Voices of the Non-Human: Animal, Plant, and Elemental Perspectives in Contemporary Environmental Literature

Wannisa Thana-wora-chai*

Department of Literature Studies, Thammasat University, Phra Borom Maha Ratchawang, Phra Nakhon, Bangkok, Thailand

*Corresponding author: Wannisa Thana-wora-chai, wannisaChai_98@gmail.com

Abstract

The deepening ecological crisis of the Anthropocene has catalysed a significant turn in contemporary literature, compelling a radical reimagining of narrative perspective and agency. Moving beyond purely human-centered dramas, a vital strand of environmental writing seeks to articulate the Voices of the Non-Human. This article argues that contemporary authors are developing sophisticated narrative strategies to represent the subjective experiences, agencies, and temporalities of animals, plants, and elemental forces (earth, water, air). Through close textual analysis of seminal works, we examine how these Non-Human Perspectives function not merely as symbolic backdrops or allegorical devices, but as central, agential viewpoints that challenge anthropocentric ontology and epistemology. We analyse the distinct narrative modes employed: the embodied, sensory-consciousness of animals; the slow, networked, and chemical intelligence of plants; and the vast, agential materiality of elemental processes. A conceptual framework (Figure 1) maps this narrative ecosystem, while a comparative table (Table 1) delineates the specific literary techniques, theoretical challenges, and ethical implications associated with each perspective. This study concludes that giving narrative voice to the non-human is a profound ethical and aesthetic project. It expands the realm of literary empathy, fosters a pluralistic understanding of worldhood, and is essential for cultivating the ecological consciousness required to navigate our precarious planetary future.

Keywords

Ecocriticism, Non-Human Narratives, Environmental Literature, Anthropocene, Narrative Perspective, Posthumanism, Material Ecocriticism, Animal Studies

1. Introduction

The Imperative of Non-Human Narration

The defining feature of the Anthropocene is the overwhelming, geophysical-scale impact of human activity on Earth's systems. In this epoch, literature faces an urgent ethical and representational challenge: how to give narrative form to a world in crisis, a world comprised of countless entangled lives and agencies that have historically been silenced, objectified, or rendered passive within human discourse. Traditional environmental writing, while raising awareness, often remained locked in a human perspective, viewing nature as a setting, resource, or sublime spectacle to be saved [1]. The contemporary project we examine is more radical: it attempts to decenter the human and narrate *from* the position of the other.

This article explores the burgeoning literary movement that grants narrative voice and perspective to non-human entities-specifically animals, plants, and elemental forces. This is not about anthropomorphism in the simplistic sense of dressing animals in human clothes, but about a serious artistic endeavour to imagine alternative modes of being, perception, and time. Drawing from theoretical currents in posthumanism, material ecocriticism, and multispecies ethnography, writers are crafting narratives that explore animal subjectivity, plant sentience, and the agential power of matter [2]. We posit that these works perform crucial cultural work: they erode the human/nature binary, cultivate a literacy in non-human signs, and model forms of attention essential for ethical coexistence.

Our analysis is structured in three core sections, each dedicated to a primary non-human perspective. We begin with Animal Perspectives, focusing on narratives of embodied, conscious interiority. We then turn to Plant Perspectives, examining literary strategies for representing vegetal life's radical alterity-its slowness, distributed intelligence, and chemical communication. Finally, we explore Elemental Perspectives, where earth, water, and air become agential narrators or central forces. Through a synthesizing discussion and visual schema, we demonstrate how these voices collectively reconfigure the novel's potential as an instrument of ecological thought [3].

2. Theoretical Groundings: From Anthropocentrism to Polyphony

To appreciate the innovation of non-human narratives, one must understand the theoretical shift they enact. Western literary tradition is deeply anthropocentric, with narrative consciousness typically reserved for human characters. Non-human entities serve as symbols, metaphors, or plot devices. Ecocriticism's first wave challenged this by focusing on the representation of nature and environmental themes. The second wave, and more distinctly material ecocriticism, argues for the agency and expressive capacity of the material world itself.

The work of scholars like Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann posits that matter is not inert but narrative: it has a story to be read-in landscapes, bodies, and chemical interactions. Similarly, posthumanist theory (Braidotti, Haraway) dismantles the exceptionalism of the human, urging us to see the world as a network of interrelated, agential beings [4]. Critical Animal Studies challenges the human/animal hierarchy, while Plant Studies (Marder) argues for the unique ontology and temporality of vegetal life. Contemporary literature is the laboratory where these theories are tested, explored, and given affective, narrative form. The central question becomes: What literary techniques can plausibly, and respectfully, bridge the chasm of difference to suggest a non-human point of view?

Beyond Representation: Towards an Ethics of Narrative Enmeshment. While the theoretical frameworks of posthumanism and material ecocriticism provide the philosophical impetus for non-human narration, they also unveil a profound methodological aporia. If, as these theories assert, the human is always already entangled with and constituted by the more-than-human world, then the project of "giving voice" risks re-inscribing the very separation it seeks to overcome. The task, therefore, is not merely one of representation (portraying the other) but of enactment (performing entanglement). This shifts the critical focus from the *accuracy* of the represented perspective to the *relational ethics* of the narrative act itself [5]. How does the text formally stage the encounter between human language and non-human being? Writers engaged in this project often employ what might be termed metafictional humility: they embed within their narratives a self-consciousness about the limitations and violence of translation. The narrative becomes a site where language stutters, fractures, or expands to register the pressure of the incommensurable. This ethical turn-from speaking *for* to letting the other *disturb* speech-marks a maturation of the non-human narrative beyond mere thematic innovation into a reflexive literary praxis.

3. Animal Perspectives: Embodied Consciousness and Multispecies Kinship

Narratives focalized through animal consciousness are the most established form of non-human perspective. The key distinction in contemporary works is a move away from fable or allegory toward a serious attempt to represent an embodied, sensory-based subjectivity [6].

●Embodied Sensorium and Umwelt: Writers like Richard Powers in *The Echo Maker* (through the sandhill cranes) and Eva Hornung in *Dog Boy* immerse the reader in a non-human *umwelt*-the perceptual world as experienced by the animal. This involves a prose attuned to smell, sound, and instinct over abstract thought. The narrative privileges scent trails, the reading of body language, and reactive survival logic, deliberately alienating the reader from familiar human cognitive patterns [7].

●Challenges of Representation: The inherent difficulty is avoiding simplistic projection. Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone* attempts this by constructing a complex elephant culture with its own mythology and language of infrasound, grounding its strangeness in real ethology. These narratives often highlight the violence of human-animal encounters not as backdrop, but as the central traumatic event of the animal's life, as seen in the brutal realism of a novel like *The Bees* by Laline Paull.

●Ethical and Narrative Function: The animal perspective generates a powerful ethical shock. By experiencing the world through the senses of a wolf, a dog, or a bird, the human reader's worldview is destabilized. It makes the animal a subject of a life, not an object, fostering a sense of multispecies kinship and exposing the violence inherent in anthropocentrism.

●Narrative Ethics and the Blurring of Species Boundaries: The ethical shock of the animal perspective is not solely generated by empathy for a suffering subject; it is equally produced by a narrative destabilization of the human-animal boundary. Contemporary works increasingly experiment with perspectives that are neither purely human nor entirely animal, but hybrid and transitional. This can take the form of a human character whose consciousness is progressively "animalized" through trauma, obsession, or mystical connection (e.g., the fox-human metamorphosis in Sarah Hall's *The Wolf Border*), or an animal narrator whose cognitive processes begin to approximate, yet crucially differ from, human logic [8]. These narratives do not offer a stable animal "voice" but instead chart a liminal zone where identity and ontology become fluid. This formal strategy performs a deeper philosophical work: it challenges the ontological hygiene that underpins speciesism, suggesting that consciousness and selfhood are not the exclusive property of *Homo sapiens* but are emergent properties within a continuous, multispecies field of life. The narrative itself becomes an experiment in becoming-with, questioning where "we" end and the "animal" begins.

4. Plant Perspectives: Narrating Slowness, Network, and Chemical Intelligence

Representing plant life poses a greater narrative challenge than animal perspective due to vegetal life's profound temporal and morphological difference. Plants are sessile, growth-oriented, and communicate through chemical signals and root networks [9]. Contemporary literature rises to this challenge through innovative formal techniques.

•Temporal Distortion and Narrative Slowness: To convey plant time, narratives must slow down. Richard Powers' *The Overstory* is a masterclass in this. Sections focalized through trees expand narrative time to encompass decades of growth, seasonal cycles, and the slow-motion catastrophe of deforestation. The novel's structure itself-a roots, trunk, crown, and seeds-mimics arboreal form.

•Distributed Consciousness and Mycorrhizal Narration: Plants lack a central brain; their intelligence is networked. Writers symbolize this through fragmented or collective narration. In *The Overstory*, the consciousness of key characters becomes deeply entangled with trees, suggesting a hybrid, networked mind. Other works imagine direct plant communication, portraying forests as interconnected, sensing communities, as hinted at in the "Woodwide Web" of Peter Wohlleben's non-fiction, which finds its narrative echo in recent fiction [10].

•Agency without Animism: The plant perspective asserts agency without resorting to simple personification. It is the agency of growth, of seeking light, of chemical defense, of symbiotic negotiation. This perspective reframes humans not as stewards of passive flora, but as participants in a vast, intelligent, and ancient vegetal world to which we are late arrivals and upon which we are utterly dependent.

5. Elemental Perspectives: The Agency of Earth, Water, and Air

The most radical decentering occurs when narrative voice or primary agential force is granted to the elemental: the geologic force of earth, the fluid medium of water, or the atmospheric body of air. These are perspectives of vast scale and inhuman time that dissolve individual subjectivity into material process [11].

•Elemental as Narrator or Protagonist: In novels like *The Sea* by John Banville, the sea is not a setting but a haunting, memory-holding presence that structures human consciousness. More explicitly, in *The History of the Rain* by Niall Williams, rain becomes a central, rhythmic, life-giving force. These elements are granted a kind of consciousness-not human, but a pervasive, shaping agency.

•Geontological Narratives and Deep Time: This perspective engages with deep time. A novel like *A Tale for the Time Being* by Ruth Ozeki, while not solely elemental, weaves the Pacific Ocean and its gyres of plastic into the narrative as a temporal and connective force. It tells the story of currents, tsunamis, and radioactive isotopes, making planetary processes key narrative agents.

•Material Storytelling: From this viewpoint, human stories are small eddies within much larger material flows. The elemental perspective can be apocalyptic (as in climate fiction where superstorms are antagonists) or revelatory, showing how human bodies and histories are composed of and vulnerable to the very elements we seek to control. It embodies the core tenet of material ecocriticism: that matter tells stories.

The Limits and Critique of Non-Human Narration

As the non-human narrative project gains cultural currency, it invites necessary critical scrutiny. Two interconnected lines of critique emerge, demanding careful consideration by authors and scholars alike.

•The Paradox of Appropriation: The most persistent critique centers on the paradox of appropriation. To narrate from a non-human standpoint using human language, conventions, and market distribution is an act of profound cultural appropriation, potentially extending the colonial logic of capture and assimilation to the very fabric of existence [12]. Does the literary "voice" granted to a river or a forest ultimately serve to domesticate its radical otherness, making it palatable for human consumption within the economy of empathy? This risk is particularly acute when such narratives, however well-intentioned, are consumed as aesthetic commodities that provide a cathartic sense of connection without necessitating material political or ecological change. The challenge, then, is to develop narratives that foreground their own complicity and insufficiency, that point towards the silence beyond the page, and that actively disrupt, rather than satisfy, the reader's desire for mastery and comprehension.

•Political Efficacy and the Horizon of Action: A second critique questions the political efficacy of these narrative experiments. In an era of concrete ecological collapse, does the sophisticated literary mediation of non-human consciousness distract from urgent, on-the-ground activism and policy change? There is a danger that the focus on interiority and agency at the level of the individual animal, plant, or elemental force might obscure the systemic, political-economic drivers of extinction and climate chaos. The most politically potent works, therefore, are those that manage to dialectically link the intimate, phenomenological scale of non-human experience with the macroscopic scale of capitalist world-ecology. They show how the trauma of an individual elephant is inseparable from global circuits of ivory trade and habitat commodification, or how the "voice" of a polluted river is a direct indictment of industrial agriculture and weak environmental governance. The ultimate test for the non-human narrative may be its ability to not only expand empathy but also to clarify and galvanize strategies for collective action against the structures that silence the more-than-human world [13].

Table 1. Comparative analysis of non-human perspectives in literature.

| Perspective	Core Ontological Trait	Key Literary Techniques	Primary Theoretical Lens	Exemplary Texts (Partial List)	Ethical/Aesthetic Impact
Animal	Embodied, mobile consciousness; sensory *umwelt*; emotion.	Focalization through non-human senses; ethological realism; defamiliarization of human world.	Critical Animal Studies; Phenomenolog.	*The White Bone* (Gowdy), *Dog Boy* (Hornung), *The Bees* (Paull).	Fosters empathy; challenges human exceptionalism; highlights animal subjectivity.
Plant	Sessile, networked intelligence; slow temporal scale; chemical communication.	Narrative structural mimicry (e.g., rhizomatic); dilated/compressed time; collective voice.	Plant Studies; Posthumanism; Network Theory.	*The Overstory* (Powers), *Prodigal Summer* (Kingsolver).	Cultivates patience & attention; redefines agency & communication; emphasizes interdependence.
Elemental	Vast, agential materiality; inhuman spatio-temporal scale; formative force.	Elemental as narrator/force; engagement with deep time; dissolution of individual subjectivity.	Material Ecocriticism; Geophilosophy; New Materialism.	*The Sea* (Banville), *History of the Rain* (Williams), *The Swan Book* (Wright).	De-centers the human utterly; evokes awe & vulnerability; narrates planetary processes.

Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of non-human perspectives in literature, examining how animals, plants, and elemental forces are represented as narrative agents rather than passive backgrounds. Each perspective is analyzed across multiple dimensions, including its underlying ontological assumptions, narrative techniques, theoretical frameworks, representative texts, and ethical or aesthetic implications.

The animal perspective emphasizes embodied experience, mobility, and sensory awareness. Literary techniques such as non-human focalization and ethological realism are used to defamiliarize the human-centered worldview. Drawing on critical animal studies and phenomenology, these narratives aim to foster empathy, challenge human exceptionalism, and foreground animal subjectivity.

The plant perspective focuses on sessility, networked intelligence, and extended temporal scales, often expressed through narrative structures that mimic rhizomatic or collective forms of organization. Informed by plant studies and posthuman theory, such works cultivate attentiveness to vegetal agency, communication, and interdependence, encouraging readers to rethink agency beyond movement and speed.

The elemental perspective extends narrative attention to nonliving yet agentic forces such as oceans, climate, and geological processes. Rooted in material ecocriticism, geophilosophy, and new materialist thought, these narratives decenter the human subject by emphasizing vast spatial and temporal scales, deep time, and planetary vulnerability. The ethical and aesthetic effect is to evoke awe, humility, and an awareness of humanity's embeddedness within Earth systems.

The table demonstrates how non-human perspectives expand literary form and ethics, transforming literature into a medium for ecological reflection and multispecies awareness.
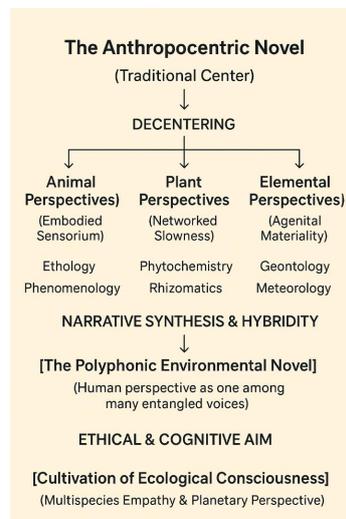
Figure 1. The narrative ecosystem of non-human voices: a conceptual framework.

Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual shift in literary narrative from a traditional anthropocentric framework toward a polyphonic, ecological mode of storytelling. At the top, *the anthropocentric novel* represents conventional narratives in which humans occupy the central and dominant perspective. The process of decentering then redistributes narrative agency away from humans alone and toward multiple nonhuman viewpoints.

Three alternative perspectives emerge from this decentering process. Animal perspectives emphasize embodied perception and sensory experience, drawing on fields such as ethology and phenomenology. Plant perspectives foreground slowness, distributed networks, and relational growth, informed by phytochemistry and rhizomatic thinking. Elemental perspectives extend agency beyond living organisms to materials and forces such as weather and geology, engaging with concepts from geontology and meteorology.

These diverse viewpoints are brought together through narrative synthesis and hybridity, resulting in *the polyphonic environmental novel*, where the human voice becomes one among many interconnected and entangled voices. The final aim of this narrative transformation is ethical and cognitive: the cultivation of ecological consciousness, fostering multispecies empathy and a planetary perspective that redefines humanity's relationship with the more-than-human world.

6. Synthesis: The Polyphonic Environmental Novel and Its Challenges

The most powerful contemporary environmental novels do not isolate these perspectives but weave them into a polyphonic whole. *The Overstory* is perhaps the prime example, intertwining human stories with the slow, networked time of trees and the catastrophic force of storms. This creates a narrative ecosystem where human agency is contextualized-and often humbled-by the vaster timescales and intelligence of the non-human world.

However, this project is fraught with philosophical and aesthetic challenges. The problem of anthropomorphism is ever-present: are we truly accessing the other, or merely constructing a mirror of ourselves in another form? The best novels acknowledge this gap, using the impossibility of perfect translation as a source of tension and humility. Furthermore, there is a risk of aestheticizing crisis or lapsing into a naïve romanticism. The ethical potency of these narratives lies in their ability to balance wonder with urgency, to foster connection while squarely facing the realities of extinction and degradation.

7. Conclusion: Towards an Ecological Consciousness

The literary project of voicing the non-human is one of the most vital cultural responses to the Anthropocene. By narrating from the perspectives of animals, plants, and elements, contemporary writers are not just adding new characters to fiction; they are fundamentally reorganizing the novel's epistemological and ethical foundations. They train readers in new modes of attention-to the scent trail, the seasonal signal, the chemical cue, the geologic timescale.

This body of work performs the critical function of expanding the circle of narrative empathy. It asks us to listen to the stories told in bark, river stone, and birdsong, and to recognize that the human story is but one thread in a vast, fraying tapestry of life. In doing so, it moves beyond warning and lamentation to actively participate in the creation of a new, more porous, and more humble story about life on Earth. The ultimate aim is not just a new genre of literature, but the cultivation of an ecological consciousness-a felt, narrative understanding of our profound entanglement with a world that speaks, if we learn to listen in radically new ways.

References

[1]   Haraway, D. J. (2016). Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw25q

[2]   Bennett, J. (2010). Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391623

[3]   Tsing, A. L. (2015). The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins. Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77bcc

[4]   Carroll, N. (2001). Mass Art: The Debate Continues. Journal of Aesthetic Education, 35(3), 15–22. https://doi.org/10.2307/3333606

[5]   Heise, U. K. (2008). Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195335637.001.0001

[6]   Ghosh, A. (2016). The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable. University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226323176.001.0001

[7]   Chouraqui, Frank, Ambiguity and the Absolute: Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty on the Question of Truth, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (FUP) (New York, NY, 2013; online edn, Fordham Scholarship Online, 29 May 2014), https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823254118.001.0001

[8]   Little, B., & Winch, A. (2021). The New Patriarchs of Digital Capitalism: Celebrity Tech Founders and Networks of Power (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429291005

[9]   Johns-Putra, A. (Ed.). (2019). Climate and Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108505321

[10] Norton, A. (2022). The Psychology of Mathematics: A Journey of Personal Mathematical Empowerment for Educators and Curious Minds (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003181729

[11] Nixon, R. (2011). Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061194

[12] DeLoughrey, E., & Handley, G. B. (Eds.). (2011). Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780195394429.001.0001

[13] Buhmann, K. (2021). Human Rights: A Key Idea for Business and Society (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003056195