Cappadocia University

School of Graduate Studies and Research

Department of English Language and Literature

READING DANIEL DEFOE'S *ROBINSON CRUSOE* AND JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS* THROUGH THE LENS OF NEW MATERIALISM

Ayçe SELVİ

Master's Thesis

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Dr. Öğretim Üyesi Gülşah Göçmen (Başkan)

Dr. Öğretim Üyesi Fatma Aykanat (Danışman)

Dr. Öğretim Üyesi Hatice Bay (Üye)

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Doç. Dr. Sinan AKILLI

Enstitü Müdürü

ÖZET

SELVİ, Ayçe. *Daniel Defoe'nun Robinson Crusoe ve Joseph Conrad'ın Heart of Darkness Romanlarını Yeni Maddeci Perspektifinden Okumak*, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Nevşehir, 2024.

Yeni Maddecilik, maddenin canlılığını ve eyleyiciliğini vurgulayarak insan ve insan dışı varlıklar arasındaki ilişkiler üzerine dönüştürücü bir bakış açısı sunar, insanmerkezci görüşlere meydan okur ve tüm varlıkların birbiriyle bağlantılı olduğunu ortaya koyar. Bu tez, Daniel Defoe'nun *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) ve Joseph Conrad'ın *Heart of Darkness* (1899) eserlerini Yeni Maddeci perspektiften inceler. Maddelerin, elementlerin ve insanların birbirine dolanıklığını ele alır; insan istisnacılığını eleştirir ve sömürge döneminde insan dışı varlıklara yönelik sömürücü yaklaşımı vurgular. Jane Bennett'in "canlı madde" ve "şeylerin gücü," Stacy Alaimo'nun "bedenlerarası akışkanlık," Karen Barad'ın "etkin gerçeklik" ve "dolanıklıklar," Nancy Tuana'nın "akışkan gözeneklilik," Serenella Iovino ve Serpil Oppermann'ın "hikâyeleştirilmiş madde" gibi teorilerinden yararlanan bu tez, maddelerin dinamik eyleyiciliğini ve klasik elementlerin hem maddi dünyayı hem de edebi anlatıları şekillendirmedeki rollerini vurgular. Maddesel ekokritik ve elemental ekokritik teorileri bir araya getirerek, maddenin insanmerkezci perspektiflere nasıl meydan okuduğunu ve bağlantısallığı nasıl ifade ettiğini inceler. *Robinson Crusoe*'da maddelerin, araçların ve hava, su ve toprak gibi elementlerin eyleyiciliği, Crusoe'nun hayatta kalması ve dönüşümü için kritik öneme sahiptir. *Heart of Darkness*'ta insan ve insan dışı eyleyiciliklerinin dolanıklığı, Marlow ve Kurtz'un deneyimlerini ve dönüşümlerini etkiler. Eserlerde sömürgecilik, emperyalizm ve insan istisnacılığı temaları, insan ve insan dışı varlıkların birbirine bağlı eyleyiciliğini vurgulayan Yeni Maddeci bakış açısı ile incelenir; geleneksel hiyerarşik ilişkiler ve insanmerkezci perspektifler sorgular. Bu Yeni Maddeci okuma, insan üstünlüğüne yönelik eleştirilerde bulunarak daha kapsayıcı bir dünya görüşü çağrısında bulunur, ekolojik farkındalığı teşvik eder ve sömürgecilik bağlamında insan-insan dışı ilişkileri yeniden tanımlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yeni Maddecilik, eyleyicilik, dolanıklık, bedenlerarası akışkanlık, akışkan gözeneklilik, hikâyeleştirilmiş madde

ABSTRACT

SELVİ, Ayçe. *Reading Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness through the Lens of New Materialism*, Master's Thesis, Nevşehir, 2024.

New Materialism, emphasizing the vibrancy and agency of matter, offers a transformative perspective on human and nonhuman relationships, challenging anthropocentric views and highlighting the interconnectedness of all entities. This thesis analyzes Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) through a New Materialist lens, focusing on the agency of materials in a colonial context. It examines the entanglement of materials, elements, and humans, critiquing human exceptionalism and highlighting the exploitative treatment of nonhuman entities during the colonial era. Drawing on theories such as Jane Bennett's "vibrant matter" and "thing power," Stacy Alaimo's "trans-corporeality," Karen Barad's "agential realism" and "entanglements," Nancy Tuana's "viscous porosity," and Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's "storied matter," this thesis emphasises the dynamic agency of materials and the roles of the classical elements in shaping both the material world and literary narratives. By incorporating material ecocritical and elemental ecocritical theories, it explores how matter challenges anthropocentric perspectives and expresses interconnectedness. In *Robinson Crusoe*, the agency of materials, tools and elements such as air, water, and earth is essential to Crusoe's survival and transformation. In *Heart of Darkness*, the entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies influences Marlow's and Kurtz's experiences and transformations. The overlapping themes of colonialism, imperialism, and human exceptionalism are explored through a New Materialist which emphasizes the interconnected agency of human and nonhuman entities, challenging traditional hierarchical relationships and anthropocentric perspectives. This New Materialist reading critiques human superiority and underscores the interconnected agency of all entities, calling for a more inclusive worldview that fosters ecological awareness and redefines human-nonhuman relationships within colonial narratives.

Keywords: New Materialism, agency, entanglement, trans-corporeality, viscous porosity, storied matter

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INTRODUCTION

Anthropocentrism is a philosophical perspective that centres on humans, considering them the most significant beings in the universe and interpreting the world primarily through a human-centred lens. This anthropocentric view emphasizes human superiority over nonhuman entities, both animate and inanimate. The origin of anthropocentrism can be traced back to the Renaissance in Europe, spanning from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. This period marked a shift in thought, as humanism, an intellectual movement focused on human reason, creativity, and achievement. It redefined humanity's relationship with the natural world by placing humans at the centre and fostering a worldview that prioritized human interests and values over those of nonhuman entities. It placed greater value on human potential and reinforced the idea that humans were primary actors in the world. Anthropocentrism is further solidified during the Enlightenment, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, due to its focus on reason, science, and progress. Philosophers and scientists like Réne Descartes and Isaac Newton contributed significantly to the rise of anthropocentrism by advancing the view that the world operated as a mechanical system that could be fully understood, explored, and controlled through human intellect and reason. Descartes emphasized the separation of mind and body, positioning humans as rational beings distinct from and superior to nature. Newton's laws of motion and universal gravitation reinforced the idea that nature followed predictable, mechanical principles that could be mastered through scientific inquiry. These developments not only enhanced human capabilities but also laid the groundwork for materialism, a philosophy emerging from the growing belief in empirical evidence and the material nature of reality, further solidifying a human-centred worldview. Materialism, like humanism, emphasizes human beings as the primary and often only subjects capable of understanding and manipulating the material world to comprehend reality. The materialist stance of the Enlightenment, by emphasizing critical thinking and empirical investigation, prioritized human rationality while overlooking the intrinsic value of the material world. This anthropocentric focus framed nature and the material world as something to be studied, controlled, and exploited for human progress, as seen in practices such as deforestation, where vast areas of forests

are cleared for agriculture or industrial expansion, leading to loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation. The human-centred perception of the world continued to dominate during the nineteenth century, however, the key figures of the Romantic movement such as William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelly, Mary Shelley, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge began to question this emphasis on human reason, and materialism. While they critiqued the reduction of nature to a mere object of human control, they did not frame nature as possessing its own active role or influence. Instead, their works celebrated the emotional and spiritual connection between humans and the natural world, highlighting the power of nature to evoke awe, inspire imagination, and provoke deep introspection. They emphasized the sublime, individual experience, and the overwhelming beauty and mystery of nature, ultimately seeking to restore a sense of respect and wonder for the natural world. This shift away from the Enlightenment's reason, human dominance, and materialism paved the way for the later critiques of human-centred thinking, which became more pronounced in the twentieth century (Rigby 60-75). Thinkers from diverse movements including, poststructuralism, existentialism, feminism and environmental philosophy, challenged the anthropocentric views by questioning the concept of a fixed, autonomous human subject and emphasizing the role of language, discourse, social relations, and interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. While these critiques expanded understandings of human and nonhuman relationships throughout the mid to late twentieth century, many primarily focused on social and discursive dimensions, underemphasizing the materiality and the agentic capacity of the nonhuman world.

In the 1990s, New Materialist perspectives began to emerge, seeking to transcend the conventional dichotomies such as human-nonhuman, nature-culture, and matter-meaning and to explore the interconnectedness and dynamic relationships among all forms of matter and life. Arising from an effort to deconstruct the anthropocentric perception of agentic capacity which privileges humans as subjects, New Materialism focuses on the agency of the material world and challenges these dichotomies by blurring the boundaries between humans and nonhumans, nature and culture, and matter and meaning, highlighting their dynamic relationships. It also encourages the reconsideration of relationships among humans, nonhumans, and the environment. New Materialism refuses the distinct boundaries among the various forms of entities acting as agents. Diana

Coole and Samatha Frost wrote in their introduction to *New Materialism* (2010) that New Materialists "eschew the distinction between organic and inorganic, or animate and inanimate in ontological level" (9). As a theoretical framework, New Materialism significantly blurs conventional ontological boundaries between human and nonhuman, mind and matter, nature and culture emphasizing their interconnectedness and mutual influence. It questions the idea that humans are separate from the material world. It argues that humans are deeply entangled with the material world, where agency is distributed across both human and nonhuman entities. Moreover, Coole and Frost assert that "matter and meaning are irreducibly interwoven" (101). New Materialist perspectives contend that both human and nonhuman, matter and meaning are interconnected, shaping and influencing each other. The material world and the meanings we attribute to it are co-constitutive. This means that our understanding of reality is shaped by the physical properties of the material world as well as by the social, cultural, and discursive meanings we impose on it. Alternatively, these meanings are based on and influenced by the material conditions of the world. The idea that matter and meaning are interconnected also challenges conventional materialist treatments of matter as passive and inert. Coole and Frost articulate: "New Materialist ontologies are abandoning the terminology of matter as an inert substance subject to predictable causal forces" (9). Abandoning classical materialist perception of matter as the lifeless substance of the universe, behaving in predictable ways following natural laws, New Materialist thought opens up new ways of thinking about the material world. In this world human, nonhuman entities and even inanimate objects actively interact with and influence one another, collectively shaping and reshaping their interconnected existence and relationships. It rejects the notion put forth by Descartes and Newton that the world operates like a mechanic machine that can be fully observed and understood, instead advocates the perspective that the world is a continuous process, a place for constant transformation as posited by Coole and Frost:

> Human species is being relocated within a natural environment whose material forces themselves manifest certain agentic capacities and in which the domain of unintended or unanticipated effects is considerably broadened. Matter is no longer imagined here as a massive, opaque plenitude but is recognized instead as indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways. (10)

In this essence, scholars adapting New Materialist perspectives rethink the human species' role within the natural environment. This agential understanding of matter

recognizes that nonhuman entities possess dynamic and transformative capacities. For instance, a river demonstrates dynamic and transformative capacities by carving canyons over time, reshaping entire landscapes through the process of erosion. According to this viewpoint, humans are not isolated agents; but they are embedded within a dynamic and ever-changing environment in which materiality plays an active role. By decentering human agency, the New Materialist view introduces "intra-active becomings" (Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity" 147) within the natural world, which is not something to be dominated or fully understood, but a complex system with its own forms of influence, unpredictability, and creativity.

New Materialisms encompass a wide range of academic fields including social and science studies, feminism, posthumanism, animal studies, environmental philosophy, anthropology, geography, queer studies, and literary studies. These varied disciplines contribute to a rich, multifaceted theoretical landscape that has been explored by scholars such as Karen Barad, Stacy Alaimo, Jane Bennett, Vicky Kirby, Susan Hekman, Nancy Tuana, Andrew Pickering, David Abram, Diana Coole, Samantha Frost, Rosi Braidotti, Serpil Oppermann, Serenella Iovino, Manuel DeLanda, and Timothy Morton. This thesis employs key frameworks and concepts within New Materialist thought, with a particular focus on Material Ecocriticism and Elemental Ecocriticism, to analyze *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness*. These subfields and concepts have been chosen for their emphasis on the interconnected agency of humans, non-humans, and the material world, offering a critical perspective for examining how these relationships are represented and challenged within these canonical colonial narratives.

New Materialism embraces "agential realism," a concept introduced by Karen Barad, a professor of Feminist Studies, Philosophy, and History of Consciousness. "Agential realism" is a complex philosophical approach that integrates concepts from quantum physics, feminist thought, and poststructuralist theory. Barad in *Meeting the Universe Half Way* (2007) contends that:

> In an agential realist account, matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of interactive intra-activity. Phenomena –the smallest material units (relational "atoms") – come to matter through this process of ongoing intra-activity. "Matter" does not refer to an inherent, fixed property of abstract, independently existing objects; rather, "matter" refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization. (151)

This quotation offers a fundamental insight into Karen Barad's concept of "agential realism" which challenges the conventional materialist notion of matter as passive and inert as she proposes a new understanding of agency. Barad discusses agential realism by proposing an active and dynamic conception of the matter. She refuses to take the matter as a fixed substance but rather refers to the matter as an "intra-active becoming" ("Posthumanist Performativity" 147) which emphasizes the process of transformation and interaction among various forms of entities through "interactive intra-activity" (*Meeting the Universe* 151). This perspective challenges the conventional notions of inert, predictable, and pre-existing matter by positing that matter itself possesses an active agentic capacity that constantly interacts with other entities. Barad expresses the idea that the world and everything in it are continuously in a process of evolving and becoming. She explains: "The world is an ongoing open process of mattering" (817). By "mattering," she refers both to the physical process of materialization and to the dynamic, ongoing process by which entities come into being and acquire importance. This dual interpretation reflects Barad's concept of the deep interconnectedness of material and discourse, where matter and meaning are entangled in forming reality. Based on the refusal of Cartesian dualisms that separate human and nonhuman, mind and matter, body and mind, nature and culture, this theoretical framework suggests an entangled understanding of the agential powers of things and words. Barad argues: "Matter and meaning are not separate elements. They are inextricably fused together, and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder" (3). Every action and occurrence in the world is, thus, both material and meaningful. Barad's view suggests that understanding the world requires us to look at how material conditions and meaning-making practices co-create phenomena, such as social interactions, scientific practices, or environmental changes. In her rendering, reality is not simply the result of material forces or human interpretation alone. She argues for the "entanglement" of human and nonhuman entities, matter, and meaning, all of which act as agential forces in shaping reality. She highlights that:

> By "entanglement" I don't mean just any old kind of connection, interweaving, or enmeshment in a complicated situation. Crucially, my use of this term goes to the agential realist ontology that I propose with all its requisite refigurings of causality, materiality, agency, dynamics, and topological reconfigurings. (160)

Barad's use of "entanglement," central to her agential realist ontology, redefines the conventional meanings of causality, materiality, and agency. She emphasizes that "entanglement" is not just things being connected in complex ways. Instead, it is about a deeper ontological reconfiguration where entities do not pre-exist in their relations but emerge through interactions. In this notion, causality is not linear or deterministic. The identities and properties of entities are not fixed but are continuously redefined through entangled relationships. This perception of matter challenges the anthropocentric view that humans are the sole agents in the universe, highlighting that agency is distributed across a network as, for Barad, "[a]gency is not held, it is not a property of persons or things; rather, agency is an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements" (Dolphin and van der Tuin 54). In this framework, matter is not pre-existing; it plays an active role in the ongoing process of becoming, constantly entangled with meaning, and the agency of both human and nonhuman entities. Profoundly highlighting that everything – human and nonhuman, matter and meaning – are intricately entangled, she proposes an "intra-connected" and inseparable agency to both matter and meaning.

Barad introduces the notion of "intra-actions" asserting that "the primary ontological unit is not independent objects with independently determinate boundaries and properties" (*Meeting the Universe* 3). Emphasizing the intra-connected nature of reality, this perception underscores the idea that entities do not exist in isolation and are not pre-existing but emerge through their interactions, revealing the "intra-connected" nature of reality. Barad draws on quantum physics to explain the ontological foundation of the active and "intra-connected" nature of the different forms of entities. She clarifies the notion of intra-actions by showcasing quantum physics experiments conducted by physicist Niels Bohr in the early twentieth century. Bohr's complementarity principle suggests that the properties of quantum objects are shaped by the experimental setup (160-61). The principle posits that the behaviour and the properties of quantum objects are not fixed; they rather depend on the specific conditions and measurements of the experimental setup, thereby highlighting the relationships between observation and reality. In these experiments, subatomic particles are not acting independently but they are continuously affected by each other, the observer, and the setup (121). This provides ground for Barad's understanding of how entities come into being through "intra-actions"

rather than pre-existing independently. Although Niels Bohr faced challenges to present a theoretical understanding of his findings and focused on the epistemological implications of quantum mechanics, Barad states: "I have mined his writings for his implicit ontological views . . . and here elaborate on them in the development of an agential realist ontology (*Meeting the Universe* 138). Barad, by grounding her theory on these scientific experiments' results, challenges conventional notions of objectivity and independent existence. She argues that entities come into being through "entangled intra-actions" among living organisms, matter, and meaning and this view indicates that the physical reality and the concepts we use to describe it are not separate but mutually shaped through these "intra-actions."

Similar to Barad's treatment of matter as an inert but dynamic entity, Jane Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), asserts that matter is vibrant and endowed with an inherent agency that shapes and influences the world significantly. As a political theorist and philosopher, Bennett, with this dynamic and vibrant perception of matter, calls for a redefinition of our understanding of agency, recognizing the active and lively role that nonhuman entities play in shaping realities. The New Materialist understanding of matter as a vibrant entity refuses to perceive the nonliving entities merely as a source of human activities, instead proposes a more active, entangled interconnectedness where all forms of entities are vibrant agents. Bennett explains the vibrancy of matter: "By 'vitality' I mean the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, and metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii). Bennett's concept of "vitality" suggests that inanimate objects and nonhuman entities possess a form of agency. This agency is not the same as human intentionality, but rather a capacity to influence events, exert force, and affect the outcomes in ways that go beyond human control. She refers to nonhuman entities as "quasi agents," recognizing that although they lack human intentionality or consciousness, they still possess the capacity to influence and alter the world. This view emphasizes the complex interactions and mutual influences between different forms of entities, highlighting that nonhuman actors play a significant role in shaping outcomes and contribute to larger ecological and social processes.

This perspective aligns with the idea that agency extends beyond human actors, permeating all forms of matter, both living and nonliving. It suggests that agency is a shared capacity, distributed across a wide array of entities, emphasizing the interconnectedness and active participation of all material forms in shaping reality. As Bennett states: "Agentic capacity is now seen as differentially distributed across a wider range of ontological types" (9). Bennett refuses the conventional understanding of agency which was viewed as a human characteristic, tied to intention, reason, and decision-making. Instead, she proposes that "agentic capacity" is distributed across a much broader spectrum of ontological types. Both living and nonliving entities possess some degree of influence in the world. Consequently, a virus, a natural disaster, or the absence of a material form can affect and influence all other forms of entities significantly. By challenging the long-established view of agency that is solely attributed to humans, this view highlights the complex interdependencies within our material world. Calling it, "thing power" Bennett stresses that all forms of bodies whether organic or inorganic, possess a kind of agency or vitality that enables them to affect and influence the world around them (7). For instance, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch consisting of an accumulation of inorganic, plastic waste exemplifies how nonhuman, inorganic entities can exert a significant impact on marine ecosystems and human health. By acknowledging that agency is not limited to humans but is distributed across both human and nonhuman entities, we can better understand the complex ways in which various forces, whether intentional or not, both visible and invisible, shape our reality.

Developing the theme of interconnected influence, the concept of "trans-corporeality" introduced by Stacy Alaimo, a feminist theorist and scholar, further explores how bodies and environments are in constant exchange, highlighting that the vibrancy of matter actively shapes and is shaped by, these fluid interactions. To understand Alaimo's "trans-corporeality," it is essential to first explore the concepts of "corporeality" and "body without organs" upon which "trans-corporeality" is built. The word "corporeality" derives from the Latin word "*corpus*," meaning "body" and the term refers to the physical, bodily existence of being ("Corporeal"). Corporeality refers to the inherent physicality of beings, incorporating the material existence of human and nonhuman bodies alike. Having been developed in philosophical traditions, this concept explores the materiality of bodies and their dynamic interactions within the physical

world. Challenging conventional body and mind dualism "corporeality" underscores that body and mind are intertwined in shaping human experience. This reconsideration of the body's materiality laid the groundwork for the subsequent theories that express the body's constant state of becoming. Aligning with this perspective, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "body without organs" discussed in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) further deconstructs boundaries between the physical body and its functions and offers a more fluid understanding of embodiment. According to Deleuze and Guattari "the 'BwO' is not opposed to the organs but to the organization of the organs called the organism" (158). "BwO" critiques the rigid structuring of the body that reduces it to a hierarchical system. Rather than viewing the body as a fixed, biological entity with organs assigned specific, predetermined functions, it suggests a radical rethinking where the body exists in a more fluid, open-ended mode free from these constraints. In parallel with "BwO" Stacy Alaimo's "trans-corporeality" challenges fixed boundaries and highlights the body's capacity for transformation. While doing so, unlike Deleuze and Guattari, who concentrated on the internal dismantling of the bodily structures and liberating the body from social and biological norms, Alaimo shifts the focus outwards. "Trans-corporeality" explores dynamic exchanges between human and nonhuman bodies, ecosystems, and environments. Alaimo in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010) describes her theory of "trans-corporeality":

> By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures. But by underscoring that trans indicates movement across different sites,trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors. Emphasizing the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world—and, at the same time, acknowledging that material agency necessitates more capacious epistemologies—allows us to forge ethical and political positions that can contend with numerous late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century realities in which "human" and "environment" can by no means be considered as separate. (2)

Alaimo's "trans-corporeality" rejects the rigid boundaries between different forms of bodies, highlighting the interconnectedness and fluidity between them. By focusing on the movement across bodies, "trans-corporeality" reveals dynamic exchanges that occur between various forms of life whether human, animal, or even chemical agents. Bodies and environments are in flux. The mobility between sites and bodies is often unpredictable and unwanted, referring to unintended consequences of these interactions. The human body is interwoven with the more-than-human world, and there is a

continuous interconnection between the human and material worlds. This interconnectedness promotes the concept of material agency, in which nonhuman elements actively participate in and influence the ongoing exchanges with the world around them. The recognition of exchange among different bodies and sites inevitably dethrones the superiority of human agency and redefines human and nonhuman relationships, potentially inspiring a more sustainable way of living by emphasizing mutual interdependence and shared agency of all entities within ecological systems.

Shifting from "trans-corporeality," the concept of "viscous porosity" introduced by Nancy Tuana, a philosopher and feminist theorist, delves also into the permeability of the bodies and their exchanges with the environment. Rejecting the established idea of a clear separation between human bodies and the environment, Tuana, like Stacy Alaimo, explores how various material entities such as chemicals, pollutants, or ecological systems, actively affect and shape human bodies and vice versa. Tuana clarifies that "viscous porosity helps us understand an interactionist attention to the processes of becoming in which unity is dynamic and always interactive and agency is diffusely enacted in complex networks of relations" (188). Tuana alleges that bodies are "porous" and constantly interacting with their surroundings. Alaimo's use of prefix "trans" suggests a dynamic, fluid flow whereas Tuana's "porosity" is described as "viscous," reflecting the resistance and complexity. This concept opposes the conventional perception of matter as fixed in liquid or solid states, suggesting instead that matter exists in a state of constant flux with permeable boundaries through which entities continuously interact and transform. It spotlights the fluidity and interconnectedness of matter, where the agency is not confined to individual bodies but distributed across a network of relations, involving both human and nonhuman bodies. Tuana's theory helps us understand how bodies are "enmeshed" in the material world, meaning they are deeply intertwined and interdependent with their surroundings due to their porosity. This perspective shows that agency is a shared phenomenon among both human and nonhuman actors. Both "transcorporeality" and "viscous porosity" treat all sorts of entities as active agents and underscore that they are intra/interrelated within a single system. This new reading of the matter does not only claim matter to be an active equal participant, it also blurs the boundaries between animate and inanimate bodies. It calls for an understanding of "viscous porosity" among the interactions between human and nonhuman entities.

Consequently, entities in the universe, whether human or nonhuman, do not exist as isolated individuals but are engaged in constant "intra-actions," forming a dynamic web of relationships that continuously shape and influence one another's existence.

Building on the New Materialist focus on matter's "entanglements," "vibrancy," "trans-corporeality," and "viscous porosity," material ecocriticism shifts the attention toward the material aspects of the texts and natural environments they portray. Material ecocriticism, as a branch of ecocriticism focuses on how literature reflects, engages with, and influences the perceptions of the natural world, paying particular attention to the material dimensions of both texts and the environments that they depict. Specifically, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann in *Material Ecocriticism* (2014) state "material ecocriticism examines matter both in texts and as a text, trying to shed light on the way bodily natures and discursive forces express their interaction whether in representations or in their concrete reality" (2). This perspective suggests that matter is active and expressive, as it is both represented in literary texts and interacts with discursive forces in the real world. It underlines the idea that literature does not only reflect nature; it participates in our understanding of the material world and the interconnections between all forms of matter. Such an approach allows for a deeper examination of how literary narratives can reveal the entanglements between human and nonhuman forces, offering a clearer understanding within the text and beyond. Matter itself, whether in human or nonhuman forms, can be analysed in literature and is also understood to possess its own narrative or textual qualities in the real world. Matter can express and influence literary narratives and ideas, blurring the line between the symbolic and the real. Moreover, matter, as a text, conveys its stories and meanings through its material interactions and transformations. Material forces shape the world around them independently of human representation, allowing us to read its agentic capacity in ecological processes, physical changes, and interrelations of living and nonliving entities. Iovino and Oppermann state "reality emerges as an intertwined flux of material and discursive forces" ("Stories Come to Matter" 3). Reality is not fixed but is constantly shaped by the interplay between the physical matter and the meaning we assign to it through language, culture and thought. For instance, we can observe this process in the way ecosystems are influenced by not just natural factors but also human practices such as agriculture, urban development, and environmental policies, all of which are informed by cultural beliefs and values.

Discursive forces shape how we perceive and interact with the material world, influencing our decisions about land use, scientific practices, and more while the material world, in turn, shapes our stories, behaviours, and social structure. In this framework, feelings, settings, objects, weather, literature, culture, language, other living organisms, and nonliving entities are active agents affecting and being affected by each other. The material world is thus not just a setting for human actions, but an active participant in the formation of cultural and literary meanings. Iovino and Oppermann maintain that "meaning is a form of embodiment, and as such complex and irreducible to human-depending dynamics. Matter and discourse shape and interfere with each other" ("Theorizing Material Ecocriticism" 454). As suggested in the aforementioned quotation, meaning is not just an abstract concept, but "a form of embodiment" indicating that meaning is tied to material reality and is shaped by the interaction between matter and discourse. The argument that matter itself can be read like "text" implies that the physical world holds stories, meanings, and histories that interact with human culture in complex ways. Material ecocriticism interprets the world's material elements as narratives where all matter is seen as "storied matter," a concept clarified by Iovino and Oppermann proposing that physical entities carry stories and histories within them. "Storied matter" refers to the idea that all physical entities – animate or inanimate – embody histories, experiences, and interactions that shape their form and their influence on the world. These narratives are not passively inscribed onto matter but are actively produced through the dynamic interplay between material forces and cultural contexts. Iovinio and Oppermann express "dealing with the narrative dimension of these agential emergences, material ecocriticism takes matter as a text, as a site of narrativity, a storied-matter, a corporeal palimpsest in which stories are inscribed" (451). As the quote illustrates, by treating matter as a text, "a storied matter," material ecocriticism emphasizes that physical elements embody their own narratives, serving as sites where histories and stories are embedded, thus revealing their active role in the ecological and cultural network. Material ecocriticism promotes a material-centred analysis of narratives emphasizing the agency of matter itself. It enhances the entangled relationship between discourse and matter from various angles. It prompts us to pay attention to the stories that matter itself embodies and to consider how these stories shape and are shaped by human interactions. Rather than positing humans' agency as privileged and separate, it introduces a more complex mesh

concept of agency which acts and is acted at the same time. Material ecocriticism emphasizes the interconnectedness of all entities and underscores the narrative agency of nonhuman matter within ecological and cultural contexts. Oppermann writes "agentic matter encourages more ecological and ethical attention toward our relations and interconnections with everything other-than-human in the indivisible field of existence" ("Entangled Stories" 11). As Oppermann suggests, material ecocriticism raises awareness of the dynamic and porous agency of human and nonhuman entities, underscoring that both are intricately linked and mutually influential within the broader ecological and ethical landscape. Material ecocriticism examines matter, both as it appears in texts, and as texts themselves, exploring how materiality influences and is represented in literature.

Expanding upon the broader focus of Material ecocriticism, which examines matter in its various forms and representations, elemental ecocriticism narrows the focus from all forms of matter to fundamental elements: earth, air, water, and fire. It recognizes the dynamic "vibrant" agency of fundamental elements. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert in *Elemental Ecocriticism* (2015) point out the vibrancy of elements: "Elemental matter is inherently creative, motile, experimental, impure because fire, water, air, and earth are never inert" (3). They emphasise the dynamic and transformative nature of elemental matter, arguing that these elements are not passive or inert but possess an inherent creativity and motion. Elements, like all living and nonliving entities, have agentic power and their agentic capacity affects and is affected by the agency of other forms of entities. This perspective challenges the notion of human dominance over nature by showing that the elements have their own powers and capacities, independent from human control. They operate according to their forces, constantly experimenting, interacting, and shaping the world. Elements engage in unpredictable, transformative processes that lead to new outcomes and interactions. For instance, ocean waves gradually wear down coastlines, winds erode mountains, and volcanic eruptions reshape the land. These elemental forces continually transform the world around us, influencing human actions, reshaping cultural landscapes, and challenging human plans in response to nature's dynamic processes. Extending Cohen and Duckert's focus on the "vibrancy" of elements, Iovino and Oppermann in their chapter "Wandering Elements and Natures to Come" in *Elemental Ecocritism* clarify elemental ecocriticism:

> It aims not simply to explore how they have affected our stories but also to show that they are all the stories of the cosmic adventure— including our story, the story of how the two of us, like all the authors in this volume, came to "think about" these topics by way of "thinking with": with each other, with the elements, with the force of things. (314)

They express the interconnectedness of human narratives and elemental forces within the large cosmic story. Elements, like all other forms of matter, carry distinct stories, each playing an active role in the broader ecological narrative that shapes our world. The idea of not just "thinking about" but "thinking with" the elements suggests that humans should view elements not as passive objects, but as active agents with equal capacity to influence and shape the world which cannot be fully controlled. Iovino and Oppermann argue that our own stories and thoughts are interwoven with these elemental narratives, reflecting the mutual influence between human experiences and the forces of the natural world.

In addition to the "vibrancy" of elements discussed by the aforementioned scholars, Timothy Morton, a philosopher and theorist known for his work in ecology, New Materialism and posthumanism, emphasizes the inseparability of elements from reality itself. Morton describes this intrinsic and inseparable nature of elements within reality:

> Elements come in all shapes and sizes since they are appearance and essence in an inseparable, non-orientable weird loop. It would be best for us to be friends with them rather than trying to police them, or push them away- remember there is no away, so trying to peel elemental out of reality will be like trying to peel your mind from your thoughts. ("Elementality" 279)

Morton suggests that elements are deeply entangled with both appearance and essence, indicating that their existence and perceptions are intertwined in a continuous, inseparable loop. These two aspects cannot be separated because our perception of the elements is always linked to their material existence. How we understand and interact with elements is shaped by both their physical properties and the cultural or symbolic meanings that we associate with them. They are dynamic agents that exist in a relationship with the world around them. This perspective of "being friends" challenges the conventional human tendency to control, dominate, and manage natural elements like fire, water, air, and earth. Morton implies that instead of treating the elements as external forces to be controlled, we should acknowledge our deep entanglement with them and adopt an approach that recognizes their agency and influence. He emphasizes the "inseparability" of elements from reality, arguing that they are fundamental components of existence. This "inseparability" also highlights the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman entities, showing that we are "enmeshed" with the elements.

Recognizing the agencies of other forms is very crucial for fostering a more sustainable relationship between human societies and ecosystems. This "vibrant" and "entangled" understanding of agency is vital both for today and the future. Awareness can be achieved through the analysis of the non-anthropocentric reading of stories. As Oppermann suggests if nature is considered a form of language, then the elements can be seen as its words and continues, "elemental ecocriticism wants to assemble these words into stories: not only stories to tell but also stories to come" ("Wandering Elements" 316). Referring to elements as the "words" of nature, Oppermann stresses the notion that the elements – water, fire, earth, and air – serve as the language through which nature communicates with humans and other living beings, and expresses its processes, changes and interactions. She posits that understanding this elemental language is vital for the present realities and future possibilities. The anthropocentric exploitation of nature resulted in the climate crisis, acidification of oceans, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, air pollution, and other severe environmental problems that threaten the well-being of the ecosystems and human well-being. Humanity witnesses the "words of nature" in their daily lives–water in the forms of floods, fire in wildfires, earth in drought and avalanches, and air in the form of extreme events driven by the climate crisis. The limitations of human reason and intelligence become evident when confronted with the agentic power of elements. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, one of the co-editors of *Elemental Ecocriticism*, states in "The Sea Above" that "to acknowledge how elements work, matter, and thrive, to realize our utter embroilment within a world of plants, animals, winds, seas, sky, stone, is to realize that environmental activism mandates ecological agentism" (28). Cohen emphasizes that "ecological agency" is not limited to human actions but extends to nonhuman elements such as plants, animals, and even inanimate entities like stone, forces of the nature like wind, and dynamic bodies of water like the sea. It pushes back conventional environmental activism by suggesting that humans are not the only agents of change. Our activism must account for the dynamic interplay between human and nonhuman forces, advocating for a more holistic approach to ecological issues. Effective activism should therefore respect and incorporate the agency of the environment itself, acknowledging that everything in nature plays a significant role in the health and balance of the planet.

By employing New Materialist, material ecocritical, and elemental ecocritical theories and concepts that are defined above, this thesis aims to reveal how the agency of matter undermines anthropocentric perspectives and expresses the interconnectedness of all entities through the relevant illustrative examples selected from *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Heart of Darkness* (1899). This study incorporates Karen Barad's theory of "agential realism" and her analysis of "entanglements," Jane Bennett's exploration of the "vibrant matter" and "thing power," Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality," Nancy Tuana's "viscous porosity," Serenella Iovino's and Serpil Oppermann's "storied-matter," and elemental ecocritical theories, which emphasize the dynamic agency and interconnectedness of four classical elements and their roles in shaping both material world and literary narratives. Collectively, these perspectives challenge the anthropocentric view of agency and reveal intricate interconnections among all entities. By examining the selective canonical colonial narratives through a New Materialist lens, this study emphasizes the importance of recognizing the dynamic interplay between human and more-than-human forces.

Establishing the theoretical framework of New Materialism and its key concepts and theories used in the analysis of the chapters, it is also essential to contextualize the socio-cultural and economic conditions under which *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness* were written. These two novels, separated by nearly two centuries, reflect distinct yet interconnected moments in the history of colonialism. *Robinson Crusoe* emerged during the height of the age of exploration in the early eighteenth century, while *Heart of Darkness* grappled with the exploitative imperial practices of the late nineteenth century. Understanding these historical moments is critical for examining how colonial ideologies shaped material-discursive interactions and relationships between human and nonhuman entities within the narrative. To achieve this, the following section delves into the socio-economic and cultural backdrop of these novels, paying particular attention to the colonial period's defining characteristics. This includes an exploration of triangular trade, which played a pivotal role in the rise of global commerce and colonial expansion, and an examination of British colonial policies that established power dynamics over both the human and nonhuman world. Additionally, the socio-economic conditions of eighteenth-century Britain—marked by burgeoning mercantilism, the commodification of nature, and the rise of industrial capitalism—provided fertile ground for narratives like

Robinson Crusoe, which valorized individualism and mastery over nature. Similarly, the late Victorian anxieties over imperialism's moral and environmental costs influenced Conrad's portrayal of the Congo in *Heart of Darkness*, where the interplay between human and nonhuman elements reveals the dehumanizing and extractive nature of imperial power. Understanding the trade in commodities and the socio-economic landscape of eighteenth-century Britain is crucial to grasp the backdrop against which these novels were produced. By understanding the ideological and economic forces that shaped the authors' worlds, we can better appreciate how these texts depict the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman actors. This analysis provides a foundation for the New Materialist perspective that follows, offering a lens through which the material agency of objects, environments, and colonial structures can be examined within the literary works.

To understand European colonialism, it is crucial to explore the term's meaning and the evolution of its concepts over time. The term "colonialism" etymologically derives from the Latin word *colonia*, which originally referred to a farm or settlement established by Roman citizens in the territories they conquered. Over time, colonialism has become a significant and recurrent feature of global history (Willoughby 236). Colonialism "the conquest and control of other people's land and goods" (Loomba 2), was already present in the Roman, Mongol, Aztec, Inca, Ottoman, and Chinese empires (2). However, European colonialism which "has been characterized as a land scramble by European states, who hoped to increase their power, wealth, and prestige" (Athow and Blanton 220) began at the end of the fifteenth century. With advancements, in navigation and shipbuilding, from the sixteenth century onwards European colonialism became globally dominant reaching Asia, Africa, and the Americas. It was the time when European countries, particularly Spain and Portugal, conducted extensive overseas exploration. The discoveries started with Portugal through the exploration of western Africa and continued with Spain's participation in the discovery of the Americas. With the exploration of the Americas by Christopher Colombus in 1492, a new age of exploration and colonization started. Spain, Portugal, France, and Britain colonized vast territories in the following centuries. The motivations behind colonization have changed and varied in time following the needs of the colonizers and it has had immense global effects on the natures, cultures, and economies. Renaissance Humanism, with its emphasis on human

superiority, exploration, and the pursuit of knowledge, helped to justify colonial expansion as a means of 'civilizing' indigenous populations and wild natures by exploiting both the people and the lands of colonial territories. Literary critic and postcolonial theorist Edward Said asserts: "Yet geographical appetite could also take on the moral neutrality of an epistemological impulse to find out, to settle upon, to uncover" ("Latent" 216). European colonizer countries, Britain becoming dominant from the eighteenth century onwards, framed their actions as a quest for knowledge rather than as an act of conquest. They competed to find new lands and expand their empires. Yet, by portraying this as an epistemological pursuit, they masked the underlying motives of domination and exploitation. With the Industrial Revolution and Britain's victory in the Seven Years' War from 1756 to 1763, British colonization reached its peak. The Industrial Revolution bore new motivations for the colonised countries. Ocheni and Nwankwo list these as the pursuit of raw materials for factories, manpower to be used, the increase in urban population resulting in the decrease in the production of agricultural products, finding new markets for European manufactured goods, new opportunities for investing the profit gained by the factories, and geopolitical competition and national prestige (46-48). The Age of Exploration extended from the fifteenth century to the early seventeenth century, after which European powers increasingly transitioned into a period of colonization and exploitation, lasting until the early twentieth century. These centuries of exploitation led to profound natural cultural, economic, and political changes that shaped the histories, natures, and cultures of these regions as Suvir Kaul points out:

> The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also saw the hardening of existent notions of racist difference into pernicious and extraordinarily violent practices overseas. In particular, white colonists decimated and displaced native populations in the Caribbean and North and South America, and plantation owners and overseers enriched themselves via the labor of enslaved people from western Africa. Imperial conquest and competition, primarily between the Spanish, the French, and the English, across the Atlantic and the Indian oceans—particularly in South Asia—generated both the modern form of the colonial nation-state and its mechanisms of capitalist resource extraction. European empires expanded their reach in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; economic and ecological disparities put into place in these years continue to structure international relations today. (9)

Colonizers enabled the extraction of raw materials which were essential for feeding European industries and trade systems. The extracted materials were processed in European factories, creating manufactured goods that were then sold both domestically and internationally, often back to the colonies. It was a cycle of exploitation where natural resources were extracted, human lives were commodified, driving money and power back

to imperial centres. The material qualities of the land, minerals, and bodies actively shaped the flow of resources and wealth. This dynamic interaction between human and nonhuman forces created systems that continually reinforced the economic and social hierarchies of imperial power.

As European countries established control over vast territories, a complex system of commerce known as the Triangular Trade emerged. This trade network, primarily conducted by England along with France, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands, facilitated the exchange of goods, enslaved people, and raw materials from the early sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Manufactured goods including guns, textiles, tools, and ammunition were transported on cargo ships from Europe to Africa. These exported products were exchanged with enslaved African people. The enslaved African natives were carried to the Americas in overly loaded ships, enduring a journey known as the Middle Passage referring to the middle leg of the triangular trade route. By the eighteenth century, the number of African slaves carried to the New World each year reached nearly 80000 ("Triangular Trade"). Half of these slaves were carried by English ships and the rest by French, Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese. The Middle Passage was a four to six-week journey that resulted in a high number of casualties, "this was a particularly risky leg of the entire voyage. Ships were buffeted by Atlantic gales and storms, the crew and slaves often became ill through disease, malnutrition, or dehydration" (Morgan 54). Once they arrived in the New World, they were sold to work in the plantations that produced raw materials and food for the colonizer countries. And finally, ships were loaded with raw materials, crops, and products and shipped back to Europe. The plantation crops and products exported to Europe were mainly sugar, rice, tobacco, cotton, flour, coffee, indigo, lumber, timber, and rum along with other valuable resources such as fur, ivory, minerals from mines, and precious metals like gold and silver (Morgan 54). The expansion of European colonial powers significantly altered global powers, influencing cultural, economic, and social structures across continents. Ertan, Fiszbein, and Putterman explain Europeans "expanded their reach, spreading European institutions, culture, and genes, and forcing and inducing massive cross-continental movements of Africans and others" (165-166). The traffic within the trade triangle that emerged from this expansion lasted for centuries and fundamentally reshaped the world not only economically, but also demographically and materially. The movement of human and

nonhuman bodies, natural resources, and commodities through these networks transformed both societies and ecosystems, leaving lasting impacts on the global landscape.

England, already involved in the Mediterranean slave trade, expanded its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade by founding the Company of Royal Adventurer's Trading into Africa in 1660, a partnership between the Stuart monarchy and London Merchants (Kaul 13). As Native Americans either struggled to meet the labour demands or were scummed to diseases brought from across the ocean, an alternative labour supply became necessary for the plantations in the Americas. Indentured white workers from England initially worked on plantations and they were granted freedom after 3 to 7 years of service. As their numbers declined in the late seventeenth century due to population stabilization and improving economic conditions in England, plantation owners increasingly turned to African slaves to meet the labour demands of plantations (Morgan, *Slavery, Atlantic Trade and the British Economy* 7). The British soon became the dominant providers of enslaved Africans to plantations across the Caribbean and the Americas, particularly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. "The Atlantic Slave Trade represents the largest importation of slaves in the history of the world" (Bulhan 242). Britain with this three-legged operation advanced its economy and dominated the world's economy for centuries.

British colonization went beyond mere resource extraction, fundamentally reshaping the economies of colonized nations and creating interdependent networks between the colonizer and the colonized. As Loomba further states;

> Modern Colonization did more than extract tribute, goods and wealth from the countries that it conquered—it restructured the economies of the latter, drawing them into a complex relationship with their own, so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonised and colonial countries. (3)

As is stated here, during the colonial age, humans, raw materials, manufactured goods, and cultures were transferred and exploited in a complex system of exchange. Manufactured goods and various groups of people, including traders, explorers, missionaries, soldiers, and colonial administrators were sent from Britain to Africa and the Americas. Furthermore, surplus populations, including convicts, indentured servants, the unemployed, and the landless poor were sent to colonies to avoid any probable civil unrest. British traders brought surplus manufactured goods to African ports, where they

were traded for enslaved people. In the Americas, the enslaved workforce was sold to work in the plantations to produce raw materials and food to be shipped to Britain. Ships laden with vast quantities of agricultural products, raw materials, and high-value natural resources were transported back to Britain. From this complex traffic of people, materials, and cultures "profits always flowed back into the so-called 'mother country'" (Loomba 3-4). With the Industrial Revolution, this exploitation intensified as the demand for raw materials grew. The commodification of natural resources and human labour allowed Britain to acquire raw materials at very low costs. The availability of cheap raw materials boosted Britain's industrial output, enabling it to expand its manufacturing sector and accumulate vast wealth, solidifying its position as a global economic power (4). As a renowned Nigerian author and critic of colonialism, Chinua Achebe offers crucial insights into the devastating cultural and human impact of these colonial policies. Achebe asserts, "Europe engaged Africa in the tragic misalliance of the slave trade and colonialism to lay the foundations of modern European and American industrialism and wealth" (29). This quote by Achebe highlights how the commodification of African people and natural resources played a significant role in the economic development of European countries, illustrating how the exploitation of African resources and labour was integral to the rise of industrialization and the accumulation of wealth in the Western world. While the commodification of peoples, lands, and natural resources enriched colonial powers, it simultaneously transformed the landscapes and cultures of the colonized regions. Cronon explains this: "Seeing landscapes as commodities meant something else as well: it treated the members of an ecosystem as isolated and extractable units" (21). Ecosystems were treated as collections of discrete, extractable parts, ignoring the dynamic relationship between humans and the nonhuman environment. Overlooking the interconnectedness of ecosystems enabled colonizers to exploit resources with no consideration for the long-term environmental impacts. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in their "Introduction" to *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2009) summarize:

> Not only were other people often regarded as part of nature – and thus treated instrumentally as animals – but also they were forced or co-opted over time into western views of the environment, thereby rendering cultural and environmental restitution difficult if not impossible to achieve. Once invasion and settlement had been accomplished, or at least once administrative structures had been set up, the environmental impacts of western attitudes to human being-in-the-world were facilitated or reinforced by the deliberate (or accidental) transport of animals, plants and peoples throughout the European empires, instigating widespread ecosystem change under conspicuously unequal power regimes. (6)

As explained, this transportation and exploitation disrupted the complex relationships among the land, its inhabitants, and the broader ecological balance, leading to deforestation, soil depletion, loss of biodiversity, and other forms of environmental degradation.

The growth in the extremely capitalist economy, driven by the trade and production of commodities in colonial plantations and mines, significantly altered not only the colonies but also the life in the metropolis, leading to a rise in the urban population changes in manufacturing cities, and broader social dynamics (Kaul 11). During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, both the urban populations increased and extraordinary advancements in material life unfolded in Britain. Commodities such as sugar, tobacco, cotton, and tea became central to the British economy (Langford 37). This period marked the rise of consumerism, as goods became widely available and integrated into the daily lives of the British public. Increased accessibility and consumption of these commodities demonstrated the rising demand for luxurious items and a shift toward a consumer-driven society. Neil McKendrick expresses that "there was a consumer boom in England in the eighteenth century," noting that people did not only buy necessities but also "decencies, and even luxuries" (9). As Britain moved into the nineteenth century, this consumerist culture continued to expand. Britain reached its peak of colonial expansion with the empire stretching across vast territories in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The wealth derived from these colonies strengthened the British economy, promoting widespread production and consumption of various goods. As Niall Ferguson notes:

> The rise of the British Empire, it might be said, had less to do with Protestant work ethic or English individualism than with the British sweet tooth. Annual imports of sugar doubled. . . and this was the only the biggest part of an enormous consumer boom. . . Sugar remained Britain's largest single import from the 1750s when it overtook foreign linen until the 1820s when it was surpassed by raw cotton. (13)

British economic expansion was deeply tied consumption of the goods imported from the colonies such as sugar, tobacco, and cotton which became integral to the daily lives of the British public. This growing consumer demand intensified colonial exploitation, as the British Empire relied on cheap labour and resources to maintain its dominance. The large flow of wealth from colonial trade boosted the economy and strengthened Britain's imperial power. It helped expand its global influence. Britain continued to be the dominant global power, engaging in trafficking goods and people for centuries.

The seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries were characterized by extensive subjugation of both human and nonhuman entities. Colonizers exploited cultures, people, religions, and the environment by overlooking their inherent agency. Through this process, the colonial powers transformed and reshaped the world, often under the guise of 'civilizing' indigenous populations, while causing profound destruction to ecosystems, local communities, and cultural traditions. These destructive practices were grounded in patriarchial, rationalist, and dominant ideologies of the colonial era that privileged human agency. New Materialist perspectives critique these anthropocentric frameworks by challenging the exceptionalism of human agency and instead emphasize the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman actors. They reject the historically dominant perception human of agency, which has conventionally prioritized white, male agency while marginalizing the roles of other living organisms and nonliving forms (Cole 513). New Materialism emphasizes the distributed and interconnected nature of agency, recognizing the active roles of both human and nonhuman entities in shaping historical and social processes. By reframing colonialism through a New Materialist lens, this approach reveals how nonhuman agents and material forces contributed to the colonial dynamics. This approach is crucial because it expands our understanding of colonialism beyond human-centred narratives, revealing the ways in which material forces such as landscapes, resources, and infrastructures continue to influence postcolonial societies and their ongoing struggles with colonial legacies. Although political control may have shifted, the material effects of colonization have not been fully reversed. As an ongoing material process, the land, resources, and even the built environments shaped by colonization continue to exert influence, perpetuating the legacy of colonial rule long after formal independence.

This study aims to analyze Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* from a New Materialist perspective within the colonial framework. Instead of prioritizing humans, New Materialism proposes a more complex, equal, interdependent distribution of roles and agencies among human and their environment and its more-than-human inhabitants. These canonical novels are chosen for their colonial connections and their portrayal of colonial endeavours. *Robinson Crusoe* is set in the seventeenth century, which marks the beginning of European exploration and exploitation of resources, labour, and native populations. While human ingenuity and resourcefulness

are celebrated, the agentic capacity of nonhuman entities is disregarded by the narration of Crusoe. *Heart of Darkness* is set in the late nineteenth century and reflects the peak of European colonialism in Africa, vividly demonstrating the power imbalances between the colonizers and colonized as well as between the human and the nonhuman. While it may seem paradoxical to discuss the vibrancy of matter in narratives that depict the colonization and exploitation of nature, a New Materialist reading reveals precisely how these seemingly opposing forces are intertwined. The survival and resilience of the characters are directly dependent on the existence of some materials, illustrating the active agentic capacity of nonhuman matter. Moreover, characters are challenged and transformed through their interactions with natural elements. Finally, the enmeshed interaction between human and nonhuman agents constantly redefines their respective roles and influence within the narrative. New Materialist perspectives allow for a more nuanced understanding of colonialism that recognizes not just its cultural and political dimensions but also its material and ecological impacts, illustrating how colonial practices disrupt, transform, and entangle human and nonhuman actors in lasting ways.

CHAPTER 1: A NEW MATERIALIST READING OF *ROBINSON CRUSOE*

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, set in the seventeenth century and written during the early eighteenth century, profoundly reflects the cultural, economic, and natural conditions of its time. This era was marked by British colonialism and capitalist expansion, which shaped global power dynamics and transformed ecologies, cultures, and demographics worldwide. While the colonial trade led to the exploitation of enslaved labour in the colonies, it also created new opportunities for social mobility and wealth for British citizens, particularly for middle-class individuals like the protagonist Crusoe, who was eager to rise beyond their prescribed social classes. Charlotte Sussman states that early eighteenth-century literature, especially Defoe's characters "borrowed the energy of masterless power. . . providing models of how this energy might be re-incorporated into law-abiding society" (135). Crusoe is dissatisfied with the stable middle-class life that his father envisions for him. Crusoe wants to go to sea to explore new places and seek wealth and adventure. As Sussman notes, Crusoe's boundless energy seems to exceed the ability of any master to confine him to a single place and occupation (135). In this context of British expansion, Crusoe has the opportunity to venture into these newly accessible lands to improve his social and economic standing. He confesses his intentions to his mother explaining that his desire to see the world is so strong that he could never settle for a new life. He states:

> My thoughts were so entirely bent on seeing the world, that I should never settle for anything with resolution enough to go through with it, and my father had better give me his consent than force me to go without it; that I was eighteen years old, which was too late to go apprentice to trade or clerk to an attorney; that I was sure that if I did, I should never serve out my time, and I should certainly run away from my master before my time was out, and go to sea. (Defoe 4)

His father strongly objects to his ambitions emphasizing that it is safer to remain in the middle class than pursuing a lower or higher position (4). Despite his family's objections, Crusoe cannot suppress his desire for exploration, reflective of the expansionist ethos of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Britain, and runs away by boarding a ship with a friend.

After some misfortunes, Crusoe engages in colonial ventures and becomes a plantation owner in Brazil, where he grows sugar and tobacco, two of the most lucrative crops of the era. These commodities were in high demand in European markets, driving the colonial economy, particularly in the Americas. The cultivation of sugar and tobacco required large-scale plantations and was heavily reliant on enslaved labour (Berg 90). Crusoe's involvement in the plantation economy reflects the exploitation of the newly discovered lands, highlighting the dependence on enslaved labour to maximize profit, a practice that was central to the success of British colonies in the Americas. Crusoe's intention to purchase enslaved Africans in the following years to work on his plantation, further illustrates the Atlantic slave trade, highlighting the material abundance driving the British economy. He describes the trade to fellow planters " the manner of trading with the negros there, and how easy it was to purchase upon the coast of trifles – such as beads, toys, knives, scissors, hatchets, bits of glass, and the like – not only gold dust, Guinna grains, elephant's teeth, etc., but negroes for the service of the Brazils in great numbers" (32). The commodification of goods, natural resources, and African human labour shows the central role of the Atlantic slave trade in fueling Britain's economic growth. Crusoe's actions in Brazil vividly display the economic motivations and colonial realities of the era, grounded in exploitation and the pursuit of wealth. His sea voyage adventure to bring African slaves to Brazil ends in his being stranded on an isolated island for almost thirty years.

Crusoe's ship is wrecked by a violent storm. This event represents a turning point in Crusoe's story and also echoes the harsh climatic experiences of the novel's author, Daniel Defoe. As Cole comments: "Before publishing *Robinson Crusoe* at age fifty-nine, Daniel Defoe (1660-1733) witnessed a lifetime of dramatic weather, periodic dearth, and mass disease. These storms, fevers, freezes, plagues, and human and animal die-offs helped to shape his writings and revealed the insights and the blindspots of early eighteenth century readers to the environment" (515). The shipwreck of Crusoe's ship during a violent storm and Crusoe's subsequent struggle to adapt to the island mirror the environmental challenges Defoe faced, reflecting the broader anxieties about the natural unpredictability of the era. Following the shipwreck, a detailed description is given of how Crusoe salvaged various tools and materials from the wrecked ship and used the island's natural resources to make new tools and objects, demonstrating both the material

richness of the era and human dependence on materials. Jess Keiser explains: “Literature of the long eighteenth century seems obsessed with matter. The period’s poetry, novels, and plays are replete with objects, things, substances, and stuff: Crusoe’s island is dense with debris” (455). Crusoe’s resourcefulness, resilience, and ingenuity on the island embody the prevailing beliefs of the era, emphasizing human reason and the idea that the material world can be controlled through human knowledge and rationality. Kathleen Lubey comments on Defoe’s portrayal of Crusoe as a resourceful character who exemplifies the Enlightenment’s self-reliance, showing how human ingenuity transforms debris from the shipwreck into essential tools and structures for survival. She puts forward: “Perhaps the most obnoxious example of this fantasy is recounted by Robinson Crusoe, hero of shipwreck, builder of canoes, breeder of goats, maker of urns. Daniel Defoe’s protagonist has long been read as an extended experiment in the eighteenth-century European subject and his consciousness, resilience, and autonomy” (225). This depiction of Crusoe vividly exemplifies the Enlightenment ideals, particularly the belief in human reason, resilience and mastery over nature, while downplaying both the material world's unpredictable forces and the colonial violence, exploitation, and ecological damage that accompanied European expansion. Crusoe’s mastery extends not only to his control over the environment but also to his relationship with others, particularly with Friday, whom he ‘civilizes.’ Kathleen Sussman criticises the master-servant relationship between Crusoe and Friday by stating: “Crusoe’s adolescent resistance to serving a master as an apprentice or clerk does not inspire him to imagine a world without masters. Instead, he styles himself as a master at the first opportunity. When, in the course of the narrative, he meets an Indigenous man who might be his ally and friend, Crusoe immediately assimilates him into the hierarchy of master and mastered” (135). This is evident when, after saving Friday, Crusoe recounts “[f]irst, I made him know his name should be Friday, which was the day I saved his life and called him so for the memory of the time: I likewise taught him to say Master, and then let him know that was to be my name” (Defoe 177). The relationship between Crusoe and Friday serves as an idealized representation of colonial power dynamics where colonial authority and subordination of the indigenous peoples are portrayed as inherent and unquestioned. This dynamic between Crusoe and Friday, like many other dynamics such as Crusoe’s dominance over the animals, and

the exploitation of the island's natural resources, reflects the political, social, and environmental realities of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Britain.

From a New Materialist perspective, the narrative of *Robinson Crusoe* is interpreted as more than just a story of human mastery of a nonhuman environment. Although Defoe's depiction of Crusoe idealises the eighteenth-century human reason with an emphasis on self-reliance and the ability to survive on a deserted island, however, a New Materialist analysis reveals the interconnectedness between Crusoe and nonhuman characters on the island, highlighting the agentic capacity of the environment, materials, and tools that contribute to shaping Crusoe's life story and survival. Long before he is stranded on the island, Crusoe's life is already marked by the complex interactions with the material world. The natural elements, materials and even the tools Crusoe interacts with, both before and after the shipwreck, are not passive entities but active forces that shape his life journey. These interactions set a stage for explicit entanglements that emerge once he is cast away, where the nonhuman world becomes an active force in his survival and development. Crusoe transforms the story of the island while Crusoe's own story is simultaneously shaped and defined by his interactions with the island's environment and resources.

1.1. HUMAN AGENCY IN *ROBINSON CRUSOE*

Modern literary narratives often reflect a worldview that prioritizes human dominance over the natural world. Amitav Ghosh, an Indian author known for his works of historical fiction that often explore themes of colonialism, migration, and environmental and cultural impacts of global trade contends that since the beginning of modernity, most literary narratives have promoted an anthropocentric perspective, erasing the interconnectedness between nature and culture. This shift that Ghosh argues creates the illusion that humans have freed themselves from the material forces of nature to become autonomous masters and creators of their own destiny (135). *Robinson Crusoe* is regarded as one of the most foundational "great myths of our civilization" (Watt 95) and it primarily celebrates "the imagination mainly as a triumph of human achievement and enterprise" (97). In this conventional interpretation, through the lens of anthropocentrism, Crusoe's ingenuity and industriousness are celebrated as the triumphs

of human reason and mastery over nature, emphasizing human's ability to dominate and control their surroundings for survival and progress. His actions such as salvaging materials, cultivating crops, and domesticating animals are all framed as a part of an economic mindset of ownership, exploitation, and mastery, reflecting the broader imperial and capitalist ideologies of the time. However, this anthropocentric perception of human agency, as the sole driving force, along with imperial and capitalist ideologies has led to various catastrophic environmental degradations. It has contributed to long-term ecological damage, overlooking the interconnectedness between human and nonhuman actors and reducing the material world to a passive backdrop to human activity.

In response to these limitations, New Materialist perspectives offer an alternative, post-anthropocentric perception of agency which emphasizes the entanglement of human and nonhuman forces, recognizing the agency of the material world. Rather than viewing nature as something to be controlled or mastered, this perspective highlights how both human and nonhuman elements continuously shape and influence one another, complicating conventional ideas of agency and autonomy. This post-anthropocentric analysis of human agency in *Robinson Crusoe* showcases the limitations of human reason and human's ability to fully comprehend and express reality, particularly in relation to the influence of nonhuman forces. In the novel, Crusoe's sense of agency is closely tied to his ongoing efforts to impose order and control over the environment and material forces around him. As Sten Pultz Moslund argues in his essay about the postanthropocentric reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, this sense of purified human subject is represented and stressed by the narrative "I," and is further intensified by the introspective mood of the novel (11). Crusoe's constant internal dialogue and journal entries serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, they emphasize his perceived mastery and self-reliance, reinforcing his sense of control. On the other hand, the very act of keeping a journal reveals his dependence on material objects and his struggle to connect with the material world. Moslund also points out the representations of objects, noting how they are simplified and portrayed as entities in a distinct external reality, devoid of depth and complexity (11), referring to: "I saw abundance of fowls, but knew not their kinds, neither when I killed them could I tell what was fit for food" (Defoe 71), "I saw . . . [an] abundance of cocoa trees, orange, and lemon, and citron trees; but all wild, and very few

bearing any fruit" (Defoe 114). This combination of outward reality and inward reflection underscores another key aspect of Crusoe's narrative. The constant interpretation of the world in terms of usefulness where everything Crusoe encounters is assessed primarily through its practical use and the potential for survival of the human agent (Moslund 12). This interplay between external observation and internal reflection reveals Cruoe's pragmatic mindset, which emphasizes the utilitarian approach to the material world. The process of categorizing animals and plants not by their intrinsic qualities but by their usefulness demonstrates the colonial and anthropocentric perspective. Moslund underscores the focus on "fit for food" and "fruit" (12), demonstrating Cruose's dependence on the material world for survival.

When Cruose's adaptation period to the island is analysed from a New Materialist lens, it becomes evident that his adaptation is not merely a triumph of humans over nature but a dynamic interplay between the human body, material forces, and the environment. Shipwrecked on a deserted island, Crusoe feels desperate. He expresses his desperation and sense of vulnerability by stating "I had neither food, house, clothes, weapon, nor place to fly to" (Defoe 58) expressing the extent of his isolation and lack of resources in the face of a harsh environment, which starkly contrasts with the agency he later attempts to assert over the island. Although he carries many provisions from the shipwreck, he still requires many essentials from nature, most notably fresh water and food to survive. He utilizes many natural sources for various purposes. Crusoe explains this necessity: "In managing my household affairs, I found myself wanting in many things," (64) underscoring human dependence on natural resources, tools, and natural elements for daily sustenance. By utilizing various natural sources with the equipment from the carpenter's chest taken from the shipwreck (42) he hunts animals, constructs himself a shelter, learns to make a fire, engages in fishing, builds storage, and crafts numerous tools (60-72). He employs the island's resources in diverse ways. For instance, he uses palm trees to support beams, (71) thatch for the roof (62) and timber as the fence of his fortification (59). Not all of his attempts to find food, craft tools, and construct shelters are immediately successful. Through a process of trial and error, marked by numerous mistakes, he ultimately manages to achieve most of his goals. As written from an anthropocentric perspective, Crusoe's resourcefulness and utlization can be viewed as a testament to human ingenuity by Defoe. However, from a New Materialist perspective,

these adaptation processes reveal the intricate relationship between humans and more-than-human world, highlighting human's dependency on material forces and nonhuman agencies to ensure survival. Moslund cites Crusoe's six-page-long description of bread making as an example, highlighting the focus on human effort and ingenuity by emphasizing "the subsequent labour of the human body" (20) and human inventions. He calls for paying attention to all other actors in bread making process which are "crop," "harvest," "invention," "utensils," "trees," "firewood," "coals," "burning," "seed," "ground," "growing," "sun," "rain," "water," "heat," "climate," "season" (Defoe 102-7). Although Defoe's narrative places particular emphasis on human agency, celebrating Crusoe's success, the process also reveals the significant role of nonhuman actors. The presence of other actors including natural elements and material forces is also listed. While Defoe may not explicitly recognize the dynamic agentic capacity of nonhuman forces as New Materialism suggests, they are integral to Crusoe's survival. The bread is not simply a product of his effort but a result of the interplay between Crusoe's actions and the dynamic contributions of nonhuman agents, such as weather conditions, soil fertility, and biological processes, all of which exert influence on the final outcome.

Gradually, Crusoe improves his skills and adjusts to his environment. He cultivates crops, tames animals, hunts animals for food and to protect his harvest, makes a canoe by cutting trees to explore the island efficiently, builds different shelters, and makes pottery by using clay and baskets by using branches. Crusoe primarily views the natural resources of the island as commodities to be exploited for his own survival and benefit. Over time, he adapts to the dynamic ecosystem of the island, adjusting his actions to the natural rhythms and forces at play by learning to plant crops according to seasonal cycles, conserving resources, building shelters to withstand weather changes, and adjusting his hunting and gathering practices to the availability of food sources. This shift reflects the broader realization of elemental forces as Cohen asserts: "To acknowledge how the elements work, matter, and thrive, to realize our utter embroilment within a world of plants, animals, winds, seas, sky, stone, is to realize that environmental activism mandates ecological agentism" (123). Yet, while Crusoe becomes more attuned to the island's natural processes, this adaptation and understanding are framed within his anthropocentric worldview, where he interprets the forces of nature as obstacles to be conquered, viewing them solely as challenges to human control rather than recognizing

them as active agents with their intrinsic agentic capacity to shape outcomes. To survive, Crusoe needs to harmonize his consumption of the island's resources with an understanding of natural environmental forces such as weather patterns, seasonal cycles, and resource regeneration. Although Crusoe experiences an intricate "entanglement" of agencies, encompassing both human and nonhuman actors, he lacks the awareness of nonhuman entities' intrinsic value. His initial despair for survival evolves into a growing sense of mastery and ownership of his environment. He sees himself as the owner of the island, and the natural resources are there for his service. Crusoe's sense of ownership and dominion over the island is vividly expressed in his reflection, where he views himself as the rightful ruler of the land, and its resources, as shown in the following passage:

> I descended a little on the side of that delicious valley, surveying it with a secret kind of pleasure (though mixed with other afflicting thoughts), to think that this was all my own, that I was king and lord of this country indefeasibly, and had a right of possession; and if I could convey it, I might have it in inheritance, as completely as any lord of a manor in England. (Defoe 84)

The quotation above shows how Crusoe sees nature and elements as his belongings. Although he always views nature as a resource for his use, in his early years he acts more hesitant. Getting to know the island better, he starts to call nature his possession. As a book written during the colonial age, the protagonist of the narrative, reflecting colonial attitudes, believes that nature can be possessed. Crusoe's belief in the ownership of nature reflects a particular worldview in which one's relationship to the environment is defined by dominance and control. As Adloff and Hilbrich state: "Different understandings of nature imply different social relationships with nature" (169). Crusoe, as a colonizer, defines himself as the lord and king of the island and does not acquire the awareness of nonhuman agents.

To sum up, when Crusoe's relationship with the natural elements and material forces of the island is examined, it becomes evident that he initially perceived them as natural resources to be utilized for basic human needs. Over time, however, his engagement with these resources shifts towards large-scale exploitation, as he increasingly exploits vast areas and quantities of natural resources for his own benefit. To survive on the island for many years, and exploit its resources, Crusoe must learn to adapt to the natural world. While the agentic capacity of nonhuman forces is evident in this

adaptation, Defoe portrays it primarily as a reflection of human ingenuity. This anthropocentric perception of human agency depicting the human as a master, self-reliant, capable of observing and fully understanding reality has contributed to long-term ecological issues that threaten the future of both human and nonhuman entities. In contrast, a New Materialist understanding of agency, which grants an equal role to the more-than-human world, rejects the notion that reality is pre-existing and observable, and can only be understood and controlled by human agents. The vibrant agentic capacities of nonhuman characters within the narrative, which are often overlooked, are critical to fostering an awareness of the complex interdependencies between the human and nonhuman world. These dynamics will be explored in the "Material Agency in *Robinson Crusoe* section" which emphasizes the importance of recognizing the active role of nonhuman forces in shaping our shared ecological future.

1.2. MATERIAL AGENCY IN *ROBINSON CRUSOE*

Natural elements and materials were regarded as sources of human well-being for centuries, and their intrinsic value and agentic capacity were ignored. With the colonial rush and industrialization, exploitation and the commodification of nature reached a peak. Colonizer countries, dominantly Britain, avoiding the agency of nonhuman entities, and even non-European humans, exploited natural resources, and trafficked industrial products, raw materials, and native people carelessly. Unlike the anthropocentric perception of the human agency, which grants superiority to humans over other living and nonliving entities, the New Materialist perspective fundamentally alters the understanding of agency by distributing it equally among people, elements, matter, and texts. New Materialist scholars insist that material "is endowed with many of the same qualities that were formerly seen as exclusive to human beings: complex self-organization, reflexivity, consciousness, and the capacity to act spontaneously" (Bergthaller 37). This approach challenges conventional hierarchies by recognizing the interconnectedness and mutual influence between all entities and shifts our focus to the active interplay of material, human, and discursive forces. New Materialist reading of early modern literary texts, which reflect the anthropocentric worldview of their era, reveals how material forces, far from being passive, possess their own agency and actively

contribute to shaping the story. The material forces, such as natural elements, tools, and resources, despite their depiction as mere backdrops, still function as significant agential forces that actively shape the narrative's direction and depth.

Robinson Crusoe is a narrative deeply rooted in the colonial era when anthropocentric worldviews were especially dominant. Despite *Robinson Crusoe*'s narrative's focus on the human's agentic capacity and ingenuity, the "vibrant agency" of matter and interconnectedness of human and nonhuman characters are also evident. Crusoe, as a human agent, is continuously challenged by the agentic capacity of matter, and elements throughout the story. A New Materialist analysis of his life story reveals how human agency is intertwined with the agency of nonhuman entities and material forces. Crusoe's transformation through his interactions with the material forces reflects what Iovino and Oppermann describe as "entanglements of more-than-human forces and substances, merge with the life of our bodies" ("Introduction" 3). His survival and personal growth are not solely the result of his ingenuity but also from his interactions with nonhuman forces including tools he uses, the crops he cultivates, and the island's natural elements. He asserts his agency in deciding to go to sea, however the subsequent adventures that he encounters are significantly shaped by the agentic capacity of more-than-human forces. To clarify, natural forces like water and wind dictate the fate of his journeys. The island's natural environment -its climate, storms, and resources – along with other forms of material forces such as tools and supplies salvaged from the ship – directly impact his survival and his daily life. The agentic capacity of these elements collectively demonstrates that Cruose's life is not solely determined by his actions but significantly influenced by his interactions with both the natural and material world. The active agency of matter in *Robinson Crusoe* is analyzed in three distinct periods: the years before Crusoe arrives on the island, his time on the island, and the time after his departure. In each of these phases, the agency of living and nonliving entities and their entanglement are observed.

A New Materialist analysis of the years preceding Crusoe's stranding on the island demonstrates how various forms of material forces significantly altered his trajectory. To start with, shortly after he boards the ship, Crusoe's body is affected by severe seasickness, marking his initial physical reaction to the harsh conditions at the sea. Crusoe recounts this experience in vivid detail:

> Never any young adventurer's misfortunes, I believe, began sooner or continued longer than mine. The ship was no sooner got out of the Humber than the wind began to blow, and the sea rose in a most frightful manner; and as I had never been at sea before, I was most inexpressibly sick in body, and terrified in mind. (Defoe 5)

Crusoe's descriptions such as "the most frightful manner," "inexpressibly sick in body," and "terrified" demonstrate the profound impact of "vibrant" natural forces on both Crusoe's corporeal and mental health. The storm and the sea exert their influence, showing how human agency is not isolated but intertwined with the forces of more-than-human world. The wind calms down the next day, but this time its influence is felt through its absence, as it no longer blows. Rather than being a mere backdrop, the agential capacity of the wind disturbs human plans which Crusoe narrates: "Here we were obliged to come to an anchor, and here we lay, the wind continuing contrary, namely, at southwest, for seven or eight days" (Defoe 7). Ships, along with their crews and captains, are rendered powerless, dependent on the wind to move them forward, illustrating that human intentions are subordinated to the vibrant agency of natural forces. The wind starts to blow yet "by this time it blew a terrible storm indeed; and now I began to see terror and amazement in the faces even of the seamen themselves . . . the sea went mountains high, and broke upon us every three or four minutes; when I look about I could see nothing but distress around us" (Defoe 7). They wait for days for the wind to blow however this time it blows so strong that even experienced seamen are in terror and panic. The water and the wind, as vibrant and unpredictable forces, determine the course of their journey. The ship "had sprung a leak" and "four feet water in the hold" (Defoe 8) and they are hopeless. The agentic capacities of the storm, and the water signify how human efforts to master the environment can be undone by more-than-human forces. Crusoe's first expedition is disrupted and shaped by these natural forces several times, demonstrating the active role of natural elements within the narrative.

Crusoe, although being warned not to go to sea anymore, not being able to return home and restrain his impulse to explore, goes on another voyage. He feels sick again during most of the second voyage: "I was continually sick, being thrown into a violent calenture by the excessive heat of the climate (Defoe 14). Cruose's experience of being "continually sick" reflects the vibrant agency of elemental forces. "Being thrown into a violent calenture" (Defoe 14) due to the excessive heat illustrates how his body is directly influenced by elements, showing that the human body is not separate from the

surrounding environment but rather shaped by it. After a while during this second journey, Crusoe is captured as a prisoner and moved into Sallee with other prisoners. In his period of enslavement, Crusoe is occasionally taken out by his master to assist in his fishing expeditions. On one occasion, while Crusoe is with his patron a dense fog emerges which Crusoe recounts:

> It happened one time that going a-fishing with him in a calm morning, a fog rose so thick, that though we were not half a league away from the shore, we lost sight of it; and rowing, we knew not whither, or which way, we laboured all day and all the next night, and when next morning came, we found we had pulled off to sea, instead of pulling in for the shore, and that we were at least two leagues from the land. (Defoe 16)

In this experience, the fog exemplifies vibrant matter as it is not a passive environmental factor; it actively disrupts human actions by disorienting Cruose and his patron, forcing them to change their behaviour. The fog also becomes an active participant in the course of events, prompting the patron to improve the boat, which ultimately facilitates Cruose's later escape, leading to further significant changes in his future. Ultimately, a New Materialist analysis of Crusoe's years before he is stranded on the island by focusing on the agentic capacity of matter demonstrates the vibrancy of matter as a force that exerts influence on human well-being, and bodily health while also shaping human intentions and plans.

An analysis of the years Crusoe spent on the island from a New Materialist perspective reveals the active influence of material entities on human characters, as Crusoe's survival was intricately intertwined and dependent on them. Crusoe is challenged by the agentic capacities of fundamental elements – water, fire, earth, air – and material forces and he also survives thanks to their existence. Matter and Crusoe continually interact throughout these years, shaping one another through intricate web relationships and "entanglements." This dynamic becomes evident immediately after Crusoe is stranded on the island, as his survival depends on the availability of both matter and fundamental elements. The first thing he looked for on the island was "fresh water to drink" (Defoe 39). He would be unable to survive without access to fresh water. His dependency on fresh water is an example of the agentic capacity of water, emphasizing the active role of nonhuman elements in Crusoe's survival. Moreover, his experiences on the island show the entanglement between human and nonhuman forces as his actions and

survival are deeply interconnected with the island's natural elements, resources, and environmental conditions.

The morning after the shipwreck, Crusoe carries provisions, tools, sails, metals, clothes, and wood from the wrecked ship to the island. As he explains "I now began to consider that I might yet get a great many things out of the ship, which would be useful to me, and particularly some of the rigging and sails, and such other things as might come to land, and I resolved to make another voyage on the board, if possible" (Defoe 45). He keeps visiting the wrecked ship until there is nothing left to salvage. When he first encounters the salvaged materials, he instinctively sees them as useful objects and tools for his immediate survival. However, as he begins to use them, he repurposes these materials. They take on a greater importance beyond their basic use. For instance, things like wood, metals, iron, sails and riggings which were originally intended for the construction of the ship, now become crucial for his survival on land. He uses wood to make a raft and shelter, metals and riggings to reinforce his constructions (41-52). He also crafts instruments such as axes, saws, and knives with iron (59-82). Crusoe recounts:

> I desisted from my work, and began to consider how to supply what I wanted, and make myself some tools: as for a pick-axe, I made use of iron crows, which were proper enough, though heavy; but the next thing was a shovel or a spade; this was so absolutely necessary, that indeed I could do nothing effectually without it, but what kind of one to make I knew not. (Defoe 61)

This transformation demonstrates the concept of "storied matter," where objects are not fixed in purpose but hold multiple potentialities depending on the context in which they are used. In Crusoe's hands, these salvaged materials not only serve new purposes but also actively participate in the unfolding story of his survival. This redefinition reflects a discursive shift: Materials conventionally associated with maritime labour are recontextualized through his interactions with them. As such, Oppermann notes "matter in every form is a meaning-producing embodiment of the world" ("Storied Matter" 411), illustrating how matter operates as a "vibrant" force that shapes human actions and the direction of the stories. In New Materialist terms, the tools actively participate in shaping Crusoe's identity and narrative, entangling him with their dynamic agency. The transformation reveals a broader discursive story about adaptation and colonization. Ultimately, these materials do not only tell new stories but also play a vital role in Crusoe's adaptation and transformation. As he repurposes tools and resources to sustain

himself, this gradually alters his self-perception. Crusoe admits this shift: “I was now in my twenty-third year of residence in this island and was so naturalised to the place and to the manner of living” (Defoe 154). This reflects how the tools he adapts become central to his survival, not only transforming Crusoe’s identity, as he integrates with the island but also reshaping the island’s landscape itself through his continuous modifications and resource use.

In addition to the materials Crusoe repurposes for his survival, other significant nonhuman forces such as barley and rice, undergo transformation. Unlike the tools and materials that Crusoe actively reshapes, barley and rice thrive without human intervention, highlighting the island’s autonomous nonhuman forces. Crusoe notes: “I have mentioned that I had saved a few ears of barley and rice which had so surprisingly found spring up, as I thought, of themselves, and believe there were about thirty stalks of rice and about twenty of barley” (Defoe 88). Crusoe’s remark, “as I thought, of themselves” reveals the vibrant agency of matter itself. Barley and rice, growing without Crusoe’s direct intention, demonstrates that matter possesses its own agentic capacity independent of human control. This unexpected growth initiates Crosue’s cultivation period which is an endeavour shaped by the vibrant agency of the natural world and Crusoe’s entanglement with the island’s ecosystem. His labour is closely connected to the forces of grain, soil, the sun, the rain. As Crusoe himself acknowledges:

> I dug up a piece of ground, as well as I could, with my wooden spade, and diving into two parts, I sowed my grain; but as it was sowing, it casually occurred to my thought, that I would not sow it all at first, because I did not know when was the proper time for it; so I sowed about two-thirds of the seeds, leaving about a handful of each. . . Finding my first seed did not grow, which I easily imagined was the drought, I sought for a moister piece of ground to make a trial in. (Defoe 88)

In this passage, Crusoe’s sowing of grain showcases the entangled relationship between human labour and natural sources such as soil moisture, seasonal timing, and drought, demonstrating the co-constitutive nature of human and nonhuman entities. When Crusoe plants seeds taken from the shipwreck, he engages in a process which depends heavily on the cooperation of natural elements. The soil’s fertility, availability of water, climate conditions, and attacks from animals are all nonhuman factors that significantly influence the agricultural processes. His decision not to sow all the seeds at once reflects the unpredictable and vibrant agency of matter as there is a delicate balance between the life-giving and destructive potential of the natural elements. To clarify, water is essential for

the growth of his crops, but excessive rain can quickly ruin them. So, water as an active agential force both enables and limits Cruso's agricultural efforts. This intricate relationship between the crops, rain, and soil reflects how life is deeply interconnected, dependent on various sources that shape and sustain it. As Timothy Morton explains: "Life forms are made up of other life-forms (the theory of symbiosis). And life forms derive from other life-forms (evolution). It is so simple, and yet so profound" ("The Mesh" 24). Crusoe's labour, crops, rain, and soil form a "mesh" of relationships in which each element is deeply intertwined by the others, creating an interconnected network that shapes and is shaped by the cultivation, growth and survival on the island. The trial-and-error process of growing seeds directly changes the stories of the island and Crusoe. As Crusoe introduces different material entities into the island's ecosystem, the island transforms into a landscape that shapes and is shaped by both human action and natural forces. This process of cultivation not only alters the island's environment but also profoundly reshapes Crusoe's narrative. Nonhuman forces that he engages with such as soil, seed, and water possess their own "storied matter," meaning that they carry embedded narratives shaped by their interaction with Crusoe. As Oppermann, drawing on Cohen's concept of "emerging through," explains: "Matter's stories emerge through humans, but at the same time humans themselves 'emerge through' 'material agencies' that leave their traces in lives as well as stories" ("Storied Matter" 411). This underscores the reciprocal relationship between human and nonhuman agents. In Crusoe's case, the island's natural resources, elements and Crusoe's actions continuously shape one another, demonstrating both the island's transformation of the landscape and Crusoe's survival are co-produced by this ongoing interaction.

As Crusoe spends time on the island, Crusoe witnesses the unpredictable and vibrant agency of natural elements in the forms of an earthquake, storms, heavy rains, extreme heat, tidal currents, and droughts, revealing deep entanglements of the human and nonhuman forces. For instance, at one point, he describes the hurricane that follows the earthquake:

> While I sat thus, I found the air overcast, and grow cloudy, as if it would rain; soon after that the wind rose by little and little, so that in less than half of an hour it blew a most dreadful hurricane: the sea was all of a sudden covered with foam and froth, the shore was covered with breach of water, the trees were torn up by the roots, and a terrible storm is was: and this held three hours, then began to abate, in two hours more it stark calm, and began to rain very hard. All of this while I sat upon the ground, very much terrified and dejected, when on a

> sudden it came into my thoughts, that these winds and rain being the consequence of the earthquake. (Defoe 67)

In the passage, Crusoe reflects on the sequence of natural events, observing how the earthquake is followed by a hurricane and a heavy rain. In the passage these events are not isolated occurrences, exemplifying the unpredictability and power of natural sources. The hurricane illustrates the vibrant matter, showing how materials are agents that interact and transform their surroundings including human and nonhuman. The hurricane, with its strong winds and rising seas, reshapes the landscape by affecting trees, the shoreline, and vegetation. As Barad notes, "'environments' and 'bodies' are 'intra-actively' co-constituted," (*Meeting the Universe* 170) meaning that in this context, natural elements like air, water, and earth (the "bodies") and the island's ecosystem (the "environment") do not merely interact but actively reshape one another through their "entanglements." The hurricane becomes not just a force acting on the island but a participant in the ongoing creation of the island's environment. This process exemplifies Barad's insight that "matter is a dynamic intra-active becoming" (107). Tress, the shoreline, water, and unseen forces are all part of this process through their continuous "intra-actions."

Although there are only two chapters mentioning Crusoe's years after leaving the island, they also demonstrate how material forces continue to disrupt human actions and plans, revealing that Crusoe's challenges with more-than-human forces reach far beyond his time on the island. Terrified by his earlier sea journey experiences, he decides to avoid travelling by sea from Lisbon to London and opts for a land trip. He is strongly advised not to go on an overland trip during this time of year yet he insists on a land journey. Although the sea is safer due to severe cold weather conditions on land, Crusoe prefers to proceed with a land journey. He recounts how they need to postpone their journey and change their plans due to severe weather conditions:

> Winter was come before its time; and the roads, which were difficult before, were now quite impasssable: in a word, the snow lay in some places too tick for us to travel; and being not hard frozen, as is the case in northern countries, there was no going without being in danger of buried alive every step. We stayed no less than twenty days at Pampeluna; when (seeing the winter coming on, and no likelihood of its being better, for it was the severest winter all over Europe that had been known in many years) I proposed that we should all go away to Fontarabia, and there take shipping for Bordeaux, which was a little voyage. (Defoe 249)

The onset of early winter and the presence of heavy snow disrupt human plans and travel. The agentic capacity of snow and its entanglement with the roads makes the journey impossible for people not to proceed without being frozen which Crusoe indicates as

“impassable” (249). This interaction between snow, roads, and human bodies reflects the dynamic mesh of relationships that New Materialism underscores and reveals that matter is not inert but actively shapes human experiences. Everywhere is covered with snow, and as Friday is not used to snow and cold weather, he is afraid. The mountains, covered in snow, and the cold weather are not just passive settings but active forces. This is evident in Friday’s reaction: “Poor Friday was really frightened when he saw mountains covered with snow, and felt cold weather, which he had never seen or felt before in his life” (Defoe 249). His body and perception are affected by the cold, demonstrating the powerful influence of material elements on the human body and emotions. Our bodies consist of natural elements and they engage in a continuous intra-action with them. Oppermann describes human bodies as “[o]ur blood is saline water, our bones are calcified earth, our breath is volatile air, and our fever is fire” (“Wandering Elements” 310), reflecting a synecdochic relationship where specific parts of human body represent the broader human connection to nature. Oppermann reinforces that humans are not separate from nature but are fundamentally composed of the same materials and forces, underscoring the interconnectedness between human bodies and the natural world. During their journey, they are threatened by the harsh weather repeatedly. Crusoe remarks: “There was no going without being in danger of being buried alive every step” (Defoe 249), demonstrating their deep vulnerability to natural elements around them. As Oppermann observes in a more expansive context: “Earth and sky, water and fire are fundamental elements that bind the fate and presence of humans and other Earthlings in their interlocked journey of matter and imagination” (“Wandering Elements” 310). The agentic and vibrant role of elements and nonhuman entities challenge the human characters throughout their journey. Harsh weather conditions, attacks of other life forms, and the intervention of human agency with the use of a manmade tool, which functions with the agentic power of fire, exemplify the entanglement of different forms of agencies “in their interlocked journey” (Oppermann, “Wandering Elements” 310), and the survival story of Robinson Crusoe illustrates these complex entanglements and intra-actions of different forms of agencies, showcasing how elements are both essential for survival and potentially fatal.

CHAPTER 2: NEW MATERIALIST ANALYSIS OF *HEART OF DARKNESS*

Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad was first published serially in 1899 and as a complete novella in 1902. It is set in the late nineteenth century, during the height of European colonialism in the Congo Free State, aligning with the historical context of the era. By the mid-nineteenth century, British imperialism reached its zenith, with the British Empire expanding its influence across continents. This period marked not only the height of colonial power and expansion but also the emergence of criticism and moral questioning regarding the practices and the consequences of imperialism (Eldridge 3). In *Heart of Darkness,* Joseph Conrad critically examines the moral and ethical implications of colonial rule, offering a profound critique of European imperialism. It is framed as a story within a story which creates a parallel between London and Africa as places of darkness and civilization, in other words between the colonizer and the colonized. The novella sheds light on the effects of colonial encounters on the colonizers as well as the colonized by focusing on the psychological struggles of its characters which arise from brutality, exploitation, and moral corruption inherent in the colonial enterprise. The story begins on the deck of a ship anchored on the River Thames in London. Marlow, the narrator, is a member of the middle class who takes advantage of colonial mobility afforded by colonial ventures of the late nineteenth century. Marlow starts to tell the other seafarers about his experiences in the Congo, working as a steamship captain for a large firm which trades ivory from the Congo and the story begins.

Marlow's story begins with his departure on a French steamer, depicted with keen attentiveness to the landscape and to the elements that surround him. As he journeys, Marlow becomes a reflective observer of the natural world, revealing the profound ways in which the environment influences human perception and experience. As he observes;

> The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist. The sun was fierce, the land seemed to glisten and drip with steam. . . the oily and languid sea, the uniform sombreness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion. (18-19)

His depiction of the jungle, the sea, and the mist does not reflect the environment as it objectively is. Rather, his sensory experiences and emotional reactions to these elements

reveal a deeper understanding of reality, demonstrating the vibrant agentic capacity of the nonhuman world. His perception is personal and transformative. Conrad's portrayal of the natural environment aligns with Helen Thompson's concept of "fictional matter," where the material world within the narrative is not passively represented but actively engages with and shapes the perception of the characters (3). Thompson, in her analysis of eighteenth-century literature, explores the concept of sensory knowledge as an active, interactive experience, noting that "[t]his is not the transcription of passive, distantly witnessed objects, but sensory knowledge placed in inextricable relation to particles, sensory knowledge that particles *produce*" (2). This perspective resonates with Marlow's narrative, where his experiences are not merely passive observations but deeply immerse interactions with the environment.

On his way to the Outer Station and during his stay there, Marlow observes wastefulness, and scattered, decaying objects which appear useless and abandoned, contrasting with the untamed and unpredictable landscape. He describes his first impressions as, "a boiler wallowing in the grass" (21) and "a lot of imported drainage pipes. . .There wasn't one broken" (23) In this sense, Marlow's observations reflect the emerging nineteenth-century perspectives that challenged human-centred views of progress and dominance over nature. These standpoints, influenced by scientific developments of the time, cast humans as relatively recent and minor actors on a vast inhuman stage. Shaped by emerging theories in geology, evolution, and ecology, such views challenged the anthropocentric view of human agency. To make it clear, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution posited that plants and animals exist in interrelated relationships. Moreover, Herbert Spencer envisioned human society as analogous to a living organism. These ideas emphasized the deep history of the Earth and the insignificance of humanity in comparison to the powerful and enduring forces of the world (Parkins and Adkins 4-8). Conrad's depiction of the Congo, its dense jungle, and its unpredictable river reflects this notion by portraying nature as an overwhelming, indifferent force that dwarfs human attempts at control.

Marlow, after a 200-mile challenging journey through a harsh and unpredictable landscape, arrives at Central Station, where he needs to stay longer than anticipated. Marlow meets the Company's Manager, and during his extended stay at the station, he repeatedly hears about Kurtz, a prominent and influential agent of the Company. Hearing

about Kurtz from various sources before meeting him creates curiosity about the character. The varying perspectives on Kurtz, who embodies the symbol of colonial ambition and its moral ambiguities, reveal the contradictions and competing beliefs within the colonial enterprise, while also reflecting the broader conflicts of its time. Once the boat is repaired, Marlow, the Manager, some agents, and a crew set off for Kurtz's Inner Station to retrieve him (Conrad 47). Their journey to Kurtz Station mirrors the narrative of his initial travel to Congo, once again highlighting the dense jungle and fog, unsettling silence that shapes this perception of the environment and disturbs human plans. As before, the landscape is portrayed through Marlow's sensory impressions and emotional responses, revealing a deeper subjective reality. The dense fog, silence, and ever-changing surroundings challenge his navigation, obscure his sense of direction, and force him to question everything he believes, creating a sense of unease and transformation. This portrayal again reinforces Thompson's "fictional matter," by illustrating how nonhuman forces like fog, silence, and shifting landscapes actively shape and transform human characters' perceptions and experiences, illustrating the entanglement between human consciousness and the agentic capacity of nonhuman forces.

A group of native inhabitants of the Congo carries Kurtz on a stretcher. Suffering from both mental and physical ailments, Kurtz appears so frail and ill, reflecting the era's concerns about the challenges of colonial power and the complex effects of imperial ambition on both the colonizer and the colonized. On their way, Kurtz keeps telling them about his immense plans, revealing a disordered and fragmented mind. On their way back home, the health of Kurtz worsens and whispers his final words: "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 98), reflecting his realization of the darkness within himself. They have a powerful effect on Marlow, revealing the brutal truth of human nature and the consequences of uncontrolled power and ambition. Marlow, deeply affected by his experiences in Congo, mentions how he falls gravely ill when he returns to Europe and then finishes his story.

Heart of Darkness vividly demonstrates the complex and multifaceted relationship between the colonizers and the colonized lands, and the indigenous people by showcasing the exploitation brutality, and cultural clashes prevalent during the colonial era. The exploitive acts of the colonizer characters mirror the broader pattern in which natural

resources were seen as mere resources for human consumption. However, from a New Materialist perspective, this reductionist view overlooks the agency and vitality of the material world, which exists beyond human use or control. European colonizers failed to recognize the intrinsic value and active presence of the colonized lands and exploited the natures of these colonized lands for centuries, treating them as inert objects rather than dynamic agential forces that shape both human and nonhuman interactions over time. Within the narrative, human characters like Kurtz embody this exploitation, viewing the land and its resources purely as tools for personal gain and power. New Materialism essentially opposes and challenges this anthropocentric perception of nature and matter as mere resources for human consumption. Karen Barad explains in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* that matter is not passive, inert, predictable, mechanic, or controllable. In contrast, it possesses a dynamic agency (445). This perspective reveals how the human exploitation of nature is based on a fundamental misunderstanding: Treating the land and its resources as inert and easily manipulated when in reality, nature has its own unpredictable agentic capacity. Iovino and Oppermann highlight the significance of perceiving what they call, "the concrete entanglements of plural 'natures,' in both human and more-than-human realms" ("Material Ecocriticism" 76) to fully comprehend the vibrant and interwoven relationships of human and matter depicted in various texts. Analyzed from the New Materialist vision, in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the Congo River and the jungle are not merely physical entities serving as settings and surroundings for the narrative but also discursive agential forces that actively shape and transform the human characters. Through the New Materialist lens, Conrad's illustration of the Congo's environment exemplifies the vibrant agency of the natural world which actively interferes with colonial activities. The deeper analysis of human and material agency in the narrative allows for a deeper comprehension of human actions shape and are shaped by the natural world, highlighting the mutual influence between people and their environment.

2.1. HUMAN AGENCY IN *HEART OF DARKNESS*

During the nineteenth century, particularly in its latter half, colonial activities carried out under the guise of "civilizing" missions faced increasing criticism in Britain.

Intellectuals and activists began to challenge the moral and ethical justifications of imperial expansion, questioning the exploitation and brutality of colonial practices. (Eldridge 53). The British authors who lived in the same period like J.A. Hobson, E.D. Morel, and Joseph Conrad contributed to this critique by exposing the economic motivations, human rights abuses, and moral contradictions inherent in colonialism through their writings, thereby trying to foster an awareness of the moral implications of colonial power and its consequences for both the colonized environments. Joseph Conrad travelled to the Congo Free State in 1980 where he briefly worked as a riverboat captain. This experience left a profound impression on Conrad, deeply shaping his views on colonialism and human nature, and significantly influencing the narrative structure of *Heart of Darkness* ("Joseph Conrad"). While portraying human characters and their interactions with nonhuman characters, Conrad captures the complexities of European dominance, particularly through their exploitation and control over the Congo environment. His narrative mostly focuses on the actions and attitudes of the European characters, critiquing their uncontrolled imposition of power, the chaotic and disorganized nature of their establishments and their reckless exploitation. These actions exemplify the colonial tendency to ignore the agentic capacity of the nonhuman world, treating both indigenous people and environments as passive resources.

Heart of Darkness presents three main types of human characters, but in Marlow's narration, only one group actively exert their agency. The first group is the native Africans, who were largely depicted as background figures affected by colonial rule. Marlow recounts:

> Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound on their loins, and the short ends waggled to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a robe; each had an iron collar on his neck and were all connected together with a chain. (Conrad 22).

Conrad portrays them not as active agents but as dehumanized figures, reduced to mere shadows suffering from disease and hunger, a depiction that is critiqued for racial stereotyping and perpetuation of colonial ideologies. Marlow, the narrator, detaches himself from the colonial enterprise, and although he is European, he maintains the role of an observer, offering a critical perspective on the actions and ideologies of colonialism. Lastly, the colonizers including, other employees of the company, pilgrims, and Kurtz

form the final group, whose agency is depicted through their anthropocentric and exploitative actions toward the land and people. This last group's perception of nature and human life is rooted in domination and resource extraction. They assert their power over the environment and indigenous populations to fulfil their imperial ambitions. Although Marlow's story centres on colonial endeavours, his self-reflection and his narration showcase the "vibrant agency" of matter, revealing the intricate relationship between human and nonhuman forces.

When examining the depiction of human agency within the narrative, European characters are viewed through their interactions with the environment and nonhuman elements in an anthropocentric manner, demonstrating how they impose power, control, and exploitation over the natural world. Their engagement with nature mirrors the exploitative nature of colonialism, as European colonizers extract resources from the land and dominate the local environment for the benefit of the colonial centre (Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy 6). This relationship highlights the primacy of resource extraction in colonial endeavours. This focus on harvesting resources reflects the exploitative relationships the colonizers established with the land and its nonhuman elements, echoing the dominant imperial ideologies of the era. Yet, this drive for resource extraction illustrates humanity's dependency on nonhuman entities, not only for survival but also for asserting economic and imperial power, underscoring how human agency is intertwined with and reliant upon the agentic capacity of the natural world.

Arriving nearby the Company's station for the first time Marlow describes the scene as "[a] rocky cliff appeared, mounds of turned-up earth by the shore, houses on a hill, others with iron roofs, amongst a waste of excavations, or hanging to the declivity. A continuous noise of rapids above hovered over this scene of inhabited devastation" (Conrad 21). This depiction exemplifies the anthropocentric activities of the colonizers, where the land and its resources are reduced to mere sources for human use. This land of "inhabited devastation" reflects the relentless exploitation and transformation of the natural environment for human purposes. "Turned-up earth" and "a waste of excavations" reflect the disruption of land's inherent agency, as the soil once stable and untouched, is forcefully reshaped. The "iron roofs" and houses on the hill demonstrate the imposition of the human structures on the natural landscape. This depiction objectively and critically illustrates the anthropocentric activities of human characters, framing the land and its

sources as commodities to be exploited for economic gain. On his way to the station, he also sees European-produced tools wasted, left to corruption in the wild nature that he details:

> I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a path leading up the hill. It turned around for the boulders, and also for an undersized rail way-truck lying there on his back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of machinery, a stack of rusty rails. (Conrad 21)

All these descriptions of Marlow, as the first impression of an observant outsider, illustrate the wastefulness and recklessness of colonial endeavours. While the imagery of discarded machinery, overtaken by the grass portrays the remains of human industrial efforts abandoned in the middle of the natural landscape, it also demonstrates how humans need nonhuman entities to fulfil their intentions and actions. This reliance reflects Bennett's concept of "thing power" which emphasizes the active that objects and materials play in shaping human endeavours and also influencing unpredictable outcomes. Marlow's observation as: "I discovered that a lot of imported drainage-pipes for the settlement had been tumbled there. There wasn't one that was not broken" (Conrad 23), again showcases both the negligent attitude of colonizers towards the environment, as they discard broken instruments without regard for the land or its preservation and human dependency on functional tools and materials to impose their control over nature. Moreover, "broken drainage pipes" demonstrate the failure of human intentions as they illustrate the limits of human agency. Marlow continues his description: "I avoided a vast artificial hole somebody had been digging on the slope, the purpose of which I found it impossible to divine" (Conrad 23), showing the senseless disruption of the Congo by the colonizers. This artificial excavation, without any clear purpose, exemplifies the anthropocentric logic that drives colonial exploitation, reducing the land to a mere object of manipulation. Such disruptions reveal the colonial failure to recognize the agentic capacity of the land. From a New Materialist perspective, these imageries of scattered human-made tools and infrastructures underscore the limits of human control and interconnectedness between human intentions and material realities.

Colonizers hunted elephants on large scales to craft a variety of ornamental items using ivory. Marlow depicts the trade exchange as follows: "A stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire set into the depths of darkness, and in return came a precious trickle of ivory" (Conrad 26). The description of "the precious

tickle of ivory" signifies the immense value extracted from the colonized regions. This trade of manufactured goods in exchange for natural resources highlights the human-centred ideology that drove the colonial mindset. This trade reflects nineteenth-century Britain's dependence on raw materials and markets where colonies were both sources of resources and essential outlets for Britain's industrial surplus (Kaul9). From a New Materialist perspective, the flow of these manufactured goods illustrates the entanglement of human desires, material goods and economic systems, as Britain's industrial power relied on the extraction of both resources and human labour from colonized regions. This of human and nonhuman elements underscores how colonial economies were not isolated but deeply enmeshed with distant ecologies and societies.

Marlow delivers a sharp critique of the exploitative nature of colonial activities and human agency throughout his narrative which becomes especially evident in his description of the so-called 'Eldorado Exploring Expedition.' In the following passage, he reveals moral emptiness, underlying their anthropocentric activities, showing how their actions are motivated by personal desires rather than any higher purpose. He recounts:

> This devoted band called itself the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, and I believe they were sworn to secrecy. Their talk, however, was the talk of sordid buccaneers: it was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage; there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, and they did not seem aware these things are wanted for the work of the world. To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe. Who paid the expenses of the noble enterprise I don't know; but the uncle of our manager was leader of that lot. (Conrad 42)

Through this scathing commentary, Marlow reveals how the anthropocentric mindset of colonizers drives them to exploit the land for material gain, treating nature as a resource to be plundered. His comparison to burglars suggests that these actions are devoid of any ethical foundations, exposing destructive motivations behind the colonial enterprise. This quote critiques the anthropocentric worldview that defines the colonizers' interactions with the land. The expedition reflects the colonizers' treatment of the natural world as a passive object to be exploited for human benefit, ignoring the agency and vitality of the environment.

To sum up, an analysis of human agency in *Heart of Darkness* through Marlow's narration reveals a critical perspective on human actions and motivations. By introducing

unnecessary infrastructures, failing to organize these structures effectively, exporting superfluous manufactured goods, and exploiting natural resources, colonial powers exert human agency in ways that demonstrate a disregard for the living environment. New Materialist perspectives challenge this anthropocentric view by emphasizing the agency of nonhuman entities, highlighting the interconnectedness and mutual influence between humans and the environment. A New Materialist analysis of the human agency in *Heart of Darkness* highlights and interrogates the anthropocentric actions of the colonizer characters, subtly reflecting the nineteenth-century colonial practices in the Congo. Furthermore, it reveals the intricate entanglement between human needs, intentions and the agnetic capacity of nonhuman entities, challenging the illusion of total human control. Human agency in the novel exemplifies how these human actions in an anthropocentric worldview neglect the interconnectedness and agency of both human and nonhuman elements within the environment.

2.2. MATERIAL AGENCY IN *HEART OF DARKNESS*

In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad establishes both a physical setting and theoretical basis for the agentic capacity of matter and natural elements through his depiction of the abundance of natural resources, the dense jungle and the unpredictable river Congo. Conrad vividly illustrates matter's vibrant agency, human and nonhuman entanglements and the concepts of trans-corporeality and viscous porosity through the characters' interactions with the more-than-human world. The dynamic and transformative nature of fundamental elements and material forces are evident in both the framing story where Marlow starts narrating his story on a board anchored in Thames and in the embedded story where Marlow recounts his time in Congo. Throughout Marlow's narrative, the interaction between human characters and more-than-human forces repeatedly disrupts human plans and profoundly transforms characters mentally and physically.

The novella starts with the lines: "The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come and wait for the turn of the tide" (Conrad 5). Marlow starts to tell his story about the Congo and the agent

Kurtz, only because they have to “wait for the turn of the tide.” The Neille, the cruising yawl on which Marlow recounts his story, is immobilized due to the tide and the absence of wind. European characters, supposedly superior to other human and nonhuman elements, and their advanced technology are undermined by the agentic capacity of natural elements. The boat, Nellie cannot move, hence the embedded story is told. This illustrates how the vibrant agency and entanglement of natural elements alter human intentions. The stillness of the river and atmosphere render human plans futile, symbolizing the powerful influence of nature over human activities and foreshadowing the broader theme of the natural world’s ability to disrupt and reshape human ambitions throughout the novella.

In the embedded story, the characters’ interaction with the Congo’s environment, including its tropical viruses, excessive heat, and unfamiliar species profoundly challenges their own physical health. These encounters illustrate the concept of trans-corporeality, which underscores the dynamic exchanges and interconnections between human bodies and the broader more-than-human environment, emphasising how deeply human experience is shaped by its entanglement with the material world (Alaimo, “Trans-corporeal Feminims” 238). Conrad’s depiction of the characters’ suffering from exposure to local diseases resulting in pervasive illnesses demonstrates these exchanges among bodies. During his stay at the Outer Station, Marlow witnesses several sick European agents, lying on tuckle beds. Marlow observes that it is so common for an agent to get sick that the Accountant is annoyed by the unceasing groans in the office. Marlow recounts the sense of indifference and the sense of habituation to the illness among the employees: “When a truckle-bed with a sick man (some invalid agent from upcountry) was put there, he exhibited a gentle annoyance” (Conrad 26). This indifference reflects how the characters have become desensitized to the illness of employees, pointing to a deeper issue of “ecosickness,” a concept where the deteriorating health of humans and the environment are co-constitutive (Houses 3). In *Heart of Darkness*, the characters’ sickness is not an isolated phenomenon, it also mirrors the exploitation and degradation of the Congo’s natural world. By aligning with Houses’ concept of ecosickness, the narrative underscores how the illnesses of the characters are deeply interconnected with the environment of Congo, emphasizing the mutual vulnerability of humans and the natural world.

Sickness is a central motif within the narrative. Upon arriving at the Central Station, Marlow notices that the Manager holds his position not due to any exceptional intelligence or ability, but rather "Perhaps because he was never ill" (Conrad 30). The manager's ability to maintain his health amidst the intense heat, disease, and challenging conditions of the Congo highlights the interaction between human bodies and the environment. This interaction also exemplifies Nancy Tuana's concept of viscous porosity, revealing how human resilience is deeply entwined with environmental conditions, where boundaries between the human body and its surroundings are permeable and constantly shifting. While the other agents suffer severely, as Marlow notes, "once various tropical diseases had laid low almost every 'agent' in the station, the manager was heard to say, 'Men who come out here should have no entrails'" (Conrad 31). The manager is somehow immune to these tropical diseases. Thanks to this resilience, he secures his position. Extreme heat and tropical diseases challenge almost every employee physically, illustrating the porous boundaries between human bodies and the surrounding environment. Climate, local viruses, and bacteria of the Congo are active agents deciding what European employees are 'becoming.' Tropical diseases transmitted by local viruses and bacteria demonstrate the potent agentic capacity of microscopic entities and interactions among the bodies. This permeability between bodies highlights how natural forces penetrate and transform human experiences, demonstrating the intertwined relationship between the human body and material forces.

Excessive heat and tropical flies disturb European characters. Marlow describes the relentless flies as such: "It was hot there, too; big flies buzzed fiendishly, and did not sting, but stabbed" (Conrad 26). This vivid depiction underscores the agential capacity of the endemic species to affect European employees, showcasing how the nonhuman environment disrupts human agency and alters the experience of those attempting to dominate it. The extensive heat and aggressive flies are the active agents and significantly affect the characters' physical stamina. During his journey to the Central Station, Marlow has a white companion who is "not a bad chap, but rather too fleshy and with the exasperating habit of the exasperating habit of fainting on the hot hillsides, miles away from the least bit of shade and water" (Conrad 28). His body struggles to withstand the oppressive heat and direct exposure to the sun, demonstrating the physical limitations of human agents when confronted with the natural forces of the Congo. The oppressive heat

affects the characters' physical endurance, decision-making, and overall well-being, highlighting the agency of the sun and climate.

The material forces and the agentic capacity of fundamental elements disturb the characters and their plans during their journey to Kurtz station. During his tenure, Marlow is both physically and mentally affected by the environment that he encounters in the African environment and the way Europeans exploit it. Engaging with the natural elements through the river Congo, he is confronted by the overwhelming power and mystery of nature. As he pilots the steamer deeper into the heart of Congo, he is constantly challenged by the vibrant agency of elements. "The current," "the tide," "the wind," "dense trees," "bushes," "the shadow," and "the dark" (Conrad 47-64) delay their journey. Marlow recounts: "I wanted to push on; but the manager looked grave, and told me the navigation up there was so dangerous that it would be advisable, the sun being very low already, to wait where we were till next morning" (Conrad 55-56). They recognize the futility of resisting the agentic capacity of the natural elements; thus, they adapt to conditions, pausing their expedition until more favourable circumstances arise. This moment exemplifies the agentic capacity of nonhuman forces such as the river and natural light, shaping human actions and decisions. They cannot move in the fog: "I watched the fog for the signs of lifting as a cat watches a mouse; but for anything else our eyes were of no more use to us than if we had been buried miles deep in a hep of cotton-wool. It felt like it, too-choking, warm, stifling" (Conrad 61). Although the crew is eager to arrive at Kurtz's station as soon as possible, they are not able to move, they are not able to see due to the fog. The quote illustrates the fog's nonhuman agency, portraying it not merely as an environmental condition but as an active force that alters human perception, decision-making, and experience. Conrad's depiction of fog, aligning with Thompson's fictional matter, demonstrates how nonhuman entities can exert agency and influence the narrative. The fog's ability to affect human actions and perceptions underscores the entanglement of material forces with human experiences, Acting as a disruptive presence, the fog blurs boundaries between visible and invisible, thereby challenging characters' reliance on vision for navigation and control. It disrupts the colonizers' attempts to impose order and mastery over the landscape. From a New Materialist perspective, this interaction exemplifies how the material world is not passive or inert but actively participates in shaping human actions and outcomes. The fog's agency, described as vibrant in line with

Bennett's theory, underscores its unpredictability and its capacity to shape events and alter the course of human decisions within the narrative.

Material and elemental forces do not only challenge characters physically but also disrupt their mental stability, alter their perceptions, and reshape their understanding of control and agency within their environment. Specifically, Marlow and Kurtz undergo profound psychological transformations shaped by their exposure to the dense jungle, unpredictable Congo River, heavy fog, relentless pursuit of ivory and oppressive weight of colonial ambitions. For instance, the challenges of navigating the treacherous river, and engaging with the vibrant agency of elements, compel Marlow to confront his inner thoughts. The exploitation he witnesses further amplifies his introspection, forcing him to grapple with the moral ambiguities of the colonial and his role within it. This demonstrates how the environment exerts its influence on human behaviour and their intentions. The land and the natural resources exhibit their own sources of agency, resisting and responding to the human agency. As Marlow notes:

> Yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me-and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough, too-and pitiful-not extraordinary, in any way-not very clear either. And yet it seemed to throw a king of light. (Conrad 11)

Blinding fog as the force of nature, and the burning heat of the sun make him question wilderness and the nature of civilization, demonstrating the psychological consequences of human and nonhuman interaction, blurring distinctions between the two. The intrinsic value and the agentic capacity of nature influence and transform Marlow, and he begins to question the legitimacy of the so-called civilizing mission. The intense heat from the sun exemplifies the inescapable presence of natural forces affecting Marlow, impacting his stamina, decision-making, and overall psychological state. Both the intense heat and the fog play an active role in shaping human experiences. Bennett's concept of vibrant matter reframes these natural elements as entities with intrinsic vitality, possessing the capacity to act independently of human intentions, meaning that matter – whether in the form of fog, heat, or other environmental forces – has the agentic capacity, actively influencing events and outcomes rather than merely shaped by human will and intention. The vibrant agency of elements consistently disturbs the characters and repeatedly alters their intentions throughout the story, exemplifying Barad's concept of entanglements

which suggests that agency is not exclusively a human attribute but emerges from direct interaction between human and nonhuman forces. While the natural landscape of Congo is reshaped by human actions, human plans, health, and decision-making are, in turn, shaped by the constant interplay between the characters and their environment.

The other main character of the story, Mr Kurtz is also deeply affected both physically and mentally by material forces and natural elements. Although he appears in a small part of the narrative, his formidable reputation dominates the entire story. Before Marlow meets him in person, he hears about him from the other characters including the Accountant and the Manager. He is a significant example of how the agency of elements and the "untamed wilderness" of the Congo can severely alter a white European civilized man, the man of reason. Kurtz initially represents the ideal colonizers, as the Accountant speaks of his "Oh, he will go far, very far. . . He will be a somebody in the Administration before long" (Conrad 27). Yet, his insatiable greed for more ivory along with his prolonged isolation in the vast and oppressive jungle triggers his physical and mental deterioration. Isolated from European civilization and culture, Kurtz's exposure to the wild jungle erodes his moral boundaries and corrupts his mental health. From a New Materialist perspective, Kurtz's isolation from European civilization and culture, coupled with his exposure to the vital materiality of the jungle, shows how non-human forces actively participate in shaping human behaviour and psychological states. The jungle is not merely a passive backdrop but an agential force that interacts with Kurtz's mind and body, blurring the boundaries between civilization and wilderness. In this view, Kurtz's moral decay is not just the result of isolation but also a product of his 'entanglement' with the dynamic, unpredictable environment around him. The depiction of the jungle as an agential force reflects the profound impact of the environmental conditions on Kurtz's psyche, emphasizing the entanglement of his decline with the volatile surroundings. His moral and physical decay becomes another vivid illustration of ecosickness where the boundaries between human and the environment collapse, expressing how deeply interconnected their fates are.

When Marlow arrives at Kurtz's station, he sees that Kurtz ornaments his place with posts and skulls. Marlow describes the unsettling site: "There it was, black dried, sunken, with closed eyelids-a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of teeth, was smiling, too, smiling continuously at

some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber" (Conrad 81). This chilling demonstration of skulls used as fencing around his station shows his transformation from a European enforcer to a mad barbarian. He is alone in the wilderness, subjected only to the untamed forces of nature and his psyche, which Marlow describes vividly: "His soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you it had gone mad" (Conrad 93). These words of Marlow, especially those of "being alone in the wilderness," implying the jungle, itself plays an important role in Kurtz's insanity. The oppressive power of the jungle, the unpredictable river Congo, and their wild and active agency profoundly transformed Marlow. Conrad's depiction shows that when removed from the structures of civilization, the characters begin to recognise the wilderness within themselves, reflecting the agentic capacity of nature. This transformation illustrates that human agency is not isolated but interwoven with the narrative agency of matter. As Iovino and Oppermann assert: "It is a material 'mesh' of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces" ("Stories Come to Matter" 1). This mesh is evident in both Marlow's and Kurtz's transformations. The material mesh emphasizes the interconnectedness and mutual influence between the human characters and the natural environment, revealing how their identities and actions are co-constituted through this dynamic interplay. Marlow admits their transformation:

> I had turned to the wilderness really, not to Mr. Kurtz, who, I was ready to admit, was as good as buried. And for a moment it seemed to me as if I also were buried in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets. I felt an intolerable weight oppressing my breast, the smell of damp earth, the unseen presence of victorious corruption, the darkness of an impenetrable night. . . (Conrad 88)

The powerful and often overwhelming influence of the nonhuman world on human consciousness and stories is demonstrated in the narrative through Kurtz's and Marlow's direct interaction with the environment and nonhuman forces.

The agential power of matter and elements not only intertwines with human characters but also alters and transforms nonhuman entities in the novel. To illustrate, when Marlow first arrives in Africa, on his way to the Outer Station, he encounters scattered and decaying machinery, left abandoned. He describes finding: "I came up with more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails" (Conrad 21). This vivid imagery demonstrates breaks down of humanmade objects with moisture and humidity.

The breakdown represents a movement across bodies showing the porous boundaries between nonhuman entities, where materials and environmental forces flow and interact. It reflects Karen Barad's concept of intra-actions which suggests that entities do not pre-exist in isolation but are in a constant becoming through their "intra-actions." Rails through their "intra-action" with natural elements such as moisture, heat, and air gradually corrode and become rusty, showing how entities are in constant interactions. As well as the agency of air, water, and soil, the agency of fire also disturbs the materials. Marlow witnesses: "One evening a grass shed full of calico, cotton prints, beads, and I don't know what else burst into a blaze so suddenly that you would have thought the earth had opened to let an avenging fire consume all that trash" (Conrad 32). The fire scene vividly portrays the destructive agentic capacity of fire on the materails. The materials that lead European to exploitation, and colonial trade, is exploited by the "wild" agency of fire. This fire exemplifies "how elements 'wild' orders and methods of ordering" (Macauley 352-5). In *Heart of Darkness*, the agency of elements enhances the understanding of intra-active relations among the various forms of agents.

The river's unpredictable waters and the rocks below challenge both human and nonhuman characters many times and this proves that elements are not predictable, passive, and inert but they are active and vibrant. They can assert dominance over humans and human-made technologies. When Marlow arrives at the Central Station, he learns that the steamer that he is supposed to pilot is destroyed. That is told to Marlow as: "They had started two days before in a sudden hurry up the river with the manager on board, in charge of some volunteer skipper, and before they had been out three hours they tore the bottom of her on stones, and she sank near the south bank" (Conrad 29). The agential capacity of sea, rocks, and wind results in the destruction of a manmade vehicle disrupting human plans and illustrating the dynamic interplay between human and nonhuman agencies. Marlow has to wait for months until the ship is repaired. The agency of elements disturbs human agency by destroying the steamboat, which carries people. Even though it is built by the agency of humans, and it needs the piloting of humans to move, humans cannot move overseas without steamships. And this steamboat cannot be repaired without some other material, rivets. All this process also serves as an example of the multifaceted interplay of human and nonhuman agents showcasing how the agency of elements like water, rock, and wind, along with the absence of humanmade tools can significantly alter

the course of human activities. This highlights the New Materialist view that matter is not passive but actively participates in shaping events and outcomes.

In addition to the direct intervention of material and elemental forces in human agency, affecting physical and psychological well-being and disturbing their plans, many tools and objects also exert inherent agentic capacity, actively shaping outcomes through their interactions with both humans and the environment. This reliance on objects and technology reveals what Jane Bennett refers to as "thing-power," demonstrating how nonhuman entities whether tools, machinery, or environmental elements play a significant role in shaping human actions. Bennet clarifies thing-power as "(from subjectivity) possessed by things, a moment that must be there, since things do in fact affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power" (Bennet, *Vibrant Matter* 3), suggesting that objects and materials have an inherent capacity to affect other entities, including human bodies and decisions through their interactions. To illustrate, European characters use rifles which function with the material agency of fire and the natural components of gunpowder-saltpetre, charcoal, and sulfur to hunt and keep the natives of the island under their control. They also use many supplies and tools that are made by the use of materials including candles, matches, torches, papers, books, and desks to improve their conditions because they need to "work with 'adequate tools-intelligent men'" (Conrad 39). The effectiveness of these tools relies on both the properties of natural substances from which they are made and human skill and intent, underscoring the interconnectedness and mutual influence between human actions and the material world. Moreover, it takes months to repair the sunken boat due to s lack of tools, materials, and craftsmen which Marlow recounts: "Rivets I wanted. There are cases of them down at the coast-cases-piled up-burst-split!. . .You could fill your pockets with rivets with the trouble of stooping down-and there wasn't one rivet to be found where it was wanted" (Conrad 39). The quote also exemplifies Bennett's thing-power, demonstrating how nonhuman elements exhibit their own form of agency. The absence of essential tools and materials, like rivets, can significantly impede human progress and activity, thereby exerting a powerful influence on the course of events. They cannot repair the ship for days, or months as they do not have rivets. The use of these tools and supplies, with their inherent properties, reflects the agentic capacity of matter by demonstrating how these materials actively shape human actions through their creative and often unpredictable influences. This highlights how

matter itself can possess a dynamic agency, influencing and participating in human endeavours beyond mere functionality. Furthermore, the characters' interaction with various tools, made of materials such as metal, gunpowder, and wood, illustrates the New Materialist perspective on the active and influential role of matter in human affairs. This perspective suggests an intricate, active, and co-constitutive relationship between human agency and material agency, where both are continually shaping and being shaped by each other.

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CHAPTER 3: COLONIAL NARRATIVES FROM THE NEW MATERIALIST PERSPECTIVES COMPARING *ROBINSON CRUSOE* AND *HEART OF DARKNESS*

Humans have shown their ability to think to prioritize their own needs over those of other living and nonliving entities in the world. As Gouwens highlights humans advocated that they could improve themselves and be more civil with "our well-ordered mind and beautiful ability to speak" (417). This perception of humans as more civil than others has led to the widespread belief in human superiority, which justifies exploiting natural resources, other species, and inorganic matter for humans' good. This anthropocentric reading of human agency reached a peak during the colonial era. European colonisation, unlike earlier colonial settlements, includes "military conquest, mass violence, genocide, trade, expropriation. . .dehumanization. . . slavery, racism. . . cultural and educational practices" (Willoughby 236). Crowning themselves militarily, economically, morally, and intellectually superior to indigenous natives, European colonizers exploited human labour and natural resources. There was "a flow of human and natural resources between colonised and colonial countries" (Loomba 3). This flow as described by Loomba worked in both directions. In addition to raw materials, slaves and labourers were shipped to metropolitans to manufacture goods. The colonies were also captive markets for European products. Hence slaves were taken from Africa to the Americas to work at the West Indian sugar plantations. They produced sugar for European consumption while raw cotton from India was shipped to England to be used for textile manufacturing. The manufactured textile was sold back to India, severely affecting local cloth marketing. As well as slave and labourer flow from Africa, European citizens including travellers, traders, soldiers, clergy, and teachers also moved to colonies which Emerson asserts as "[t]he imposition of white rules on alien people's inhabiting lands separated by salt water from the imperial centre" (Emerson 3). This flow of profit and populations resulted in the growth of global trade, significant demographic shifts, and the economic dominance of imperial nations.

Maintaining hierarchies and cultural dominance, imperialist European powers reshaped global politics, economies, ecologies, and societies over centuries. From a New Materialist perspective, examining these changes in the colonial setting is significant as

New Materialism emphasizes the interconnectedness of various agencies, both human and material, revealing how these economic and demographic shifts have impacted environments and lives. The relentless pursuit for profit led to widespread exploitations of nature and natural resources ending in the loss of habitats, biodiversity alterations, species extinction, and long-lasting environmental degradation. Demographic changes led to alterations in habitats. The influx of African populations transformed the environment of the Americas while the environment of Africa was profoundly affected by European migration and exploitation. The economic and demographic changes driven by colonial exploitation exemplify the entangled agencies of human and nonhuman that New Materialism seeks to highlight. By realising the active role of human and nonhuman entities in shaping ecological, economic, and historical outcomes, New Materialist reading provides a deeper understanding of colonial context.

Both *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe and *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad are literary works that reflect the themes of the colonial era. *Robinson Crusoe* was published during the early eighteenth century's age of exploration, while *Heart of Darkness* was written in a period generally regarded as the peak of European imperialism. Each work uniquely portrays colonial mindset and practices, showing how European settlers and explorers perceived themselves in relation to the lands and native inhabitants they encountered. These two narratives provide significant insights into how colonial stances transformed over time shifting from explorers to imperialist exploiters. These two novels have been canonized not only for their literary qualities but also for their roles in reflecting and shaping the imperialist and colonialist ideologies of their era. Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), asserts that *Robinson Crusoe* exemplifies the colonial ethos of its time, portraying the protagonist as the archetypal European colonizer. Crusoe's conquest of the land reflects the dominant narrative of European superiority. Similarly, *Heart of Darkness* has been the subject of extensive critical debate, particularly for its portrayal of European imperialism and its depiction of Africa and its people. While Conrad's work is often praised for exposing brutal realities of colonial exploitation, Chinua Achebe, in his essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" critiques the novel for its deeply embedded Eurocentric and dehumanizing portrayal of Africans. Although they are different in style and content, both narratives have overlapping themes of dominance, cultural superiority, and exploitation of lands and

native inhabitants and they reveal the deep impacts of colonialism on both the colonized natures and cultures. Both novels remain central to literary studies precisely because they embody the complexities and contradictions of their historical content. From a New Materialist perspective, the background of these narratives is crucial as it underscores the intricate entanglements between human and nonhuman agents, emphasizing how colonial practices shape and are reshaped by the material world. When analysed from New Materialist views, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness* illustrate the agency of nonhuman entities, such as land, water, natural resources, soil, wind, and microorganisms, illustrating the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman. By foregrounding the vibrant and active roles of these nonhuman elements a New Materialist reading of these novels challenges the anthropocentric perception of agency.

3.1. EXPLOITATIVE NATURE OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM IN *ROBINSON CRUSOE* AND *HEART OF DARKNESS*

Human exceptionalism is reinforced by clear divisions such as human-animal, nature-culture, and mind-body. These distinctions strengthen hierarchical structures by prioritizing one aspect over the other. For instance, human and animal duality has led to justifications for the use of animals for various purposes while nature and culture duality has resulted in the assumption that nature is merely a resource for humans rather than a complex network that is integral to our survival. This modernist trend of humanism, human exceptionalism, and anthropocentrism which favours humans, has recently been challenged by postmodernist, ecocritical, New Materialist scholars who advocate for a more interconnected understanding of existence, captured in the idea that "we are a part of that nature we seek to understand" (Barad, *Meeting the Universe* 42). This new perception urges our reconsideration of our dominant worldviews and practices. It promotes a more holistic approach where humans are neither separate nor superior to nonhuman entities but rather they are integral components of the ecological system. In both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness*, which were written during a time when anthropocentrism reached its peak, the characters' relationships and interactions with their surroundings well exemplify the anthropocentric dualities of human-animal and nature culture. This examination of selective literary works highlights the necessity of

challenging and reconsidering these notions. It encourages New Materialist perspectives that underscore the equally entangled agencies of human and nonhuman entities.

Robinson Crusoe was written in a century that upheld the belief that human reason could control, understand, and manipulate the world. Defoe portrays his protagonist, Crusoe not as an aggressive conqueror but as a figure, who through ingenuity and practical knowledge, navigates and utilizes the island's resources, embodying the Enlightenment's ideals of human mastery over nature and frames his actions within a seemingly benign and pragmatic approach to survival. Crusoe, reflecting the belief in humans' superiority due to their rationale and ability to think, views natural resources as mere tools to be exploited for his survival and comfort. This perspective is vividly demonstrated in his words when he describes the power of human reason to master the natural world. He explains: "So I went to work, and here I must needs observe, that as reason is the substance and original of the mathematics, so by stating and by squaring everything by reason, and making the most rational judgment of things, every man may be the master of every mechanic art" (Defoe 56). This statement shows Crusoe's belief that human intelligence justifies the use and control of nature which reflects the colonial anthropocentric mindset. Although the agentic capacity of nonhuman characters is evident in the plot, such as the land, the tools and materials that play crucial roles in Crusoe's survival, Defoe's narration lacks this acknowledgement, focusing on mostly human actions. *Heart of Darkness*, which was written almost two centuries after *Robinson Crusoe*, portrays the notion of human agency in a more severe and critical tone. Conrad's narrative, written during the nineteenth century which was a time that saw increasing criticism of colonial enterprises, serves as a critique of the exploitation of both human labour and natural resources. Marlow's story about his earlier years, while working for a European trading company, strikingly illustrates how European imperial powers claimed superiority over the indigenous people and exploited the nature of the Congo Africa. Symbolically referring to wild nature as 'darkness,' Conrad uses this motif to explore the ironic contrast between imperial asserts of bringing 'enlightenment and civilization' to Africa and the actual darkness of exploitation. Although both narratives, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness*, depict human characters with an anthropocentric perception of nonhuman matter, they differ significantly in their portrayals of human agency. Defoe celebrates his protagonist as someone who harnesses nature for survival,

largely overlooking more than human world. In contrast, Conrad frames human agency in Congo as a form of exploitation. Moreover, the portrayal of nonhuman forces like the river's currents, the dense jungle, and the tropical climate reflects how human actions and plans are influenced and entangled with the inherent agency of the nonhuman world.

In both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness,* human agency is characterized anthropocentric, utilitarian view of nature, where the natural world is perceived primarily as a resource to be exploited for human benefit, ignoring its intrinsic value and agentic capacity. The stories demonstrate complex power dynamics and exploitation. In both of the stories characters' encounters with nature vividly reflect this early human-centered perspective. *Robinson Crusoe*, as the story of a European survivor on a deserted island, exemplifies the exploitation of nature through Crusoe's utilization of the island's resources. While he is utilizing the island's resources, Crusoe as a shipwrecked survivor, initially explores the island to satisfy his immediate needs. He first looks for fresh water and a secure, suitable place to build his tent. Once settled on the island, Crusoe begins to explore his surroundings in search of additional resources to ensure his survival and comfort. He recounts: "I began to take a more particular survey of the island itself" (Defoe 83). Crusoe's actions reflect his utilitarian perception of nature, viewing it primarily for his own consumption. This becomes evident with his words "that God had miraculously caused this grain to grow, without any help of seed sown; and that it was so directed, purely for my sustenance on that wild miserable place (Defoe 65). Here, Crusoe interprets the natural resources of the island as divinely provided for his personal benefit. In this quote, Crusoe attributes his survival to divine intervention rather than recognizing the natural processes and the intrinsic value of the environment. His belief that this grain is provided "purely for his sustenance" underscores his anthropocentric view, where nature is seen solely as a resource for humans. The statement "without any help of seed sown" further illustrates his lack of acknowledgement of the natural world's inherent agency. He claims ownership of both the island and its resources. Cruosoe's exploitation of natural resources begins on a small scale but evolves into larger operations including cultivation of the land, domesticating animals to supply food, building different shelters on the various parts of the island for different purposes, constructing different canoes, and making pottery and baskets. Although his exploitation of resources intensifies over time, it remains primarily individualistic, rather than driven by broader economic motives.

Similarly, in *Heart of Darkness*, starting from his first arrival in the Congo, Marlow describes the immensity of exploitation of nature throughout the story continuously. However, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* exemplifies a more systematic and profit-driven exploitation of resources. Unlike the individualistic survival tactics seen in *Robinson* Crusoe, the exploitation in *Heart of Darkness* is tied to colonial ambitions and economic motives. In Marlow's story, characters, rather than just satisfying their immediate needs and comfort, exploit nature and indigenous inhabitants of the Congo for commercial motivations. This broader scale of exploitation demonstrates how human agency extends beyond personal survival. To accumulate capital for themselves, European colonizers ruthlessly exploit natural sources, causing the deaths of people and cultures. He ironically narrates "The work was going on. The work!" (Conrad 24). Employees of the company, along with pilgrims which means a large group of European people systematically exploit natural resources by ignoring their intrinsic value. The narrator's depiction of native people, their treatment, and European characters' competition for ivory powerfully illustrate human exceptionalism's devastating effects on the environment and native populations. Marlow notes: "They were dying slowly-it was clear" (Conrad 24). Although he refers to the native peoples of Congo here, this observation goes beyond the human victims, it reflects the broader demise of elephants, the natural environment, and the Congo itself due to the pursuit of economic gain which is driven by the belief in the superiority of human agency. European employees and the pilgrims' interaction with the Congo environment and the natural resources demonstrate the anthropocentric view that prioritizes human needs and economic gain over ecological balance. *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness* depict characters with an anthropocentric understanding of nature but in distinct settings and manners, revealing the consequences of their attempts to dominate and exploit environments. While Crusoe's actions remain individualistic, driven by his personal need for survival, the exploitation Marlow narrates is deeply embedded in the structures of imperialism.

In addition to the exploitation and extraction of natural resources, in both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness*, characters introduce human and nonhuman entities to the existing environments, reflecting their anthropocentric perceptions of these landscapes. The characters view the natural world as existing solely for human benefit, they manipulate and control it for human purposes. Humans and matter, are both active agents,

and the introduction of non-native forces to the local environments demonstrates how these interventions can profoundly alter, transform and disrupt existing ecological balances. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe introduces non-native species and settlers to the uninhabited island, signalling long-term alterations to the island's environment. Firstly, he introduces two European cats and a dog from another shipwreck. These animals, not native to the island, have their own agentic capacity and influence on the natural environment. While he is cultivating land, he plants European seeds, and over time, increases his agricultural production. Due to the rise in cultivation and livestock farming, Crusoe transforms the island and the island transforms Crusoe. Crusoe's entanglement with nature is evident as he both sustains himself and alters the landscape. While the changes lead to alteration of the habitats and potential disruptions to the native flora and fauna, they also introduce new resources for his survival, such as increased food production and the domestication of the animals. Defoe depicts this ongoing interaction optimistically, showing how it not only reshapes the island but also transforms Crusoe himself. He adapts, benefits from earlier experiences, and gradually improves his methods of farming, and building. He also introduces more inhabitants to the island with different motivations. The presence of additional people intensifies the island's transformation. From the New Materialist perspective, this continuous process between human actions and the island's resources reveals a complex and reciprocal relationship between human practices and the environment. Likewise, in *Heart of Darkness*, non-native populations and manufactured products are introduced to the natural environment of the native Congo. However, unlike Defoe's portrayal, Conrad presents these introductions of non-native populations, manufactured goods and infrastructure in the Congo as destructive and chaotic. Marlow conveys this disorder and wastefulness by stating:

> A quarrelsome band of footsore sulky niggers trod on the hills of the donkey; a lot of tents, camp-stools, tin boxes, white cases brown bales would be shot in the courtyard, and the air of the mystery would deepen a little over the muddle of the station. Five such instalments came, with their absurd air of disorderly flight with the loot of innumerable outfit shops and provision stores, that, one would think, they were lugging, after a raid, into the wilderness of equitable division. It was an inextricable mess of things. (Conrad 42)

In this passage, Conrad's depiction of a "quarrelsome band," the chaotic accumulation of objects, and the disordered movements of goods into the Congo reveals the entanglement of colonialism's material culture with its disorienting impact on the environment. The "inextricable mess of things" reflects the disruptive nature of colonial interventions,

where manufactured goods and infrastructure intrude on the native land and its organic order. From a New Materialist perspective, this disorder illustrates both the imposition of foreign entities and blurs the boundaries between humans, organic and inorganic matter, and the environment. In essence, either for immediate needs for survival or for economic gain, in both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness*, characters introduce non-native entities that transform the landscape they encounter, reshaping the environment and material relations. However, the authors' depiction of these introductions varies; Defoe portrays them as acts of adaptation and progress, overlooking the intrinsic value of nonhuman entities, while Conrad frames them as chaotic and destructive forces, illustrating the agential capacity of both human and nonhuman actors to constantly interact with and reshape one another within the material and ecological relations.

3.2. TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF MATERIAL AGENCY ON HUMAN AGENCY IN *ROBINSON CRUSOE* AND *HEART OF DARKNESS*

New Materialist perspectives advocate for the material turn and underscore that material agency "is often involved in interactions, including, but not limited to human agency" (Tuana 194). Nancy Tuana's description of material agency involves "the human and nonhuman interactions," but at the same time highlights that material agency is not confined only to human interactions but extends to encompass various forms of nonhuman interactions. From this view, humans are not the primary agents. New Materialism embraces the vibrant, dynamic entanglement of agencies, blurring the boundaries and recognizing the co-constitutive interactions between human and nonhuman entities, where both shape and are shaped by each other. In the colonial contexts of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness*, the agency of matter is evident in the way it exerts influence, challenging human characters' actions and plans and disrupting their physical and psychological well-being. *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness* vividly demonstrate the entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies. Barad clarifies that entanglement is not merely about being intertwined as distinct entities coming together; rather it signifies the absence of "an independent, self-contained existence." ("Preface and Acknowledgements" iv). From this perspective, neither the human agency nor the material agency exists individually but they are in an active

'becoming' process, continuously influencing and transforming each other through their dynamic actions. This understanding of entanglement is evident in both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness* through both matter-to-matter interactions and matter-to-human dynamics, where nonhuman entities engage with and impact one another just as profoundly as they do with human actors.

In both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness*, elemental forces play a crucial role in shaping the narratives and influencing human actions and plans. Crusoe's shipwreck and subsequent isolation on the island are the direct consequences of natural forces such as wind, sea, and storms, which set the stage for much of the novel's events. Crusoe recounts this as:

> The wave that came upon me again buried me at once twenty or thirty feet deep in its own body: I could feel myself carried with a mighty force and swiftness towards the shore a very great way; but I held my breath, and assisted myself to swim forward for all my might. I was ready to burst with holding my breath, when, I found myself rising up, so, to my immediate relief, I found my head and hands shoot out above the surface of the water; and though it was not two seconds of time thatI could keep myself so, yet it relieved me greatly, gave me a new breath and courage. I was covered again with water a good while. (Defoe 37)

The narration of Crusoe vividly illustrates both the overwhelming agentic capacity and the entanglement of elemental forces, in shaping Crusoe's future. Similar to Crusoe's story, in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's chance to recount his story is the result of the boat being immobilized, unable to navigate the river due to environmental conditions, underscoring agentic capacity of elemental forces in disrupting and directing human actions and shaping the course of the narrative. Although the active role of elemental forces is apparent in both narratives, the authors' portrayals of these forces are distinctly different. Defoe does not depict elemental forces as entities with their own agential capacity; rather, his protagonist interprets them as manifestations of Providence's punishment or reward for his actions. Crusoe reflects on his first challenge with the storm:

> I began now seriously to reflect upon what I had done, and how justly I was overtaken by the judgment of Heaven for my wicked leaving my father's house, and abandoning my duty. All the good counsels of my parents, my father's tears and my mother's entreaties, came now fresh into my mind; and my conscience, which was not yet come to the pitch of hardness to which it has since, reproached me with the contempt of advice, and the breach of my duty to God and my father. (Defoe5)

Crusoe's reflection on the storm reveals his tendency to interpret natural events as moral judgments, seeing the storm as divine punishment for his disobedience and abandonment of duty. He similarly interprets positive events as God's reward, attributing favourable circumstances for divine favour rather than recognizing the agentic capacity of elemental

forces. However, in *Heart of Darkness*, the elemental forces and landscape of Congo are portrayed as active agents. The adjectives human characters use to describe nonhuman characters such as the "unpredictable river Congo" and the "dense jungle" emphasize how these nonhuman entities possess their agential capacities, exerting influence on the characters and the events, resisting human control, and blurring the distinction of nature and human activity. This interplay illustrates the entanglement of human and nonhuman forces, challenging the anthropocentric worldview by showing nature's active agentic capacity. This active agency of the landscape is vividly captured in Marlow's description of navigating the river: "We wouldn't be able to tell where we were going—whether up or downstream, or across—till we fetched against one bank or the other—and then we wouldn't know at first which it was" (Conrad 59).

Human characters in *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness* undergo trans-corporeal transformations, where their bodies are altered through their interactions with the fundamental elements and matter. These interactions illustrate how boundaries between the human body and the environment become permeable, emphasizing the fluid exchange between human and nonhuman bodies. To illustrate, sometime after being shipwrecked on the island, Crusoe falls very sick, suffering from fever and chills that leave him capacitated for several days. Crusoe writes in his diary: "Rained all day, I stayed within. I thought at this time the rain felt cold, I was something chilly, which I knew was not usual in that latitude" (Defoe 72) and the following day, he notes: "Very ill, and shivering," (Defoe 73) and soon after, "very ill, feeling frightened" (Defoe 73). A few days later he records: "Very bad again" (Defoe 73). This quote underscores the vibrant agency of nonhuman forces, illustrating the effect of environmental forces on Crusoe's physical and emotional state. Being exposed to the persistent rain and adapting to a new environment, likely encountering and interacting with local bacteria and viruses to which his body has no immunity, Crusoe becomes increasingly ill and weakened, showcasing his body's vulnerability to trans-corporeal exchanges between himself and the unfamiliar ecosystem. This vulnerability is further emphasized when Crusoe reflects on the impacts of the environment on his health noting that "being abroad in the rainy season was the most pernicious thing to my health that could be, especially in those rains which came attended with storms and hurricanes" (Defoe 82). This experience shows the dynamic interplay between human and nonhuman entities. The sun also physically affects

him as he explains: “One reason why I could not go quite naked was, I could not bear the heat of the sun” (Defoe 113), illustrating the agentic capacity of the sun as a powerful force that directly influences human physical well-being. In a comparable manner to Crusoe, characters in *Heart of Darkness* are directly disturbed and affected by natural forces. Europen employees of the Company, not being immune to various tropical diseases of the Congo, suffer severe physical and psychological ailments. The vibrant agentic capacity of tropical diseases significantly disturbs human health, underscoring the vulnerability of human bodies to nonhuman forces and emphasizing the entangled and co-constitutive relationship between human and nonhuman entities.

Although both novels depict the porous and interdependent relationship between human and nonhuman bodies where boundaries between them blur through the constant exchange of matter, energy, and agency, the outcomes of these interactions are depicted differently. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe reflecting the seventeenth and eighteenth-century ideologies, framed these interactions as opportunities for human adaptation, downplaying humans’ entanglement with more-than-human forces. Yet in *Heart of Darkness*, these interactions result in the transformation of the human characters, revealing a sense of destabilization and the breakdown of human control. The characters, namely Kurtz and Marlow, are also psychologically affected by their interaction with the wild natural environment. Marlow hints that the reason for Kurtz’s madness is his exposure to wild nature. He remarks: “Being alone in the wilderness” (Conrad 81) and his relentless pursuit of ivory, irreparably affect Kurtz’s mental health. Kurtz’s deteriorating mental health exemplifies how the significant influence of natural forces and material forces destabilize human agency, showing the active agency of matter in shaping human experiences and conditions. Likewise Kurtz, Marlow, the narrator also, is deeply affected by his experiences during his stay in the Congo. Seeing his limitations before the agency of elements during their journey to Kurtz’s station and witnessing Kurtz’s mental transformation due to his direct exposure to the wilderness cause him a mental breakdown which Marlow reflects when he returns home as: “It was not my strength that wanted nursing, it was my imagination that wanted soothing” (Conrad 100). Marlow’s breakdown, as he grapples with the agency of natural elements and the transformative power of wilderness demonstrates the entangled agencies of human and nonhuman where one is constantly reshaped by the other. From a New Materialist perspective, the material

powers “can aid or destroy, enrich or disable ennoble and degrade us” (Bennett, “Preface” ix). This view underscores the dynamic and reciprocal nature of human and nonhuman interactions. *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness* are alike in that Crusoe, Kurtz, and Marlow are directly physically challenged by their interaction with the natural forces. However, Defoe’s depiction of Crusoe focuses on his attempts to assert control over the environment but minimizes the agentic capacity of more-than-human forces. In contrast, Conrad’s portrayal of Kurtz and Marlow emphasizes the overwhelming power of the environment, revealing the characters’ vulnerability and lack of control in the face of nature’s agency. These interactions in *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness* demonstrate the intricate entanglements between human and nonhuman agents demonstrating that human characters are continually shaped and reshaped by the material world around them.

CONCLUSION

Humans have privileged their agency over nonhuman entities – animate or inanimate – for centuries by claiming their cognitive superiority. This human-centric understanding of agency which emphasizes the human capacity of rationality has proven to be problematic. The exceptionalism attributed to human agency has caused many catastrophic results such as environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, and disruption of indigenous cultures and ecosystems. Today, the world is facing a climate crisis, plastic pollution, scarcity of natural resources for energy use, and human exploitation largely due to this human exceptionalist perspective. Scholars from varied fields, including environmental humanities, philosophy, sociology, and science, have been suggesting a more inclusive approach to agency which recognizes more-than-human forces. This perspective is often studied under the theoretical framework of New Materialism, which challenges the conventional notions of agency and advocates for the active agency of matter. New Materialist scholars refuse clear-cut boundaries between human and nonhuman agencies and emphasize complex interactions that define our world. Serenalla Iovino underscores this view by stating, "[t]he idea of the interplay of physical substances (whether natural or human-made) and biological bodies shed light on the unpredictability of causal lines and on the impossibility of delineating a clear-cut boundary between life forms and other material entities: even what is not recognizable as 'alive' acts and has effects" (139). This understanding of human and nonhuman agencies as complex and porous, as Nancy Tuana terms it, is crucial for the well-being of the universe. A New Materialist reading is important because it provides a challenging perspective on the conventional understanding of matter, agency, dichotomous thinking, and the relationship between humans and nonhuman participants of the universe. Unlike classical Western views that often perceive matter as passive and inert, New Materialism posits that matter possesses its own agency, actively participating in unfolding events. This perspective shifts the focus from a pure anthropocentric worldview, where humans are the only and primary agents of change. By doing so, it emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all entities, expressing that humans are not separate from, but rather part of, the broader ecological and material processes. It suggests more equal and intra-active relationships between humans and the nonhuman world. This

understanding of the intra-activity that Karen Barad introduces, is significant because it refuses interactions between pre-existing entities and elaborates that phenomena emerge through intra-actions where the boundaries and properties are not fixed but rather continually reconstituted (*Meeting the Universe* 148). Building on this transformative understanding of human and nonhuman relationships, the New Materialist perspective proposes a comprehensive framework that includes both humans and nonhumans as active agents in discussions about ethics, environment, and society, promoting a more inclusive and holistic mindset.

The world, including humans, is suffering from the climate crisis, overpopulation, loss of habitats, extinction of species, and plastic pollution. This global crisis necessitates a reevaluation of how we understand the interconnectedness of all entities. Jane Bennett articulated this need by proposing a framework of materiality that challenges hierarchical thinking and highlights the complex entanglements between humans, living beings, and non-living matter:

> Materiality is a rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota. It draws human attention sideways, away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being and toward a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans. Here, the implicit moral imperative of Western thought – "Thou shall identify and defend what is special about Man" – loses some of its salience. (112)

As explained by Bennett in the above quotation, the concept of materiality invites us to rethink about conventional anthropocentric perception of existence. Unlike the conventional "Western thought," this perspective proposes a more integrated perception of agency where biotic and abiotic, elements affect and are affected by each other. Bennett argues that matter is "vibrant, vital, energetic, lively, quivering, vibratory, evanescent, and effluescent" (112). Owing to its inherent agentic capacity to influence and interact with its surroundings, matter is vibrant and energetic. Coole and Frost elaborate on the vibrancy of matter by stating: "As human beings we inhabit in an ineluctably material world. We live our everyday lives surrounded by, immersed in matter. We are ourselves composed of matter" (1). The New Materialist understanding of matter as an active agent leads us to reevaluate our relationships with nonhuman participants of the world because human and nonhuman, biotic or abiotic, all forms of existence are 'enmeshed' and transformed constantly by their 'intra-actions.' This active understanding of the agency of the matter highlights the agentic capacity of elemental forces.

Macauley observes current ecological problems have derived from humans' ignorant relationship with the environment and elements. Humancentric use of nature, attempts to domesticate the elements, and "social taming of other-than-human entities, animals, and locations" (Macauley 2) has disrupted both ecological and social balances. Now elemental forces threaten the human and the nonhuman world severely. Natural disasters, including storms, hurricanes, and earthquakes, which originate from the agentic capacity of the elements, impact communities and destroy habitats. These phenomena are caused by the climate crisis and embody the inherent agencies of four classical elements; fire, water, earth, and air. Oppermann emphasizes this by stating: "If nature exists, elements are its (or her, or his, or their) words" ("Wandering Elements" 316). The 'vibrant' agency of elements and matter has started to speak through severe natural disasters, viruses, resource depletion, and so on. Their agentic power poses significant risks for both human societies and ecosystems. Because of the human agency which exploited nonhumans claiming superiority over them, we are now facing the consequences of this exploitation through environmental and biological challenges.

Increasing environmental awareness is crucial in addressing the anthropocentric perception that views nature as a mere resource for human use. Causing severe damage to the world this limited perspective led to complex environmental problems including the climate crisis, pollution, extreme weather conditions, loss of habitats, and loss of biodiversity. Oppermann comments on the environmental condition of the world, describing the current situation as "waterways gradually poisoned with industrial refuse, its carbon-dioxide-filled atmosphere, and soils infected with pesticides" ("World Communicates" 108), and it is "physically in despair" (108). In this quote, Oppermann demonstrates the material agency of the environment, highlighting how nonhumans and humans actively influence each other. The gradual poisoning of waterways, the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide, and the contamination of soils with pesticides illustrate "a constant process of shared becoming" (Iovino and Oppermann, "Stories Come to Matter" 1) of human and nonhuman forces highlighting the critical need for environmental awareness. As Cox states, even though "in one sense, nature is silent" (Cox 4) since it does not have the ability to talk, in another sense, it communicates its stress through increasing natural disasters. Such awareness is essential to recognize the intricate and entangled relationships between human activities and the natural world. New Materialism

offers a framework for understanding these relationships by emphasizing the agency of all matter, human and nonhuman.

Everything surrounds us, from the air we breathe to the water we drink, to the food we eat communicates with us through their languages. Material ecocriticism, as a New Materialist approach, introduces the concept of "storied matter," which reveals how matter itself holds narratives and histories. This "entangled and constant process" is discussed through analysis of human and nonhuman interactions in *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness*, highlighting how human characters shape the stories of nonhuman entities and are, in turn, shaped by their intricate interactions. In both of the narratives both human and nonhuman elements actively contribute to the unfolding events. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe's survival is dependent on his engagements with the island's resources, which in turn shapes his experiences and decisions. Similarly, in *Heart of Darkness*, the oppressive jungle and unpredictable river influence the actions and decisions of European characters, revealing the profound impact of the natural world on human behaviours. Natural forces both shape the characters' physical journeys and transform their inner lives. A New Materialist analysis of these stories demonstrates that matter is not passive but 'vibrant' and agentive, actively entangled with human actors, shaping and being shaped by them, jointly participating in the creation of meaning and history alongside human actors.

The anthropocentric, biased understanding of human agency, particularly European male people's agency, justified destructive environmental and social practices driven by economic motivations and led to long-term ecological and cultural disruptions and damages. Human exceptionalist view of nature threatens the sustainability of life on Earth. Extreme weather conditions, plastic pollution, and acidification of oceans are all the consequences of humans' perception of nature as a resource rather than a mutual participant. The current climate crisis is promoting critical questions about humanity's relationship with the environment as David Abram asks: "What is climate change if not a consequence of failing to respect or even to notice the elemental medium in which we are immersed? Is not global warming, or global weirding, a simple consequence of taking the air for granted?" (301). It is imperative for humans to critically reassess their perceived superior agency and acknowledge the agency of matter and elemental forces. Humans must recognize that they merely are "a part of nature" as Barad frequently

emphasizes in her work: “We are a part of that nature that we seek to understand” (*Meeting the Universe* 26). Expanding on this concept of “being part of nature,” Oppermann explains that: “In the ecological context, being part of nature means not remaining perceptually out-side as if we exist independent of the world’s confluent biotic and abiotic components. If we want to intuit our worldly embodiment, we need to be more alert and less distant to the material world” (“From Material to Posthuman” 274). As Opperman reminds us, recognizing all forms of agencies within the web of nature is significant for the sustainability of our planet. The New Materialist perception of material agency, as agentive and ‘vibrant,’ offers a more interconnected and holistic view of our role in the natural world. In this vein, a New Materialist reading of canonical colonial British novels is significant for addressing global ecological problems resulting from colonial endeavours and mindset. This perspective promotes a more integrated understanding of human and nonhuman relationships and encourages responsible, sustainable interactions with the environment.

New Materialism shifts the focus from human-centred understandings to a broader perspective which recognizes the active agency of nonhuman entities and proposes an ‘entangled’ relationship between human and nonhuman. According to New Materialist theories, both humans and nonhuman entities coexist and shape and are shaped by each other which is discussed by Oppermann as “a radical dismantling of the boundaries between human and nonhuman agencies, the social and natural, above all between matter and discourse” (“Material Ecocriticism and the Creativity” 56). The colonial age was dominated by humanist and materialist ideologies which supported the idea that material wealth could be achieved through the exploitation of natural resources. European colonizers, dominantly Britain claiming superiority over indigenous people, exploited natures and cultures “under the cover of a master theory of historical materialism, continued to define the subject of European thought as unitary and hegemonic and to assign him (gender is no coincidence) a royal place as the motor of human history” (Braidotti 23). By positioning the European male as central, they exploited human labour and natural resources for their economic gain. In doing so, they ender ignored the agency of colonized people and the landscapes they exploited. Under the guise of ‘civilizing’ missions, European colonizers imposed their cultural and economic structures on the people and landscapes they conquered and caused irrecoverable demographic and

ecological changes. New Materialism critiques this anthropocentric perception of nature and natural resources which led to widespread environmental degradation and invites a more inclusive and holistic perspective of all entities. This vision recognizes not only humans but also nonhuman matter as equal agents acting together. Applying New Materialist angles to the colonial contexts provides us with the opportunity to see the 'entanglement' of human and nonhuman agencies and their long-term consequences. It thus encourages us to reevaluate past practices for a more sustainable future.

The colonial age, which lasted between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, started due to the materialist desires of colonizer countries. European countries, who needed food for their people and raw materials for their factories, looked for new lands they could benefit from. Once they arrived in Africa and the Americas, they encountered indigenous cultures. As these people were technologically less developed than colonizers, colonizers used this in their advantage to exploit resources and assert dominance over the local populations. As Young notes: "The West mistook technological advance and the power it brought for cultural superiority" (5). Colonizers established plantations to produce food and raw materials for Europe. They mined precious metals and extracted valuable resources. They did not only exploit natural resources but also human labour, subjecting native inhabitants to harsh and deplorable living and working conditions. They moved thousands of African people to America to work on plantations that cultivated crops such as tobacco, sugar, and cotton for European consumption. They also moved European people from various occupations to 'civilize' indigenous populations of the colonies and brought European manufactured goods to the colonies. For centuries there was an ongoing traffic of people, goods, and natural resources across the continents. These colonial practices both contributed to the improvement of European power and wealth, and at the same time, they changed and shaped social structures, economies, and environments all around the world. The ruthless pursuit of material wealth during the colonial ages caused the extinction of species, irrecoverable damage to habitats, and loss of natures and cultures. The colonial practices did not only transform nature and natural resources but also integrated diverse cultures into a global system dominated by Western imperial powers. As Robert Young explains: "The effect of the globalization of Western imperial power was to fuse many societies with different historical traditions into a history which apart from the period of centrally controlled command economies, obliged them to

follow the same general economic path" (5). This very merging forced societies to abandon their unique culture and histories and adopt similar practices imposed by Western colonizers. In conclusion, when the colonial era is explored from the New Materialist perspective, it is seen that the relentless exploitation of natural resources and human labour, and the imposition of economic structures have produced enduring entanglements between human and non-human actors, transforming ecosystems, reconfiguring material relationships, and fundamentally altering both cultural and environmental landscapes.

Integrating New Materialist theories into the analysis of colonial texts offers a nuanced perspective on the complex relationship depicted in these narratives. Colonial texts often narrate the encounters between colonial settlers and the colonized lands and the native inhabitants. A New Materialist reading uncovers the human exceptionalist perspective inherent in these narratives. The relationships and interactions within these narratives reflect human-centred views, often portraying European settlers as the only agents who have the capacity to change and influence. The agency of nonhumans and indigenous natives is minimized or even ignored while natural sources and native human labour are exploited which has led to long-lasting ecological, demographic, and social changes, disrupting conventional ways of life and local ecosystems severely. The New Materialist approach exemplifies how colonial practices not only shaped but also endangered today's world. Applying New Materialist theories to colonial texts, specifically, the agency of matter and entanglement of human and nonhuman actors, is hence, crucial for the reevaluation of historical narratives.

New Materialist theories criticize this anthropocentric perception that led to severe alterations of natures and cultures by proposing agency to matter and calling for a more complex relationship between human and nonhuman agents. New Materialist scholars reject the humanist understanding of agency, which prioritizes humans' cognitive skills and overlooks the agency of nonhumans. Instead, they introduce matter as "vibrant agents," as termed by Jane Bennett, and emphasize active participation in the world. They advocate for a more entangled view where humans and nonhumans constantly shape and are shaped by their interactions. Oppermann explains this concept by stating: "This is an ongoing process the nature of which is shaped by immense creativity and experience exercised by compound individuals that exhibit self-organizing dynamics and internal

relation" ("Nature's Narrative Agencies" 246). Oppermann, along with the other New Materialist scholars, highlights the dynamic and interactive process of the mutual existence of human and nonhuman entities. This framework emphasizes the interconnectedness of, whether biotic or abiotic, all parts of the ecosystem. That's why reading colonial texts from New Materialist perspectives allows us to see how human exploitation impacted societies, natural environments, and cultures. Considering these exploitations' current outcomes also shows how humans are affected by their interaction with nonhuman participants of the world. Understanding this dynamic is essential for confronting colonial legacies and promoting sustainable practices today.

New Materialist theories promote agency and vibrancy of materials, objects, elements, and nonhuman entities and underscore their porous and complex intra-actions. Refusing boundaries between different forms, New Materialism challenges conventional dichotomies such as nature and culture, subject and object by calling for an interconnectedness and mutual influence of all forms of entities within a system. New materialist perspectives, rather than prioritizing human agency over other agencies, present an intra-active and integrated view of agencies. Applying the New Materialist framework to colonial classics like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness* provides textual evidence of the possible and deliberate misinterpretation of the domination of humans over nonhuman entities. The analytical reading of these colonial narratives demonstrates a deeper layer of interactions between humans and nonhuman entities. It reveals how human and nonhuman relationships are intricately shaped and transformed by one another across different colonial settings and contexts. In both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness*, the 'wild environment' and the natural resources do not only act as mere backdrops but also as active participants that shape the destinies of human characters. Acting as vital agents these elements are severely impacted and transformed by the agency of human characters which illustrates the complex and entangled integrations among the different forms. This very interdependency and entanglement exemplify the mutual influence and co-creation of different forms of agencies that New Materialism emphasizes. Applying New Materialist theories to literary texts, thus, strengthens our comprehension of dynamic roles within narratives while at the same time enabling us to reconsider the place of human agency in creating a sustainable world.

The interactions between human and nonhuman characters in *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness* vividly reflect human exceptionalist understanding of the agency prevalent in the period they were written. Throughout the colonial age, Europe, using their technological advancements such as firearms, ships, and navigation tools, ranked themselves above all the other living and nonliving participants of the world. Showing their ability to 'reason,' European colonizers assumed nonhuman entities as mere resources for human consumption. While exploiting resources and labour of these lands, colonizers ignored their vibrant agency and they treated nonhuman entities of those lands as mere resources to be exploited for European benefit and profit. The interactions between the characters and nonhuman entities demonstrate the same perception of human agency. In *Robinson Crusoe*, the protagonist utilizes natural resources for his needs and comfort. He domesticates animals. He declares himself as the owner of the island and claims all living and nonliving inhabitants of the island as his property. Likewise, in *Heart of Darkness*, European colonizers see themselves as the owner of both human and nonhuman inhabitants of the Congo and relentlessly exploit the natural resources. Vast amounts of ivory are traded by the employees of the company. Driven by anthropocentric motivations reflected within the novels human characters ignore the agency of nonhuman characters and exploit them.

The New Materialist reading of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness* unveils the active agency of matter and elements, challenging and shaping human actions throughout the stories. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe depends on his complex entanglement with various materials, natural resources, and elements for survival. During his years on the island, he utilizes numerous natural resources with the tools taken from the shipwreck, He creates more tools, repurposes them, builds shelters, engages in farming, hunts, secures his safety, and so on. Moreover, his survival hinges on the existence of some materials and elements since he does not only rely on the elements for his immediate needs, such as fresh water and fire, but he also carefully plans his farming and life routine according to the climate of the island. He escapes from the island thanks to the engagement of human, material, and elemental agencies. To escape, he needs a big boat and more people to support the crew, and favourable weather conditions. Although Defoe's depiction promotes human agency and Crusoe's mastery, reflecting the ideals of the era, a New Materialist reading of Crusoe's survival story uncovers the agentic

capacity of matter and the intricate interdependence and co-constitutive nature of human and nonhuman agencies. *Heart of Darkness* is a story of material exploitation of the colonial age, driven by the relentless hunt for more ivory and the exploitation of mines, illustrating the entanglement of matter, humans, and elements. Conrad criticizes colonial endeavour through Marlow's story. He does not portray nature as a passive background; rather, he depicts it as an active force that continually challenges human characters and their plans. European employees go to the Congo and they are physically and mentally affected by its wild nature. The pursuit of some materials and direct interaction with the environment lead to the irrecoverable transformation of the human characters both physically and mentally, illustrating the agentic capacities of more than human forces. Different forms of agents such as human characters, elements, nature, and matter are intricately interwoven within the narrative, reflecting their interconnected roles in real life. The complex interactions and mutual dependencies in *Heart of Darkness* demonstrate the entanglement of the agencies of human characters, nature, elements, and materials.

The perception of human supremacy and agency, rooted in Renaissance ideals, dominated the colonial era by advocating the central role of human beings as rational actors. Showing their ability to reason, humans overlooked the agency of other life forms. They exploited nature and natural resources to fulfill their needs and secure power and wealth. The irresponsible exploitation of nature either for immediate needs or for political motivations led to severe environmental degradation and long-term ecological consequences. The two colonial British novels, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness* exemplify the humanist, anthropocentric view of human agency. However, the authors' depictions of these exploitations differ in their acknowledgement of nonhuman agency, with Defoe framing nature as something to be mastered and controlled, while Conrad portrays it as a powerful, active force that shapes and challenges human endeavours. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe utilizes natural resources to find food, build shelters, and make boats and tools. He introduces new species such as European cats, a dog, and European seed, cultivates land, and domesticates some native species. With the arrival of new human characters, he increases the number of cultivated lands and domesticated more animals for human consumption. In doing so, he overlooks the agentic capacity of nonhuman entities. In *Heart of Darkness*, the exploitation of nonhuman characters of the

novel extends beyond the utilization of natural resources for humans' immediate needs, both reflecting and critiquing the colonial ambitions of the era. European characters exploit the land, natural resources, and native inhabitants for economic gain. They force indigenous characters to work under severe conditions, cut trees, and hunt a significant number of elephants. They introduce unnecessary European-produced materials, tools, and infrastructures to the local environment and disrupt conventional practices. European characters of *Heart of Darkness* prioritize their economic motivations and remain indifferent to the agency of other entities. This privileged perception of European human agency, as reflected within the narrative, has contributed to demographic shifts and significant environmental degradation in the real world. Both novels illustrate the human exceptionalist understanding of human agency which has led to irreversible environmental damage and social disruption. Reading these narratives from a New Materialist perspective enables a deeper understanding complex interplay of human and nonhuman.

To conclude, with the New Materialist analyses of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness*, this thesis aims to contribute to literary studies and environmental criticism suggesting a new perception of the relationships between human and nonhuman entities. It challenges the conventional understanding of human dominance and agency that appeared in the setting of imperialism and colonialism. Instead, this thesis suggests a new, vibrant, entangled, and equal understanding of agencies among the participants of the universe. With this thesis, ecological awareness is hoped to be raised and readers' attraction will be drawn to the interconnectedness and entanglement between human and nonhuman entities.

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