



International Journal of Advanced Research in Arts,
Science, Engineering & Management (IJARASEM)

Volume 11, Issue 2, March 2024



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.583



Examining Ecological themes: An Eco-critical study of 'The Overstory' by Richard Powers and 'Bird Box' by Josh Malerman

Stuti Paul

Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow, India

ABSTRACT: Literary works have often explored environmental themes that have been significant to their times. This research paper explores the complex ecological elements woven into the narratives of two well-known modern novels, 'The Overstory' by Richard Powers and 'Bird Box' by Josh Malerman, through an in-depth eco-critical examination. By carefully analysing the writers' stylistic decisions, theme progressions, and character interactions, the research seeks to reveal the underlying ecological consciousness that is present in these literary works.

By bringing together stories that surpass centuries and linking the fates of humans and woods, 'The Overstory' engrosses readers in a gripping investigation of the symbiotic relationship between trees and human existence. However, 'Bird Box' presents a dystopian vision that makes us consider how fragile our relationship is with nature as it navigates the effects of an invisible, apocalyptic environmental force.

By using an eco-critical lens, this study adds to the expanding body of knowledge on environmental literature by revealing the ways in which these books connect with and affect current discussions about the relationship between humanity and the natural world.

KEYWORDS: Eco-criticism, Ecological themes, Nature representation, Literary Analysis, Interconnectedness, Environment

I. ECO-CRITICISM

1.1 Importance of Environment

The French word "Environ," which meaning to encircle or surround, is where the word "environment" originates. The literal definition of environment is the space we live in. It refers to everything around us, including non-living things like water and air and live things like plants and animals. It encompasses all that we depend on, either directly or indirectly, to survive. The environment provides the resources required for life and maintains complex ecosystems that support biodiversity, acting as the cornerstone of human existence. Additionally, it is essential for preserving ecological balance and averting species extinction, both of which support the stability of our world and ecosystems' resilience.

1.2 Role of Humanity in degrading the Environment

The environment is being harmed by a number of human activities that are fueled by industrialization, urbanization, and unsustainable consumption patterns. Excessive emissions of greenhouse gases, mostly carbon dioxide, from burning fossil fuels for transportation, energy production, and industrial operations are a major cause of environmental degradation. This causes climate change and global warming, which bring about extreme weather, increasing sea levels, and ecosystem disruptions. Deforestation increases environmental deterioration by removing important habitats, decreasing biodiversity, and upsetting ecological equilibrium. These factors make it crucial that we transition to sustainable growth. Three objectives underpin sustainable development: reducing the loss of natural resources, fostering development without negatively affecting the environment, and utilizing ecologically friendly methods.

1.3 The Theory of Eco-Criticism

With its inception barely dating to the middle of the 20th century, eco-criticism is a relatively young discipline of critical inquiry. A lot of the theory's content may be found in contemporary literature, and it centers on examining how humans interact with nature. William Rueckert coined the term "eco-criticism" in his 1978 book *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. The 1930s saw the start of scientific studies on how humans affect the environment, but eco-criticism's development as a literary and critical philosophy came later. It is believed that Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring* launched the literary eco-critical movement. *Silent Spring* examined and condemned agricultural pesticide use and the manner in which it can seriously harm the ecosystem. Despite the fact that pesticides



were proven to be extremely harmful to the environment, many people persisted in using them because they were useful. The risks associated with pesticides and the broader effects of human activity on the environment are clarified in Carson's book. It was a pioneering work of literature in its genre. "It is an interpretive instrument of investigating nature composing which is usually connected with Environmental criticism, animal studies, deep ecology, and ecofeminism." (Dar, 29) With the increasing scope of eco-criticism as a theory and the growing importance of it, two seminal works have left a mark. 'The Overstory' by Richard Powers and 'Bird Box' By Josh Malerman are two contemporary literary works that explore humanity's relationship with nature and can also be studied through the lens of Eco-Criticism.

'THE OVERSTORY' BY RICHARD POWERS

2.1 About the Author

Prolific American novelist Richard Powers is renowned for his emotionally charged and intellectually stimulating books that frequently examine the nexus between science, technology, nature, and humanity. His writing is greatly influenced by his early enjoyment of science and literature. A deep sense of wonder and curiosity about the natural world and our place in it permeates his works. His books frequently compel readers to ponder the secrets of life and their place in the universe. Powers' books frequently have complex, multi-layered structures. "The Overstory," one of Powers' best-known books, was awarded the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Powers examines the complex relationships between people and trees in this epic story, highlighting the fragility and beauty of nature via the lives of nine different characters.

2.2 Representation of Environment in 'The Overstory'

Richard Powers' "The Overstory" explores the complex interrelationships between people and the environment in great detail. Powers portrays woods as intricate ecosystems brimming with life that are irreversibly transformed by human activity, vividly illustrating the devastation inflicted by logging and clear-cutting. "Therefore, deforestation should come together with the act to preserve the forest." (Safina, 37) Powers emphasizes the critical necessity for conservation efforts to preserve our natural heritage through moving accounts of devastated landscapes and the loss of biodiversity. "The Overstory" also explores the idea of environmental activism and the ability of group action to bring about change. "In short, environmentalist is a person, whether individual or in a group, who understands and makes an effort to preserve nature." (Safina, 39). The book chronicles the adventures of a number of people who became environmentalists in several contexts, ranging from scientists examining the complex webs of communication among trees to tree-sitters denouncing deforestation.

"Remember? People aren't the apex species they think they are. Other creatures—bigger, smaller, slower, faster, older, younger, more powerful—call the shots, make the air, and eat sunlight. Without them, nothing." (Powers, 285)

2.3 Eco-critical elements in 'The Overstory'

The Pulitzer Prize-winning book "The Overstory" by Richard Powers provides rich content for ecocriticism. "The Overstory" is fundamentally a combination of interwoven tales, each of which is weaved together to create a bigger image of how people relate to trees and the natural environment. The book's nine main protagonists all have some sort of relationship with trees in their lives, underscoring the significant influence that forests and their denizens have on human existence.

The idea of "deep ecology," which emphasizes the intrinsic value of non-human existence and the interdependence of all living things, is one eco-critical factor that is clearly present in the book. Individuals such as Patricia Westerford, a botanist whose studies unveil the intricate communication systems of trees, contest human-centered viewpoints and promote a more comprehensive image of the natural world. "Her love for nature has kept growing since she was a child." (Safina, 41). "The Overstory" also explores the issue of resistance to ecological damage and environmental action. Individuals such as Doug Pavlicek and Mimi Ma, who participate in civil disobedience to preserve old-growth forests, personify the essence of eco-critical opposition to the exploitation and commercialization of the natural world. Powers also delves into the idea of "ecological grief," which is the emotional reaction to loss and deterioration of the ecosystem. Characters struggle with emotions of grief, rage, and despair as they see animals becoming extinct and forests destroyed. "Property and mastery: nothing else counts. Earth will be monetized until all trees grow in straight lines, three people own all seven continents, and every living organism is bred to be slaughtered." (Powers, 348). The characters also showcase the present situation of the world and how it will get even more capitalized in the near future. Furthermore, Powers deftly incorporates scientific information into the narrative, informing the novel's portrayal of natural processes with findings from studies conducted in the domains of ecology, biology, and forestry. In order to comprehend and address environmental concerns, Powers emphasizes the significance of empirical data by firmly establishing the narrative in scientific reality. With its exploration of issues such as deep ecology, environmental



activism, ecological bereavement, and the interconnection of all living things, "The Overstory" is an overall powerful piece of eco-critical literature.

III. 'BIRD BOX' BY JOSH MALERMAN

3.1 About the Author

Josh Malerman as an author is popular among audience of horror and suspense literature. Due to his distinctive writing style and evocative storytelling, Malerman has captivated readers all over the world with his compelling fiction that explore the darkest corners of human psychology. The ability to evoke in his readers a constant sensation of dread and unease is at the core of Malerman's writing. The main character of "Bird Box," Malorie, struggles with motherhood in the midst of a crazy world, and her tenacity and willpower provide hope amidst the overwhelming darkness. Malerman gives his stories depth and emotional impact by delving into themes of survival, resiliency, and the enduring force of the human spirit through his characters. Among the well-known pieces Malerman has written are "Black Mad Wheel," "Goblin," and "Inspection."

3.2 Representation of Environment in 'Bird Box'

Josh Malerman authored a compelling book called "Bird Box," which digs deeply into the theme of surviving in a world where supernatural forces drive people insane and eventually to their demise. Although the protagonists' fight to survive in this horrific new reality while wearing blindfolds is the main emphasis of the novel, Malerman deftly incorporates a subtle but significant depiction of the surroundings into the narrative. The universe at the center of "Bird Box" is overrun by enigmatic creatures that push anyone who sees them to commit suicide. Because of this, the surroundings turn into a dangerous and perilous place where the act of simply opening one's eyes can result in an immediate death. The intense feeling of loneliness and claustrophobia that surrounds the environmental portrayal of 'Birdbox' is among its most striking features. "In a world where you can't open your eyes, isn't a blindfold all you could ever hope for?" (Malerman, 77) The reader's anxiety is increased as they follow the characters on their risky journey because of this sensation of confinement, which also serves to heighten the tension and suspense.

In conclusion, Josh Malerman's "Bird Box" expertly portrays the surroundings as a crucial component of the story, giving the world of the book a tangible sense of fear and anxiety. Malerman examines the themes of survival, loneliness, and the precarious balance between mankind and the natural environment through vivid descriptions and symbolic imagery.

3.3 Eco-critical elements in 'Bird Box'

The issue of degradation of the environment is one of "Bird Box's" most noticeable eco-critical themes. In the novel, an invisible force that causes people to go insane and commit suicide when they view it has turned the world into an uncomfortable place. Although the consequences of this power are never fully understood, characters are forced to blindfold themselves in order to survive. This drastic change in the ecosystem serves as a warning about what happens when people abuse and disregard nature. The characters' fight to survive in a dangerous environment is a reflection of the eco-critical idea of ecocentrism, which puts the interests of the ecosystem as a whole before those of humans. In "Bird Box," human domination has been challenged, putting the protagonists in a difficult situation and emphasizing how precarious our place in the natural order is. This change highlights the connectivity of all living things and questions anthropocentric viewpoints.

The work also examines the notion of nature as a strong and erratic force. The characters are haunted by an invisible creature that arouses a sense of primitive fear, highlighting humanity's vulnerability to natural phenomena. "They're like infinity, it seems. Something too complex for us to comprehend." (Malerman, 35). This picture is consistent with eco-critical ideas about nature as a dynamic, unpredictable force that may both support and endanger life. Throughout the book, Malerman uses symbolism to emphasize eco-critical concerns. The protagonists' birds operate as warning flags, warning them that an invisible threat may be there. These birds serve as a reminder of the intrinsic link that exists between people and the natural world and the value of protecting biodiversity and the environment.

Extending the eco-critical aspects of Josh Malerman's "Bird Box" offers a chance to examine the complex interaction between people and the environment as it is portrayed in the book in further detail. "You are saving their lives for a life not worth living." (Malerman, 3). The quote depicts the deteriorating condition of the environment and showing that only survival won't be enough. The psychological effects of environmental deterioration on the characters are one area that needs more investigation. The protagonists struggle with the psychological effects of living in perpetual fear and isolation throughout the narrative, in addition to the physical difficulties brought on by the invisible menace. This feature emphasises the connection between mental health and environmental health, highlighting the significance of a comprehensive strategy for resolving ecological concerns. The idea of resilience in the face of environmental crises can



also be looked at. The characters in "Bird Box" show resiliency and flexibility in the face of dire situations as they make their way across the dangerous terrain. The importance of community and cooperation in environmental stewardship is another point of view to take into account. Although the main concern of the characters in "Bird Box" is individual survival, their interactions with other survivors highlight how crucial teamwork is when facing natural obstacles.

Furthermore, examining the novel's symbolism related to sight and blindness can shed light on how people view the natural world. It is possible to read the protagonists' need on blindfolds to shield them from the invisible threat as a metaphor for humanity's inadequate comprehension of the intricacies of the environment. "The chicken wire... has served as armor, protecting the children not from what could see them, but from what they could see." (Malerman, 3). The characters eventually develop a greater understanding of the interconnectivity of all living things by facing their anxieties and stepping into the unknown, highlighting the significance of environmental awareness and education. "Bird Box" may be seen as an indictment of how disconnected from nature modern society has become. The characters' dependence on blindfolds as a means of protection from the outside world represents humanity's unwillingness to address the environmental issues we face. The characters illustrate the need for increased knowledge and accountability by symbolically blinding themselves to the consequences of their actions.

Finally, a more thorough examination of eco-critical themes of 'Bird Box' can be obtained by looking at the wider cultural and political ramifications of environmental deterioration. One way to interpret the story's depiction of the disintegration of social institutions and communication channels is as a warning about the possible repercussions of disregarding environmental issues. The novel invites readers to consider how they personally contribute to determining the course of the planet by making connections to contemporary environmental challenges.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be concluded that examining literature through the lens of eco-critical analysis provides a deep perspective on how humans interact with the natural world. By delving into Josh Malerman's "Bird Box" and Richard Powers' "The Overstory," one can explore complex web of ecological themes woven within modern literature. These books force readers to face the harsh reality of environmental deterioration and the necessity of taking action as a group, offering moving thoughts on the complex interactions between our society and the natural world.

REFERENCES

1. Dar, Firdous Ahmad. *ECOCRITICISM: A STUDY OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENT*.
2. Malerman, Josh. *Bird Box*. Voyager, 2014.
3. Powers, Richard. *The Overstory: A Novel*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.
4. Safina, Putri Intan. *ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF RICHARD POWERS' THE OVERSTORY*. Accessed 18 Mar. 2024.
5. Taxmann. "Understand Environmental Studies – Scope, Importance, Sustainability, and History." *Taxmann Blog*, 25 Sept. 2023, <https://www.taxmann.com/post/blog/understand-environmental-studies-scope-importance-sustainability-history/>.
6. "Understanding The Importance Of Environmental Awareness - Kasiga School." *Kasiga School - Kasiga School*, 2 Jan. 2024, <https://www.kasigaschool.com/blog/understanding-the-importance-of-environmental-awareness/>.
7. "What Is Ecocriticism in Literature | Theory Meaning." *A Research Guide for Students*, 27 Aug. 2018, <https://www.aresearchguide.com/ecocriticism.html>.



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA



International Journal of Advanced Research in Arts, Science, Engineering & Management (IJARASEM)

| Mobile No: +91-9940572462 | Whatsapp: +91-9940572462 | ijarase@gmail.com |

www.ijarase.com