



A Material Ecocritical Elucidation of Augusta Webster's "Medea In Athens", "In an Almshouse", and "A Dilettante"

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Abstract

In addition to her being an avid campaigner of women's suffrage and education rights, Augusta Webster (1837-1894) is a profoundly important 19th century Victorian female poet who recurrently hearkens to the necessity of obliterating boundaries, dualities, and hierarchical divisions between humans and the physical universe. Diverging from Victorian industrial society's general propensity of perceiving nature as an inanimate commodity material to be used and abused, Webster, in her poems, captures a biological and a material understanding of the universe in which every natural entity is embedded with actively dynamic agency and vitality. Within this incessantly vibrant universe, humans' deepest situatedness and innate connectedness to the rest of nature are repeatedly underscored in Webster's poetry, which shows a sharp contrast to the anthropocentric assumptions of her epoch about humans' being disparately privileged species on earth. In this regard, the main goal of this study is to analyze Augusta Webster's "Medea in Athens", "In an Almshouse", and "A Dilettante" from the perspective of a recently emerging critical theory of material ecocriticism to reveal Webster's uniquely significant ecological consciousness about the vital materiality of the universe. These poems are particularly significant in their painstaking effort to unfold the material consanguinity between human-nonhuman beings.

Keywords: Augusta Webster, Material Ecocriticism, Victorian Poetry, Nature, Vibrant Matter.

Augusta Webster'in "Medea In Athens", "In an Almshouse", ve "A Dilettante" Başlıklı Şiirlerinin Maddesel Ekoeleştirel İncelemesi

Öz

Augusta Webster (1837-1894) kadınların oy kullanma ve eğitim haklarının savunucu ateşli bir aktivist olmasına ek olarak, insan ve fiziksel çevre arasındaki sınırların, hiyerarşik sınıflandırmanın ve ikilemlerin ortadan kaldırılmasına dikkat eden, 19. Yüzyıl Viktorya döneminin son derece önemli bir kadın şairidir. Viktorya dönemi sanayi toplumunun, doğayı kullanılacak ve istismar edilecek cansız bir meta malzemesi olarak görme yönündeki eğiliminden ayrılan Webster, şiirlerinde, her doğal varlığın aktif olarak dinamik bir eyleycilik içinde olduğu, biyolojik ve maddesel bir evren anlayışını benimser. Her an yeni bir eylem halinde olan bu evrende, insanların doğanın içindeki en derin konumu ve doğuştan içiçe geçmişliği, Webster'in şiirinde defalarca vurgulanır ve insanların yeryüzünde ayrıcalıklı türler olduğuna dair kendi döneminin insan merkezli varsayımlarıyla keskin bir tezat oluşturur. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışmanın temel amacı, Augusta Webster'in "Medea in Athens", "In an Almshouse", and "A Dilettante" adlı şiirlerini yakın zamanda ortaya çıkan maddesel ekoeleştirel teorisi

perspektifinden analiz ederek, Webster'ın evrenin yaşamsal maddeselliği hakkındaki son derecede önemli ekolojik bilincini ortaya çıkarmaktır. Bu şiirler, insan ve insan dışı varlıklar arasındaki maddesel bağlaşımları ortaya çıkarmaları yönünden ayrı bir önem oluşturmaktadırlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Augusta Webster, Maddesel Ekoeleştiri, Viktorya Dönemi Şiiri, Doğa, Maddenin Eyleyciliği.

INTRODUCTION

Regardless of receiving not so great critical acknowledgement as her female contemporaries like Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barret Browning, Augusta Webster (1837-1894) is still a uniquely proliferative poet whose poetry principally foregrounds "radical female figures suffering from and rebelling against the impediments of their society's patriarchal impositions of docile gender roles on women" (Bulut Sarikaya, 2024, p. 95). Apart from her vigorous feminist ideas, which inflame her commitment to "campaigns for suffrage and female education," (Brown, 1991, p. 90), Webster's poetry is also immersed with vivid depictions of the natural world in which there is an unremitting physical and emotional entanglement between self-sentient beings. The poet raises an assertive voice against the exploitation of natural entities by capitalist economic concerns and industrial activities. Webster's disgruntlement of the human abuse of nature and the unfaltering contamination of natural resources fuel her indulgence in destabilizing the duality between human and nature by endorsing the deeply rooted, yet unfortunately forgotten physical and spiritual bond between humans and nature. Hence, this article intends to bring the lens of a recently emerging critical theory of material ecocriticism to Augusta Webster's poetry to reveal the poet's outstandingly worthwhile environmental consciousness, enabling her to instruct the Victorian public about the necessity of finding effectual means of meaningful interaction with nature rather than fighting against it. To this end, Webster's "Medea in Athens", "In an Almshouse", and "A Dilettante" are specifically chosen for this article on account of their insightful depiction of an agential universe which is rife with the myriads of nonhuman species who are sufficiently intentional and rational.

The 19th century Victorian Britain, when Augusta Webster wrote her poems, is marked by a large-scale transformation of the country from an agricultural into an industrial and technology-based economy, which required finding new energy supplies and cheaper raw materials like coal, iron, steel, cotton, and wool to be used in factories. The most detrimental outcome of humans' industrial activities during the Victorian Age is the unrestricted release of poisonous and harmful gases into the atmosphere as the harbinger of pervasive human intervention into nature's ecosystem. As Parkins adroitly notes, "Victorians were forced to confront a previously unimagined scale of human endeavour and its consequences around the planet" (Parkins, 2018, p. 1). Similarly, in *An Environmental History of Great Britain*, I. G. Simmons writes that "[t]he burning of coal in homes, workplaces and railways, together with the by-products of the chemical industry, were led off into the air in a more or less uncontrolled fashion" (Simmons, 2001, p. 150). Aside from the ferocious ransacking of Britain's green landscapes, the destruction of its native forests and pastures for the construction of coal mines, the use of coal in steamships, factories and houses gradually culminated in the increased levels of poisonous particles and acid rains in the atmosphere. As Simmons statistically notes, "[t]he great inorganic pollutants of the air were hydrochloric acid and hydrogen sulphide produced in the manufacture of alkalis", making it impossible for humans to inhale a clean air (2001, p. 150). It is not aberrant that this uncontrolled emission of toxic chemicals as the offshoots of Britain's hankering for progress and economic growth inevitably wreaked an immense havoc on the environment, triggering the disruption of the whole ecosystemic balance. Among the environmental problems, generated by the escalation of Britain's industrial development is the gathering of population around the urbanized areas where many factories are built and the small towns are turned into abruptly crowded cities, becoming the economic and technological nucleus of the country. Notwithstanding the unprecedentedly dangerous level of air and water pollution caused by the manufacturing factories, as Clapp argues, "[s]cientific findings do not necessarily arouse much public concern and the level of interest in environmental questions has waxed and waned over the years, without ever coming to the top of the political agenda" (2013, p. 7). While relatively significant sections of the Victorian society doggedly seem negligent of the seriousness of environmental deterioration, Augusta Webster comes to the fore as a prominent Victorian poet who

pays utmost critical attention to the Victorian society's insensitivity towards natural entities, and ardently tries to lay bare humans' material and emotional connectivity with nonhuman beings in the physical universe. Therefore, it is inexorably necessary to examine theoretical premises of material ecocriticism for a better understanding of Webster's materialist ecological understanding of the universe.

Material Ecocriticism

Having transpired recently as a proliferating branch of ecocritical studies, material criticism raises a more clamorous voice against humans' acting against nature, instead, promotes acting with nature, and calls for a more ethical responsibility towards the material universe in which "diffusive meshworks generate strange stories and demand participations that move beyond the certainties of closure" (Cohen, 2014, p. x). Material ecocriticism has a strong belief in the ongoing flow of vitality, animism, and dynamism between every individual members of the universe without necessarily excluding humans. In fact, the most confrontational argument put forward by material ecocriticism is that humans are not distinct or superior to the nonhuman world since they are, willingly or not, exposed to the same process of biological "mineralization" and eventually become the part of the organic universe serving as a "substratum for the emergence of biological creatures" (De Landa, 2000, p. 26). Material ecocriticism redirects human attention towards the unavoidably ostensible fact of the colossal materiality of the universe in which humans are not except from nonhuman material organisms but deeply immersed in and merged with them.

In reconfiguring human-nonhuman relationship, material ecocriticism introduces the notion of the "narrative agency" of the matter, a paradigm which destabilizes humans as the narrators of their own stories, cultures, and histories and deems humans as subjects and part of "geological, biological, and cosmic stories that compel us to envision the physical world as storied matter" (Oppermann, 2013, p. 57). That is a groundbreaking paradigm shift offered by material ecocriticism that unsettles the anthropocentric authority of humans as the dominators, owners, writers, and narrators of the outside universe, which is turned into an unassertive medium *for* and *of* human discourse. The world is viewed as a dynamic system in an ongoing activism of co-production occasioning heterogeneous life forms that are all capable of telling their own stories and giving meaning to the outside material world.

Attributing meaningfulness and intelligence to nonhuman world requires, on the part of humans, an unprejudiced recognition of nonhuman agency, which denotes that the matter is equipped with incessant agency and vitality, rendering the physical world into a place that is full of ongoing interaction and inter-activity. Expanding the frontiers of agency to include all human and nonhuman, living and nonliving, organic and inorganic beings, Jane Bennett coined the term "vibrant matter," by which she refers to the potency of an "energetic vitality" within every matter, even the ones which are usually considered to be inanimate, lifeless objects (2010, p. 5). Not only the natural entities, as Bennett suggests, but also the substances produced by humans like "plastic glove, and the bottle cap", or even a piece of rubbish is capable of revealing a "thing-power" and a willingness to interact with its environment (2010, p. 7). This thing-power that all the natural and unnatural entities possess, also, empowers them to play an actively and equally domineering role in the materialization of the universe.

"Material ecocriticism overthrows human's hierarchical supremacy over nature by calling for a replacement of humans' narcissistic conceptualization of themselves as the only active intentional agents" (Bulut Sarıkaya, 2022, p. 1497). Eradicating the hierarchical distinction between the subject and object, material ecocriticism favors the equalization of humans and nonhumans to "allow the collective to assemble a greater number of actants in a single world" (Latour, 2004, p. 80). Anthropocentric presumptions disallow humans to be integrated with the universe and make it difficult to dismantle

their dualistic mindset which operates through exclusions, oppositions and discriminations instead of inclusions and participations. Humans align themselves with the active and dominant subject position while casting nonhuman world into the role of being the object which is associated with inactivity, immobility, and incapacity, lacking in self-awareness and self-consciousness. Counting on their hegemonic role as the subject, humans bestow upon themselves the authority to represent, narrate, and write human stories about nonhuman objects. What is more appalling is the question of whether humans know anything about the objects that they are narrating and interpreting. Material ecocriticism, therefore, challenges humans' authority to represent the nonhuman world about which they do not have accurately sufficient knowledge, and opens the prospect of a more egalitarian relationship between humans and nonhumans. To this end, Levi Bryant points out the necessity of stripping humans off their subjective positions. He stresses that:

Subjects are objects among objects, rather than constant points of reference related to all other objects. As a consequence, we get the beginnings of what anti-humanism and post-humanism ought to be, insofar as these theoretical orientations are no longer the thesis that the world is constructed through anonymous and impersonal social forces as opposed to an individual subject. Rather, we get a variety of nonhuman actors unleashed in the world as autonomous actors in their own right, irreducible to representations and freed from any constant reference to the human where they are reduced to our representations. (2011, pp. 22-23)

Bringing human and the-more-than-human world together in a more intimate and required relationship, material ecocriticism looks for the ways of superseding humans' anthropocentric social stratification system with that of collectivities and "assemblages", which, in Karen Barad's terms, are constituted by the "intra-actions" of human and nonhuman agents through a "process of being enfolded into the assemblage as part of its ongoing process of reconfiguration" (2007, p. 239, emphasis in the original). More plainly, the material world is constantly going through a process of reconfiguration and re-composition as a result of the agential intra-activity of its actors, who act differentially, influentially, and purposefully on other partners within assemblages. Such intentional intra-action of individual partners unravels the material universe as an intelligible and meaningful phenomenon, overturning humans' false assumption about their being the only intelligent and knowing subjects of the universe. In contrast to the ordinary act of interaction which "assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction", Barad offers "intra-action" that "signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" who gain their individual existence following their entanglement (p. 33, emphasis in the original). Knowing, as Barad argues, "is an ongoing performance of the world" and each nonhuman actor or actant emerges as an intelligent and knowing subject, playing a quintessential role in the materialization of the world (p. 149). Once restoring the agency of nonhuman beings and the vivacity and intelligibility of the matter, material ecocriticism advocates the power of nonhuman actors to represent, narrate, and tell their stories directly without a human intervention. As Coole and Frost affirm, "materiality is always something more than 'mere' matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable" (2010, p. 9). In contrast to the traditional ecocriticism's dubiousness of the textuality, which is assumed to reduce nature into linguistic constructions, material ecocriticism aims to reconcile the text and the matter by revealing their internal relatedness. No matter how humans try to distance themselves from the material world, humans are also the embodiment of the matter in such a way that their imaginations, feelings, viewpoints, languages, cultures, literature, stories, texts, and discourses are all derived from the material world. In this regard, material ecocriticism explores each natural entity as significantly saturated with a different story and endowed with a capacity to narrate its own story without needing any intermediary. As Iovino and Oppermann bluntly put it, material ecocriticism "examines matter both in texts and as a text, trying to shed light on the way bodily natures and discursive forces express their interaction whether in representations or in their concrete reality" (2014, p. 2). Since it is

unattainable to set apart literature and nature, material ecocriticism shows an exciting commitment to displaying the ongoing material interaction between the matter and the text, and thus, achieves to deconstruct the artificially contrived binary oppositions between the meaning and the matter, text and the matter, human and nature, culture and nature.

In this light, material ecocriticism shows a keen interest in how this intentional and agential materiality of the outside world is reflected in literary texts and encourages human's imaginative agency to be more intricately connected to the agency of the matter by corroding the boundaries between human and nonhuman agents. Both human and nonhuman beings, in this way, play equally significant roles in the construction of literary texts. Designating poetry as a "material entity", Timothy Morton argues that "[a]ll kinds of nonhumans are already involved in the existence of a poem" shaping and constructing its "physical architecture" (2014, p. 271). The textuality of poetry is intersected with the materiality of the outside world with a potentiality of revealing the agency of the nonhuman beings without reducing them into passive objects of poetry. Catriona Sandilands, similarly, emphasizes the interwoven stories of human and nonhuman beings and perceives material ecocriticism as a "*politically generative practice*" which "*demands careful attention to the ways in which the more-than-human world writes itself into literature*" (2014, p. 157, emphasis in the original). In the same vein, nonhuman beings are allowed to inscribe themselves on the textuality of Augusta Webster's poems.

Augusta Webster's Poetry of the Agency, Intelligibility, and Vibrancy of the Material Universe

Acknowledged to be "one of the most politically active and informed writers of her generation" (Olverson, 2010, p. 27), Augusta Webster deviates from the anthropocentric Victorian proclivity to objectify every natural entity as a raw material for Britain's industrial development. Webster has every confidence in interaction and internal connectedness of human and non-human nature and frequently brings forth her ecological concerns in her poetry. When we consider the social and political atmosphere of the 19th century British imperialism and the accelerated impetus of industrialization, accompanied by the unabating depletion of natural resources, we can better appreciate Augusta Webster's endorsement of a dis-anthropocentric notion of nature that cannot be treated as a property to be bought and sold but as a living, vibrant organism, embodying diverse material forms of life, each equipped with the necessary consciousness of its environment.

Except for her vigorous efforts to liberate women of her time from patriarchal oppression, Augusta Webster develops a discernibly scientific perception of nature and blatantly reveals her ecological concerns in "Medea in Athens", a poem which is built upon Euripides' tragedy of *Medea* which is translated from Greek by Webster in 1868 (Olverson, 2010, p. 36). Deflecting from the conventional approaches to Medea as a revengeful woman who kills her husband and children, Webster unravels Medea's "role of iconic feminine victim" that solicits sympathy and compassion from its readers (Gregory, 2011, p. 31). The following lines portray Medea as a woman who conflates herself with nature:

*All faces smiled on me, even lifeless things
Seemed glad because of me; and I could smile
To every face, to everything, to trees,
To skies and waters, to the passing herds,
To the small thievish sparrows, to the grass
With sunshine through it, to the weed's bold flowers:
For all things glad and harmless seemed my kin,
And all seemed glad and harmless in the world. (Webster, 2000, p. 176)*

It should be noted that the poet does not depict nature homogenously in anthropocentric terms as an inferior domain in opposition to the human sphere. Conversely, the persona shows respect and appreciates each individual being in nature for its distinctiveness and uniqueness; moreover, she
SEFAD, 2024; (52): 91-104

identifies with every natural entity and pays special attention to them. It is stressed that she smiles at trees, skies, waters, herds, sparrows, grass and the weed, and in return, all these natural entities, even the seemingly "lifeless things" smile at her (p. 176). It is riveting that rather than treating nonhuman beings as passive objects, possessing no sign of vitality, the persona has an acute awareness of the agency and vitality of the allegedly lifeless things. This prominently scientific and groundbreaking notion of the vitality of the universe reverberates with Jane Bennett's theory of "vital materiality" which connotes the idea of vital energy embedded in the physical universe, "the swarm of activity subsisting below and within formed bodies and recalcitrant things, a vitality obscured by our conceptual habit of dividing the world into inorganic matter and organic life" (2010, p. 50). Likewise, the persona's mind, in the poem, is not obstructed by the anthropocentric mindset which constructs dualities and boundaries by attributing inactivity to the nonhuman world while assuming humans as the only exceptional beings who have vitality, soul, and agency in the world. On the contrary, she encounters a vitally material universe in which every single entity epitomizes a vibratory force to thrive itself and incessantly yearns for new entanglements and new formations.

What is quite apparent is that the persona orients herself inside the matter's web of interconnections, feels a deep sense of emotional affiliation to the concrete elements of the natural world including air, water, plants, and animals and dives into a genially mutual interaction with them. The poet's emphasizing smiling as an act of trans-species companionship between human and nonhuman actors is quite difficult to ignore because of its new materialist implications of the world which comes into being, in Barad's words, "through complex agential intra-actions of multiple material-discursive practices or apparatuses of bodily production" (2007, p. 206). In other words, the reality of the phenomenon in the physical world is produced by the intimate bodily entanglement of human and nonhuman agents, a cross-species interaction which is discursive, constantly changing and evolving into new relationships and new becomings. Within the context of the poem, the persona's dismissing human language and preferring to use her bodily gesture to engage in meaningful interaction with natural entities is utterly important. The persona's smiling at nonhuman individuals of nature that do not remain unresponsive and smile back at the persona resonates with the material ecocritical perspective of the world which decentralizes human speech as a necessary requirement for meaningful communication with the outside world where physical entanglement is the essential unit of the matter's articulation of the self. "Discursive practices", as Barad suggests, "are not speech acts, linguistic representations, or even linguistic performances" (2007, p. 149) because humans are "neither pure cause nor pure effect but part of the world in its open-ended becoming" (p. 150). Similarly, the persona is aware of the fact that she should transcend the boundaries of her humanly linguistic discourse which remains insufficient in getting in contact with the natural world and adopts a more universal language of nonhuman beings. Once she achieves to move away from human barriers, the persona comes to the realization of her biological kinship with the nonhuman world where every human and nonhuman being is constituted by the same material substance and flourish on earth in a total enmeshment with each other. Correspondingly, the persona's calling nonhuman beings not as the enemy or the other of humans but as "kin" of humans (Webster, 2000, p. 176) echoes Donna Haraway who formulates the new materialist paradigm as "creaturely kinship versus human exceptionalism" (Haraway, 2008, p. 245). Haraway perceives the whole human and nonhuman beings as "agents of multi-species kinship formation" who perpetually come together in a physical entanglement during a process of the world's ongoing intra-activity and materialization (2008, p. 296). Webster's poem, in the same way, draws humans and nonhuman beings together as equally significant intra-acting agents by depicting her female persona with a capacity to step aside from her human privileges to become aware of her striking similarities and kinship ties with the other-than-human beings, and ungrudgingly plunges into a convivial relationship with them.

An analogous concept of nature as a place of revitalizing force, giving life energy not only to the evolution of humans and nonhuman beings but also stimulating Webster's artistic creativity to compose her poem is seen in Webster's "In an Almshouse", a poem which is dedicated to a summer evening and presents a vitally exuberant nature with a multiplicity of its individual entities:

*Oh the dear summer evening! How the air
Is mellow with the delicate breath of flowers
And wafts of hay scent from the sunburnt swathes:
How the glad song of life comes everywhere,
From thousand harmless voices — from blithe birds
That twitter on incessant sweet good-nights,
From homeward bees that through the clover tufts
Stray booming, pilfering treasures to the last,
From sleepless crickets clamouring in the grass
To tell the world they're happy day and night,
From the persistent rooks in their high town,
From sheep in far-off meadows: life, life, life,
That is the song they sing, and to my mind
The song is very happy, very good.
My God, I thank thee I have known this. (2000, p. 244)*

In her description of the beautiful summer evenings, the poet makes a perfect use of olfactory images about "the breath of flowers" and "hay scent" (2000, p. 244), to spotlight the ongoing activity and dynamism in nature. Depicting flowers as delicate and breathing individuals, filling the air with attractive odors, the poet, in fact, draws her readers' attention to the agency of nature which is evidently observed in almost every part of nature. The smells of flowers are mixed with the hay scent that is moving smoothly out of swathes and all together, they permeate into the air, composing "the glad song of life", which can be heard everywhere (Webster, 2000, p. 244). The radiance of nature and its transformative power of influencing, producing and shaping everything within itself do not necessarily exclude humans since the human persona of the poem finds a re-vitalizing energy of life in nature. He is capable of hearing this song of life coming from multifarious voices; the air, flowers, and animals who are all engaged in singing the song of life and enacting the performative agency of the material universe. As the persona meticulously observes, "blithe birds", "homeward bees", "sleepless crickets", "persistent rooks", and "sheep" are diversely heterogeneous individuals of nature who are empowered enough to communicate with their environment and "tell the world they're happy day and night" (Webster, 2000, p. 244).

In her poem, Webster shatters the rigid foundations of the so-called fixity of nature which stands outside of human domain in isolation, as a stable and dormant object, ready to be used and controlled by human beings. All throughout the poem, Webster emphasizes the intense vitality of natural entities that are not presumably static or unvoiced things, but each of them is perceived as a person with its distinct individuality and uniqueness, expressing its bodily existence in diverse ways. As the new materialist philosopher Jane Bennett also highlights, even "the smallest or simplest body or bit may indeed express a vital impetus, conatus or clinamen, an actant never really acts alone" (2010, p. 21, emphasis in the original). Moreover, the agency of individual bodies, Bennett suggests, "always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces" (p. 21). Webster's poem remarkably encapsulates this collaboration and permeability of different natural bodies by depicting an image of nature's chorus, consisting of plural voices, all singing, in its own unique way, the same song of peaceful existence and happiness.

Furthermore, Webster recurrently describes nature as "harmless" both in her previous poem, "Medea in Athens" and in "In an Almshouse" as if she were trying to convince her readers that contrary

to her society's anthropocentric preconceptions that nature is a frightening enemy of humans, it is a harmless and peaceful companion, not an antagonistic force trying to kill or frighten human beings (Webster, 2000, p. 244). Webster's insistent focus on the harmlessness of nature is reminiscent of Simon Estok's theory of "ecophobia" which he defines as a "uniquely human psychological condition that prompts antipathy toward nature" (Estok, 2018, p. 1). Discerned by Estok as the primary reason for humans' distancing themselves from nature, ecophobia incorporates feelings of "fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) toward the natural environment" (2018, p. 1). Significantly enough, Webster, in her poem, strives to lay bare the groundlessness of human trepidation of nature and nonhuman beings living in nature. The persona in the poem is not inhibited by ecophobic constructions of nature and through his ecological awareness, he is able to hear and understand the song of nature coming out of "thousand harmless voices" (Webster, 2000, p. 244). In the following part of the poem, the persona expresses his desire for a more intimate relationship with nature with a total disdain for the imprisonment of city life:

*Not in the city of the million homes,
The throbbing heart of England — No, not there,
How could I find home there? — those pent black streets,
That skylless prison room, where day by day
My heart and head grew number, day by day. (Webster, 2000, p. 251)*

The persona is an old man grabbling with the social and psychological impositions of the Victorian society in the midst of industrialization which has an accelerating impact on the change and decay of landscape, the growth of cities, urbanization, and relentlessly increasing problems of pollution. Such a quick-paced change of lifestyle in the industrial world of Britain, ineluctably, places unendurably heavy burdens on the shoulders of individuals like the necessity of unending working hours or being forced to live in exceedingly filthy, unsanitary urbanized centers. As Parkins announces, "[i]t was the Victorians who first contemplated the widespread environmental despoliation brought by industrialization" (2018, p. 1). So, the persona, in these lines, feels a deep sense of psychological exhaustion and trauma in his struggle to cope with the decadence of Victorian city life which he describes as a "skylless prison room" where the air and streets are polluted (Webster, 2000, p. 251). The filthiness of the "pent black streets", and the pollution of air are complementarily added up to the problem of overpopulation, leaving little space for individuals to live in "the city of million homes" (Webster, 2000, p. 251). The difficulty of living in overcrowded and environmentally devastated urban centers is profoundly dealt with in the poem where the speaker is spiritually entrapped in the prison houses of Victorian urban environment and physically isolated from the natural world. This radical break away from nature is demonstrated to be a painful process, inflicting severe emotional damages on the minds of individuals who no longer carry on their lives as healthy and happy as before. The persona expresses his discontent with the barrenness of modern life in cities in which he no longer feels at home and utters his utmost desire to live amidst wilderness in nature where he intrinsically belongs:

*That whirr and whirl of traffic, ceaseless change
Of unknown faces thronging to and fro!
My life went shrivelling there as if one brought
Some thirsty field plant maimed of half its root
Amid a ball-night glare of flashing lamps.
And if I, even in this haven nook,
Sheltered out of the cold winds of the world,
If here on the free hill-side, with the sounds
Of woodland quiet soothing in my ears,
Here where the dear home breezes blow to me
Over the well-known meadows, I have longed
Like a sick schoolboy for his mother's face,*

*To look on my remembered trees and fields,
To touch them, to feel kin with them again. (Webster, 2000, p. 252)*

Webster, in the quotation above, provides an exquisite insight into the mental suffering of individuals living in Victorian Britain where humans feel a tremendous sense of powerlessness, inhibition, and alienation among the multitude of people living in the city centers, disconnected from nature. The persona elucidates his feelings of exile by likening his separation from nature to uprooting a field plant, transplanting it into a foreign environment, and leaving it for dead among the “ball-night glare of flashing lamps” (p. 252). He laments the fact that his life is “shriveling” and losing its vitality in this artificially constructed urban environment where the individuals have lost their sense of belonging (p. 252). The persona knows that re-connecting with nature is the one and only cure for his illness. This is a disease of modern societies in which individuals are undergoing painful experiences of psychological and emotional fragmentation due to an abrupt alienation from nature. Contrary to the sterility of urban life, nature is full of vibrant materiality sustaining both human and nonhuman beings with a sufficient energy to flourish actively. While nature has its heterogeneously organized interdependent system of operation, urban city centers are artificial constructions, imposed by capitalist, industrial economies to homogenize, classify, configure, and stabilize societies according to social, cultural, and economic backgrounds of their individuals. However, the material universe, according to the material ecocritical perspective, has its own self-sustaining system of “[s]ymbiotic relations” in which “an ecosystem links together a wide variety of heterogeneous elements (animals and plants of different species,) which are articulated through interlock, that is, by their functional complementarities” (De Landa, 2000, p. 65). Similarly, the persona, in Webster’s poem, suffers from the fracture of this symbiotic relationship with the material universe in which “living creatures and their inorganic counterparts share a crucial dependence on intense flows of energy and materials” (De Landa, 2000, p. 104). The vibrancy of the matter provides every human and nonhuman being with a necessary nurturing power, as De Landa veraciously points out, “[o]ur organic bodies are, in this sense, nothing but temporary coagulations in these flows” (2000, p. 104). The persona, remarkably, is absolutely conscious of his material connectedness to nature where he thinks that his true home resides. He persistently states that although the house he lives in, which he calls as a “haven nook” provides him with shelter, he is still craving for “well-known meadows”, “trees”, and “fields” in order to “touch them” and “feel kin with them again” (Webster, 2000, p. 252). The persona’s desire to touch trees to restore his kinship ties with nature is quite significant in terms of the material ecocritical concept of “trans-corporeality” which is defined by Stacy Alaimo as “a movement across bodies” to manifest “the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures” (2010, p. 2). Trans-corporeality allows humans to be aware of the materiality of their own humanly bodies, and, as Alaimo suggests, it is “a recognition that one’s bodily substance is vitally connected to the broader environment” (p. 63). In tune with Alaimo, the persona’s trans-corporeal consciousness endows him with an awareness of his physical enmeshment with the material universe so that he perfectly knows that human body, similar to nonhuman bodies, can grow into being and flourish by being materially entangled with other natural bodies. The persona’s feelings of depression, fear of city life, his sense of exile, and homelessness are all caused by his physical detachment from other natural bodies.

Presenting the necessity of humans’ amalgamation with nature, Webster, in her poems, tries to divert the attention of contemporary Victorian society away from urban centers towards nature, which is conceived by the poet as an all-embracing abode of humanity. Webster aptly points up to humans’ situatedness in the outside physical nature and acknowledges that a healthy evolution of human beings can be attained only through a reciprocal interaction with other natural entities. This interplay of human and nonhuman bodies is underpinned by material ecocriticism as prerequisite for building “agentic assemblages with the power to instigate long-standing effects” (Oppermann, 2013, p. 62). In like

manner, Webster recurrently alludes to nature not with the aim of eliciting poetic inspiration but because nature is conceived to be the exact material substance that humans are derived from. Since human body like other nonhuman bodies is also nurtured by and composed of the material universe, as Webster shows in her poems, keeping humans detached from the vibrant materiality of nature have devastating consequences for humans' physical and psychological well-being. In addition to "In an Almshouse", where the poet deals with humans' spiritual dismantlement brought by the urban lifestyle, "A Dilettante" shows the connectivity between humans and nature as the fundamental remedy for healing of the human soul.

*As grass may grow in and some verdurous tree,
And some few yards of blueness and of clouds
May stretch above, making immensity;
When, lost out of our petty unit selves,
The heart grows large in the grave trance of peace
And all things breathing, growing, are its kin,
And all the fair and blossoming earth is home. (Webster, 2000, p. 280)*

In these lines, the poet contrasts the immensity of the outside material universe to the pettiness of human beings and proclaims that in order to conceive the greatness of the universe, it is a precondition for humans to step aside their "petty unit selves" and begin to comprehend their own selves not as uniquely special owners or the hegemonic masters of the nonhuman world, but as indistinguishably small species among miscellaneous diversified and complicated life forms (Webster, 2000, p. 280). Once they can overcome the barriers of their anthropocentric self-centeredness and move beyond the humanity's dualistic mindset which interdicts them from a complete interaction with nature, humans can truly discover that human identity is not something dichotomously constructed against nature but, in fact, is constituted by nature. According to Dophijn and van der Tuin, dualism "comes to fore as the structuring principle of the transcendental and humanist traditions" and hierarchically categorizes "mind over matter or culture over nature" (2012, p. 97). Appropriating a non-dualistic view of the world, Webster assures her readers that a human heart can grow large in intertwinement with the greater material world and experience "the grave trance of peace" if we achieve to transcend "our petty unit selves" (Webster, 2000, p. 280). Webster, further, avows that widening the contours of human identity will enable humans to notice their spiritual connectedness to the nonhuman nature. The poet concisely puts forward a dis-anthropocentric ideology of the inextricable embranglement and the kinship of human and nonhuman beings by stating that the human heart will know that "all things breathing, growing, are its kin" and "all the fair and blossoming earth is home" (p. 280). Aligning humans with nonhuman entities of nature and positioning humans as tiny and insignificant elements of a biologically complex, incessantly dynamic and vigorous universe, Webster invalidates a strongly established Victorian dualistic ideology which invigorates the burgeoning of divisions between human and nature, and culture and nature. In the following part of the poem, Webster lingers on canalizing her infatuation with the material universe to her readers by encouraging them to use every possible ways of intercommunicating with disparate elements of nature, ranging from plants to animals:

*Count the world loam or gravel, stocked with flowers
Or weeds or cabbages, as we shall find
Within our own small ranges, and (being wise
And full of care for all the universe)
Wonder, and blame, and theorize, and plan,
By the broad guide of our experiences!
...
Twere a neat world if levelled by the ants;
No ridges, no rough gaps, all fined and soft.*

*But I will rather use my antish wits
In smoothing just my cell and at my doors. (Webster, 2000, p. 281)*

Webster, in lines above, substantially conditions the development of human wisdom on a scale of humans' involvement with the outside physical nature and how much they respect and care about nature. Engaging with soil, plants, flowers, growing cabbages or weeds are counted imperative for the physical and mental maturation of humans in such a way that spending time in interfusion with nature, as the poet believes, will provide humans with a "broad guide" for their experiences which will transform them into accomplished individuals who are "wise" and "full of care for all the universe" (Webster, 2000, p. 281). The notions of theorizing, planning, wondering, and blaming are associated with humans' intellectual competencies which are conventionally and anthropocentrically presumed to be the most prominent feature, demarcating them from the rest of nature. Therefore, it is a groundbreaking post-humanist understanding that is proffered by Webster that the development of human intellect is only possible by building a symbiotic relationship with the material universe which is actively dynamic and equally agent as human beings. Barad comments on the inseparability of intelligence and the material universe and underscores that intelligibility is not a "human-dependant characteristic but a feature of the world in its differential becoming" and "an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation" (2007, p. 149). Barad, further, argues that "matter and meaning, the literal and the figurative, are never as separate as we like to pretend" (p. 362). By the same token, Webster, in her poem, bestows intelligibility and meaning on the every natural entity living in material universe and evocatively declares that intelligence and wisdom can be acquired by humans as long as they conjoin with nature and embrace each natural body not as an isolated object but as a partner and kindred of human body. Iovino and Oppermann elucidate the interconnectedness of humans and the biosphere as follows:

The emerging dynamics of matter and meaning, body and identity, being and knowing, nature and culture, bios and society are therefore to be examined and thought not in isolation from each other, but through one another, matter being an ongoing process of embodiment that involves and mutually determines cognitions, social constructions, scientific practices, and ethical attitudes. (2014, p. 5)

In accordance with Iovino and Oppermann's material ecocritical perspectives of the universe, Webster has an ultimate faith in the sagacity of the material universe which is full of self-conscious, attentive, and sentient individuals who are equally complicated, agential, and intelligent as human beings and sometimes even wiser and more rational than humans. For instance, Webster does not abstain from expressing her admiration for an ant's organizational skills and claims that the world would be a better place if it were ruled by animals, in her own words, it would be a "neat world if levelled by the ants; / No ridges, no rough gaps, all fined and soft" (Webster, 2000, p. 281). Webster, here, refers to the foundational differences between a human perspective of the world and a nonhuman perspective of the world. Humans' understanding of the world is predicated on constructing hierarchies, binaries, and dualities while non human world renders itself meaningful through entanglements, intercommunications, companionships, and interdependencies. In nonhuman material universe, as Webster specifically notes down, there are no "ridges, no rough gaps" because nothing in nature operates according to the blindsided principles of anthropocentrism which categorizes the physical universe as consisting of privileged human beings and submissive nonhuman beings (Webster, 2000, p. 281). Materialist perspective views the matter, as Coole and Frost underpin, as being more than just a matter and as "an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable" (2010, p. 9). In congruence with the materialist perspective of the world, Webster is so much astounded by this force of nonhuman vitality and intelligence that she genuinely expresses her yearning for using her "antish wits" to experience the world from a distinctive nonhuman perspective (Webster, 2000, p. 281). The poet's aspiration to have an animal mind presents conspicuous evidence of her acknowledgment of the material universe as embedded with self-sentient

and intelligent organisms that are “complex, interconnected, and surprising networks of things, each with its own agency, always liable to interact with human plans in surprising and disconcerting ways” (Clark, 2019, p. 114). Webster’s determination to use her antish wits is also reminiscent of David Abram who allocates himself to teach how to think with body and mind and the experience of becoming animal which he explains as “the matter of becoming more deeply human by acknowledging, affirming, and growing into our animality” (Abram, 2010, p. 10). The concept of becoming animal encapsulates looking into the world from a nonhuman perspective instead of humanity’s dualistic outlook. Arrogating a materialist understanding of the world, Abram perceives that “matter is not inert, but is rather animate (or self-organizing)” which, in the end, ensures that “the hierarchy collapses, and we are left with a diversely differentiated field of animate beings, each of which has its gifts relative to the others” (p. 47). Like Abram, Webster, in her poem, adopts an ant’s perspective of world, goes through a corporeal experience of becoming animal which allows her to overcome distances and dismantle hierarchies and divisions between her own body and the rest of the world. Repudiating the superiority of her human reasoning, Webster embraces her “antish wits” which empower her to encounter all beings in this entirely animate, material universe and participate in its ongoing interactivity, reciprocity, and mutual entanglement. The poem, therefore, unravels Webster’s attentiveness towards nature which dictates that it is exigent to step out of the confinements of the anthropocentric human mindset in order to fully grasp the alluring complexity and diversity of nonhuman world.

CONCLUSION

Reading Augusta Webster’s poems from the standpoint of material ecocriticism have divulged ecological sensitivity of the poet towards nonhuman beings who are not seen as objects but as living entities. On account of the conformist Victorian mentality about the humanity’s absolutist moral values, Webster’s material ecocritical understanding of the world which erases dualities, hierarchies, polarities, and distinctions between humans and nonhumans can be considered exceedingly revolutionary, turning her into a pioneer materialist philosopher who recognizes that humans are not the only distinguished species who have the agency; contrarily, there are multitudes of nonhuman beings who possess agency and vitality with a power to influence and change their environment. Webster, with her recurrent allusions to the unbreakable physical and emotional connectedness of humans and nature, proves to be a landmark poet who takes the lead in her own society by advocating the necessity of changing the anthropocentric human perception of the universe in order to see the intense vitality, agency, and ongoing interactivity between nonhuman individuals. With her keenness to participate in the ongoing activity and performative agency of the material universe, Webster shows how futile it is for humans to try to keep themselves aloof from nature while they owe their physical existence to the materiality of the universe. This vital materiality of the universe transforms, shapes, and reshapes its individuals while also composing the textuality of Webster’s poems, inspiring her imagination to give the structure of her poems. In the end, there is an ongoing flow of vital energy stemming from nature and transmitted to humans and their textual world. Therefore, nature’s materiality becomes the ultimate cause of the human and nonhuman beings’ coming into being, constituting their mind, language, and imagination, texts, and contexts. Likewise, not only the physical world, but also the imaginative sphere of literature is composed by the matter which stimulates Webster to write her poems, reminding humans of their physical and emotional enmeshment with the nonhuman world.

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