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THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATURAL AGENCY: A MATERIAL ECOCRITICISM PERSPECTIVE ON *ISTIKHDĀM AL-ḤAYĀH* AND *BILANGAN FU*

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ABSTRACT

Material Ecocriticism shifts ecocritical attention from representing nature to the agency of matter. Yet, its secular ontology has seldom been tested on non-Western corpora in which the material and the spiritual are inseparable. No study has read an Arabic and an Indonesian novel together through this framework, so it remains unclear why material agency takes different ideological forms across Southern traditions. This descriptive-analytical qualitative study examines how Ahmad Naji's *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* and Ayu Utami's *Bilangan Fu* construct the agency of nature and its ideological orientation. Systematic close reading identified 31 excerpts in which non-human matter acts, remembers, or responds, 12 of which were analyzed through affinity studies and the concepts of storied matter, more-than-human agency, and vibrant matter. Both novels construct nature as an autonomous narrative agent that retains material memory and acts beyond human control. Ideologically, they diverge. Naji's destructive-melancholic agency turns sand, stone, and an ailing Nile into archives of post-Arab Spring urban trauma, whereas Utami's cosmological-dialogic agency makes limestone, wind, and fish partners in an ethics grounded in post-Reformasi Javanese spirituality. Tracking the political rupture of each setting, this divergence indicates that Material Ecocriticism needs a geo-historical dimension to explain why a shared ontology of matter yields opposed ecological imaginaries. Naji keeps religion as an external matter, while Utami locates spirit within stone and mountain, and this relationality exposes the secular limits of Bennett's vibrant matter. The study proposes the destructive-melancholic and cosmological-dialogic typology as an analytical category for comparative Global South ecocriticism.

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INTRODUCTION

Ahmad Naji's *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* (Egypt, 2014) and Ayu Utami's *Bilangan Fu* (Indonesia, 2008) are among the most formally and ideologically ambitious novels of their literary traditions after 2000. Naji's speculative fiction depicts a future Cairo overwhelmed by sandstorms, a Nile that sickens with grief, and a desert that gradually reclaims urban infrastructure. Its language led to Naji's imprisonment on charges of violating public morality, making him the first modern Egyptian novelist jailed for a literary work (Gibbons, 2019). Utami maps the spiritual cosmology of the limestone highlands of Java through characters who commune with ancient winds, prophetic fish, and rock formations that store geological and cosmological memory (Utami, 2008). Published six years apart, both novels use surreal and fantastic modes of narration and emerge from moments of political rupture, namely post-Arab Spring Cairo and post-Reformasi Java, the period of democratic reform that followed the fall of the New Order in 1998.

This pairing was chosen over other possible Arab–Indonesian combinations for two reasons. Each novel places non-human matter at the structural center of its narrative instead of using it as a descriptive backdrop, and each stages the ontological claim under investigation, that matter possesses autonomous agency. The corpus was thus selected for its shared centrality of material agency more than for thematic or historical proximity. The selection is purposive and criterion-based, a standard strategy in comparative literary studies that makes no claim to statistical representativeness (Felski & Friedman, 2013; Patton, 2015). Despite their different geo-ecological contexts, the two texts advance a single proposition that sets them apart from earlier ecological fiction in their respective traditions. Nature is an autonomous material agent that responds to the conditions humans create for it and retains the memory of those conditions. A comparative Material Ecocritical analysis of the two novels is therefore both productive and theoretically necessary.

Scholarship on *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* has developed along three lines, none of which treats non-human matter as an autonomous material agent. Gibbons (2019) reads the trial of the novel as a document of Egyptian legal discourse and literary freedom. Pepe (2023) situates it within Arabic climate fiction alongside post-Arab Spring dystopias; Tabur (2024) reads its assemblage aesthetics as a resistance to hegemonic techno-futurist urbanism; and Bešková (2023) reads it as a critical dystopia whose open ending preserves a utopian impulse without addressing its material dimension. In Arabic ecocriticism, Sinno (2013) first identified an ecological turn in contemporary Arabic fiction; Alkodimi (2025) observes that the field remains in its early stages; and Jadwe and Al-Khazraji (2026) place al-Koni's animist desert fiction in comparative dialogue with Powers. AlSuhaibani and AlQahtani (2023) applied Material Ecocriticism to Arabic fiction, showing that non-human places act as vibrant matter that stores cultural memory. The framework has not yet been extended to Naji's novel, whose sand, Nile, and desert remain unexamined as forces beyond human interpretation.

Studies of *Bilangan Fu* approach the novel through ecofeminist ethics and Javanese spirituality, emphasizing resistance to karst exploitation, the role of female characters, and indigenous cosmology as markers of ecological consciousness (Christy & Margono, 2018; Masruroh & Dewi, 2023), while Susilowati et al. (2022) use Garrard's typology to trace ecological markers as units of representation. Two Scopus-indexed studies represent wider strands of Indonesian ecocriticism. Wiyatmi et al. (2022) compare deforestation in Indonesian and Malaysian novels and show that Indonesian fiction

addresses the environmental crisis through local wisdom set against anthropocentrism, and Arianto et al. (2021) trace the ecological crisis in Indonesian drama through representational analysis. Indriyanto and Barus (2025) add that Indonesian literary ecologies are conditioned by reformist political histories that Western frameworks do not anticipate, and Duile (2022), reading two Indonesian novels through the lens of plural ecologies, shows an Islamic-humanist naturalism displacing animist relations. None of these studies treats Utami's limestone, ancient winds, and prophetic fish as autonomous agents that store cosmological narratives beyond human meaning-making.

Material Ecocriticism has expanded through cross-cultural applications while retaining theoretical tensions. Iovino and Oppermann (2012a, 2012b) conceptualize matter as possessing a storied agency that exceeds human interpretation. The framework has since been applied to cities (Iovino, 2016), Chinese climate narratives (Li & Liu, 2017), speculative fiction (Colligs, 2023), and urbicide in Israel and Palestine (Golanska, 2022). Studies of Japanese American fiction (Dellacasa, 2025), postcolonial contexts (James et al., 2022), Indonesian folklore (Rahayu et al., 2026), and South Asian fiction (Ağır, 2025) identify forms of material agency shaped by non-Western cosmologies. Other scholars question the secular ontology of the framework from South and Southeast Asian (Sankaran, 2026), eco-Marxist (Skiveren, 2023), and Indigenous (Yavaş, 2025) positions. Their critiques call for reconsidering the framework's applicability to non-secular and non-Western corpora and raise the question of whose ontology of matter it assumes.

Fernando (2022) argues that dissolving the divide between nature and culture must also accommodate the more-than-natural. Magnat (2022) and Rosiek et al. (2020) show that Indigenous relational ontologies challenge Barad's agential realism and should be engaged as theory, not only as illustration. Jolly and Fyfe (2018) caution against reducing animism to a theory of matter, and Southeast Asian animism forms a regionally grounded ontology in which spirits may be affirmed or denied (Århem & Sprenger, 2016; Sprenger, 2023). Secularity, too, operates materially by drawing boundaries between religious and non-religious forms (Echtler et al., 2025; Meyer, 2025), a distinction that bears on the comparison of Cairo and Java. New materialisms have been criticized for universalizing the human and neglecting postcolonial and Indigenous knowledges (Last, 2026; Rosiek et al., 2020), and for revisiting long-debated questions in historical materialism (Lettow, 2017; Skiveren, 2023). Larsen (2026) addresses the concern that attributing agency to matter obscures human responsibility for the ecological crisis through strategic posthumanism.

Blue Humanities scholarship (Dobrin, 2021; Mentz, 2023; Oppermann, 2023) complements Material Ecocriticism by treating bodies of water as active cultural forces that store and transmit the histories of landscapes and communities. Oppermann (2023) argues that rivers in the Anthropocene serve as intimate archives of local ecological trauma. The argument fits the Nile in Naji's novel, whose illness registers the degradation of post-Arab Spring Cairo, and is supported by work that distinguishes mourning with the more-than-human from possessive melancholia (Aroch, 2026). Utami's limestone springs and aquatic creatures invite the same attention to freshwater bodies as geological and cosmological agents, so the two texts call for a comparative framework that engages water as an agent across cultural contexts. Rangarajan et al. (2015) argue that Global South ecocriticism must negotiate postcolonial and decolonial entanglements that neither Western Material Ecocriticism nor the Blue Humanities has fully theorized, and Naji's Nile and Utami's limestone springs put this claim to the test.

Three gaps define this study. First, within the literature reviewed here, no comparative ecocritical study has placed an Arab and an Indonesian novel in sustained dialogue, despite Heise's (2013) call for an international turn in ecocriticism and Huggan and Tiffin's (2009) insistence that postcolonial ecocriticism engage divergent Southern traditions. Second, although Material Ecocriticism has been applied to one Arabic novel (AlSuhaibani & AlQahtani, 2023) and studies of *Bilangan Fu* have addressed ecological themes, neither novel has been comparatively analyzed through Material Ecocriticism, leaving the narrative memory of their non-human matter unexamined. Third, affinity studies, which compare works without relations of influence (Felski & Friedman, 2013; Remak, 1961), have not yet taken ecological materiality as the *tertium comparationis* of an Arab–Indonesian comparison, although event-based comparative methods exist (Strayer, 2019). As James et al. (2022), Rangarajan et al. (2015), Fernando (2022), and Rosiek et al. (2020) observe, Material Ecocriticism needs to be tested on non-Western corpora in which the material and the spiritual are inseparable.

This study addresses these gaps through two research questions. (1) How do *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* and *Bilangan Fu* construct the agency of non-human matter through the categories of storied matter, more-than-human agency, and vibrant matter, and what affinities and divergences do these constructions show? (2) What are the ideological implications of these constructions within the geo-cultural context of each novel, and what analytical typology can be derived from their comparison? The working hypothesis is that the two novels share a structural affinity in positioning nature as an autonomous and affective material agent, while producing divergent ecological imaginaries: a destructive-melancholic agency that interrogates post-Arab Spring urban ecologism in Naji, and a cosmological-dialogic agency rooted in post-Reformasi Javanese spirituality in Utami. Reading the two novels together, the article extends the framework's cross-cultural reach. It proposes a comparative typology of Global South ecocriticism, responding to the calls of Heise (2013) and Rangarajan et al. (2015) for a global and decolonial ecocritical practice.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive-analytical qualitative design to identify, describe, and compare the constructions and functions of nature's agency in the two novels. The primary data are *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* by Ahmad Naji (2014), Arabic edition, Dār al-Tanwīr, and *Bilangan Fu* by Ayu Utami (2008), first edition, Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia. The English translations of the Arabic excerpts were prepared for this study, rather than taken from Koerber's published translation (Naji, 2017), to maintain direct control over the lexical and semantic nuances of material agency. Secondary data are theoretical and critical studies. Data were collected through close reading in two stages. The first stage identified 31 candidate excerpts that describe nature, stage dialogue with non-human entities, use ecological metaphor, or present non-human matter as an active participant. The second stage grouped these excerpts into the predetermined categories and retained the 12 with the clearest markers of material agency, two per novel per category.

The data were classified into the three categories of Material Ecocriticism, namely storied matter (matter as a repository of narratives), more-than-human agency (the agency of matter that exceeds the human), and vibrant matter (the affective vitality of matter) (Bennett, 2010; Iovino & Oppermann, 2012a, 2014). An excerpt was coded as storied matter when non-human matter acts as an archive of narrative, historical, or

cosmological memory that precedes and exceeds human documentation; as more-than-human agency when non-human matter acts, decides, or constrains human action by a logic independent of, and before, human interpretation or control; and as vibrant matter when non-human matter shows affective vitality, whether destructive or benevolent. The criteria are not strictly exclusive in the source texts, but no excerpt in the final dataset required dual classification.

In this article, natural agency refers to the agency of non-human matter as examined through these three categories. The character Sebul in *Bilangan Fu*, depicted as an ancient wind, illustrates storied matter, while the novel's distinction between dialogical and coercive tools illustrates an ethics that can be read through the concept of intra-action (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2016). The analysis compares the two novels category by category to identify their affinities. It interprets these affinities in relation to the geo-ecological and socio-political conditions of each novel, which ground the conclusions. Material Ecocriticism was chosen because it treats matter as an autonomous participant in narrative, not only as an object of representation. Storied matter accommodates the geological and cosmological dimensions of the two novels, and vibrant matter supports the analysis of negative and affective agency in their narrative structures (Bennett, 2010; Iovino & Oppermann, 2014).

RESULT

This section presents the analysis of natural agency in *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* (Naji, 2014) and *Bilangan Fu* (Utami, 2008) under the three categories of Material Ecocriticism. For each category, excerpts from Naji and Utami are presented first, followed by an analysis that compares them and identifies affinities between the two novels. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of all 31 excerpts across the categories.

Table 1. Distribution of Data across Categories

Category	Novel	N	Pages
Storied Matter	*Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh*	5	9, 9–10, 12, 59, 233–234
	Bilangan Fu	6	16, 17, 19, 26, 50, 59
More-than-Human Agency	*Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh*	4	9-10, 36, 108, 225–228
	Bilangan Fu	5	26–27, 77–78, 111, 149–150, 359
Vibrant Matter	*Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh*	6	51, 79, 81, 106–107, 107, 179
	Bilangan Fu	5	19, 20, 23, 77–78, 414
Total		31	

Storied Matter: Sand and Stone as an Archive of Urban Trauma versus a Cosmological Archive

In *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh*, non-human matter functions as storied matter, storing and narrating the ecological trauma that followed the Arab Spring. *Bilangan Fu* builds a different but structurally parallel archive.

Excerpt 1

بناءً على مواسم القمر وحركة الأجرام السماوية، تتحدد حركة الرمال البرتقالية. قد تتركك تمشي بسلام حتى النهاية، وقد تبتلعك بعد الخطوة الأولى.
(Naji, 2014, pp. 233–234)

Binā'an 'alá mawāsim al-qamar wa-ḥarakat al-ajrām al-samāwīyah, tataḥaddad ḥarakat al-rimāl al-burtuqālīyah. Qad

tatrukuka tamshī bi-salām ḥattá al-nihāyah, wa-qad tabtali'uka ba'da al-khaṭwah al-ūlá.

Based on the phases of the moon and the movement of celestial bodies, the movement of the orange sand is determined. It may let you walk all the way to the end safely, or it may swallow you after the very first step.

Excerpt 2 التصدعات ضربت الأهرامات ولم ننجح في إنقاذ الهرم الأكبر الذي تحول إلى ركام من الحجارة المتناثرة، ما تبقى من تراث، حضارة، عمارة، أرشيف موثق رسمي أو منته على هذه الأرض كل هذا كان مصيره أسوأ حتى من مصير الأهرامات التي سقطت من جرّاء الزلزال العظيم وطُمرت تحت بحور الرمال. (Naji, 2014, p. 12)

Al-taṣaddu'āt ḍarabat al-ahrāmāt wa-lam nanjaḥ fī inqādh al-haram al-akbar alladhī taḥawwala ilá rukām min al-ḥijārah al-mutanāthirah, mā tabaqqá min turāth, ḥaḍārah, 'imārah, arshīf muwaththaq rasmī aw muntah 'alá hādhihi al-arḍ, kull hādhā kāna maṣīruh aswa' ḥattá min maṣīr al-ahrāmāt allatī saqaṭat min jarrā' al-zilzāl al-'aẓīm wa-ṭumirat taḥta buḥūr al-rimāl.

The cracks struck the pyramids, and we failed to save the Great Pyramid, which turned into a heap of scattered stones. Whatever remained of heritage, civilization, architecture, or officially and unofficially documented archive on this earth, all of it met a fate worse even than that of the pyramids, which collapsed in the Great Earthquake and were buried beneath seas of sand.

The orange sand in Excerpt 1 moves unpredictably, following a cosmological rhythm beyond human calculation. As storied matter, the sand holds the memory of the climate change and civilizational catastrophe that shaped Cairo's dystopia and carries the narrative of a world that humans can no longer grasp through logic alone. It is a material archive of civilization and of Cairo's ecological trauma, bearing the collective burden of the city it buries (Naji, 2014). Excerpt 2 carries the same logic into the built environment. The collapse of the Great Pyramid into "a heap of scattered stones" figures the erasure of an archive of heritage, civilization, and documented memory, a loss the narrative ranks as worse than the fate of the pyramids that fell in the Great Earthquake. Matter here outlives the human record meant to contain it, and sand and stone alike act as archives whose agency resides in their materiality (Iovino, 2016; Iovino & Oppermann, 2014).

Excerpt 3 *"Ia membawaku ke sebuah dinding bukit yang terbentuk dari retakan… tentang selapis debu tipis yang disebutnya berasal dari abu Eksplosi Sangkuriang, yaitu letusan gunung yang menyebabkan terbentuknya Tangkuban Perahu 200 sampai 160 ribu tahun yang lalu."* (Utami, 2008, p. 50)

He took me to a hillside wall formed from fissures… about a thin layer of dust which he said came from the ash of the Sangkuriang Explosion, the volcanic eruption that formed Tangkuban Perahu 200,000 to 160,000 years ago.

Excerpt 4 *"Di dalamnya terdapat sepotong batu sederhana. Batu endapan berwarna kelabu, nyaris segitiga bentuknya. Padanya ada sebuah jejak fosil… Batu itu tampak seperti replika yang dijual sebagai suvenir museum geologi… Museum yang tak hanya memperlakukan koleksinya sebagai obyek ilmiah; melengkapinya dengan kartu berisi data-data mati. Melainkan yang juga menganggap benda-bendanya sebagai subyek, yaitu yang memiliki ruh pada dirinya. Ruh yang mewujudkan diri dalam rupa dongeng dan cerita."* (Utami, 2008, p. 19)

Inside it there was a simple stone. A gray sedimentary stone, almost triangular. On it was a fossil trace… The stone looked like a replica sold as a geology-museum souvenir… a museum that does not merely treat its collection as scientific objects, furnishing them with cards of dead data, but that also regards its objects as subjects, possessing a spirit within them, a spirit that manifests itself in the form of fable and story.

In *Bilangan Fu*, the hillside wall described in Excerpt 3 serves as a geological archive, whose thin layer of volcanic ash preserves the memory of an eruption that occurred 200,000 to 160,000 years ago. Parang Jati reads the layer as one reads a text, without creating its meaning (Utami, 2008), which makes humans secondary mediators. The passage supports the claim that matter already carries its own narrative before any human interpretation (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012b; Oppermann, 2016). Excerpt 4 brings the same claim down to a single object. The fossil stone is regarded as a subject possessing a spirit that manifests itself "in the form of fable and story," in contrast to a museum practice that reduces objects to cards of "dead data" (Utami, 2008, p. 19). As the bearer of its own story, the stone is the most literal figuration of storied matter in the corpus and recalls the reading of a city as a material text (Iovino, 2016; Iovino & Oppermann, 2014).

In the four excerpts, humans lose their position as the sole givers of meaning, and matter inherently holds narratives. The residents of Cairo do not create the rhythm of the orange sand (Excerpt 1), just as Parang Jati does not create the history layered in the hillside wall (Excerpt 3), and in each case humans only come to terms with, or gain partial access to, a narrative already in place. This structural affinity is the core finding of the first category. The difference lies in the kind of memory stored. Naji's storied matter (Excerpts 1 and 2) holds the contemporary ecological trauma of Cairo's post-Arab Spring urban crisis on an immediate and painful historical timescale, whereas Utami's (Excerpts 3 and 4) holds a cosmology spanning hundreds of thousands of years on a geological timescale beyond any human history.

More-than-Human Agency: Autonomous Destruction versus Distributed Agency

In *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh*, natural disasters act beyond human control and interpretation, whereas in *Bilangan Fu* more-than-human agency is distributed and conditional.

Excerpt 5 استيقظ سكان القاهرة فوجدوا أنفسهم مدفونين تحت أطنان من الرمال والغبار...بدأ سكان المدينة يفيقون من صيف الصدمات، حينما حدثت مجموعة من

الهزات والزلازل أصبحت تعرف بعد ذلك 'بالزلزال العظيم'... غضبٌ من الله. لعنةٌ من السماء. الرب قرَّر عقاب المصريين بالسبع لعنات. (Naji, 2014, p. 9-10)

Istayqaẓa sukkān al-Qāhirah fa-wajadū anfusahum madfūnīn taḥta aṭnān min al-rimāl wa-al-ghubār... Bada'a sukkān al-madīnah yafīqūn min ṣayf al-ṣadamāt, ḥīnamā ḥadathat majmū'ah min al-hazzāt wa-al-zalāzil aṣbaḥat tu'raf ba'da dhālika bi-"al-zilzāl al-'aẓīm"... Ghaḍab min Allāh. La'nah min al-samā'. Al-Rabb qarrara 'iqāb al-Miṣrīyīn bi-al-sab' la'nāt.

The residents of Cairo awoke to find themselves buried under tons of sand and dust… the city's residents began to come to their senses after a summer of shocks, when a series of tremors and earthquakes occurred, later known as 'the Great Earthquake'… the wrath of God. A curse from heaven. The Lord had decided to punish the Egyptians with the seven curses.

Excerpt 6: ليس مطلوبًا أن يرصد ويسجل الفيلم وضعًا قائمًا، بل أن يسعى لخلق عملية توثيق لحدث مُتخيل يقترب من الفانتازيا، وهو ليس اختفاء بل تغير مجرى النيل بحيث لا يمر بمدينة القاهرة بل يلتف حولها ليشق طريقه من الحد الفاصل بين محافظة أكتوبر ومحافظة الجيزة. (Naji, 2014, p. 108)

Laysa maṭlūb an yarṣud wa-yusajjil al-fīlm waḍ' qā'im, bal an yas'á li-khalq 'amalīyat tawthīq li-ḥadath mutakhayyal yaqtarib min al-fantāzyā, wa-huwa laysa ikhtifā' bal taghyīr majrá al-Nīl bi-ḥaythu lā yamurr bi-madīnat al-Qāhirah bal yaltaff ḥawlahā li-yashuqq ṭarīqahu min al-ḥadd al-fāṣil bayna Muḥāfaẓat Uktūbar wa-Muḥāfaẓat al-Jīzah.

The film is not required to observe and record an existing condition, but rather to create a process for documenting an imagined event that verges on fantasy. The event is not a disappearance but a change in the Nile's course, so that it no longer passes through the city of Cairo but instead curves around it, cutting its path along the boundary between October Governorate and Giza Governorate.

In Excerpt 5, sandstorms and earthquakes act according to their own material logic, and humans interpret them only retrospectively (Barad, 2007; Iovino & Oppermann, 2014). The residents read the disaster as divine punishment after the sand has already buried the city. Nature acts first, and human discourse follows, which makes this agency destructive and non-negotiable. Excerpt 6 moves into speculative agency. The imagined documentary depicts the Nile being diverted, not disappearing, as it curves entirely around Cairo, and this act of world-making turns the river's altered course into the definition of the imagined catastrophe. Nature refuses the boundaries that urban planning assigns to it. It exceeds the documentary's descriptive function and becomes an agent that redraws the city's geography on its own terms (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012a; Oppermann, 2023).

Excerpt 7 *"Ikan pelus adalah ikan istimewa... Asalkan diperlakukan dengan baik oleh warga manusia, pelus akan menampakkan*

diri pada orang-orang yang dipilihnya dan memberi pertanda mengenai gempa, air bah, musim yang salah, bencana maupun pageblug… Dasar laut terangkat dan bergelung-gelung menjadi perbukitan kapur. Ikan ini terjebak di air darat yang pelan-pelan menjadi tawar." (Utami, 2008, pp. 149–150)

The pelus fish is a special fish… If it is treated well by the human community, the pelus will reveal itself to the people it chooses and give signs about earthquakes, floods, a season out of joint, disasters, and plagues… The seabed rose and coiled itself into limestone hills. This fish became trapped in inland water that slowly turned fresh.

Excerpt 8

"Mereka adalah liang-liang udara, terbentuk oleh pusaran angin selama jutaan tahun. Berabad-abad pasukan angin menderu dan dalam ziarahnya mereka menembus gunung batu, menaburkan benih dari sebuah zaman yang jauh… Setiap kali mereka bernyanyi bersahut-sahutan, imanku diteguhkan bahwa ruh-ruh anjing hutan dari masa purba itu masih semayam di dalam gunung, untuk melantunkan lagu dari kehidupan silam." (Utami, 2008, pp. 26–27)

They are airshafts, formed by whirlwinds over millions of years. For centuries the army of wind has roared, and on its pilgrimage, it has pierced through the stone mountain, scattering seeds from a distant age… Every time they sing back and forth to one another, my faith is reaffirmed that the spirits of the ancient forest dogs still dwell within the mountain, chanting a song from a bygone life.

The pelus fish in Excerpt 7 illustrates a distributed and conditional chain of agency. The geological transformation of the earth is borne within the body of the fish (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014; Oppermann, 2016), which signals danger only to humans who "treat it well." Agency here has the structure of intra-action, in which agents emerge through their relations instead of preceding them, so the agency of the pelus is responsive and contingent on the relationship that humans build with it (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2016). Excerpt 8 extends this logic to the winds that carve airshafts "over millions of years" and to the spirits of ancient forest dogs that, in the narrator's belief, still dwell within the mountain. This agency is temporal and ancestral and does not depend on the response of an immediate human actor (Århem & Sprenger, 2016; Iovino & Oppermann, 2012a).

Naji's model of agency (Excerpts 5 and 6) is therefore destructive and unpredictable, since nature follows a logic that humans cannot negotiate. The sand buries Cairo before any religious reading, and the Nile redraws the city beyond urban planning. Utami's model (Excerpts 7 and 8) is distributed and conditional, since nature acts within a relationship that human ethical choices can nurture or damage. The pelus fish warns only those who treat it well, and the winds and ancestral spirits act across ages no human governs. Both novels nonetheless share a structural affinity, portraying nature acting before, and beyond, human control, which supports the view of matter as an active participant in its own materialization (Barad, 2007; Iovino & Oppermann, 2014).

Vibrant Matter: Melancholic Affect versus Active Resistance

In *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh*, non-human matter responds to the conditions the city imposes on it with melancholic illness, whereas in *Bilangan Fu*, vibrant matter takes the form of active resistance to human coercion.

Excerpt 9

النيل يمرض من الحزن كلما مرّ بالقاهرة. (Naji, 2014, pp. 106–107)

Al-Nīl yamraḍ min al-ḥuzn kullamā marra bi-al-Qāhirah.

The Nile falls ill with sorrow every time it passes through Cairo.

Excerpt 10

لأن القاهرة غالبًا هي من تقرر لك كيف تكون حياتك، كيف تتوقع قصة حب، كيف تنتهي، متى تأكل، كم ساعة من عمرك ستضيع في زحام الشوارع، نسبة إصابتك بالسرطان، توقيت أن تعرف صلاح الباذنجان المعدّ لوجبة غذاء، والطعم الذي ستعتاده في الشارع. كم قلبًا سيجري وراءك ليلًا في حياتك، أنت هنا من أجل هذه المدينة. ولكي تمنحك نفسها يجب أن تبيعها روحك بعقد موثق بالدم والقلب. (Naji, 2014, p. 179)

Li-anna al-Qāhirah ghāliban hiya man tuqarrir laka kayfa takūn ḥayātuka, kayfa tatawaqqa‘ qiṣṣat ḥubb, kayfa tantahī, matá ta’kul, kam sā‘ah min ‘umrika sataḍī‘ fī ziḥām al-shawāri‘, nisbat iṣābatika bi-al-saraṭān, tawqīt an ta‘rif ṣalāḥ al-bādhinjān al-mu‘add li-wajbat ghadhā’, wa-al-ṭa‘m alladhī sata‘tāduhu fī al-shāri‘. Kam qalb sayajrī warā’aka laylan fī ḥayātika, anta hunā min ajl hādhihi al-madīnah. Wa-li-kay tamnaḥaka nafsahā yajib an tabī‘ahā rūḥaka bi-‘aqd muwaththaq bi-al-dam wa-al-qalb.

For Cairo is often the one who decides for you how your life will be, how you will imagine a love story, how it will end, when you will eat, how many hours of your life will be wasted in the crowded streets, your likelihood of getting cancer, the moment you will know whether the eggplant prepared for your lunch is any good, and the taste you will grow used to in the street. How many hearts will chase after you at night in your life! You are here for the sake of this city. And for it to give itself to you, you must sell it your soul through a contract sealed in blood and heart.

Excerpt 9 constructs the Nile as an entity with its own affective capacity, falling “ill with sorrow” every time it passes through Cairo. The Nile displays what Bennett calls thing-power, “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett, 2010), here in a melancholic form, as the river absorbs the affective burden of Cairo and responds with illness. In Excerpt 10, Cairo “decides for you how your life will be” and demands that residents “sell it your soul through a contract sealed in blood and heart.” The city holds a will and an appetite that exceed any single human agent within it (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010), since the text treats it as a material assemblage of infrastructure, streets, food, and bodies whose combined effects are attributed to Cairo as the acting subject. The reading follows

Bennett's extension of thing-power to composite assemblages, with the electrical grid as her central example (Bennett, 2010).

Excerpt 11 *"…Ada dua macam alat. Alat yang memaksa, dan alat yang dialogis… Ada kalanya tebing melawan dengan merumpalkan diri. Artinya alam menolak dengan menghancurkan diri. Itu adalah kekalahan kedua belah pihak, alam dan manusia, akibat pemaksaan manusia…"* (Utami, 2008, pp. 77–78)

There are two kinds of tools. Coercive tools and dialogical tools… There are times when the cliff resists by crumbling on its own. That is, nature refuses by destroying itself. That is a defeat for both sides, nature and humankind, because of human coercion.

Excerpt 12 *"…Di bawah batu endap itu terdapat secarik surat tua bertulis tangan dengan sepatah kalimat terakhir: apa yang tak selesai kau mengerti di sini, tak boleh kau tanyakan padaKu di luar."* (Utami, 2008, p. 19)

…Beneath that sedimentary stone lay an old handwritten letter with a final line: whatever you have not finished understanding here, you may not ask of Me out there.

In *Bilangan Fu*, vibrant matter first appears in the cliff's resistance in Excerpt 11. The distinction between a coercive tool and a dialogical tool implies that the cliff's response depends on how humans approach it. Its choice of self-destruction over submission is, in Barad's terms, a response that emerges from the relationship and has no existence before it (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010). Excerpt 12 extends this affective capacity to the fossil stone, which holds a narrative and acts on those who read it. The old handwritten letter found beneath the stone ends with the line "whatever you have not finished understanding here, you may not ask of Me out there." The line gives the stone a withholding and almost sentient discretion over what may and may not be known.

With this category, the two novels move from nature that holds narratives or acts beyond control to nature that feels. Bennett (2010) calls this capacity vibrant matter, the thing-power or affective agency of non-human matter that cannot be reduced to decorative or symbolic functions. The ontological similarity between the two novels is clearest here, since neither the Nile (Excerpt 9) nor the cliff (Excerpt 11) responds to its surroundings as an inanimate object that happens to be affected. Each responds with a material sensitivity to the way it is treated, and vibrant matter thus takes shape within relations instead of preceding them (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010).

Their modes of response, however, differ. The Nile's vibrant matter is melancholic passivity: the river absorbs the city's sorrow into its body and falls ill, unable to separate from the city that causes its grief. The vibrant matter of the cliff is active resistance: it chooses to destroy itself rather than submit to the coercive apparatus, thereby demonstrating its material autonomy at the most extreme moment. Naji and Utami thus give a single affective assumption two forms. Matter does not accept human treatment without response, and the way it feels reflects the relational conditions that humans create for it (Bennett, 2010; Iovino & Oppermann, 2014).

DISCUSSION

Storied matter shows that matter contains narratives before humans read them and carries agency within its own materiality (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014), as in Iovino's (2016) reading of a city as a carrier of material narratives. More-than-human agency shows that matter acts by its own logic and takes part in its own materialization (Barad, 2007) in ways that humans cannot always negotiate or understand. Vibrant matter shows that matter possesses thing-power, the capacity to sense and respond to the relational conditions that humans create for it (Bennett, 2010). Together the three categories build one ontological argument, in which nature, in Naji as in Utami, is a subject already in motion. This personification need not be naive anthropomorphism, since it can be defended as strategic posthumanism (Larsen, 2026) and aligns with the way speculative fiction conceptualizes non-human agency (Colligs, 2023).

The affinity between *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* and *Bilangan Fu* lies in their shared assumption about what nature is and can do within the narrative, more than in any similarity of form, imagery, or context. That assumption matches the Material Ecocritical view of matter as active, self-generating, productive, and unpredictable (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012b). From this common ground, however, two distinct ecological imaginaries emerge. The first constructs nature as a destructive and melancholic force that turns against ecological discourse, a register supported by readings of Naji's novel as a critical dystopia that sustains resistance (Bešková, 2023; Tabur, 2024) and by the distinction between foreclosing melancholia and mourning with the more-than-human (Aroch, 2026; Oppermann, 2023). The second constructs nature as a cosmological and dialogic force that invites humans into a more ethical relationship.

Material Ecocriticism can explain why the two texts treat nature as an autonomous agent, but not why the same starting point yields two ideologically opposed ecological imaginaries, and this explanatory gap is the starting point of the discussion. As formulated by Iovino and Oppermann (2014) and Bennett (2010), the framework can describe what matter does in a narrative but lacks the tools to explain why the same agency produces different ideological orientations in different geo-ecological contexts (Arens, 2017; Oppermann, 2016; Sankaran, 2026). This article argues that the answer lies in the historical conditions that shape each text, and that Material Ecocriticism needs a more systematic geo-historical dimension to work as a cross-cultural comparative framework (Skiveren, 2023).

The argument bears on how ecocriticism understands the relation between materiality and ideology. The destructive-melancholic agency in *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* and the cosmological-dialogic agency in *Bilangan Fu* are material responses to two structurally distinct regimes of crisis. In post-Arab Spring Cairo, destructive nature is the one force that the collapsing political apparatus cannot control. Nixon's (2013) notion of slow violence describes this position, and new materialist work extends it to urbicide against the built environment (Golanska, 2022). The finding extends AlSuhaibani and AlQahtani's (2023) observation that non-human places store cultural memory in Arabic fiction, since the sand and the Nile in Naji's novel store urban ecological trauma. It also supplements readings of the novel as a resistant dystopia (Bešková, 2023; Tabur, 2024) by locating that resistance in matter, and the ailing Nile supports the Blue Humanities view of water bodies as narrating forces and of rivers as archives of local ecological trauma (Dobrin, 2021; Oppermann, 2023).

In post-Reformasi Java, the dialogic nature is a partner in cosmological restoration, taking the place of a state whose authority was being dismantled (Christy & Margono,

2018; Mulyati et al., 2024). The conditional agency of the pelus fish (Excerpt 7) and of the winds and ancestral spirits of the mountain (Excerpt 8) recalls Southeast Asian animist ontologies in which non-human agents are constituted through relation and communication (Århem & Sprenger, 2016; Sprenger, 2023), an ecology that Duile (2022) shows to be in tension with Islamic-humanist naturalism in Indonesian fiction. The reading agrees with Indriyanto and Barus's (2025) finding that Indonesian literary ecologies are conditioned by reformist political histories and with Wiyatmi et al.'s (2022) observation that Indonesian fiction answers environmental crisis through local wisdom. It adds that in *Bilangan Fu,* matter itself, and not only its characters, carries that wisdom.

This geo-historical reading is preferred over explanations based on genre convention or authorial biography because the destructive and dialogic modes track the political rupture specific to each setting. Egyptian and Arab speculative fiction does not consistently produce the destructive-melancholic mode outside post-Arab Spring settings (Pepe, 2023; Tabur, 2024), and Indonesian ecological fiction does not uniformly produce Utami's cosmological-dialogic mode outside the Reformasi-era return to indigenous cosmology (Wiyatmi et al., 2022). The geo-historical account explains this divergence better and suggests that vibrant matter and more-than-human agency are shaped by the geo-historical conditions of each text, although the relation remains interpretive and has not been demonstrated (Huggan & Tiffin, 2009; Skiveren, 2023). The findings also suggest that the limitation identified by Huggan and Tiffin (2009) in postcolonial ecocriticism and Lettow (2017) in critical social theory applies to Material Ecocriticism.

The two novels also draw the line between the religious and the material differently. In Excerpt 5, the reading of the disaster as "the wrath of God" is a human interpretation added after the sand and the earthquake have acted, whereas in Excerpts 4 and 8 the spirit resides in the fossil stone and in the mountain. Because secularity functions as a material principle of boundary-drawing (Echtler et al., 2025; Meyer, 2025), this contrast suggests that Naji keeps the religious outside matter, whereas Utami locates it within matter. The contrast also exposes a conceptual limit of the theory. Bennett's vibrant matter assumes a secular-material ontology in which matter acts through physical capacities, not through ethical relationships (Bennett, 2010; Yavaş, 2025). The pelus fish, whose agency depends on how humans treat it, challenges this assumption and is better described by Haraway's (2016) response-ability, in which agency emerges relationally. This raises the question of whether vibrant matter can accommodate texts grounded in non-secular cosmologies (Querejazu, 2024).

Fernando (2022) and Magnat (2022) likewise argue that secular accounts miss the more-than-natural and that matter can be both physical and spiritual. Heeding Jolly and Fyfe's (2018) caution against reducing animist elements to a theory of matter, this study reads the fish's agency as relational. The distributed agency of the pelus fish also stands beside James et al.'s (2022) postcolonial nonhuman and Dellacasa's (2025) eco-polyphony, two accounts of non-Western forms of material narration that Bennett's framework does not fully accommodate, and the present findings add a comparative Arab–Indonesian case. Ağır (2025) identifies a similar unresolved tension in Ghosh. This study addresses it by integrating Haraway's contribution into Bennett's framework, thereby loosening its secular assumptions and accommodating non-Western contexts in which the material and the spiritual remain inseparable (Oppermann, 2016).

The main contribution of this study is the typology of destructive-melancholic and cosmological-dialogic agency. This analytical category emerges from testing Material

Ecocriticism under the boundary conditions of two non-Western traditions with different cosmologies and regimes of ecological crisis. No similar typology exists in the literature reviewed (Alkodimi, 2025; AlMutairi & AlQahtani, 2026; Pepe, 2023; Sinno, 2013; Tabur, 2024). The typology also treats Javanese and Arab-Islamic conceptions of agency as contributions to theory (Magnat, 2022; Rosiek et al., 2020). Because it operates at the level of materiality, its application to other corpora (AlMutairi & AlQahtani, 2026; Rahayu et al., 2026) depends on similar conditions of crisis that produce specific models of agency. By placing an Arab and an Indonesian novel in sustained dialogue through Material Ecocriticism, these findings close the first two gaps identified in the Introduction.

Methodologically, affinity studies have proved more productive than influence-based models for comparing two literary traditions without a direct connection (Felski & Friedman, 2013; Remak, 1961). Previous studies of *Bilangan Fu* (Christy & Margono, 2018; Masruroh & Dewi, 2023; Mulyati et al., 2024; Susilowati et al., 2022) and of *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* (Gibbons, 2019; Pepe, 2023; Tabur, 2024) have not used the ecological dimension as a basis for cross-traditional comparison, so positioning ecological materiality as the *tertium comparationis* closes the third gap. The approach can be replicated for other non-Western literary pairs with comparable conditions of ecological crisis, as the international turn in ecocriticism requires (Heise, 2013; Huggan & Tiffin, 2009), and comparisons of culturally distant traditions (Jadwe & Al-Khazraji, 2026) and Chinese climate narratives (Li & Liu, 2017) suggest that these pairs can converge on non-anthropocentric narration. In practice, the typology offers a reading protocol for teaching and researching ecological literature in comparative and Global South curricula.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Ahmad Naji's *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* and Ayu Utami's *Bilangan Fu* construct the agency of nature and what ideological orientations these constructions carry in their contexts. Both novels treat nature as an autonomous narrative participant, yet two opposed ecological imaginaries emerge from this common ground. Naji's destructive-melancholic agency unsettles urban ecological discourse, and Utami's cosmological-dialogic agency invites an ethical relation between humans and matter. Material agency in non-Western fiction therefore cannot be read as a universal property of matter alone, and Material Ecocriticism gains explanatory power when read together with the historical conditions of post-Arab Spring Cairo and post-Reformasi Java. The study contributes a comparative typology for Global South ecocriticism, extends Material Ecocriticism to Arabic and Indonesian literature, and demonstrates the value of affinity studies grounded in ecological materiality. In these two novels, literature becomes an epistemological space in which matter speaks and takes part in writing the history of ecological crisis.

Several limitations qualify these conclusions and point to the need for further research. The typology rests on two novels and should be tested on a broader corpus from diverse geo-ecological conditions to establish whether it is contextual or generalizable. Material Ecocriticism also needs further elaboration to accommodate non-secular cosmologies, Javanese spirituality among them, and to answer the charge that new materialism assumes a universal human. Because only 12 of the 31 identified excerpts were analyzed in detail, a wider account of material agency across the two texts remains to be written. Reading the Arabic text through translations prepared for this

study may reduce the nuances of the original language, which future philological analysis could address. Finally, how Arab and Indonesian readers receive these constructions of nature's agency remains an open empirical question.

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All authors contributed to the conceptualization and development of the analysis in this study. Throughout the research process, the first author played a primary role in data collection, data provision, preparation of analytical instruments, data analysis, and manuscript drafting. The second author contributed to the drafting of the manuscript and the final editing stage, and provided constructive comments and suggestions to improve its clarity and overall quality.

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