

# Trans-Corporeality as a Conceptual Model of Material Ecocriticism and the Human Body as a Site of Narrativity in *Baromaas*: *Twelve Enduring Months*

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**Abstract**—This paper attempts to analyze Sadanand Deshmukh's Marathi novel *Baromaas: Twelve Enduring Months*, translated by Dr. Vilas Salunkhe into English, using the framework of trans-corporeality and investigate how the material environment affects human bodies, the knowledge and the ethical systems, and the social practices and politics. *Baromaas* is a Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel of 2004 and is critically acclaimed for its realistic depiction of the current condition of Indian farming. To say that *Baromaas* depicts the socio-economic and psychological trials and tribulations of the farming community alone would be incomplete as it would disregard the non-human nature which is a major actant or actor in the novel and thus would be inadequate to understand the real nature of environmental issues like climate change, droughts, chemical imbalance of the soil, infertility, and genetic modification of seeds touched upon by the author. It would also be inadequate to determine the ethical responsibility for these human induced environmental harms. The novel then should be seen from the material-social-discursive perspective with a focus on trans-corporeal inter-actions or processes. When we focus on the biological or physiological responses of the human body to its environment, they "spark lines of inquiry, paths of struggle and even bodies of literature." [1]. In a world of trans-corporeal bodies which are networked, interfacing and interacting, the human and more-than-human become co-constituted and permeable. Trans-corporeality, thus, can offer a theoretical framework to analyze the complex environmental issues which are very much real and demand new epistemologies to deal with the "entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual." [1]

**Keywords:** *Baromaas*, material ecocriticism, transcorporeality, networked bodies, ethics, epistemology, discursive, seed freedom, risk society, collaborations.

The people all over the world today have to contend with environmental realities like the climate change, pollution, loss of forest cover, extinction of species, just to name a few and to say that our existence can no longer be separated from the

survival of our planet would not be out of place. Positive environmental change can be affected by considering the environment itself or the material realities and also the perceptions about these environments; our attitudes towards them and our cultures and religions. For any kind of environmental activism to succeed we need to align the material environments or things, our ideas about them, our ethics and also our rhetoric about them. This is easier said than done! Ecocritic Scott Slovic rightly says that to solve complex problems we need an interdisciplinary solution. Material ecocriticism offers a methodology to take into consideration both, the material and the affective. Ecocriticism becomes a tool to analyse our relationship to the material world around us and to discover and investigate its representations in our texts. It also helps us to align scientific information, cultural representations and political decisions so as to bring about a change in our imaginations. The idea then is to study the narrativity of the environments or the stories that matter tells us. This attempts to break down the boundaries between physical environments, culture and texts or literature and as they become mutually permeable, we can see that nature/environments are vibrant with agency and eloquence. They have a power to enchant us! We can also see how literature and stories can help restore meaning to matter, differentiate between realities and illusions of reality, explain the 'Why' of the material to understand the 'how' of the solution. It also brings into focus the places where we have misread the text of the matter and have perpetuated boundaries between 'us' and 'them', where the ecological balance has become precarious which further leads to the questions of accountability, ethics and environmental justice. The idea of storied matter attempts to combine the reality of matter with rhetoric to enforce political action. The discursive material

practices have been conceptualized as vibrant matter, agential realism (Jane Bennett), transcorporeality (Stacy Alaimo), diffraction, post-human performativity and intra-action (Karen Barad), assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari), just to name a few. This paper uses Stacy Alaimo's conceptual model of transcorporeality to look at human body as site of narrativity.

Stacy Alaimo considers the human body as always and already inter enmeshed with the more-than-human world and thus inseparable from the environment. She defines bodies as material entities which are porous and allow for 'intra-actions' and flows of energy through them and thus have the ability to influence and transform each other. The manner in which bodies interface with other bodies is defined as transcorporeality by Alaimo. Bodies in this case are entities that exist and have agential capacities. They could be small units like electrons or large complex, composite entities made up of multiple bodies. Thus a body could mean the human body, a city, a hurricane, a chemical, an atom or a monkey or anything that exists. Bodies are characterized by their porosity and capacity to exchange energy flows, matter and information which transform the bodies involved in the exchange. Transcorporeality is a transverse movement across bodies and helps to break down the boundaries between bodies at multiple levels viz biological, cultural and semiotic. Alaimo underscores the transverse by "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." [1]. By acknowledging the material nature of bodies, transcorporeality makes us look at ourselves as organisms among many other organisms and our society as part of a larger ecosystem and also underlines the fact that information exchange or discourse and agency is not a prerogative of human beings alone. It brings "nature as always 'here' as well as 'there'; simultaneously local and global, personal and political, practical and philosophical." [1]

In a world of networked and interfacing and interacting bodies, the living and the non-living, nature and culture, mind and body are co-constituted, for example, the food on our plate is linked in a network with the processes of farming, the soil, the water, the seed, the chemicals, the networks of transport and economy, the power relations between the farmers and the buyers, government policies and laws, the droughts and floods, farmer suicides, the uneven development, the clearing of forests and the climate change which affects the entire planet! Alaimo states that "potent ethical and political possibilities emerge from the literal contact zone between human corporeality and the more-than-human nature." [1] Trans-corporeality offers a theoretical framework to analyze the complex environmental issues which are very much real and demand new epistemologies to deal with the "entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual." [1]

This paper attempts to analyze Sadanand Deshmukh's Marathi novel *Baromaas: Twelve Enduring Months*, translated by Dr. Vilas Salunkhe into English, using the framework of trans-corporeality and investigate how the material environment affects human bodies, the knowledge and the ethical systems, and the social practices and politics. *Baromaas* is a Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel of 2004 and is critically acclaimed for its realistic depiction of the current condition of Indian farming. The book has been prescribed to study by the Pune University for the M.A syllabus. To say that *Baromaas* depicts the socio-economic and psychological trials and tribulations of the farming community alone would be incomplete as it would disregard the non-human nature and would be inadequate to understand the real nature of environmental issues like climate change, droughts, chemical imbalance of the soil, infertility, and genetic modification of seeds touched upon by the author. It would also be inadequate to determine the ethical responsibility for these human induced environmental harms. The novel then should be seen from the material-social perspective with a focus on trans-corporeal intra-actions or processes. When we focus on the biological or physiological responses of the human body to its environment, they "spark lines of inquiry, paths of struggle and even bodies of literature." [1]

The novel opens with a sharp critique on hybridization in agriculture. The grandfather Nanu refuses to eat food prepared from hybrid grains and starves himself to death because of his 'obstinate' beliefs. Deshmukh's further observations on the decreasing body weight of the farmers and obesity in the city dwellers and merchants who buy agricultural produce, and the bribe taking government official who was "thin like a rat. Now looks like forest buffalo. His shoulders and neck has merged." [2], connects the soil and seed to the human body. The effect of the agricultural practices and social status are mirrored in human corporeality. Alaimo writes that "these places of connections, or 'joints', between flesh and mountain, corporeality and landscape, serve as sites for cultural critiques and transformation." [1]

"Though the soil looks lifeless on the surface, it has life within. That is why its belly ripens. If you so outrage it, how long do you think the soil will support you?" [2]. This question raises a myriad of questions like the ethics behind using genetically modified seeds over indigenous varieties, use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, nutritional value in the hybrid seeds, modern agricultural practices and the effects of all these on the human body and soil. The diminished fertility of the soil, the strained physical relations between the protagonist Eknath and his wife Alka resulting in abortions, the failure of their cow to produce calves can be read as corporeal resistance and reaction to environmental conditions. The dust which pervades the village roads, trees and water bodies, also invades the human bodies and their clothes, it falls from the rafters of their houses and settles in the creases

of their faces and into the minds. Ironically, this dust is absent in the town where everything is fresh and green!

“Clouds begin to appear in the sky. When such clouds gathered at the beginning of the monsoon, the atmosphere became really pleasant. It made you feel joyous and full of energy. But you also felt a bit heavy. The clouds reminded you that the sowing season was near. And getting ready for sowing meant getting money. There was no money in his pocket.” [2] Land here is seen as sublime and as a commodity, at the same time. The farmers love the monsoons better than the summers, the green crops against the black soil and the cloudy skies bring happiness and the promise of good times, even the birds and the animals on the farm sing for joy but Eknath feels that “from the list of alluring sights and sounds, the cloudy skies and the rain are eliminated now because they are ruining the farmers’ lives” [2] The agricultural landscape is a “peopled landscape..... cut through by economic and political forces” [1] Land and the soil therein no longer remains distinct from the human, it becomes a “substance and force that both affects and is affected by human activities, institutions and knowledge systems.” [1]

“The damp land had been pressed and tramped until it was hard as stone. Khandya and Eknath tried to push a dry plough into the soil but it wouldn’t go in. The plough remained on the surface as if afraid to go into the soil. A man stood on the plough to force it down, but it was no use. The added weight only exhausted the oxen. Foam started oozing from their mouths. Eknath’s right hand started aching. The acute pulsating pain scared him.” [2]

Land which predates the human being is agential and the resistance it shows to the plough bring the power relations to the fore which crisscross across many networks which collide into each other; the physical power of the farmer and his animals and machines, the economic power which necessitates the agricultural activity, the technological power which tries to gain mastery over the soil to produce maximum output. Deshmukh comments on the technology which is powerful in two ways; tractors which tear the soil apart in deep furrows and the machines which test the soil to calculate its nature, fertility and try to find the harm or damage done to the soil in order to find solutions and seek remedies.

The failed suicide attempt by Dada, Eknath’s father, even after consuming a bottle of pesticide is a stark example of trans-corporeality where the farmer’s body becomes resistant to toxins by constant exposure to harmful chemicals. This can be termed as an environmental illness and Alaimo writes that it is particularly potent example of trans-corporeal space. Tracing the *Multiple Chemical Sensitivity*(MCS) of the human body which is weighed down by toxins from products like pesticides, fertilizers, vehicle emissions, dust, agricultural practices, and various domestic and consumer products can show the extent to which the personal, domestic and work spaces are merged with the environment.

The seed which rests in the womb of the soil, encoded by genetic material capable of sprouting new life and which forms the center of a farmer’s existence, which is doused in chemicals, genetically modified by modern technology, price-tagged by human economy and which is essential for survival, embodies the inseparability of the natural, social and discursive. Deshmukh writes that the farmers today have to buy seeds from the multinational companies, and the hybrid seeds have pushed the indigenous seeds to extinction. Vandana Shiva too laments this fact when she states that, “the diverse seeds now being pushed to extinction carry within them seeds of other ways of thinking and other ways of living.” [5] Shiva’s agro-ecological approach and the idea of “seed freedom” are echoed by the old grandfather Nanu in the novel who points out the environmental wisdom in planting indigenous seeds which are hardy and sturdy and genetically resistant to climate change and also raises a very pertinent question about seed ownership. The way the land lives in the farmer’s soul and how he is physically and materially entrenched in the soil is beautifully written in the novel, “manure of feet means the manure made by human feet. When a farmer always works in the field, his feet naturally create manure which give a good crop. Love your farm, work there with love and the soil speaks to you like a bird.” [2]

The novel can be read as a vital link between the people and their workplaces. The human bodies can be seen as sites of social forces and the societies that they live in can be seen as risk societies. The answers that we may arrive at after this kind of trans-corporeal reading would lead us to understand the ways in which twenty first century modernization has refigured our bodies and the more-than-human bodies around us. How the natural, social, legal, medical, industrial, agricultural, knowledge institutions and discursive practices are inter-mangled and only then can we effect change in attitudes and find solutions to environmental problems which in Latour’s words are “simultaneously real like nature, narrated like discourse and collective like society.” [3] When we look beyond the dualities of human/more-than-human, nature/culture, mind/body, ecology/economy, and flatten out the human centric hierarchical structures of power, we realize that we live in a trans-corporeal space and we carry ‘nature’ within us.

Opperman and Iovino write that “at the root of all ecological crises, in other words, lie the divisive epistemologies that create an illusory sense of an ontological dissociation between the human and the non-human realms.” [4] Trans-corporeality offers a new mode of thought focusing on inter-actions and collaborations which are a prerequisite to survival in our times. Anna Tsingrightly concludes that “staying alive- for every species- requires livable collaborations. Collaboration means working across differences—without collaborations, we all die.” [6]

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