

Ecofeminist Interconnections and Rebellion in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*

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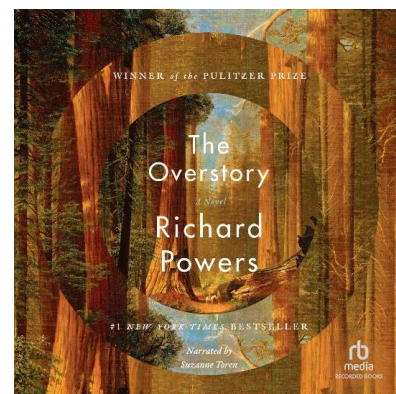
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Abstract

This paper investigates the exploitation and suppression of trees, drawing a parallel to the treatment of women, within Richard Powers' The Overstory. The novel underscores the critical global issue of ecological degradation, calling for urgent awareness and solutions. Powers critiques human ignorance and anthropocentrism, depicting both trees and humans as central figures to convey the message that trees, like humans, possess intrinsic value and agency. The portrayal of female characters in the novel closely mirrors nature, highlighting shared traits such as emotionality, care, altruism, empathy, compassion, and intuition. These qualities, make ecofeminism a fitting theoretical framework for textual analysis. Greta Gaard's Ecofeminist theory states how the ideologies that enable the oppression of women, nature, and other marginalized groups are interconnected. This paper applies Gaard's ecofeminist perspective to explore how The Overstory satirizes the human exploitation of nature and a parallel to the oppression of women. Employing a qualitative research methodology, this paper scrutinizes the interconnectedness of fictional human and non-human characters to examine the ecological destruction caused by the exploitation and subjugation of both nature and women.

Keywords: anthropocentrism, ecofeminism, interconnectedness, oppression, The Overstory

This paper critically explores the connection between women and nature, examining how both are exploited, suppressed and oppressed in society due to patriarchal structure of the human civilization. *The Overstory*, written by Richard Powers, born in Illinois (US) in 1957, won the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and was shortlisted for the Man Booker prize. This novel is ambitious and profound, delivering an urgent and powerful environmental message that serve as acting an eye-opener. Powers introduces a variety of characters,



with nine key figures acting as eco-activists dedicating to protecting trees and the environment. Spanning multiple time periods, and locations across the USA, the novel follows these characters and narrates their interconnected stories. It highlights the importance of ecology, emphasizing the characters' deep connection to trees and the miraculous power of nature. As a result, the novel becomes a reflection of the environmental crises affecting human civilization, such as ozone depletion and global warming (Power, 2018). In *Sustainability, Civilization and Women- An Environmental Study of the Overstory* by Richard Powers, Nikita Gandotara and Shuchi Agrawal (2020) argue: "Global warming and an intensive exploration of environmental effects on the human civilization have gained significance over time and continue to be prominent topics of debate in both local and global context". Thus, Gandotara and Agrawal show that *The Overstory* is centrally focused on environmental concerns.

Firstly, since *The Overstory* explores the intricate relationship between humans and trees, this paper naturally addresses the role of trees, which make forests ecologically significant for the survival of living beings on world. According to ecological science, trees produce oxygen, facilitate rainfall, serve as habitats for wildlife, and contribute to ecosystems that include humans. As every tree function as an oxygen factory essential for human survival, its significance is undeniably justified. Trees also have deep roots in religion and literature. In the earliest stages of human civilization, when people/nomads had yet to master farming, their survival depended largely on the forests, as they relied on animals and plants found there. The portrayal of trees in various mythologies and religions reflects the profound and inseparable connection between trees and humans. As Weronika Laszkiewicz (2017) notes in *into the wild woods: On the Significance of Trees and Forests in Fantasy Fiction*:

Today, some of the most recognizable examples of sacred trees are the biblical Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Tree of Life appearing in the Old Testament as well as in numerous other traditions (the universal motif of the *arbor vitae*), and Yggdrasil—the cosmic ash tree of Norse mythology. From the various vegetation gods and other mythical beings connected with trees, the ones which have most strongly imprinted upon popular imagination are the Greek dryads and the Green Man.

The depiction of trees and forests in mythologies and religions highlights the deep connection between trees and humans. Trees hold a significant place in the lives of individuals who embark on a spiritual journey, transforming from ordinary humans to sages, hermits and even Buddhas. As Alexander Porteous (2002) argues in *The Forest in Folklore and Mythology*:

There are numerous references to forests in the sacred writings of India. Thus, we are told, that among the Brahmins, students of the Vedas had to study each Veda for twelve years, although he might study one only. Buddha was one of the god Vishnu's incarnations by Norther India, and it is told that in his youth he was never

so happy as when sitting alone in the depths of the forests lost in meditation; and it was in the midst of a beautiful forest that he was shown the four great truths.

Thus, the importance of trees is reflected in mythologies, highlighting their connection to human beings on their spiritual journey.

Secondly, literature which serves as a mirror to the world, reveals a profound connection between humans and non-humans. Different genres of literature, such as poetry, fiction, prose, and drama, not only portray how humans coexist with nature, how nature benefits humans, and how humans exploit nature, but also give voice to non-human entities, encouraging people to recognize and preserve nature. According to Francoise Besson, literature plays a crucial role in fostering and strengthening the relationship between humans and nature, teaching people from an early age how humans and nature should coexist. In *Ecology and Literature in English: Writing to save the Planet*, Besson (2019) argues: “It is from the angle of the preservation of the planet that I would like to demonstrate how writers, through poetry, fiction, theatre, essays or any form of writing—even the simplest book teaching children how to read and write, an alphabet book—give us the key to the preservation of the natural world, hence the preservation of man in the world”. Besson suggests that the ecological slogan ‘in preserving the nature, people preserve their own life’ should be reflected in the literature. Besson’s (Besson, 2019) argument “Literature might give the nonhuman world an opportunity to hold out a mirror to us since we are unable to see the mirror animals and plants hold out in reality” underscores the importance of literature in making the ecological significance of nature more visible to people worldwide.

The depiction of nature in relation to human and non-human characters has been a fundamental aspect of literature since its inception. Folklore and mythology cannot be imagined without the depiction of forests. Porteous’ argument, “Many forests of fabulous fame have been mentioned in classical writings and by the authors of old romances. Hindu mythology tells of a great cosmogonic forest, the principal tree in which is the mighty Jambu, which bears an immortal fruit as large as an elephant, resembling gold, and of which the seeds produce pure gold” (Porteous, 2002) highlights the significant role forests have played for human beings. A. Suderland (2016), in “*Forest in Ancient Beliefs: Powerful Realm of Good and Evil, Ghosts, Gods and Monsters- Ancient Pages*” points out that forests have been central in legends, myths, and fairy tales across cultures since recorded history. Laszkiewicz (2017) claims “Also folktales and fairy tales frequently depict the forest as a threatening territory from which the heroes—who either willingly seek refuge in the wild woods or are forced into their exile by the antagonist—can emerge only thanks to their cleverness and perseverance” positioning forests as a shelter for humans. Literature often treats nature as God’s angel, a teacher for human beings, and a female force. Carolyn Merchant’s (10830 perspectives in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, “Here nature is God’s involuntary agent, a benevolent teacher of the hidden pattern and values God employed in creating the visible cosmos” (natura naturata, the natural creation) emphasizes the didactic role of nature in literature. In the context of Romanticism, nature is highly valued, and it is believed that God is immanent through

nature. Laszkiewicz's (2017) statement "The poets of Romanticism unanimously expressed their worshipful admiration of the natural world, which they perceive as imbued with genuine spirit" supports Merchant's view.

Thirdly, this paper examines *The Overstory* to illustrate how both women and nature share similarities in being exploited and oppressed due to patriarchal structure of the human society. The novel centers on nine main characters: Nick, Olivia Vandergrief, Patrica Westergrief, Douglas, Pavlicek, Ray Brinkman, Dorothy Cazaly, Neelay, Mehata, Adam Appich, and Mimi Ma. However, this paper focuses primarily on the female characters-Olivia, Patricia, Dorothy and Mimi Ma to highlight their analogy with nature. The characters' attachment to trees, their love for trees, and their fight to protect trees position them in a similar way to how women are treated. Merchant's (2017) claim "Women and nature have an age-old association- an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language and history" is particularly meaningful in the context of this analysis.

The research primarily focuses on the degradation of ecology and the environment due to humanity's tendency to impose anthropomorphism views on nature. However, the paper also explores the parallel treatment of nature and women in society. Hence, one objective of the research is to examine how trees like humans are endowed with intrinsic value and agency. The second objective is to discover how both women and nature are oppressed and suppressed in the human world due to the parallel treatment they receive from a patriarchal society. The third and final objective to raise awareness, both locally and globally, about the importance of preserving the rights of both women and nature to protect ecology and the environment.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The research methodology applied for this project is qualitative, as the study examines fictional characters depicted in the selected novel, focusing on their feelings, emotions, beliefs, attitudes and behavior. Regarding the research design, the study moves from specific observations to general conclusions, making the inductive approach appropriate. Furthermore, since textual analysis is the primary theoretical method used for narrative analysis, naturalistic analysis serves as the interpretative framework for examining the select novel.

The research adopts Greta Gaard's theory of ecofeminism as its broad theoretical framework for two primary reasons. Firstly, Gaard, ecofeminism has evolved various fields of feminist inquiry and activism, including peace movements, labor movements, women's health care, and anti-nuclear, environmental, and animal liberation movements. Second, this research examines the interconnectedness of fictional human and non-human characters, arguing that the ecological devastation depicted in the novel reflects broader patterns of exploitation and oppression affecting both nature and women. Hence, Gaard's theory is applicable in connecting the theory and practice of both environmentalism and feminism.

Discussion

This paper examines the interconnectedness of the issues of nature, women, patriarchy, capitalism, and the exploitation of both women and nature in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*. On one hand, the paper explores how women are treated similarly to nature in the novel. On the other hand, it highlights the exploitation of both women and nature, focusing on the rebellion against the subjugation of both.

The research conducts a textual analysis of *The Overstory*, a novel in which trees are depicted as active agents that influence the human beings around them. The story is primarily narrated through the perspectives of nine human characters, each portrayed as protagonists who study trees and recognize their significance both in their own lives and in the future of humanity. The novel reveals the profound symbolism of trees. At the beginning of the novel, Powers gives

A woman sits on the ground leaning against a pine. Its bark presses hard against her back, as hard as life. Its needles scent the air and a force hums in the heart of the wood. Her ears tune down to the lowest frequencies. The tree is saying things, in words before words. It says: Sun and water are questions endlessly worth answering. It says: A good answer must be reinvented many times, from scratch. It says: Every piece of earth needs a new way to grip it. There are more ways to branch than any cedar pencil will ever find. A thing can travel everywhere just by holding still. The woman does exactly that. (*The Overstory*,

What Powers aims to convey through his writing is that trees, representing nature, communicate much like human beings. By giving them voice and humanizing them, he underscores the symbolism of trees as a representation of the interconnectedness of ecology, nature and life, which are vital for all living beings on Earth. Pia Masiero's (2020) comments, "This interpretation would imply that at least the sections making up the "Roots" section could be narrated by the same voice which is saying things to the woman here, namely, the pine. This radical reading is certainly intriguing and would amount to the literal manifestation of Powers' desire to give voice to trees he has articulated on various occasions" indicates that Powers seeks to humanize trees by giving them voices, reflecting the similarity between women and nature. In this context, Rakhi Vyas, like the critics mentioned above, share similar views towards trees and nature, asserting:

In Powers' *'The Overstory'*, trees symbolize the interconnectedness of life, illustrating how individual stories and lives intertwine to form a larger, collective story of survival and resistance. The novel employs trees as living entities that witness and withstand the passage of time, embodying themes of resilience and renewal amidst destruction. For example, the ancient chestnut tree in the Hoel family plot stands as a testament to generations past, embodying the continuity of life and the resilience of nature against human and environmental challenges. Similarly, the character Patricia Westerford's discovery that trees communicate and support each

other in a forest network emphasizes connectivity and mutual support as essential elements of survival, both in nature and human societies. (Vyas, 2024)

Thus, the trees in the novel strengthen the conviction of interconnections between nature and human societies, revealing how trees, much like human beings, communicate and support one another within the forest network.

Fateh Abdelaziz Dahy employs the theoretical metaphor of the “Quilt” from Karen J. Warren and considers *The Overstory* as a quilt of Ecofeminism. According to Dahy, much like Warren’s different ecofeminist philosophical patches that form a quilt, Powers’ *The Overstory* weaves together patches for the philosophical quilt. Dahy highlights Powers’ vision in *The Overstory*:

To sew his final quilt, *The Overstory*, Powers tells the story of a group of eco-activists who chain themselves to trees, organize activities of sabotage and arson to save the trees, the last 3% of redwood trees on the Earth, marked for felling. The nine human characters are: Patricia Westford, Olivia Vandergriff (Maidenhair), Nick Hoel, Mimi Ma, Douglas Pavlicek, Ray Brinkman, Dorothy, Neelay Mehta, and Adam Appich. The non-human characters are the trees, the most important characters of the novel. (Dahy, 2022)

The nine characters, depicted as protagonists, provide metaphorical patches that contribute to the theoretical quilt in the novel. Each of these characters, as eco-activists, plays a significant role in preserving the ecological environment.

Out of the nine protagonists, four are female characters who are portrayed in such a way that a clear similarity between them and nature can be discovered analyzed in this paper. Among these four female protagonists- Patricia Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff, Dorothy Pavlicek and Mimi Ma, Patricia is one of the most powerful protagonists figures who study trees and the human relationship with nature, identifying patriarchy as a root cause of domination of both women and nature. Patricia shows deep interest in trees, becomes a dendrologist, completes Ph.D. in trees and establishes herself as a professional scientist. During one of her studies, she observes a tree under insect invasion, conducts experiments in her lab, discovers: “The wounded trees send out alarms that other trees smell. Her maples are signaling. They’re linked together in an airborne network, sharing an immune system across acres of woodland. These brainless. Stationary trunks are protecting each other. . . life is talking to itself, and she has listened in” (129-130). This passage not only reflects Patricia’s ability to humanize trees but also illustrates that trees are like her possess agency. Here, Carolyn Merchant’s theoretical concept in *The Death of Nature* “Women and nature have an age-old association- an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language and history” (xix) is applicable to show the interconnectedness between trees and Patricia, who represents women.

Despite her holding a doctoral degree, Patricia westerford is not addressed as ""at the midwestern branch meeting of the professional forestry society. Instead, she is humiliated as her idea that trees communicate with one another is mocked. Her defense is printed in the

newspaper with three dendrologists criticizing her views: “Patricia Westerford displays almost an embarrassing misunderstanding of the units of natural selection. . . even if a message in some way received, it would in no way imply that any such message has been sent” (131). Besides, Powers writes, “For the three days of the agonizing of the conference, people nudge each other as she passes them in the halls of the hotel: There is the woman who thinks that trees are intelligent” (131). Despite Patricia Westerford groundbreaking work in discovering the secret communication of trees, she is not supported or congratulated for her contribution; instead, she is ridiculed and humiliated by the male-dominating meeting. This reflects how patriarchy perpetuates the domination of both women and nature.

In this context, Kayla Kruse West, in *"She has Gone to Seed: The Ecofeminist Landscape in Richard Powers' The Overstory,"* argues: in “As the protagonist Patricia Westerfield (Patty) makes clear, the search for dominance relies on inherently masculine principles and is therefore inaccessible to those who subscribe to feminine practices of research and interpretation. The trees in this sense allegorises a conventionally masculine interpretation of landscapes. . .” (Westerfield, 2021). Gaard’s ecofeminist theory is highly relevant in explaining why Westerford is dominated by men. Gaard (1993) posits, “Ecofeminists believe that we cannot end the exploitation of nature without ending human oppression and vice versa. To do both, they reason, we must expose the assumptions that support patriarchy and disconnect our concept of masculinity from that of ‘power over’ others and the rejection and denigration of the feminine”. Patricia’s subjugation by men mirrors the natural domination of the environment, emphasizing the parallel exploitation of both women and nature.

The Overstory revolves around the struggles of female characters who, knowing the value of trees, care for them and demonstrate their deep connection with nature. Knowing Patricia’s early interest in trees. Her father gifts her Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* on her birthday, saying, “For my dear daughter who knows how big and wide family tree really is” (Westerfield, 2021)). Instead of offering this book to one her brothers, her father gives it to her because he recognizes her closeness to nature and her ability to understand it deeply. Gondotra and Agrawal assert that women are more closely connected to nature than men “In *The Overstory* we know that as a young girl Patricia to engage with trees and has a fondness for them. Soon just like her father she also begins to understand their significance which is why her father shares his thoughts on trees instead of her brothers and offers her Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* on her birthday” (Westerfield, 2021).

However, it becomes problematic if only women are depicted as being closer to nature. From an eco-critical perspective, it is not just women or men, who are connected to and care for nature; who are close to nature and love nature preserve or feel for nature; on the other hand, those who neither feel for nature nor preserves nature even destroy nature irrespective of the gender. In this context, it even becomes injustice to the males just blaming them to dominate both women and nature othering both of them. Babar T. Gates’ (1998) argument “Ecofeminism is a belief in the interconnectedness of all living things and

hence it is baseless to claim a part of it, or for that matter, only women can be closer to nature” (*A Root of Ecofeminism: Ecofeminism*, 20) challenge hierarchical concept in interconnections between ecology and human beings. In “Perspectives on Ecofeminism: A Brief Discourse,” Tialila (2022) argues “The mistaken belief that ecofeminism is essentialist and that it promotes the principle of an ontological connection between women and nature has been at the heart of the earliest rejections of the ecofeminist philosophy”. Tialila’s views on interconnections between women and nature are similar to Gates’ views on non-hierarchical relationships.

A novel like *The Overstory* becomes a powerful eye-opener in today’s world of materialism, capitalism and globalization, especially as nature faces significant decline. The entire novel which highlights the connection between trees and human beings, and particularly the passion of its female characters, emphasizes the urgent need for the preservation of trees. Monica Manelesu’s (2021) views “All the characters in *The Overstory* converge in their passion for trees in resulting in shared environmental commitment and action of various kinds, from scientific study to forceful inventions. For all of the characters, trees represent the apex of natural life form and the consummation of their own lives giving meaning to all other concerns” (Monolescu, 2021)). This reveals how the characters in the novel place immense value on trees for the survival of human life.

Vandana Shiva provides a dire warning about the ecological threat the world faces: “The death of nature is central to this threat to survival. The earth is rapidly dying: her forests are dying, her soils are dying, her waters are dying, her air is dying. Tropical forests, the creators of the world’s climate, the cradle of the world’s vegetation wealth, are being bulldozed, burnt, ruined or submerged” (Shiva, 20230). Shiva creates a grim picture of the world’s ecological degradation. To maintain the interconnection between human beings and nature, equal opportunities should be provided to both men and women, with nature treated as deserving of the same care and respect as humans. In this context, Carolyn Merchant’s (1983) views on *Earthcare* “For liberal ecofeminists, equal opportunities are particularly necessary within the areas traditionally used to control environmental issues in society. They believe that together with scientists, environmentalists, lawyers and legislators, women like men can also contribute to the improvement of the environment for higher quality of human life”. Merchant’s argument highlights the importance of liberal ecofeminism in ensuring that both genders have equal roles in protecting the environment (Merchant, 19830).

One major issue explored in this paper is how the novel shows the connection between capitalism and patriarchy, both of which negatively impact women. As a result, both women and nature face domination. Isak Skold’s (2023) claim in “*The Over Story: A Blueprint for Cultural change in the Anthropocene*”: “The connection that ties capitalism and patriarchal structures to the exploitation of nature is a theme that is reoccurring throughout the book, aligning it with arguments often considered central to the movement of

ecofeminism” (Merchant, 1983). This insight helps illuminate the root causes of ecological destruction. Skold (2023) further points out:

For Patricia, patriarchal and capitalist power structures become very problematic when her scientific research becomes discredited as a result of them. Her findings, which mirror the findings Suzanne Simard made in the nineties of the interconnectivity of trees through a fungal network, turn out to be much too groundbreaking, and much too incompatible with the rest of the ideas in the field to be accepted by the patriarchal-capitalist elite. So, three leading men in the field, all from prestigious institutes of research write a scathing criticism of her work, discrediting its findings.

The above quoted lines reflect how deserving women like Patricia are dominated and other by men due to patriarchy and capitalism. If women like Patricia who are eco-activists, are marginalized and subjugated, the nature they strive to preserve will inevitably be endangered. In this sense, hierarchy becomes a significant issue for both women and nature, as it perpetuates systems of exploitation and neglect.

Thus, the entire paper focuses on the importance of trees, which the characters in the novel deeply value. These eco-activist characters are affected by patriarchy and capitalism. The paper not only explores the interconnections of humans and non-humans but also highlights the rebellion of female characters, such as Patricia, against patriarchy and capitalism.

Conclusion

In this way, Powers’ *The Overstory* reflects a profound bond between humans and trees focusing on the parallel treatment of both women and nature. The novel is structurally divided into four sections- ‘Roots’, ‘Trunk’, ‘Crown’ and ‘Seeds’- which reveal the different stage of connection between humans and trees. While the novel seems to depict a clear picture of America, akin to *Aboretum America*, it in fact reflects a global perspective on the relationship between humans and non-humans as well as women and nature. The voices raised by the novelist align with the voices of ecofeminists who advocate for the rights of both women and nature. Consequently, Gaard’s theory of ecofeminism is applied in the research to explore the ecofeminist interconnections and rebellion in Powers’ *The Overstory*.

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