

# Ecofeminism Revisited: An Ethical/Rhetorical Reading of Richard Powers's The Overstory

إعادة دراسة النسوية البيئية:  
قراءة أخلاقية بلاغية لرواية "القصة الأهم" للكاتب ريتشارد باورز

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### **Abstract**

The present paper attempts to study how the concept of ecofeminism, which was suggested in the west in 1974, and was relentlessly revisited over the years, is reflected in Richard Powers's novel *The Overstory* (2018). This paper reviews the broad contours of the ecofeminist debate and then analyses *The Overstory* in the light of the ecofeminist theory, highlighting Powers's contribution to the ecofeminist discourse. Moreover, this paper argues that Powers's narrative adds a new dimension to the narrative theory; the paper particularly refutes the claim of the Anthropocene narrative theory which advocates that environment material in literature is incapable of producing hall marks of narrativity.

**Key words:** ecofeminism, narrative theory, environment, Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

### **إعادة دراسة النسوية البيئية: قراءة أخلاقية بلاغية لرواية "القصة الأهم" للكاتب ريتشارد باورز الملخص:**

تحاول هذه الورقة البحثية دراسة مفهوم النسوية البيئية (وهو المفهوم الذي استحدث في الغرب عام 1974 ودرس على مدار السنوات الماضية) كما انعكس في رواية "القصة الأهم" للكاتب ريتشارد باورز. 2018

تراجع هذه الورقة البحثية الخطوط العريضة في الجدل القائم حول مفهوم النسوية البيئية، ثم تحاول التركيز على مساهمة الكاتب ريتشارد باورز في الحوار النسوي البيئي.

كما تناقش هذه الورقة البحثية كيف استطاع باورز إضافة بعد جديد للنظرية الأدبية وذلك عن طريق رفض الادعاء القائم في النظرية الأدبية وخاصة نظرية سرد الأنثروبوسين والتي تدعى أن البيئة لا يمكن أن تنتج أيًا من بصمات السرد في الأدب.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** النسوية البيئية، النظرية الأدبية، البيئة، ريتشارد باورز، القصة الأهم

## **Ecofeminism Revisited: An Ethical/Rhetorical Reading of Richard Powers's *The Overstory***

### **1.Introduction**

The aim of this research paper is to understand ecofeminism in a multi – national American context through a close reading of Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018), which won him the National Book Award. This paper reviews the broad contours of ecofeminism by examining multiple perspectives of Western and Eastern ecofeminists. Then, it analyses *The Overstory* in the light of these different perspectives, exploring how this American novel adds a fresh insight to ecofeminist discourse. This paper also refutes the claim of the Anthropocene narrative theory that environment material (such as rocks, ice and tree material) is incapable of producing hall marks of narrativity.

In an interview with *Hamner (2018)*, Powers explains that fiction is about “transformation through conflict” which may be referred to as “three general levels of dramatic conflict”: the battle within a person (psychological), the battle between people (social or political), and the battle between people and non-people (environmental). Powers laments that the literary fiction published in the last 30 years is mostly dominated by the psychological at a time when “*there's something bigger at stake out there!*” (Hamner, 2018) and that is paradoxically our own existence on earth. Powers explains that the obsession with private fears and hopes is simply solipsism, and we “need level-three stories and myths”. Out of this perspective, *The Overstory* and this paper emerge.

Drawing on ecofeminist theory and narrative theory, this paper shows how *The Overstory* highlights the environment as a critical issue that needs full awareness and immediate solutions. His narrative satirises individual blindness to nature and discrimination against it, articulating a crucial question: what is wrong with human beings? His narrative appeals to the reader's code of ethics trying to persuade him to take the side of trees. In doing so, Powers does not spare any type of myth or perspective of ecofeminism.

This paper refutes the claim of the Anthropocene narrative theory which advocates that environment material is incapable of producing hall

marks of narrativity. An analysis of *The Overstory* and the narrative of Powers explores his use of focalisation, consciousness of characters and the enmeshing of characters in the plot as significant hall marks of narrativity. The trees as main focal characters, their enmeshing in the plot with other human focal characters, and the omniscient narrator succeed in implementing the ethical stand of the novel.

## **2. Ecofeminism: Multiple Perspectives**

Ecofeminism as a term indicates a double intervention of environmentalism into feminism and feminism into environmentalism (Strugeon, 1997, p.169). The term ecofeminism implies the association between women and nature and most ecofeminists assert that women and nature conjoin for one reason or another, but mainly because both are life-givers and tend to be exploited. Kaza (1993), an American Zen Buddhist, finds in the small bronze casting of Kuan Yin (also known as Kannon or Kanzeon in Japan) a feminine gender form of a realized Bodhisattva: she is depicted with a thousand arms to reach out to offer a thousand tools of compassion (p.51).

Women and nature conjoin because both tend to be dominated as many ecofeminists assert. Powers explains in an interview with Hamner (2018) his interpretation of humans' actions to the surrounding environment by a "psychological" urge. He explains that our actions are "driven by a will to total dominance", which encourages "putting men above women, whites above minorities, Americans above all other countries, and humans above all other living things."

Ecofeminism was coined by the French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 in her book, *Feminism or Death*. Her book is a call out to women to save the planet, and she claims that the main cause of domination of women and nature is patriarchy. D' Eaubonne asserts that women are life-givers, life-preservers and have concern for future generations, whereas men are exploiters with their ways of mastering fertility and exhausting resources. (Noble-Martocci, 2006, p. 2).

Some feminist theories repudiated women's special relationship with nature. Beauvoir (1953) rejected maternity, arguing that a woman remains "bound to her body like an animal" (p. 60). Firestone (1970)

called for artificial wombs rather than natural pregnancies to avoid male power. However, there are many feminists who have drawn a relationship between the parallel exploitation of women and nature and did not fear women's association with nature that would drag them to stereotypes they have fought against: "We are...the open seas where the great whales are slaughtered, .... We are this whole agonized weeping ... planet crying out against the insupportable burden we have borne for so long" (Morgan, 1977, p.225).

Morgan's words are echoed by Griffin (1978), "We are the bird's eggs....; We are woman and nature. And he says he cannot hear us speak." (185). Griffin states here that it is the male's deafness to women and nature that creates problems. Daly (1978) asserts that patriarchy makes women the objects under attack, and it does the same to the planet, and its key message is "necrophilia", which is "fatal for the future of this planet" and can be witnessed in the nuclear reactors and the poisons they produce, stockpiles of atomic bombs, ozone destruction, etc. (30, 46, 218).

Dworkin (1974) explains that it is the arrogance which informs man's relations with nature, asserting his superiority to it and it is precisely the same arrogance which informs his relationship with woman, asserting his superiority to her. Dworkin concludes that man has treated nature much as he has treated women: with rape, plunder, and violence. Adams (1990) argues that there are links between the oppression of women and that of animals. She explores the links between meat eating and patriarchal attitudes including the concept that "the objectification of other beings is a necessary part of life" (xxxv).

Shiva (1988) explains the commonality of the oppression of both the environment and women as "the marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand" (215, xvii). This is because the application of monoculture agendas transforms them from decision makers into unskilled laborers and monoculture crop destroys the fertility of the soil (Shiva and Mies, 2014, p.164, p.170).

Noble-Martocci (2006) draws a comparison between Rosemary Radford Ruether's addressing of the ecological crises in Christianity and Rita Gross's addressing of the same crises in Buddhism; Ruether dives into Judeo-Christian scripture and emphasises the importance of right relationships, asserting that the nonhuman aspects of creation, plant and animal, are now recognized not as other but as kin. Within the Buddhist tradition, Gross highlights the importance of compassion and of developing no harming habits of thought, speech and action by practising more meditation and more understanding of the "interconnectedness of all life forms" (Noble-Martocci, 2006, p.14).

The Buddhist feminist activity on behalf of the environment is not yet very extensive but examples of their environmental work are significant; Kabilsingh reviewed the early Buddhist teachings of the Pali Canon and uncovered specific references that forbid harming others in the environment, specifically trees, rivers and animals of the forest (Kaza, 1993, p.66). To commensurate with Dharma is thought to lead to happiness, fulfillment, and salvation while neglecting it is said to lead to endless torment in the cycle of rebirth (Keown, 2005, p. 4). Ecofeminism is structurally pluralistic, rather than reductionist or unitary: "it emerges from a multiplicity of voices, especially women's voices across cross – cultural context" (Warren, 1994, p.84).

### ***3. Hallmarks of Narrativity of the Environment: Implementing an Ethical Stand in the Narrative Theory***

While material ecocritics assert that all matter is storied, so its capability of producing its own narratives exists, the Anthropocene narrative theory denies this assumption, presuming that "rock, ice and tree material is incapable of producing other hall marks of narrativity such as focalisation, the representation of the consciousness and emotional state of characters, ... to name but a few" (James, 2020, p.191). This study refutes this claim, proving that narrative of the Anthropocene is capable of allowing tree material, for example, to celebrate as many hall marks of narrativity beyond the alleged assumptions. This section focuses on some hallmarks of narrativity (focalisation, consciousness and emotional state

of characters and their enmeshing in the plot of *The Overstory*) which will be applied to tree material in section five.

The Anthropocene is “the era in which human impact on the earth has become so forceful that we are seeing shifting seas, changes in climate, and the disappearance of innumerable species—as well as placing humanity itself at the brink of extinction” (Emmelheinz, 2015, p.131). Scholars of narrative theory have ignored the Anthropocene in their work because of the multiple claims of critics “who link narrative and the Anthropocene in a much less optimistic way” as a result of the dominant conviction of cultural theorists and literary critics such as Claire Colebrook and Timothy Morton who suggest that “narrative is a rhetorical mode deeply unsuited to our current epoch” (James, 2020, p.183 - 184).

Colebrook (2014) is of the opinion that today humanity’s capacity to destroy its own species– being makes one say ‘no’ to everything that makes room for man; he insists that we require a new discipline but asserts it would not take the form humanities (p.159). Chakrabarty (2009) calls for the need to understand how humans have initiated the climate crisis, which now threatens their own existence; he calls for a solution in any discipline and calls on academics “to rise above their disciplinary prejudices” (p.215).

Unfortunately, some of the prejudices/shackles exist in the narrative theory. James and Morel (2020), for example, refer to James Phelan’s definition of narrative “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something happened”, and they assert that it is this precise insistence on “somebody” as one of many approaches to narrative that assumes human speakers that creates a huge shackle, and even when narrative scholars agree that narrators and characters are admitted not to be human, “at the foundation of narrative lies a rhetorical situation reliant upon human capacities for language” (p. 6).

Herman (2014) unshackles the narrative of the burden of human speakers because he is more interested in the place of humans in ecological contexts rather than nonhuman narrators, and he argues that



fictional narratives can serve as crucial tools for rebuilding concepts about the human self in a world which proves the impossibility to perceive the human as isolated from the surrounding ecological and biotic communities. James and Morel (2020) assert that Herman's perspective complies with "the very ethics of environmental responsibility and care for which environmental humanities and ecocritical scholars call" (p. 7-8). Through *The Overstory*, Powers pays homage to the environment and sets an example of the ethics under discussion; Powers manages to place the trees and humans in a way that suggests integrity, where trees play the major role.

All living beings can be holders of justice entitlements including sharks, pine trees, or foxgloves (Wienhues, 2020, p.3). *The Overstory* advocates the ethics of this philosophy and reveals the amount of injustice that trees are subjected to. The core reason of the devastation that characterizes the Anthropocene is not simply the result of activities undertaken by the species *Homo sapiens*. Instead, "the heightened hierarchical relations of humans, the continued violence of white supremacy, colonialism, patriarchy, heterosexism, and ableism, all of which exacerbate and subtend the violence that has been inflicted upon the non-human world (Davis and Etienne, 2015, p. 7).

Garrard (2020) salutes the efforts of previous scholars of narrative ethics, but he is not very satisfied with the idea that if the narrative constitutes an encounter of/with the other, the narrative is then considered "ethical" because this leaves no room for any distinctions between narratives or any detection of uniqueness among writers (p.110). He suggests extending the attention to form by linking it differently to ecocriticism's ethical concerns; it is how "literary fictions enmesh characters in plots that test them" which is "the heart of a narrative ethics of the told" and even more importantly how they "narrate their fates in ways that imply judgment, or a range of possible judgements, upon them" (p.111).

Garrard's model of ecocritical narrative ethics advocates how "a work of literature stages environmental virtue and vice, albeit not in relation to a preexisting set of precepts such as environmental justice"; it

is rather how “the reader, allied with the narrator and focalizer in the desire to see how things turn out and form judgements about them, enjoys both the privileges and vulnerabilities of his place in the hierarchical organization of narrative ...” (Garrard, 2020, p.112). In *The Overstory*, the reader is perplexed by the vulnerability of his/her position witnessing an acute judgement cast by the author upon many characters, leaving the reader thinking deeply about the concept of environmental justice and whether the characters deserve their verdicts.

Focalisation is “the point of view” of the narrator and/ or the character(s) in the story world, and the narrative “can furnish the reader with more or fewer details, and in a more or less direct way” (Genette, 1980, p.161). In a third – person narrative, the story world is seen through the eyes of a character or a number of characters. Henry James calls these characters “centres” or “reflectors” and Genette calls them “focal characters”.

Genette (1980) explains that his module of focalisation embodies three modes; the first and the second modes are of concern in this research. The first mode is “non- focalisation” or “zero focalisation” in which events are narrated from an omniscient point of view. The second mode is “internal focalisation” in which events are focalised or reflected upon by one or more reflector character in the story and their narrative information is presented according to their perception. There are three sub – patterns of internal focalisation; the first and second are relevant to this research: “fixed focalisation” is employed in texts which are told from the point of view of a single focal character; and “variable focalisation” is employed in texts which are told from the point of view of more than one focal character (Genette, 1980, P.189, p.190). Section five of this research applies Genette’s module of focalisation, a hallmark of narrativity, to prove that tree material utilises focalisation to advocate an ethical stand.

Degrees of speech presentations as: direct discourse (a monologue or a dialogue); or free direct discourse (typical form of first-person interior monologue and can be defined as direct discourse trimmed of its conventional orthographic cues); or free indirect discourse (FID) manifest focalisations in the story. FID, Rimmon – Kenan (1983) asserts, “can be

grasped as marking literariness" (p.115). FID has a number of functions: it can contribute to the main thematic principle(s) of the work; FID is a "convenient vehicle for representing stream of consciousness, mainly for the variety called indirect interior monologue" because of the capacity of FID to reproduce the idiolect of a character's speech or thought and pre-verbal perceptions; FID can help the reader in "reconstructing the implied author's attitude toward the character(s) involved" (Rimmon – Kenan, 1983, p. 113, p.114). Section five of this research shows how Powers's *The Overstory* implements different degrees of speech presentations to display the different focalisations in the novel to attain his ethical goal.

A narrator who is "above" or superior to the story is "extradiegetic"; moreover, a narrator who does not participate in the story is called "heterodiegetic", whereas the one who takes part in it is "homodiegetic" (Genette, 1980, p.255-256). The narrator of *The Overstory* is both extradiegetic and heterodiegetic. This absence of the narrator from the story and their higher narratorial authority is what confers on such narrators the quality which has often been called "omniscience"; the characteristics of this quality are: familiarity with the characters' innermost thoughts and feelings; knowledge of past, present and future; presence in locations where characters are supposed to be unaccompanied (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p.95). Techniques of overtness of the narrator include: description of setting; identification of characters which reveals that the narrator has prior knowledge of the characters; temporal summary which accounts for time-passage; and commentary (Chatman, 1978, p. 220–252). Powers's omniscient narrator practises all these techniques.

Caraccilio (2020) asserts the potential of recent literary narratives to put weight on the dynamics of the plot to highlight "meshings" between the human and nonhuman which serves the natural and physical phenomena: "an object takes center stage in a narrative and partly pushes plot beyond its anthropocentric comfort zone" (p.46). This is why Caracciolo's discussion of the plot dynamics "suggests that natural phenomena are an invaluable formal resource for storytelling itself" (p.17). Powers's *The Overstory* leverages the plot which celebrates

humans' lives connected, influenced and at times saved by the trees; the trees become the center of the narrative.

#### **4. *The Overstory*: A “Quilt” of Ecofeminism**

This section borrows the metaphor “quilt” from Warren and argues that *The Overstory* represents a quilt of ecofeminism. Warren (2000) explains quilting of theories, including ecofeminist theories and philosophy. To her, “theories are like quilts” and the “necessary conditions” of a theory “are like borders of a quilt” which “delimit the boundary conditions of the theory without dictating beforehand what the interior” design of the quilt must look like. As for the actual design of the quilt, it “will emerge from the diversity of perspectives of quilters who contribute, over time, to the making of the quilt. Theory is not something static, preordained, or carved in stone; it is always *theory – in – process*”. (Warren, 2000, p.66)

With respect to the quilt of ecofeminist philosophy, Warren (2000) explains that nothing which maintains “isms of domination” as sexist or racist belongs on this quilt: “An ecofeminist philosophical quilt will be made up of different “patches”, ..., which express some aspect of that quilter’s perspective on women – other human others – nature interconnections” (p.67). Powers presents a number of distinct patches, each of which is a different perspective of ecofeminism. 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: Dr. 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.

Dr. Patricia Westerford is one of the most important human protagonists of the novel. Her work on tulip trees earns her a doctorate, and then she starts a postdoc at Wisconsin. One day, she finds one of her trees under full-scale insect invasion and as a professional scientist, she runs experiments in the lab and double checks to reach her conclusions: “The wounded trees send out alarms that other trees smell. .... They’re

linked together in an airborne network, sharing an immune system... Life is talking to itself, and she has listened in" (Powers, 2018, p. 116).

Powers irony lies in making Dr. Patricia who suffers from a hearing impairment "listen" to the trees to prove that women tend to be greener. She is an outstanding scientist who has made a great contribution in her field, and her paper gets public recognition. However, four months later, the journal that ran her article prints a letter signed by three male leading dendrologists; they strike a blow at her asserting that her methods are flawed and the letter mocks the idea that trees send each other chemical warnings. The short letter contains four uses of the word Patricia and no mention of Doctor, until their own signatures. This male tyranny leads to Dr. Patricia's humiliation and debunking. The perspective of ecofeminism (crystallised by Daly and Dworkin among others) which advocates women and nature being the victims and targets of exploitation is very clear at certain parts in the novel.

Patriarchy "pre-occupies women's minds, filling them with images which constantly re-generate confusion, guilt, and despair". (Daly, 1978, p.218). At the midwestern forestry conference Patricia receives questions that are hostile and "people nudge each other as she passes them in the halls of the hotel: There's the woman who thinks that trees are intelligent" and the scandal makes her unable to "even get work washing glassware for some other researcher" (Powers, 2018, p.118). Powers here gives precise examples of the images Daly refers to; Powers manages to describe moments when women are enforced to possess negative feelings about their own thinking and contribution, which is sometimes outstanding, with a devastating outcome in some cases.

Powers is biased to the concept that women tend to be greener than men, embracing in this what the ecofeminists, Morgan and Griffin, assert about their unity with nature. This is why Patricia's second book includes passages on how trees have been trying to reach human beings, but they speak on frequencies too low for people to hear. Patricia succeeds in listening to them and so does Olivia Vandergriff, who hears the trees call for help as well as Mimi Ma who receives smells from the trees and attains enlightenment.

Powers denounces America's fault in using Agent Orange during the Vietnam war from 1961 which led to the destruction of Hoel veterans; he also denounces monocrop factories that cause the Hoel family farm to fall in debt. Powers articulates the dilemma of exhausting the soil, using expensive fertilizers and falling in debts, "Extinction sneaks up on the Hoel farm ..., and the soil too worn by repeated row-cropping to make a profit" (Powers, 2018, p. 19). At this point in the novel, Powers articulates the western, capitalist stand towards the environment that has been under attack in the ecofeminist discourse. Indian ecofeminism denounces mono cropping: Shiva (1988) holds the Western patriarchal and capitalist worldview responsible for the majority of Indian and 'Third World' environmental degradation because there are no measures of ethic of ecology applied in the process of so called development.

Powers shows that women tend to be greener and more open to experiences and messages from nature, but a careful reader will not miss the fact that Patricia's father and Mimi Ma's father are their real mentors. Moreover, Dr. Patricia's partner, Olivia's partner, Mimi Ma's partner and Dorothy's partners show a great homage to trees. Mimi Ma's father shoots himself dead to save the trees after he gets psychologically tormented upon realizing the death of his tree. Hence, it is not a patriarchal world per se that destroys the environment; destroyers are homo sapiens regardless of their sex. Powers sounds more like Warren when she argues that "relationships of humans to the nonhuman environment are, in part, constitutive of what it is to be human" (Warren, 1990, p.143).

Patricia's father is her mentor; "her father is her water, air, earth and sun. He teaches her how to see a tree" (Powers, 2018, p.108). Her father is the one who gives her Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on her fourteenth birthday. The first sentence in this book reads: "Let me sing to you now about how people turn into other things" (Powers, 2018, p. 117). Powers is completely convinced of the idea of metamorphoses and his conviction of the Greek myth is articulated in an interview with Brady (2018): "One way or another, we humans are on our way to becoming something else.

The question is rather how gracefully or how violently we make that Ovidian metamorphosis”.

The idea of reincarnation is part of the Buddhist doctrine. “In myths, people turn into all kinds of things. Birds, animals, trees, flowers, rivers” (Powers, 2018, p.32). Powers states that *The Overstory* is in many ways an attempt to bring that hard-headed science into an intersection with the kinds of truths that older stories — animist stories, pantheist stories — once told in an attempt to save our collapsing world by advocating what he calls “tree consciousness” from every possible myth/religion that credits other forms of life (Paulson, 2021). Hence, Greek myths, Indian myths, Chinese myths, reference to the Buddha and his teachings, and reference to every possible sacred tree from any culture protrude in the novel. That is why the chestnut tree is now a ‘dying god,” (Powers, 2018, p. 177) and it does not seem odd in the novel.

Powers is very influenced with Buddha's line of thought: he judges the character of trees to be impressive in their overwhelming extent of caring towards people. Powers refers to the Buddha's words about a forest: it is “an extraordinary organism of unlimited kindness and generosity that asks for nothing and gives copious food, shelter, protection, shade, and wealth to all comers, even to the men who cut it down” (Brady, 2018). The altruistic trait of trees is relentlessly exemplified all through the novel.

Readers come across the procedure to follow the Buddha's steps if they want to try this path. Powers narrates the story of the sacred fig tree of India, under which the founder of Buddhism is reputed to have attained the Enlightenment that made him the Buddha. Mimi Ma sits and her back to the orange trunks, “Imitates the arhat, waits, breathes.... That unnameable scent—that's all she wants” (Powers, 2018, p. 167).

To conclude, Powers celebrates the diversity of perspectives of ecofeminism and does not refute any: it is a patriarchal world that dominates women and nature; women tend to be greener and better listeners to nature; Western capitalist practices which encourage monocropping are responsible for the dilemma of nature; being human

regardless of being a man or woman is the solution to the problem of the environment, and Buddhist meditation is a great route towards enlightenment. Hence, Powers displays all the patches of the quilt of ecofeminism as represented in his novel.

### **5. The Ethical/Rhetorical Stand: focalisation, consciousness of characters and their enmeshing in the plot of *The Overstory***

Powers uses the structure of a tree to provide structure for his book; this structure affirms the ethical stand that it is impossible to assess the human self as unconnected to larger ecological and biotic communities. The novel starts with “Roots” as the first section and is followed by “Trunk”, then “Crown” and “Seeds”. Powers comments on this structure, saying that although the novel first appears as independent sequential expositions, presenting the backstories of characters who seem unrelated, labelled as “Roots”, these roots unfold as tree anatomy suggests into “the story as a whole” which includes all the “mini-novels” “incorporated into one, large coastal redwood-size whole” (Rose, 2018).

Richard Powers has managed to hold his readers tangled for 150 pages out of 500 in the lives of his many characters, only to discover that the real protagonists are the “centuries old” and “300 feet tall” trees that bring these lives together in the Pacific Northwest, to save the last virgin stands of California redwoods (Kingsolver, 2018). Wilhelmus (2018) explains that the title of the novel suggests that the novel takes into account something larger than homosapiens as a species in a story; *The Overstory* or “the larger” story is that of the trees or the environment as readers conclude.

Rhetorically, Powers utilises different modes of focalisation to implement his ethical stand: the first mode of focalisation which Genette calls “non– focalisation” or “zero focalisation” in which events are narrated from an omniscient point of view; and the second mode “internal variable focalisation” in which events are focalised by many characters in the story and their narrative information is revealed according to their perception. The omniscient narrator of *The Overstory*, who is both extradiegetic and heterodiegetic, gains a narratorial authority that compels



the reader to rethink his values concerning the ecological community he/she lives in.

Powers admits in several interviews (John (2018); Paulson (2021); and Neary (2018)) that he was tree blind and did not consider trees until his first encounter with a giant redwood that fascinated him. Powers also explains that it took him five years to read more than 100 books about trees in order to grasp the “science of trees” to reach the conclusion that trees are social, have a memory and talk to each other. This scientific explanation is what Caracciolo (2020) explains as a solution for the narrative of the nonhuman because it takes the anthropocentric conceptions about such phenomena to “the outer limit of narrativity, the place where story borders on other discourse types” such as scientific explanation (p.45).

This scientific explanation is also what gives immense power and credibility to the focalisation of the omniscient narrator and the focalisation of a character as Dr. Patricia who spells out facts based on science. Moreover, it is this science of trees that helps in enmeshing homosapiens' lives with trees in a plot which is based on scientific facts. The object-oriented plots “do not (and can not) completely eradicate the human element in narrative. Yet these narratives are able to evoke a sense of what ecophilosopher Timothy Morton calls “the mesh,” or the intertwining between human realities and the nonhuman, which allows object-oriented plots to decenter the human and allow, at the level of narrative structure, for a “stand-in” for nonhuman, which serves as a “reminder of our embedding in a more-than-human world” (Caracciolo, 2020, p.46).

The omniscient narrator displays tremendous scientific details: how the American chestnut disappeared; how a huge banyan tree grows from a small fig; and how trees communicate with each other. The narrator-focaliser knows everything about his/her represented world, and when he restricts his knowledge, he does so out of rhetorical considerations to create an effect of surprise and shock (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p.79). This is exactly what the narrator-focaliser in *The Overstory* does when he embodies fascinating details about trees and when he

shocks his readers with Patricia's suicide to surprise the readers against any preconceived codes of ethics of environment.

The focalisation of the narrator emerges from a reliable narrator and, as Rimmon-Kenan (1983) asserts, a commentary made by a reliable narrator is supposed to be received by the reader "as an authoritative account of fictional truth", and if the implied author does share the narrator's values then the latter is reliable in this respect (p.100). The narrator of *The Overstory* is an omniscient, reliable one; his values are trustworthy and tally completely with Powers's.

As an overt omniscient narrator, Powers dives into Dr. Patricia's consciousness: after her debunking, she is on the verge of committing suicide, but in a moment of self revelation, she decides that human estimation can no longer touch her and that she is free to discover anything. As Ford (2002) says, "It is not until we pay attention to this pain and longing within us that we can begin to walk an authentic spiritual path" (p. xii). As a focal character, Dr. Patricia manages to see the trees and listen to them. In her paper, which is based on scientific investigation, she writes the conclusion: "The biochemical behavior of individual trees may make sense only when we see them as members of a community" (Powers, 2018, p. 117). When the monologue blends with the whole of the narrative, the narrating instance is "annulled", and we are "in the presence of a narrative in the present tense and in the first person" (Genette, 1980, p.175). Patricia's monologue reveals her faith in trees and represents how they stand on equal footing with the rest of the members of the community.

The meshing of the trees with people's lives in the plot crystallises how environment material is capable of evoking a narrativity which is very powerful. Dr. Patricia's understanding of the dark doom of the planet inspires her to start a Seedbank. When she is invited to speak at a conference to bring hope via her speech, she decides to commit suicide by drinking poisonous tree extracts in front of the gathering to make a profound statement, namely our death is the only thing we - as humans - can do for the planet. Her smile suggests triumph, not defeat this time; it is her way to buy a few more resources for the planet. Powers explains

that this is the gesture behind the entire novel: “the violent effort to oppose a way of life” is the best way to “unsuicide” (Hamner, 2018).

As an extradiegetic narrator, Powers's definitions of characters are more reliable and effective; definitions of characters “tend to carry more weight when given by an extradiegetic narrator than by an intradiegetic one” (Rimmon-Kennan, 1983, p.98). The trees are main focal characters and the omniscient narrator tells the readers that Dr. Patricia is trying to listen to the trees, “Her ears tune down to the lowest frequencies. The tree is saying things, in words before words” (Powers, 2018, p.1).

Through direct discourse, a dialogue between trees and human beings, Trees' consciousness and point of view concerning their position and human beings is given:

Trees even farther away join in: All the ways you imagine us—bewitched mangroves up on stilts, a nutmeg's inverted spade, gnarled baja elephant trunks, the straight-up missile of a sal—are always amputations. Your kind never sees us whole. You miss the half of it, and more. There's always as much below ground as above. (Powers, 2018, p.1)

Powers then shifts from direct discourse of the trees to a commentary, one of the signs of an overt narrator, by a reliable omniscient narrator. In this commentary, Powers sums up facts, sometimes in acute short phrases, to alert the reader and force him/her to start thinking:

That's the trouble with people, their root problem. Life runs alongside them, unseen. Right here, right next. Creating the soil. Cycling water. Trading in nutrients. Making weather. Building atmosphere. Feeding and curing and sheltering more kinds of creatures than people know how to count. (Powers, 2018, p. 1)

Powers again shifts to direct discourse displaying the focalisation of the trees so the reader does not have a chance to forget that trees talk and are even an authority that blames:

“A chorus of living wood sings to the woman: If your mind were only a slightly greener thing, we'd drown you in meaning”

“The pine she leans against says: Listen. There's something you need to hear” (Powers, 2018, p. 2).

This shifting allows the ethical stand and message of the novel to become more profound and more credible particularly as the novel develops. It is the problem of the human beings, not the trees, that their minds are not green and that they do not tend to listen.

Powers uses free indirect discourse in which “the narrator takes on the speech of the character, or, if one prefers, character speaks through the voice of the narrator, and the two instances are then merged” (Genette, 1980, p. 174). The trees are indeed characters that talk, speak, shake down, repeat, laugh and share; they are full agents.

Talk runs far afield tonight. The bends in the alders speak of long-ago disasters. Spikes of pale chinquapin flowers shake down their pollen; soon they will turn into spiny fruits. Poplars repeat the wind’s gossip. Persimmons and walnuts set out their bribes and rowans their blood-red clusters. Ancient oaks wave prophecies of future weather. The several hundred kinds of hawthorn laugh at the single name they’re forced to share. (Powers, 2018, p. 1)

Hence, Powers leaves no room for any doubts concerning the agency of trees.

Nick is enchanted by Olivia and becomes a dedicated fighter to save trees as she is. Trees are doers of great action; they are focalised as life – savers by both Nick and Douglas. When the mountainside loosens and starts pouring down, Nick and his neighbors are saved by a line of redwoods that are marked for destruction. Douglas is also saved by a banyan, centuries old, when he was a Technical Sergeant, flying trash hauler missions.

The narrator – focaliser’s emotive transformation stays objective (neutral/uninvolved), whereas the internal focalisers’s emotions are subjective (coloured/involved) (Rimmon – Kenan, 1983, p.80). As an internal focaliser, Douglas’s emotions of satisfaction with respect to his duty towards trees are dismantled; he discovers that the trees along the road are only an *illusion to hide the crime taking place in the forests where trees are slaughtered*. Through monologue, Douglas articulates the question Powers is mostly interested in: Douglas wonders, “What the F---

Went Wrong with Mankind” (Powers, 2018, p. 386). Douglas addresses his Douglas-fir seedlings, urging them to hang on “only ten or twenty decades” which is “child’s play” for the trees and then no human being will be left to mess up with the trees (Powers, 2018, p. 386).

Ray Brinkman, a property lawyer, and Dorothy, have their marital conflicts, but after Ray’s brain aneurysm, he and Dorothy manage to get along. As focal characters, they perceive trees as important entities cable of speaking: they start listening to what the trees are saying and consider the American chestnut in their yard their daughter. Ray reads an essay about trees potentially having a legal standing; the issue is not carried for further investigation in the novel, but it does pose a possible argumentative question, particularly with the on – going ethical stand of many philosophers and environmentalists who assert that “all living beings are morally considerable” which is a position termed biocentrism (Wienhues, 2020, p. 3).

Readers dive into the consciousness of Adam Appich as a child who retreats up into his maple tree and is astonished by the life he never thought existed in this tree. As an adult, his stream of consciousness asserts his scientific claims of how cognitive blindness will always prevent people from acting in their best interest. His monologues assert a sense of relief of paying a couple of years in prison to save the trees.

Trees emerge as individual characters in *The Overstory*: the Hoel chestnut; the Thai banyan that saves Douglas; the oak that converts Neelay’s life by pushing him out; Mimas, where Olivia and Nick and Adam live; Mimi’s mulberry that reminds her of her father; Ray and Dorothy’s chestnut that act as their unborn daughter. The Bo tree is not the only sacred tree that is mentioned; “India’s bejeweled wishing trees, Mayan kapoks, Egyptian sycamores, the Chinese sacred ginkgo -all the branches of the world’s first religion” (Powers, 2018, p. 215). Trees talk to Neelay and inspire him with the idea of the game that hits and makes him ultimately rich, but trees also sometimes abstain from talking to him (exactly like human beings), “He remembers how they whispered to him about a game... Tonight, the trees are tight-lipped, refusing to tell him anything” (Powers, 2018, p. 175).

Anger or any strong emotions alone are not enough to stop environmental tragedy because they “block communication” (Kaza, 1993, p. 59). Powers presents several characters who commit arson, but he neither condemns nor accepts eco- terrorism. Mother N advocates nonviolence, but ironically enough, it is she who is violently killed. Olivia’s death and Dr. Patricia’s suicide are perhaps Powers’s way to purify and educate.

Powers believes that “*We can only be redeemed if something traumatic happens to us*” and that is why each character in *The Overstory* suffers a deadly ordeal of some kind or bears witness to the death or near-death of a loved one because he postulates the dark truth is “*Something traumatic is going to happen to us*, both privately and collectively, whether we are smart enough to be redeemed by it or not!” and this happens because of “our alienation from the rest of creation” (Rose, 2018).

## **6. Conclusion:**

This paper demonstrates that Powers is concerned about the critical situation of earth today, and he tries to reconstruct an ethical venue which is: trees are individual characters that communicate with each other and human beings; trees provide for innumerable species; trees die and resurrect. Moreover, they are crucial for humans' survival but not vice versa. He approaches this ethical cause by accepting all perspectives of different ecofeminist discourses, only to add a new insight to ecofeminism, namely quilting of ecofeminist discourses. Powers allows for plurality of perspectives of ecofeminism rather than unity of them as in the patches of a quilt.

How intermeshed the lives of the humans and the trees are in this novel, does not leave much room for the arrogance of human beings to insist on their supremacy. Most human species are plant-blind and need some kind of punishment to start "seeing" and "listening". Human beings are greedy, selfish and ignorant to the extent that they have assumed that they are the only beings capable of being agents. Powers manages through specific hallmarks of narrativity (focalisation, consciousness of characters and the enmeshing of trees as main characters in the plot) to reveal that trees are agents in their own right and need to be freed of cognitive biases. Powers successfully manages to embarrass his readers regarding their tree blindness; thus, he achieves one of the goals of literature: "If literature can't surprise, enrage, and embarrass us—and not just our students—we have no business teaching it" (Garrard, 2020, p. 107).

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