



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

History

**CHALLENGING ANTHROPOCENTRICISM:
RICHARD POWERS' THE ECHO MAKER**

KEY WORDS:
Anthropocentricism, human, nature, ecological, neuro

Ragavi A.

Research Scholar, PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore

Sangeetha S.

Associate Professor of English Department, PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore.

ABSTRACT

Gillespie defines 'anthropocentricism as human chauvinism', the belief that humans are the central figures in the whole world prioritizing their own needs rather than the environment, living and non living entities. Literature started to play an important role in challenging anthropocentricism by providing narratives and criticism that highlights the intrinsic value of our whole natural system. Particularly, Ecocriticism emerged as a strong influencing field in literature among the readers to argue against anthropocentricism. Anthropocentric worldview disconnects us from nature and encourages human progress at nature's cost and unsustainable practices that threaten and distort the whole ecological system. Cheryl Glotfelty, Val Plumwood, Caryl Wolfe, Donna Haraway, Timothy Morton, Pramod K.Nayar etc.. are some of the significant figures who challenge the notion of Anthropocentricism influencing great narrators to weave ecological stories. In this Article, let us delve into one such narration with ecological consciousness, i.e Richard Power's The Echo Maker, which challenges the human centric Anthropocentricism through its story and the way of narration. The main protagonist's neuropsychological disorder in the brain has been taken as an illustration for understanding the human limitation and the process of whole ecological system that significantly works beyond human control and understanding.

Humans attempt to dominate the world in the name of progress and technological advancement. But can they truly predict and control the natural consequences of their actions or all ecological processes? This question exposes human limitations and challenges anthropocentric beliefs. In reality, most natural processes exist beyond human governance. They are part of an interconnected ecological system where everything is interdependent. This aligns with Morton's ecological thought:

The ecological thought understands that there never was an authentic world. This doesn't mean that we can do what we like with where we live, however. Thinking big means realizing that there is always more than our point of view. There is indeed an environment, yet when we examine it, we find it is made of strange strangers. Our awareness of them isn't always euphoric or charming or benevolent. Environmental awareness might have something intrinsically uncanny about it, as if we were seeing something we shouldn't be seeing, as if we realized we were caught in something." (Morton, 2010, p. 57)

Powers' The Echo Maker serves as an effective illustration of this idea, challenging anthropocentric perspectives. The protagonist, Mark Schluter, suffers from Capgras Syndrome due to an accident, causing him to forget his loved ones and believe his sister is an impostor. This neurological disorder distorts his perception of reality, reflecting the broader limitations of human cognition. His condition, which he cannot control, mirrors humanity's struggle to understand the complexities of the ecological system. The unpredictability of his brain's function after injury symbolizes the unpredictability of nature itself. As Powers writes, "No one is on a separate path. Everything connects. His life, yours, hers, his friends'....mine. Other..." (Powers, 2006, p. 72). This interconnectedness highlights how human existence is entwined with larger ecological and psychological forces. Moreover, Powers emphasizes: "Of course there are forces bigger than us" (Powers, 2006, p. 73). "Forces so big that our paths mean nothing to them" (Powers, 2006, p. 73). These lines reinforce the insignificance of human endeavors in the face of larger natural and ecological forces, further challenging anthropocentrism.

Neuroscience reveals that much of what we consider conscious decision-making is influenced by unconscious processes beyond our awareness. Powers illustrates this idea through Weber, the neuroscientist studying Mark: "Mark at least was still himself—more than Weber could claim. Method

acting, Weber tried to inhabit the man sitting in front of him, weaving theories." (Powers, 2006, p. 74) While Weber is speaking with Mark, he is trying to discuss his condition. However, instead of being able to actually focus on Mark and his needs, he is mostly concerned with his own failings as a neuroscientist and researcher. He feels that he is merely "method acting" his way through the conversation, trying to keep up a performance of his impressive stature. Weber's struggle reflects the broader theme of human limitations in understanding individual consciousness, a biological process that is inherently woven into the ecological web. After the accident, even Mark himself couldn't fully grasp or control the changes unfolding within him.

Beyond its neuroscientific themes, the novel also highlights human resilience, empathy, and connection. Despite Mark's inability to fully recover, he copes through the support of his sister, psychological aid from Dr. Weber, and the symbolic presence of the sandhill cranes. These birds play a crucial role in his psychological recovery, embodying nature's resilience. This challenges the anthropocentric view by suggesting that human survival and healing are intertwined with psychological and ecological systems. Accepting nature's processes and adapting to them becomes a form of healing.

Furthermore, The novel's narrative style, emphasizing natural settings and nonhuman entities, further challenges human-centric perspectives:

"In this light, something saurian still clings to them: the oldest flying things on earth, one stutter-step away from pterodactyls. As darkness falls for real, it's a beginner's world again, the same evening as that day sixty million years ago when this migration began." (Powers, 2006, p. 3-4)

These lines capture the majesty and endurance of the sandhill cranes, reinforcing the insignificance of human existence in contrast to nature's timeless resilience. The Platte River and the cranes function as characters in their own right, further disrupting anthropocentric narratives. Recognizing human limitations and understanding our true role in shaping the world allows us to appreciate both our place and the value of all nonhuman entities:

"It's like driving a car at night. You never see further than your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way." (Doctorow, The Paris Review)

REFERENCES

1. Anthropocentrism - (Intro to Literary Theory) - Vocab, Definition, Explanations | Fiveable. fiveable.me/key-terms/introduction-to-literary-theory/anthropocentrism.
2. Ecosystem. education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/ecosystem.
3. Lernout, Geert. "Richard Powers: The Echo Maker." *De Standaard*. - Brussel, Jan. 2006. repository.uantwerpen.be/record/irua/opacirua/c:irua:60928.
4. Moore, Bryan L. "Ecological Literature and the Critique of Anthropocentrism." Springer eBooks, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60738-2>.
5. Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. 2010. ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB02446453.
6. Plimpton, George. "E.L. Doctorow, The Art of Fiction No. 94." *The Paris Review*, no. 101, Winter 1986, www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2718/the-art-of-fiction-no-94-e-l-doctorow. Accessed 26 Nov. 2024.