
**The Role of Women in
Environmental Conservation:
A Study of Richard Powers’
*The Overstory***

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Abstract

Nature is intertwined with our lives in numerous ways, from providing fundamental essentials for our survival to inspiring, providing valuable insights and shaping our cultural identities and values. The burning question regarding nature for the present scenario is the environmental issues that are evolving at an alarming rate. Literature has always been vocal for the issues and often serves as a reflection of the present societal problems and challenges. Various literary works illustrate the environmental concerns, environmental abuse that impact the human health, biodiversity, the well being of the whole planet, and discuss the role of mankind in its present condition. The present paper aims to discuss the relationship of women with nature in the novel *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. An analysis of the female characters of the novel would highlight their diverse perspectives and backgrounds which underline the varied nature of environmental activism that enriches the pivotal role of women in developing environmental

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consciousness and shaping a sustainable future amidst ecological crisis.

Keywords

Environmentalism, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Deep Ecology, Anthropocentrism.

Introduction

We are in an age where we are already under stress that we don't even have time to notice that the earth we are living on is slowly perishing. Starting from the day when industrialization started till today we are witnessing a wide range of environmental issues. Thus, it is understood that these environmental problems are caused due to our irresponsible attitude towards nature which has pushed the whole planet under threat and is eventually making the planet hard to live on. The world is suffering a lot from the global ecological crisis due to the atrocities on nature. Therefore, literature cannot turn its back on this burning issue as literature is a mirror to society, it also creates awareness about the environmental crises and helps in developing an eco-consciousness. The past few years have witnessed a remarkable growth in the literature dedicated to environmental conservation. It presents theories like Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Deep Ecology, and other associative theories that support the ideas and structure of desire which govern the interaction between humans and their natural environment which are of utmost importance.

Literary works detail how every human being has a distinct relationship with the environment. Environment has a great impact on the lives of all beings but the impact varies from men to women. From managing the natural resources on a household level to the social level they interact intensively with nature and build a rapport and it is different in comparison to men therefore various studies have shown that women are also important contributors in the field of environment conservation and protection but the role of women in environment

protection now is not as same as it was earlier. The role of women in environmental conservation has evolved over time earlier women had no significant role in environmental protection and other social spheres and they too were marginalized. The early 1970s embarked on the development of the theory of ecofeminism that examines a connection between women and nature and the oppression of women and nature in a male-dominated society. It upholds a view that feminine values are more life-enhancing and life-affirming than masculine values. The feminine principles represent Mother Nature, the body, intuition, and emotions. Women play an essential role in the management of natural resources including soil, water, forests and energy and often have a profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the natural world around them. By now there are a lot of female activists who have worked as a leader in various protests for environmental conservation all around the world. It has proven that women have an intrinsic relationship with nature.

The Overstory by Richard Powers is a novel that is divided into four sections 'Roots, Trunk, Crown, and Seeds'. Each section details a different stage in the life cycle of trees as well as the characters. It highlights the intrinsic connection between humans and trees and explores the theme of anthropocentrism, and environmentalism in the modern world. Every character in the novel has a distant relationship with the trees and these characters are from different backgrounds and are eventually drawn together through their connection with the trees. Richard Powers delineates the relations of the characters with the trees and how crucial it is in today's scenario where human beings have a connection with nature only because of their greed. The novel provides a narrative of the devastation inflicted upon the forest and also the violence that happens with the characters while protecting the environment. Powers' women characters actively and equally take part in environmental protection. Characters like Patricia Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff, and Mimi Ma participate in the demonstration aimed at preserving the ancient trees. These characters also collaborate with other protesters to inspire a collective consciousness. With unwavering determination, the characters advocate for the preservation of trees.

Relationship between Women and Nature

From the initial pages of the novel, Richard Powers starts giving traces of the innate relationship between woman and nature by depicting a woman leaning against the pine tree and that tree was communicating with her.

A chorus of living wood sings to woman: If your mind were only slightly greener thing, we'd drown you in meaning. The Pines she leans against says: Listen. There's something you need to hear. (Powers 4)

It shows the interconnectedness between the woman and the tree that guides her and hints at going green and developing a consciousness of nature. Here Richard Powers gives a message to the whole community to become eco-conscious to listen to the music the trees sing.

Mimi Ma a woman character in the novel was an engineer and the daughter of Winston Ma, a Chinese American. His father was himself a nature lover who planted a mulberry tree and later took his own life under the same mulberry tree. When Mimi Ma's father takes his life he leaves no suicide note but a calligraphic copy of Wang Wei's twelve-hundred-year-old poem left unfurled on parchment across the desk in his study:

An old man, I want only peace.
The things in this world mean nothing.
I know no good way to live and I can't
Stop getting lost in my
thoughts, my ancient forests. (Powers 50-51)

After her father's death, she is left with nothing except an old jade ring that symbolizes her family heritage. After all this she realizes that she similarly craves peace as her father did among the trees. One day outside her office under the pine tree she feels the perfume of the trees that helps her to control her mind. The tree around her "smells nothing but itself, pungent and sublime. She breathes in, eyes closed,

the tree's real name" (Powers 228). When the foreman cut the pine trees outside her office she felt so sad and:

She closed her eyes. Outrage floods into her, the sneakiness of man, a sense of injustice larger than whole life, the old loss that will never, ever be answered. When her eyes open again, truths rush into her head. Like Enlightenment, but without the glow. (Powers 237-238)

Mimi Ma got enlightened under the pine tree and the cutting of the trees left her devastated. Her enlightenment presents a spiritual relationship between humans and trees.

Patricia Westerford a botanist had a kinship with the trees since her childhood. Her father helped her in developing a relationship with nature, her father used to take her to the farms and on their drives he used to tell her about all the oblique miracles that green can devise. His father had a problem with activities that were happening around he says Patricia once bought him a hillside that slopes away from the town. She read Muir and Thoreau widely during her research. She writes in the conclusion of the research paper that "The biochemical behaviour of individual trees may make sense only when we see them as members of a community" (Powers 158).

Her research paper details that trees are linked in an airborne network and share an immune system across acres of woodland these brainless trunks protect each other her research was condemned by other male scientists who said her methods were flawed and her statistics were problematic. When she goes to the conference in Columbus, the questions asked to her are hostile and people nudge each other as she passes them in the halls of the hotel and say "There's the woman who thinks that trees are intelligent"(Powers 160).

When Patricia is in distress because of the shame she tries to end her life by eating fungal fruiting bodies but then something stops her and the signals flood in her muscles, finer than any words and tells her "Not this. Come with. Fear nothing" (Powers 161). This time too she got protected by the trees and this incident made her determined enough to start her research again without any fear. The impactful role

of trees in Patricia's life is evident through the numerous incidents she has experienced. The trees guide her to be vocal about the conservation of trees in the future.

Olivia Vandergriff, a young incautious college student while in college one day, she accidentally electrocuted and her heart stopped for one minute and ten seconds. When she awakes after the electric shock she feels as if some mysterious voices were guiding her and wanted to show her something. "You were worthless, they hum. But now you're not. You have been spared from death to do a most important thing" (Powers 203).

Olivia was trying to converse with the voices and asking those voices to tell her what they wanted her to do. One day when she was driving near the Illinois border she watched a cargo. Car after car each one loaded with the pallets of dimensional lumber. While watching the sight of cars carrying wood:

She closes her eyes and across her eyelids, small people sit chained together around an enormous tree. The most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help. She laughs and opens her eyes, which fills with tears. Confirmed. I hear you. Yes. (Powers 205)

The voices she was listening to were most probably of the trees. Under the guidance of these voices, she decoded the message the voices wanted to convey. Those voices not only influenced her course of action but also transformed her relationship with the trees. From a reckless college student who had nothing to do with the trees and the environment, she turned into an environmental activist. These voices served as a catalyst for her to become involved in environmental activism.

Dorothy Cazaly, a stenographer for whom trees mean nothing. She was in a complex relationship with Ray Brinkman and the natural world. On their first anniversary when she survives from an accident she develops a profound connection with the trees. Her nearly-death experience enhanced her sensitivity to the natural world therefore when her husband came to the hotel to meet her she told her husband. "Let's plant something". (Powers 90)

Thus the novel *The Overstory* delves into the deep connection between its female characters and the trees, ultimately resulting in their engagement in environmental activism. Patricia Westerford's scientific relationship, Olivia Vandergriff's spiritual relationship, Dorothy Cazaly's sensitivity and Mimi Ma's cultural connection represent diverse perspectives and their relationship shows the interdependence of humans and trees on each other. The novel's universal allure encourages individuals to establish a profound connection with nature, rather than perceiving it solely as an object to exploit.

Environmental Activism of the Female Characters

Since childhood, Patricia Westford listened to the forests and the chatter of the forests had always sustained her. She thinks of writing her book someday which will be named *The Secret Forests*. The opening pages of the book will read as "You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. A billion and a half years ago, the two of you parted ways. But even now, after an immense journey in separate directions, the tree and you still share a quarter of your genes" (Powers 166). Patricia's groundbreaking work becomes a source of inspiration to other characters throughout the novel. Most of the characters read her book as a self-help tool as they embark on their journey of eco-activism. Thus, through the book written by Patricia Westerford, Richard Powers presents an excellent example of how a well-written book can have a profound impact on individuals' choices and perspectives that can change their course of action.

When she is summoned to the court she openly condemns the rapid industrialization and Patricia speaks with a judge in defence of old forests her love for trees pours out of her and she says:

If you want to maximize the net present value of a forest for its current owners and deliver the most wood in the shortest time, then yes: cut the old growth and plant straight-rowed replacement plantations, which you'll be able to harvest a few more times. But if you want next century's soil, if you want pure water, if you want variety and health, if you want stabilizers and services we can't measure, then be patient and let the forest give slowly. (Powers 355)

The above paragraphs show Patricia's eco-consciousness and her environmental activism that was grounded in her scientific understanding of trees. She started a seed bank to preserve the trees for a long time and attended a lot of conferences to tell people more about the trees. At last, she committed suicide at a conference. Powers highlights that her activism involved research, the importance of biodiversity and an urge to establish a harmonious relationship between the natural environment and humans for a sustainable future.

Olivia Vandergriff together with Nick Hoel tries to start a movement to save the trees. She suggests Nick find people like them who will help them in their protest. She says "They're trying to get into the newspapers. It should be easy. If we get close and still can't find them, we'll start our movement" (Powers 252).

Olivia joins a group of environmental conservationists. To preserve the majestic Mimas redwood tree from being felled, she took up residence in the same remarkable tree house nestled within its ancient branches. The foreman comes to threaten her to send her group to jail for three years for criminal trespass but this too does not divert her from the path she was walking in. She tells the loggers to be gentle with the trees and tells the loggers that the trees are gifts. It is clearly shown throughout the novel that tills her last breath. "She moans and the noise leaks away until there's no louder sound than the flames on three sides of them. Her eyes squeeze shut. Then they open, wild. She stares, unsure what she's looking at" (Powers 439). She endeavours to safeguard the trees as if they were her own kin, yet tragically meets her demise in a devastating explosion. Her dedication to environmental activism is evident through her unwavering determination. She not only perseveres until the very end but also motivates others to join her in the cause of preserving trees. Her death leads everybody into despair and separates them from each other.

Upon witnessing the devastation caused to the pine tree beneath which she had found enlightenment, Mimi Ma a Chinese software engineer embarks on a journey towards becoming a fervent activist, ready to sacrifice her entire existence in order to safeguard the precious

trees therefore she joins a protest to save the trees and gets arrested. She together with the other protesters climb the trees to save them from being cut. She suffers a lot and fights with the loggers to stop them. In addition to enduring brutal torture by the police, her friends also suffered greatly. Along with the other characters of the novel she valiantly battles against adversities and wholeheartedly strives to protect the environment.

Dorothy Cazaly together with her husband explores the lives of trees and lets her suburban yard grow wild. She reads the book *The Secret Forest* written by Patricia Westerford and this book changes her perception about the trees growing in her backyard. She learns that every leaf out there connects. This news for her is like “A shocking revelation in a nineteenth-century novel of manners, where one character’s awful secret ripples through every life in the entire village” (Powers 554).

Over time, Dorothy’s bond with the trees transformed. Gradually, she began to cultivate a profound fondness and admiration for the natural world. She did not meet the other activist and other characters personally and her activism is less confrontational in comparison to other characters in the novel. However, she sets an example and serves as a role model for suburban individuals, illustrating how they too can mend their relationship with trees. She let the trees grow in her backyard at their own pace without imposing any human idea upon them. Her approach to activism adds another layer to environmental activism that is woven into the narrative.

Richard Powers shows the lives of the women characters are interconnected in the novel. Their journeys converge around the same idea, the deep connection with the natural world and the urgent need for environmental activism and conservation. He delves deep into the conflicts arising from the narrow-mindedness of commerce in contrast to the imperilled environment. Powers has intertwined the lives of the characters as they face challenges like deforestation, anthropocentrism, and climate change. In the novel, each character diligently progresses and confronts the various obstacles that are imposed upon them,

showcasing their unwavering resolve and determination. Despite their diverse backgrounds, they come together to form a strong interconnected network advocating for the protection of nature.

Conclusion

The role of women in environmental conservation has always been deep-rooted. From working indoors to taking the role of a leader to protect our environment their contribution has been great. They play a crucial role in safeguarding and preserving the environment across different sectors, ranging from local community efforts to shaping impactful policies at the highest level. Their contributions are instrumental in paving the way for a more sustainable future. The female characters of the novel *The Overstory* show the role of women in environmental protests or conservation efforts and the different ethical perspectives on the environment. It also explores the impact of nature on the lives of the characters of the novel and the different ways by which nature influences their thoughts, emotions, and course of action.

Through characters like Patricia Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff, Dorothy Cazaly, and Mimi Ma Richard Powers gives a social message to stand up against excessive anthropogenic activities and an urgent need to advocate for environmental conservation and a harmonious relationship with nature for a more sustainable future. Richard Powers also vividly portrays that the environmental crisis can be bridged only if the anthropocentric attitude of humans becomes 'eco-centric' and mature enough to deal with this global issue with the help of mutual action. The novel not only prompts women but everybody to re-think and re-evaluate our relationship with the environment and inculcates a need for developing a sense of responsibility and environmental consciousness for a better future.

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