

Responsibility of Literature in planting Green Consciousness: Trees and Decarbonization in *The Overstory* by Richard Powers

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Abstract

Trees play a significant role in literature as it does in the lives of humans. Trees co-exist with humans and there seems to be a natural connection between humans and trees. Humans introduce too much of carbon dioxide or methane which obliterates the balance of the ecosystem which in turn affects our lives. An ecosystem is called sustainable only when it is healthy, biodiverse and capable of sustaining itself. Global warming is a serious consequence of the destruction of the ecosystem which eventually intrudes every living thing on the planet. The new genre of climate fiction, abbreviated as ‘cli- fi’ describes the effects of climate change that is perceptible and also confer possible options to alleviate those effects.

The research paper presents Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* as a climate fiction which attempts to depict the problems of deforestation and ecological crisis. Powers portrays the beautiful relationship between trees and humans in the novel and provides an insight into the environmental issues of the present era. Harmony between human and the natural world must be maintained for a perfect ecosystem as Frederick states, “The modern ecological consciousness has a feeling that the balance between human and the natural world must be maintained. A perfect ecology is one in which plants, animals, birds and human beings live in such harmony that none dominates or destroys the other” (147). This paper attempts to prove that literature has always been responsible in creating Green Consciousness in people. The paper critically analysis *The Overstory* and illustrates how Powers’ novel is a great step towards the global concern of ecological crisis. This study aligns with

one of the indicators of Oman Vision 2040 creating awareness through literature and contributing for an effective, balanced and resilient ecosystem to protect the environment ensuring sustainability.

Key Words: climate fiction; environment; green consciousness; trees; ecosystem

1. Responsibility of Literature in planting Green Consciousness: Trees and decarbonization in *The Overstory* by Richard Powers

Trees play a significant role in literature as it does in the lives of human. Narratives on trees and nature have been presented to the readers by many authors. Trees co-exist with human and there seems to be a natural connection between humans and trees. Forest is one of the most vital aspects on earth and literary works have been representing environmental issues and concerns now and then. Deforestation has led to environmental degradation and it affects our planet in many aspects. Environmental degradation in our planet is an important reason that causes climate change which further affects human in the future.

Deforestation is a significant reason behind environmental degradation and it also paves way for increased level of carbon dioxide in air, droughts and increase in temperature. American authors namely, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau who were known as the transcendentalists, celebrated nature in their works and talked about the influence of nature in our lives and its relationship with humans. William Wordsworth represented pastoral traditions in his poems and is considered to be the earliest of ecocritics. Ecocritical perspectives in literature can be observed in many Indian writers, to name some, Rabindranath Tagore, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Ruskin Bond and Amitav Ghosh. Ecocriticism is an organized movement which has gained its momentum worldwide and steps towards a global concern of ecological crisis.

This study presents Richard Powers' *The Overstory* as a climate fiction which attempts to depict the problems of deforestation and ecological crisis. Powers portrays the beautiful relationship between trees and humans in the novel and provides an insight into the environmental issues of the present era. This paper attempts to prove that literature has always been responsible in creating Green Consciousness in people. The paper critically analysis *The Overstory* and illustrates how

Powers' novel is a great step towards the global concern of ecological crisis. This study aligns with one of the indicators of Oman Vision 2040 creating awareness through literature and contributing for an effective, balanced and resilient ecosystem to protect the environment ensuring sustainability.

Climate change is a change in the average weather patterns that defines Earth's local and global climates. Since 20th century, changes in Earth's climate are caused by human activities, mainly burning of fossil energy sources which drive the heat-trapping greenhouse gas levels in Earth's atmosphere. This eventually increases the Earth's average surface temperature that can contribute to climate change with devastating consequences. The volume of greenhouse gas emission would be twice by 2030 which lead to a rise in global temperature by 2100. This emission has to be reduced at the earliest to achieve the requisite climate goal as laid out in the Paris Climate Agreement (2015). Effective sustainability measures are necessary to reduce carbon and promote renewable technologies.

“Decarbonisation means switching from the use of fossil fuels such as coal, natural gas or oil to carbon-free and renewable energy sources as quickly as possible”, states myclimate, a partner for effective climate protection. It is crucial to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions such as carbon dioxide (CO₂) to prevent climate change. Paris Climate Agreement (2015) made many countries worldwide commit themselves to decarbonisation. Sustainability measures were taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2040 or 2050. Oman Vision 2040 sets action to reduce the amount of CO₂ emissions which otherwise would increase to 16%. The Sultanate of Oman is assessing energy transition pathways that would help in mitigating these emissions and reach its goal of net zero by 2040.

Humans introduce too much of carbon dioxide or methane which obliterates the balance of the ecosystem which in turn affects our lives. An ecosystem is called sustainable only when it is healthy, biodiverse and capable of sustaining itself. Global warming is a serious consequence of the destruction of the ecosystem which eventually intrudes every living thing on the planet. The causes and effects of global warming have been discussed by many writers such as Margaret Atwood, Paola Bacigalupi, T. C. Boyle, Barbara Kingslover, Lydia Millet, Nathaniel Rich and Marcel Thoroux. The new genre of climate fiction, abbreviated as 'cli-fi' describes the effects of climate

change that is perceptible and also confer possible options to alleviate those effects. Climate fictions play a significant role in creating awareness and understanding of the environmental crisis. Increase in the publication of climate fictions has augmented the effects of climate fiction as an impelling force in activating the readers to change their behavior and patterns of consumption. This in turn can be believed to persuade readers to support national policies to limit greenhouse emissions.

2. Climate fictions' depictions of climate change:

Climate fiction referred to as 'cli-fi' differs from other science fictions which depicts lives on distant planets and other discoveries of the future. Cli- fi involves narratives which include ecological crisis in our own planet Earth and recently, there have been more works criticizing the system questioning the sustainability of the environment. *The Overstory* as a climate fiction portrays trees as protagonists and illustrates how they form connections with other trees and organisms in the forest. Trees play an indispensable role in protecting our environment. As humans, we cannot be separated from nature, the earth and the physical world. Our life is positively affected by the role of nature and the environment.

Nature not only covers plants and animals, it is the entire physical environment comprising of the human and the non- human. Harmony between human and the natural world must be maintained for a perfect ecosystem as Frederick states. The modern ecological consciousness has a feeling that the balance between human and the natural world must be maintained. A perfect ecology is one in which plants, animals, birds and human beings live in such harmony that none dominates or destroys the other. (Powers, 2018, p. 147)

There are many authors who write green novels like J. G. Ballard, Jesmyn Ward, James Bradley and David Wallace- Wells. These works reflect the ecological crisis and highlight the impact of it on humans. Some Indian writers in English have also been clearly portraying their ecological concerns from ancient classical texts passing on the message to readers to conserve nature. Lawrence Buell (1995) states different waves in ecocriticism, the first being focus on nature writing and the second towards environmental justice. This wave of ecocriticism is also known as revisionist ecocriticism. It seeks to locate the vestiges of nature in cities and exposes crimes of eco-injustice against society's marginal section" (22). *The Overstory* falls under the second wave

towards environmental justice. The contents page of the novel resembles the structure of a tree with prologue as a seed from which develops the entire narrative and concludes with a seed showing an entire cycle.

The Overstory explains the arboreal communication structure and the ecosystem through imagery, illustrating how trees speak and communicate. Ecologist Suzanne Simard shows in her studies, “The Mother Tree”, that trees communicate with each other through mycorrhizal networks in many complex ways. Her study also proves that we rely on the conservation of old trees for pure water and air. Trees possess a complex network which is depicted by Powers in this novel and that deforestation is condemned. Large scale deforestation is an environmental crisis and has to be treated with urgency to save the earth. The destruction of forests, ecological imbalance and rise in sea water are not the only concerns to be addressed. Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* addresses that humans, in general, have a difficulty in reacting and dealing with the urgent issues of climate change. Ghosh states, “The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (9). The cli- fi fictions’ depictions of climate change and crisis seems to be melodramatic and unrealistic to readers but it illustrates reality of the situations which needs immediate action.

3. Richard Powers’ portrayal of trees in *The Overstory*:

Powers portrays trees as active means which influence human and nature around them. *The Overstory* is a story which involves nine human protagonists who understand the importance of trees and forests in saving the future mankind. The narrative includes lives of characters experiencing unique relationship and connectedness with trees. Powers says, “A forest deserves protection regardless of its value to humans” (414). Dr Patricia Westerford one of the protagonists in *The Overstory* attempts to prove the interconnectedness of trees and the underground super-trees but her study was mocked and rejected. Mimi is another character in the novel who experiences a personal and positive connection with the trees. Powers brings in Douglas Pavlicek who plants fifty thousand trees for money, for which his friend Dum remarks “Lotta new oxygen out there, because of you. Lotta greenhouse gases put to bed” (184). Dum also reinstates that, “You’re putting in babies so they can kill grandfathers. And when your seedlings grow out, they’ll be monocrop blights”

(186). Powers emphasizes on the point that planting seedlings has also become commercial that further raises the annual allowable cut of trees.

Patricia Westerford has a comprehensive knowledge of many living organisms on earth, especially trees. Being a Biologist, she is able to comprehend how trees coordinate with every part of their own body and the other trees in the forest. Patricia states,

“Before it dies, a Douglas-fir, half a millennium old, will send its storehouse of chemicals back down into its roots and out through its fungal partners, donating its riches to the community pool in a last will and testament. We might well call these ancient benefactors giving trees” (Powers, 2018, p. 196).

Douglas fir is taken as an example to explain how trees communicate with every part of its body similar to that of a human. Patricia’s love for nature was born since she was a child; hence she chose her favorite field of study and career focusing on the study of trees. She was always emotionally attached towards nature and was striving to preserve nature at any cost. Patricia always wanted to preserve nature and worked towards saving trees for a better future for the next generation. Moreover, she finds joy in explaining about trees to others as she has good comprehensive knowledge about trees.

Powers stresses that humans need not be biologists to understand trees, the value of trees can be realized as we enjoy every benefit from trees on a daily basis. Powers portrays the damages caused by humans to the environment which further collapses the ecosystem. How the towering, teetering pyramid of large living things is toppling down already, in slow motion, under the huge, swift kick that has dislodged the planetary system. The great cycles of air and water are breaking. The Tree of Life will fall again, collapse into a stump of invertebrates, tough ground cover, and bacteria, unless man . . . Unless man. (Powers, 2018, p. 267)

Patricia emphasizes that more trees have to be planted on Earth and insists on trees to ‘grow harder’ which means protecting the trees for a longer time. Another character in the novel, Douglas Pavlicek has a past and he was saved by a banyan tree when he fell from a plane. Henceforth he developed a bond with the tree and wished to show his gratitude towards trees. Pavlicek claims in

The Overstory that deforestation occurs over a very short period of time but it takes hundreds of years to grow and protect a tree. Pavlicek realizes that logging industry is tough to defeat but is determined to do something to protect the trees, “But he doesn’t have to vanquish the lumber industry or even get nature’s revenge. He just needs to earn a living and undo the look of those cuts, a look that tunnels into him like a beetle into sapwood” (Powers, 2018, p. 84.) There is an emotional attachment between the characters in the novel and the trees due to various personal experiences in their lives.

Patricia in *The Overstory* addresses the cedar as ‘Long Life Maker’ as it plays a crucial role in maintaining the balance in the ecosystem. Despite the advantages trees have been providing the living organisms on Earth, humans have been exploiting trees and the environment. Patricia demands appreciation and gratitude from humans towards trees keeping in mind the fact that we humans co- exist with other creatures and the environment. The most undeniable fact is that it takes a long time for a tree to grow and it is very essential to preserve them. The movement to preserve nature and the action taken by different characters in the novel is varied. It ranges from recycling bottles to protecting trees that are facing extinction. Powers constantly emphasized the fact that any action from our side might lead to great changes in the environment.

4. Responsibility of Literature in planting Green Consciousness:

Powers demands a cultural change of green consciousness that has to be realized in the US which will enable an effective response to the concerns related to climate change and deforestation. Characters from different backgrounds and interests create changes in ways that reflect them personally while striving for a common cause. Douglas Pavlicek who joined Air Force plants thousands of seeds with full spirit hoping for a good future. Patricia writes a book about forests, *The Secret Forest* which later changes the perspective of people towards nature. Powers through *The Overstory* enlightens the readers on the subject of environmental protests and civil disobedience, namely tree sitting. Tree sitting is a group that protests sitting in a tree to prevent it from being cut down. Tree sitters usually sit on small base put up for the purpose believing that loggers will not harm human lives while cutting a tree occupied by humans. Olivia and Nick Hoel stay on the branches of Mimas for almost a year setting up their bed and kitchen on its branches. Nick and Olivia call this as ‘tree-sitting’ which is a non violent protest to save the tree from logging down.

They are offered food and support from likeminded people and it is a tactical approach towards high level of public attention. The other character creates art and videogames along with these acts of civil disobedience.

Green consciousness which is demanded and expected in the novel is also related to the national institutions and policies. Some of the protagonists in the novel work towards creating an impact in the national institutions and policies while others towards the individual perspective of the people. Green consciousness created in people would bring in a lot of change in the society as well, allowing the people to align towards the national policies. For instance, The Oman government has taken various measures to restore a valuable natural resource which are the mangroves as they play a significant role in absorbing carbon. The ultimate goal is to mitigate planet warming emissions and restore the coastal forest with mangroves which were widespread in Oman 6000 years ago. Restoration of the mangroves is indispensable because they serve as effective sinks which seize the atmospheric carbon and aids in carbon sequestration. Mangrove habitats are highly effective than forests in removing CO₂ from atmosphere and it is discovered that the coastal ecosystem collapsed in Oman due to the climate changes. The Sultanate of Oman has been planting thousands of mangrove seedlings to restore natural habitat and biodiversity. The mangroves breed many species of fish, provide nutrients and shelter for fish, crayfish and migratory birds. They not only protect the coastal shores but also develop into a highly attractive tourist spot which in turn raises the income of locals.

Historical evidence states that the mangrove tree species, *Avicennia Marina* found along the coastline of Oman spreads around 1030 hectares. Awareness of the value of these mangrove ecosystems has increased the participation in mangrove seedling and many projects have been launched to cultivate 100 million mangrove trees in Oman. This is an initiative that aligns with the Oman Zero Carbon Strategy 2050 to achieve net zero emissions. The Oman government has been preserving the existing mangroves, executing the planting of many seedlings by the Environment Authority (EA) and creating awareness through campaigns about environmental sustainability. Nature based solutions along with behavioral changes which are suggested by Powers in *The Overstory* would definitely lead us towards a sustainable environment which includes many sub-

indicators like biodiversity, air quality, climate, energy, water, sanitation, fisheries and water resources as per the Oman vision 2040 Report.

5. Conclusion:

The Overstory discusses the activism in the novel and also the possible transformations in the consciousness of the people. The act of the environmentalists in the novel had the same motive of saving trees and environment and they were stronger together as their purpose was the same. There is a diversified vision on change in consciousness of people that is presented in the novel. The novel manages to change the perspective of humans on trees and their steps onto preserving old-grown forests. Conservation of trees, environmentalism, destruction of forests, and extinction of species of trees are majorly covered and maintained in the narrative by Powers.

The disappointment that the environmentalists sense in *The Overstory* depicts that change is slow and time-consuming. *The Overstory* as a Climate fiction does not possess the capability of advancing action and making amendments but it can be ensured that they are capable of planting the green consciousness in readers. They reflect reality in present day situations and offer futuristic solutions that inspire readers to cultivate their inner consciousness through which great changes are made possible.

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