

## Post-Nature Narratives: Fiction in the Age of the Anthropocene

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### ABSTRACT

Erle Ellis, a modern thinker on ecology, remarks that, "Nature is gone. . . . You are living on a used planet. If this bothers you, get over it. We now live in the Anthropocene—a geological epoch in which Earth's atmosphere, lithosphere, and biosphere are shaped primarily by human forces." (Erle Ellis, 2009) These words show the condition of the modern world where human beings have changed the face of the earth. The rivers, forests, and air have lost their purity because of man's selfishness. The novel *The Overstory* by Richard Powers presents how trees also have life and emotions like human beings. The writer shows that man and nature are connected by one common thread. The trees in the novel speak silently through their strength and patience. Jane Bennett, in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, also explains that every small thing in the world has energy and value. In this sense, *The Overstory* teaches people to live with nature and respect all living beings. The novel becomes a voice of harmony, care, and new hope in the world that man has already damaged. Thus, literature becomes a tool to remind humanity of its duty towards the earth.

## 1. Introduction

The idea of the Anthropocene has great meaning in the present world. It marks the period when man has become the central force shaping the air, land, and water of the earth. The boundary between nature and culture has become thin. The natural world has changed under the touch of human hands. Erle Ellis rightly says, "You are living on a used planet." His words remind mankind that the earth once pure and generous is now tired under human pressure. The Anthropocene calls for moral as well as scientific thought. Literature becomes a means to show this new relation between man and nature. In the beginning, ecocriticism spoke about nature as something sacred and pure. It praised the beauty of rivers, trees, and mountains.

Later, scholars began to study how man and nature live together and influence each other. This new idea is known as post-nature. It accepts that every part of nature bears the mark of man. Writers of the new age present both beauty and damage in the same frame. In this way, modern fiction becomes a record of shared life between man and the earth. Jane Bennett's theory of *Vibrant Matter* offers a new understanding of this living world. She believes that every object, small or big, carries its own power. Stone, water, air, and metal have silent energy. They can affect and shape life in their own way. This thought helps readers to understand that all things in the world are alive with spirit. Richard Powers in his novel *The Overstory* brings this idea into fiction. He presents the lives of men and trees together. The trees are not silent

objects but living companions of human life. They communicate, endure, and teach the value of patience. The forest becomes a living family where every being has a role. Thus, the novel shows that the world is full of unseen energy and silent wisdom. In this way, literature in the age of the Anthropocene teaches man to live with care, humility, and faith in the larger life of the earth.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Vibrant Materialism and Post-Nature

In the study of literature and culture, the idea of the Anthropocene has created a new sense of awareness towards the material world. Earlier writers looked at nature as something silent and weak before the power of man. Modern thinkers believe that matter itself has life and strength. Jane Bennett has given this thought a clear shape. She says that the old belief which separates man as active and nature as passive is incomplete. Her theory of *Vibrant Materialism* explains that every object, whether living or non-living, has its own force. Things are not dead matter; they act and influence life in many ways. This view removes the pride of man and gives equal place to every element of creation. It also widens the meaning of art, ethics, and life as a shared process between human and nonhuman beings. Bennett's thought follows the ideas of great philosophers like Spinoza, Deleuze, and Latour. Spinoza believed that the whole world is made of one living substance. Deleuze and Guattari spoke of reality as a moving network where every form has energy. Latour used the word *actant* for any being that brings change in the world. Following these ideas, Bennett says that energy and life move through all things. This belief teaches the reader to see life even in simple objects like food, metal, water, and plants. It calls for a moral change in man's attitude towards the earth. From this understanding comes the idea of *post-nature*. The word does not mean that nature has vanished; it means that nature and man

are now joined in one field of life. The old Romantic idea of nature as pure and separate has changed. The Anthropocene has proved that no place on earth remains untouched by man. Every river, forest, and mountain carries the mark of human action. Post-nature therefore stands for unity and coexistence instead of distance and domination. It teaches man to live with balance and humility. In literary studies, Bennett's idea helps to read texts in a new way. Literature becomes a meeting place of human and nonhuman energies. Objects, trees, and landscapes play a role equal to human characters. They shape meaning and emotion within the story. In *The Overstory*, the trees live and breathe as companions of man. They guide, protect, and suffer along with human life. In this way, the novel expresses the truth of post-nature thought and shows that every part of creation shares the same living spirit.

## 3. *The Overstory* as an Anthropocene Narrative

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* stands as one of the finest literary responses to the age of the Anthropocene. In this period, man has begun to change the climate, the soil, and even the rhythm of the earth. Literature, therefore, seeks new forms to express the deep link between human life and the world of nature. Powers brings together several stories of men and women whose lives are tied with trees. The forest becomes the heart of the novel and serves as a living spirit that connects all. The structure of the book resembles a tree itself, with sections named "Roots," "Trunk," "Crown," and "Seeds." Each story grows like a branch from the same stem. This design shows that man's destiny and the life of trees are closely joined. In this way, the novel changes the form of fiction into a symbol of natural unity. The opening of the novel reads like a legend about the secret voice of trees. Phrases such as "air raining messages" and "wood humming with force" suggest that trees speak in their own

manner. Powers makes the readers feel that trees can see, hear, and respond. This thought agrees with Jane Bennett's idea of *Vibrant Matter*. Bennett says that every form of matter has life and power. Powers gives this idea a poetic body. The forest in his story is not a silent scene but a living being that acts, resists, and remembers. The novel joins philosophy and imagination. Bennett's theory of "thing-power" becomes real in Powers' writing. His human characters—scientists, artists, and ordinary people—realise that their life depends on the trees around them. The botanist Patricia Westerford discovers the "wood-wide web," the hidden network through which trees exchange messages. This discovery recalls Bennett's idea of *assemblage*, where living and nonliving elements work together as one system. The forest in *The Overstory* is such a system, showing how all forms of life share one energy. Powers also presents a new sense of time. The life of trees spreads across centuries, while human life appears brief and fragile. Through this contrast, the writer reminds mankind of humility before nature's vastness. The novel questions man's pride and the belief that only human history matters. The Anthropocene in the story is both a time of loss and a time of awakening. Trees, through their silence and strength, reveal the weakness of modern civilization. In this way, *The Overstory* performs the same work in literature that posthumanist thinkers perform in philosophy. It moves man from the centre and places him within a living circle of men, trees, soil, and air. The novel becomes a grand image of Bennett's political ecology of things, teaching that every form of existence carries its own light, force, and meaning. Thus, Powers' work stands as a moral and artistic reminder that the world itself is alive and that man must live with reverence within its embrace.

#### 4. Agency and Voice of the Nonhuman

The idea of agency has undergone a major redefinition in contemporary theory. Traditionally, agency was understood as the conscious and deliberate action of a human subject. In the Anthropocene, however, this view becomes inadequate, for it fails to account for the causal powers of nonhuman forces such as climate, geology, and technology. The ecological crisis compels a recognition that agency is not the property of human beings alone, but a distributed capacity shared by all forms of matter. Jane Bennett develops this argument through her concept of *thing-power*. She defines it as the inherent vitality of things, the ability of nonhuman bodies to act and produce effects. Bennett's emphasis on "a more distributive vitality" invites a revision of political and ethical thought that no longer treats human will as the sole determinant of change. In this expanded view, matter itself becomes expressive and affective. *The Overstory* gives literary shape to this notion of distributed agency. The novel attributes a kind of consciousness to trees, not in the anthropomorphic sense but as a metaphor for their participation in the world's processes. The opening section, as the woman hears "the tree saying things, in words before words," establishes the nonhuman voice as central to the vision of the novel. Powers creates a textual environment in which trees are capable of communication, memory, and resistance. Their "speech" is a form of material expressiveness that corresponds to Bennett's description of nonhuman affect. In Bennett's words, vitality is "the capacity of things... to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own." Powers translates this philosophical insight into narrative form and enables readers to perceive the forest as a living community of actants. The novel also demonstrates that human beings are deeply embedded within these networks of nonhuman agency. The activists who attempt to protect the forest discover that their actions are shaped by the trees themselves. They are moved by direct

encounters with the vitality of the nonhuman world. The trees influence human feeling, decision, and imagination. This process reflects Bennett's argument that affect and agency are not limited to human bodies; rather, they circulate among heterogeneous assemblages of human and nonhuman elements. The characters' transformation reveals a new kind of ecological subjectivity—one that listens to the "voice" of matter and responds to its call. By giving narrative prominence to trees, Powers subverts the anthropocentric hierarchy that privileges human speech and reason. The forest becomes a site of nonhuman expression that allows meaning to arise through interdependence rather than domination. This makes the novel a truly post-nature narrative. Nature here stands within human life, participating in the same field of action. The agency of trees, soils, and seeds operates alongside human intention, producing unpredictable outcomes. Such a conception challenges the traditional realist novel, which focuses on individual human will. The novel replaces that model with an ecological realism, in which agency is plural, relational, and material. The ethical implications of this new understanding are profound. If trees and other nonhuman entities possess agency, then moral responsibility extends beyond human society to include the entire web of life. Literature, by giving voice to these silent actants, becomes a means of ethical reorientation. The novel speaks with the environment and gives voice to the shared rhythms of life and crisis. Its narrative structure, imagery, and language are shaped by the rhythms of the natural world. In this way, the novel exemplifies what Bennett calls "attentiveness to thing-power," a mode of perception that recognises the vitality of matter and the interdependence of all beings.

## 5. Ethics and Hope in the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene brings into focus a new form of moral awareness. When human

activity transforms the earth's systems and influences its climate, ethics must respond to this expanded sphere of responsibility. The distinction between human action and natural process dissolves, revealing a single network of interdependence. As Erle Ellis observes, humanity now inhabits a "used planet," one shaped by its own history of intervention. Within this changed world, literature continues to explore possibilities of renewal and coexistence. Ethical reflection, therefore, moves toward understanding how to live meaningfully within a dynamic, human-altered environment. Bennett's philosophy of *vital materialism* provides a foundation for this ecological ethics. By recognising vitality in all material forms, she invites a more responsive relationship with the nonhuman world. Her idea of *thing-power* encourages attentiveness, cooperation, and respect for the energy inherent in matter. When matter is seen as active and self-organising, moral awareness develops through participation rather than control. Ethical thought becomes a practice of listening and collaboration with the forces that sustain life. Such an approach nurtures humility, reciprocity, and care—the essential attitudes for coexistence within the Anthropocene. *The Overstory* transforms this ethical vision into narrative experience. The novel presents human characters who rediscover moral depth through encounters with trees. Their devotion to the forest arises from reverence and empathy, qualities that extend the idea of respect beyond its human limits. The forest becomes a moral presence, teaching endurance, patience, and interconnection. Through its silent persistence, it renews human sensitivity to the shared pulse of life. Bennett's call for "attentiveness to thing-power" finds its artistic equivalent in Powers' detailed portrayal of ecological interdependence. The hope that grows within this ethical awareness arises from participation in life's continuity. Powers envisions regeneration within the very processes of change and decay that define

the planet's condition. The living world retains its energy for renewal, and human beings discover meaning through alliance with that vitality. Post-nature ethics, therefore, cultivates trust in coexistence, acknowledging transformation as a creative force. In this sense, both Bennett and Powers affirm an ethic of shared flourishing that makes literature a medium of ecological mindfulness and moral imagination. Through such writing, the Anthropocene gains an affirmative vision. Literature reconnects thought and feeling with the living substance of the world, teaching awareness, sympathy, and endurance. *The Overstory* exemplifies this capacity: its images of growth, roots, and seeds express continuity within change. The novel and Bennett's philosophy together present a world animated by vitality and relation—a world that reveals ethics as emerging from participation in the larger life of the earth.

## 6. Conclusion

The age of the Anthropocene transforms both ecological awareness and literary imagination. Erle Ellis' statement that "you are living on a used planet" defines this transformation with precision. The earth has entered a phase defined by human traces in every element, yet the planet continues to sustain vibrant life. Literature, philosophy, and science together reveal that vitality persists within change. The imagination of the Anthropocene, therefore, becomes an inquiry into coexistence—an effort to recognise energy, motion, and renewal in the material world. Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* provides a philosophical framework for this vision. Her concept of vital materialism awakens attention to the agency of things and encourages an ethics grounded in relation. Matter, in her thought, possesses its own forms of movement and intelligence. This understanding dissolves the old boundaries

between life and substance, culture and nature. It cultivates a sense of shared existence that prepares the ground for ecological responsibility. *The Overstory* renders this philosophy into narrative form. Through its polyphonic structure and its celebration of trees, the novel creates an image of the world as a living network of mutual influence. The forest, in Powers' vision, symbolises the principles of vitality and endurance that Bennett describes in philosophical terms. The novel becomes a literary expression of vibrant materialism that unites fiction and philosophy in their affirmation of life's continuity. Post-nature narratives such as *The Overstory* expand the role of literature in the present epoch. They guide the reader toward new habits of thought and feeling—habits shaped by attentiveness, respect, and participation in the living world. The idea of the "used planet" thus evolves into an image of renewal. Even in transformation, the earth remains fertile with meaning and possibility. The Anthropocene emerges as an age that invites humility, imagination. The moral and aesthetic task of literature in this age is to recognise life wherever it appears and to preserve the memory of its continual becoming.

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