
**MARINE DISTRIBUTED AGENCY: HUMAN–NONHUMAN
ENTANGLEMENTS IN ANTHONY DOERR’S THE SHELL
COLLECTOR**

***¹M. Sruthi Sriece, ²Dr. M. Kannadhasan**

¹PhD Research Scholar (Full Time), Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University,
Vellore, Tamil Nadu.

²Associate Professor, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu.

Article Received: 11 June 2026, Article Revised: 01 July 2026, Published on: 21 July 2026

***Corresponding Author: M. Sruthi Sriece**

PhD Research Scholar (Full Time), Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu.

Doi: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.6763>

ABSTRACT

Anthony Doerr’s *The Shell Collector* offers a compelling exploration of the dynamic relationships between humans and the marine environment, challenging anthropocentric conceptions of agency and existence. This paper examines the short story through the lens of posthumanism, and new materialism, to investigate how marine distributed agency emerges through the interconnected actions of humans, shells, marine organisms, tides, and coastal ecologies. Through Bruno Latour’s concept of distributed agency, Karen Barad’s theory of entanglement and intra-action, Jane Bennett’s notion of vibrant matter, and Rosi Braidotti’s posthuman ethics, the paper argues that the narrative reconfigures the ocean as an active participant and not a passive setting. Through close textual analysis, the paper demonstrates that shells, venomous sea creatures, ocean currents, and other marine entities possess material agency that shapes human perception, identity, and survival. The narrative destabilizes the human/nonhuman binary by presenting the marine world as a relational assemblage in which agency is distributed across diverse living and non-living actors.

By positioning the sea as a vibrant ecological network, *The Shell Collector* redefines survival as a collective process of more-than-human becoming than an expression of individual human mastery. The paper contributes to contemporary posthuman literary studies by advancing the concept of marine distributed agency and demonstrating how Doerr’s fiction enriches discussions of ecological ethics, and human–nonhuman entanglements in contemporary environmental literature.

KEYWORDS: Anthony Doerr, *The Shell Collector*, Marine Distributed Agency, Human–Nonhuman Entanglements, Posthumanism.

INTRODUCTION

Anthony Doerr is a contemporary American writer celebrated for his evocative prose and ecological imagination. His fiction consistently explores the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world, presenting landscapes, animals, and material objects as active participants in shaping human experience. He foregrounds nature's dynamic role in the formation of identity, memory, and survival, making his works significant contributions to contemporary environmental literature. He does not depict nature as a passive backdrop in his works. His debut collection of short stories, *The Shell Collector* (2002), comprises eight narratives that explore themes of isolation, transformation, resilience, and ecological interconnectedness.

The title story explores about an unnamed retired, blind malacologist living on the Kenyan coast, whose intimate engagement with shells and marine organisms reshapes his understanding of life. Throughout the narrative, the ocean, tides, shells, and marine life function as more than descriptive elements. They actively influence human perception, behaviour, and survival.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology centered on close textual analysis to examine the eco-critical dimensions of Anthony Doerr's title short story. This qualitative reading moves beyond traditional thematic interpretation, analyzing how the formal structure of the narrative itself shifts away from anthropocentric focalization to allow the marine environment to generate meaning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper uses an interdisciplinary framework integrating posthumanism, and new materialism, to examine marine distributed agency and human–nonhuman entanglements in Doerr's narrative. Together, these approaches challenge anthropocentric literary interpretations by recognizing that agency, and ethics emerge through the interactions of humans, nonhuman organisms, material objects, and ecological environments. Accordingly, the ocean is understood not as a passive setting but as a dynamic ecological assemblage that actively shapes narrative events and human subjectivity.

Posthumanism provides the conceptual foundation of this paper. Rejecting the humanist notion of the autonomous individual and emphasizing relational existence and multispecies interconnectedness. Rosi Braidotti argues that posthuman subjectivity is grounded in ecological interdependence rather than human exceptionalism, while Cary Wolfe contends that humans exist within complex biological, technological, and ecological networks rather than above them. “What this means is that when we talk about posthumanism, we are not just talking about a thematics of the decentering of the human in relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates” (Wolfe xvi).

Complementing this decentering of the human, Bruno Latour’s concept of distributed agency is central to the analysis. In *Reassembling the Social* (2005), Latour argues that agency is not an exclusive human attribute but is distributed across heterogeneous networks of human and nonhuman actants.

Barad argues that entities do not pre-exist their relationships. They emerge through ongoing, entangled ‘intra-actions’. Bennett expands this material vitality by attributing ‘thing-power’, the capacity of inanimate objects to act as forces with agentic trajectories independent of human design, to the nonhuman world.

DISCUSSIONS

The ocean functions not only as the setting of the narrative, but also as an active ecological force that shapes the protagonist’s life, knowledge, and survival. Living in isolation on the Kenyan coast, the unnamed retired malacologist, addressed as the shell collector, structures his daily life around the rhythms of the sea, where tides, currents, and marine biodiversity continually influence his observations and actions. The marine environment is presented as an active participant in the narrative rather than a passive backdrop. The protagonist’s scientific expertise is inseparable from the material processes of the ocean. Shells collected along the shoreline are deposited by tides and currents, making the sea an active contributor to his knowledge of marine life. The protagonist acquires understanding through sustained engagement with the dynamic coastal ecosystem. The shoreline becomes a relational space where human knowledge is co-produced through interactions with ecological forces.

Doerr further reinforces this distributed agency through the biological capacities of marine organisms. Mollusks, cone snails, fish, and other coastal species actively influence the protagonist’s scientific practice and everyday existence, demonstrating that agency is shared between human and nonhuman actors.

Latour's Actor–Network Theory states that the narrative constructs action through the interactions of heterogeneous actants rather than through human intention alone. “ANT claims that we should simply not believe the question of the connections among heterogeneous actors to be closed, that what is usually meant by ‘social’ has probably to do with the reassembling of new types of actors.” (Latour 75). These ecological processes operate independently of human control but profoundly influencing the story's progression. For example, the arrival of the critically ill visitor, Nancy, in the story, whose survival ultimately depends on the protagonist's knowledge of cone-snail venom acquired through years of engagement with marine organisms. “Ten hours of this vigil, a sunset and bats feeding and the bats gone full-bellied into their caves at dawn and then Nancy came to, suddenly, miraculously, bright-eyed” (Doerr 17).

Healing is not solely a human achievement in the story but it is the outcome of an ecological network involving the ocean, marine species, scientific knowledge, and human intervention. By foregrounding these interconnected relationships, Doerr reimagines the ocean as a more-than-human assemblage in which humans, shells, tides, and marine organisms collectively generate meaning and action.

Through Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, the malacological specimens gathered by the blind protagonist emerge as vibrant material actors endowed with independent thing-power, the concept which describes an entity to act, and to alter the situations independent of human intentions or designs. By focusing on the intrinsic vitality of the nonhuman world, Doerr reconfigures the shell from a dead canvas of human projection into an active participant in an ecological assemblage, carrying its own material agency and deep ecological memory.

For the shell collector, blindness does not dim the material world. It sharpens his sensitivity to the tactile vitality of matter. When he handles the shells, he engages with what Bennett characterizes as a ‘vital materiality’ that refuses to be reduced to mere human utility. The shells act upon him, dictating his movements, spatial orientation, and emotional landscape.

The agentic matter manifests vividly during his encounters with the highly venomous cone shells. In a pivotal part of the story, the collector tracks a *Conus geographus*, an organism whose shell is not a static shield but an active weapon housing a lethal neurotoxin. The plot emphasizes this material vitality. “By noon he had one, a tiny tessellated cone he hoped couldn't paralyze a housecat, and he dropped it in a mug with some seawater” (Doerr 21). The vibrant colours and geometric precision are material expressions of the shell's evolutionary history and chemical agency. When the shell delivers its venomous sting to the young girl,

Nancy, it acts as a disruptive force within the ecosystem, setting off a chain of somatic and social reconfigurations that the human characters can neither predict nor control.

Doerr positions the shells as repositories of ecological memory, material archives of tectonic and oceanic shifts. The physical structures of the shells are sedimented histories of the Indo-Pacific waters, recording centuries of calcium deposits, temperature fluctuations, and ancestral migrations.

The shell's material agency lies in its capacity to collapse temporal boundaries, linking the collector's immediate touch to ancient oceanic currents. Bennett notes that human agency is always intertwined with a "the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies, and will enable wiser interventions into that ecology" (Bennett 4). In Doerr's narrative, the shell collector does not merely collect objects. He is collected by them, drawn into an ecological memory where the boundaries between the human body and the marine artifact dissolve.

Expanding beyond vibrant materiality, the text details the radical blurring of boundaries between the protagonist and his environment, a phenomenon illuminated by Barad's concepts of quantum entanglement and 'intra-action.' "A phenomenon is a specific intra-action of an "object" and the "measuring agencies"; the object and the measuring agencies emerge from, rather than precede, the intra-action that produces them" (Barad 128).

In *The Shell Collector*, the protagonist's identity is not that of an autonomous human subject observing an external nature, his very subjectivity is continually co-constituted through ongoing intra-actions with marine organisms. The blind collector's daily practices on the Kenyan coast exemplifies this ontological entanglement. Lacking sight, his primary mode of being is tactile and fluid, constantly merging with the marine ecology.

When he wades into the ocean, the narrative portrays his body not as a bounded human form, but as a porous entity fully integrated into the aquatic medium. Doerr observes that the collector "The tide was coming up. Unharnessed now, Tumaini stood panting, half out of the water on a mushroom-shaped dais of rock. The shell collector was stooped, his fingers middling, quivering, whisking for shells in a sandy trench." (Doerr 10). The collector's sensory apparatus is structurally coupled with the ocean's dynamics. His understanding of the world does not happen at a distance. It is an embodied, material realization born from the physical pressure of the tides and the chemical signatures of the reef. Human perception is revealed to be a shared phenomenon happening between the flesh of the man and the fluid mechanics of the sea.

This entanglement becomes even more pronounced in his intimate handling of the marine organisms themselves. When examining a specimen, the boundary between the human hand and the calcified architecture of the mollusk begins to break down. The story highlights how he tracks the subtle, living movements within the structures “Under a microscope, the shell collector had been told, the teeth of cones look long and sharp, like tiny translucent bayonets.” (Doerr 10).

The collector’s identity is completely reconfigured by these ecological relations. He is defined not by his human isolation or his physical disability, but by his capacity to attune to nonhuman life. Doerr’s narrative demonstrates that ‘human’ is always already entangled within a wider, lively network of nonhuman actors.

According to Braidotti’s formulation of nomadic, relational subjectivity, she conceptualizes the subject not as an isolated, self-contained ego, but as an ‘expanded, relational self’ that is embedded in and embodied by a complex network of nonhuman forces. “These non-profit experiments with contemporary subjectivity actualize the virtual possibilities of an expanded, relational self that functions in a nature–culture continuum and is technologically mediated” (Braidotti 61). Subjectivity becomes a process of ongoing transformations across multiple species, explicitly dependent on its connection to the *zoe*—the dynamic, nonhuman force of life itself. In Doerr’s narrative, the marine ecology of the Kenyan coast does not serve as a static background for human drama. The ocean functions as a vast, *zoe*-centered assemblage where the protagonist’s subjectivity is thoroughly relational, constantly folding the marine environment into his own sense of self.

The collector’s daily immersion in the intertidal zone showcases posthuman subjectivity in practice. His internal state is structurally linked to the rhythm of the ocean, highlighting a profound environmental attunement. During his excursions, “All night it was hot. Lightning marbled the sky beyond the reef. From his cot he heard siafu feasting on the big men and heard them claw themselves in their sleeping bags. Before dawn he told them to shake out their shoes for scorpions and when they did one tumbled out” (Doerr 10). His subjectivity is not locked within his skull, it expands across the nocturnal reef, fluctuating alongside the blooming corals. By experiencing the ocean as an extension of his own corporeal reality, the collector embodies Braidotti’s nomadic subject, which flows across and connects distinct species and ecosystems. “The posthuman nomadic subject is materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded...” (Braidotti 188). His blindness facilitates this open subjectivity, replacing the distant, mastering human gaze with an immersive, tactile connection that welcomes the nonhuman world into his identity.

This relational subjectivity is highlighted by the way the narrative structures memory and consciousness around marine life. The collector does not organize his life through traditional human milestones, but through the migrations, structures, and cycles of the sea. Doerr writes that the collector's mind was a map of the coast, where every inlet, every finger of coral, was printed into his feet.

His consciousness is quite literally grounded in the geography of the reef. The marine ecology acts as a cognitive partner; his memories are tied to the textures of specific shells and the seasonal changes of the tides. By presenting a protagonist whose identity cannot be separated from the marine ecosystem, Doerr's short story affirms Braidotti's claim that posthuman subjectivity is fundamentally "...connects us trans-individually, trans-generationally and eco-philosophically." (Braidotti 135). The collector's sense of self emerges from his relationships within the marine assemblage, proving that the human subject is always an open, relational entity.

The relational subjectivity developed within the marine ecology naturally demands a new ethical framework, what Braidotti calls a posthuman ethics of sustainability. This ethical position moves away from traditional, anthropocentric morality, which values nature only in relation to human needs. Instead, it advocates for an ethics based on shared vulnerability and the mutual interdependence of all living things. It requires humans to recognize their equality with nonhuman actors and act with deep responsibility toward the ecosystems they inhabit.

In *The Shell Collector*, this posthuman ethic is put to the test when the arrival of other people disrupts the delicate balance between the collector and the sea. The narrative uses the tragic consequences of human interference to expose the dangers of treating the ocean as a mere resource for human exploitation.

This ethical tension centers on the discovery of the cone shell's lethal, yet strangely curative, neurotoxin. When news spreads that the sting of a *Conus geographus* miraculously cured Nancy's chronic illness, the island is flooded with desperate people seeking a miracle. Doerr depicts this human influx as an aggressive violation of the marine ecosystem. They think the venom may have real medical benefits.

"Who is they?"

"Scientists. They say they're trying to isolate some of the toxins and give them to stroke victims. To combat paralysis."

The shell collector felt like saying that injecting cone venom into someone already half-paralyzed sounded miraculously stupid.

"Wouldn't that be something. Pop? If what you've done winds

up helping thousands of people?”

The shell collector fidgeted, tried to smile. (Doerr 27)

This destructive behaviour represents the anthropocentric mindset at its worst, reducing a complex, living ecosystem to a utilitarian medicine cabinet. The human actors fail to respect the intrinsic value and agency of the reef, seeing it only through the lens of human desire. In contrast, the collector warns them of the danger, understanding that the cone shell’s power is not a commodity to be harvested, but an autonomous, lethal force that demands caution and respect.

The narrative enforces a posthuman ethic through the ocean’s violent pushback against human hubris. The sea refuses to be mastered. The venomous cone shells remain wild and deadly, eventually claiming the life of the collector’s own son, Josh. This devastating loss brings the concept of shared vulnerability to the forefront. The collector does not respond with anger toward the sea or seek vengeance against the organisms, but he accepts this tragedy as part of the harsh, nonhuman reality of the marine world.

Braidotti emphasizes that a posthuman ethic requires one to acknowledge the structural vulnerability human beings share with the nonhuman world. By returning to the sea and continuing his quiet study among the waves, the collector demonstrates an enduring commitment to this posthuman ethics of the sea. He embraces a relationship with the ocean that is defined not by dominance, but by humility, respect, and deep ecological responsibility.

CONCLUSION

Based on the posthuman perspectives developed in the preceding sections, this paper demonstrates that Anthony Doerr’s *The Shell Collector* actively deconstructs traditional human-centered hierarchies. The primary finding reveals that the marine specimens are not passive commodities, but vibrant material actors endowed with independent agentic trajectories. By exploring the tactile relationship between the sightless protagonist and the reef, the narrative proves that human identity is not fixed or autonomous. The collector’s sense of self shifts from an isolated ego to a nomadic, relational subject embedded within a *zoe* - centered ecological network. “Zoe-centred egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the post-anthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism” (Braidotti 60).

The paper underscores how the short story enforces posthuman ethic by dramatizing the violent failure of human mastery. When human actors attempt to treat the *Conus tessulatus*,

Conus obscurus and *Conus geographus* and its venom as a medical resource, the ecosystem actively resists this exploitation. The resulting tragedy highlights the profound environmental cost of anthropocentric hubris and forces an acknowledgment of “...a great deal of its inter-connections are negative and based on a shared sense of vulnerability” (Braidotti 40). Doerr’s narrative positions the marine ecology not as a static setting, but as a dynamic repository of ecological memory and material agency capable of reconfiguring human lives and ethical responsibilities.

Looking forward, this critical framework opens several productive paths for further future literary scholarship within the Blue Humanities. Researchers can expand by conducting comparative analyses between Doerr’s Kenyan coast and the marine geographies of other contemporary coastal fictions to see how different oceanic spaces shape ecological memory.

WORKS CITED

1. Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke UP, 2007.
2. Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke UP, 2010.
3. Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013.
4. Doerr, Anthony. *The Shell Collector*. Scribner, 2002.
5. Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford UP, 2005.
6. Wolfe, Cary. *What is Posthumanism?* U of Minnesota Press, 2010.