

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614

E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

**Vol. 1, Issue 4, September
2026**

© 2026 by the author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



A Literariness.org Project

DOI: 10.67147 literariness.v1i4.015

**Reconfiguring Plant Monstrosity: An Analytical Study of
Bloom and *The Ruins* through the lens of Critical Plant
Studies and Material Ecocriticism**

RESHMA R

Research Scholar, University of Kerala
Assistant Professor, Department of English
Sree Narayana College, Punalur, Kerala
reshmaneeraja@gmail.com

DR HIMA S. MADHU

Associate Professor
Govt. Arts and Science College Kulathur, Kerala
himasnc.1982@gmail.com

Abstract: Kenneth Oppel's *Bloom* and Scott Smith's *The Ruins* are novels that depict the weird and mysterious invasion of plants in future worlds where humans encounter extraordinary vegetal power. The novels clearly foreground human vulnerability and helplessness at the sudden expansion of invasive plants, which were hitherto considered as passive presences. Both narratives pose the dilemma of whether humanity should fight against the invasion or learn to coexist with the new species. Critical Plant Studies and Material Ecocriticism enable a different reading of texts, challenging human-centrism and foregrounding vegetal agency, intelligence and subjectivity. These approaches together envision a future ecology where plants are significant forces in determining the future ecological system, as well as redefining human and plant identity. The paper argues plant monstrosity as an anthropocentric construct rooted in human perceptions of plants and other nonhuman matters as passive and sessile entities.

Keywords: *Plant Monstrosity, Vegetal Agency, Critical Plant Studies, Material Ecocriticism*

There has been an unprecedented growth in ecological crises signified by climatic variations, global warming, deforestation, species extinction, pollution and large-scale exploitation of nature and its resources. The escalation of environmental destruction has ignited scholarly debates and critical thinking on humanity's relationship with nonhuman matters. The anthropocentric thought has marginalised all other entities from the limits of major philosophical discourses. Within the literary arena, an interest in the vegetal world has sparked scholarly approaches such as Critical Plant Studies and Material Ecocriticism that foreground the plant species. These new theoretical approaches disregard the conventional representation of plants in traditional texts and instead centre on plant intelligence, communication and its transformative power.

A historical analysis reveals that plants have been significantly marginalised in the literary and cultural history. Plants are portrayed either as metaphorical or symbolic objects or as biological resources serving the human world. Scholars such as Matthew Hall, Michael Marder, Natania Meekker, and Antonio Szasbari emphasise that plants are active ecological agents rather than passive entities. This vegetal shift has contributed to greater scholarly engagement and studies regarding the representation of plants in the literary world.

Speculative fiction explores the multifaceted representation of plants either as symbiotic beings or as monstrous, uncanny beings. The concept of man-eating plants came about in the late 19th century with the publication of Charles Darwin's *Insectivorous Plants* and *The Power of Movement in Plants*. The abilities of plants such as plant signalling and responses to light and stimuli are exaggerated by authors for dramatic effect resulting in the proliferation of narratives about such plants. The representation of monstrous plants in speculative fiction may give rise to ecological anxieties, concerns regarding ecological collapse, fear of nonhuman agency, and disruption of human dominance. These narratives present the tensions within the human world as they struggle hard to coexist with the monstrous plants, which are significant enough to determine or manipulate ecological structures. Plant monstrosity arises when vegetal life exceeds human authority and dominance, disrupting the existing ecological orders, giving rise to posthuman agencies.

Kenneth Oppel's *Bloom* and Scott Smith's *The Ruins* offer excellent examples of speculative narratives featuring plant monstrosity. Oppel's *Bloom* presents invasive black plants and vines spreading across the entire earth after a heavy downpour, strangling humanity to death and transforming the ecological landscapes. Similarly, *The Ruins* presents carnivorous vines that trap, mimic, and eventually consume human beings, showcasing vegetal monstrosity at its extreme level.

The paper explores the texts *Bloom* and *The Ruins* through the theoretical lenses of Critical Plant Studies and Material Ecocriticism. Critical Plant Studies is an interdisciplinary branch of study that integrates both philosophical and botanical insights while foregrounding plant intelligence, subjectivity and agency. Matthew Hall's *Plant as Person: A Philosophical Botany* and Michael Marder's *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* are significant texts that contribute substantial knowledge and understanding of the floral world. Marder tries to understand plants in terms of higher qualities, such as plant thinking, vegetal existence, etc., rather than adhering to the Western philosophical ideal of plants as ensouled beings. He tries to explore the "post-metaphysical ontology of vegetal life" (18). Matthew Hall, in his text, discusses "plant personhood" (183), a concept that challenges the marginalisation of plants as objects but as "other than human persons" (163).

Material ecocriticism relocates human beings to a broader spectrum where the human agency interacts and coproduces with the organic and inorganic materiality. According to Donna Haraway, the material self does not exist in isolation but instead lives in a "world sustained by queer confederacies." (qtd. in Iovino and Oppermann 2). It implies that the human material self does not exist as a separate entity, unaffected by the non-human material agency, but intermingled by alien agencies. It emphasises a shift from subject-object binary division to human-nonhuman ontological entanglement.

As Critical Plant Studies and Material Ecocriticism provide the theoretical backgrounds to explain vegetal agency and human nonhuman entanglement, the paper proposes to redefine plant monstrosity through the intersection of these two approaches. With the aid of both these methods, the study argues that the monstrosity in the novel does not merely seem to evoke horror, but as a method of expressing ecological anxieties and posthuman subjectivity. Plant monstrosity arises when vegetal beings become visibly active, intelligent and possesses communicative abilities, challenging the existing hierarchical order of humans as active subjects and plants as inert objects.

Bloom opens with a rare botanical phenomenon that is distinct from the conventional science fiction narratives that explore alien and technological invasions. The sudden propagation of black flowers after a heavy downpour initially evokes curiosity among humans, but soon they turn disastrous as the pollens from the flowers turn fatal to humans. Rather than presenting the flowers as passive decorative elements, Oppel explores the agentic role and intelligence of the plants, capable of disrupting the anthropocentric assumptions of vegetal passivity. Its ability to grow overnight and proliferate quickly subverts human perceptions of plant temporality. The plant was "tall and black and spiky, and seemed to have shot up overnight as the rain hammered on the roof" (Oppel 35).

The sudden proliferation of the black grass that spreads enormously across the globe challenges human perceptions about nonhuman intelligence and agency. Reading through the lens of Critical Plant Studies, the novel subverts the traditional concept of plant human hierarchy and reconfigures the vegetal being as an autonomous entity with its own existence and temporalities. Reflecting on Matthew Hall's concept of "plant personhood" (183), they have their own "ways of going about their lives and have different needs from human beings" (163). Hall argues that the Western philosophy has historically marginalised plants as the passive other making them insignificant. Bloom strictly challenges this notion by portraying plants as active agents that can shape ecology and transform human lives.

The novel focuses on the central agentic power of the plants through the mysterious ability of the black grasses that spread invasively and extensively, challenging the human perceptions of "vegetal temporality" (Marder 96). The black grass spreads across human inhabitations and the entire farmlands are colonised by the invasive species. The rapid spreading of the vegetation depends not on any kind of human interference, but on their own intelligence and capabilities. Kenneth Oppel's vegetal world thus invites the readers to reconsider human perceptions of nonhuman intelligence, thus broadening the concept of intelligence and communication.

One of the significant aspects of the novel is the portrayal of plant monstrosity. Conventionally, monstrosity emerges from the fear of the unknown or fearful alien creatures that disrupts humanity. In *Bloom*, the plants do not show inherent evil or violence but their monstrosity is produced through their disruption of the anthropocentric supremacy. The sudden growth of the black grass exposes the vulnerability of humans when met with a nonhuman vegetal agentic power. The horror in the novel develops from the realisation that humanity is not the sole agent that controls or dominates ecology.

Material ecocriticism as developed by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann further substantiates the nonhuman agency by arguing that matter is an active producer of meaning capable of narrating stories. In the novel, the nonhuman plant is able to take the narrative forward by becoming a "storied matter" (Material Ecocriticism 1). The proliferation of the black grass and the rapid dissemination of the pollens across the landscape are major ecological acts that narrate stories of environmental transformation and ecological anxiety. The spreading pollens in the air cause terrible allergies to people and the entire humanity felt totally displaced and insignificant before vegetal power. The effects of the pollens are evident in the scene where, "the parking lot was chaos now, people shouting and sneezing and hurrying to their cars. Doors slamming. Cars starting. Horns blaring" (Oppel 68).

The pollens from the black flowers play a significant role in this narrative. They act not as an evil or monstrous element in nature but as an ecological agent that plays a predominant role in ecological interconnectedness. The monstrosity arises from humanity's inability to acknowledge the power of nonhuman agency. Material ecocriticism argues that human beings are interconnected with nonhuman material agency "and emerge together as storied beings" (Iovino and Oppermann 8). Human beings do not exist on earth in isolation from other forms of matter. Oppel's *Bloom* presents this material interaction between human and nonhuman agency resulting in environmental anxieties and disasters. The novel presents the acts of pollen as the result of continuous interactions and entanglements between human beings and vegetal beings rather than an act of alien invasion.

Though the intelligent plant does not show direct communication, the way they exhibit a synchronised growth pattern, flowering and spreading of pollens show a kind of sophisticated intelligence and communication pattern beyond the limits of human cognition. By decentring humans as the central subjects, the novel reverses the hierarchical pattern and makes humans vulnerable beings rather than dominating the natural world. Their survival thus depends on understanding and observing the agentic power of the new flora. This shift in hierarchy illustrates the posthuman perspectives common to both Critical Plant Studies and Material Ecocriticism. Both these frameworks reject the rigid divide between the human and the nonhuman world.

Plant monstrosity depicted in *Bloom* is not simply a literary strategy to evoke fear and horror, instead it inspires the readers to reconsider the conventional concepts regarding plant agency, intelligence and the role of plants in determining ecological and narrative strategies.

Speculative fiction has recently begun to portray plants as central actors rather than passive beings. Scott Smith's *The Ruins* features vines that are carnivorous in nature displaying plant agency, communication, intelligence and material agentic power. Drawing on Critical Plant Studies and Material Ecocriticism, *The Ruins* reveals a new ecological imaginary in speculative narratives, where vegetal life is depicted as a dominating force advocating a new posthuman ecology.

The Ruins goes further than *Bloom* in its display of plant monstrosity. A group of six friends on a mission to search for one of their companions is unfortunately trapped in a Mayan ruined site preoccupied by the sentient and active vine. The acts of bodily invasion, ecological control and mimicking human voices reveal how the vines deploy strategic methods to control human subjects and its environment. This resonates well with Critical Plant Studies' notions of plant subjectivity, agency and intelligence and material ecocriticism's ideas of storied matter.

The narrative foregrounds a sentient vine that traps human beings strategically and destroys them both physically and psychologically. Thus, what occurs is a reversal of conventional roles making human beings mere vulnerable objects at the hands of the sentient vines. This reversal of roles is associated with anxieties about the autonomous nature of vegetal beings. According to Iovino and Oppermann, “every living creature, from humans to fungi tells evolutionary stories of coexistence, interdependence, adaptation and hybridisation, extinctions and survivals” (7). This is literally true in the case of *The Ruins* as it tells the story of the vines and its ecosystem in relationship with the humans.

A conventional reading and interpretation of the novel frames it as a survival horror, but reading it through the frameworks of Critical Plant Studies and Material Ecocriticism allow readers to shift their perspectives from humans to plants giving a new discourse on plant subjectivity. This interpretation shifts the focus from plant monstrosity to monstrosity as an anthropocentric discourse on vegetal sentience. According to Trevawas, “Plants perceive themselves and can distinguish between self and non-self” (qtd. in Witzany 40) and “this capability allows them to protect their territory” (Witzany 40). Witzany’s idea of biosemiotics of plant communication is reflected in the novel as the vines perceive the human intruders and employs violent and brutal means to eliminate them. According to Witzany “the biosemiotics of plant communication provides robust empirical evidence about sign-mediated interactions taking place incessantly both within and between plants, as well as between plants and non-plant organisms” (40). The vines mimic human sounds and sounds of mobiles luring human beings to be trapped by them, which can be interpreted as the fictional enactment of plant biosemiotics communication.

Critical Plant Studies does not see the vines as scary things, instead they perceive them as sentient organisms that have the capability to communicate and possess intelligence to strategically manipulate things to their own ends. By granting the vines intentions and autonomous existence, they become the sessile vegetal subjects challenging human exceptionalism. One of the characters named Stacy felt during their long trail through the forest that the forest was whispering to her. The trees appear to whisper, “take me with you” (Smith 82). The character observes,

A tree on her left seemed to call her name Stacy, it whispered so clearly that she actually turned her head, a goosebump feeling running up and down her back. Behind her came another rustling voice: are you lost? And then she was stepping with the others into sunlight. (Smith 82)

In the material ecocritical perspective, the vines in *The Ruins* tell their story of growth, expansion and challenging human attempts of occupying the ruins. It tells the story of reconquering its

space from human inhabitants who try to establish their space on its territory. The focus of the narrative shifts to the plants where it seems to exhibit extraordinary sentient powers to sense humans and trap them. The sentient vine grows not only on organic matter but also on inorganic stuff such as clothes and shoes trying to colonise the entire place. The vines act of mimicking human sound, sound of mobiles and birds' chirping are methods of narrating a different story to the humans through sound waves. These sounds have a greater impact on the trapped humans who perceive them as possibilities to either survive or escape from the ruins. Thus, the vine rewrites the reality by faking sounds and manipulating the human lives trapped in the Mayan ruins. Human beings are transferred to vulnerable objects at the hands of the vines who emerge as the controlling agency of ecology. The vines dominate the ecological space displacing humans or any other organism from its territory.

The vines infiltration into human bodies can be read further through Foucauldian concept of "biopolitics" (qtd in Iovino and Oppermann 158), which is extended here to explain the vegetal control over biological life. The vines invade into human bodies through small cuts in their bodies which they seem to make intentionally to facilitate their penetration. It is a kind of biopower with which the plant controls the biological process of humans. The vines perceive humans as part of the ecological system and controls their life and death challenging human assumptions of anthropocentric supremacy and dominance. Rather than remaining as an external entity, the vines explore the human body consuming the human flesh and reversing the hierarchical conventions of humans controlling the plants. Pablo sustains injuries on his limbs, which are later found to be ensnared with the vines, leaving his lower limbs with just white bones as the vines consume the flesh.

Bennett evokes "bacteria colonies in the human elbow" (qtd. in Iovino and Oppermann 26) "to express the obvious interchanges of human and nonhuman natures and to display the human as an assemblage of microbes and other substances" (Serpil 26). From a Material Ecocritical perspective, this bodily invasion of the vine is significant as it surpasses the concept of human body as an autonomous entity. The vine takes root in human flesh giving way to plant human hybridity. One of the characters, Eric fears that the vine is growing inside his body. "Somehow the vine had pushed itself into his wound, opening it, widening it, thrusting a tendril into his body" (Smith 229).

According to Witzany, "Plants are sessile, highly sensitive organisms that actively compete for environmental resources both above and below the ground" (40). This ability helps them protect their territorial landscapes and acts as a significant mode of vegetal agency. The vines agency becomes evident when they strategically respond to human occupation in their territory. Rather than remaining passive, the vines senses and responds to human trespassing into their territory. The vines maintain a distributed agency through its vast network of tendrils. The vines' network monitors human actions and

reacts accordingly. This becomes evident when the vine senses the presence of the severed human limb and snatches it away with its long tendrils. “The vine had sent another long tendril snaking out into the clearing. It had wrapped itself around one of Pablo’s severed feet and was dragging the bones away now, back through the dirt” (Smith 290). The vines’ seemingly violent response can be interpreted as its mode of territorial defence challenging the assumptions that humans are the sole authority to control ecological spaces.

Critical plant studies and material ecocriticism provide the necessary frameworks to theorise plant monstrosity as a humancentric construct, that has historically marginalised plants as passive objects. The human fear arises from their reluctance to accept plants as sentient and intelligent beings. The vine blurs human plant divide by growing from within human bodies advocating a posthuman ecology that insist on human nonhuman interconnectedness. In this sense, plant monstrosity can be interpreted as a criticism of human exceptionalism. The vines’ monstrous act is a kind of self-defence, with which they try to secure their territorial landscape.

In both these novels, plants are the central actors portraying vegetal agency, plant communication and intelligence making humans the vulnerable sects. Plant invasion is a common mode of vegetal agency in both *Bloom* and *The Ruins*. While *Bloom* presents a global vegetal invasion indirectly through the dissemination of pollens, the vines in *The Ruins* present a local more intense invasion directly by penetrating and growing from within human bodies. Here the plant communicates directly by mimicking human voices, and sounds of mobile phones but in *Bloom* the plant communicates indirectly through pollens.

Thus, situating the novels within the frameworks of Critical Plant Studies and Material Ecocriticism supports the argument that plant monstrosity is not an innate attribute of the vegetal world. Instead, it is an anthropocentric construct that develops as a result of humanity’s inability to accept vegetal agency. The fear arises from humanity’s knowledge of plant biopower that is able to control both human lives and ecology. By reconfiguring our perceptions of plant monstrosity, both *Bloom* and *The Ruins* enable us to envision a posthuman world centred on interspecies relationship and coexistence, thereby advocating posthuman ethics and morality.

The paper thus theorises plant monstrosity as an anthropocentric construct that arises when the vegetal world surpasses human perceptions of plants as passive and sessile. Drawing on Critical Plant Studies and Material Ecocriticism, the paper argues that the monstrous plant in speculative narratives represents vegetal agency, intelligence, communicative ability and plant human hybridity. This realisation destabilises human exceptionalism and the monstrosity arises from the threat the vegetal agency poses to the anthropocentric dominance and authority over nonhuman matter.

Work Cited

- Hall, Matthew. *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*. State U of New York P, 2011.
- Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann, editors. *Material Ecocriticism*. Indiana UP, 2014.
- Marder, Michael. *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. Columbia UP, 2013.
- “Man-Eating Plant.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man-eating_plant. Accessed 24 Aug. 2026.
- Oppel, Kenneth. *Bloom*. HarperCollins, 2009.
- Oppermann, Serpil. “From Ecological Postmodernism to Material Ecocriticism.” *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, Indiana UP, 2014, p. 26.
- Smith, Scott. *The Ruins*. Vintage Books, 2006.
- Sims, Shalon. “Bloom by Kenneth Oppel.” *Young Adulting*, 1 Sept. 2020, youngadulting.ca/2020/09/01/bloom-by-kenneth-oppel/. Accessed 24 Aug. 2026.
- Witzany, Günther. “The Biosemiotics of Plant Communication.” *The American Journal of Semiotics*, vol. 24, nos. 1–3, 2008, pp. 39–56. ResearchGate, doi:10.5840/ajs2008241/34.