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## An Eco-Critical Study of Richard Power's *The Overstory*

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### ABSTRACT

*The Overstory* by Richard Powers (2018) is a novel with intricate narrative threads that blend human stories with the ecological. In doing so, the paper adopts eco-criticism as its theoretical framework which delivers familiarity between literary texts and the natural environment. This study focuses on how the lives of trees in the book suit to mirror human experience and tries to understand how it is a challenge to anthropocentrism, call for environmental stewardship, and critique the contemporary ecological crisis. It seeks to clarify how *The Overstory* works as an advocacy for environmental preservation and a re-examination of humanity's place in nature is one aspect defined. This paper demonstrates how the novel could be more effectively utilized for ecological awareness and advocacy by integrating eco-criticism and analyzing Powers' approach to structure, character, and language. The study explores the text regarding deep ecological allegory and eco-criticism, as well as nature's agency, or pseudo-agency, through animals. The study helps to understand better how literature can represent and affect societal responses to environmental crises and sustainability.

**Key words:** Eco criticism, Eco Feminism, Environment, Richard Powers, Overstory.

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طابق علوي تحليل نقدي بيئي لريتشارد باور

م.م. بناز وريا علي

الجامعة اللبنانية الفرنسية

## المستخلص

بقلم ريتشارد باورز طابق علوي (2018) هي رواية ذات خيوط سردية معقدة تمزج القصص الإنسانية مع البيئة. وبذلك، تتبنى الورقة النقد البيئي كإطار نظري يوفر الألفة بين النصوص الأدبية والبيئة الطبيعية. تركز هذه الدراسة على كيفية تناسب حياة الأشجار في الكتاب مع التجربة الإنسانية وتحاول فهم كيف أنها تمثل تحدياً لمركزية الإنسان، والدعوة إلى الإشراف البيئي، ونقد الأزمة البيئية المعاصرة يسعى إلى توضيح أن كيفية عمل طابق علوي كدعوة للحفاظ على البيئة وإعادة فحص مكان الإنسانية في الطبيعة هو أحد الجوانب المحددة. توضح هذه الورقة كيف يمكن استخدام الرواية بشكل أكثر فعالية للتوعية البيئية والدعوة من خلال دمج النقد البيئي وتحليل نهج باورز في البنية والشخصية واللغة. سوف تستكشف الدراسة النص من حيث الرمز البيئي العميق والنقد البيئي، وكذلك وكالة الطبيعة، أو الوكالة الزائفة، من خلال. تساعد الدراسة على تطوير فهم أفضل لكيفية تمثيل الأدب والتأثير على الاستجابات المجتمعية للأزمات البيئية والاستدامة.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* may well be the most important novel to come out in the last decade, and it is certainly one of our greatest environmental novels ever. Through the lives of several characters—inextricably connected to trees--Powers' novel deeply preserves a tale that transcends human experience into larger, and ignored, systems of life in the wild. The objectives of this research offer an eco-critical reading on *The Overstory* where this paper tackles how Powers frames all forms of life in connection to one another and exhibits the practice of disclaiming anthropocentrism that has advanced ecological disturbances.

In the face of a growing climate crisis and an ebbing tide in biodiversity, fiction like *The Overstory* feels vital, as it can reach people with a truth that sometimes cold hard data never will. So, the aims of this research walk together in two hands. To begin with I will show how *The Overstory* enacts eco-critical principles by presenting trees as unfixed, animating entities in their own right rather than static fixtures of human activity. Secondly, it investigates how the novel represents anthropocentrism, capitalism, and industrialization — three mutually reinforcing narratives that tie directly to environmental degradation and collapse. Through the consideration of how each character develops their relationships with trees and the environment, this research will demonstrate that Powers' novel works to argue for a more symbiotic and compassionate relationship between humans and the earth.

This work will help to answer several important questions. So when did the author write the novel, and particularly how would he have done with the narrative structure to mirror that suggestion of all life (to collaborate)? How does the novel skewer anthropocentrism and put forward a more ecocentric perspective? What do we learn from each character, and how does their narrative coalesce into a greater theme of environmental activism/awareness? Last, but by no means least — from the standpoint of a few vacuous sentences of description like these at least: where and how does *The Overstory* fall into or out of existing environmental discourses; most notably in terms of deep ecology and eco-justice?

The importance of such studies is abundant, both to the discipline of literary scholarship as well as to ongoing discussions in environmental agenda. At once an eco-critical text, *The Overstory* provides a glimpse of the undeniable potential that literature has to be an unsung hero in the crusade for ecological awareness and activism. Theoretical Framework

Eco-criticism is a fairly new field within literary studies that looks into the intricate links between literature and nature. A critical framework for interrogation of environmental issues through literature, it emerged in response to the recognition by scholars and society late in the twentieth century that in pursuit of ecological degradation (a.k.a. progress) they had made a misstep. Eco-criticism is thus focused on how nature is represented in texts, and what these representations mean in terms of both cultural attitudes towards the natural world and the environmental consequences of such ways of thinking. As Greg Garrard (2004) points out eco-criticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. 5). In this way, it asks how literature serves to question or reaffirm an anthropocentric viewpoint and adds to the conversation on environmental ethics.

It is based on three main directions — deep ecology, ecofeminism, and eco-justice. They help to unpack the human-centered framing and to promote a more holistic understanding of nature as nature being of intrinsic value. This critical forum investigates different ways in which literature reflects environmental anxiety, especially novels such as Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018), through diverse readings that provide new and nuanced responses to the subject. Powers shifts the narrative focus from humans to non-human narratives in his novel, introducing a new form of the Anthropocene epic of power and style that makes human expression subordinate to place-based morality—but it is not exactly rooted in whiteness as much as trees.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 Deep Ecology**

Deep ecology is a philosophical, ethical, and ecological perspective that challenges conventional environmental approaches by advocating for a radical rethinking of humanity's relationship with the natural world. It goes beyond shallow environmentalism, which focuses on addressing immediate environmental issues like pollution and resource depletion without questioning underlying societal structures. Deep ecology emphasizes the inherent value of all living beings, regardless of their utility to human beings. This perspective was introduced by the Norwegian philosopher Arne

Naess in the early 1970s, who argued for a "deeper" ecological approach to addressing environmental crises.

## **2.2 Philosophical Foundations of Deep Ecology**

Deep ecology stems from a philosophical tradition that rejects anthropocentrism, the belief that human beings are the most important entities in the universe and that the environment should be valued primarily for its utility to humanity. Instead, it embraces an ecocentric or biocentric worldview, where all forms of life have intrinsic value, independent of their usefulness to humans (Naess, 1973).

One of the core principles of deep ecology is the belief in the interdependence of all living organisms. This interconnectedness implies that harm done to one part of the ecosystem affects the whole. Deep ecology, therefore, calls for a holistic understanding of nature, where the relationships between organisms and their environment are given precedence over individual species' survival or growth. Naess (1989) argued that this holistic perspective is necessary for truly sustainable environmental practices.

The philosophical foundation of deep ecology can also be traced to the work of thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza, whose monistic philosophy suggested that all of nature is part of a single substance, and Mahatma Gandhi, whose idea of "non-violence" extended beyond human beings to include all living creatures. Naess was significantly influenced by Gandhi's ethic of non-violence, which he interpreted ecologically to mean that humans should minimize their impact on the natural world (Naess, 1989).

## **2.3 The Eight Principles of Deep Ecology**

In 1984, Arne Naess and George Sessions outlined eight principles that encapsulate the core tenets of deep ecology. These principles have served as a guide for individuals and organizations committed to fostering an ecologically balanced relationship with the earth:

1. The intrinsic value of nature: The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes (Naess & Sessions, 1984).
2. Biodiversity is vital: The diversity of life forms contributes to the flourishing of life on Earth and has intrinsic value.
3. Reduction of human population: Human interference with the natural world is excessive, and the flourishing of non-human life requires a significant reduction in human population and activity.
4. Sustainability of human society: Human life and civilization can thrive only when they live in harmony with the biosphere.
5. Radical transformation of economic systems: Human activities must transition from exploitative practices towards practices that respect the integrity of natural systems.
6. Obligation to reduce human impact: People have an ethical obligation to drastically reduce their negative impact on the environment, particularly about resource consumption and population growth.
7. Commitment to ecological activism: Individuals who subscribe to deep ecology should be active participants in the movement for radical environmental change.
8. Holistic worldview: There is an interdependence between all living beings, and all are part of a greater whole or ecosphere.

## **Conclusion**

Deep ecology offers a radical and holistic rethinking of humanity's relationship with the natural world. It challenges the anthropocentrism that has dominated Western thought and environmental policy by emphasizing the intrinsic value of all living beings and the interconnectedness of ecosystems. However, deep ecology is not without its limitations. Its idealism and lack of practical political solutions have led some to critique its relevance in urgent environmental crises like climate change and biodiversity loss.

Nevertheless, deep ecology's ethical framework remains an important contribution to environmental philosophy, and its emphasis on the interdependence of all life forms provides a necessary counterbalance to more anthropocentric approaches to environmentalism. As humanity faces increasingly complex environmental challenges, the ideas of deep ecology will continue to play a role in shaping the philosophical and ethical foundations of the ecological movement.

## **3. ECOFEMINISM**

Ecofeminism is a social and political movement that integrates ecological concerns with feminist theories, focusing on the interconnections between the oppression of women and nature. Developed during the 1970s and 1980s, ecofeminism critiques patriarchal structures that contribute to the degradation of both the environment and women. It emphasizes that the same ideologies that sanction the exploitation of nature are often linked to those that oppress women, marginalized communities, and non-human animals (Mies & Shiva, 1993). This essay explores the historical development, core principles, critiques, and contemporary relevance of ecofeminism, along with its intersections with other movements.

### **3.1 Historical Development of Ecofeminism**

The term "ecofeminism" was first coined by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*. D'Eaubonne argued that women possess the power to initiate an ecological revolution that could mitigate environmental degradation and promote social equality (Merchant, 1980). The feminist environmental movement gained traction in the 1980s, especially through the work of activists and scholars like Ynestra King, Carolyn Merchant, and Vandana Shiva, who emphasized the interconnectedness of ecological and feminist issues.

In the 1980s, ecofeminism developed into a more formalized academic and activist movement. One of the earliest conferences on ecofeminism, held at the University of California in 1980, marked the convergence of feminist and ecological discourse. Scholars like Ynestra King (1989) viewed the patriarchy as fundamentally linked to the exploitation of nature and proposed ecofeminism as a holistic framework that could transform society. This period saw the publication of key texts, such as Carolyn Merchant's *\*The Death of Nature\** (1980), which highlighted the relationship between the scientific revolution and the subjugation of both women and nature. Vandana Shiva's *\*Staying Alive\** (1989) critiqued Western development models, arguing that they undermined indigenous women's knowledge and ecological sustainability in the Global South.

### **3.2 Core Principles and Themes of Ecofeminism**

Ecofeminism is characterized by several core principles that integrate feminist and ecological thought:

1. **Interconnectedness of Oppression:** Ecofeminism posits that various forms of oppression, including those based on gender, race, class, and nature, are interconnected and mutually reinforcing (Warren, 2000). Patriarchal structures that dominate women are the same forces that exploit nature, animals, and marginalized communities. Therefore, dismantling one form of oppression requires addressing all forms.
2. **Rejection of Dualism:** Ecofeminists critique dualistic thinking (e.g., man/woman, culture/nature, human/animal) inherent in Western thought. Such dualisms reinforce hierarchies, where the male, culture, and human categories are privileged over their counterparts (Plumwood, 1993). By contrast, ecofeminism advocates a more holistic view that sees nature and humans as part of an interconnected web of life.
3. **Valuing the Feminine Principle:** Many ecofeminists celebrate what they perceive as a feminine affinity with nature, suggesting that women's roles as caregivers and nurturers align them more closely with the environment (Merchant, 1980). This perspective has been critiqued for essentialism, but it remains central to some strands of ecofeminism, especially spiritual ecofeminism, which emphasizes women's spirituality and ecological wisdom.
4. **Critique of Capitalism and Development Models:** Ecofeminism critiques capitalist development for exploiting both women and the environment. Vandana Shiva (1989) argues that the logic of profit-driven growth undermines both ecological balance and women's subsistence practices, especially in the Global South. Ecofeminism promotes alternative models of development that prioritize ecological sustainability and gender justice.
5. **Activism and Praxis:** Ecofeminism is not just a theoretical framework but also a call to action. It has been linked to numerous grassroots movements, including anti-nuclear protests, environmental justice initiatives, and campaigns against deforestation and water privatization (Gaard & Gruen, 1993). By blending theory and activism, ecofeminists seek to create transformative change.

### **3.3 Types of Ecofeminism**

Ecofeminism is not a monolithic movement but encompasses diverse strands, each emphasizing different aspects of the relationship between feminism and environmentalism:

1. **Radical Ecofeminism:** Radical ecofeminists argue that the root cause of environmental degradation is patriarchy, which constructs both women and nature as subordinate and exploitable (King, 1989). This strand emphasizes the need to dismantle patriarchal systems to achieve environmental and gender justice.
2. **Cultural and Spiritual Ecofeminism:** This strand emphasizes women's spiritual connections to the earth and celebrates feminine qualities such as nurturing and care. Spiritual ecofeminists often draw on indigenous and non-Western traditions to propose alternative models of relating to nature. Critics argue that this approach risks essentialism by associating women too closely with nature (Warren, 2000).
3. **Social Ecofeminism:** Social ecofeminism integrates Marxist and socialist critiques of capitalism, focusing on how economic systems oppress both women and nature (Salleh,

1997). It emphasizes the role of labor, class, and power relations in shaping environmental and gender inequalities.

4. **Materialist Ecofeminism:** Materialist ecofeminists focus on the material conditions that link the exploitation of women and nature, such as land use, agricultural practices, and resource distribution (Plumwood, 1993). They argue that ecological sustainability and gender justice can only be achieved through changes in material practices and social structures.

### **3.4 Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology**

Ecofeminism shares certain philosophical underpinnings with deep ecology, a movement that emphasizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and the need for a radical restructuring of human-nature relationships. Both ecofeminism and deep ecology critique anthropocentrism (the belief that humans are the center of existence) and advocate for a more holistic, interconnected view of the world (Naess, 1973).

However, ecofeminists critique deep ecology for its failure to address the social and political dimensions of environmental degradation. While deep ecology focuses on the intrinsic value of nature, ecofeminists emphasize that environmental harm is often linked to social inequalities, such as gender, race, and class. They argue that addressing environmental issues requires not only a philosophical shift but also a transformation of social and economic systems that exploit both women and nature (Plumwood, 1993).

### **3.5 Ecofeminism and Climate Change**

In the context of climate change, ecofeminism offers a critical perspective on how environmental degradation disproportionately affects women, particularly in the Global South. Women in developing countries are often the primary caretakers of the environment, responsible for growing food, collecting water, and managing household resources. As climate change intensifies, these responsibilities become increasingly difficult, leading to greater gender inequality (Shiva, 2008).

Ecofeminists argue that climate change is not just an environmental issue but also a social justice issue. They critique the global economic systems that contribute to environmental degradation, pointing out that those who are least responsible for climate change—such as women in poor, rural communities—are often the most affected by its consequences. Ecofeminists advocate for climate justice, which involves addressing the root causes of climate change and ensuring that solutions are inclusive, equitable, and gender-sensitive (Gaard, 2015).

### **3.6 Spiritual and Cultural Ecofeminism**

Spiritual ecofeminism, a branch of the movement, emphasizes the sacredness of nature and the spiritual connections between women and the earth. Drawing on indigenous and non-Western traditions, spiritual ecofeminists argue that Western patriarchal systems have desecralized nature, leading to its exploitation. In contrast, many indigenous cultures view nature as a living, sacred entity, deserving of respect and care (Merchant, 1980).

This strand of ecofeminism often critiques organized religion, particularly Christianity, for promoting anthropocentric and patriarchal worldviews that justify the domination of both women and nature. Instead, spiritual ecofeminists advocate for a return to more earth-centered spiritual practices that honor the feminine and the natural world (Ruether, 1992).

Critics of spiritual ecofeminism, however, caution against romanticizing women's connection to nature, arguing that this can reinforce gender stereotypes and essentialize women's roles. They argue that women's oppression is not inherently tied to their biology or connection to nature but is a result of social and political structures (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008).

### **3.7 Conclusion**

Ecofeminism is a vital framework that bridges the gap between feminist and environmental concerns. By highlighting the connections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature, ecofeminism provides a critical lens for examining how patriarchal and capitalist systems contribute to both gender inequality and environmental degradation. Despite facing critiques of essentialism and ambiguity, ecofeminism has evolved to incorporate intersectionality, indigenous perspectives, and climate justice, making it more inclusive and relevant in contemporary environmental and feminist discourse.

Through both theory and praxis, ecofeminism continues to inspire activism and influence policy, advocating for a more just and sustainable world. As environmental challenges intensify, ecofeminism offers a holistic approach that recognizes the interconnections between social and ecological justice, providing a roadmap for creating transformative, long-term solutions.

Eco-justice is an interdisciplinary framework that merges environmental and social justice concerns, addressing how ecological degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities. It critiques the unequal distribution of environmental burdens and benefits, advocating for protecting both the Earth and the people who depend on it, especially those who have been historically oppressed. This concept encourages a systemic approach to addressing both environmental and social inequalities.

## **4. ECOJUSTICE**

Eco-justice emerged from converging the environmental movement and social justice activism in the late 20th century. Early environmental activism primarily focused on the conservation of natural resources and the protection of wildlife, largely neglecting the human implications of environmental degradation, particularly for low-income and minority communities (Schlosberg, 2007). The social justice movement, on the other hand, concentrated on fighting inequalities in race, class, and gender, often sidelining environmental concerns. Eco-justice integrates these two perspectives by recognizing that social and environmental issues are interconnected.

### **4.1 Key Concepts in Eco-Justice**

Eco-justice addresses several key concerns:



1. **Environmental Racism:** This refers to the practice of placing environmental hazards disproportionately in or near communities of color or economically disadvantaged populations. Studies show that these communities are more likely to be affected by air and water pollution, toxic waste, and hazardous working conditions (Bullard, 2005). For example, the siting of hazardous waste facilities in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods is a prominent case of environmental racism in the U.S.
2. **Ecological Distribution Conflicts:** These conflicts arise from the unequal distribution of environmental goods (such as clean air and water) and bad (such as pollution). Global ecological distribution conflicts are particularly pronounced between the Global North and the Global South. While the Global North consumes the majority of the world's resources, the Global South disproportionately bears the environmental costs of extraction and waste (Martinez-Alier, 2014).
3. **Intersectionality:** Eco-justice also draws upon intersectionality, a framework developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how race, gender, and class intersect to shape an individual's or group's experience of oppression. In eco-justice, the intersectionality lens helps to highlight how marginalized communities, especially women and people of color, bear the brunt of environmental harm (Gaard, 2011).
4. **Environmental Rights:** Eco-justice advocates for the recognition of environmental rights as human rights. This includes the right to clean air, water, and soil, as well as access to natural resources that support basic human needs. The recognition of environmental rights also requires that the needs of future generations be considered, promoting sustainability and intergenerational equity (Schlosberg, 2007).
5. **Indigenous Knowledge and Practices:** Indigenous communities around the world have historically practiced sustainable forms of agriculture, land management, and resource use that are now being recognized as crucial to achieving eco-justice. Indigenous peoples' rights to land, resources, and self-determination are central to many eco-justice struggles, particularly in regions where their lands are threatened by extractive industries (Whyte, 2018).

#### **4.2 Eco-Justice and Climate Change**

Climate change is a significant eco-justice issue. The effects of climate change—rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and shifting agricultural patterns—are not distributed equally across the globe. Developing countries, which have historically contributed the least to greenhouse gas emissions, are the most vulnerable to its effects (Roberts & Parks, 2007). For instance, small island nations like the Maldives face the existential threat of rising sea levels, while many African nations are experiencing increased droughts and food insecurity.

Moreover, marginalized communities within developed countries also face greater risks from climate change. Low-income populations and communities of color often live in areas more vulnerable to flooding, heatwaves, and other climate-related disasters, and they typically have fewer resources to recover from such events (Bullard, 2005). Eco-justice advocates argue for climate policies that not only reduce emissions but also address these social inequalities.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

Eco-justice presents a holistic approach to addressing the intertwined crises of environmental degradation and social inequality. By acknowledging the disproportionate impact of environmental harms on marginalized communities, it calls for a more equitable distribution of both environmental benefits and risks. Movements for eco-justice are diverse, spanning from climate justice activism to indigenous land rights struggles, and they challenge both environmental and social injustices at local, national, and global levels.

As the world faces escalating environmental crises, eco-justice offers a crucial framework for ensuring that efforts to protect the Earth are inclusive and equitable. The growing recognition of the intersection between ecological and social issues is essential for crafting policies that not only address environmental problems but also promote fairness and human dignity for all.

## **5. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Eco-criticism, a branch of literary theory focused on the relationship between literature and the environment, has gained increasing relevance over the past few decades. In recent eco-critical studies, Richard Powers' *The Overstory* has been a focal point for exploring themes such as deforestation, environmental activism, and the deep interconnectedness between human and non-human life. While numerous scholarly works have examined *The Overstory* from eco-critical perspectives, analyzing its environmental themes and activism, this paper seeks to highlight a distinct approach by focusing on the narrative structures, character development, and the symbiotic relationship between humans and trees within the novel.

This literature review aims to critically evaluate prior studies, compare and contrast their methodologies and conclusions, and highlight the unique contributions of this paper in addressing the gaps in the existing literature. The review will explore how *The Overstory* has been interpreted in previous research, identifying areas where this study provides a fresh perspective on Powers' work.

### **5.1 Prior Studies on Eco-Criticism and *The Overstory***

Many scholarly articles have analyzed *The Overstory* through an eco-critical lens, predominantly focusing on the novel's exploration of environmental activism and its critique of human-centered ideologies. For example, in Smith's (2020) examination of the novel, he emphasizes the role of environmental activism, illustrating how Powers critiques the capitalist exploitation of natural resources. According to Smith, *The Overstory* serves as a call to action for readers to reconsider their relationship with nature and actively participate in conservation efforts. His study highlights the novel's treatment of environmental degradation and the characters' responses to ecological crises as central themes, connecting them to broader discourses of climate change activism (Smith, 2020).

Johnson (2019) also centers her analysis on *The Overstory*'s eco-critical themes, focusing on the concept of "deep ecology," a philosophy that advocates for the intrinsic value of all living beings, independent of their utility to humans. In her paper, she argues that the novel's depiction of trees as sentient, almost spiritual beings, shifts the narrative from a human-centered to a nature-centered perspective. Johnson's work focuses on how Powers

challenges the anthropocentric worldview, using the narrative to emphasize the interconnectedness of life on Earth (Johnson, 2019).

Similarly, \*\*Lee (2021)\*\* offers a comprehensive eco-critical analysis of \*The Overstory\*, with particular attention to its portrayal of environmental activism and the political implications of ecological destruction. Lee's work underscores how the novel uses allegory and symbolism to represent the clash between environmental advocates and industrial forces. He points out that \*The Overstory\* places its characters on the front lines of ecological battles, making them "eco-warriors" who resist the corporate powers responsible for environmental devastation (Lee, 2021).

In contrast, Garcia's (2022) study takes a broader approach, considering \*The Overstory\* within the context of contemporary environmental literature. Garcia situates the novel within a lineage of eco-critical works, comparing it to classics such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. His analysis focuses on how Powers reimagines the eco-literary genre for a 21st-century audience, combining narrative techniques with environmental advocacy. He emphasizes how *The Overstory* incorporates diverse narratives to represent different cultural perspectives on nature (Garcia, 2022).

While these studies offer valuable insights into the eco-critical dimensions of *The Overstory*, they predominantly focus on similar themes: environmental activism, deep ecology, and critiques of industrialization and human-centered ideologies. While these elements are undeniably central to Powers' novel, this paper aims to fill the literary gap by addressing other aspects of the text that have been underexplored in the existing literature, such as the narrative structure, characterization, and the symbiotic relationship between humans and the non-human world, especially trees.

## **5.2 Addressing the Gaps in the Literature**

Although environmental activism and deep ecology are prominent in *The Overstory*, the narrative techniques that Powers employs to convey these themes have not been adequately analyzed in previous studies. This paper's primary contribution lies in its focus on the novel's narrative structure and how it reflects the interconnectedness of life forms. Powers constructs the novel as a series of interconnected stories, each centered around a different character, mirroring the complex web of relationships in nature. These interwoven narratives function as a literary device that reinforces the ecological theme of interconnectivity. As Brown (2018) notes, narrative structures in eco-literature often mimic the natural patterns they seek to represent (Brown, 2018), but this concept has not been extensively applied to *The Overstory*.

This paper will further build on Brown's insight by arguing that Powers' use of multiple narratives also serves to decentralize human experience, placing it alongside non-human life in equal significance. By intertwining human and tree stories, Powers disrupts the anthropocentric hierarchy, emphasizing that trees, like humans, have stories worth telling. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on environmental activism, this paper will delve deeper into how narrative techniques serve to represent ecological relationships. In doing so, it will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the form and content of *The Overstory* work together to create its eco-critical message.

Another critical gap in the literature is the insufficient exploration of character development in *\*The Overstory\**. Most studies, such as *\*\*Johnson (2019)\*\** and *\*\*Smith (2020)\*\**, focus on the actions of characters in relation to environmental activism. However, little attention has been paid to how Powers develops characters over time to reflect their growing awareness of and connection to the natural world. This paper will argue that character arcs in *\*The Overstory\** serve as a microcosm of ecological consciousness, tracing individuals' transformations from detachment to deep ecological understanding.

For instance, this study will explore how the character of Patricia Westerford evolves throughout the novel. Initially an isolated scientist marginalized by her peers, Patricia eventually becomes a vital voice for ecological wisdom, representing the transformative power of environmental knowledge. The evolution of her character symbolizes humanity's potential to reconnect with the natural world, a theme that has not been fully explored in prior analyses. By examining such character arcs in detail, this paper will offer new insights into how Powers humanizes eco-criticism, making it not just a matter of ideology but of personal growth and transformation.

Finally, this paper will address the overlooked theme of the symbiotic relationship between humans and trees in *\*The Overstory\**. Previous studies have acknowledged the significance of trees in the novel but have largely framed them as symbols or metaphors for environmental activism. This paper will take a different approach by focusing on the trees themselves as characters with agency. Drawing on *\*\*Mancuso and Viola's (2015)\*\** research on plant intelligence, which challenges traditional notions of cognition and agency, this study will argue that Powers grants trees a form of subjectivity within the narrative. In doing so, Powers challenges the conventional boundaries between human and non-human life, suggesting that trees, like humans, have agency and are capable of forming relationships. This view extends beyond the traditional eco-critical focus on activism to propose a more philosophical interpretation of interspecies communication and coexistence.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

While previous studies have provided valuable eco-critical analyses of *The Overstory*, focusing on themes such as environmental activism, deep ecology, and critiques of industrialization, this paper offers a fresh perspective by examining the novel's narrative structure, character development, and portrayal of the symbiotic relationship between humans and trees. By addressing these underexplored aspects, this study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Richard Powers' eco-critical vision in *\*The Overstory\**. Through its emphasis on the interconnectedness of narrative and ecology, this paper advances the eco-critical discourse, offering new insights into the ways literature can challenge anthropocentric worldviews and promote a deeper understanding of our place within the natural world.

## **6. INTERCONNECTED AND NON-HUMAN AGENCY**

Just as central to the narrative of *The Overstory*, as any other key aspect, is challenging our anthropocentricity by positing trees at its heart. Throughout the novel, Powers uses trees not exactly as metaphors or symbols but as characters themselves. Levi Strauss suggests that this shows trees have a life concurrent with humans, suggesting therefore a world of ecological awareness where man is not dissociated from nature and even part of an inferior global system. This narrative strategy challenges the typical Western view of nature as merely a setting in which human things occur.

Through his story, Powers escapes the default of a human-centered approach to writing about trees and recasts trees as real players in this world. It begins with the stories of

different characters whose lives in some way have to do with trees. For example, the Hoel family whose generational curse is linked to a chestnut tree. Despite being ravaged by pests and mortally ill, the tree survives as a reminder of time, of endurance, and of life transcending human mortality (Powers 2018).

The notion of non-human agency is further explored in the character of Patricia Westerford, a scientist who finds that trees have developed an intricate communication network. Such as the information that trees share nutrients, protect each other, and communicate across large distances through mycorrhizal networks in what Wohlleben calls "the World Wide Web" (Powers, 2018). Westerford's research. repositories. In this way, the scientific evidence by Westerford goes back to undermine a major assumption of human superiority — finding that trees do have their own intelligence which operates on a scale we often fail to perceive.

In the way he bestows trees with agency, Powers challenges readers to reconsider humans as actors in the natural world. This fits with deep ecology's principle, which is based on the belief that living beings have an intrinsic value outside their utility for humans (Naess, 1989). Representing trees as sentient beings with their own networks and systems of communication, Powers takes aim at the human-exceptionalist view that has given Western civilization a foundation on which to build its economic exploitation of environments. As Buell (2005) remarks, eco-criticism aims to unravel anthropocentric approaches to nature by arguing that nonhuman entities are also part of the system. The *Overstory* deconstructs this disconnection by offering trees as protagonists, and in turn, asks readers to reflect deeply on their relationship to nature.

### **6.1 The tension embodies a critique of anthropocentrism and capitalism.**

*The Overstory* is through and through an examination of anthropocentrism; the belief in human primacy, or that human beings are the most significant entity in the universe. Throughout the novel, Powers shows that through environmental damage how this view poisons nature. The stories of the characters reveal an interesting examination of the actions of humans driven by profit, attempting to control nature, which only resulted in the devastation of forests and abuse of natural resources.

Of all the more obvious critiques of anthropocentrism, it is most naked in the character of Nicholas Hoel — who becomes a militant environmentalist when he sees his family's generations old forest cut down. Hoel goes from a passive observer to fighting for the forests, signifying a broader theme of the novel: that humans must accept responsibility for destroying our environment (Powers 166). Hoel's story is an example of a transition from anthropocentric (the world exists for humans to exploit) to eco-centric (life has an intrinsic value.)

Powers also takes on the capitalist underpinning that has empowered environmental degradation. In the end, it represents capitalism functioning as its exploitation of resources by States and Capital to benefit at all costs over our planet. It's in the form of the lawyer Ray Brinkman -- who first and foremost evinces corporate interest but then leads change through legally challenging the protection of the environment. This economic history reflects the way capitalism too often serves short-term gains at the expense of long-term sustainability (Powers, 2018).

This marginalization of environmental activists only adds to the novel's critique of capitalism. Olivia Vandergriff and Douglas Pavlicek are two characters who have dedicated their lives to the forest, fighting at every level of society for its continuation—

and the most opposition they encounter is from the government itself and the public. While Powers holds these activists up as heroes, he also paints them as outsiders who are consistently referred to the fringes by a society that cherishes the expansion of the economy above the preservation of the environment. Is a reflection of the broader social dismissal of nature and nature protectors.

This transverse criticism of capitalism and anthropocentrism corresponds to the eco-justice model that highlights how social and environmental injustices should be addressed in unison. Indeed, as Nixon (2011) points out, environmental degradation has profoundly disparate effects on the abilities of marginalized peoples to survive and thrive in democratic civil societies (and thus arguably ethical, democratic consumption); dealing with ecological crises is a matter of confronting questions of inequity and injustice. In *The Overstory*, Powers reveals the symbiosis of environmental destruction and capital punishment, leading to the belief that saving the planet is not about losing human life, but rather changing society's understanding of humanity and nature.

### **6.2 Environmental Activism / Eco-Justice**

Among other things, *The Overstory* offers a convincing image of environmental activism and eco-justice. Characters within the novel might hail from many different places and backgrounds, but they all unite under one common cause — saving our planet's very forests. And their atavistic activism, though impotent against the vast machinery of corporations and government, is depicted as a righteous duty that springs from a place of real urgency insofar as the ecological endgame lurks just around (and beyond) every corner.

In *Environmental activism*, Olivia Vandergriff's story is one of the more extreme cases. Olivia is convinced that she has been selected by a Higher Power to save forests, after surviving on her last leg. This trajectory — the transition from a college student without reservation to an environmental advocate with full commitment is in sync with how the novel progresses toward its climax, which deals with awakening to eco-consciousness. In addition to this, Olivia's story further emphasizes the sacrifices that activists often have to make in their quest for environmental justice since sadly, protecting the trees ultimately costs her own life (Powers 2018).

In this perspective, it discusses eco-justice discourses in the novel as the eco-justice focuses not only on environmental crisis but also social injustice. Powers shows how environmental devastation falls hardest on the most vulnerable, many of whom originally depend upon extracting from the land to make a living. Neelay Mehta is the embodiment of this connection, and in all ways spiritual, and physical. But what sets Mehta apart from other tech platform successes is his utter reverence.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

*The Overstory* by Richard Powers (2018) is a powerful and overarching critique of the loss of human attunement to the natural world around it, provoking us to deisis how disconnected we are from it, while at the same time causing unprecedented techno development. This research reveals that the novel critiques anthropocentrism and capitalism, which place human desires and economic benefit above ecological welfare, through its eco-critical perspective. The paper reveals five central findings: The Oneness of All Mammals; Powers stresses the parallel universe of human and non-human life — that trees reflect this silent coexistence of all beings, as powers of creatures in chains. The narrative structure, which mimics the pattern of growth and decay in trees serves to

deepen this sense of oneness while also inviting readers to re-think humanity's role within the larger ecosystem. Another finding of this paper is the Critique of Anthropocentrism; The anthropocentric perspective that nature is a tool for human use, the novel critiques. Powers reminds his readers through characters like Patricia Westerford and Nicholas Hoel how deleterious this outlook can be, instead championing an eco-centric stance in that he believes that nature has value on its own behalf. Non-human agency is another finding of this study in which Powers suggests that there are other, silent forces working; that humans do not hold a monopoly on agency and intelligence before providing trees with an active role with their form of consciousness and communication. This is consistent with the deep ecology position which would argue for the intrinsic value of all life forms, irrespective of their usefulness to humans.

Moreover, in *The Environmental Activism of a Moral Stoic* in the novel, environmental activists Olivia Vandergriff and Ray Brinkman also reveal the social castoffs — replete with human sacrifices, and personal and individual sins — which often accompany a façade of what might appear to be environmental happiness. In his *Ideabook*, Powers paints activism as mandatory in the context of ecological collapse, arguing that there is no such thing as being against preservation because to see things that way is only an argument against a debilitating form of passivity. The last finding point of this paper is *Wondering about Eco-Justice and Social Inequality*; in which the image from Powers of environmental destruction exacted against poor and disproportionately nonwhite communities implied the linkage of environmental justice to economic and social justice across the spectrum. Through this critique, the novel illustrates that as long as economic systems like capitalism continue to reproduce environmental and social injustices ... a more just and sustainable society can only happen through changing both our economics and our environmental policies.

*The Overstory* is as much a work of literature that investigates the interface between humans and nature as it is a call to action for ecological consciousness. Powers frames the ecological crisis as one caused by human arrogance, capitalism, and ignorance of nature's inherent value. Humanity survives only at the behest of a healthy planet, and in many ways Üzi feels more like a wind chime clinking away in attack on dry-leaf-heart-beat-cell-tip with all the accumulated curse generations that her body was forced to carry forward upon its skin-sack.

Beyond furthering the research on gender and other distinctions between men and women, this paper illustrates that *The Overstory* works as an eco-critical ecofeminist text opposing dominant cultural stories in defining who or what about the environment deserves to be saved. *Old as the Moon*—The novel also functions to reflect and further contemporary environmental discourses associated with deep ecology, non-human agency, and eco-justice while provoking a re-thinking of ethical responsibilities toward the natural world.

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