between the protagonist Ma, and non-human entities lifts the veil of horrific partition memory.*

Keywords: Intra-action, Diffraction, Trans-corporeality, Posthumanism, New materialism, Partition Memory.

Introduction

Posthumanism and new materialism deterritorialize non-human objects, substantiating new contours of agency and breaking human-centred ontology of the anthropocentric assumptions. Posthuman and new materialist approaches decentralize human agency, raising questions about authority and power. New materialism reexamines the role of human as having the exceptional capability of controlling the non-human objects as chief agent. New materialist theorists like

Samantha Frost, Diana Coole, Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Manuel DeLanda, Stacy Alaimo, and Quentin Meillassoux escalate the question of absolute human liberal subjectivity and agency by preferring the active vitalist agency of non-human objects. They view matter as dynamic. In alignment with new materialist philosophical output of interdependence and entanglement of human and non-human objects, Posthumanism rejects human and non-human binary. The posthuman and new materialist thinker, Rosi Braidotti focuses on “an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others” (48). N. Katherine Hayles, in her book *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, posits the notion of human as an amalgamation of human and the non-human through “a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (3). Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, in the introduction of their book *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, discuss new materialism from posthuman approach as they state that “an orientation that is posthumanist in the sense that it conceives of matter itself as lively or as exhibiting agency” (7). Significantly, non-humans draw the attention of the new materialist and posthuman theorists as the focal point of analysis.

Karen Barad is one of the most important figures in the field of new materialism. She proposes the term “intra-action” (815) instead of interaction as the latter precedes the ontological separation of subject and object. Intra-action, on the other hand, follows the agential realistic view of the mutual interdependence of each and every phenomenon. In fact, it is through the mutual interdependence or encounter of human and non-human objects that a whole new quality is constituted. This process is called diffraction. This diffractive process abolishes all kinds of independent agencies. It is performative new materialism where nothing is determinate. Every agency is indeterminate. Therefore, Intra-action generates indeterminacy. There is no definite boundary but it is nascent ongoing iteration. There is continuous diffraction lacking any definite closure. According to Barad, “Diffraction is not a set pattern, but rather an iterative (re) configuring of patterns of differentiating-entangling. There is no absolute boundary between here-now and there-then” and the “matter is a sedimented intra-acting, an open field” (4).

Through this typology of diffractive intra-action process, Barad developed the concept of “agential realism” (149) for the inseparable ontological relationship between human and non-human objects. This agential realist notion of intra-action is further developed through the posthuman lens of “trans-corporeality” which according to Stacy Alaimo is “a posthumanist mode of new materialism” and it “means that all creatures, as embodied beings, are intermeshed with the dynamic, material world, which crosses through them, transforms them, and is transformed by them” (435). It focuses on the dynamic process of diffraction where every phenomenon constitutes other phenomenon beyond any rigid boundary. The concept reflects on the patterns of mutual interconnection wherein non-human objects modify humans and they are, in turn, modified by humans.

Discussion

The present paper focuses on the role of non-human objects in engendering the sequestered memories of partition violence that distorted the speaking power of the partition survivor, Ma, in the novel, *Tomb of Sand*. It reads the novel through the lenses of intra-action and trans-corporeality to recalibrate the dynamics of agency of human and non-human objects. It also

focuses on how this agential dynamism forges and illuminates a new complex entanglement of relationship that creates a new socio-cultural framework of interdependency and interconnectivity. The trope of interdependence of different non-human and human agencies echoes the buried traumatic history of partition genocide, and through the entanglement, non-human objects come forth as the bearer of the unheard voices of partition survivors by enabling the expression of silenced traumatic experiences of partition.

Posthuman representation of the agency of objects demands voices of non-humans as speaking subjects over human speaking autonomous voices. Trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub develop the notion of traumatic memory as inaccessible. Those memories cannot be directly located. They are characterized by the impossibility of bearing witness. Therefore, traumatic memory is unspeakable. Caruth notes: “The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (5). Caruth, thus, presents the notion of the unspeakable memory of the traumatic victims. Partition of India is one of the horrific genocidal events in the history that has left its unheard wound in its survivors. The intensity of psychological wound has turned the traumatic memories unspeakable. They have lost the language to express such events. Anjali Gera Roy notes that “Partition survivors’ suspicion of memorializing appears to emanate from both a desire for forgetting and scepticism about the power of language to be able to capture the experience of Partition” (1). As a result, the notion of ineffability of traumatic memory of partition has emerged. Interestingly, it is not only humans who feel the intensity of tragic separation and bear witness to the event but also the non-human objects who play important role in the resurgence of memories. Moreover, it is incontrovertible to say that the non-humans also play active roles in preserving memories than humans. They unfold the traumatic history as a bearer of the horrific memories of past. Aanchal Malhotra, an oral historian, reflects on the events of partition through material memory. She tries to eradicate the “notion of the unspeakable” (xviii) of “cavernous excavation of migratory” (xvi) partition memory by focusing on the role of objects. There is always the imperative of forgetting at the heart of the memory of violence. Paul Ricoeur, in his book *Memory, History, Forgetting*, focuses on the traumatic victims’ willingness to forget the traumatic memories. Further, Pierre Nora notes that those memories find their roots “in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects” (9). The partition survivors have become forgetful of the traumatic memories. Their memories are transferred into material objects which they have borrowed with them. Thus, the entanglement of human and nonhuman transcends the dichotomies of boundaries. While speaking about partition memory and material objects, Malhotra points out: “Memories often fall into the abyss of forgetting. But, unknowingly in some cases, transference of such memory does occur into alternative means of collection, for instance, into inanimate objects. The object, thus, serves as a catalyst for memory, a trigger for remembering as well as a portal into the past” (24).

So, considering the posthuman framework of object-oriented ontology, it is noted that the roots of human memories of partition are instilled into objects. The agency of objects demolishes the sovereignty of the humans. In fact, Barad addresses the entangled relationship between entities. This interrelation dissolves the polarity between human and non-human. Together, they co-create new phenomenon. Thereby, the objects and humans collectively elicit the expressibility of partition memory. The article tries to bring forth the buried memories of partition. It also

focuses on how the entanglement of entities disentangles the notion of the silent magnitude of partition memories.

The paper reflects on how the contiguousness of nascent iteration of intra-action of Ma and non-humans untangle the severity of horrific partition history. Ma is Chandraprabha Devi who was abducted from Lahore and forcefully taken into India and entrusted with the new conventional duties of wife and mother. Somehow, she willingly or unwillingly forgot the violent history. Immediately after the death of her husband, she revisits the memories of the native bioregion but chooses to remain silent. She tries to visit Pakistan to meet her former husband, Ali Anwar, carrying fractured memories. What Ma can no longer bear witness to, the inanimate object i.e. the idol of Buddha that she has carried from her native land, is capable of bearing witness. The statue of Buddha is conjoined with Ma through agential realist intra-activity. Buddha disappears and reappears as Ma disappears in the first part of the novel and regains a new vitality in her Beti's house in the second part. This diffractive pattern of disappearance and reappearance transcends the boundaries of human and non-human in terms of mutual interconnectedness of trans-corporeality. Inanimate objects assert their agency when the Buddha reappears at the Wagah border as if "Buddha has become self-willed, it shows up of its own accord, whenever it feels like it" (Shree 551). Buddha disappears itself leaving unresolved questions. Material objects have agency that joins itself with Ma. Through intra-action of disappearance of Buddha's self-will and Ma's self-will to annihilate her present identity, an open field of new meaning emerges to underscore the intensity of the horrific events of partition. In this way, through their entanglement, a voice emerges as if the voice of Buddha and Ma reverberate and blur the boundaries of time and space. Barad's "agential realist ontology" (811) of "ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting 'components'" dissolves the rigid boundaries between human and non-human and through this mutual iterative process, objects assert their agency (815). Therefore, the demand of representation of the matter or object emerges. According to Barad: "On an agential realist account, agency is cut loose from its traditional humanist orbit. Agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity . . . Agency is the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices through the dynamics of intra-activity" (826-827). While talking about partition memories, Malhotra seeks the agency of the witnessing power of objects or non-humans. She captures "migratory memory in a visceral way" and how "the object continues to be an invaluable means of unearthing social and material culture" (20). She deliberately talks about various material objects. For example, the sword becomes the replica of cultural identity for her. It shatters the notion of the inarticulateness of traumatic memory. It plays the vital role than humans in bringing out the unconscious history from the speechless horror. The material objects are entrances to the partition memory of 1947. Malhotra said: "It is my intention to explore these contested objects – these artifacts that were carried across or, at times, discarded and further lamented for at the conjoined birth of these two countries – and the memories that are infused within them" (15).

Disentanglement of the unspeakable memory demands a retreat to the past through material objects. An interviewer of the victims of partition violence as well as the third generation of partition survivors' descendants has no direct experience of the genocide. But they can retreat to the past through the material objects. Though people have gone, the material objects keep them alive bearing their unspeakable stories. These objects are archives of lost memories. They are non-human testimonies of the other side of the history of partition. Posthuman reading

alters the notions of silence and speech where the speaking human beings as partition victims have lost speaking power. But the non-human lifeless nonspeaking material objects function the role of bearing witness breaking the horrific silence of partition. Objects redeem memory and reality of partition more than the humans.

Malhotra talks about one of the partition survivors called Kalyani Ray Chowdhury in the preface of her book who migrated to West Bengal from Chittagong. She tries to sow the seeds of plants from her native home in Kolkata's soil to feel her native ambience but surprisingly "nothing grew here, as even trees bear allegiance to their soil" (xx). So, the agency of non-humans like plants are remarkable here so much so that no one can control them. Humans are not only attached to a particular place but also places know their people as "the road was quite close; that is, it rose to meet her" (Shree 563). A packet of a type of almond carries the emotions of people as the transgender character Rosie insisted Ma to deliver that to the people of her homeland. Though Rosie dies, the fruit reconnects her through her absence to her native land. It shows how nostalgia and memories of partition are borne by objects whereas humans are unable to bear. Malhotra notes: "Thus we see that as the years have passed, memory has settled into objects in such a way that they have become the only physical evidences of belonging to a certain place at a certain time. The object expands to transcend its own physicality, creating a tangible link to an intangible place or state of being" (27). Dominiek Dendooven addresses the role of objects in the preservation of memories:

We all know how unreliable memory can be, how transient reminiscences are, and how inaccessible the past will always remain . . . Herein lies the beauty and power of conflict-related objects, some of which withstand the ravages of time in a way memories do not. The past may be gone, but sometimes objects retain the power to evoke aspects of that past which gave birth to them, and thereby connect us to our own private and collective histories. (63)

Material objects or inanimate objects become the reservoirs of partition memory as memories of humans are fallible. So, the mutual interdependence of humans and non-human objects plays a crucial role in recollecting and relieving past memories. As such, repressed memories find gateway through this pattern of reciprocity. In the novel, the Grand Trunk Road is imbued with the capability of feeling the emotional pain of partition amalgamating with Ma's intense pain and suffering as the road "too had veins, had age, felt emotions such as joy and sorrow" (Shree 559). Though Ma is unable to speak, the road retains everything. It has preserved the history more than any historical documents. Human history and culture can be witnessed by its place that includes animals as well as inanimate objects. The road has become the beholder of partition trauma which witnesses various stories:

The road has traversed centuries, twisting and twirling like a river, wandering from this country to that. It has known the laughter of humans, understood their haste, seen many fearful sights to that flow through its veins like blood. It must have been offended when so much dust rose up that the green of the trees gracing its edges could barely peek through the layers of brown and grey, and the waters of the nearby spring, in which fireflies twinkled on summer nights, flowed red, a reflection not of the rising and setting sun but of the bloodshed of days gone by. (Shree 557)

Socio-political-cultural discourses formed the immutability of non-human objects as they lacked cultural representations but the era of posthuman material turn has distorted the dynamics of

“the linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretive turn, the cultural turn” (Barad 801). The discourse of non-human agency challenges the indefinability of the psychological wound of traumatic discourse by giving speaking power to non-human objects. Liberal humanist philosophies bestowed upon humans the distinctive quality that emblazoned the superiority of humans over non-humans. Agential realist explication of subversion of human subjectivity postulates the reconfigurations of agencies of human and non-human that enmesh or entangle them in a new form. This enmeshment is illuminated through intra-activity. The object-oriented ontology eschews all-knowing intellectual agential capacity of human. Instead, it articulates agential realistic account of onto-epistemology as the difference between ontology and epistemology frames the difference of subjectivity and objectivity. But the onto-epistemological approach evades any rigid boundary by the superposition of iterative performativity. So, the trope of diffraction is embedded in this iterative performance. The agential entanglement produces a new diffractive pattern as diffraction is concerned with effects of difference through encounter. Diffraction is created when something is intermingled with some another thing that produces a new pattern:

Diffraction is an ethico-onto-epistemological matter. We are not merely differently situated in the world; “each of us” is part of the intra-active ongoing articulation of the world in its differential meaning. Diffraction is a material-discursive phenomenon that challenges the presumed inherent separability of subject and object, nature and culture, fact and value, human and non-human . . . Diffraction is a matter of differential entanglements. Diffraction is not merely about differences, and certainly not differences in any absolute sense, but about the entangled nature of differences that matter . . . Diffraction is a material practice for making a difference, for topologically reconfiguring connections. (Barad 381)

This whole new diffractive pattern is created in the novel as non-human objects lift the veil of silence associated with traumatic violence by juxtaposing the real and the fantastic. The birds are delivering the stories of partition as the bearers of the history. But Ma could not narrate her story. The novel intertwines the real with the unreal by presenting the fantastic tales of butterflies that recount Ma’s abduction and partition. Moreover, birds like crow and partridge record the meeting of the two lovers, Anwar and Chanda. Cats, pigeons, crows and butterflies appear in the novel as the witnesses of bloody partition history. Animals of a particular bioregion know its culture, history and human beings. They can identify people of their bioregion. In the novel the birds have joined Ma as her relatives. They are waiting for Ma in her bioregion. They remember everything of Ma’s life in this bioregion. They can also sense the agony of individuals as “the human is always partly constituted by the non-human and that their interaction is too complex to be reduced to a mere dialectical opposition” (Braidotti and Hlavajova 2). Ma’s condition is only recognized by the butterflies. This knowing emerges through agential-realist intra-action:

As such, agential realism goes beyond both humanist and antihumanism accounts of the knowing subject . . . Knowing is a matter of intra-acting . . . In some instances, “nonhumans” (even beings without brains) emerge as partaking in the world’s active engagement in practices of knowing . . . Knowing is not bounded or closed practice but an ongoing performance of the world. (Barad 149)

The non-humans know the stories of the past. Even the objects “occupy the weight of the

past” (Malhotra 16). They uncover the violent history of partition in the novel as butterflies tell many episodes of Ma’s agony during partition. Their stories reveal how Ma was abducted during partition of India. A man with a cloth covering his face caught Ma’s hair and dragged her. She called out to Anwar and other family members but she was pulled “on and on” (Shree 598). Ma even starts talking with a crow as if Ma and nonhuman worlds merge with one another to welcome the return of Ma to her life place. Partition has drawn border between them but these non-humans do not know any border. They are the bearers of history, love and culture of humans within bioregional boundaries. As Ma comes to her real home, she forgets all about the alien bioregion, her daughter, son, and every identity that she wears falsely in that land. Now she regains her bioregional consciousness. She identifies herself with her real name Chandraprabha Devi, Chanda of Anwar. When she is asked about her home, she indicates that her home is here even without a visa. and she doesn’t believe “in the restrictions of visas” (Shree 589). When the officials interrogate “her about her home, she holds up a handful of soil” and on being asked again, she directs their attention to the “soil” (Shree 621). Her identity is her bioregion that includes its soil, non-human animals, roadways and other surroundings of this place. This identity is intra-acting identity in the new materialist sense. New materialism eradicates the anthropocentric binaries between human and the non-human or material world. It subsequently blurred the distinction between what Bruno Latour called “two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on one hand; that of nonhumans on the other” (10-11). The posthuman era has turned the immaterial exceptionality of humans upside down by recuperating material agencies. Matter is no longer a passive meaningless substance. Posthumanism and new materialism articulate the active, lively and vibrant agency of matter or non-human.

Conclusion

To conclude, Partition memory comes alive through the ‘intra-action’ of human and non-human in the novel. The posthuman reading of the text opens up the overarching vitalist essence of non-humans to articulate the indescribable mystery of traumatic memories even after seven decades of partition. The novel effectively delineates how the new materialist reconfiguration of non-human voice disseminates the saga of partition as the intensity of trauma has plunged the survivors into the cave of silence. Elucidating the memory of Partition violence through the framework of interdependence of human and non-human, the text sunders all hierarchies of subjectivity and objectivity of entities.

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