



Advance Social Science Archive Journal

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol.3 No.1, January-March, 2025. Page No. 1056-1066

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



DECIPHERING THE CANOPY: TREES AND THEIR ASSERTIVE ECHOES IN THE OVERSTORY

Hani Ikram

MS English literature student at International Islamic University Islamabad Pakistan

Email: haniikramkashani@gmail.com

Khamsa Qasim

Lecturer at International Islamic University Islamabad Pakistan

Email: khamsaqasim@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Richard Powers's novel *The Overstory* with specific reference to challenging traditional forms of narration. I argue that Powers's novel challenges anthropocentric biases in narration by centralizing trees in his text and advocating eco-consciousness. However, the novel provides a significant shift in human-centric narration by acknowledging the interconnectedness and interdependence of human and non-human entities. Drawing upon the conceptual horizons of the material ecocriticism, this paper suggests that matter is not passive rather, it's a site from where meanings can be generated and conveyed, and stories can be told. It makes us rethink the question of agency, interconnectedness, and narrativity. I will deploy material-discursive practices and intra-action put forward by Karen Barad and semiotic-materiality being co-constituted by Donna Haraway to address the activeness of matter in overall environmental operations. Hence, this paper argues that materials convey meanings, they are the co-participants of humans in the physical world, and they can bring a transformative shift through their meaningful existence.

Keywords: *The Overstory*, centralization of trees, anthropocentrism, material ecocriticism, Karen Barad and Donna Haraway.

Introduction

Human activities have drastically changed the course of the ecosystem, and all such activities are firmly rooted under the rigid grounds of anthropocentrism. The anthropocentric world order disrupted the natural system of coexistence, where nature is often overlooked as a mere resource with no role or identity. However, Anthropocentrism has been challenged through various modes, but I seek to disrupt anthropocentrism in narration by portraying trees as primary figures in storytelling. Narratives that centralize trees encompass trees as a primary figure within a tale; such

narrative devotes sufficient space to the trees in the narrative canon, and enriches them with agency, vitality, voice, and significance rather than neglecting them backstage.

In *The Overstory*, I find a redefinition of conventional approaches to storytelling, where the plot is devoted to discussing trees and their vitality in the physical world. Stories are primarily surrounded by human characters and their discussions, in the mentioned novel, the plot surrounds multiple characters, but the limelight is given to non-human entities and their discussion that, ultimately redefines the traditional approaches of storytelling. *The Overstory* is an extensive novel about the intermingled connection between humans and trees. It contains nine characters, all primarily indulged with trees, shaping their individual experiences and leading them toward environmental consciousness and activism. The novel highlights the themes of non-human agency ecological awareness and the interwoven relationship between humans and nature. Through narrative art, the story depicts the often-overlooked bond between humans and trees. This paper utilizes material ecocriticism to address the matter and its various tendencies that denounce the notions of matter being meek and inactive. "Material ecocriticism asks about material agencies that are so astonishingly expressive that the anthropocentric framing of storytelling as a uniquely human enterprise is easily undone when their narratives are discovered. Material ecocriticism posits that endowed with meanings and thick with stories, matter is a site of creative becomings and dynamic expressions" (Opperman 89). This paper mobilizes Barad's Intra-action and Haraway's Semiotic materiality to bring home matter's agentic and expressive power and its inherent entanglement, creativity, and meaning. Barad's material-discursive practices highlight that the world is co-constructed through ongoing intra-action between matter and meaning (31). In my paper, Intra-action illustrates how trees, as assertive agents, emerge through entanglement with other entities, discourses, and histories. The agency of trees is not dependent but formed through consistent intera-action, contesting anthropocentric storytelling. Following this, Haraway's material-semiotic process sees non-human agents as co-participants of the meaning-making process (200). I use semiotic materiality to showcase how trees are not meek objects but agentic beings, capable of meaning production. Trees formed stories through their existence, growth, decay, and interconnection ultimately becoming co-authors with humans in shaping histories. Hence, this study argued that anthropocene can be contested through narrative art, which centralizes matter and its agency and postulates that matter in any form, shape, and size is not mute and passive; rather, it's an active and equal participant in the world.

Digging deep into *The Overstory*, I argue that anthropocene and all notions of human exceptionalism can be denounced and contested by centralizing any non-living

entity in the text and devoting major concern to that non-human entity can bring forth the point of matter being assertive and agentic. The first part of this paper provides a brief Literature review that examines different debates to establish this paper's argument. The second part "The Overstory's Living Tapestry: Trees as Agents of Meaning and Entangled Entities" leads the readers towards a brief account of The Overstory and the theoretical tapestry of material ecocriticism, Intra-action, and Semiotic materiality. Material ecocriticism recognizes matter's agentic and expressive power and inherent creativity and meaning. While mobilizing Barad's concept of Intra-action and Haraway's Semiotic Materiality, I stressed the approach of centralizing trees in the text to bring home the vitality of matter in terms of its coexistence, entanglement, and meaning-producing potentialities. In the analysis part "Living Matter: The Interconnected Vitality of Trees in Environmental Narratives" that makes up the third part of the paper, I first investigate how the author centralized trees in the text, how trees are co-participators in maintaining the ecology, and most primarily how I analyze Powers's narrative approach that stands to contest the rigid notion of anthropocentrism.

Literature Review

Powers's *The Overstory* is a captivating narrative filled with various crucial and thought-provoking perspectives. Researchers, debaters, and critics from different fields and backgrounds studied and analyzed the story with their unique perceptions. *The Overstory* is primarily analyzed under the paradigm of ecological studies, as Powers's narrative is enriched with ecological concerns and issues. Meintjes analyzed the novel through the extensive nature of time under an eco-consciousness temporal approach, he criticized the limitation of time within the organizational change perspective and suggested broader and timeless theories (20). However, Maheshini and Jayanthi studied Powers's *The Overstory* as a multidisciplinary text that encompasses literature with environment, in their analysis, they focused on narrative construction and character development and the author's description of the natural world. Taking insights from literature and the environment at the same time, the researchers argued that Powers's primary intention is to raise contemporary environmental issues. Moreover, they took the text by unpacking literary devices such as symbolism and metaphors highlighting environmental activism (14).

Skold, in his study of *The Overstory*, suggests that the novel inspires cultural change amidst the Anthropocene. He probes the story as a climate change fiction by examining the role of literature. However, his main focus was to investigate how storytelling in Powers's narrative becomes a catalyst for activism and cultural change at the same time and space. Undertaking an ecocritical study, he argued that literature tends to contribute to social change as it provides a narrative rich in activism and

highlights the issue of conflict that exists between culture and scientific realities (16). The theoretical underpinning of matter and meaning illustrates hard facts about material agency. The material agency also focuses on stories from stone, river, mountain, and sea. Jeffery Jerome Cohen, in his book *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, discusses the narrative tendency of stone for which he suggests that narrative coming from stone cannot be for granted thus, he proclaims that stone has the power to devastate cities and that devastation then narrates their stories of ruins (44). Texts can prioritize non-human entities to convey realistic messages that eventually influence readers understanding in various means. The theoretical debate on agency and the meaning of matter sheds light on narrativity and text as well. Matter and non-human entities bear meanings. Hence, they can tell stories and can be the object of critical analysis and the subject of discursive practices, and they also occupy a place in the choreography of becoming (Lovino 18).

Niklas Erlandsson, under an effective study, examines the non-human phenomenological experience, communication, and sensory perception in Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone*. Erlandsson argued that the novel provides narrative strategies revolving around non-human entities and their experiences, which serves as a disorientation by challenging the notion of anthropocentrism (22). This paper now argues that anthropocentrism can be challenged and contested through the centralization of non-human entities in narration. Pre-existing literature focused on human characters where humans were the central figure or subject matter in narration, while the inclusion of non-human centralization in this regard not only generates new avenues of thought but also dismantles the previous worldview by subverting human dominance of the natural world. Powers's novel, rich with meaning and filled with tales of human and non-human connection, provides fertile ground for such investigation. I found trees as the central figure for discussion in the mentioned text, inviting my readers to project a compelling viewpoint that non-human entities possess agency, narrate tales, and have active roles in our ecological system. Paying keen attention to the Centralization of trees and their narration, this paper disorients readers, familiarizes them, and disrupts their thinking patterns. This intentional departure from human-centered communication norms challenges readers anthropocentric biases and prompts them to re-evaluate their preconceived notions, and it also raises ecological consciousness.

The Overstory's Living Tapestry: Trees as Agents of Meaning and Entangled Entities

The *Overstory* is a sweeping story about multiple characters and their intricate bond with trees, stressing ecological awareness and the mutual existence of humans and the natural world. The story consists of chapters named after tree parts of tree ranging

from Roots, Trunk, Crown, Seeds, and Forest suggesting the vitality of trees in the physical world. Each character in the novel experiences transformation under the pretext of their encounter with trees. Nicholas Hoel treasured a generational chestnut tree, Mimi Ma examined tree communication, Adam Appich devoted his life to environmental activism under his ecological awakening, and Ray Brinkman advocated against tree preservation. Doug Pavlicek seeks nature as a healer and finds comfort under the lap of nature, Neelay Mehta studies trees by integrating technology with environmental consciousness, and Patricia Westerford denounces scientific perspectives by unveiling trees communicative potentialities. Olivia Vandergriff gains spiritual transformation, which consolidates his connection with trees. The characters ultimately formed a collective effort to protect an ancient forest, stressing trees as vital and active contributors to ecological canon and human narratives. Through personal experiences, scientific knowledge, and technological underpinnings, *The Overstory* accentuates ecological urgency while focusing on re-evolution of humans and non-human relationship. In the story I find a vivid denouncement of human exceptionalism as trees are given the limelight.

Human beings are perceived to be superior in terms of their linguistic capacity, expressive tendency, intellectual outcomes, and action orientation, and nature in any form is perceived to be inactive, having no linguistic, emotional, or intellectual potentialities. Nature as meaningless and devoid of agency is contested under the broad theoretical debate of material ecocriticism. Material ecocriticism debunks this rigid dichotomy by vividly illustrating matter's assertiveness and vitality in the physical world. "This is a world with permeable boundaries where material agencies; Human and nonhuman bodies; ecological, social, and political forces; economic practices; global warming; climate anomalies; planetary pollution; landscapes; flora and fauna; and biogeochemical flows become fundamentally intertwined" (Oppermann 93). The word is intertwined where boundaries between humans, nonhumans, and various material forces are fluid, emphasizing their deep entanglement. Trees are entangled with the rest of the world, and their entanglement conveys crucial messages that shape environmental realities and illustrate nature's power.

The theory of new materialism offers a lens to examine the interconnection between nature and humans and stresses the agency of matter and the active role of nonhuman entities. Matter, regardless of its size and shape, poses various capabilities that range from communication to intelligence, meaning production to vital means of existence.

All forms of material in the Universe, from small particles to stars, are interconnected in a web of ecological relations that produce meaning entwined with human existence. These meanings are not

inherent in material objects themselves but are produced through a continual interplay between human and non-human encounters, and this interplay is what Donna Haraway calls "semiotic materiality (Iovino 163).

Semiotic materiality refers to how the material objects carry meaning, the material forms involved are enmeshed in a creative process of meaning-making that shapes the world in dynamic and unpredictable ways. "When operating in the domain of onto-epistemological entanglement, multiple assemblages operate in "interchangeable isotopes in a chemical brew" (Barad 6), which means that different elements are constantly interacting and influencing each other. Trees have this interacting and influencing tendency, which depicts their agency and activeness. When we look at it this way, the "human knowledge-making practices" are inseparable and entwined within the "social-material" world (26). In this regard, Cohen's notion of lithic agency supplements Barad by saying that stones shape landscapes and actively collaborate with humans. Similar to stones, trees also carry meanings and absorb human emotions. These theoretical stances resonate with *The Overstory*, where the significance of trees is evident.

"Living Matter: The Interconnected Vitality of Trees in Environmental Narratives"

This paper intertwines humans and nature to reveal their mutual existence and intermingled bond. The text contains multiple characters spanning generations, and all of them indulged with trees in their respective ways, portraying broader ecological patterns of matter. This paper, by analyzing the text, mainly focuses on trees and the agency of matter and its importance in the human world. Taking insights from Barad and Haraway's respective concepts, I firstly analyze the character of Patricia Westerford. Westerford's groundbreaking work reveals the intricate communication and intelligence of trees. Being the central voice for the trees in the novel, Westerford shows trees communication through their roots, fungi and chemical signals.

We found that trees could communicate over the air and through their roots. Common sense hooted us down. We found that trees take care of each other. Collective science dismissed the idea. Outsiders discovered how seeds remember the seasons of their childhood and set buds accordingly. Outsiders discovered that trees sense the presence of other nearby life. That a tree learns to save water (426).

While contesting anthropocentrism, this excerpt from the novel vividly depicts the vitality of the trees, their role as supporters and co-participators in ecological functioning, and their intellectual abilities, which involve not just communication but

learning and recalling information. This paper depicts the mutual existence of humans and nature that goes far beyond anthropocentrism. Intra-action provides two notable challenges to anthropocentric understandings of agency: firstly, that agency is not attributable just to humans or even to individual non-human entities, as these entities 'do not pre-exist as such, and secondly, that agency is therefore not a correlate of intentionality (Barad 179). However, the story surrounding different characters having a deep connection with trees stresses the agency and entanglement of human and non-human entities. Utilizing Haraway's argument of Semiotic Materiality, I came to the illustration that Semiotic materiality is not confined to biological organisms or organic matter only; it is also the inherent property of inorganic systems, entities, and forces. Igneous rocks, like granite, for instance, provide ample evidence of expressive creativity (Opperman 58). This idea further sheds light on the assertive qualities of matter and non-human elements. Similarly, the mentioned text is filled with such descriptions of trees where they are shown as vocal and equal participators in the world. At the being of the text, a woman sitting against a tree is depicted as pondering the meaningful messages of trees.

Her ears tune down to the lowest frequencies; the tree is saying things in words before words. It says: Sun and water are questions endlessly worth answering. It says: A good answer must be reinvented many times, from scratch. It says: Every piece of earth needs a new way to grip it. There are more ways to branch than any cedar pencil will ever find. A thing can travel everywhere just by holding still (7).

The above lines illustrate trees and their vitality in terms of communication demonstrating nature's interconnected wisdom. Sun and water depict eternal mysteries seeking consistent entanglement. Trees are rooted yet dynamic in nature indicating interwoven functioning of nature. Trees not just communicate but transfer meaning and knowledge. Following this, for meaning production and agentic power of matter, this paper helps its readers to understand the broader picture of human existence that is co-dependent on the material or non-human world. Matter does not require an external source to complete it, but it has its significance, and this imperative tool of matter decentralizes narrow perceptions of matter's passiveness. In the text, matter's agentic power is evident, showcasing its liveliness and capabilities.

The bends in the alders speak of long-ago disasters. Spikes of pale chinquapin flowers shake down their pollen; on, they will turn into spiny fruits. Poplars repeat the wind's gossip. Persimmons and walnuts set out their bribes and rowans their blood-red

clusters. The single name they're forced to share. Laurels insist that even death is nothing to lose sleep over (7).

The above lines from the text, while showing the agency of matter, advocate for the existence of matter by postulating how non-human elements are woven in a dynamic whole and how they are entangled however, it shows how matter is the site where stories are not just formed but transformed from the past to present meaningful manner. Apart from this, reproductive tendency of non-human entities are depicted through Chinquapin flower and matter's wisdom and as a mean of knowledge carrier is portrayed in terms of weather prediction, hence proving that matter is not mute at all, and such vivid description provides enough grounds for debunking the idea of human exceptionalism. Trees and their existence unveil how they function in intertwined ecological system. They feed, support, provide security to their community, and maintain their surroundings in a very meaningful manner.

Trees feed their young, synchronize their masts, bank resources, warn kin, and send out signals to wasps to come and save them from attacks. "Here's a little outsider information, and you can wait for it to be confirmed. A forest knows things. They were themselves up underground. There are brains down there, ones our brains aren't shaped to see. Root plasticity, solving problems, and making decisions. Fungal synapses. What else do you want to call it? Link enough trees together, and a forest grows aware (429).

In the above passage, trees justify that, they exhibit social behavior, problem-solving potentialities, and communication through biochemical and fungal networks, which disregards anthropocentrism. I also analyze the narrative art that depicts how matter strengths in times of struggle and trouble, consolidating the argument of matter's vitality and assertiveness.

The sole remaining chestnut goes on flowering. But its blooms have no more blooms to answer them. No mates exist for countless miles around, and a chestnut, though both male and female, will not serve itself. Yet still, this tree has a secret tucked into the thin, living cylinder beneath its bark. Its cells obey an ancient formula: Keep still. Wait (14).

Trees are survival of the fittest as they have the power to stand firm during difficult times, and this power of trees amplifies the agency of trees and contests the anthropocentric viewpoints in a very vivid manner. In Haraway's terminology, "the material-semiotic actor actively contributes to the production" (200). The semiotic actor can be in any form of matter, and here, trees are under discussion to provide fertile ground for their agency and their role in the pretext of overall ecological

patterns. Tea from infant trees for heart trouble leaves from young sprouts to cure sores, cold bark brew to stop bleeding after birth, warmed galls to pare back an infant's navel, leaves boiled with brown sugar for coughs, poultices for burns, leaves to stuff a talking mattress, an extract for despair when the anguish is too much (13). This excerpt from the novel further sheds light on the significance of trees with specific reference to their vital role in healing and cures. Humans are not superior to nature as trees, with their medicinal role, challenge the idea of matter being passive and meek.

Say the planet is born at midnight, and it runs for one day. First, there is nothing.....The day is two-thirds done when animals and plants part ways. And still, life is only single cells. Dusk falls before compound life takes hold. Every large living thing is a latecomer, showing up after Dark. Animals start teaching their children about the past and the future. Animals learn to hold rituals. Anatomically, modern man shows up four seconds before midnight. The first cave paintings appear three seconds later. And in a thousandth of a click of the second hand, life solves the mystery of DNA and starts to map the tree of life itself. By midnight, most of the globe is converted to row crops for the care and feeding of one species. And that's when the Tree of Life becomes something else again. That's when the giant trunk starts to teeter (444).

This passage of the novel encapsulates nature's assertiveness by stressing the dynamic and vast ecological system that sustained before the arrival of humans. Life flourishes in its simplicity, portraying the simple yet dynamic existence of nature. The formation of single cell and its evolution to massive organism and ultimately to creatures having potentialities of learning illustrates the creative power of non-human entities, independent from any human influence. The narrative contests anthropocentrism, providing a re-examination of myopic vision of human superiority. The ecological destabilization and human driven ariculture showcases how humans and their needs disturb natural existence. Thus this passage calls for a re-evolution and recognition of matters' agency and the urgent need to create harmonious bond with natural world. To sum up, Richard Powers's *The Overstory* centralized a non-human entity and its voice, which serves the purpose of redefining the traditional forms of narration. This approach of narrating and prioritizing non-human entities' primary trees challenges anthropocentric biases. Under the conceptual framework of material ecocriticism and its further concepts of Intra-action and Semiotic Materiality, the paper depicts that matter in any form, size, and shape is not passive and mute but active and expressive.

The narrative structure of the novel justified the argument of this paper that Powers's narrative style emphasizing the agency, vitality, interconnection, and coexistence of nature and the human world stands as a paradigm shift from traditional forms of narration. However, through the characters of the text, powers advocate environmental activism and address ecological issues generated by humans. Each character in the novel has a unique and intricate connection with trees, highlighting the significance of human and non-human relationships. Additionally, the chapter division of Powers's narrative entitled Roots, Trunk, Crown, Seeds, and Forest portrays the imperative role of trees and each part in the complex web of the ecosystem. The analysis of the selected text projects not merely how the anthropocentric world order is dismantled but also calls for a reimagination, reconceptualization, and reevaluation of human and non-human connection. By representing trees as narrators, supporters, and vital beings, this paper opens up various dimensions of thoughts for recognizing and acknowledging the agency and significant role of the natural world.

Works Cited

- Barad, K. "Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning. Duke University Press, 2007.
https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=H41WUfTU2CMC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=karan+barad+meeting+the+universe+halfway&ots=MKV9aqtJyT&sig=x5F6Fv hTbd6iroycoT6j5_-d358
- Cohen, Jeffery Jerome. Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
<https://asu.elsevierpure.com/en/publications/stone-an-ecology-of-the-inhuman>
- Erlandsson, Niklas. "Animal Qualia and Non-Anthropocentric Narration in Barbara Gowdy's The White Bone: Problematizing Nonhuman Experientiality through Envisionment in the EFL classroom." 2021.
<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:1560316>
- Haraway, Donna. Simians, Cyborgs and Women. Free Association Books, 1991.
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203873106/simians-cyborgs-women-donna-haraway>
- Iovino, Serenella and Serpil Oppermann. "Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity." Ecozon, vol. 3, no. 1, 2012, pp.75–91.
<https://ecozona.eu/article/view/452>
- Maheshini, K., and S. Jayanthi. "Deforestation versus Afforestation: Contemplating Ecomaterialism in Richard Powers The Overstory.
<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/S-Jayanthi>
 3/publication/365373431_Deforestation_versus_Afforestation_Contemplating_Eco_M

aterialism_in_Richard_Powers'_The_Overstory/links/63731e7d54eb5f547cd3c8e7/Deforestation-versus-Afforestation-Contemplating-Eco-Materialism-in-Richard-Powers-The-Overstory.pdf.

Meintjes, Ananke. "Time and Trees: An Eco-critical analysis of temporality in Richard Powers The Overstory." 2022.

https://ufs.figshare.com/articles/report/Time_and_trees_An_eco-critical_analysis_of_temporality_in_Richard_powers_the_overstory/27061249/1/files/49290280.pdf

Oppermann, Serpil. "How the material world communicates: Insights from material ecocriticism." *Routledge Handbook of Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication*. Routledge, 2019, pp.108-117.

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315167343-10/material-world-communicates-serpil-oppermann>

Oppermann, Serpil. "Material Ecocriticism and the Creativity of Storied Matter." *Frame*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2013, pp. 55-69.

https://www.frameliteraryjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Frame-26_2-Material-Ecocriticism.pdf

Oppermann, Serpil. "New Materialism and the Nonhuman Story." *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities*, 2021, pp. 258-72.

https://www.academia.edu/download/103741011/Oppermann_New_Materialism_and_the_Nonhuman_Story.pdf

Powers, Richard. *The Overstory*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.

<https://www.mencap.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-04/pdf-the-overstory-richard-powers-pdf-download-free-book-98d4d2b.pdf>

Riem, Antonella. "At the Speed of Trees": Richard Powers *The Overstory*". *Le Simplegadi* 21, 2021, pp. 27-40.

<https://le-simplegadi.it/article/view/1455>

Skold, Isak. "The Overstory: A Blueprint for Cultural Change in the Anthropocene". 2023.

<https://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/9127752/file/9127757.pdf>