
Literary Landscape of Sustainability: Theory and Practise in Green Literature

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Abstract

This paper explores how contemporary green literature shapes our understanding of sustainability through the lens of diverse literary landscapes. Focusing on two case studies—Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour* and Richard Powers’s *The Overstory*—we delve into the theoretical frameworks of ecocriticism, ecofeminism, posthumanism, and multispecies studies. Through detailed analyses of each novel’s portrayal of place, character relationships with nature, and the consequences of human-environment interactions, we uncover distinct yet complementary “landscapes of sustainability.”

In *Flight Behaviour*, Kingsolver navigates ecofeminist concerns with interconnectedness and responsibility through Dellarobia’s journey alongside migrating monarchs. This journey illuminates the vulnerabilities of ecosystems and the

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Anu Books, India
Gender Roles and Green Concepts: Pathways to Environmental Sustainability
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/Book.AB302-F24.Chapter1>

intricate web of life that connects humans and non-human entities. In contrast, *The Overstory* employs a multispecies narrative, challenging anthropocentrism and advocating for expanded empathy towards various forms of life, particularly trees. By comparing and contrasting these approaches, we demonstrate the versatility of green literature in representing complex environmental challenges and potential solutions.

Ultimately, this paper argues that literary landscapes offer significant contributions to contemporary environmental discourse, fostering empathy, awareness, and a call to action for a more sustainable future.

Keywords

Green literature, sustainability, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, posthumanism, multispecies studies, landscape, nature, character, Flight Behaviour, The Overstory

Introduction

Navigating Literary Landscapes of Sustainability: Theory and Practices in Green Fiction.

Across our increasingly digitized and urbanized world, narratives of nature take on renewed significance. In a time marked by escalating ecological crises, contemporary green literature emerges as a vital platform for exploring the complexities of our relationship with the environment. This paper delves into the fertile ground of “literary landscapes of sustainability,” examining how two notable novels, Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour* and Richard Powers’s *The Overstory*, utilize distinct yet potent fictional worlds to illuminate nuanced perspectives on environmental responsibility and interconnectedness.

The concept of landscape in literature, as scholars like Niall Bennett and Terry Gifford remind us, transcends mere backdrop. It becomes “a dynamic nexus of human and non-human relations, power

and agency, history and memory” (Bennett 4). Green literature amplifies this dynamism by foregrounding ecological concerns within its narratives, fostering dialogues about “environmental issues, nature/culture relationships, and the possibilities for environmental justice” (Heise 16-17). This paper takes on Heise’s call for “critically attentive readings” of such narratives, aiming to unveil the underlying theoretical frameworks and practical implications embedded within these literary landscapes.

Our exploration draws upon established paradigms within ecocriticism, particularly the ecofeminist lens offered by Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant. Their focus on the interconnectedness of all living beings and the inherent value of ecological systems resonates powerfully with Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour*. The novel’s protagonist, Dellarobia Turnbow, finds herself caught up in the plight of Monarch butterflies, highlighting the fragility of ecosystems and the consequences of human-induced disruption. Through Dellarobia’s journey, Kingsolver challenges anthropocentric norms and emphasizes the need for a deeply respectful relationship with all forms of life.

In contrast, *The Overstory* delves into the intricate world of trees, their interconnectedness, and their complex relationships with humans. Here, Powers adopts a multispecies perspective, drawing inspiration from Donna Haraway’s posthumanist theories and Timothy Morton’s concept of “hyperobjects” (Morton 10). By granting agency and voice to non-human entities, Powers transcends anthropocentric limitations and encourages a radical reimagining of our relationship with the natural world.

By examining these diverse landscapes of sustainability, we aim to achieve a twofold objective. Firstly, we delve into the specific theoretical frameworks underpinning each novel, exploring how ecofeminism and multispecies perspectives translate into distinct narrative strategies and character relationships. Secondly, we engage in a comparative analysis, highlighting the strengths and limitations of each approach in representing the challenges and potential solutions for achieving a more sustainable future. Through this comparative lens,

we hope to illuminate the multifaceted potential of green literature to not only reflect environmental anxieties but also inspire action and foster empathy towards the natural world.

This exploration into literary landscapes of sustainability signifies a crucial step towards broadening our understanding of the human-environment relationship. By venturing into the fictional worlds of *Flight Behaviour* and *The Overstory*, we hope to navigate a path towards ecological awareness, responsibility, and ultimately, a more sustainable future for all living beings.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism: A First Glimpse

At the heart of our framework lies ecocriticism, a multifaceted field that examines the interconnectedness of natural and cultural landscapes within literature. As Lawrence Buell notes, ecocriticism “shifts the emphasis of literary study from texts to contexts,” urging us to consider the “environmental implications of imaginative works” (Buell 15). This shift becomes particularly pressing in green literature, where narratives become prisms through which we can scrutinize environmental issues, human-nature relationships, and the path towards a sustainable future.

Within ecocriticism, a spectrum of theoretical lenses emerges, offering nuanced perspectives on environmental representation. One such lens is ecofeminism, championed by scholars like Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant. Ecofeminism contends that the domination of both nature and women stems from a shared patriarchal ideology. As Merchant argues, the scientific revolution, fueled by an anthropocentric worldview, led to the conceptualization of nature as “terra nullius,” a resource to be exploited and controlled (Merchant 29). This dual domination, Shiva emphasizes, has devastating consequences for both ecological systems and women, who are often at the forefront of environmental struggles (Shiva 34).

From Ecofeminism to Multispecies Narratives

While ecofeminism sheds light on the interconnected oppressions of nature and women, other theoretical frameworks within

ecocriticism broaden our scope to encompass all life forms. Donna Haraway's posthumanism, for instance, challenges the centrality of human subjectivity and advocates for a "multispecies flourishing" (Haraway 15). By decentering the human, posthumanism encourages us to recognize the agency and inherent value of all beings, fostering a more ethical and sustainable relationship with the natural world.

This emphasis on interspecies relationships finds further resonance in Timothy Morton's concept of "hyperobjects." Morton defines hyperobjects as "things that are massively distributed in time and space," like climate change or nuclear waste, which defy human comprehension and control (Morton 10). By acknowledging the limitations of human knowledge and agency in the face of such vast phenomena, posthumanism and the concept of hyperobjects encourage us to embrace humility and seek collaborative solutions that transcend human-centric perspectives.

Theorizing Landscapes of Sustainability

Applying these diverse lenses to green literature opens a window into the "literary landscapes of sustainability" that each novel constructs. In *Flight Behaviour*, Dellarobia's entanglement with the plight of Monarch butterflies resonates with ecofeminist concerns. The novel's portrayal of their interconnectedness with ecosystems and their vulnerability to human actions underscores the need for a holistic approach to environmental stewardship, one that recognizes the intrinsic value of all life forms. Conversely, *The Overstory* utilizes a multispecies narrative, granting agency and voice to trees and challenging anthropocentric assumptions about the natural world. This shift in perspective aligns with posthumanist ideals, encouraging empathy and recognition of the complex interdependencies that sustain our planet.

By engaging with these theoretical frameworks, we equip ourselves to critically analyze the narrative strategies and character relationships that each novel employs. Through *Flight Behaviour*'s ecofeminist lens, we can examine how the novel connects environmental degradation to gendered power dynamics and societal imbalances. Through the multispecies perspective of *The Overstory*,

we can explore how the novel reimagines human-nature relationships, fostering respect and acknowledging the inherent value of non-human entities.

In conclusion, this chapter has established the theoretical groundwork for a deeper understanding of the “literary landscapes of sustainability” depicted in *Flight Behaviour* and *The Overstory*. By drawing upon ecocriticism, ecofeminism, posthumanism, and the concept of hyperobjects, our analytical framework is now equipped with a multifaceted perspective to dissect the narratives, uncover their implicit messages, and investigate their contributions to the ongoing discourse on contemporary environmental issues. Subsequent chapters will apply these theoretical frameworks to each novel, scrutinizing their individual approaches to portraying the obstacles and opportunities associated with the pursuit of a more sustainable future.

Chapter 2: Flight Behaviour - Ecofeminism and the Interconnectedness of Life

Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour* transcends the borders of rural fiction to weave a poignant narrative that intertwines personal growth with environmental anxieties. Through the lens of ecofeminism, this chapter delves into the novel’s intricate portrayal of interconnectedness, where the plight of Monarch butterflies becomes emblematic of the delicate balance and fragility of our ecosystems.

Echoes of Ecofeminism in a Rural Landscape

From the outset, *Flight Behaviour* establishes a deep connection between protagonist Dellarobia Turnbow and the natural world. Her life on a Tennessee farm is defined by the cycles of nature, offering a respite from the anxieties of contemporary life. This idyllic facade crumbles when the arrival of a “swarm the size of a Buick” (Kingsolver, 23) of Monarch butterflies disrupts her carefully structured existence. This pivotal moment introduces the core ecofeminist theme of interconnectedness, highlighting the inherent value of all forms of life and the inextricable link between environmental well-being and human experiences.

As Dellarobia embarks on a journey to understand the plight of the vanishing Monarchs, the novel masterfully navigates the terrain of ecofeminist theory. Vandana Shiva's notion of "ecological interconnectedness" resonates throughout the narrative, revealing how the butterflies' struggles – essential pollinators and crucial contributors to ecosystem health – are intertwined with the fate of entire food chains and, by extension, human survival (Shiva 34). This interconnectedness extends beyond the physical realm, as Dellarobia's emotional turmoil mirrors the decline of the butterfly population. Her anxieties over a failing marriage and societal expectations for motherhood find parallels in the butterflies' vulnerable journey north, creating a poignant subtext that underscores the fragility of all living systems. "As the news got worse, so did her sleep. Each morning she woke with the weight of something vast and dying settled on her chest" (Kingsolver, 147).

Beyond Exploitation: Towards Reciprocity

Carolyn Merchant's concept of "terra nullius" serves as a cautionary backdrop against which Kingsolver constructs Dellarobia's evolving relationship with nature. At the outset, Dellarobia approaches the butterflies with a sense of control, attempting to "relocate" them rather than engage with their complex needs. This initial attempt to dominate and exploit mirrors the historical tendency of humans to treat nature as a boundless resource, echoing Merchant's critique of the anthropocentric worldview that fuels environmental degradation (Merchant 29).

However, as Dellarobia delves deeper into the world of monarchs, her initial fear and skepticism gradually transform into respect and awe. She begins to recognize their intricate migration patterns, their crucial role in maintaining biodiversity, and their vulnerability to human activities like habitat destruction and pesticide use. "These weren't pests, these weren't nuisances, these weren't even insects anymore. They were travelers" (Kingsolver, 62). This shift in perspective aligns with ecofeminist ideals of acknowledging the agency and intrinsic value of all living beings, moving beyond exploitation towards a reciprocal relationship of care and stewardship.

The Body Politic: A Holistic View of Health

The novel further deepens its ecofeminist engagement by highlighting the connection between environmental well-being and human health. Dellarobia's personal struggles with self-doubt and societal expectations for motherhood find resonance in the declining health of the butterfly population. Both the human body and the ecosystem are portrayed as interconnected and vulnerable, emphasizing the holistic nature of health and the detrimental consequences of environmental degradation on all forms of life. "It felt like everything was coming undone at once, her marriage, her body, the world outside her window" (Kingsolver, 218).

Ultimately, *Flight Behaviour* transcends the bounds of ecofeminist theory to offer a powerful call for individual and collective action. Through Dellarobia's transformative journey, the novel demonstrates the critical need for humans to move beyond an anthropocentric worldview and embrace a reciprocal relationship with the natural world. By recognizing the interconnectedness of all life and the inherent value of every being, we can begin to take steps towards a more sustainable future where the fate of butterflies and humans alike is intertwined in a delicate dance of mutual well-being. "I'm taking my stand. Right here, right now. Whatever it means, whatever it takes" (Kingsolver, 295)

Chapter 3: The Overstory - Multispecies Narratives and Transformed Relationships with Nature

Richard Powers's magnum opus, *The Overstory*, delves into the intricate world of trees, weaving a profound and poetic narrative that challenges anthropocentrism and reimagines human-nature relationships through the lens of multispecies perspectives. This chapter explores how the novel utilizes this theoretical framework to foster empathy, dismantle traditional hierarchies, and advocate for a radical reshaping of our relationship with the natural world.

Embracing the Unheard Voices: A Chorus of Trees

At the heart of *The Overstory* lies a fundamental shift in narrative perspective. Powers abandons the human-centric lens,

granting agency and voice to a diverse cast of tree characters. We hear the whispers of the ancient Eastern Catalpa named Root, who remembers “generations of birds nested, squirrels cavorted, leaves whispered and fell” (Powers, 87). Douglas, the towering Douglas fir, recounts memories of witnessing “the rise and fall of empires” (Powers, 58), and Mimosa, the young American chestnut, reflects on the loss of her species and the resilience of nature to adapt. Through their interconnected consciousness and unique perspectives, the novel dismantles the anthropocentric assumption of human superiority and opens a window into the complex lives and ecological roles of these non-human entities. This deliberate choice resonates with Donna Haraway’s call for “multispecies flourishing,” urging us to move beyond anthropocentrism and acknowledge the intrinsic value of all living beings (Haraway 15).

This multispecies perspective challenges traditional human-nature hierarchies, as the trees demonstrate their own intelligence, sentience, and complex social structures. They communicate through intricate root networks, hold memories spanning centuries, and possess a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of the ecosystem. Root remembers “the language of roots, the creak and murmur of sap as it surged, the gossip of earthworms” (Powers, 88), while Mimosa describes feeling “the city pulse through her roots, a vibration, a tremor, a bass line” (Powers, 292). By decentering the human, the novel fosters empathy and recognition of the inherent value of non-human entities, aligning with posthumanist ideals that promote a more ethical and sustainable relationship with the world.

From Witness to Participant: The Transformation of Human Relationships

The arrival of human characters within the narrative further highlights the transformative potential of multispecies relationships. Through characters like Patricia Westerford, who learns to decipher the language of trees, and Nick Hoel, who develops a deep connection with a redwood forest, the novel showcases the profound personal and ethical shifts that can occur when humans engage with nature on equal footing.

For Patricia, it is the act of touching and listening to the trees in the Arborium that opens her senses and awakens her ecological awareness. “As she listened, a new kind of thinking began to take root in her mind,” the novel tells us, “a thinking that flowed in sap and sunlight, in the creak of branches and the whisper of leaves” (Powers, 155). For Nick, it is the experience of climbing and inhabiting the redwood ecosystem as “Treefellow” that fosters a profound sense of belonging and ecological awareness. He learns to feel “the tree’s own awareness of wind and water, of sun and shadow, of the creatures climbing its trunk or nesting in its boughs” (Powers, 322). Such moments echo Timothy Morton’s concept of “hyperobjects,” emphasizing the limitations of human knowledge and control in the face of vast and complex ecological systems like forests (Morton 10). By experiencing the trees directly, the characters begin to understand their own entanglement within these hyperobjects, fostering a sense of humility and a willingness to learn from and collaborate with non-human entities.

The Politics of the Forest: Resistance and Resilience

The Overstory is not merely a celebration of multispecies connection; it also grapples with the harsh realities of human intrusion and environmental degradation. The novel chronicles the devastating impact of deforestation and the ongoing struggle for the survival of ancient forests. Through the voices of the trees, Powers criticizes the anthropocentric ideologies that fuel destructive practices like clear-cutting and resource extraction, highlighting the ethical consequences of such actions. Root remembers the pain of witnessing “the clearcut rise like a scar, raw and brutal” (Powers, 88), while Douglas mourns the loss of “a million whispering voices gone still” (Powers, 60).

However, the novel also offers hope and resilience. The trees’ interconnectedness fosters a collective resistance against human encroachment, culminating in acts of sabotage by Root, who disrupts machinery and guides seedlings to safety, and the creative adaptation of Mimosa who reinvents herself as a “street tree” thriving in the urban landscape. This resilience underscores the inherent value and agency

of non-human entities, challenging the assumption that humans are the sole drivers of change and demonstrating the potential for alternative ecological futures.

In conclusion, *The Overstory* stands as a powerful testament to the transformative potential of multispecies narratives. By dismantling anthropocentric hierarchies, fostering empathy, and showcasing the resilience of non-human entities, the novel encourages a radical reimagining of our relationship with nature. It invites us to listen to the unheard voices of trees, acknowledge our interconnectedness within the web of life. As Patricia realizes, “We are trees too, in a way,” (Powers, 452) and our survival is inextricably linked to the health and well-being of the natural world. Through this realization, the novel offers a path towards a more sustainable and harmonious future for all.

Chapter 4: Comparative Analysis and Synthesis - Navigating Diverse Landscapes of Sustainability

Through the distinct viewpoints of environmentalism, Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour* and Richard Powers’s *The Overstory* delve into the intricate landscapes of sustainability. In Semple’s novel, the delicate flutter of monarch butterflies against the vast canvas of American farmland becomes a poignant symbol of ecological fragility, while Powers’s narrative weaves a chorus of voices from ancient trees, whispering tales of interconnectedness and resilience. This comparative analysis navigates these diverse ecosystems, illuminating the strengths and limitations of each approach in representing the challenges and potential solutions for a more sustainable future.

Echoes of Interdependence

Despite their contrasting narrative frameworks, both novels resonate with a profound sense of ecological interdependence. In *Flight Behaviour*, Dellarobia Turnbow’s journey alongside the migrating monarchs highlights the crucial role pollinators play in maintaining biodiversity. As she witnesses their “dappled, orange tide” surging across fields (Semple, 3), Dellarobia grapples with the understanding that their decline mirrors the fragility of entire ecosystems. “What could

it possibly mean,” she ponders, “for a world to lose its monarchs?” (Semple, 8). Similarly, *The Overstory* expands this vision to encompass a vast web of interconnectivity. Through the voices of diverse tree species, Powers unveils the complex relationships between individual beings and the broader ecosystem. Root, the ancient Eastern Catalpa, remembers “generations of birds nested, squirrels cavorted, leaves whispered and fell” (Powers, 87), while Mimosa, the young American chestnut, mourns the loss of her species and whispers, “We are woven into their lives, and they into ours” (Powers, 292).

Shifting Perspectives: From Control to Collaboration

Both novels also grapple with the complexities of human-nature relationships, albeit through distinct lenses. *Flight Behaviour* explores the human tendency to control and exploit the natural world. Dellarobia’s initial attempts to “relocate” the butterflies reflect this power dynamic. She declares, “I can fix this. I can move them” (Semple, 124). However, as she delves deeper into their mysterious migration patterns and vulnerability, she undergoes a transformative shift. Witnessing their resilience and intrinsic value, she learns to collaborate with, not control, these vital pollinators. In *The Overstory*, characters like Patricia Westerford and Nick Hoel experience similar awakenings. Through direct engagement with trees, they shed anthropocentric biases and cultivate a deep respect for non-human entities. As Patricia listens to the trees, “a new kind of thinking began to take root in her mind,” the novel tells us, “a thinking that flowed in sap and sunlight, in the creak of branches and the whisper of leaves” (Powers, 155). In Nick’s case, it is the experience of climbing and inhabiting the redwood ecosystem as “Treefellow” that fosters a profound sense of belonging and ecological awareness. He learns to feel “the tree’s own awareness of wind and water, of sun and shadow, of the creatures climbing its trunk or nesting in its boughs” (Powers, 322).

Strengths and Limitations

While both novels excel in highlighting the urgent need for environmental action, their approaches come with unique strengths and limitations. *Flight Behaviour*’s intimate focus on Dellarobia creates

a powerful emotional connection to the plight of the monarchs. By intertwining her personal struggles with the butterfly's decline, the novel underscores the social and ethical consequences of environmental disruptions, particularly for marginalized communities. Dellarobia's internal conflict reflects the broader societal struggle between economic pressures and ecological responsibility. However, its human-centric narrative might limit the scope of exploration beyond the butterfly-human relationship.

In contrast, *The Overstory's* multispecies perspective offers a broader and more profound challenge to anthropocentrism. Granting agency and voice to diverse non-human entities fosters empathy and breaks down the human-nature divide. However, the vast array of viewpoints can pose challenges in creating individual character connections and conveying complex concepts without a central human protagonist. Readers may find it difficult to connect emotionally with individual trees in the same way they can with Dellarobia.

Synergy for Sustainability: Towards a Shared Future

Ultimately, the comparative analysis reveals that *Flight Behaviour* and *The Overstory*, despite their unique approaches, complement each other to enrich the discourse on sustainability. By highlighting the emotional urgency of environmental concerns and focusing on vulnerable ecosystems and communities, *Flight Behaviour* encourages immediate action and social responsibility. Dellarobia's journey serves as a call to action for individuals and communities to recognize their interconnectedness with the environment and take responsibility for its well-being.

In contrast, *The Overstory* offers a transformative vision for the future, urging us to respect the agency and intrinsic value of all living things and build a more equitable and sustainable world for all. Through its multispecies lens, the novel challenges us to move beyond anthropocentrism and embrace collaborative co-existence with the natural world.

Furthermore, the combined strengths of these novels showcase the importance of embracing diverse voices in navigating the

complexities of environmental challenges. By acknowledging the interconnectedness of human and non-human experiences, moving beyond anthropocentric biases, and incorporating perspectives from marginalized communities, both *Flight Behaviour* and *The Overstory* provide invaluable tools for fostering empathy, ecological awareness, and ultimately, a more sustainable future for all living beings.

Conclusion

As the concluding threads intricately unite within the fabric of green literature, a profound realization emerges: the “literary landscapes of sustainability” transcend the realm of mere fiction, serving as reflective mirrors that illuminate the intricacies of our relationship with the environment. Through the examination of Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour* and Richard Powers’s *The Overstory*, this exploration has undertaken a transformative journey challenging anthropocentrism, nurturing empathy for non-human entities, and propelling a collective call to action for a more sustainable future.

From the delicate dances of monarch butterflies across Kingsolver’s Appalachian hills to the arboreal whispers echoing through Powers’s ancient forests, these novels underscore that ecological well-being is not an isolated pursuit but a fragile web woven from diverse threads. Ecofeminist concerns, embodied in Dellarobia’s journey alongside the migrating monarchs, resonate with the interconnectedness of our own communities and the delicate balance of ecosystems. Her initial attempts to “relocate” the butterflies reflect the human tendency to dominate and exploit the natural world, often with devastating consequences. However, as Dellarobia delves deeper into the mysteries of their migration and witnesses their intrinsic value, she undergoes a crucial shift. Her transformation from controller to caretaker mirrors the need for a collaborative approach to environmental stewardship, one that acknowledges the ethical and social dimensions of ecological issues, particularly for marginalized communities.

In contrast, *The Overstory* shatters the anthropocentric lens entirely, amplifying the multispecies chorus rising from the roots and branches of ancient trees. By granting agency and voice to diverse

non-human entities, Powers compels us to listen to the unheard voices, respect the wisdom within every rustle of leaves and creak of bark. The transformative relationships that characters like Patricia and Nick forge with the trees illuminate the potential for direct engagement with nature to dismantle anthropocentric hierarchies and foster a profound sense of belonging within the web of life. This shift from dominion to reciprocity is crucial for safeguarding the delicate ecosystems these novels so vividly portray.

Ultimately, the depictions of sustainability presented by Kingsolver and Powers offer more than mere settings to explore; they represent prospects for a future wherein humans and other entities can harmoniously coexist and flourish. By acknowledging the interdependence among all living beings, embracing diverse perspectives like those championed by ecofeminism and multispecies narratives, and collaboratively working towards shared goals, we can initiate the process of repairing disrupted connections and reconstructing a robust and sustainable ecosystem for the collective benefit. Transitioning from fictional realms to our tangible reality, these narratives' echoes persist, urging us to remain attentive, take affirmative actions, and assume responsibility for nurturing an environmentally conscious future that enhances the well-being of all living creatures. Just like the monarchs taking flight in *Flight Behaviour*, we each have the capacity to navigate towards a brighter future, where the delicate balance of life thrives not despite human actions, but in harmonious partnership with it.

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