



# The Interaction between Tradition and Modernity: The Evolution of East Asian Literature in the Context of Globalization

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**Abstract:** South Asian literature has historically engaged with ecocriticism and environmentalism from a postcolonial, region-specific standpoint. New materialism aligns with this ecocritical commitment, emphasizing posthumanist concepts of embodiment and material entanglement between human and nonhuman agencies. While both new materialism and South Asian literature share an interest in alternative human and nonhuman interactions, there has been limited meaningful interaction between the two. This article aims to bridge this gap by analyzing Kiran Desai's novel "Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard" through a new materialist lens. The novel portrays human and nonhuman characters interacting, envisioning posthumanist possibilities in the world. Drawing on Karen Barad's agential realist theory and Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, the article argues that Desai's light-hearted satire raises critical questions about environmental and human exploitation. The examination of India's material reality, considering local, national, global, and historical dimensions, highlights the agential realist nature of human and nonhuman interactions in the novel's rural postcolonial context. This interpretation broadens the scope of new materialism into South Asian literature, fostering the potential use of new materialist theory to engage with ecocriticism from a postcolonial perspective.

**Keywords:** global context, East Asian literature, evolution

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## Introduction

In the era of globalization, East Asian literature engages in a captivating dialogue between tradition and modernity, presenting a fascinating panorama. The evolution of this literature is shaped not only by traditional values and cultural heritage but also by contemporary trends and the forces of globalization. This article explores the subtle interplay between tradition and modernity in East Asian literature and its evolution on the global literary stage<sup>[1]</sup>. The scope of new materialism into South Asian literature, fostering the potential use of new materialist theory to engage with ecocriticism from a postcolonial perspective.

### 1. Background

To begin with, traditional elements play an indispensable role in East Asian literature, serving as the foundation of literary genres and carrying profound historical and cultural significance. Traditional literary works often convey values through narratives of myths, legends, and classic stories, transmitting generational perspectives. The continuity of this tradition allows East Asian literature to express a unique cultural identity while capturing the attention of global readers. Authors, by incorporating traditional

elements, reinterpret ancient stories from a modern perspective, breathing new life into them in contemporary settings. Such works provide readers with a sense of cultural continuity while rejuvenating tradition in the context of modern society<sup>[2]</sup>.

However, with the rise of modernity, East Asian literature transcends mere nostalgia for tradition and actively integrates contemporary societal ideologies. Modern East Asian literary works break away from traditional expressions, adopting more open and liberal forms that address the challenges and issues of contemporary society. Authors dare to challenge traditional norms, expressing reflections on the transformations of modern society through their words, propelling East Asian literature to international recognition. This modern expression not only offers authors greater creative space but also presents readers with a more diverse and complex literary experience.

Against the backdrop of globalization, East Asian literature is playing an increasingly pivotal role. The interplay of tradition and modernity gives East Asian literature a cross-border appeal, attracting readers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Literary works are no longer confined by geographical boundaries but have become a global cultural language, breaking down cultural barriers through shared human emotions and experiences. The global dissemination of East Asian literature not only promotes the preservation of East Asian culture but also makes a unique contribution to the richness of global literature.

In conclusion, the captivating dialogue between tradition and modernity in East Asian literature not only enriches the essence of literature but also injects new vitality into the development of global literature. This evolution is both a tribute to and continuation of tradition, as well as a scrutiny and contemplation of modern society. Through this interplay, East Asian literature is continually moving towards a more expansive and diverse future, bringing forth unique and compelling expressions on the global literary stage<sup>[3]</sup>.

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

“Interplay of Tradition and Modernity: Evolution of East Asian Literature in a Global Context” delves into new materialist theory, beginning with Barad’s agential realism. Barad contends that realism, in this context, is not about representing an independent reality but understanding the consequences, interventions, creative possibilities, and responsibilities of intra-acting within the world. Agential realism, in contrast to other realisms, shifts the focus from correspondence between descriptions and reality to the performative alternatives of representationalism, emphasizing matters of practices or actions<sup>[4]</sup>.

Agential realism posits that matter’s agential nature lies not in what it is, but in its continual becoming through intra-actions, which Barad defines as the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. In contrast to mere interaction, intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede but emerge through their interactions. Entangled agencies are interconnected and inextricable, with their attributes and characteristics continually emerging and changing within the course of their intra-actions. These changing attributes influence perception, which is a material practice based on specific intra-actions, altering imminent possibilities with each interaction<sup>[5]</sup>.

Barad highlights that with each intra-action, the spectrum of possibilities shifts, leading to new potential intra-actions and shaping the world's emergent becoming. This continuous process implies that the world and its possibilities are remade with each moment. Barad provocatively questions who bears responsibility for this perpetual reconfiguring of the world and how this responsibility should be undertaken within the context of the interplay between tradition and modernity in East Asian literature on a global scale<sup>[6]</sup>.

A concept Barad defines as an “ethico-onto-epistem-ology — an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being”. While Barad initially draws inspiration from physicist Niels Bohr’s

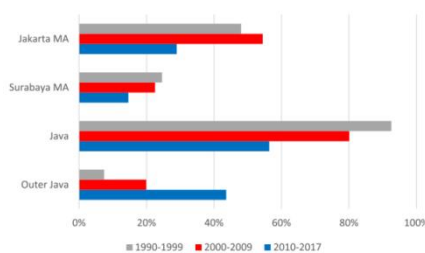
mid-twentieth-century work, agential realism transcends the confines of laboratory settings, extending into the realm of ethical responsibility. Within the agential realist framework, the absence of a strict boundary between a scientific laboratory and the external world underscores the impossibility of observing the universe from an external standpoint [7].

This impossibility arises from the understanding that humans, like other components of nature, are not merely in the world but of the world, precluding any vantage point from outside looking in (Barad, 2007: 206; emphasis in original). Herein lies the ethical dimension of agential realism. By positioning humanity as an integral part of the world, both shaping and being shaped by the nonhuman world, Barad necessitates a reimagining of responsibility and accountability. The entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies through continuous intra-actions challenges the separation or distinction between them, influencing the world's ongoing emergence. In essence, our actions and identities are both causal and consequential [8].

At the core of Barad's agential realism is the recognition that we are perpetually changing, intricately entangled, intra-active, and emergent entities contributing to the boundless possibilities of the world's becoming. This perspective informs the exploration of the interplay between tradition and modernity in East Asian literature within the global context .

According to Alaimo, the permeable boundaries of the human body facilitate a dual exchange, where nonhuman agencies, both organic and inorganic, influence and are influenced by the human body. This trans-corporeal perspective underscores that substances traverse the skin's permeable boundary, infiltrating the body and instigating unpredictable changes within. It not only traces the movement of various substances within the human body but also highlights their transformative actions, often resulting in unwelcome or unexpected outcomes. Human interactions with harmful agents such as toxic waste and chemical pesticides lead to adverse health effects, including high cancer rates, reproductive difficulties, and chronic illnesses .

While Alaimo's focus is on the detrimental impact of nonhuman matter, the concept of trans-corporeality extends beyond illness. It advocates for a "material ethics" centered on the interchanges between humans and their environment, recognizing that these flows enhance our responsibility to ourselves, each other, and the nonhuman. Despite the appearance of passivity in the face of harmful substances permeating the body, trans-corporeality asserts that these substances result from exploitative human practices that affect both human and nonhuman populations. Similar to Barad's and Alaimo's insistence on exploring our place in the world, trans-corporeality positions the human as a site of emergent material intra-actions, inseparable from the broader fabric of the world. Rather than diminishing our role, this perspective demands a critical examination of how human practices impact both human and nonhuman entities. Embracing the knowledge and ethics of permeability, we are called to take active responsibility for our intra-actions, not as mere custodians of "nature" but as accountable agents shaping the perpetual emergence of the world.



**Figure 1** Geographical shift of incoming FDI.

### **3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this exploration of Kiran Desai's novel "Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard" through a new materialist lens underscores the convergence of South Asian literature and ecocriticism within a postcolonial framework. By integrating concepts from Karen Barad's agential realism and Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality, the analysis illuminates the intricate interplay between human and nonhuman agencies in the novel's rural postcolonial setting. Desai's light-hearted satire serves as a powerful vehicle for posing critical questions about environmental and human exploitation, transcending the boundaries of traditional literary engagement with ecological concerns.

This endeavor to bridge the gap between new materialism and South Asian literature not only enriches our understanding of alternative human and nonhuman interactions but also expands the scope of new materialist theory within the context of postcolonial ecocriticism. By delving into the material reality of India across local, national, global, and historical dimensions, the study emphasizes the agential realist nature inherent in these interactions. Through this nuanced examination, the article advocates for the integration of new materialist perspectives into the discourse of South Asian literature, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to ecocriticism that is grounded in the complexities of the postcolonial experience.

### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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