

PROMOTING TRANSFORMATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND SUSTAINABILITY IN RICHARD POWERS' *THE OVERSTORY*

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ABSTRACT

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* highlights the intricate and inexplicable web of human and nonhuman relationship. The narrative is woven around the individual characters, connected to the ancient trees. Having met each other in a university course on arboreal biology, they are fascinated by the ancient forests, corporate logging and environmental resistance. Each one chooses his own way and approach to what he witnesses. On the whole, they cross others' path or diverge completely from it. Throughout the course of their academic journey, they exemplify the complexities of human relationships with nature. Jones, the protagonist undergoes traumatic experiences. In the midst of protests and peaceful demonstrations, the strong action working out in the novel is the rejection of the human law and acceptance of the law of nature.

The present study explores how Powers' *The Overstory* stresses the need for transformative environmental ethics and recognition to trees as conscious partners in planetary survival. The novel retains a positive tone by highlighting the importance of ecological consciousness and community engagement in promoting sustainability. In alignment with the sustainable development goals, specifying the significance of environmental protection, Power does a detailed demonstration of the systems of human and nature and the urgent need for environmental stewardship and individual's responsibility in energy consumption. The study reveals the fact that only through interconnectedness and harmonious coexistence of the human and the nonhuman world, ecological resilience can be ensured. This assurance will result in sustainable future and creation of a more equitable world.

Key Words: Ecological consciousness, Environmental stewardship, Ecological resilience.

Introduction:

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* has been widely recognized as a cornerstone of climate fiction. In the contemporary environmental literature, it is regarded as a key work. The lives of the characters are woven around their relationship with nature, particularly with trees. The activities of the human and the resultant happenings in nature are intertwined deftly and dealt with by Power by environmental themes and complex narratives. . The names of the novel's four parts indicate the book's basic structure and growth. The novel is unique by adopting an innovative way of storytelling; instead of the traditional way of human narration, the story is narrated from the perspective of the non-human world. Powers alerts the human beings of the consequences of destruction of the forests and celebrates the ecological complexity. The major characters sketch the devastation of American forests and evoke the empathy of the readers on

the silenced nonhuman world. They are capable of bringing awareness on deforestation and environmental degradation.

The Overstory evidences the transformation from environmental awareness to social responsibility. Carolyn Merchant, in her book *Ecological Feminism and the Politics of Nature*, arrives at the conclusion that individuals who question anthropocentric beliefs can promote reverence for nature. (Merchant 1989) The major characters in the novel exemplify this statement. While talking about the Chipko Movement in her article, Jayanta Bandyopadhyay states that many courageous activists, who are men and women of determination, have brought Chipko from the stage of a possible instrument of struggle to the stage of a trend-setting achievement. (Bandyopadhyay, 1999, p 882) In the same way, apart from creating awareness, the characters in *The Overstory* battle environmental deterioration with the resolution to find environmental justice.

Theoretical Framework:

In *The Overstory*, Powers harnesses his creative energy to voice for the exploited forests by linking the story with the place and exhibiting his imagination. The novel runs in four parts titled Roots, Trunks, Crown and Seeds. It is celebrated as a true document, examining the relationship between humans and forests to highlight environmental ethics. The present study employs an eco-critical perspective to *The Overstory* with the intention of illuminating the interdependence of human and nonhuman world. Cheryll Glotfelty has defined eco-criticism as the right medium to examine "the relationship between literature and the physical environment". (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xviii) Accordingly, the present eco-critical reading of Powel's text reveals the conflict that exists between the human world inflicting trauma on the nonhuman world and the resilience of the latter. The gradual deforestation, as dealt with in the novel is sure to lead to erasure of biodiversity as well.

Significance of Study:

Through the delineation of multitudes of characters, *The Over story* portrays a range of human-nature relationships. These relationships differ from each other by being either exploitative or symbiotic. The unexplored area of inhuman deforestation and environmental degradation, as conveyed throughout history, has been highlighted in the novel. *The Overstory* presumes that a sustainable future awaits human beings, when harmonious reciprocal relationship with nature is extended. The two different worlds of the human and the nonhuman coexist interdependently. If they commune, harmony blooms out of it. Douglas Pavlicek, the veteran in the novel involves in environmental activism and demonstrates to the world the devastating consequences of environmental exploitation.

Marring the Planetary Savings:

Powers' characters in *The Overstory* live with nature, but their connection is in complexities. Journeying along degradation of the environment and deforestation of forests, they start acquiring eco-consciousness. Their experiences of struggle and suffering motivate them to reflect on their consciousness of surrounding. The framework of Powers for exploring the hazardous outcomes of environmental

exploitation is tracing the life history of trees. It is a painful reality that the range of trees on the earth was once phenomenal; but, the greed and the ambition of man have destroyed most of them; men have named as progression, without realizing its true effects. Powers' essential and powerful message in the novel is, "We are cashing in on a billion years of planetary savings bonds and blowing it on assorted bling." (*Overstory* 386)

Basically, human beings are acquisitive by nature. They are propelled by the impulse to exploit and utilize, being oblivious to the consequences. This human impulse is the main cause for the destruction of the planet. *The Overstory* is a monumental document, voicing out the heartfelt plea of the earth to man. Power's novel is not to be considered simply as a fiction; it is a scientific document, incorporating astonishing facts, derived out of knowledge in science and research. The characters are fictional; yet, they tend to serve the noble vision of environmental conservation. The writer has revealed that trees are not simply static objects; they are interconnected with each other, sharing resources among themselves. They are capable of adapting themselves to the place and develop their diversity.

The Overstory alerts the readers of the disappearance of trees at an alarming rate. The global warming has caused the death of seventeen kinds of forest. (*Overstory* 388) Every year, thousands of forest area is converted to the purpose of other developments, leading to the total loss of one hundred billion trees every year. Powers states, "Half the wood species on the planet gone by this new century's end." (*Overstory* 388)

The Arboreal Interest of the Characters:

Trees have important messages to pass to the human beings; if the latter misses such messages, the tress will surely pronounce their last word. Analyzing the present environmental scenario, human world must realize its crucial responsibility and cease its hubristic efforts to dominate and exploit nature; it must be ready to be in compliance with the highly interconnected ecosystem; if this realization does not strike the human beings, the only alternative awaiting them is the planetary catastrophe. The contemporary society is not fully convinced of the stark scientific data, which advises to take this alternative seriously.

Though being a fictional narrative, *The Overstory* is capable of changing minds where the scientific and factual analyses have failed to create awareness on the seriousness of the issue of natural disasters. Powers' ingenuity is manifested in the similarities, bifurcations, branching and connections among the nine major characters introduced in the independent, sections of the novel. The characters in the narration extend an emotional connection with the readers to change their attitudes, shown to the environment and its related matters. Powers' description and delineation of the characters awake the expected awareness on the gradual diminishing rate of trees from the planet. They strike the reality of the rapid and irretrievable loss of the majestic trees. The relationship among the characters is not a planned one; instead, they come together by chance; they get connected with each other by their arboreal interests. They venture to conduct protests in favour of the trees. Their objections in the form of protests cannot be considered to be terroristic in nature. They are sympathetic acts, done to avoid the obliteration of the great treasures of the earth.

Powers is skilful in portraying the interconnectedness of human beings with the trees; this happens in the novel through their memories, emotions and experiences. The characters in *The Overstory* arise from specific and identifiable background; yet, they are temporal in nature. They fit into the needs of the narrative. Patricia Westerford, a botanist is the author of *The Secret Forest*. She serves the purpose of being the spokesperson of Powers, as she is about twenty years older than the other characters. Initially, her exploration and research are dismissed as invalid by her academic peers. Patricia never loses her spirit; she investigates independently and inconspicuously. In the later years, others vindicate her research aptitude. She flourishes in the academic and the public sphere as she gains ample acclaim and reputation. She is found to be immersed in the physical world and write the bestseller book, based on her research findings. She discovers the communicative abilities of trees and thus establishes her vision of human nature synergy. Her in-depth study reveals the intricate network of communication among trees. The prevalent dominating view that trees are meant for exploitation is questioned by her work. Patricia's memory of the extinct American chestnut tree is ever fresh. She could not come out of this haunting memory; actually, it inspires her to become an activist and writer later. In her book, she says, "You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. ...after an immense journey in separate directions, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes." (*Overstory*137)

It is no wonder that Patricia's life in the redwood tree has increased her reverence for the forest. She is wonderstruck by its delicate balance. She could realize her increasing responsibility and commitment in its protection. (*Overstory* 237) Her act of rebellion against deforestation challenges the conventional wisdom, which prioritizes human beings over nature. Her scientific research has revealed the fact that trees have the ability to transmit and receive signals. Her portrayal of trees enunciates that trees are complicated entities with sophisticated communication network; it is insisted that they are not for exploitation.

Neelay, the child of Indian immigrants is a coding genius. He creates a series of world-building computer games. As a child, he has met with the misfortune of falling from a tree and breaking his back. This sad incident has made him paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life. Becoming extremely wealthy and successful in his coding work, he feels discontent. His encounter with another avatar makes him confront the consequence of his success. "Midas problem. People build shit until the place fills up. Then you gods [programmers] must make another continent or introduce weapons." (*Overstory* 377) At this juncture, it is Patricia's book *The Secret Forest* that inspires him to make a new kind of game that reflects the natural world of Earth. He gathers information on the work pattern of the forests with the help of Artificial Intelligence technology. Neelay exemplifies how technology can help repair humanity's relationship to nature. Neelay proves to be the high-flying collector of future arboreal information. Being a competitive computer games producer, he endeavours his best to create virtual experiences dense with nature.

Powers characters resemble each other; they experience trauma and get associated with trees. As a young boy, Nicholas Hoel has spent his days in an Iowa farm, especially with one of a few surviving chestnut trees. In his adulthood, he experiences the trauma of finding his family being asphyxiated by a faulty gas heater. The Chinese father of Mimi Ma planted a mulberry in the yard, when he was in Illinois. After some years, he killed himself underneath it. Adam Appich is the psychologist in the novel. After the disappearance of his sister during her vacation at Florida, he develops his relationship with a maple tree. Douglas Pavlicek is saved by a banyan tree after parachuting into the jungle. Ray Brinkman suffers by a weakening physical stroke and later finds consolation in appreciating the trees in his backyard. Olivia Vandergriff, a college going student meets with an accidental electrocution and the trauma has infused the thought of protecting the trees in her. Olivia and Nicholas move together to the West Coast and join the Nature Defence Force; they spend a year sitting on a platform in a giant redwood. Westerford, a graduate student discovers many unknown secrets of the trees in forests. According to them, the trees communicate in subtle ways with each other; they warn themselves of the approaching danger; they know to defend themselves; they encounter and defeat certain threats, approaching them. Nick finds solace in the strength of redwoods. Adam, who is fascinated by nature, finds solace in its companionship. Olivia shoulders the responsibility of protecting natural wonders.

Adam Appich, a scientist is passionate about studying the unique relationship between trees and fungi. It is interesting to note that Adam has spent his childhood days in a tree house, built in a sturdy oak. These fond memories of his happy childhood days have chiselled his career as a scientist in the later years. His research is focused on exploring the interconnectedness of forest ecosystems. He demonstrates the way trees communicate and cooperate through vast networks of mycelium. In the world of nature, there is no place for individualism and rivalry; it is a world of mutualism and reciprocity.

Mimi Ma, the former eco-extremist begins the narrative, by listening to the trees. The readers witness her, leaning against a pine tree, which speaks to her in ‘words before words’. (*Overstory* 4) At the beginning the pine tree starts its monologue; gradually, it blooms into a chorus by the other species; each species seems to insist, “There’s something you need to hear.” (*Overstory* 4) The message heard by Mimi Ma from the pine tree turns out to be the inherent concept of the novel. Powers insists the same statement in the later part of the novel. When the ecological catastrophe arises, human beings must “grasp the Earth’s intentions”. (*Overstory* 455) The concluding part of the novel assures in future the AI algorithms alone could figure out the intention of the trees; they could “... translate between any human language and the language of green things”. (*Overstory* 496) Jorgen Hoel expresses his hope that his children will enjoy playing with the chestnut tree he planted in his garden. He utters that they will “...shake the trunks and eat its fruit for free.” (*Overstory* 7)

It can be elicited that Powers has a clear vision about his characters, who are more eco-conscious. These characters become appreciators of nature. After undergoing a personal trauma; their hatred toward industry and police is obvious; their only desire to save the other human beings from their suicidal act of destroying the trees. Analysing the transformative environmental ethics is the scientific and emotional

point in *The Overstory*. Powers resembles Thoreau, who referred nature as ‘extravagant’ and separated himself from the human world. He quotes Thoreau in *The Overstory* and utters “Old trees are our parents, and our parents’ parents, perchance. If you would learn the secrets of Nature, you must practice more humanity.” (*Overstory* 5) He highlights the value of individual as well as unified action by deriving many routes to create environmental consciousness.

Conclusion:

Powers delineates his characters with his usual scientific nerve. They have individualistic perspective of history, science, or music. In addition, he does a wonder in *The Overstory* by presenting trees that live, breathe, and signal to each other; it is meant that trees exist in a social relation with other trees and the biosphere. The narration implies that trees had exhibited qualities of animal life long before the details of the human race came into existence; they are capable of sustaining these qualities even if the human race perishes. The sad and cruel fact is that the suicidal deforesting of the planet by the human beings will lead to the extinction of trees.

The Overstory is a profound and important book, one that does for the life that hovers over us. It explores the relationship of eco-consciousness, struggle and suffering in regard to environmental challenges. Power is successful in inspiring his readers to think about the importance of getting connected with nature and living a sustainable life. On the whole, the novel offers a compelling account of eco-critical ideas, prompting readers to consider their link to nature and the broader context of environmental degradation.

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