

Narrating the More-Than-Human World: Ecological Ethics in the Fiction of Richard Powers

¹Jaspreet Kaur, ²Dr. Jyoti Syal, ³Vishrut Uttam Chauhan

¹Research Scholar, Department of Humanities, Maharishi Markandeshwar Engineering College MM(DU) Mullana, jassoftware@gmail.com

²Associate Professor, Department of Humanities, Maharishi Markandeshwar Engineering College, MM(DU), Mullana.

jyotisyal@mmumullana.org

³Assistant Professor, University Institute of Liberal Arts and Humanities, Chandigarh University, vishrututtam9@gmail.com

HOW TO CITE:

Jaspreet Kaur Research Scholar, Jyoti Syal, Vishrut Uttam Chauhan (2026). Narrating the More-Than-Human World: Ecological Ethics in the Fiction of Richard Powers. International Journal of Special Education, 41(11s), 1106-1112

ABSTRACT:

In the 21st postmodern era, climate change, environmental degradation, increasing sea level, depletion of the ozone layer has taken an important and debatable place at every platform, may it be national or international. It has forced humans to rethink the human and humanity's relationship with nature. The fiction of Richard Powers' has offered a powerful literary exploration of what scholars call "more-than-human world" a mirror that accepts the presence and existence of non-human life like animals, plants and ecosystem and their interconnected existence. This paper examines how Powers' novels *Gain*, *The Ecomaker* and *The Overstory* presents an ecological vision that criticises and challenges anthropocentric world views. In his fictional world Powers constructs stories in which nature is not only a passive backdrop but an active and everlasting member in constructing the existence of humans. By giving attention to the lives of trees and the people in *The Overstory*, Powers encourages readers to rethink the way they value the natural world. Similarly, *Gain* explores the rise of a powerful corporation which represents how the life of a common man is affected by industrial pollution. In *The Ecomaker* the exploration of memory and identity following an accident raises a question about human consciousness and its connection with the natural world. By analysing these texts through the lens of ecocritical theory these works challenge the dominant human centered approach and demonstrates that Powers' fiction not only expands the aesthetic possibility but contributes to environmental conservation also.

Keywords: Environment, Degradation, Human, Nature, values

COPYRIGHT STATEMENT:

Copyright: © 2026 Authors.
Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

In the 21st century, issues like global warming, population, pollution, deforestation, depletion of natural resources have become the hot potatoes as this century is alarmed by ecological crises that are strangulating the survival of the natural resources on earth or the survival of earth itself.

This situation has forced the policymakers, environmentalist, scientist, scholar, artist and a concerned human being for introspection as reflected in the poetry of Pablo Neruda *Keeping Quiet* "Now we will count to twelve and we will all keep still." This stillness refers to the cause

and think for a while about how much harm we human beings have caused to the face of the earth. As the reflection of the society, literature has emerged as a powerful tool to articulate about the amplifying environmental crisis and the ecological anxieties. Not only a tool but as a powerful and inspiring vehicle to inspire the readers to reconsider the role for nature. Through their imaginative skills the writers have tried to rebuild this fragile relationship and to bring the balance between human progress and environmental preservation. The interdisciplinary approach and the emergence of eco-criticism has further strengthened the exotic relationship between natural environment and literature. Basically, the challenge to anthropocentric approach by ecocritical text, advocates and ecocentric worldview. Due to this literature a transforming vehicle posters empathy and promotes ecological responsibility.

In the midst of all these situations where many scholars and authors are playing a significant role for the survival of the earth. Richard Powers also stands as one of the most influential American novelists. His narrative style and pen seamlessly presence and interdisciplinary approach where he is integrating science, philosophy and environmental ethics to highlight this. His works prominently range from Artificial Intelligence and neuroscience to genetics and ecology. He challenges readers to rethink progress, technology without damaging the natural world. Powers' fiction criticizes anthropocentrism- the belief that humans occupy a supreme position in this universe. He challenges this approach through his vivid descriptions of ecosystems, plants and animals and portraits that nature is not only a backstage artist but it is an active participant that two on front stage which helps in shaping human destiny. His works encourage readers to think critically and adopt a more inclusive and ecologically responsible world view on an urgent basis. "The best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story." (Powers 2018)

The Overstory, Powers tries to present the transformativ power of literature and the

urgency of ecological awareness. This power has the ability to evoke empathy and inspire the readers for sustainable development rather than relying only on scientific data. As the narrative has great influence on the minds of readers. Power redefines humanity's role and relationship with nature through his works *Gain*, *The Ecomaker* and *The Overstory*. Collectively these novels challenge anthropocentric ideologies and call for renewed sense of environmental stewardship and an urgent need to safeguard the future generations by protecting this environment.

Theorists like Lawrence Buell, Greg Garraard and William Ruckert developed the foundational principles of eco-criticism that examines the connection between literature and the physical environment. Buell coined the term "Eco-criticism" that highlights the application of ecological principles. Cheryll Glotfelty defines eco-criticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." These theorists foster the readers to rethink their relationship with nature and evaluate the interconnectedness of life. As this approach challenges anthropocentrism- the idea that humans are the prominent entities in the universe. Rather it boosts ecological awareness and environmental responsibility. In addition to this David Abraham's ideology and the key concept on "more than - human world" challenges the hierarchical separation between humans and non-human. He further strengthened his concern that humans are deeply embedded with nature. The idea that emphasizes an eccentric perspective and presents nature not only as a source but a resource which deserves respect and proper care. As it is rightly said by Nani Palkhivala that these resources, we have not inherited from our forefathers but we have borrowed from our future generations. We have to consider our role as the protectors of this planet, not the destroyer.

In a similar way Richard Powers' fiction invites the readers to acknowledge the relationship of nature as an active participant and reinforce the ecocritical vision of a shared planetary existence.

This vision is clearly presented in *The Overstory* where Powers shares. "This is not our world with trees in it. It's a world of trees, where humans have just arrived." (Powers, 2018). This statement and vision capture the essence of eco-criticism by portraying nature as a living entity and its emphasis on ecocentrism, calls for a reorientation of human consciousness toward harmony with the natural world. The novel also warns against environmental degradation: "We're cashing in a billion years of planetary savings bonds and blowing it on assorted bling." (Powers, 2018) By portraying trees as intelligent, communicative and interconnected beings, Powers enacts what Timothy Morton describes as a shift toward "ecological thought" which dissolves rigid boundaries between human and non-human life. This ecological imagination finds compelling derivatives in novels like *Gain* and *The Echo Maker*, each of which engages with environmental concerns in many ways that reflect and extend ecocritical theory. It also encourages the readers to recognize their ethical relationships and responsibilities towards the planet. It would be more appropriate to mention that Powers could be recognized not merely as a novelist but as a key contributor to contemporary discourse.

In *Gain* Powers pen expressed the growth but this too at the cost of personal suffering of an individual primarily affected by industrial pollution. This growth is symbolically presenting the idea and value of human lives which considers humans as the subjects not a living entity. The novel exposes what Lawrence Buell terms the "toxic discourse" of modern industrial society. Powers' narrative criticizes this growth system that prioritizes profit and gain over human wellbeing and alarming the readers to take a call on eco-criticism ethical concerns. Powers employs a striking biological metaphor to describe corporate growth: "The company grew the way all living things grow- cell by cell, division by division." (Powers, 1998). This novel intricates two parallel narratives: the growth of a company and the disaster to the human body. The capital rise of Clare Soap and Chemical Company (later Clare International) and the

story of Laura Bodey, a human body is not unintentionally but the chemicals discarded by the big whales into soil, water and air eventually entering the bodies of innocent individuals.

The personal narratives of Laura Bodey as an ordinary woman living near the company's plant, becomes a victim of this growth. Her diagnosis of ovarian cancer is linked to the prolonged exposure to environmental toxins, making a metaphor and symbol of the human cost of industrial rise. Her journey reveals the unequal distribution of environmental harm which is not only an isolated incident but a part of a broader and bigger circle where the lives of the ordinary people are quietly devastated by forces beyond their control. At the same time Powers criticizes the products manufactured by Clare International soaps, detergent and other household items that are an integral part of our day-to-day life and consumer without any awareness increasing the consumption and participating directly and indirectly to the largest cycle of production and destruction as well.

Gain presents a powerful opinion of anthropocentric notion of growth. The structure also reinforces an ecological message. Moreover, *Gain* critiques the ideology of progress that undermines the role of the environment. Powers invites the readers to question the meaning and definition of progress that the system is setting and calls for a more sustainable and ethical approach to development. Ultimately it serves as a cautionary tale about the unchecked danger of growth and urgency of reconsidering humanity's relationship with nature.

As the world grapples with the devastating consequences of environmental neglect, literature is stepping up to play a crucial role in shaping our ecological consciousness. By exploring the complex relationship between humans and the natural world, green studies in literature offer a nuanced understanding of the impact of our actions on the planet. Modern fiction is increasingly tackling the tough issues of biodiversity loss, climate change, deforestation and shining a light on the far-reaching consequences of industrialization and our

addiction to resources. Through powerful storytelling, authors are not only highlighting the environmental crises we face but also critiquing the systems that got us here. By sharing personal stories of loss and ecological woman who was completely unaware of the fact that this contamination is giving birth to cancer in her body. Powers exposes the hidden intersections between corporate expansion, consumer culture and environmental degradation. Growth is not success but it is a vicious circle in which a common man is trapped from head to toe. This is ironical as one sided it exposes the growth but on the other side the uncontrolled proliferation of cells characteristics of cancer.

This growth is shown from the transformation from a small soap venture into a global chemical empire. The empire that is challenging human existence, creating suffering and environmental damage. As the growth is based on the usage of synthetic chemicals, which are toxic and not eco-friendly. This systematic growth creates a tension between economic progress and the ecological system. Powers challenges the readers to reconsider the ethical foundation as he captures the insidious nature of environmental contamination in haunting observation: "What was buried in the ground did not stay buried." (Powers, 1998). The entry of chemicals in a

collapse, writers are pointing to the destructive patterns that have led to environmental degradation, while also offering a glimmer of hope for change.

Powers' *The Eco Maker* presents a metaphor for humanity's detachment from nature. In this he focuses on the fragile relationship between human consciousness and the natural world. The setting of the work where the migration of sandhill cranes deals with the themes of identity,

memory crisis and perception. The neurological disorder and concern echoes David Abram's argument that modern human consciousness has detached from the sensory and ecological realities of the human world. Collectively these three works question the readers to reconsider

their actions towards nature and natural things and advocate for a more sustainable and ethical relationship with the natural world. His works reinforce William Ruckert's idea that ecological principles can be meaningfully applied to literary studies.

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* is also an important text in environmental literature in that it moves to the center the intricate relationship between man and nature through multiple perspectives. Powers similarly approaches this burning topic by portraying the natural world and by personifying it not as a backdrop but as a living, interconnected system. that is integral to human existence. Ecocriticism explored in the novel reframes human identity by decentering the human and highlighting "the world is not a collection of objects but an ecology of relations". Powers, in the context of ecocritical theory, looks at the anthropocentric minds, awakens eccentric awareness, and evokes empathy with the world's natural environment. Greg Garrard defined Ecocriticism by way of an examination of the relationship between literature and the environment and emphasized how texts shape cultural attitudes to nature (Garrard, 2012). *The Overstory* is thus often interpreted as a landmark novel of this movement since it insists on understanding human lives in entanglement with arboreal and ecological time. Powers poignantly states: "People aren't the apex species they think they are." (Powers, 2018) By portraying characters whose lives are shaped by their encounter with nature, he makes the novel relatable to readers. Both his novels align with Val Plumwood's call for an "ecological culture" that rejects human exceptionalism and acts towards embracing mutual dependence with the non-human world (Plumwood, 2002). Powers' clever integration of both the scientific realm and emotional narratives of characters invites readers to feel the effects of environmental crises, transforming the issues into personal, urgent concerns. Furthermore, Powers in *The Overstory* interweaves nine human characters' fates with those of trees. Powers observes: "A tree is a passage between earth and sky." (Powers, 2018).

The arrangement of the story mirrors ecocritical models of nature and humans. interdependence and demonstrates that human lives and the future of nature are interlinked. For instance, Patricia Westerford, a dendrologist, reveals how "The trees under our feet are linked into a network... a kind of underground socialism". This moment

reframes trees not as passive backdrops but as social, sentient beings just like human beings. Patricia's discovery that "trees are social creatures", each with a history and agency of their own, Powers debunks the anthropocentric assumptions about trees and makes the readers sympathize with the natural world in the novel just as much as they would with human characters. Powers describes trees as "storied beings" with their own kind of intelligence and memory. "Trees remember in a kind of slow, lateral intelligence". By doing this, he gives readers a way to adopt and feel trees not as mute objects but as participants in life as living beings which bleed when hurt. By using a structure where each character is like a branch, like a cord in a larger forest, the book enacts its own worldview. In doing so, Powers indicates the way in which humans use nature as a resource that can be easily exploited, and that aligns with Plumwood's argument that ecological disasters happen because of a "crisis of reason" and prioritize profit over ecological and human well-being (Plumwood, 2002). By connecting Laura's testimony to the ecological disaster, Powers compels readers to recognize their own stake in environmental justice and take a step to save this mother earth. The criticism of commercialization of mother nature and making it to suck all the nutrients and later throwing it as excretion, gives an alarming call to the readers. Powers' novel critiques the commercialization of nature, aligning with Plumwood's. His critique of profit-driven rationality resonates here, as with all this waste being emitted into the environment, the companies "Make money, and [the characters] got their waste[s]" consequences. Buell's concept of "toxic discourse" is evident in the novel, where seemingly invisible pollution infiltrates

everyday life. The protagonist's gardening, her children's laughter, and her community ties amplify the injustice of her suffering, including "Everything she's ever touched... it's all been part of the same chain". He condemns the profit-driven mindset that prioritizes wealth over people and the planet, resulting in devastating environmental degradation and human suffering. In doing so, Powers translates abstract critiques of capitalism into intimate, relatable narratives. By illustrating the harm caused to Laura, Powers denotes the serious consequences of industrial pollution and greed for profit, urging readers to confront the human cost of environmental neglect due to excess consumerism. *The Overstory* reimagines trees as central characters and challenges traditional narrative conventions. Powers portrays them as sharp and communicative. He writes: "Trees cluster in circles. They grow tall together, feeding and protecting each other." (Powers, 2018)

One of the common themes in both of Powers' novels is the mutual dependency of nature and the environment, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all kinds of living and nonliving species. In *The Overstory*, characters like Adam Appich, a psychologist, and Olivia Vandergriff, a college student, are drawn to green causes through their experiences and connectedness with trees. Powers depicts their journeys by emphasizing their inner turmoil, that is due to the reshaping of environmental conditions, one that echoes ecocritical notions of "dwelling," where human beings experience an interdependent relationship with their environment (Garrard, 2012). Olivia's transformation goes from being a rebellious student to an activist due to her emotional connectivity with the ancient trees. This connection that is created in the novel is described as an emotion yet extends to the natural environment. Through this, Powers invites the readers to share empathy and tries to foster a sense of connectivity that is unseen but felt only.

Set along the Platte River in Nebraska, the central Platte Valley is a crucial migration stop

for the endangered whooping cranes. Richard Powers carefully situates the setting for his work *The Echo Maker*, a natural landscape not merely as a passive stage but a living, breathing entity that serves the annual migration of Sandhill cranes. The presence of these birds sets an imagery both visual and auditory, a dynamic space of movement symbolizing the enduring rhythms of the natural world. Powers describes the cranes with lyrical reverence: “The rose in a single chorus, a sound as old as the earth.” (Powers, 2006). The irony also presents here as in the midst of this transient and fragmented nature of human existence, these birds represent the stability, their calls echoes across millennia, connecting past and present. Moreover, this landscape also presents the view of tension between preservation and degradation, the harmony of natural world. Here lies the story of Mark Schluter, a metaphor for humanity’s fractured relationship. His traumatic brain injury results in Capgras Syndrome, a rare neurological condition in which he starts believing that his sister Karin has been replaced by an imposter. This character depicts the bitter reality of humans as he fails to recognize his intimate familiar persons, in the same manner the modern humans have also become estranged from that environment that sustains: “Identity is a story we tell ourselves.” (Powers, 2006).

With the migration of Sandhill cranes Powers in *The Echo Maker* tries to portray the intricate network of local to global that sustains life, illustrating how local environment is connected to global ecological systems. These cranes represent themselves as a symbol of vulnerability and resistance as these birds through their migration presents a fragile balance of geological regions.

Similarly, they show an image of increasing destruction, climate change and industrial expansion that is posing a major risk to this silent spring. Thus, *The Echo Maker* suggests the harmony with nature by aligning personal identity with ecological awareness.

The narrative technique of Richard Powers’ works is marked by an interdisciplinary approach

by combining computational thinking, philosophy, literature, science and neuroscience to awaken the readers to address and understand the complex ecological issues. His usage of innovative narrative technique creates the engagement of the readers and reinforces them to give a second thought for the deeds and actions that humans do on a daily basis. As he condemns the Anthropocentric approach, he uses polyphonic narratives, which draws multiple perspectives. The stories begin with characters but how it intermingles and gradually intersect through their relationships with trees and forests. Powers challenges the dominance of a singular, human centered viewpoint.

Another important aspect is integration of scientific knowledge into literary narratives. His works are not only confined to the readers of literary background but by multidisciplinary approach such as biology, neuroscience and environmental science, he deeply informs and connects the readers in a seamlessly woven fabric of the story and enhances both intellectual and emotional depth. Further his use of nonlinear narrative structures often unfolds in fragmented or non-sequential ways connecting the readers in different time periods rather than reflecting the straight stories. As this nonlinear approach encourages the readers to recognize the broader temporal scales. Symbolism also plays a crucial role in Powers’ fiction. As the connection of natural elements presents a deeper philosophical and ethical importance. Finally, Powers works are deeply embedded by interdisciplinary approach, collectively these narrative techniques create an ecological aesthetic and move beyond anthropocentric perspective to engage with the more than human world. As in *The Overstory* he writes; “The world is not only a machine. It is a network of relationships.” (Powers, 2018) Similarly his style is also a reflection of ethical engagement which deepens the understanding of intricate relationships that preserve life on Earth.

This Powers’ work echoes the principles of expanding the ethical boundaries of literature. Environmental historian Lynn White Jr. famously argued that “what people do about

their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them” (White 1206). This insight completely associates Powers’ fiction and offers a compelling voice in

contemporary environmental discourse. Through novels such as *Gain*, *The Echo Maker* and *The Overstory* Powers not only reshape narrative conventions but reinforces the idea that humans are not separate from nature but they are an inseparable part of this circle. If one connection disrupts the whole chain distorts.

Powers’ fiction fulfills the role of a writer by inspiring the readers to reconsider the relation and place within ecological systems. In addition to this depth, his works expand aesthetic possibilities and ultimately his fiction serves as a powerful reminder of humanity’s ecological responsibilities and think and work rigorously on a more than human centric approach. His works remains timely and necessary and proves that literature in his hands becomes a space where the issues related to humanity and ecological crisis can be addressed and can reach to the pinnacle of solutions.

References:

- Powers, Richard. *Gain*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.
- Powers, Richard. *The Echo Maker*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. Powers, Richard. *The Overstory*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.
- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. Vintage Books, 1996.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2012.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Love, Glen A. *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment*. University of Virginia Press, 2003.
- Rueckert, William. “*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*.” *The Iowa Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1978, pp. 71–86.
- Slovic, Scott. *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility*. University of Nevada Press, 2008.
- White, Lynn, Jr. “*The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*.” *Science*, vol. 155, no. 3767, 1967, pp. 1203–1207.
- Bate, Jonathan. *The Song of the Earth*. Harvard University Press, 2000.