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**From Passive Flora to Storied Matter: Plant Agency in Selected Speculative Fiction**

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**Abstract:** Speculative narratives enliven readers with visions of altered futures, where human beings coexist with diverse species. Speculative plant-centric narratives, termed Speculative Botany, are a relatively new genre in speculative fiction that combines both philosophical and speculative insights. The genre portrays sentient flora not in the background as in traditional texts, but as active, sentient forces. These texts help readers imagine an agentic world of plants, portraying them as possessing their own characteristic attributes. It challenges the symbolic and objective representation of the vegetal world.

Drawing on the philosophical and theoretical framework of Critical Plant Studies and material ecocriticism, the paper probes into the material and agentic role of plants in selected works of speculative fiction. Vegetal agency is manifested through interspecies communication, plant-human entanglements, plant intelligence and the ability of flora to transform and reshape human, ecological, and narrative structures. The paper makes a close textual analysis of the agentic role of sentient flora depicted in selected speculative texts. The central argument of the study is that plant agency challenges human-centric norms, resulting in a paradigm shift in human perspectives toward plants, thereby restructuring the way humanity relates ethically to the nonhuman world.

**Keywords:** *Critical Plant Studies, Material ecocriticism, Speculative Botany, Plant agency, Plant sentience*

The anthropocentric worldview preferred human-centred notions, interests and experiences, marginalising the contributions of all nonhuman entities as insignificant. Every other species on Earth is compared with respect to human attributes, ignoring their inherent qualities. The nonhuman world has long been neglected and relegated to the margins owing to anthropocentric or “zoocentric preferences” (Hall 95). According to Matthew Hall, “Zoocentrism is a method for achieving the exclusion of plants from relationships of moral consideration.” (95). Western epistemology situates plants at the bottom of the hierarchy of living beings, which is below animals. While Animal studies have already been established as a major field of study, offering insights into animal ethics and rights, plants still remain neglected despite their major role in the sustenance of life on earth. They are so ubiquitous that we often take them for granted or simply pretend not to have seen them. But plants occupy the majority of biomass in this universe, and both human and animal sustenance is impossible without these life forms. Major scientific and epistemological discourses excluded this botanical being from philosophical discussions, reducing it to mere resources for human survival.

This continuous exclusion of plants has largely contributed to “plant blindness” (Wandersee and Schlucher), which further escalated the neglect of the plant world. Critical plant studies emerge in response to this large-scale neglect of vegetal beings by recognising the inherent worth and merit of these ecological actors. Critical Plant Studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines the relationship between plants and humans from a different perspective, by foregrounding their agency and consciousness. Plants exhibit their agency in the form of growth, maturity, reproduction, etc, and these forms of vitality are indeed considered a legitimate part of world-making. Matthew Hall’s *Plants as Person* and Michael Marder’s *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* are the two texts that offer a deep insight into the ontological significance of the vegetal world. Material ecocriticism contributes to the growing studies on ecological matter. It views the plant as a material form capable of exhibiting its vibrancy and material performance. Key thinkers of material ecocriticism, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, describe matter as “storied matter”(1), which brings into concern a new material non-anthropocentric view that dismantles the traditional Western philosophical thought that relies on dichotomous modes of thinking.

Speculative botany situates these concepts within a futuristic imagined ecology, portraying plants in complex relationships with multiple species. It portrays the mutually coexisting and symbiotic ecology as well as the uncanny and weird world of ecology, portraying them as colonising and altering the human world, forming plant-human hybrids etc. This futuristic genre envisages a shift from mere metaphorical representation to the literalisation of plant narratives. This shift manifests in the representation of vegetal forms that speak, act intelligently, reproduce human memory, or de-

essentialise anthropocentric classifications. Speculative botany challenges the limits of plant boundaries and assigns new roles to vegetal life. The genre challenges the anthropocentric perspectives that marginalise the nonhuman entities. These narratives explore the imaginative and futuristic potentials of the plant world. The interdisciplinary nature of the narrative reflects the environmental anxieties, ethical dilemmas and societal concerns.

The paper argues that speculative botany emerges not as a literary genre that envisions an imagined future ecology, but also offers a practical framework for future ecological sustenance. It advocates an ecological and philosophical discourse that reconfigures our traditional epistemological understanding of nonhuman life. By analysing selected speculative texts, the study proposes that plants in these altered ecological fictions are agents that can play a significant role in transforming the ecological, ontological, ethical and narrative structures. The paper further conceptualises speculative botany as a literary genre that foregrounds the diverse manifestations of vegetal agency represented in these narratives, such as plant-human entanglements, multispecies coexistence, becoming plant-like, etc.

The paper attempts a close textual analysis of selected speculative texts, namely *Semiosis* by Sue Burke, *Trees* by Ali Shaw and “The Fruit of My Woman” by Han Kang, to explore how plant agency, subjectivity and plant-human entanglements are manifested in these narratives.

Sue Burke’s *Semiosis* is a multigenerational narrative exploring the possibilities of multispecies coexistence on an Earth-like planet named Pax in the year 2060. The story, narrated from the first-person perspective of eight narrators, seven humans and one indigenous sentient bamboo, destabilises human narrative structures by including a nonhuman narrator. The narrative initially shows human attempts to master the alien ecology. These clashes subside as soon as the narrative foregrounds the agentic vigour of the indigenous vegetation. The edible vines in Pax are not just passive organic resources but effective caretakers of nature by preventing human attempts to conquer the Pax ecology. The vines’ intentional act is an example of posthuman subjectivity reflecting Hall’s concept of “plant personhood” (183), which affirms personhood and intentionality to the floral beings. The vines’ ability to strategically alter their composition undermines human assumptions of the vegetal world as passive.

The ecological order in *Semiosis* is regulated and controlled by the indigenous flora in Pax, compelling the humans to lead a negotiable existence with other ecological beings. The extension of vines to human fields and poisoning their crops shows a strategic attempt at denying human domestication and exploitation. Here, the text situates the botanical beings as manipulators that can regulate human actions by controlling the ecology. The vines’ act of extracting nutrients and resources from dead humans and animals signifies the interconnectedness between human and nonhuman beings.

The title *Semiosis*, referring to communication with the aid of signs, highlights the significance of human understanding of these sign patterns for survival. This highlights interconnectedness among species, which resonates well with Critical Plant Studies' emphasis on the interspecies relationship between plants and humans. Humans cannot establish their colonies on Pax without acknowledging the indigenous vegetation on Pax. Moreover, the plants' ability to plan and react according to circumstances aligns with Michael Marder's concept of "plant thinking" (6) and "vegetal otherness" (36). Ultimately, humans understand that their survival depends not on conquest but on ethical and moral relationships with one another.

One of the significant characters, the sentient bamboo, Stevland, is accorded human-like status in the narrative. By making it one of the nonhuman narrators, the novel challenges the anthropocentric narrative techniques. It was named Stevland in honour of the first person to die on Pax. As one character observes, "It earned a human name in honour of its importance, and pretty soon we started calling it "him" as if he were a man and not a hermaphrodite plant."(131). This anthropocentric shift reflects humans' acceptance of botanical life and the dissolution of the rigid human/nature boundaries. Stevland collaborates with human efforts to find cures for deadly diseases. The acts of Stevland exceed the limits of human perceptions of vegetal life and reestablish a new kind of mutually interdependent relationship between species.

The posthuman perspective is made dominant in the text, destabilising humans' position as the centre of the narrative. The humans' survival on the new planet depends on their mutual respect, negotiation and relational approach with these ecological actors rather than becoming the colonisers. Thus, the traditional inert plant becomes a storied matter in the text, and the narrative unfolds from the relations that result from their mutual coexistence. In this instance, the sentient vegetal being attains the status of a cocreator of meaning, dismantling the conventional concept of plants as objects. This strongly foregrounds the material ecocritical perspective that all inanimate and nonhuman matter are active and vibrant beings capable of recounting stories, making themselves narrative agents. Sue Burke best exemplifies the role of matter as storied and agentic in the novel *Semiosis*.

Burke creates the sentient bamboo, Stevland, with its own perception, intelligence, and intention. The bamboo observes the colonists without their knowledge, looking for potential survival strategies. Stevland reflects, "I would have died without these new foreigners, I will die without them." (87). It further observes, "Animals never grow smarter, but I do. Ours will be a rewarding relationship." (88). It asserts that its intelligence is smarter than that of animals, including humans. With its agentic power, the bamboo controls and regulates the habits of predatory animals in Pax. Stevland never asserts himself as a ruler or dictator but demands mutual coexistence. It provides

essentials to humans, such as food, vitamins and medicines, but also punishes those who try to master or enslave the ecology. Through its intelligent and mutually coexisting behaviour, Stevland deploys a brilliance that persuades humans to adopt an ethical and moral relationship with the ecology. Thus, the sentient flora exhibit a subtle yet significant control over humans, marking a major shift in human power structure.

The sentient bamboo communicates with other vegetation on Pax with the help of its decentralised root network system, allowing it to plan and respond strategically to ecological threats. These characteristic features of the bamboo suggest “vegetal existentiality” (Marder 94), which explains that vegetal life is scattered across leaves, stems and roots through which it interacts with the surrounding ecosystem. By foregrounding the decentralised communication system inherent in plants, Burke challenges human assumptions about nonhuman sentience. The vegetal sentience represented in the text also echoes Hall’s characteristics of plant personhood. Hall observes,

“As persons, plants are not naively thought to have human faculties. They are understood to be living beings with their own perspective, and with the ability to communicate in their own way. Personhood thus emerges from a focus on relating and the recognition of shared volition and intentionality in natural beings.” (Hall 1459).

The text, therefore, centres a posthuman intelligent world, in which vegetal life participates in shaping the future ecology. The various vegetal interventions in *Semiosis* can be interpreted as a restructuring of the ecological hierarchy in which the botanical beings emerge as playing significant roles in human survival. By portraying an ecology filled with vegetal forces, the narrative dismantles the conventional notion of human beings as conquerors of nature and focuses on interspecies coexistence and symbiotic relationships.

While *Semiosis* presents the mutual coexistence of multispecies entities, *The Trees* by Ali Shaw presents a weird and fierce nonhuman world. In *The Trees*, the human-centric world is shattered when the trees conquer the urban city, exploding from underneath, shattering the peaceful life of the human settlement. The text describes, “The forest burst full-grown out of the earth, in booming upper-cuts of trunks and bludgeoning branches. It rammed through roads and houses alike, shattering bricks and exploding glass.” (Shaw 6).

Shaw’s narrative posits trees as a strong agentic force capable of dominating, manipulating, and even controlling the human world. Their sudden intrusion into human space signifies reconquering their natural habitat and destabilising human authority. From a material ecocritical perspective, the forest is not just a passive presence but a strong narrative force capable of redefining human monopoly

over nature. Serenella Iovino conceptualises “matter as a text, as a site of narrativity” (45), which is manifested in the text with the forest occupying the human spaces. *The Trees* situates the forest as a strong narrative agent, unfolding stories and restructuring the human monopoly over the environment. Thus, the narrative envisions a new ecological order, where the living and the non-living matter exist as “causal structure” (Opperman 26), influencing each other.

The text describes, “In the blink of an eye, the world had changed” (6), which signifies the forest in the narrative is not a passive presence but a dynamic force that acts with intention. The forest’s encroachment on urban spaces shows the reclamation of its natural space and habitat, long conquered by human expansion. Humanity is rendered psychologically disoriented by the sight of familiar spaces turned into spaces of ecological disorder. The violent resurgence of trees subverts human hierarchy and makes them mere fragile objects in the face of vegetal power. The collapse of all technological and sophisticated man-made objects signifies the failure of humanity when met with a posthuman agency. The sudden disruption of the stable environment compels humanity to survive in an unfamiliar environment. This sudden transformation underscores the importance of plant-human interconnectedness that was hitherto neglected. The appearance of “whisperers” (263), who are creatures with twigs and leaves in the narrative, further elevates the fear, displacement and disorientation of human characters in the novel.

Critical Plant Studies emphasise plant-human entanglement, and the novel foregrounds a reversal of human dominance, with the trees occupying human dwellings. It showcases human vulnerability during ecological dominance. The novel illustrates how humanity responds differently to nature’s sudden transformations. Human beings are forced to reconfigure and adjust their ways to coexist with the multispecies world. The sudden emergence of the forest cover suggests the dominance of a vegetal power capable of monopolising the human world. Marder’s concept of “vegetal temporality” (96) is best exemplified through the sudden growth of the forest, disrupting the logical human sense of temporality. The forest’s growth is sudden, unlike the normal pattern of growth and expansion, which is linear and human-centric. According to Marder, “The pulsations of temporality are often imperceptible to a conscious human observer, because even when they share a physical space, the two beings do not live in the same homogenous time but are non-contemporaneous with one another” (103). Shaw’s narrative expresses vegetal temporality, and human beings are forced to readjust their ways to follow the plant temporality, which is beyond the cognition of human ways.

The narrative clearly depicts the collapse of human structures through the sudden coming of trees to human-occupied spaces. The agentic power of the trees in the novel is illustrated through the portrayal of the forest as an active force of resistance, reminding humans of the transient nature of

human authority upon ecology. The novel reflects the ecological concerns associated with environmental destruction and human detachment from nature. The text thus comes within the purview of speculative botany that situates trees at the centre of the narrative, emphasising their agentic role and vitality.

While the sentient flora in *Semiosis* imagines the possibility of mutual coexistence, *The Trees* presents a disruptive and violent ecological power. The sentient bamboo in Burke's narrative seeks a collaborative approach from humans for mutual survival. In contrast, the forest in *The Trees* exhibits its agency as a resistive force that reclaims its habitat from human occupation. Rather than mutual coexistence, the narrative emphasises human displacement and the collapse of a human-centric world. Despite these differences, both are plant-centric narratives, that discuss the different manifestations of plant power, demonstrating how speculative botany reimagines plants as active participants of ecological structures.

Han Kang's "The Fruit of My Woman" narrates the story of a woman who cherishes a long desire to escape the constraints of a mundane way of life, eventually metamorphosing into a tree by herself. The narrative offers significant scope to analyse plant vitality through the portrayal of human plant transformation and plant becoming. The woman's interest in nature is evident from the way she caresses the potted plants on her balcony, which often wither, suggesting her own loneliness and disappointment at her present life. She occasionally dreams of growing into a large poplar tree, reflecting her longing for freedom and joy.

Drawing on Radical Botany, the concept of "becoming plant" (Meeker, Szabari 174) is a means of shifting from fixed human existence to nonhuman existence. There has been a long tradition of identifying vegetal world with the feminine body, and both have been subjected to patriarchal dominance and social and political control, giving a feminist dimension to the narrative. Radical botany explores "the plant as part of an attempt to animate a feminist politics and a critique of contemporary capitalism" (174).

In Han Kang's story, the woman's transformation is actually a revolt against dominance. By becoming a nonhuman form, she transgresses the socially accepted norms of womanhood and the non-normative possibilities inherent in turning into a plant. The woman's transformation into a plant dissolves the plant-human divide and clearly echoes the concept of plant-human interconnections. The woman who led an ordinary and passive life with her husband becomes more vibrant and active as she transforms into a plant. The husband observes, "Her entire body was dark green. Her formerly shadowed face now gleamed like a glossy evergreen leaf. Her dried radish-leaf hair was as lustrous as the stems of wild herbs" (6). The woman's body now follows a non-linear temporality, which is

beyond human cognition and understanding. The development of roots, stems, shoots, flowers and fruits, displays vegetal growth and resistance. Every phase of her transformation recounts the story of her growth, resilience, adaptation and survival and these stories are interconnected with human stories. The plant thus turns into a narrative agent relating stories of its transformation.

Reading through the critical lens of Radical Botany, this transformation is actually a revolt against patriarchal dominance and control. Radical botany helps to read the transformation of women as a form of revolt against domestic confinement and patriarchal control. By metamorphosing into a plant, she blurs the so-called normal gender and sexual binaries, advocating a new queer and feminist ecology. The narrative represents vegetal life not as passive but as a radical site for resistance and reconstruction of human identity and existence. The story thus foregrounds how human beings and ecology interconnect, giving significant scope to interpret the concepts of Critical Plant Studies and material ecocriticism.

Han Kang's story clearly extends the scope of speculative botany by connecting it with feminist and posthuman ecology. Unlike traditional narratives that position the botanical form as a metaphor, the altered existence makes it more vibrant, enabling it to be a narrative agent of resistance, adaptation, and liberation. The narrative reads becoming plant-like not as a mode of passivity but as a site of resistance and liberation from normative human structures. While *Semiosis* and *The Trees* represent external agentic force capable of controlling humanity, vegetal sentience in "The Fruit of My Woman" is manifested within the human body.

The narratives discussed in this paper fall within the realm of speculative botany as they represent hypothetical sentient flora in an imagined ecology where conventional boundaries between humans and plants are blurred. The genre thus stands strong as an evolving genre that dismantles the human nature divide, offering fertile ground where humans and plants interconnect, unite, and transform. In an era marked by heightened ecological crises and climatic changes, these botanical narratives help readers envision a symbiotic existence among species in which humans are no longer the conquerors of Earth. Such altered images of future ecology will help reconfigure human beings' perceptions about the plant world, making an ethical and moral shift in their relationships with it. The sentient ecology visualised in these narratives enables readers to alter their current perceptions about plants and envision a future sustainable ecology where humans coexist with the animate and inanimate world. Speculative botany not only represents an imaginary world with altered flora but also envisions a future ecology that blurs plant-human boundaries, fostering a better philosophical understanding of the plant world.

The study thus adds to the evolving philosophical and ecological discourse on speculative botany by emphasising how these narratives envision plant life as a mode of resistance, coexistence and posthuman space. Through these selected narratives, the study recommends that these vegetal beings are not just ecological entities, but dynamic, vibrant subjects capable of moulding and influencing the narrative and philosophical structures. Speculative botany thus emerges as a counterhegemonic tool that foregrounds botanical subjects by portraying plants as agents of coexistence and resistance in an ecology that challenges human exceptionalism.

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