



A Merciless Mother: Nature Paying Back in Richard Power's *The Overstory*

Sibgha Tanveer

Mphil Scholar, The University of Lahore, Sargodha
someone_8912@yahoo.com

Maryam Javed

Lecturer in English, The University of Lahore, Sargodha
maryam.javed@ell.uol.edu.pk

Abstract

The current study deals with the interdependency between human and the non-human world in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*. It further explicates the lack of coherence between human and non-human environment. One of the basic objectives of this research is to study human behavior with respect to his relation to nature and the ecosystem. The eco-critical analysis of any of the narratives reveals the attitude of Nature towards mankind. The researchers contend that nature now has turned into a Retaliator while formerly being treated badly in the hands of a man. Therefore, it takes revenge in the form of Natural disaster and brings epidemics like Covid-19. The eco-critical perspective of the text leads to comprehend the contemporary set-up of environment and makes Man understand what he needs to associate that goes side by side. The present study suggests new research for further understanding and evaluation about the significance of the non-human world and how to overcome the upcoming environmental issues such as famines, deforestation, droughts, global warming etc.

Keywords: interdependency, pandemic (Corona Virus), human & non-human world

1. Introduction

Nowadays, when the world is becoming a global village and different fields of studies have become an interdisciplinary hub, the interdependency of nature and other fields of studies are evident and doubtless. Therefore, the relationship of nature with literature is an unbreakable connection. The human and non-human world collaborates to coexist and act respectively. The environment and the Man have a connection just as the connection of a mother with her children. Nature behaves as a mother and the human beings as soiled children. The more Man cares about his surrounding the more nature reacts back to him. If man tries to behave destructively nature would take revenge and destroy the very existence of man in reaction.

The current scenario of pandemic is also giving the same notion. It entails the story of the very relationship between nature and its habitants. The present research also elucidates the fact that human and nature react towards each other in the same manner. The man when takes care of nature, it provides a serene horizon of life to him and when he tries to destruct his environments, it simply reacts in the most rebellious way. As written in *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell, in chapter three *Representing the Environment* he alludes to Barry Lopez's Landscapes and Narrative:

I think of two landscapes___ one outside the self, the other within. The external landscape is the one we see___ not only the line and the color of the land and its shading at different times of the day, but also its plants and animals in season, its weather, its geology, the record of its climate and evolution . . . one learns a landscape finally not by knowing the



name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationship in it---like that between the sparrow and the twig. . .

The second landscape I think of is an interior one, a kind of projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape . . . the speculations, institutions and formal ideas we refer to as “mind” are a set of relationships in the interior landscape with purpose and order . . .

The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of exterior landscape; the shape of the individual is affected by land as it is by genes. (Buell, 1995, p.83)

The eco-critical approach makes it easier to the readers and future researchers to identify the evident connection between nature and human beings. They take the literary works and analyze the work with eco-centric perspective that is their particular emphasis is on the representation of the natural world. This opens up a new horizon of catching up the significance of the connection between the outer worlds with the inner world of a self of a person.

The similar relationship of nature with the lives of different characters in Richard Power's *The Overstory* is appreciated. The story involves the lives of nine different people from different fields of life. They share a similar connection among them that is built up by nature particularly the trees. They finally got to get together to save nature. They stand up for the protection of the tress against deforestation in the story. Some of them suffer different kinds of anxieties and misdirection of their goals when they ignore the silent messages from the trees.

1.1. Background of the Study

The present research takes an eco-critical theory to analyze decadent features of nature particularly of trees responsible for rejuvenation and regeneration in *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. Moreover, the current scenario of pandemic is deliberately an undoubted answer to what is written in Power's novel *The Overstory*. The research talks about how nature takes revenge and strikes back when there occurs an imbalance in the ecosystem which is been built on certain rules of nature. As it is seen in the present condition of the world that the nature is destroyed by violating the rules set by it and consequently the human race has to suffer from Corona virus. An Eco-criticism is a lens through which the striking features of Nature are discussed. This work discusses the very powers of Nature specifically trees providing shelter, food, oxygen and shadow for even after the death approaches man. In the current pandemic scenario, mankind is be confined to the four walls of his house which is evident in the story of two of the characters of *The Overstory*; Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Brinkman. Moreover, nature not only strikes back in a violent way rather it also reminds mankind that death is a reality for him but for rejuvenation Nature utilized death and decadence.

1.2. Research Questions

- 1) What are the instances of Nature behaving mercilessly to pay Man back?

2. Research Methodology

To carry out this work, the researcher adopted the qualitative method of analyzing this research work. There is involved a closed textual reading of the novel by Power's *The Overstory*. The novel is taken as a primary data source. Textual evidences will be extracted to reach the findings as data analysis. The data follows the eco-critical perspective of literature according to Lawrence Buell. Moreover, textual evidences and reviews are taken as evidence to justify my work. As we are all aware of the fact that the world is going through consecutive waves of pandemic, and it is taken as one of the evidence as nature strikes back.



3. Theoretical Framework

For the present research, the researcher has chosen *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* the work of Cheryll Glotfelty and *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell. Both the theorists have talked about the interdependency of nature with human beings. The connection is obvious between the two entities. Moreover, the concept Nature Strikes Back has been amalgamated in the present research to advocate the current scenario of the world. Cheryll Glotfelty is the first acknowledged founder in USA who has started this movement of talking about environment and human beings. She also co-founded the ASLE (the association of Literature and Environment). ASLE also has its own 'house journal' named ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment). Therefore, this is an American Eco criticism striving to made ways for its set of assumptions, procedure, and doctrines.

4. Literature Review

Ali (2020) identified the problem of human violent approach towards Nature. He says that human beings are taking the advantage of Nature without providing the same kind of improvement to the Natural world. He tries to shift our attention to the relationship of man with his surroundings. He expresses that Nature is not the *Other* rather we are a part of it. It's necessary to act for the survival of the green world that is the main cause of human subsistence on this planet earth before the world turns into a catastrophe. He suggests that human beings should turn to the fact that present outbreak of COVID-19 is a threat to the contemporary social and economic order. Moreover, it's necessary for human confidence. He states:

“From critical theory studies we get to learn that disasters have social meaning, and they impact human conception of the world on both micro (psychological) and macro level (socio-political). For example in 18th century the Lisbon Earthquake (1755) provoked the western world towards crude materialism and challenged the providential optimism. Similarly, the current outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic is also challenging the contemporary corporate social and economic order and its related human confidence”. (Ali, 2020)

He says that this is one of the ways that nature communicates with us and reminds us how we are part of it although people take such happenings as wrath of God. He states:

“In other words, such catastrophic events have the ability of destroying the ongoing accepted notions about the world. Nevertheless, a proper understanding of such crises is to consider it as Nature's intervention or presence”. (Ali 2020)

Mandal (2018) examined the perspective of postcolonial eco-criticism in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. She expresses the dangers of overpowering actions of mankind over nature. These will lead the impending dangers mankind will suffer in the future. She recommends the lives of people in accordance with nature and caters upon the facts of costly living. She tries to decode the ecological imperialism in the First World. She points out some of the unethical modernization which parts in changing the actual form and shape of lower species, and comments:

Two bulls live in the service lane outside my flat. In the daytime, they appear quite normal but at night they grow tall... when they piss, they lift their legs like dogs... These days one is never sure whether a bull is a dog, or an ear of corn is actually a leg of pork or a beef steak. But perhaps this is the path of genuine modernity? (p. 299)



Roy reveals that the environmental destruction of Euro-American ideology of development which is a disguised form of imperialism and neo-colonialism.

Herdiana (2018) examined the ability of nature to heal and protect the physical and mental health of children in *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. He explores the consequences of children interacting with nature. He finds out how a child is transitioned from illness to wellness. The powerful positive impact of nature on human health is prominent in each event of the narrative. Herdiana employed the eco-critical theory in order to prove that how much it is benefitting for mankind to be in touch with nature. The interdependency of human over nature is necessary for improvement of the whole humanity.

Romadhon (2011) extracts evidences from James Cameron's film *Avatar* (2009) about Nature's behavior towards its habitants. He entails in his essay that there is an inter-relational connection between human and Nature. Nature reacts the way man reacts to her. It heals when it's been taken care of, and it destroys when it falls maltreated in the hands of man. In his article *An analysis of environmental issues using ecocriticism in James Cameron's film avatar*, he states:

The film entitled *Avatar* describes the various relationship of nature with its varied characters; human and non-human. Nature, in this film, conceives both as a hospitable and hostile force depend on how characters treat it. This reveals that each different character has also different opinion about nature that lead into different attitude toward it. The arrogances of human being, that consider nature as an object to explore, bring them to be apart from the rest of nature. On the other hand, the nonhuman creatures and a number of human represent as a part of nature and live in harmony with it because they respect it. (Romadhon, 2011)

Not only the present time but nineteenth century has novel *Frankenstein* had also an eco-critical view. Mary Shelley explores the crisis of environmental change in her novel when industrialization was just at its beginning. Phillips (2006) examines the 19th century novel *Frankenstein* through the lens of eco-criticism. He discovers that even the idea of writing the novel has been conceived on the stormy night on Lake Geneva at Villa Diodati. It was the month of June when the weather was turning stormy due to the erosion of Indonesian volcano. This results in crop failure, starvation and other societal riots. The novel reveals underlying themes of environmental changes resulted in crisis of Natural World. Phillips writes: "rather than representing the horrors of the Industrial Revolution, Victor Frankenstein's monster symbolizes the capacity of nature to instigate environmental crisis of biblical proportions." (Phillips, 2006)

Therefore, the role of non-human existence plays an integral part of events happen in the human world. May it be the undertakings about the outburst of natural phenomena, or changes on the individual or societal level?

The eco-critical critics talks about how nature works with the human world. There is this uniformity between the two entities that holds them together to exist in harmony and balance. Lawrence Buell pens down the fact that both human and non-human world coexists and, in his book, *The Environmental Imagination* he quotes Carolyn Porter as: "we confront a virtually horizon less discursive field in which ...the traditional boundaries between the literary and the extra literary have faded" (Buell, 1995, p.85).



Powers intends to emphasize on the co-relationship of human beings with its non-human environment. In the preface of *The Overstory* he introduces the interdependency of nature and mankind as:

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, p.4)

A chorus of living wood sings to the woman: if your mind were only a slightly greener thing, we'd drown you in meaning." (Powers, p.4)

These lines expound how the non-human world goes side by side with the human world. The natural world is very much in collaboration with the world of machines and human beings. The balance is evidently with the support of Natural world. The imbalance may lead us to the great extent of environmental apocalypticism. The ecological cycle may destruct with the modernized cause of disproportion in the industrialized world. Moreover, it's a necessary take to practice humanity which is impossible without taking care of our environment or stay apart from the non-human surroundings. Powers quote this fact in a narrative aptitude in the first portion Nicholas Hoel as: "Old trees are our parents, and our parents' parents, perchance. If you would learn the secret of Nature, you must practice more humanity" (Powers, p.5).

The researcher finds once in a while different evidences from the text to support the idea of interdependency of Man and Nature. The co-existent ongoing phenomenon is the only ways to the possible equilibrate in the environment. For instance, growth goes side by side in both the human and the non-human world. "When it's time to plant, Vi is pregnant. Their firstborn dies in infancy, killed by a thing that doesn't yet have a name. One of the six chestnut fails to sprout" (Powers, pp.6.7).

Thus, both beings go hand in hand with the exposition of the work which is an evident example of how interdependent are the two entities. It's a new perspective to analyze text with an eco-centric approach.

5. A Reflection on Approaching Pandemic in Power's *The Overstory*

The Overstory by Richard Powers is a novel published in 2018 and won the title for 'The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction' in 2019. The novel includes nine main characters and every one of them has his/her autonomous role in their respective aspect of life. They all gather up for a solo purpose of saving the life of redwoods. Although all these nine people do not know each other but there is one unique connection between them is trees. All of them have their personal connection with nature (trees) which speak to them and connect with them with their special power. The connection illustrates the humanlike nature of trees and the way they are in connection with each other. Belonging to different disciplines of life doesn't bring them peace and tranquility until they find their association with trees.

The technique of personification employed by writers enables them to associate human desires, sentiments, emotions, human traits, and qualities to the non-living or living elements, often including the speeches or words uttered and gestures of the element or object that is personified. Powers frequently employed this technique of personification to aware his readers to find the worlds of 'Trees' identical to their world. If this notion is true then there is a relationship between person and trees which is not just a connection but more than that as stated in his work by Powers;



“He feels he is casting rocks at a sentient being, with a duller sense than his own, yet still a blood relation. Old trees are our parents, and our parents’ parents. If you would learn the secrets of Nature, you must practice more humanity....” (Powers, 2018, p. 5).

The extract comprehensively gives two ideas of how personhood of nature implies deep connection of man and nature precisely with ‘Trees’ in Powers’ work. The relationship is of father-son somehow. The connection doesn’t only exist in the ecosystem but it’s more like a family system. It entails all about the ancestry. Moreover, if the relationship is accepted by both particularly by human beings there will be more humanity on earth and less destruction towards nature. Buell has also added some lines from Thoreau’s *Walden*. Buell talks about how intensely Thoreau bonded himself with the pond in *Walden*. He takes examples from Thoreau’s work and has quoted as:

“He writes of it as his “neighbor”, (*Wa* 86) his great bed-fellow (272), his soul-mate in its isolation, himself feeling “no more lonely” than it: “What company has that lonely lake, I pray?” (137). Repeatedly he imagines Walden as a living thing. The pond is a hermit (194), a squaw (295), an eye, an iris (186, 176)” (Buell, 1995, p. 208).

Buell also claims that personifying this planet and its elements supports Lovelock to construct a bridge between ecology and ethics. The connection helps to make the masses aware of the living feature and its powers as living beings on earth.

Moreover, the novel is replete with a lot of personifying features of Nature. Among them, there is a quality of nature to give birth and nurture. That’s why many of the writers, poets and literary figures entitled Nature as Mother Nature. Like a mother, like a maternal existence it nourishes its children and provide for them. It gives life to not only its own race but also it helps the other species including human beings to survive on this planet earth. This quality of reproductive system is stated in the book by placing the planting season parallel to Vi’s pregnancy. The firstborn Child of the Hoel’s family died equivalent to which one of the six chestnuts also fails to sprout too. Nature is not only behaving as human beings but also keeps itself assimilated with them. The family suffers the loss so does the chestnut. With the passage of time the character Hoel has three children and a chestnut grove too. (Powers, 2018, para. 4)

Along with the same physical potentials, the trees share abstract ideas of emotion such as grief, mirth, happiness, anger, convulsion, and contempt. Moreover, the quality of guidance and supervision is another empowering feature of trees. Nature provides guard to the living as well as to the dead too. When Hoel’s father dies he buries him under the same tree he planted himself. The tree casts shade like a shelter from rain and the savageness of nature in order to keep its planter under the same generosity it has gathered from him. It has the quality of being indebted and obliged. It never forgets and always be thankful to those who favors it. That’s why the Chestnut Tree stays thankful towards his planter even after his death. *The Overstory* hides every now and then messages to its readers about why we should save nature. Our environment needs to be preserved reciprocal to the fact that we are saving ourselves.

A tree or plant if it is a living being has the same developmental stage of growth. A child born after the mother carries him/her in her womb for fix duration and gives birth at the time when he gets ready to face the world. Similarly, a plant or a tree has been sown by its farmer or planter under the earth where the earth takes care of the seedlings as a fetus and helps to nourish it in a big tree or a fruitful plant. How beautifully nature accompanies with the human existence in the same



way. But unfortunately, mankind is ignorant of his surroundings and consciously and unconsciously confounds his environment and hurts the Mother Nature.

As a growing child mother keeps a memory track of her child by taking pictures and by telling stories. Likewise, the Hoel family has this practice of taking pictures of their sentinel trees after every season to know how much it has changed and notify the developmental stages of the chestnut. The tree also keeps the same track as human beings from its childhood to adolescence, stepping into the stage of maturity and leads itself to old age and leaving the wisdom with its remnants. The life span has the history, and it must be transferred from one generation to another which is why John Hoel promises himself to go with the family's old practice of taking pictures of the Chestnut Tree.

Powers dedicated the second chapter to Mimi Ma. She is an engineer and the daughter of Chinese immigrant. The father who is saving the family treasure and misfortune from the time his father alarms him of the upcoming industrial arrival and which would probably wipe out the very history of the family, is finally handing over the treasure the three rings to his daughter Ma.

Man finds himself the only center and end of this universe and he takes his surroundings as a docile entity to him. This leads him to the imprudent apex of ignorance. Subsequently he falls in the hands of natural castigations similar to casualties by droughts, famines, global warming, flooding, soil erosion, air pollution and to the very prominent pandemic (corona Virus) the world is facing currently. There is less amount of oxygen and industrialization brings about and outburst of air pollution. This is the foremost cause of diseases like air congestion, asthma, respiratory issues and bronchitis.

The world is going through a lockdown where people distanced themselves with the outer world. Man, who finds himself he ends and the center is confined to the four walls of his house. Man is at fault, and it is stated by Powers as: "It's a grand, luxurious act of self-deceit, an outright lie, that claim of Kant's: As far as non-humans are concerned, we have no direct duties. All exists merely as a means to an end. That end is man" (Powers, p. 314).

Shahzad Ali validates the research's yielding findings that man is at great fault when he thinks that he is the center and everything around him is subservient to him and his practices. In his article *Coronavirus Pandemic: Nature Strikes Back* he emphasizes on the fact that the relationship between nature and its habitants is wrongly taken as 'Human' vs. 'Nature'. He states that; "the problem with the dichotomy of Nature versus human is that we are treating Nature as an unanticipated 'other' and therefore consider 'Nature' alien to our existence and progress" (Ali, 2020).

Rather he believes on the Japanese religious belief that Nature is a divine being which must be worshipped to maintain the progress and prosperity of its inhabitants. The framework Eco-criticism also emphasizes on this notion that Nature should be taken as an existence which is responsible for the existence of mankind not the human is responsible for the existence of his environment.

A glimpse to the lockdown situation is perceived in the part of Dorothy and Ray Brinkman. The couple has promised to plant anything on their yearly wedding anniversary to compensate the inefficiency of childlessness. But for some reason they forget to perform the ritual. As stated; "For some reason, when their anniversary comes, the Brinkmans again forget to plant anything." (Powers, p. 263)



Consequently, the couple dives into the depths of infuriation towards each other. At the brink of separation Ray Brinkman suffers a stroke and confines to bed. He loses the ability to speak. His wife decides to stay with him and read aloud to him to put him at calm. This gives her reason to not to leave him against her former decision. The point is validated through Powers' own words in an interview he has given to GQs Brett Martin. In the story, the couple learns to stay inside the silver yard visible from his bedroom window and they learn to live according to Tree-Time. They alter into their new consciousness, and they focus on a tiny patch of natural world. The writer confirms to the source that the piece is a Religious Conversion. But in the current wave of pandemic, he also throws light and says:

We've been hypnotized by this idea that we won the battle against nature, that the only modern story left—the only dramatic and interesting story—is our battle with ourselves, with each other, and with our inner demons. That's what literature has become. The coronavirus is just a very rapid refutation of this idea that we live in a completely human-moderated, human-mastered, human-controlled world, and that all the stories will basically be about ourselves. We haven't even begun to see the ways in which that notion is going to fall apart in the years ahead. We've gotten a pretty good taste of it but, you know when this virus goes, there's going to be another one. In order for literature to understand who we are, how we got here, and where we're going, how to survive sheltering in place will be the smaller part of the question. The larger part is how to incorporate the reality of this moment into the story we're telling about ourselves and our place here. (Powers, 2020)

Thus, there is a dire need to understand and comprehend Nature as a living being and without its existence the survival of mankind is impossible. The current situation is one of the reasons that mankind takes the non-human environment as a commodity. But Powers says in *The Overstory* that: “she remembers the Buddha's words: A tree is a wondrous thing that shelters, feeds, and protects all living things. It even offers shade to the axmen who destroy it. And with those words, she has her book's end” (Powers, 2018).

Mankind must remember the statement mentioned above by one of the characters of *The Overstory* Patricia to attain his salvation.

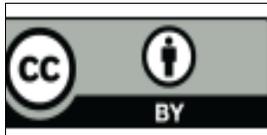
Conclusion

The study has explored the regard for Nature been forgotten by the human world and now Nature is set on taking revenge from the human world. Powers through the characters in his narrative *The Overstory* (2018) expounds the need of present situation of the world. He clarifies the very connection of man with his surrounding significant existence indispensable for his safe future and survival. The paper ponders over some of the reasons of how and why nature strikes back in retaliation to its inhabitants ignorant of its existence. Lack of coherence between man and his surrounding leads the world to its worse that is evident in the shape of pandemic. This study can be helpful not only in the field of literature but environmental studies too. Those set to serve nature can find this novel an inspiration and this research a true reflection of their objectives.



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