

## A Posthuman Quest for Establishing Self-Image through Nature in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Virginia Woolf, in her highly experimental modernist novel *The Waves* (1931), depicts the psychological depth and texture of human experience through a series of fragmented and disjointed images, interior monologues and soliloquies, highlighting the feeling of loss, disillusionment, and brokenness. Throughout *The Waves* (1931), the characters strive to express themselves, and engage in a posthuman quest for a construction of a self-image through interactions with human and nonhuman life forms, and co-existence with the environment. This paper explores *The Waves* from a material posthumanist approach to offer a new perspective to Woolf's understanding of the interface of nature and culture, self and the environment, the human and nonhuman agencies. This approach would be useful means to analyze the characters' yearning for unification and their embodiment with nature, and explore the posthuman materiality of living and non-living beings that would help them redefine their shattered images and modern way of living.

### Keywords

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### About Article

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## Virginia Woolf'un Dalgalar Romanında Doğa Yoluyla Öz-İmge Kurmak İçin Bir Posthüman Arayış

### Öz

Virginia Woolf, son derece deneysel olan modernist romanı *Dalgalar* (1931) (*The Waves*)'da, insan deneyiminin psikolojik derinliğini ve dokusunu, bir dizi parçalanmış ve kopuk görüntüler, iç monologlar ve kendi kendine konuşma tekniği (soliloquy) yoluyla tasvir ederek, kayıp, hayal kırıklığı ve kırılmışlık hissini vurgulamaktadır. *Dalgalar* (1931) romanı boyunca, karakterler kendilerini ifade etmeye çabalarlar ve insan ve insan olmayan yaşam formları ile etkileşimler içine ve çevre ile birlikte var olma yoluyla bir öz-imge inşası için posthüman bir arayışa girerler. Bu makale, Woolf'un doğa ile kültür, benlik ve çevre, insan ve insan olmayan yapılar arasındaki arayüz anlayışına yeni bir bakış açısı sunmak için materyal bir posthüman anist yaklaşımla *Dalgalar*'ı (1931) incelemektedir. Bu yaklaşım karakterlerin doğayla bütünleşme ve bir olmaya özlem duymak ve canlı ve cansız varlıkların maddeselliğini keşfetmek ve paramparça imajlarını ve modern yaşam tarzlarını yeniden tanımlamalarına yardımcı bir araç olarak görülmektedir.

### Anahtar Sözcükler

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posthumanizm  
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Öz-imge

### Makale Hakkında

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an altered and expanded version of my paper entitled, "A Quest for Establishing Self-Image Through Nature: An Ecocritical Reading of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*" that I presented in *International and Interdisciplinary Environment and Literature Symposium*, organized by Celal Bayar University between the dates 1-2 November 2017.

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### Introduction

Contrary to what is commonly referred to as the literature of the urban, modernist literature, molded by ecological wisdom, urges an eco-conscious and hence an ecocritical and a material posthumanist approach towards the natural world, cherishing the entanglement of human and the nonhuman life forms without hierarchy among them. Embodying ecological proclivities and environmental concerns, modernist writers frequently direct our attention to societal corruption, social and cultural assumptions, and environmental destruction under the jarring effects of increasing industrialization, which destroys interconnectivity with the more-than-human world along with the idea of wholeness in society. People's escalating obsession with machinery and the industrial determinism of the post-war era, which as modernist writers such as D. H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster, and W.H. Auden deeply lament, annihilates spirituality, mutuality, vitality, and interconnectedness with the nonhuman world. They, in response, celebrate pastoral landscape that stands for harmony and embodiment with all organic and inorganic life forms, and/or depict the nature as a realm to emancipate from the destructive forces and impacts of industry and mechanization. Shaped by the dire effects of modernization and technological improvements, these modernist writers depict city life embroidered with their individual experiences, utterances, impressions, subjective reliance, and often with their rather apocalyptic visions. Amidst these prominent modernist British writers epitomizing nature's agency and its agentic performativity, Virginia Woolf has particularly carved her distinctive place as an influential precursor of the expanding field of ecocriticism and posthumanism. Sharing the similar sensibilities, Virginia Woolf notably in *The Waves* (1931), as this paper argues, presents us an agentic performativity and vitality of the natural images and beings in their most complexity and dynamicity that alter the way in which characters perceive their constructed reality and landscape, and act upon it. The co-evolutionary relationship the characters develop with the more-than-human world helps them re-establish their shattered, broken selves, and re-discover their material posthumanist and ecological self.

*The Waves* depicts the psychological depth and the texture of human experience through a series of fragmented, disjointed images, interior monologues, highlighting a feeling of loss, despair, disillusionment, destabilization, and brokenness. The atmosphere feels as if "the world [is] moving through abysses of infinite space ... [humans] are extinct, lost in the abysses of time, in the darkness" (Woolf, 1990, p. 150). The prevalent, drastic changes, the effects of the ongoing war, increasing scientific and technological advancements of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century have aroused a feeling of estrangement, self-consciousness, obscurity, and fragmentation among the

characters in the novel. The notion of nature in the novel is not portrayed as an idealistic, pastoral landscape to escape from the traumatic experiences of this urbanized and mechanic life, or a beautiful realm to be used and exploited for lucrative purposes. Instead, Woolf draws our attention to the natural world in its complexity as a dynamic and vital network of interlaced materiality, ecologies, flows, and agencies. Pivotal to Woolf's stance is her understanding of nature not as something static or unchanging but, on the contrary, as a dynamic and performative entity that is always becoming and co-emerging with other forms and systems of life. Here, becoming refers to an "evolving process [that] needs to be understood as a substitute of thinking in dichotomies" (Kümbet, 2020, p. 26). Becoming offers, as Rosi Braidotti explicates,

a decentred and multi-layered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity. The definition of a person's identity takes place in between nature-technology, male-female, black-white, in the spaces that flow and connect in between. We live in permanent processes of transition, hybridization, and nomadization, and these in-between states and stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation (Braidotti, 2013, p. 2).

Thus, Woolf's deification of dualities suggests Braidotti's understanding of mutual becoming with other organisms, objects, species, in short, with all human and nonhuman life forms that are defined by their fluidity and porosity.

Relationally, Derek Ryan posits that "Woolf's writing offers new conceptualisations of the material world where the immanent and intimate entanglements of human and nonhuman agencies are brought to the fore" (Ryan, 2015, p. 4). Her intricate attachment to the fluxing natural world, is lucidly represented in what she prefers to call a play-poem, or *The Waves* (embodying rhythm like in poetry blended with objectified dramatic personas in drama), an experimental novel responding to "ecological relationships within an environmental ecosystem" (Kostkowska, 2013, p. 163). To unravel Virginia Woolf's eco-conscious and new material posthumanist approach, for this paper, therefore, I opt for *The Waves* (1931) which engages with human's ambiguous and complex interaction of the nonhuman world and how the interrelation of culture and nature shape one another. This paper thus analyzes the ways in which *The Waves* reflects and develops a new material posthumanist approach in describing and reconfiguring the inescapable and indivisible relationships of the human with the surrounding environment.

### Posthuman Entanglements Between Human and Nonhuman Life Forms

In *The Waves*, Woolf introduces the characters, Susan, Jinny, Rhoda, Neville, Louis, and Bernard through making use of the technique of an interior monologue that “reflects the constant flow of the character’s inner world” in which “a trivial moment and an ordinary external object can be a flash of light, a sudden epiphany, or an important moment of being” (Buran, 2021, p. 42-3). The reader is informed about another character, Percival, via the interior monologues of these characters, whose death seems to shock, upset, yet helps them to become more unified and harmonized. This is why, James Jeans delineates these characters as “six electrons revolving around the appropriate central nucleus, like six planets revolving around central sun [Percival]” (Jeans, 2017, p. 53). Despite existing as a seemingly distinct entity, each one with their permeable, transitive, and porous personalities and identities are interpenetrated to one another through invisible yet strong forces. Being associated with the waves, each is a “part of the sea and yet recognizable as an individual entity with a particular wavelength, crest height, and trough depth (Detloff, p. 53). They strive to express themselves ably and thus engage in some sort of posthuman quest for a construction of a self-image, by means of their interactions with the environment that encapsulates them. As Francesco Mulas explains, “their personalities are individualized, but they share a common existence” (Mulas, 2005, p. 81). While searching for interrelation with the world through impressions and associations, what the characters become aware of is their fluid existence and identity, correlated with the waves as a response to their traumatic experiences and fluctuating lives. As Bernard in the novel mentions, “it becomes clear that I am not one and simple, but complex and many” (Woolf, 1990, p. 48). Similarly, his friend Rhoda mourns: “I am broken into separate pieces; I am no longer one” (Woolf, 1990, p. 69). Throughout the novel, Woolf illustrates the precarious effects of modernization as a cultural and psychological change in characters’ lives and exposes the inner workings of their mind, which leads them to question their alleged coherent identity and autonomous, unified self-image. Therefore, due to these alterations the characters undergo, feeling alienated and de-familiarized, they embark upon a posthuman quest for embodiment with nature as well as with other characters.

In contrast to “modern” individuals’ tendency to configure their identities by commodified cultural media images and dominant power structures, the characters in *The Waves* define and frame their identities through natural images to attain an ecological and a posthumanist self. To this end, posthumanism, which can roughly be defined as a conceptual change in the perception of the human, rests on the argument that the human can no longer be

seen as an exceptional and a privileged being, but as an assemblage co-emerging with other species the planet is shared with. Central to this posthumanist vision is the view of perceiving human beings in their “critical enmeshment” (Hayward, 2008, p. 65) with the more-than-human world. With this in mind, posthumanism signifies a significant turn in formulating a new conceptual life with more ecologically conscious orientation and acknowledgement of other more-than-human actors.

To this posthumanist framework and understanding, the posthuman subjectivity is “materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 51), which makes it a crucial component to create an affirmative binding between living and nonliving matters:

The ethical imagination is alive and well in posthuman subjects, in the form of ontological relationality, which stresses an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the nonhuman . . . by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism on the one hand and the barriers of negativity on the other (Braidotti, 2013, p. 25).

Posthuman theory mostly revolves around the posthuman subject, which is discussed in terms of “heterogeneous assemblages” (Bennett, 2008, p. 23) inextricably interlaced with the more-than-human world. As Sherryl Vint explains posthumanism “remains focused on a subjectivity embedded in material reality and that seeks to be responsible for the social consequences of the worlds it creates...[It] endeavours to acknowledge difference without hierarchy; to refuse to found its subjectivity on the grounds of repudiation and boundary setting” (Vint, 2007, p. 182). While recontextualizing the notion of the human, in tandem with identity, gender, and sexuality, posthumanism refutes the ontological distinctions between human/nonhuman, self/other, male/female, organic/inorganic, and natural/genetically manipulated. As an affirmative paradigm, posthumanism enables us re-consider the “unit of reference for the human in the biogenetic age known as ‘anthropocene’” as well as “basic tenets of our interaction with both human and non-human agents on a planetary scale” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 5). Thus, posthumanism dwells more on extending the concept of the human to the nonhuman world, allowing one to see that the boundaries between the human subject and other entities are porous. In this regard, posthumanism, which enables to explore the inextricable ties with more-than-human world, stands out as a well-suited environmental discipline to explore and recontextualize *The Waves* to bring up a new perspective to Woolf scholarship.

*The Waves* hence foregrounds each entity’s inherent and intrinsic values while delineating that each character is extremely interfused with these human and nonhuman forces, co-constituting one another as their “separate drops are dissolved” (Woolf, 1990, p. 150). Thus,

analyzed from a posthuman and an ecocritical perspective, *The Waves* provides new insights into the relationship between human beings and the natural landscape, which is forged through ecological interconnectedness and mutual symbiosis rather than ontological dualism. In this vein, Woolf's *The Waves* is an enlightening novel reminding us of the fundamental bond between the human and the environment, which can contribute to restoring the ecological thought and self and the idea of coexistence with nonhuman beings, which foreshadows today's posthumanist and new materialist theories.

Woolf is more invested in exposing how the modern mind operates through impressionistic images and free associations, and personal projections than objectified reality as, for her, "the mind receives a myriad of impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel" (Woolf, 1994, p. 160). The flow of the thoughts and conceptions of the characters are rather metamorphosed by environmental awareness, stimulation, and embodied natural knowledge. Woolf's use of stream-of-consciousness technique, as Justyna Kostkowska identifies, is "inherently ecological, as it deconstructs the boundary between the outside and the characters' mind" (Kostkowska, 2013, p. 15). Not only the boundaries between outside/inside, reality/illusionary, but also rural/urban, nature/culture, self/other are skewed through Woolf's stream-of-conscious technique to evince the posthumanist inseparability of each term from the other as the novel mentions, "the sea was indistinguishable from the sky" (Woolf, 1990, p. 1). Also, Bernard insists on the impossibility of distinction that sets them apart from one another: "Faces recur, faces and faces – they press their beauty to the walls of my bubble – Neville, Susan, Louis, Jinny, Rhoda and a thousand others. How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole" (Woolf, 1990, p. 171).

*The Waves* offers a human-environment interaction a new ecologically informed perspective on human-place connections, comprised through the characters' own subjective and experiential relations, as well as personal impressions. The waves, therefore, in the novel reinforce and reminds this inherent human-environment interaction, which helps the characters in the novel reconnect their urbanized and constructed experiences with the natural one, and contribute to restoring their ecological and biological self and posthuman identity that is utterly shattered by the modern way of living. The sound, the crashing, the breaking, the spreading and the rising of the waves is interwoven with the lives of the characters; they hover in the background, often help them formulate their inner thoughts, shape their perceptions, intuitions, and insights. If the presence of the waves is not manifest, it is referred to as the "waves of

darkness,” (Woolf, 1990, p. 158) “waves of colour,” (Woolf, 1990, p. 192) “waves of incense,” (Woolf, 1990, p. 195) “ride the waves” (Woolf, 1990, p. 9).

Through the characters' reunification with their habitat and intertwined connections with one other, Woolf seeks to develop non-anthropocentric and non-androcentric understandings of the world to essentially heal their scattered modern selves and severed connection with the Earth and to help us recognize our intertwined and sustainable relations with the nonhuman world. In this sense, *The Waves* falls into the maxim of what Lawrence Buell defines as “environmental texts” in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), because of its emphasis on the idea of responsibility and accountability towards the more-than-human world, the visibility of nonhuman life, natural and biological state of existence to mend severed or lost connection with the natural world. *The Waves*, belonging to this category, “construct[s] humanity's understanding of itself within a fluctuating world of environmental factors – sentient others that are paradoxically both kin and alien to the individual characters encountering them” (Sultzbach, 2016, p. 2). As Emily Hinnov posits, *The Waves* represent “unity among humanity not based upon the hierarchical, mechanistic collective of fascism that would surely obliterate those designated as other” (Hinnov, 2011, p. 217). The story in *The Waves* embodies and traces the entangled lives of these characters from their early childhood to their physically separate adult lives, strengthened by the image of the sea, the sound and the crashing of the waves. They are “embedded in a substance made of repeated moments run together” (Woolf, 1990, p. 148) even if they take different paths in life. Louis in the novel highlights this forged and indivisible connection as follows: “Life will divide us. But we have formed certain ties ... The bird flies; the flower dances; but I hear always the sullen thud of the waves; and the chained beast stamps on the beach. It stamps and stamps” (Woolf, 1990, p. 36). In the wake of the tragic death of their beloved friend Percival in particular, their awareness of the inevitability of their impending death is strengthened and their interconnection is re-established and reaffirmed:

Now I ask, “Who am I?” I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. We sat here together. But now Percival is dead, ...; we are divided; we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt “I am you.” (Woolf, 1990, p. 193).

Over the passing years, in their repeated reunions, they gradually espouse their fragmented individuality, strangely alienated selves, and most importantly, they come to terms with the inevitability and visibility of their mortality. Bernard reminds this imminent mortality

by saying “many of us will not meet again. We shall not enjoy certain pleasures again” (Woolf, 1990, p. 37). The ubiquity of death, loss, suffering, grief, desperation, and abandonment feels more pertinent as they age and become parents, which paves the way for them to question their past lives, choices, experiences, frustrations, desires, and past remorse.

In such an “appalling moment” of their confrontation with the sense of death, they go through “precarious dialectic between identity and its loss” (Minow-Pinkney, 2011, p. 155): their selfhood collapses and is reconfigured through the process:

We have dined well. The fish, the veal cutlets, the wine have blunted the sharp tooth of egotism. Anxiety is at rest. The vainest of us, Louis perhaps, does not care what people think. Neville's tortures are at rest. Let others prosper—that is what he thinks. Susan hears the breathing of all her children safe asleep. Sleep, sleep, she murmurs. Rhoda has rocked her ships to shore. Whether they have foundered, whether they have anchored, she cares no longer. We are ready to consider any suggestion that the world may offer quite impartially. I reflect now that the earth is only a pebble flicked off accidentally from the face of the sun and that there is no life anywhere in the abysses of space (Woolf, 1990, p. 149-50).

These ritualistic meals and getting-together dinners provide consolidating moments that enable them to collectively embark on a journey to past, embrace their sufferings and grief, and move on with their lives while the crashing and breaking sound of the waves always hover in the background. In these instances, as Kelly Saltzbuch observes,

Woolf's vision of human experience within a larger natural world depends on a dialectic that has despair and loss as one pole, but unity and hope as the other... Nature functions neither as a sympathetic mirror for humans, nor an antagonistic foil, but as a force intertwined with humans in a larger community of reflexive exchange (Saltzbuch, 2016, p. 23).

With this in mind, while nature emerges as a dual force reminding of their own chaotic and broken lives, it also operates as a vital and agentic means to coalesce meaning and harmony. It has an agentic performativity in shaping inner thoughts, demeanors, perceptions and, more succinctly, their lives and actions. Even though the characters have different aspirations in life, they all seem to be intertwined: “Our friends, how seldom visited, how little known—it is true; and yet, when I meet an unknown person, and try to break off, here at this table, what I call “my life”, it is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am—Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs” (Woolf, 1990, p. 185). In a way, each represents one aspect of a personality of an individual. The interaction and co-existence is manifest in the following utterances. Bernard says, “we melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist” (Woolf, 1990, p. 7), and

Susan responds, "I am tied down with single words. But you wander off; you slip away; you rise up higher, with words and words in phrases" (Woolf, 1990, p. 7) and she further carries on: "I am Bernard; I am Byron; I am this, that and the other" (Woolf, 1990, p. 50). These paramount examples evince how they are integrated into one another, how their thoughts and words melt into each other's.

Around the sea metaphor they contextualize their own experiences. The image of waves evokes a sense of reality for the characters. More precisely, it evokes not only a rhythm in human thought and experience but it also signifies the passing of time. Anthony David Moody contests that the image of the waves stands for "the relations of the transient individual to the continuing force of life. It has the advantage of suggesting the successive and continuous nature of life, as well as the way in which the individual being forms within, carried upon, and finally merges back into its elemental source" (Moody, 1963, p. 48).

Not only do the characters have shared identities and collective experiences, but they also engage in a web of connection with nature, identifying themselves with both human and nonhuman agencies encircling them. In a way, they seek to construe and give meaning to life through these encompassing agencies and their collective identities. Therefore, even when they are physically detached from each other and feel isolated, they are still interwoven by the "wandering thread" of their collective experiences, interdependence, and mutuality, which is precisely reminded by the waves metaphor. As Kostkowska argues, *The Waves* "models individuals engaging in a relationship with the 'you' of the rest of the world, sometimes even achieving a shared 'we'" (Kostkowska, 2013, p. 50). In order to depict their intimacy with one another and the natural environment, Woolf situates metaphors, sea, and the waves at the center of her narrative, which operate on multiple levels. First and foremost, each character ascribes a different connotation to the waves, which allows them to achieve a sense of posthuman identity as the nature of the self is inextricably linked to the nature of the outer world that is structured around the waves. As in Julia Kristeva's words, they are "subjects-in-progress," who are caught within the entanglement of ontological questions of what it means to be and what a true self is. Woolf offers us a new posthuman subjectivity of characters entangled with the agentic materiality of the waves. The structure of the waves shapes their thoughts and ideas as well as their speech as we can witness it in Jinny's soliloquy: "Now the tide sinks. Now the trees come to earth; the brisk waves that slap my ribs rock more gently, and my heart rides at anchor, like a sailing boat whose sails slide slowly down on the white deck" (Woolf, 1990, p. 28). In their quest for conceptualization of their identities, for Susan, for example, the waves are compatible

with productivity, fertility, and reproductive body, echoing motherhood and childbearing, while the waves remind Louis of his own failure as he feels “the weight of the earth is pressed on [his] ribs” (Woolf, 1990, p. 111) because of his constant need for appreciation and acceptance to overcome his non-conformity. Jinny is reminded of her material existence and the inevitability of death, whereas intellectually cultivated characters, Bernard and Neville are enchanted by the vastness of the sea, which becomes a true source of inspiration in their creation and production of a literary work. Especially, Bernard strives to transform his fluctuating psychological state into an orderly fashion of writing. The rhythm of the words in his mind shows parallelism to the rhythms of the sea as his fluctuation in the writing process is symbolized through the waves:

there is a gradual coming together, running into one, acceleration and unification ... I regain the sense of the complexity and the reality and the struggle ... in me too wave rises. It swells; it arches back. I'm aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back (Woolf, 1990, p. 199).

In addition, creating her imaginary and isolated world around the image of the waves and associating it with loneliness and despair, Rhoda imagines, “I will now rock the brown basin from side to side so that my ships may ride the waves” (Woolf, 1990, p. 9). Rhoda sees herself “disintegrated,” “perpetually contradicted,” “interrupted,” “broken,” and “derided,” yet comforts herself by thinking that everybody hides themselves behind a mask. Thus, Woolf foregrounds the sea image in order to depict the characters’ intimacy with nature, which is such a powerful agentic force that the fluctuation of the waves alters the way they think, act, and perceive the world.

As inferred, the characters relate their sensual experiences to the effect and movement of the waves in their struggle for identity formation as a source of dynamic inspiration, but they also formulate their language to convey their thoughts and perceptions of the world in such a way that recollects the ebbs and flows of the sea. In establishing the connection between the landscape and the language, Conrad Aiken posits that “the landscape and the language are the same, and we ourselves are language and are land” (Aiken, 1993, p. 67). Extending this idea to the connection of how ideas lingering in minds are the reflections and traces of the images encapsulating our environment, an ecocritical philosopher Jim Cheney uses the mindscapes and landscapes correlation:

Our position, our location, is understood in the elaboration of relations in a nonessentializing narrative achieved through grounding in the geography of our lives. Self and geography are

bound together in a narrative which locates us in the moral space of defining relations. 'Psychology without ecology is lonely and vice versa'. Mindscapes are as multiple as the landscapes which ground them (Cheney, 1995, p. 8).

Therefore, our minds, being part of the fluid nature of the world that flows into other forms of life, are interwoven into the landscapes we inhabit. As such, as Cheney argues, in an attempt to define and explain ourselves, the structure of the speeches, constructed from our mindscapes bears a resemblance to the structure of our landscapes. More precisely, our minds are shaped and transformed by our landscapes. With a tendency similar to Cheney's, Virginia Woolf, bridging the essentialist gap between landscapes and mindscapes, "reestablish[es] connections between our isolated linguistic selves, and between ourselves and the environment around us" (Cheney, 1995, p. 115). Her characters in the novel thus correlate the use of language with their material and corporeal existence by the sea. For example, "[t]hose are white words," says Susan, "like stones one picks up by the seashore" (Woolf, 1990, p. 10). Also, Bernard reveals, words "flick their tails right and left as I speak them" (Woolf, 1990, p. 10). "They wag their tails; they flick their tails; they move through the air in flocks, now this way, now that way, moving all together, now dividing, now coming together" (Woolf, 1990, p. 10).

Although each chapter in the novel is composed of interludes, framed around the recurrent image of the sea and the fluctuations of the waves, other nonhuman agencies such as the sun, birds, garden also recurrently appear within the structure of *The Waves* that are not distinct from human life. For example, before the group unites, Neville takes his place at the table, for he takes pleasure in seeing everyone enter the place. Being cognizant of the agentic effect of the nonhuman elements around him, he says:

This table, these chairs, this metal vase with its three red flowers are about to undergo an extraordinary transformation. Already the room, with its swing-doors, its tables heaped with fruit, with cold joints, wears the wavering, unreal appearance of a place where one waits expecting something to happen (Woolf, 1990, p. 77).

Woolf's ascription of vitality and agency to nonhuman elements ties her with the notion of posthumanism which considers that human beings are "not the privileged and protected center because humans are no longer – perhaps never were – utterly distinct from animals, machines and other forms of the inhuman" (Badmington, 2006, p. 374). The agents are in inextricable connection in "a new rational ontology" (Gaard, et al., 2013, p. 8). Jane Bennett explains the agency of matter in terms of its "vitality" and writes, "edibles, commodities, storms, metals ...

act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett, 2010, p. viii). Besides attributing agency to nonhuman entities, Bennett argues that human agency cannot be thought of as independent from nonhuman agencies. She makes her point by asserting that “there was never a time when the human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and non-humanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore” (Bennett, 2010, p. 31). Jane Bennett’s view of human agency as “an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity” is of great significance in posthumanist accounts in showcasing the co-constitutive structure between the human and the nonhuman beings.

Viewing matters as having agency, Neville also touches upon the inseparable posthumanist bond between the material objects and their biological lives: “Chairs and cupboards loomed behind so that though each was separate they seemed inextricably involved” (Woolf, 1990, p. 55). Their agencies shape their lives in often unexplainable and unpredictable way as they are materially entangled with these surrounding images and objects. These incisive examples show how humans are not essential, unchanging, and enclosed beings, but rather they are co-evolving with other human and nonhuman beings. As Jane Bennett pinpoints that we undergo a significant period “when interactions between human, viral, animal, and technological bodies are becoming more and more intense” (Bennett, 2010, p. 108).

The trajectory of the lives of the characters from childhood to their maturity in the novel is reflected with a time span from the sunrise to the sunset. While the garden constitutes an important part in their lives together with the nonhuman birds flying over the garden. It is as if birds mimic humans’ talk and stop chirping when the communication among humans fails. Birds, becoming engaged with humans’ lives, start to sing “together in chorus, shrill and sharp; now together, as if conscious of companionship. They swerved, all in one flight, when the black cat moved among the bushes, when the cook threw cinders on the ash heap and startled them” (Woolf, 1990, p. 46). In this respect, humans and nonhumans in the novel co-exist in a contingent relation to one another and they have a reciprocal connection creating ecosocial practices and forming a posthumanist relation and insight.

By bringing the materiality of the human body and the natural world in the foreground, Woolf specifically directs our attention to the posthuman inseparability of the corporeal substance of the human from the substances of the nonhuman material world:

Images breed instantly. I could describe every chair, table, luncher here copiously, freely. My mind hums hither and thither with its veil of words for everything. To speak, about wine even

to the waiter, is to bring about an explosion. Up goes the rocket. Its golden grain falls, fertilising upon the rich soil of my imagination. The entirely unexpected nature of this explosion – that is the joy of the intercourse. I, mixed with an unknown Italian waiter, what am I? There is no stability in this world...It is a balloon that sails over tree-tops...All is experiment and an adventure. (Woolf, 1990, p. 76).

As inferred, she draws particular attention to the fluid relationship between self, body, and the environment, each of which is mutually co-constituting and co-evolving through various entanglements. For instance, Susan's lines "I am the field, I am the barn, I am the trees, mine are the flocks of birds" (Woolf, 1990, p. 63) and "I am the seasons, I think sometimes, January, May, November; the mud, the mist, the dawn" (Woolf, 1990, p. 63) epitomize a posthumanist and new materialist understanding of the human as substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies in the physical environments. Additionally, the way the characters share their agonizing experiences is always accompanied by a material agentic object. When Susan sees Louis and Jinny kissing, her experiential moment is reinforced by a handkerchief. She reveals, "I will wrap my agony inside my pocket-handkerchief. It shall be screwed tight into a ball ...That I observed even in the midst of my anguish when, twisting her pocket-handkerchief, Susan cried, "I love; I hate." (Woolf, 1990, p. 5) and that little piece of dramatization shows how incompletely we are merged in our own experiences. Her suffering is connected to the agentic materiality of the handkerchief. Even the pains, worries, grief, and anguish of the characters are entangled with the ore-than-human world.

Focusing on the intricate relationship between the agentic capacity of the material world and humans, and articulating matter as active, alive, vital, and efficient, posthuman scholars come up with their own terms to describe the inseparability of the self from the environment. Notably, a posthuman scholar and a quantum physicist Karen Barad emphasizes agencies' ontological inseparability from each other with her term intra-action as it epitomizes "a disruption of the metaphysics of separateness" (Hammaeström, 2015, p. 208). She calls this "posthumanist performativity," which she explains this as such

that incorporates important material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural factors . . . [It] calls into question the givenness of the differential categories of "human" and "nonhuman," examining the practices through which these differential boundaries are stabilized and destabilized (Barad, 2010, p. 126).

This reveals that Barad's posthumanist performativity echoes the same compelling arguments posthumanism shares by "taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are a part" (Barad, 2007, p. 384). As opposed to "a Cartesian (inherent, fixed, universal) subject-object distinction" (Barad, 2007, p. 175), Barad proposes to re-articulate the human subject as part of nature. Having an agency, Barad argues, nature is no longer "a passive blank slate" (Barad, 2007, p. 181) that we can relentlessly shape for our sake. Especially highlighting the inseparability of nature, the relationships that humans establish with the nonhuman world can only be based on what Barad calls "mutualistic symbiosis" (Barad, 2007, p. 63). Whether we are conscious of our actions, or we feel responsible about our ontological entanglements with others or not, we should understand that our bodies can never be thought separate from other bodies and other agencies. All bodies, Barad avers, "not merely 'human' bodies come to matter through the world's iterative intra-acting – its performativity" (Barad, 2007, p. 152).

Woolf, in *The Waves* challenges the concept of human nature as fixed, knowable, one, and constant, but, instead she presents an intra-active relationship between human and other human beings, nonhuman forms, and inhuman entities. Bernard endorses this by stating "all this little affair of 'being' is over" (Woolf, 1990, p. 193). This non-hierarchical relationship is made obvious when Bernard declares, "I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am – Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs" (Woolf, 1990, p. 185). They always intra-act with other agentic flows, forces, and movements that are encapsulating their lives from naturalcultural images, nonhuman animals, symbolic forces, and/or any material agency. In Barad's theorizing of intra-action, "no entity whether it is human or nonhuman is prioritized or privileged" (Kümbet, 2020, p. 21). On the contrary, Barad reconfigures the concept of the human through fusing it with other material agencies. In the novel, for instance, Louis realizes his mutual entanglement with the material world as such: "I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre" (Woolf, 1990, p. 4). This is in tandem with what Barad argues that agencies "rather than viewed as independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties" can only be considered "*distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements*" (Barad, 2007, p. 33, emphasis in the original). Barad's understanding of posthumanism supports her idea that "relata do not preexist relations" (Barad, 2007, p. 140). Without preexisting independent subjects, neither humans nor any species can occupy a position of exceptionalism.

In *The Waves*, characters are always part of this ongoing intra-active entanglement that helps them see the world in its material complexity and vitality.

Barad's conceptualization of posthumanist intra-active performativity of all material agencies can be traced even in the very opening of the novel when the inextricable tie with the nonhuman world is evident in their communication and connection:

'I see a ring,' said Bernard, 'hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.'

'I see a slab of pale yellow,' said Susan, 'spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.'

'I hear a sound,' said Rhoda, 'cheep, chirp; cheep chirp; going up and down.'

...

'I hear something stamping,' said Louis. 'A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps.'

'Look at the spider's web on the corner of the balcony,' said Bernard. 'It has beads of water on it, drops of white light.'

'The leaves are gathered round the window like pointed ears,' said Susan.

'A shadow falls on the path,' said Louis, 'like an elbow bent.'

'Islands of light are swimming on the grass,' said Rhoda. 'They have fallen through the trees.'

'The birds' eyes are bright in the tunnels between the leaves,' said Neville.

'The stalks are covered with harsh, short hairs,' said Jinny, 'and drops of water have stuck to them.'

'A caterpillar is curled in a green ring,' said Susan, 'notched with blunt feet.'

'The grey-shelled snail draws across the path and flattens the blades behind him,' said Rhoda.

...

'Now the cock crows like a spurt of hard, red water in the white tide,' said Bernard.

'Birds are singing up and down and in and out all round us,' said Susan.

'The beast stamps; the elephant with its foot chained; the great brute on the beach stamps,' said Louis. (Woolf, 1990, p. 2-3)

Woolf affirms the enriching and deep vitality of the inanimate and animate things that have a capability to produce effects and meanings, shape lives, transform, and generate new linkages and forces. Here, all these nonhuman entities act independently, mix with humans, and shape their lives.

The material feminist theorist Stacy Alaimo, explains this fluidity between human bodies and the geographical land through her concept of "trans-corporeality," which she defines as "the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from 'nature' or 'environment.'" Trans-corporeality, as a theoretical site, is a place where corporeal

theories and environmental theories meet and mingle in productive ways” (Alaimo, 2008, p. 238). Alaimo’s account, “trans-corporeality,” turns upside down the grounding belief that the environment is situated distinctively out there torn off from the culture, and human beings, part of that culture, are distinct, infallible figures and superior over that environment. Instead, “nature, the environment and the material world itself signify, act upon, or otherwise affect human bodies, knowledges, and practices” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 78). This trans-corporeal interrelation between human and nonhuman agencies manifest posthumanist idea in which we are all placed and entangled with the outer world with the flows, assemblages, practices, substances, and toxic forms and various other unknown materials embedded in it. This is echoed in the novel by Bernard as: “We are forever mixing ourselves with unknown quantities” (Woolf, 1986, p. 76). To have a more sustainable, ecologically safe, non-anthropocentric and non-hierarchical world order, Alaimo places strong emphasis on the posthumanist and new materialist theories that does not “divide human corporeality from a wider, material world, but should instead submerge the human within the material flows, exchanges, and interchanges of substances, habitats, places and environments” (Alaimo, 2011 p. 281). By “bring[ing] the material, specifically the materiality of the human body and the natural world into the forefront” (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008, p.1) especially with her seminal concept, trans-corporeality, Alaimo directs our attention to the inseparability of the corporeal substance of the human from the substances of the material world.

By accounting agency to nonhuman entities including animals, plastics, geological formations, silicones, from all species to the smallest substances, Alaimo also suggests that “understanding the substance of one’s self as interconnected with the wider environment marks a profound shift in subjectivity ... the existing of anything – any creature, ecosystem, climatological pattern, ocean current – cannot be taken for granted as simply existing out there” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 20-21). These trans-corporeal interrelations and movements between human and nonhuman agencies showcase a posthumanist pattern that underscores our entanglement with beings, forces, and substances flowing within and through our bodies. Bruno Latour explains the vitality of materiality and the agentic power of nonhuman forces through his term “actant,” which he defines it as “an entity that modifies another entity in trial” (Latour, 2004, p. x). In a similar fashion, Timothy Morton uses the term “mesh” to describe the interrelatedness and mutual dependence of all material phenomena, such as toxins, bacteria, minerals, and trees, animals and all the elements and forces in the environment. Therefore, “intra-action,” “trans-corporeality,” “mesh,” “actant,” and “agency” are the significant key concepts introduced by

new material posthuman theorists to the fast-emerging posthuman paradigm. Each of these terms innovatively explores not only the vitality of matter, but also its agentic capacity to play as an active role in shaping our ecological, ethical, and socio-political views. These concepts bring an additional dimension to “the changing notion of the human and its interrelated intimacy with the more-than-human world” (Kümbet, 2020, p. 22). Embodying same posthumanist proclivity, Virginia Woolf places a strong emphasis on the potentiality of nonhuman forces in shaping human entities. She is not trapped into the belief that nature is hostile, violent, or just sublime and sentimental entity, far away from the cultural touch of humanity. She demonstrates the coexistence of human and nonhuman forces in *The Waves*, which are tightly knitted together, evolving, and emerging together:

[T]he rising sun came in at the window, touching the red-edged curtain, and began to bring out circles and lines. Now in the growing light its whiteness settled in the plate; the blade condensed its gleam. Chairs and cupboards loomed behind so that though each was separate they seemed inextricably involved. The looking-glass whitened its pool upon the wall. The real flower on the window-sill was attended by a phantom flower. Yet the phantom was part of the flower, for when a bud broke free the paler flower in the glass opened a bud too (Woolf, 1986, p. 47-48).

Signaling a “post-anthropocentric turn,” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 38) with *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf advocates belief in the inseparability of the corporeal substance of the human from the corporeality of the wider and external material world that the human form is enmeshed with. The characters come to terms with the expansion of their posthumanist self to “a whole universe” (Woolf, 1990, p. 196). As the extract above demonstrates lucidly, Woolf is an adamant advocate of the inextricable and ostensible relation of material self with nonhuman others, and their engagement in complex, dynamic, and vital intra-active performativity with one another.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, in *The Waves* Virginia Woolf explores and questions whether the self is unitary, coherent, and knowable; or fragmented and malleable, or whether one can attain a fixed and a constant and essentialist self-image. As Makiko Minow-Pinkney contests,

Woolfian personality is never essentialist, though her work is often a quest for the essence of a character. The quest always involves a sense of impossibility of fixing the essence: there is no inherent substantiality to the personality, which turns out to be the concurrence of all surrounding elements (Minow-Pinkney, 2011, p. 156).

Through refuting a fixed image of one's self, thus Woolf proposes a posthumanist self-image. Her view of the self-image is tightly merged with landscape and nonhuman agencies embodied within it, as opposed to a constant and stable self as the characters acknowledge in the novel through their intra-active process with their environment, in Jim Cheney's words:

To articulate an understanding of both self and world and to weave them together into a unity in which an understanding of self and community is an understanding of the place in which life is lived out and in which an understanding of place is an understanding of self and community (Cheney, 1995, p. 34).

The novel also hints at the idea that nature can no longer be seen as an inert background, totally cut off from the culture and the human self in the creation of what Donna Haraway defines as "naturecultures" to emphasize the collapse of boundaries between them. On the contrary, the novel makes us cognizant of agentic capacity of nature and its various images to transform bodies and minds, perceptions and insights, often in unexpected and profound ways. This paper concludes that, *The Waves* presents a pertinent insight into the interconnectedness of ourselves with the material-discursive forces and opens up a new material posthumanist discussion about our identities as Rosi Braidotti concedes, posthuman predicament is "an opportunity to empower the pursuit of alternative schemes of thought, knowledge and self-representation. The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 12). Thus, posthumanism opens up a more inclusive approach to embrace the inclusion of entities formerly believed to be separate and inferior. In that sense, posthumanism doesn't "presume the separateness of any-"thing," let alone the alleged spatial, ontological, and epistemological distinction that sets humans apart (Barad, 2007, p.136). Its pivotal job is "to develop alternative, more egalitarian, democratic and just models for a future posthuman(ist) society" (Herbrechter, 2013, p. 23). Since posthumanism is a significant turn in formulating a new conceptual life with a more ecologically conscious orientation and acknowledgment of other more-than-human actors, Virginia Woolf can easily be claimed to be an early material posthumanist, who cherishes interconnectedness and non-anthropocentric contextualization of materiality and environmental relations as she encourages us to imagine ourselves in a constant interchange and flow with the environment. Karen Barad famously states that "*we are a part of that nature that we seek to understand*" (Barad, 2007, p. 26, emphasis in the original). The evocations of the fictional landscape in *The Waves* does not suggest idyllic, pristine, and idealized nature, but it reinforces the co-evolutionary and trans-corporeal relationship between

humans and nonhuman agencies that have been obscured by industrial and androgenic interventions. In this sense, *The Waves* bears a conceptual link between today's notion of material posthumanism and modernist literature. The novel in a way unravels "the co-constitutive materiality of human corporeality and nonhuman natures" (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, p. 9) that has often tended to be overlooked.

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