



## The Entanglement of the Human and Place as a “Storied Matter” in the Womb: Ian McEwan’s *Nutshell*<sup>1</sup>

Ana Rahminde İnsan ve Mekân Dolanıklığı: Ian McEwan’ın *Fındık Kabuğu* Romanı

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### Abstract

Ian McEwan’s (1948- ) *Nutshell* (2016) has drawn the attention of academic spheres as a modern adaptation of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* since its publication. That is why the novel has been mostly studied as a rewriting in which the existential questionings of Shakespeare’s Hamlet are attributed to a modern-day foetus. Employing a foetus as a narrator and protagonist in the novel, McEwan demonstrates the reflections of Hamlet’s existential crisis on a contemporary foetus who is oscillating between being human and nonhuman. As helpless as Hamlet for his modern-day problems, the foetus narrator talks about his consciousness, human side, morality and, most importantly, his role in this world which is devastating gradually due to various reasons such as environmental problems, climate crisis and wars. In that respect, it can be asserted that the novelist raises questions about human-nonhuman, ethics and morality through the story told by a foetus protagonist. Even though McEwan touches upon the environmental crisis through the foetus’s narration, *Nutshell* has never been studied from an ecocritical perspective. However, the foetus’s entanglement with the womb and the story originating from this bond are the instances of human-place entanglement. From the perspective of material ecocriticism, with the “narrative agency” given by the material environment, the foetus becomes the text that narrates his story of birth and becoming human. Accordingly, this study aims to analyse the foetus in *Nutshell* as a “storied matter” by emphasising the human-place entanglement in the womb.

**Keywords:** Ian McEwan, *Nutshell*, entanglement, material ecocriticism, “storied matter.”

### Öz

Ian McEwan’ın *Fındık Kabuğu* (2016) isimli romanı yayımlandığı tarihten itibaren William Shakespeare’in *Hamlet* adlı eserinin modern bir uyarlaması olarak akademik çevrelerde dikkat çekmektedir. Bu nedenle roman daha çok, Shakespeare’in Hamlet karakterinin varoluşsal sorgulamalarının günümüz fetüsüne atfedildiği bir yeniden yazım olarak çalışılmıştır. Romanda anlatıcı ve ana karakter olarak bir fetüsü kullanan McEwan, Hamlet’in varoluşsal krizlerinin yansımalarını insan ve insan olmayan arasında gidip gelen çağdaş bir fetüste gösterir. Günümüz problemleri için Hamlet kadar çaresiz olan fetüs, kendi bilinci, insan tarafı, ahlak ve en önemlisi, çevre sorunları, iklim krizi ve savaşlar gibi çeşitli nedenlerden ötürü günden güne kötüye giden dünyada kendi rolü üzerine konuşur. Bu durumda, yazarın fetüsün anlattığı hikâye boyunca insan-insan olmayan, etik ve ahlak konularında sorular yönelttiği iddia edilebilir. McEwan fetüsün anlatımıyla çevre problemleri konusuna değinse de *Fındık Kabuğu* hiçbir zaman ekolojik açıdan çalışılmamıştır. Yine de fetüsün ana rahmi ile bağı ve bu bağdan ortaya çıkan hikâye bir insan-mekân dolanıklığı örneğidir. Maddesel ekoeleştirici perspektifinden bakıldığında, içinde bulunduğu maddesel alan tarafından verilen “anlatı eyleyciliği” ile fetüs, doğum ve insan

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olma hikayesini anlatan metnin kendisi olmuştur. Bu doğrultuda bu çalışma, *Fındık Kabuğu* romanındaki fetüsü ana rahmindeki insan-mekân dolanıklığına vurgu yaparak bir “hikayeci madde” olarak incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Ian McEwan, *Fındık Kabuğu*, dolanıklık, maddesel ekoeleştiri, “hikayeci madde.”

## Introduction

Ian McEwan’s *Nutshell* has never been studied from an ecocritical or material perspective since its publication. However, the unusual narrator/protagonist of the novel (a foetus who is in his trimester in the womb) and the allusions to William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* deem the novel a prominent one in literary spheres. Therefore, the scholarly analyses of the novel generally focus on the adaptation of Hamlet’s existential questioning about a contemporary context with a foetus narrator who is at the edge of being human. Upon the abundance of such studies, McEwan claims in an interview that “[he] didn’t really intend to write a version of *Hamlet*. It just sort of crept in” (Neill, 2016, N.p.). In another interview with *The Guardian*, he explains how he decided to work with a foetus protagonist who sits irremediably in his mother’s womb: “[T]he only person I could think of who was more helpless than a foetus was Hamlet (‘able to think a lot, but trapped’)” (Aitkenhead, 2016, N.p.). The foetus as the modern Hamlet is also helpless and apprehensive about the problems of the contemporary world such as environmental problems, climate crises, and wars. These issues lead him to question his consciousness, morality, humanity and, most importantly, his role as a human-to-be in these calamities. Carrying the burden of Hamlet’s dilemma, the foetus is concerned about both the state of the world and his unclear future. Through the questioning of the foetus narrator, the text draws attention to the matter of ethics, morality and the binary between human and nonhuman. Regardless of McEwan’s examination of these topics, the novel’s affiliation with the ecological standpoint has been disregarded in the existing analyses. Even though the novel is not explicitly ecological, Sebastian Groes draws attention to the focus of the author on the state of the world and his engagement with the climate change since the eighties (2008, p. 2). In that respect, one can easily observe McEwan’s idea of the “new” and his methodology to “capture ‘newness’” in Groes’s terms (2008, p. 3) in *Nutshell* with a contemporary and new materialist approach to humankind. The agentic capacity of an unborn being and the entanglement he forms with the physical environment he inhabits are fertile grounds to discuss material ecocritical engagements. Thanks to the “narrative agency” (Iovino and Oppermann, 2012, p. 86) provided by the material environment, the foetus becomes the text itself that narrates his story of becoming human in a devastating world. In other words, the foetus as a material being becomes both a story and a storyteller in material ecocritical discussions. Accordingly, focusing on the entanglement between the foetus and the mother’s womb in McEwan’s *Nutshell*, this study aims to reconsider the foetus as a “storied matter” from the material ecocritical perspective.

The material turn in the Humanities has introduced new perspectives in the study of matter. These new perspectives subverted the classical and traditional understanding of matter and offered a new conceptualisation for it. In that respect, matter which has been considered passive and secondary to the human subject in old materialisms started to be seen as active, agentic, and vital. However, the emergence of new materialism is not separate from the history of matter which has been analysed either ontologically or epistemologically since Aristotelian philosophy. Richard Grusin argues that “[t]he ubiquity of nonhuman matters of concern in the twenty-first century should not obscure the fact that concern for the nonhuman has a long Western genealogy” (2015, p. viii). Similarly, Jane Bennett acknowledged “the idea of vibrant matter” that has been dominant in philosophical discussions for so long as she aptly based her study on “the concepts and claims of Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henry David Thoreau, Charles Darwin, Theodor Adorno, Gilles Deleuze, and the early twentieth-century vitalisms of Bergson and Hans Driesch” (2010, p. viii). These philosophical discussions on matter were mostly drawn from epistemological approaches to matter which were based on Cartesian dualism. Even though Cartesian revolution introduced a new attitude towards matter different from the Aristotelian hylomorphic account which discussed matter in relation to form (Fine, 1992, pp. 36-37), Descartes’s concept of matter was “constructed out of mathematical facts about material things, facts about size, shape, composition, and speed” (Sorell, 1987, p. 3). These studies on matter in old materialisms were mostly epistemological conceptualisations and they were “both deterministic and mechanistic” (Benson, 2021, p. 257) different from new materialism. To put it differently, the

epistemological approach to matter which has been conducted mostly to understand the world and the human, obscures the fact that matter has an irrefutable ontology. As a new materialist, Jane Bennett discusses matter as vivacious and energetic from a relatively new standpoint that she calls "enchanted materialism":

What I am calling impersonal affect or material vibrancy is not a spiritual supplement or 'life force' added to the matter said to house it. Mine is not a vitalism in the traditional sense; I equate affect with materiality rather than posit a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body. (2010, p. xiii)

In other words, Bennett's vitalism does not separate between matter and its vitality as in the old Western philosophies which study matter as in relation to form (Aristotle) or mind (Descartes). The dichotomy between matter-form and matter-mind, therefore, has been eliminated in the new materialist perspective with the recognition and acknowledgement of matter's vital ontology.

Due to this new approach, not only just the agentic matter but also various relations among matters are put under the scope. The focus is not only the ontological reality of matter but also the "intra-active"<sup>2</sup> relations among matter including the human matter in the more-than-human world. To put it more precisely, by asserting its agency, matter shares an equal role with human existence which is also a thing among other things in the forming of the world. In that regard, the human body is just another matter working to be merged with other matters as aptly put forward by Bennett: "[H]uman individuals are themselves composed of vital materials, that our powers are thing-power" (2010, p. 11). The quote suggests that human matter is an inseparable part of the material world in which matter exists and asserts its agentic ontology. The epistemological approach to matter has been altered with the new materialist thought that studies matter as an ontological entity asserting its existence in this world. However, this new understanding of matter is neither ontological nor epistemological as in old materialism; but it is a wholistic view that proposes an "ethico-onto-epistemological" perspective in the analysis of matter. Karen Barad defines this term:

[A]n appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being—since each intra-action matters, since the possibilities for what the world may become call out in the pause that precedes each breath before a moment comes into being and the world is remade again, because the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter. (2007, p. 185)

By merging ethics, knowing and being, Barad introduces the human matter to the more-than-human world and reveals that the qualifications attributed to humankind for so long do not separate the human from the rest of the world. On the contrary, human is a part of this world together with all the material and discursive engagements. The ethical perspective Barad integrates into this system of thoughts refers to the ethical stance humans must hold towards the becoming of the world. Such an approach to the world by a human being may seem anthropocentric at first glance. However, Barad does not draw boundaries between human and nonhuman by encumbering human with ethical responsibility. Instead, she emphasises the role each matter plays in the configuration of the world because this is a collaborative act. As she insists, "we are a part of that nature we seek to understand" (2008, p. 146).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this paradigm shift challenges the highly accepted views and assumptions not only about nonhuman matter but also about human matter. The essentialist mindset on the more-than-human world has been problematised and almost deconstructed through the recent scientific discoveries in various fields such as neuroscience, quantum physics, biology, and anthropology. These discoveries prove that human and

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of "intra-action" is introduced by Karen Barad who explains the term as a representation of "mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (2007, p. 33). The term indicates that matters do not precede their relations as opposed to "interaction" which refers to the relation between two distinct entities. For Barad, material beings emerge through their relationality.

<sup>3</sup> Instead of responsibility, Barad argues for a "response-ability" that "cannot be restricted to human-human encounters" (2007, p. 392). She insists on a "posthumanist ethics" that is strengthened with the capacity to "respond" because a humanist ethics is not enough in a world in which the borders and configurations are continuously changing (2007, p. 392).

nonhuman matter are inevitably entangled, and human beings cannot be considered separate from the natural environment. For instance, the recent discovery of microplastic in human blood and lungs explains how human and nonhuman beings are influenced by the change in the natural environment (Parker, 2023, N.p.). It also leads us to question the border between the organic and inorganic beings. Moreover, a relatively recent study on the brains of macaque monkeys lays bare the existence of mirror neurons and proves neural connection between different organisms in the more-than-human world (Gallese, 2011, p. 442).<sup>4</sup> Instead of the binaries created between human-nonhuman, body-mind and nature-culture, this material turn strengthens the unified existence of human and nonhuman matter as an “active process of materialization of which embodied humans are an integral part, rather than the monotonous repetitions of dead matter from which human subjects are apart” (Coole and Frost, 2010, p. 19). The relationality among matters is interpreted as dependency and it is suggested that we, as human matter, are inescapably dependent on other things “within the material flows, exchanges, and interactions of substances, habitats, places and environments” (Alaimo, 2011, p. 281). According to the new materialist thought, there is a dialogic relationship, intra-action and communication among matters. Due to this interactive relation, it can be asserted that life on earth functions as a network of relations in which different matters come together to act effectively in the forming of the world.

In this network of relations, both human and environment engage in material intra-actions to assert their agency and express their story. This network between human and the environment has always been a point to discuss among the place theorists and the debate on place has already pointed out the never-ending intra-action between an organism and its environment. Accordingly, Edward Casey argues that place has been acknowledged as a God-like existence regarding its “roles of preserving and sustaining things in existence” (1998, p. 4). This is to show the agency and the power of the concept of place over the human. Yet, again, this does not mean to create hierarchical positions between human and environment; but to demonstrate the long-ignored collaboration of place with human existence. So, the material place must be understood as an agentic matter that intra-acts with its inhabitants to transform them in each encounter. In line with this view, Tilley draws attention to the contribution of place in creating what is called human: “Personal and cultural identity is bound up with place; a topoanalysis is one exploring the creation of self-identity through place” (1994, p. 15). As it can be seen, the theories on the sense of place discuss the inseparable bond between human existence and place regarding the social, political and cultural intra-actions among matters. The debate on place is not only about the physical place but also covers cultural, political, and social constructions that the place produces. Similarly, David Abram contemplates the human-place entanglement by recognizing the active role of both human and environment in the material engagements they share. According to Abram, each engagement between the material body and the land alters both the organism and the place because “[w]e might as well say that we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself through us” (1996, p. 49). Therefore, Abram demonstrates how the human body and material environment are tied up in this dialogic relationship. In addition to that, acknowledging the agency of place and this unbreakable bond, material ecocriticism dwells on the unique entanglement created by these intra-actions and approaches this entanglement as a story to be told by the material engagements. Even though the sense of place has been theorized both by place theorists and ecocritics in terms of its power and role in life on earth, it seems that the conceptualization of place as a material storyteller has been missing in critical appreciation. In that context, material ecocriticism has the necessary theoretical and conceptual background to study the entanglement between human and place as a storied matter. Acknowledging this entanglement as a story will both deconstruct the anthropocentric worldview and help us remember to position ourselves as human beings among the nonhuman matters as their partners in this ongoing life. This perspective will lead us to reconsider the concept of place under new lights.

### **Material Ecocriticism as a Theoretical Stance**

Material ecocriticism is a relatively new perspective on matter and its agentic nature. Combining new materialist thought and the ecocritical look on nature, material ecocriticism asserts that if matter is agentic and able to communicate, then, it can tell stories. Material ecocriticism’s approach to matter is

<sup>4</sup> It is later discovered that humans also have the same kind of neurons that are activated when a person is observing a motor act done by someone else (Gallese, 2011, pp. 441-49).

explained by Serenella Iovino as in the following: “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” (2012, “Stories” p. 451). In 2012 Editor’s Note of *ISLE*, Scott Slovic claims that material ecocriticism may mark a new wave, a fourth wave to discuss ecocriticism (2012, p. 619). Later, Iovino and Oppermann pinpoint their belief in material ecocriticism as a “further wave” as it functions like a bridge or a liaison among material-discursive and posthuman concepts. According to them, material ecocriticism does not challenge the previous waves of ecocriticism but works to connect them towards an expanding theoretical discourse (2014, pp. 16-17 n.5). This may be possible through a new conceptualisation of place from the material ecocritical view. Material ecocriticism presents a new version of the sense of place in which material beings narrate their stories in varied intra-actions with the material spaces. From this standpoint, this study deems material ecocriticism as a substantial part of the fourth-wave ecocriticism.

Material ecocriticism as a theoretical stance offers a new perspective on the study of matter in which matter is not only agentic but also can narrate its story. Accordingly, Oppermann proposes that “[m]aterial ecocriticism’s main argument is that, if matter is agentic, it must also be capable of expressing itself, and if it can express itself, then it is capable of producing narratives” (2019, p. 4). Acknowledging matter’s vitality and energy, yet different from the existing analyses of matter, Iovino and Oppermann suggest a distinct examination of the material entanglements “in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces” (2014, p. 2). Dwelling on the creative ability of matter, material ecocriticism presents new ways to study matter with its ability to produce stories out of the “interlocked” entanglements the world offers. So, matter’s agency extends to creating and expressing the stories of becoming:

[M]aterial ecocriticism shed lights not only on the way agentic matter is narrated and represented in literary texts, but on matter’s “narrative” power itself. Matter, in all its forms, in this regard, becomes a site of narrativity, a storied matter, embodying its own narratives in the minds of human agents and in the very structure of its own self-constructive forces. Interpreted in this material-ecocritical light, matter itself becomes a text. (Iovino and Oppermann, 2012, p. 83)

Material ecocriticism, therefore, emphasises the creative ability of matter which arouses from its relationality “as a form of narrative transmitted through the interchanges of organic and inorganic matter” (Oppermann, 2014, p. 21). As a result of these various engagements between human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, and material and discursive practices, every single matter becomes a “storied matter” that is stored in “the earth’s rich archives of biological memories, climate narratives, geological records, and species tragedies” (Oppermann, 2016, p. 95). Oppermann explains such biological memories:

Squids, for example, tell tragic stories of their diminished ability to survive amid increasing ocean acidity. Retreating glaciers transmit stories about the earth’s changing climate, blending global warming with political anxieties and social changes. Another distressing story comes from the soil and concerns its excess amounts of nitrous oxides dripping into underground aquifers and reaching up to the clouds, accelerating the erosion of the ozone layer. (2016, p. 95)

From this material ecocritical perspective, every material entanglement in nature can be interpreted through discursive practices as a story. Analysing matter from this perspective will not only provide us with new ways to see matter but also save us from anthropocentric attributions to nonhuman matter. Material ecocriticism demonstrates that those abilities attributed to human beings are shared by the nonhuman world, as well. Correspondingly, this “narrative agency” does not necessarily require a human language. Moreover, such narrative ability is not related to human agency and human attributions to matter. The stories of matter already exist regardless of human perception and acknowledgement. In its simplest terms, for example, the physical change in nature through the change of seasons is itself a story. Or the stones of Göbeklitepe in Turkey that were recently discovered tell the story of their existence and change the way we investigate the history of humankind. Bennett approaches this point

from a different perspective by emphasizing the fact that a bit of anthropomorphizing subverts the boundaries in the more-than-human world and “will prove valuable”: “Too often the philosophical rejection of anthropomorphism is bound up with a hubristic demand that only humans and God can bear any traces of creative agency” (2010, p. 120). In other words, the “narrative agency” puts an end to the long-established divide between human and nonhuman in terms of creativity. Nevertheless, the aim is not to discard the human here but to emphasize the entanglement and the story the entanglement produces. Cohen claims that these stories of entanglement are told through human agents but also “human themselves emerge through ‘material agencies’ that leave their traces in lives as well as stories” (2015, p. 36). Similarly, the foetus narrator emerges from this story of becoming in which he is not only a narrator but also a protagonist who fulfils what he desires at the end of the novel. Drawing on this, it is time for us to reconsider our place on earth not as central figures but as contributing factors interacting with various nonhuman species to shape the story of the world. In that case, human language and creativity cannot be considered separate but it is a part of this becoming in this cooperation with all its materiality. Observed from this perspective opened by material ecocriticism, the contemporary British novel offers a fertile ground to study the concept of storied matter as an entanglement between human and place. Moreover, due to its unusual narrator, McEwan’s *Nutshell* is a proper example of human-place entanglement as a “storied matter.” Studying “storied matter” with the concept of place will demonstrate that the entanglement between human and environment is the story itself since it is the environment that shapes the identity of matter and also its story. In that regard, it can be argued that through the entanglement between the foetus and the mother’s womb, the foetus gains agency and tells the story of his becoming a human in the configuration of the world. The bond between the foetus and the womb is a storied matter that needs to be analysed.

### **A Material Ecocritical Analysis of *Nutshell***

As a rewriting of *Hamlet*, *Nutshell* covers the extra-marital relationship between the mother, Trudy (alluding to Gertrude) and the uncle, Claude (alluding to Claudius) and their plan to kill the father, John Cairncross. The irony is that the foetus Hamlet overhears their evil plan from the womb and tries to avert the murder of his father. As a witness of every minute, the foetus blames himself and feels that he is a partner in this crime because he is literally a part of Trudy. Even though he cannot succeed in thwarting the murder, the foetus decides to be born early to help the criminals get arrested by the police. Successful this time, the foetus Hamlet believes that he acts ethically by taking responsibility as a human being. Although *Nutshell* has never been studied from an ecological perspective, the emphasis on the fine line between human and nonhuman in the novel through the foetus’s philosophical questionings and the intra-active relationship in the womb deem the novel a proper site for fruitful discussion in terms of material ecocriticism. *Nutshell* owes its popularity in the critical debates to the foetus narrator who has reached the ability to follow everything happening around him. Apart from the environment to which he belongs, the foetus is also not indifferent to global events such as world wars, terrorist attacks, environmental problems and climate crisis. Through the podcasts his mother listens to, the foetus becomes aware of the devastating state of the world and is as insightful as he can comment on these. However, all these events cause great misery for him since he is unable to act in the mother’s womb similar to his restriction in preventing the murder of his father. Nonetheless, the ambiguous ending of the novel in which the foetus decides to be born proves the capacity and the power of the nonhuman narrator. Accordingly, it can be claimed that such agency originated in his entanglement with the mother’s womb. The environment to which he is inextricably attached provides him with the power to act and liberates him not only from his existential crises but also from the chaotic atmosphere to which he originally belonged.

Before the analysis of the foetus as a “storied matter” in entanglement with the womb, it is important to note that the attachment between the mother and the foetus is approached only as a physical one in the novel rather than an emotional attachment which is the focus of critical studies regarding the mother-foetus relationship. In that regard, the womb is described as a material place through a clear emphasis on its physical features: “[M]y secret sea, reeling of the walls of my castle, the bouncy castle that is my home” (McEwan, 2016, p. 63). The emotional tie that is said to be between a foetus and a mother is also supported by the senses, in other words, the physical connection that they share in this novel. This is most visible when the foetus states “I love her—how could I not?” (McEwan, 2016, p. 7)

while implying that this is because of some sort of obligation or responsibility he must have since he is literally in her. Likewise, this kind of emotional bond cannot be traced on the side of the parents, as well. Trudy's lack of interest towards the baby is clear in her plan to kill the husband, escape with the uncle and get rid of the child. John, on the other side, does not ask about the baby once throughout the story, which demonstrates his lack of care for the foetus, as well. What John cares about is the embodied identity produced by the mother and the foetus together since he contemplates the beauty of his wife during the pregnancy:

The steady work of pregnancy goes on and she is weary, agreeably so. John Cairncross sees the summer's flush on her cheeks, the lovely line of neck and shoulder and swollen breasts, the hopeful knoll that is me, the sunless pallor of her calves, the unwrinkled sole of one exposed foot, its line of diminishing innocent toes like children in a family photo. Everything about her, he thinks, brought to perfection by her condition. (McEwan, 2016, p. 15)

It is quite clear that John realises that her condition, in other words, her pregnancy or her entanglement with the foetus influence her, her body and her beauty. It seems that she is transformed into somebody else or a different being. So, John's interest is in this new existence of entanglement rather than the baby. Therefore, it can be stated that the emotional needs of the foetus are not satisfied while his physical needs are catered for. For instance, when he kicks the mother in the middle of the night to play podcasts or when he desires a glass of wine, he gets what he wants. Being aware of this lack of care and interest towards himself, the foetus learns to manipulate the physical bond that he shares with the mother. The entanglement the foetus shares with the mother's womb ensures the foetus with an agency to form his own identity, to be born and to take an active part in the configuration of the world. So, the bond between the mother and the foetus affects them both, in which they create a new existence different from theirs, a new unique being that deems himself as an inseparable part of this natural environment. Therefore, as a human who has the "response-ability" through the end of the novel, the foetus Hamlet becomes the embodiment of "ethico-onto-epistemological" understanding according to Barad's terminology. The prefix "ethico," then, refers to the foetus's response to the entangled agencies in the devastating world. In that case, his story of coming to the world or becoming "human" is his response to material entanglements. In one of her articles in which she delves into the ways of communication in the material world, Oppermann explains "becoming with" as a communication and as a way of "express[ing] [the] sense of being in the world" (2019, pp. 110-111). The foetus's entanglement with the womb is his way of "becoming with" the world he will be born into. The foetus's becoming is his sense of being in a world where he does not exist yet. Narrating the story of his becoming as a "storied matter" contributes to the existence of the foetus in the deteriorating world.

Contrary to the existing analyses which study the foetus narrator in terms of his lack of agency, this entanglement, which embellishes Trudy with a charming beauty, actually provides the foetus with agency. Throughout the novel, the foetus is continuously complaining about the limited space he must endure. Such an analysis of the foetus as a passive and inert matter is supported by the mental restriction of the foetus as he is extremely concerned about the state of the world. From a different angle, the philosophical questionings of the unborn in the womb show his agential capacity. Referring to William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the foetus is bounded in a nutshell; yet acts like the "king of infinite space" (Shakespeare, 2006, 2.2.253) despite of his confinement. Although the foetus can hear and feel everything happening around him, he is not able to move as he is restricted in the material environment. Creating an analogy between Hamlet's mental and physical imprisonment and the imprisonment of the foetus, McEwan mirrors the existential tragedy of Shakespeare's Hamlet in the short life of a foetus. Similar to Hamlet who is both mentally and physically trapped in the state of Denmark where "[s]omething is rotten" (Shakespeare, 2006, 1.4.90), the foetus is not only restricted in the womb but also feels trapped in the rotten familial relations. According to Elena Bandín and Elisa González:

The confinement of this character in a womb symbolises the state of Denmark in the original play [...]. *Nutshell* is not located in Denmark, but, unambiguously, in London [...]. Not only does the geographical location change, but so does the inhabited dwelling,

switching the magnificent castle of Elsinore for the family house of the unborn baby's father. (2021, pp. 18-19)

Although the location is different, Bandín and González find similarities in the confinement in the castle of Elsinore and the family mansion of the Cairncross family for which a murder is committed. However, it is quite clear that the foetus Hamlet is an agentic being different from Shakespeare's character. The most important facility provided to the foetus by the entanglement with the womb is his agentic ontology. It is through the intra-actions with the material environment that the foetus gains agency to kick his mother, to think on various issues and be able to comment on them. He can decide what is best for him and shape his future accordingly as opposed to the future settled by the mother and the uncle who are planning to run away and desert the kid in a child welfare centre. The privilege of this embodiment the foetus shares with the womb is described by the foetus as in the following:

The condition of the modern foetus. Just think: nothing to do but be and grow, where growing is hardly a conscious act. The joy of pure existence, the tedium of undifferentiated days. Extended bliss is boredom of the existential kind. This confinement shouldn't be a prison. In here I'm owed the privilege and luxury of solitude. (McEwan, 2016, p. 74)

Even though he is bored in the womb, the foetus comprehends that this violent and cruel world is itself a prison for humankind and it is no different from the womb. Acknowledging this, though, the foetus is ready to take responsibility for his actions and he decides to get born at the end of the story. This choice not only demonstrates the agentic being of the foetus but also his desire to live and his hope for the future: "His narration is filled with life, hope, and fervor, even when facing the harsh realities of the world and his broken family. He realizes that he needs to become his own master and therefore kicks Trudy to show his agency" (Tang, 2020, p. 7). His will to experience this life outside of Trudy's borders and his insubstantial optimism for the future indicate the agentic existence of the foetus and make him an "existential hero" in Tang's perspective (2020, p. 7). Throughout the novel, the foetus questions his existence, identity, and his role in the configuration of this world. The story ends with his discovery that his part in this world is to take responsibility for his actions because that is only how the world can be saved from evil. Therefore, it can be proposed that the time the foetus spends in the womb shapes his identity and he comes out as an agentic, responsible, and ethical human being. From this perspective, the foetus's response to the lack of ethical stance is to be born and to tell the story of his father's murder to the whole world. In other words, as a "storied matter," the foetus itself is the ethical response to the deteriorating condition both in the family and the outside world.

As a substantial part of the foetus's narrative, the family mansion indicates the restriction of both the foetus and Trudy and functions as a microcosm for the degrading state of the world. Most importantly, this Georgian mansion can be interpreted as a "storied matter" in which the physical condition of the house is reflected. As a symbol of both physical and moral degradation, the mansion stands in the middle of intra-acting agencies, both human and nonhuman. In *Bodily Natures* in which she discusses a material environment as an organic being, Stacy Alaimo argues that "[t]he environment has been drained of its blood, its lively creatures, its interactions and relations" (2010, pp. 1-2). Irrespective of the idea that the mansion is a cultural artefact, the old mansion could be interpreted as an organic being that works in entanglement with other matters inhabiting the house. Therefore, it can be stated that the degradation in the family house is not only symbolic but also physical since this is the result of chemical interaction among various matters including human matter. Such an analysis saves the mansion from being "a mere empty space, an 'uncontested ground,' for human 'development'" (Alaimo, 2010, pp. 1-2); but makes it a living entity responding to the rotten behaviours of the family members. In other words, it is "a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions" (Alaimo, 2010, p. 2). The old Georgian mansion's decaying condition is a quite clear response to the intra-action between matters:

All the sources agree, the house is filthy. Only clichés serve it well: peeling, crumbling, dilapidated. Frost has sometimes glazed and stiffened the curtains in winter; in heavy rains the drains, like dependable banks, return their deposit with interest; in summer, like bad banks, they stink. (McEwan, 2016, p. 12)



The decaying condition of the house narrates the story of decay in the familial relations. As Iovino and Oppermann place "the stories of matter [...] everywhere: in the air we breathe, the food we eat, in the things and beings in this world" (2014, p. 1), the smell of waste and leftovers in the kitchen can be read as stories and as the indicators of the moral decay in Trudy and Claude, the usurpers of the family mansion. Trudy is depicted as "finding space on the kitchen table for her elbows among the yolk-glazed plates of a month ago, the toast and sugar crumbs that houseflies daily vomit on, the reeking cartons and coated spoons, the fluids dried to scabs on junk-mail envelopes" (McEwan, 2016, p. 47). This depiction of the house not only shows the corruption in the family but also their irresponsible attitude towards the sacred familial bonds which is represented through the house. From a different perspective, R. S. White comments on the place of the fictional Georgian mansion in the suburbs of London:

The suburb is nowadays associated with affluence, expensive houses, and Lords cricket ground, but it has historical associations of seedy, adulterous affairs, a reputation dating back to the Restoration when Charles II was said to have had a cottage built for one of his mistresses. (2019, p. 322)

The entanglement formed by the family mansion, the foetus and the usurpers as an amalgamation of material and discursive formations tell the story of the adulterous affair. Similar to the foetus, the Georgian mansion responds to the decay in the family in an expressive way as a witness to the crime. As "[m]aterial ecocriticism conceptualizes the world of dynamic expressions as storied matter made up of narrative agencies" (Oppermann, 2019, pp. 112-113), the dialogic exchange among the material environment and the human matter is definitely and heavily storied. When the intra-action between human matter and environment is taken into consideration, there is a parallelism between the corrupted identities of the Cairncross family members and the dilapidated house. The identity of the unborn foetus cannot be considered separately from this environment since as Oscarson puts it "place is produced as an interaction of human experience and material environment" (2010, p. 2). The family house, therefore, is the result of such engagements in which the foetus takes an active part. This is the description of the atmosphere where the unborn foetus tries to shape his identity. Not only is he currently restricted in the womb, but also he observes the decaying ethical values of the people inhabiting the microcosm. As a result, this unstable future causes mental breakdown for the unborn.

It is then possible to compare the family home as a built environment and the womb as the natural place. As opposed to the family home which functions as a microcosm reflecting the degrading and decaying state of the world, the womb as a material environment is void of all social and political constructions. Alaimo makes a comparison between nature as an organic being and home as a constructed ground and questions this binary opposition between the two. She contemplates the possibility of demolishing these walls risen between natural and built environments: "Is it possible, then, to reenvision the home- a place constructed of literal and metaphorical walls- as a liminal zone, an invitation for pleasurable interconnections?" (2016, p. 22). According to this approach, a home is a place of control where patriarchal ideology displays its power while nature is away from all the ideological constructions. The discourse on nature as "Mother Nature" supports this binary opposition between natural and built places, as well, when we notice the etymological bond between the Latin words *mater* ("mother") and *materia* ("matter") regarding matter's "all-encompassing generativity" (Iovino, 2012, "Stories" p. 453). While nature is matriarchal with its creativity, home is a patriarchal structure with a controlling atmosphere. Keeping this in mind, it is possible to reconsider, and even deconstruct, these borders drawn between nature and home, then. Both the family mansion and the mother's womb as material environments challenge the conventional binary logic. The decay and chaotic condition of the mansion both inside and outside contributes to this subversion of ideological constructions, as well. Both the Cairncross home and the mother's womb as material environments are shaped by their material engagements with their material inhabitants while creating an analogy between the family home and the womb. Accordingly, as opposed to the traditional ideology formed around these places, the family home can be interpreted as "a liminal zone" in Alaimo's terms which is open to outside dangers while the womb is the peaceful and safe environment for the foetus. Most of the time, he is satisfied about the environment he is situated in. Comparing the womb with the outside world which is filled with people such as Trudy, Claude and John, the foetus is aware of the freedom, presented to him by the physical

environment, away from these immoral people. At this juncture, it is possible to assert that the identity and the story of the foetus are shaped by the environment that he is a part of:

Compared with the musty atmosphere which permeates his future ‘kingdom’, the fetus’ condition in Trudy’s womb is to him one of perfect bliss, having nothing to do with the condition of “not being” commonly associated with prebirth. He enjoys this privilege of pure solitude as if he found himself within the protective walls of a castle, far from the external world and from the evil side of mankind. (Codurelli, 2020, N.p.)

Compared to the family house, which is full of evil and lack of care, the womb is a peaceful zone, which deconstructs the conventional understandings and binary opposition between the natural and built environments. Despite its physical restrictions, the place offers an insight, an ethical viewpoint of the world and time to think about these without being influenced by the ideologically structured home. Not only is he informed about his ontology in the womb, but he is also acknowledged about the various possibilities provided by this material place. On the other hand, even though the mother’s womb seems safe, it is, at the same time, uncanny, liminal, and open to outside dangers as a material environment. For instance, the foetus sees the “rival’s penis” (McEwan, 2016, p. 21) as an intruder and eternal foe for his existence. Therefore, despite its suspension from the ideological constructions of the outside world, the womb functions as a playground in which the foetus protests immoral behaviours both in the microcosm and also macrocosm. In that regard, his kicking, questioning of life, his suicidal attempt and most importantly his decision to be born early are specific examples of his protests against the status quo which is represented by the patriarchal and anthropocentric family house and relations. Even his rejection of the pessimistic mindset and configuring a promising future for himself can be interpreted as resistance to the current situation in the world. His first words as a newborn seem to exemplify this: “I’m breathing. Delicious. My advice to newborns: don’t cry, look around, taste the air. I’m in London” (McEwan, 2016, p. 197). Instead of crying over the change the body goes through, the foetus proposes to be mindful of the situation in which the newborns are born. It can be stated that the foetus challenges the conventions and subverts them in his unique attitude towards life in his entanglement with the womb. This entanglement can be best traced in his material side as a “storied matter.”

Iovino deems body as one of the “many points from which we can start exploring ‘narratives’ about materiality” (2012, “Steps” p. 136). In due course, “[b]eing the ‘middle place’ where matter encounters and enmeshes with the discursive forces of politics, society, technology, identity, the body is the site where matter more clearly performs its narratives” (2012, “Steps” p. 136). The body of foetus, then, in the process of composition in the womb is the site where these discursive and material forces intermingled in various ways. As a “storied matter” that is filled with expressive ability, his existence in the womb gives the foetus the chance to observe and narrate the events happening around him. According to the path opened by material ecocriticism, matter’s agency is not only related to physical abilities but also related to its creation of meaning in the story of becoming. For instance, the foetus defines everything in his own terms since he is not aware of the political discourse of the outside world. He can comment on colours even though he has not seen one before: “She doesn’t braid today. Instead, two plastic devices, highly coloured, I’m sure, attached above her ears hold her hair back on each side” (McEwan, 2016, p. 162). Moreover, he comes up with new words in that vagina becomes the “birth canal,” as the womb is defined as the “bloody walls” or “the body bag.” That means that he orients language to his identity and his entanglement with the environment, which means he creates his own discourse based on his bond. This kind of “narrative agency” of the foetus gets ahead of any kind of agency we can rely on actually because while narrating the story the foetus takes the responsibility of actions that he feels a part of. His narration is his “response” to the various entangled materialities he realises in the womb. In this context, the responsible and conscious narration of the foetus narrator coincides with McEwan’s perspective on the human role in environmental issues. According to McEwan, the role of the human being in this deteriorating condition of the world is not only the devastating actions of humankind. Human beings should act consciously and take responsibility for those actions, and this is the agentic nature of the human as he claims in his article “Save the boot room, save the Earth” which was written after his expedition to the Arctic (2005, N.p.). Drawing from this, the conscious foetus who fits perfectly into his environment is an agentic being who can take the burden of

his actions by narrating the story of his life. As argued by Iovino and Oppermann on the “narrative agency” of matter,

[m]aterial ecocriticism proposes basically two ways of interpreting the agency of matter. The first one focuses on the way matter’s (or nature’s) nonhuman agentic capacities are described and represented in narrative texts (literary, cultural, visual); the second way focuses on matter’s “narrative” power of creating configurations of meanings and substances, which enter with human lives into a field of co-emerging interactions. (2012, p. 79).

That is to state that matter not only comes forth as an agentic being in texts but also turns into the text itself whose agency and being is based on the narration itself. There are two scenes in the novel that support this argument even more. The first one is the part of the narrative where the foetus narrates the conversation between his father and uncle from an all-knowing point of view. Even though the foetus is not present in the scene, he uses his imagination and creative ability to write a story on the probable dialogue that must have happened between John and Claude (McEwan, 2016, pp. 35-38). The second one is when the foetus describes a ghost scene similar to Hamlet’s. Considering the plot of the novel, the ghost scene of King Hamlet is absent in *Nutshell* except in the mind of the foetus as an imagination. The foetus imagines the ghost of John Cairncross, his murdered father, coming to haunt the old mansion (McEwan, 2016, pp. 186-188). The importance of these scenes lies in their demonstration of the foetus’s desire to live even in a narrative. As an agentic body, the foetus not only writes but also manipulates the story as he wishes. Since he realises that he can only exist in a narrative, as a text, the foetus creates his own text as he takes part in his own becoming as a human being. Not only is this narrative his story but also an amalgamation of his ethics, being and knowing. In other words, the foetus in the womb is the story itself.

As a storied matter and through this narrative ability, the foetus discharges the ethical responsibilities he holds as a criminal of the father’s murder. Even though the foetus can have access to the outside world through the mother, it is clear that there is a lack of physical interaction with the outside world. However, the foetus has other means to interact and to express himself as stated by Tang: “However, due to his containment and lack of interaction with the outside world, the foetus needs to find other indirect means of personal expression” (2020, p. 3). His narration of the murder of his father is such a means of expression for the foetus. Narrating the murder story to the whole world, the foetus finalises his ethical dilemma and reaches self-fulfilment since he believes that helping the murderers get arrested is his ethical duty to live the life he imagines. Gouleau claims that “[t]he amniotic and more generally Trudy’s body are not only ‘nourishing’, not only life-sustaining for the foetus: they also sustain the narration” (2022, p. 3). Trudy’s body as the material environment contributes to the tale of becoming for the foetus. As “[m]aterial ecocriticism sees all these entangled relations as texts bearing material stories, stories of creativity as well as destruction that are both cultural and ecological” (Oppermann, 2019, p. 115), the entanglement in the womb is a story of becoming “human” for the foetus that is expressed in various creative ways. The foetus wants to prove his material existence and secure his future through this story. He is aware of the fact that his existence is not perceived by the members of the family and the only way to exist and survive in this devastating world is to narrate his story. That is why the foetus states: “Now I live inside a story and fret about its outcome” (McEwan, 2016, p. 75). The sign of the foetus’s material existence can only be observed through the “onto-tale” (Bennett, 2010, p. 117) he narrates.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it can be safely argued that this Hamlet story is the story of becoming human for the foetus. Inquiring the humanity of his parents and relatives, the foetus contemplates his humanity at the edge of being born and questions his role both in microcosm and microcosm. The foetus’ humanity, therefore, moves in the same direction with Barad’s “ethico-onto-epistemology” in which human matter exists as an ethical being in the forming of the world. In this context, the womb is not just a habitation for the foetus but also an equal partner that provides him with a “narrative agency.” From the material ecocritical perspective, then, the story of the foetus is constructed with the narrative ability of the

material environment, the mother's womb. The concept of "storied matter" is the entanglement created by various matters and this Hamlet story is the story of becoming human for the foetus. As his identity and humanity are only traced in this tale, the foetus becomes a "storied matter" or the text itself adapting Hamlet's story to his narration to be recognised by the authority. The recognition of such an entanglement with the material environment not only leads us to reconsider the sense of place from a novel perspective but also to question our relationship with various environments both built and natural.

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