Healing the World: An Exploration of Connectivity and Collective Spirit in *The Overstory*

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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of modern ways of living in nature, in the context of *The Overstory* (2018) of Richard Powers. It argues that *The Overstory* sheds light on the ecological disaster that the world is facing now. The crisis has a deeper connection with the market-driven consumerism of capitalistic societies. Under the changing socio-economic structure, the political system and its laws, nature-friendly cultural values have lost their implications. The growing individualism threatens the collective welfare of biodiversity. The radical loss of ecological sensitivity and ethical ways of living severely compromises the delicate and balanced relationship between humans and nature. Therefore, we need ecological healing to revive the collective spirit and strengthen connectivity. To examine the problem represented in the text, the study method is a qualitative approach to eco-critical reading. The analysis of the narratives shows that Richard Powers raises the issue of the ecology of global concern. For this, he crafts the narratives of rebellious characters who defy the authority to save the trees. Under the guidance of ethics and ecological sensitivity, these characters hug the trees and resist felling them. Their campaign, to awaken the sensitivity to nature, calls for the urgency of nature-saving actions. Since we are reeling under the environmental crisis, we must reawaken the ecological sensitivity with eco-friendly culture and environmental ethics. It also demands to neutralization of capitalism's ills and a search for an alternative that embraces sustainable principles and balances human-nature relations.

Keywords: Ecology, Capitalism, Memory, Culture, Ethics, Eco-Critical, Sustainable, Consumerism

The Overstory (2018) by Richard Powers represents the compelling issue of human-nature relations with the aim of self-reflexivity. To review our present relationship with nature in the context of environmental crisis, Powers creates a narrative that raises questions about modern lifestyle and its impact on nature. Reading the narrative from the eco-critical perspective, the paper argues that the world is reeling under an ecological crisis since the forests and the landscape that harbour millions of species are under attack. The rise of this dismal situation, as the characters' narratives reveal, is largely due to the consumerism of capitalism and its growing materialistic culture. The self-centred entrepreneurship with materialistic quest and urban-centric artificial lifestyle of the present age remains indifferent to the collective existence of species. The immediate concern for self-fulfilment at the cost of ecological balance aggravates the sustainability of nature.

The tie between myopic politics and an unsustainable economy bolsters a materialistic consumer culture that compromises with environmental ethics and sustainability. The industrialists use technology that is hostile to nature, like tree-cutting machinery, in the narrative, fails to uphold the principle of sustainability. Nature shaped some cultures, so they valued nature. The loss of the memory of cultures that are close to nature works as one of the elements for the rise of ecological crisis. To heal the harm inflicted on nature, it is worthy to quote Patrick D. Murphy's view of understanding ecology. He stresses, "Ecology can be a means for learning how to live appropriately in a particular place and time, to preserve, contribute to and recycle the ecosystem" (194). So, learning to live with a sensitivity to the preservation of nature and a sense of duty to contribute can arouse hope for a better future. That is unlikely to happen with the argument of the loggers, who see the old trees as money: "These trees are going to die and fall over. They should be harvested while they're ripe, not wasted" (360). Watchman, a forest saver, rejects this consumerist view. He launches the verbal attack, "Great. Let's grind up your grandfather for dinner, while he still has some meat on him" (360). He implies that an attack on the forest is like an attack on your dear grandfather. This degree of attachment to trees reveals the level of consciousness to save nature. The loud voice of Watchman

comes with the message that people like him, cannot remain silent while the existence of living beings comes under threat.

In his interview, Richard Powers shares that he got the inspiration to create the narrative around trees from redwood trees while teaching at Stanford University, USA. He feels attached to the trees, and he maintains this bond between his characters and trees in different contexts. The nine major characters of the narrative, who represent diverse backgrounds, participate in the tree-saving mission. Some of these characters, like Nicholas Hoel and Mimi Ma, inherit tree-saving cultures from their families. It is the legacy of the Hoel family to capture the photographs of the family chestnut tree and hand over the photos to the new generation. The Hoel descendants follow the same tradition. Mimi gets rings with the image of trees from her father. Later, she devotes herself to saving the forest. Their growing awareness of deforestation and climate change encourages the leading characters to launch a tree-saving campaign. As they try to translate the commitment to practice in the forest, they must confront the social, political and legal hurdles. Under the protection of legislation, the forest–cutting industries operate for profit. So, the epicentre of the battle is the forest. It is between tree-cutting timber industries and tree-saving green revolutionaries. It is satirical that tree-cutting is legal and saving becomes illegal. To resist the forest destruction, the green revolutionaries' resort to the violence of burning tree-cutting machinery. Consequently, the authority arrests them and puts them in prison. The tree-saver, Olivia, sacrifices her life for the sake of the forest. The major characters, Nicholas, Mimi, Adam, Ray, Dorothy, Douglas, Neelay and Patricia draw themselves to each other for the cause of the tree. The novelist constructs situations where the seed of a forest-saving spirit develops in the characters.

Loss of Trees, the Metaphors of Diversity

The Overstory glorifies trees for their potentialities. It sets the contexts for different possibilities of symbolic interpretation. Trees hold the potential to transcend visible existence. A man in the narrative calls them, "Forever in motion, these stationary things" (443). Powers probably implies that trees travel miles through the waves of chemistry that emanate from them. Another way to spread is

through insects, birds and animals which carry trees' elements, like seeds and others, to distant places. Otherwise, their motion is through roots that expand to a long distance. But this travel limits itself to certain areas compared to another one that defies the borders. Humans can draw inspiration from trees for resilience and strength to offer something to others through constructive acts.

As a material object, a tree can satisfy our needs for furniture and other tools of necessity. However, its magnitude goes beyond these visible needs. It holds the key to running life through oxygen and multiplies organisms by offering shelter and food. As needed, it assumes different roles. Adam, a psychologist in the narrative, examines its usefulness, "The fruit flesh has a smell that curdles thought; pulp kills even drug-resistant bacteria. The fan-shaped leaves with their radiating veins are said to cure the sickness of forgetting" (551). These are but a few known worldly things of trees. What about the unknown?

Trees' outer mortality or decay becomes illusive when their underground system, roots, remain alive for thousands of years. So, a tree becomes the text of history. For instance, the tree-sitters settle in the ancient giant tree, Mimas, for months to save it from the tree-loggers. This tree bears the memory of hundreds of years. So, the loss of this historical text, the tree of magnitude, is the loss of memory metaphorically.

Neelay Mehta, a child of the Indian diaspora living in the USA, who breaks his spinal cord falling from an oak tree, creates video games. He employs his creative potential to fulfil his wishes of covering the empirical world with greenery. He meets his wishes in the virtual world of gaming. Otherwise, they remain dry in reality. His virtual forest can flourish much faster than an empirical forest. Mehta's ideal green project gets its foothold in his creativity. His father ignites his curiosity to plunge into the world of exploration and possibilities. The father does so with an example of a seed, "You, see? If Vishnu can put one of these giant figs into a seed this big . . . Just think what we might fit into our machine" (117). He refers to Vishnu as the God of Hindus. So, the computer, a machine in the hand of Neelay, can give rise to the magic of metaphoric trees, which can defy the empirical barriers to their growth and challenge the impact of time.

Trees also transcend the physical sphere to connect with spirituality regarding cultural practices. Powers draws instances from myths and cultures to evidence the supernatural dimension of trees. Both the Gods and humans transform into trees. In Greek mythology, Daphne transforms into a bay laurel to avoid the catch and harm from the God Apollo. Similarly, Apollo converts a boy, Cyparissus, into a cypress, a tree (147). In the context of Hindu societies, they worship tulsi/basil as an incarnation of Lakshmi, the Goddess. So, a basil embodies the Goddess. Deity transforms into a plant. And a specific plant becomes a deity for the worshippers. Trees' magnitude defies the disciplinary borders since its discourse spreads across Science and Humanities, including spirituality. With limited knowledge, one misses the totality of appreciation of trees. When we lose the element of such value, how do we compensate with money or commodity? In the language of metaphor, if we choose such an alternative, we exchange our existence with the trifle toys of short-term pleasure.

Culture, Political Economy and Ecological Crisis

In the context of *The Overstory*, the ecological crisis is the outcome of the political economy and the loss of eco-friendly culture. As politics shapes the mode of economy, the economy also structures the political system. So, the interaction between politics and economy offers the possibilities for the people to practice cultures, and politics and engage in economic activities. The social mechanism, under the regulation of laws, that the government implements is a part of politics. So, politics formulates economic policies and programs. And culture cannot remain untouched by the interactions between them. Therefore, it is essential to examine the intersection of politics, economy and culture.

The author paints a dismal picture of human-nature relations as the narrative unfolds the growing clash between the eco-savers and the government and industries regarding forests. The modern American lifestyle is hostile to the sustainability of nature as the characters can convince a limited number of people to protest tree cutting. The majority of Americans do not show concerns about ecological welfare. Individual comfort undermines the collective good. Observing the unhealthy lifestyle, Adam Appich critiques, "Human-kind is deeply ill. The species won't last long" (70). The illness of humanity emerges from its greed for prosperity and comfort and kills the

sensitivity to the delicacy of nature. The ailment fails to give meaning in isolation as it is deeply rooted in cultural degeneration. The culture that gave space to nature no longer remains the same as it comes under the pressure of a capitalistic economy. However, Adam sees the possibility of recovery of collective lives through our intelligence. The interconnectedness of species can be reawakened if human intelligence works in constructive ways. The role of science and technology becomes instrumental in the nature-saving mission as it holds the potential to explore sustainability. The reviewer, Wai Chee Dimock, sees the possibility of survival of the unfit also if we develop a collective spirit (144). Even the weak species can survive in the world if they get support from other species. It questions Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest. The chain of connectivity does not differentiate between fit and unfit but binds them together so that they become one or part of a totality. So, collective existence offers the possibility of individual survival, which becomes impossible in isolation.

Patricia Westerford also observes that trees are in trouble. The forests of the world are meeting the blight of human greed (275). If human greed works to threaten the existence of trees, people should be self-reflective to be aware of the underlying cause of their suffering and other species. To address the present ecological crisis, Patricia underscores the necessity of understanding ecological connectivity and collective spirit. She argues, "There are no individuals in a forest, no separate events" (273). All the elements of nature are interconnected and shape one another. So, individual existence is not individual as it relies on a larger mechanism of existence. For Jonathan Damery, the forest is a metaphor that incorporates humans also. The affinity of characters with trees reflects this (33). The modern cultures that differentiate themselves in binary relation to nature claim that it is the culture that teaches people how to utilize nature for their benefit. This perspective to understand nature in opposition to culture is faulty as it fails to examine the intricacies between nature and culture. Jhan Hochman also agrees that connections exist between nature and culture. However, he argues that nature and culture should not be brought together forcefully by naturalizing culture and vice versa. If they do so, more harm is done to nature than to culture (192). He underscores that humans

should give independent status to nature and not impose anthropocentric views on it. He sounds logical. However, the present researcher views that to address the present ecological crisis, it is necessary to value the role of nature in shaping the culture. As we examine human nature relations, the nature-culture interaction needs attention. So, if trees are in trouble, humans remain no exception because they are parts of an interconnected existence.

The power of capitalism is that it creates desires for commodities and money. The motivation for luxury promotes individualism. Consequently, the culture that implants the values of collective welfare of both humans and non-humans gets eroded. Against the capitalistic tendency of ownership, Mimi Ma comments, "Money you lose by slowing down is always more important than the money you've already made" (306). The spell of capitalism is that it triggers a quest for money; the quest never gets satisfied. The desire for more undermines how much someone has already earned. Mimi sounds true in her view that present earnings are more important than previously earned. This is the driving force that converts every resource of nature into money. The principle of fulfilling the needs with sustainability contradicts the money-making formula of capitalism. In the narrative, the timber industries embrace this formula. Their aggressive operation of tree-cutting day and night illustrates how serious is their business for money. As they meet resistance from the tree-savers, the industries lament the growing loss and try to justify the act of cutting as a part of investment under legal provisions. These industries have ties with the government as they contribute to jobs and the economy. More importantly, they pay the taxes and the government does not want to lose the income by changing the policy and laws to protect forests. Seeing this scenario, Adam becomes rebellious and expresses his commitment to recovery, "Justice for ninety-nine percent. The jailing of financial traitors and thieves. An eruption of fairness and decency on all continents. The overthrow of capitalism. A happiness not born of rape and greed" (532). Adam argues that one percent of rich people who reap the benefits of investments are causing injustice to ninety-nine percent. He wants people to overthrow capitalism as it promotes greed. He seeks happiness that emanates from selflessness. His choice of words: traitors, thieves, rape and greed, to refer to the actions of capitalist

evidences how harshly he critiques the nature-harming acts of industries. So, what the tree-savers are fighting for is justice. And justice is not only for humans but also for every species on the planet. Since this battle is the battle for the existence of millions of species, the green revolutionaries hold the right to raise their voice for lives and they uphold the moral principles to speak for all living species.

Richard Powers critiques the rationality of utilizing nature for the sake of humans. For Bradford Morrow and Richard Powers, the essence of the narrative is a rejection of human exceptionalism (59). They interpret *The Overstory* with the view of accepting all the elements of nature that make human existence possible. So, they deny the assumption that humans are more important than others. To substantiate such an assumption, Powers illustrates the anthropocentric view of Immanuel Kant, "All exists merely as a means to an end. That end is man" (314). So, Kant takes nature for granted for the use of privileged humans. His view overlooks the existence of non-human species. This view compromises with the ethics and duty of humanity to nature. Such a perspective promotes consumerism that is fatal to ecological sensitivity. The rationality that compromises with the collective welfare fails to offer a long-lasting solution to the problem that the world is facing now.

The philosophies and logic that serve the interests of humans at the cost of ecological balance are detrimental to humanity itself as we cannot imagine human existence and happiness in isolation. For instance, Powers writes, "The hottest year ever measured comes and goes … almost every one of them among the hottest in recorded history" (467). The issues of climate change and global warming are the consequences of human-centred activities that overlook the ethics of sustainability. The timber industries, like Humboldt, make money out of trees. As represented in the narrative, the money-making businesses fall short of ethics that balance the individual interests and collective welfare of species. When both politics and business operate without ethics, they compromise with the fundamental ground for life. So, in the narrative, neither the government nor the timber industries heed the concerns of the tree-savers. They simply see trees as commodities for the transaction and

fail to perceive that a tree harbours thousands of species, seen and unseen. But Patricia can examine its potentiality. She claims, "A dead tree is an infinite hotel" (353). What a dead tree can offer is beyond general comprehension. The business industries lack this sensitivity or they become insensitive purposefully so that money-making mantras work without ethics. The timber industries follow the laws, but the laws are hostile to nature. So, the problems go beyond industries. They extend to the government and its political system: laws and cultures that are under the influence of consumerism. To change this mode of living, we need alternatives that are healthier for humans and nature. The novelist envisions such alternatives. The roles of the characters and their expressions support environmental justice. Olivia discloses her project to her father, "The most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help" (211). These wondrous products are trees. She decides to act as a volunteer for the great cause of saving them. She commits to fighting for the justice of millions of species. Olivia sacrifices her life while saving the forest. Another character, a tree researcher, Patricia, reveals unknown facts about the forest. Her in-depth knowledge, supported by scientific evidence, prepares a ground to justify her claim that trees have connections and can communicate with each other (159). As the narrative revolves around the tree-saving characters and their mission, Powers creates a situation where biodiversity speaks in diverse languages. However, they succeed in communicating with each other due to interconnectedness. Or, nature's species understand its language.

Culture as a memory survives over generations. In The Overstory, memory keeps some human-nature relations alive. For instance, Jorgen Hoel from Norway settles in Iowa, USA. He plants six chestnuts on his farm, around which no trees are visible. Hoel nurtures the trees with this thought, "One day, my children will shake the trunks and eat for free" (7). Out of them, three chestnuts survive. As they grow massive, the Hoel farm gets recognition for chestnuts. They get high value. Jorgen dies but the legacy of the protection of chestnuts transfers to his son, John, who preserves their memory in photography. Taking photos of chestnuts for future use has become a family tradition. So, over the generations, the pile of photographs keeps the memory of chestnuts alive. The legacy of preserving

trees makes space in the mind of young Nicholas Hoel. He becomes a part of the tree-saving campaign. It is his family culture that associates him with trees. And he discharges his obligation with love and sincerity. This illustration evidences that human-nature relations can develop in the form of culture. And revival of such culture offers the possibility of restoring the spirit of respecting nature. Patricia Westerford possesses such spirit. As a researcher on trees for years, she aligns herself with them. Her happiness and existence lie in them. So, she sets a mission of collecting seeds of rare species of plants to save them from extinction. The seeds themselves are the in-built memory of trees as they hold the potential to grow into immense trees. Patricia's efforts can radiate inspiration and be a memory for the new generations to follow the tree-saving culture. Thus, the memory of culture is one way to revive the previous healthy relations between humans and nature.

Ancient cultures developed with nature. People learnt the key strategies of survival from nature. So, the development of nature-friendly culture paved the way for the balance of human-nature relations. In this relation, humans are sensitive to the delicacy of ecological connectivity and use the resources as per their genuine needs, unlike the consumerist culture. In the study of myths, Claude Levi-Strauss brings structuralism in harmony with nature. He defends how structuralism does not limit itself to abstractions, rather well-grounded on reality as it teaches people to love and respect nature and its living beings. With this approach, we can better understand living species and they are the sources of aesthetic pleasure for humans from the beginning (134). Traditional societies worship nature, such as rivers, trees, animals, and land. For instance, there are tree-worshiping cultures globally: oak in Britain, kapos in Mayan, sycamore in Egypt and ginkgo in China (269). Others, in Nepal and India, Bar, Pipal and Tulasi (basil) are worshipped by people as deities. The tree-worshippers do not destroy them for the sake of money. The Chipko movement of the 1970s in India is another example of conservation efforts by women against the commercial logging of forests. Such efforts are crucial to protect the ecosystem. However, the governments mercilessly crush them in the interest of capitalism. Governments fail to uphold environmental ethics due to their immediate concerns about meeting the economic needs of the people. As Powers presents in the American

context, the way timber industries operate is hostile to nature but beneficial for a capitalistic economy. Populist politics undermines the principle of sustainable economy and development.

Powers draws attention towards the common origin of humans and plants. Through Patricia, he foregrounds the base of common existence. She reads from The Secret Forest, "You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor . . . that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes. . ." (166). The idea of common origin reminds us that we share so much with trees. Patricia further argues that we have shaped the forests, and they shaped us even before we evolved into *Homo Sapiens* (567).

As tree-cutting industries run their business aggressively, the peaceful protest turns into violence. The timber industries assault even the rare, valuable, and very old chestnuts. The slogan sounds true to their acts, "This State Supports Timber: Timber Supports This State" (357). The collusion between the state and industries makes it hard for the green savers to fight. So, the protestors resort to the violence of arson to destroy the timber-cutting machinery. For that act, they are charged with domestic terrorism. As the American federal government fails to address their demands of saving the forest through the new legislation, it tries to brush them aside in the name of terrorism. Rather than calling protesters for negotiation to end the protest, the government tags them as terrorists so that it can go against them. The tree-savers get long-term imprisonment. The ending of the narrative does not arouse optimism to resolve the crisis peacefully but indicates that nature protectors should be ready to face the challenges. They may have to sacrifice personally and socially to exert pressure on the political machinery for the anticipated change.

The American government makes no effort, though the tree-savers continuously protest tree-felling. On top of that, the court decides against Douglas who plants fifty thousand trees alone. As he cannot bear to see the trees being cut, he tries to hinder the drive. Consequently, the court charges him, "The defendant obstructed a job being done by a tree-cutting company on city orders in the dead of the night" (253). Douglas gets a penalty for stopping the cutting business. Ironically, this is the reward for saving nature. As the state machinery implements the so-called laws, the violators have to

pay the cost. The state does not act as the sensitive apparatus to differentiate the protest of a good cause from a bad one. Therefore, it makes the actors serve the prison as terrorists since they uphold the noble cause of saving the ecosystem. The state authority puts Adam, the professor of psychology, and his friends behind bars.

The tree-savers critique the capitalistic culture that subdues nature and they question individualism that undermines connectivity and the collective spirit. Seeing nature from the perspective of satisfying personal greed, only invites the ecological catastrophe. So, Patricia reads from a book, "No one sees trees. We see fruit, we see nuts, we see wood. . . we see a cash crop. But trees—trees are invisible" (529). This consumerist perspective overshadows the existence of a tree in totality. The slogan, "Control kills/ connection heals," questions such perspective. The slogan means that individual ownership of resources is against the collective well-being. It underscores the necessity of understanding the importance of connectivity among the species to heal the ecological wound.

Conclusion

The present study stresses to review of our ways of living as it questions whether the economic mode of capitalism contributes to a sustainable economy and development. After examination of the connection between politics, economy, and culture in the narrative, it uncovers that without ethics in politics and business, we may amass property and add facilities but weaken the sustainability of nature. The declining forest and issue of climate change in the narrative expose the vulnerability of ways of living. So, to heal the impairment, what are the alternatives? The revival of the memory of nature-friendly culture, ethical consumption to satisfy genuine needs, and awareness of collective well-being and connectivity among the species of the world, contribute to the balance of human-nature relations. Ethical politics to craft nature-friendly laws and practice of culture with ecological sensitivity, as Patricia sees a dead tree as an infinite hotel, can contribute to recovering the loss and resolving the present ecological crisis.

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