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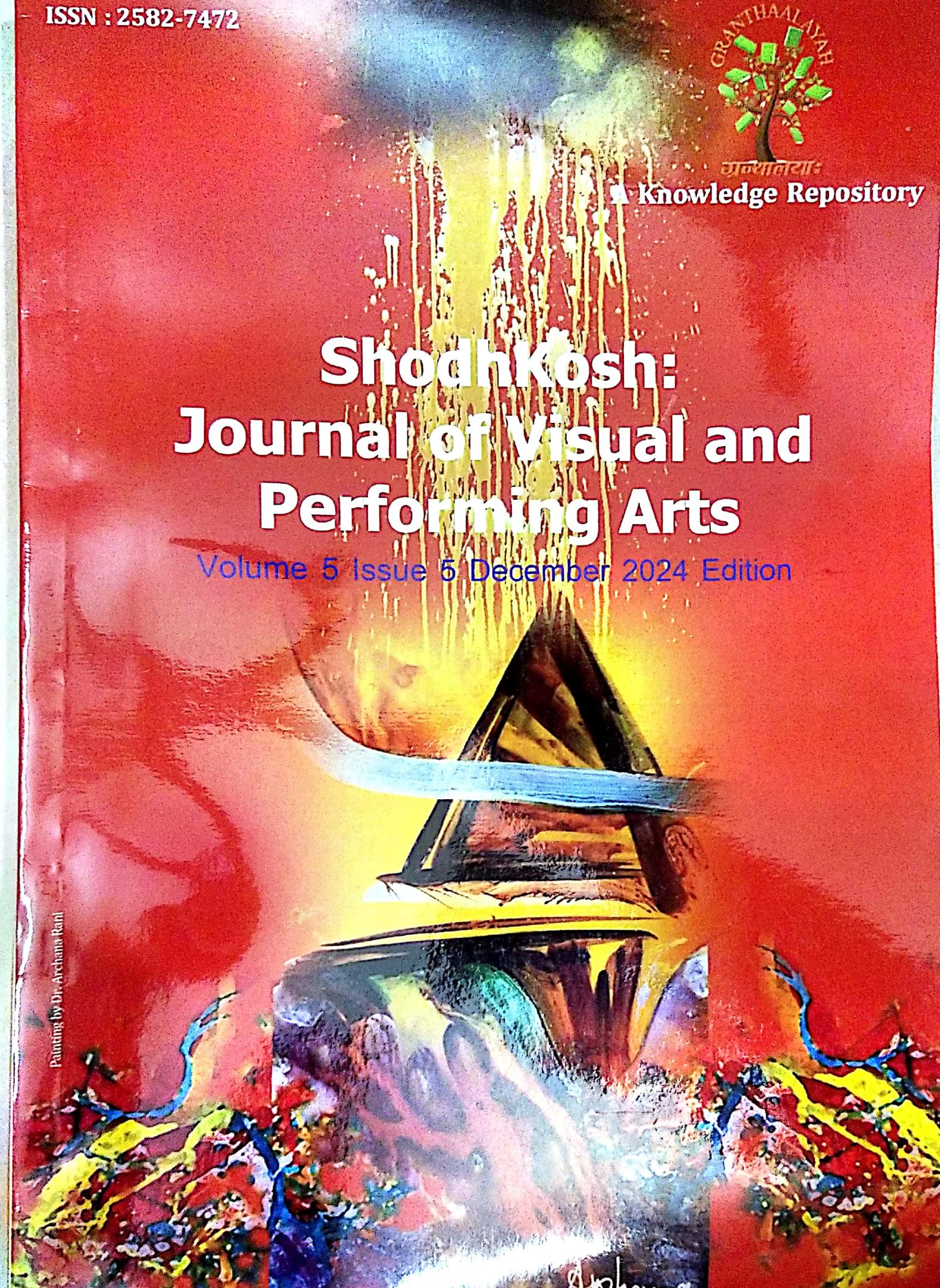


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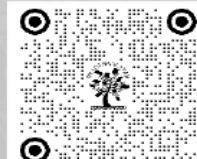
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ECO-ANXIETY AND CLIMATE FICTION IN RICHARD POWERS' THE OVERSTORY

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ABSTRACT

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) is a novel deeply embedded in contemporary discussions about ecological consciousness, climate change, and the psychological distress associated with environmental degradation, often termed eco-anxiety. This paper explores how Powers' novel engages with climate fiction (cli-fi) as a genre and how it represents eco-anxiety through its characters and narrative structure. The novel interweaves scientific knowledge, environmental activism, and the personal struggles of individuals who experience profound connections with trees, leading to heightened ecological awareness. Drawing from theories of eco-criticism, affect theory, and climate psychology, this paper argues that *The Overstory* embodies the psychological and ethical dilemmas of living in the Anthropocene. Through close textual analysis and theoretical engagement, it highlights the novel's role in shaping contemporary environmental discourse.

Keywords: Eco-anxiety, Climate Fiction, Environmental Literature, Anthropocene, Ecocriticism, Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

Introduction

As climate change becomes an increasing global concern, literature has responded by reflecting the anxieties, hopes, and ethical dilemmas associated with environmental degradation. Richard Powers' *The Overstory* stands out as a seminal work of climate fiction, not only for its intricate narrative but also for its profound engagement with eco-anxiety. Eco-anxiety, a term referring to psychological distress caused by climate change, manifests in the novel through its characters' radical shifts in perception and action regarding nature. The novel prompts critical questions about humanity's role in ecological destruction and whether literature can foster an urgent sense of responsibility.

Climate fiction (cli-fi) has emerged as a genre that intersects literature and environmental discourse, focusing on the catastrophic consequences of human-induced climate change. Scholars such as Adam Trexler (*Anthropocene Fictions*, 2015) and Amitav Ghosh (*The Great Derangement*, 2016) argue that fiction plays a crucial role in shaping climate consciousness. Powers' novel, through its deep engagement with arboreal life and environmental activism, aligns with these theoretical perspectives, portraying trees not merely as passive background elements but as agents of change. This paper explores how

The Overstory embodies eco-anxiety through its narrative form, character development, and environmental ethos.

Eco-Anxiety and Psychological Distress

Eco-anxiety is a significant psychological phenomenon that has gained scholarly attention in the wake of accelerating climate crises. Glenn Albrecht, who coined the term "solastalgia" to describe the distress caused by environmental loss, argues that the emotional toll of ecological destruction is as severe as physical displacement (*Earth Emotions*, 2019). Powers' novel illustrates solastalgia through characters like Patricia Westerford, a scientist whose studies on tree communication are initially ridiculed but later gain recognition. Patricia's isolation and frustration reflect the alienation experienced by those who acknowledge environmental crises before they become widely accepted. Her assertion that "trees are social creatures" (Powers, 142) challenges anthropocentric worldviews, aligning with recent scientific discoveries about plant intelligence.

Another key character, Olivia Vandergriff, undergoes a transformation after a near-death experience, leading her to interpret ecological activism as a sacred calling. Her character embodies the existential dread and urgency that many individuals feel when confronting climate change. As Lawrence Buell notes in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), literature can "generate an affective response to ecological crises that data alone cannot achieve." Olivia's radical shift in perspective, driven by an emotional awakening, exemplifies this literary power.

Climate Fiction as a Call to Action

Climate fiction serves not only as a reflection of ecological anxieties but also as a catalyst for activism. Powers' depiction of radical environmentalists, particularly Douglas Pavlicek and the tree-sitting protests, echoes real-life movements such as Earth First! and the actions of Julia Butterfly Hill, who lived in a redwood tree for over two years to prevent its logging. The novel raises ethical questions about civil disobedience, challenging the boundaries between legal and moral responsibility.

Amitav Ghosh, in *The Great Derangement*, criticizes mainstream literature for failing to adequately address climate change. He argues that the "individualist" nature of contemporary fiction often excludes collective ecological crises from its narrative focus. Powers' novel, by contrast, challenges this trend by weaving interconnected stories that emphasize the interdependence of all life forms. The characters' actions, whether through scientific research, protest, or artistic expression, highlight different responses to eco-anxiety, demonstrating that literature can serve as both a mirror and a call to action.

The Anthropocene and Narrative Form

One of the defining features of *The Overstory* is its unique narrative structure, which mirrors ecological networks. Ursula Heise, in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), argues that narratives in the Anthropocene must reflect planetary interconnectedness rather than purely human-centric experiences. Powers achieves this by structuring his novel in a manner reminiscent of a tree's life cycle—roots, trunk, crown, and seeds—suggesting that human stories are part of a broader ecological continuum.

By employing multiple perspectives and fragmented storytelling, the novel resists linear, human-centered narratives. This technique aligns with Timothy Morton's concept of "ecological thought" (*The Ecological Thought*, 2010), which challenges the illusion of human separateness from nature. The novel's polyphonic style invites readers to consider nonhuman perspectives, fostering empathy toward trees as sentient beings.

Conclusion

The Overstory is a profound meditation on eco-anxiety and the transformative potential of climate fiction. Through its complex characters, scientific underpinnings, and non-traditional narrative structure, Powers' novel challenges readers to reconsider their relationship with nature. By foregrounding ecological interconnectivity and the psychological distress of environmental collapse, the novel aligns with contemporary eco-critical discourse. As climate crises intensify, works like *The Overstory* play an essential role in shaping both literary and ecological consciousness, urging readers to move beyond despair toward meaningful action.

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