Symbiotic Storytelling in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* and Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone*

DOI: https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes1265

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Received: 24.12.2025 Accepted: 30.5.2026 Published: 7.6.2026

Abstract: This paper examines comparatively the concept of symbiotic storytelling as a narrative strategy in two major environmental novels: Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) and Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone* (1990). Drawing on ecocritical posthumanism theory, symbiogenesis, and posthumanist thought, the paper proposes a conceptual framework for understanding how these novels construct profound interdependence between human and nonhuman life. While Powers employs scientific realism and polyphonic narrative structures modeled on mycorrhizal networks, al-Koni crafts mythic allegory rooted in Tuareg animism and desert spirituality. The analysis reveals that despite their divergent cultural contexts—North American forests versus the Saharan desert—both novels challenge anthropocentrism and advocate for ecological consciousness through distinct yet convergent narrative strategies. This study contributes to global comparative ecocriticism by demonstrating how different cultural traditions offer unique resources for imagining ecological interconnectedness. The paper concludes that symbiotic storytelling represents an urgent and necessary mode of environmental literature, one that can help readers reimagine humanity's relationship with the more-than-human world.

Keywords: ecocriticism, ecological consciousness, Ibrahim al-Koni, posthumanism, Richard Powers, symbiotic storytelling

1. Introduction

In an era of climate and environmental crisis, the novel has emerged as a significant space for reimagining the relationship between humanity and the nonhuman world. As the limitations of purely scientific or political discourses become apparent, narrative offers a powerful means to cultivate ecological consciousness, challenge anthropocentric worldviews, and explore alternative modes of existence (Buell 1995). The novel, in particular, with its capacity for immersive world-building and deep character development, provides a fertile ground for what can be termed "symbiotic storytelling"—a narrative practice that portrays the profound and mutual interdependence of human and nonhuman lives. This paper will conduct a comparative study of two contemporary novels that exemplify this practice: Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018), an epic of the American forests, and Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone* (1990), a mythic tale of the Saharan desert. Though rooted in vastly different geographical and cultural landscapes, both novels dismantle the long-held Western binary of Nature and Culture, instead weaving narratives where human destinies are inextricably linked with the lives of

trees and animals, or what Donna Haraway (2016) calls our "kin." Powers, an American novelist celebrated for his engagement with science and technology, and al-Koni, a Tuareg writer from Libya whose work is steeped in desert mysticism and Sufi philosophy, offer distinct yet convergent visions of a world where humanity is not the master of nature, but a participant in a complex, symbiotic web of life (Morton 2010).

Richard Powers and Ibrahim al-Koni belong to markedly different cultural and literary traditions. Powers (1957) is an American novelist whose fiction is characterized by a sustained engagement with science, technology, and ecology. He received the National Book Award for The Echo Maker (2006) and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for The Overstory (2018). Al-Koni (1948) is an Arabic novelist from Libya. He is a prolific writer whose fiction is rooted in Tuareg oral tradition, Sufi mysticism, and an animist cosmology of the desert. He received many distinguished prizes like the Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger and the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature (Moolla 2015; Tynan 2020).

The two novels themselves are equally contrasting in narrative form and setting. *The Overstory* is epical in scope and polyphonic in structured. It falls into four parts that bear botanical names: Roots, Trunk, Crown, and Seeds. These parts parades nine human characters who are intimately connected to a particular tree or forest. These characters are gradually brought together by the man-made catastrophe of deforestation in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. The novel focalizes trees as living and communicating beings whose slow time encompasses human. Similarly, *The Bleeding of the Stone* presents an allegorical vision of the Libyan Sahara after the Second World War through the life of Asouf, the last of a nomadic Tuareg lineage. He inherits a sacred covenant to protect the waddan, which are a wild mountain sheep revered by the natives as a spirit creature. The mytheo-ecological climax of the novel happens when the foreign soldiers and a hunter are miraculously destroyed when they force him to reveal the location of the waddan. This makes the novel an allegory for colonial destruction and the heavy cost of tragic violating a sacred ecological covenant.

The geographical and cultural landscapes in which these two novels situate their narratives are equally central to their ecological visions. The vast and ancient coastal redwood forests of the Pacific Northwest were tragically reduced to a minor fraction of their original size due to forced displacement of indigence people and massive deforestation by settlers and big industries (Plumwood 2002; Nixon 2011). Similarly, the Libyan Sahara is one of the most ancient places on the planet. The Sahara, particularly the Fezzan region and the Acacus Mountains (Tadrart Akakus), is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site It is an ecosystem in which mankind lived for millennia in perfect harmony with nature. This ecoregion was severely destroyed by WWII, Italian occupation (1911-1943), and the fight for independence (1951). The waddan is, zoologically speaking, a Barbary sheep, native to the Saharra Rocky Mountains. It was unfortunately hunted to near extinction in this region (Tynan 2020). Thus, Powers and al-Koni make strategic choices of the Pacific Northwest and the Sahara respectively these are ideal spaces where

ecological, colonial, and political histories converge to produce the conditions for symbiotic storytelling.

This paper employs the narrative construction of symbiosis to understand how these two authors, from their unique cultural and literary traditions, employ different strategies to achieve a similar ecological effect: the decentering of the human and the recognition of nonhuman agency. The research will be guided by the following questions: How do Powers and al-Koni construct symbiotic relationships between their human characters and the nonhuman natural world? What specific narrative strategies—such as structure, characterization, symbolism, and voice—enable this symbiotic storytelling in each novel? Finally, how do the distinct cultural and geographic contexts of North American forests and the Saharan desert shape these symbiotic narratives and their underlying ecological ethics? By addressing these questions, this paper aims to illuminate the diverse ways in which contemporary world literature is responding to the environmental crisis and forging new narrative forms for a more-than-human world (Abram 1996).

The paper argues that while both *The Overstory* and *The Bleeding of the Stone* are powerful narratives of symbiotic storytelling that challenge anthropocentrism, they do so through distinct cultural and narrative lenses. Powers employs a mode of scientific realism, integrating contemporary ecological science and the intricate biology of forest ecosystems into a sprawling, polyphonic narrative that mirrors the interconnectedness of a mycorrhizal network. The symbiosis he presents is understood through the language of biology, communication theory, and environmental activism. In contrast, al-Koni crafts a mythic and allegorical narrative, drawing upon the deep well of Tuareg animism, Islamic spirituality, and desert folklore. His vision of symbiosis is expressed not through scientific discourse but through a sacred ecology, where the relationship between the lone bedouin and the elusive moufflon becomes a spiritual kinship, a testament to a pre-modern, non-parasitic mode of existence. The significance of this comparative study lies in its potential to broaden the scope of ecocriticism beyond its predominantly Anglo-American focus (Heise 2013). By placing a celebrated American novel in dialogue with a major work of modern Arabic literature, this paper seeks to contribute to a more global and comparative understanding of environmental literature. It highlights how different cultural traditions offer unique resources for imagining and narrating ecological interconnectedness, demonstrating that the work of fostering ecological consciousness is a truly planetary endeavor. This paper will first review the existing literature on the two novels, then establish a conceptual framework for symbiotic storytelling. It will then proceed to a detailed comparative analysis of the novels, focusing on their construction of symbiotic relationships, narrative strategies, and cultural contexts. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the findings and reflect on the broader implications of symbiotic storytelling for the environmental humanities.

2. Literature review

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) and Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone* (1990) have been recognized by critics as powerful works of environmental

literature, though they are never analyzed together. A review of the existing criticism reveals that while each novel has been lauded for its ecological depth, a significant research gap exists in the comparative analysis of their distinct narrative strategies for representing human-nonhuman symbiosis.

Critical reception of *The Overstory* has predominantly focused on its ambitious narrative structure and its deep engagement with scientific ecology. Scholars have extensively analyzed how the novel's polyphonic narrative, which interweaves the stories of nine human protagonists, formally mimics the interconnectedness of a forest's mycorrhizal network (Caracciolo 2021). The novel is celebrated for translating complex ecological concepts, such as inter-tree communication, into a compelling narrative, thereby fostering a new form of "eco-consciousness" in readers (Bhusal 2024). The critical consensus is that Powers employs a mode of scientific realism to challenge anthropocentrism, using the language of biology and communication theory to give voice to the nonhuman world.

Bruce Clarke's chapter "Cracking Open: Ecological Communication in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*" (2013) situates Powers' novel in the context of the emerging sciences of systems biology and forest ecology. Using their empiricism, Clarke argues that nonhuman organisms are cognitive, communicative agents embedded in dense symbiotic networks. This argument situates *The Overstory* within a convergence of posthumanist theory, plant cognition science, and ecocriticism. The novel interrogates the anthropocentric assumption that meaningful agency is exclusively human. To support his claim, Clarke performs close analysis of the character of Patricia Westerford, whose arc he takes to be an embodiment of ecological posthumanism, which is an intentional turning away from what he calls "human exceptionalism practiced in popular scientific ideology" (Clarke 2023: 127). Kathie Birat uses Bruno Latour's actor-network theory to explores the philosophical-theological notion of nonhuman agency in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*. Nirat argues that Powers "enhances the capacity of his story to give trees equal weight with humans in the ecological equation by conferring "agency" upon them" (Birat 2024: 2). This textual fashioning of nonhuman agency is not a result of metaphorical appropriation as much as the outcome of Powers' peculiar manners of exploring the relation between literal and metaphorical levels of narrative makes it possible for the readers to perceive the agency of trees as an effect of this narratological interaction. Birat theorizes that this narrative strategy produces "assemblages" similar to those which Bruno Latour takes to be the ultimate vehicles for nonhuman agency. The novel is thus positioned as a landmark of North American environmental literature, one that finds a model for symbiotic living in the material reality of the forest ecosystem.

In contrast, criticism on Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone* has centered on its mythic and spiritual dimensions, situating it within the contexts of postcolonial Arabic literature and desert writing. Critics have highlighted al-Koni's formulation of a unique "desert ethic," which is rooted in a syncretic blend of Tuareg animism, Sufi mysticism, and pre-Islamic beliefs (Moolla 2015). The novel's central relationship between the Bedouin protagonist, Asouf, and the sacred moufflon is consistently read as an allegory for a vanishing nomadic way of life

and its non-parasitic coexistence with the desert (Tynan 2020). The narrative is understood as a work of "sacred ecology," one that transforms the physical desert into a spiritual landscape where the boundaries between human, animal, and the divine are blurred (Fouad and Alwakeel 2013). The critical literature thus frames al-Koni's novel as a powerful counter-narrative to Western environmentalism, offering a vision of symbiosis grounded in indigenous wisdom and spiritual kinship.

The Bleeding of Stone was examined within the critical framework of desert literature and postcolonial Arabic fiction. For instance, Baidaa Muhyi al-Din's analysis of *The Bleeding of Stone* (2004) shows how al-Koni fashioned the desert with genuine narrative agency. She argues that "the desert/place has become a viewpoint through which the narrator monitors the movements of characters inside it, and which cannot be separated from the place where it is located" (Mohyi al-Din 2004: 203). This is eccocritically significant since the blood covenant between Asouf and the Waddan is framed within Tuareg totemism and Sufi ontology in such a way as to dissolve the hierarchy separating human from nonhuman life. Similarly, Mohammed, Badran and Hashem (2024) approach the same terrain through the structuralist notion of binary oppositions, notably desert/oasis, drought/flood, and life/death. The researchers argue that these binaries represent the very structural logic of a Saharan ecology as captured narratively. The researchers further argue that al-Koni employed these binaries to criticize ethically the tendency of modern humanity toward "stripping itself of instincts, whose only goal is satisfying desires and suppressing them" (Mohammed et al. 2004: 711). Together, both critical studies, among many others, establish al-Koni's novel as among the most powerful ecological imaginaries in contemporary Arabic fiction.

Furthermore, the present study departs from the theoretical framework of existing studies on the two novels under study here. For instance, Marco Caracciolo (2021) approaches *The Overstory* through the theoretical lens of narrative nonhuman spaces. He argues that Powers creatively employs novelistic form to enable readers who are conditioned by human-centered cognition to perceptually access plant-life. Shannon Lambert (2021) uses posthumanist narrative theory to read the mycorrhizal network as a model of collective, non-hierarchical agency in *The Overstory*. On al-Koni's side, F. Fiona Moolla (2015) uses the desert ethics theory to approach the ecological vision of The Bleeding of the Stone. She manages to uncover the productive tension with Western environmentalism that is the core of the novel by reading the novel's desert ethics via Tuareg animism and Sufi spirituality. The present study departs from all three by adopting a comparative framework that brings the two novels in a productive dialogue. Moreover, this study places scientific realism and sacred allegory in direct dialogue via the framework of symbiotic storytelling, hoping to uncover convergences that no single-text study has yet managed to map.

While the existing literature on *The Overstory* and *The Bleeding of the Stone* is insightful, it is confined within its respective cultural and literary contexts. There has been no sustained comparative study that places the scientific realism of Powers in direct dialogue with the sacred allegory of al-Koni. The research has not yet explored how these two novels, despite their vastly different origins and narrative

modes, converge on the central practice of "symbiotic storytelling." This paper will address this research gap by conducting a comparative analysis of the two novels, examining how they employ distinct yet convergent strategies to dismantle anthropocentrism and imagine a world of profound ecological interconnectedness. By bridging the critical conversations on these two seminal works, this study aims to contribute to a more global and comparative understanding of environmental literature.

3. Theoretical framework: Symbiotic storytelling

To build a robust comparative analysis of *The Overstory* and *The Bleeding of the Stone*, this paper employs a conceptual framework centered on the idea of "symbiotic storytelling." This framework is not a rigid theory but a heuristic tool, designed to illuminate the narrative strategies through which literature can represent and foster a sense of profound interconnectedness between human and nonhuman life. It draws upon concepts from biology, ecocriticism, posthumanism, and narrative theory to provide a multi-faceted lens for reading environmental literature.

The term "symbiotic storytelling" is derived metaphorically from the biological concept of symbiogenesis, most famously articulated by biologist Lynn Margulis. Symbiogenesis posits that evolution is driven not just by competition, but by cooperation, particularly through symbiotic relationships where different species merge to form new, more complex organisms (Bollinger 2010). Translated into a literary context, symbiotic storytelling refers to a narrative mode where the stories of human and nonhuman entities are presented as mutually constitutive and interdependent. It is a form of storytelling that moves beyond simply using nature as a backdrop or symbol for human dramas. Instead, it actively constructs a world where the agency and well-being of humans, animals, plants, and even entire ecosystems are inextricably linked. In a symbiotic narrative, the plot cannot advance, and the characters cannot develop, without acknowledging the active role of the nonhuman world. The narrative itself becomes an ecosystem, where different storylines and forms of agency coexist and interact, creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. It is a narrative practice that embodies the ecological principle of interconnectedness, demonstrating through its very form that no being, and no story, exists in isolation.

At its core, symbiotic storytelling is characterized by its cultivation of ecological consciousness. It seeks to move the reader from an anthropocentric and individualistic worldview to one that recognizes their embeddedness within a larger ecological community (Bhusal 2024). This is not merely an intellectual understanding but a profound, often painful, awakening to the reality of interspecies dependence. A key element of this is the recognition of nonhuman agency. Drawing from material ecocriticism and animist philosophies, symbiotic narratives attribute the capacity to act, influence, and even communicate to entities like trees, animals, and landscapes (Curry 2014; Iovino and Oppermann 2014). This challenges the traditional view of nature as a passive object and instead presents a world populated by a multitude of active, intentional subjects, thereby dismantling the human/nature binary.

Furthermore, symbiotic storytelling is deeply rooted in the particularity of place. The environment is not a generic "nature" but a specific, named, and historically rich landscape that functions as a central character in the narrative (Wyse 2021). The unique ecological features of a place—be it a forest or a desert—profoundly shape the forms of symbiosis that can emerge and the stories that can be told. To achieve this, symbiotic storytelling employs a range of narrative strategies, including structural choices, such as interwoven, polyphonic narratives that mimic ecological networks, versus linear, allegorical tales that embody a singular spiritual truth (James and Morel 2018). It also involves the manipulation of temporality as corollary to spatiality (e.g., contrasting human time with the deep time of trees or geology) and the use of symbolic systems and metaphors that link the human and nonhuman realms. Finally, in many instances, symbiotic storytelling engages with what can be termed sacred ecology, integrating spiritual and ecological knowledge to posit a cosmic order in which all beings have a place and a purpose, governed by natural and divine laws (Berkes 2012; Moolla 2015). This provides an alternative ethical framework to the utilitarian and managerial approaches of modern environmentalism.

4. Method

This study uses a comparative literary methodology, which is integrated with the heuristic framework of symbiotic storytelling developed in the preceding section. The comparative method is used in this study not to find equivalence between the two novels but to highlight how different narrative forms and cultural epistemologies can converge on a shared ecological ethic.

The primary analytical tool in this study is close textual reading, which will be informed by ecocritical, posthumanist and narratology. Specific textual passages, figurative language, structural choices, and narrative voice are going to be read closely to identify the specific narrative strategies through which ecological relationships are constructed. In this study, close reading is conducted in English (for Powers's novel) and in English translation (for al-Koni's novel, translated from Arabic by May Jayyusi and Christopher Tingley). The researchers are aware that translation mediates and often transforms ecological meaning, notably in the rendering of culturally specific terms for landscape features, spiritual concepts, and animal species.

The theoretical framework of symbiotic storytelling provides the analytical categories that organize close readings into (1) the construction of ecological consciousness; (2) the representation of nonhuman agency; (3) the manipulation of temporality; (4) the depiction of ecological violence and resistance; and (5) the grounding of narrative in the specificity of place. These categories are the lenses that enable systematic comparison across the two novels.

5. Textual analysis

Using the symbiotic storytelling to compare Richard Powers' *The Overstory* and Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone* shows how two culturally different literary traditions can converge on a shared ecological ethic. While both novels

powerfully decenter the human and champion a world of profound interconnectedness, they do so through narrative forms and cultural epistemologies that are as distinct as the forest and the desert. Powers' novel unfolds through a sprawling, polyphonic narrative that mirrors the intricate, communicative networks of a forest ecosystem, a symbiosis understood through the lens of modern science. Al-Koni, in contrast, crafts a spare, mythic parable that finds in the vast emptiness of the desert a space for spiritual kinship between human and animal, a symbiosis rooted in sacred, pre-modern wisdom. By examining these two works in tandem, we can see the diverse ways in which contemporary world literature is forging new narrative forms to confront the environmental crisis, engaging with complex questions of agency, temporality, and place.

The structural differences between the two novels are central to their respective ecological projects. In *The Overstory*, the symbiotic relationship between humans and the nonhuman world is modeled on the scientific discovery of the "wood-wide web," the mycorrhizal network that connects trees into a vast, interdependent community. The botanist Patricia Westerford, the novel's central consciousness, makes this discovery, and her work becomes a manifesto for the book's ecological vision. Powers uses her character to articulate the novel's central theme of arboreal sociality:

> She's sure, on no evidence whatsoever, that trees are social creatures. It's obvious to her: motionless things that grow in mass mixed communities must have evolved ways to synchronize with each other. The forests of the world are a single commonwealth, and life has been trying to tell her this for years, in a hundred million ways (Powers 2018: 98).

This scientific revelation becomes the novel's central metaphor and its structural principle. The nine human protagonists, initially strangers, are gradually drawn together by their shared, often unconscious, connection to trees. Their lives, like the roots of different tree species, become entangled in a shared destiny of activism and witness. The novel's sprawling, multi-plot structure formally enacts this principle of interconnectedness, denying any single character a privileged, central position. This "eco-polyphony" (Dellacasa 2025) challenges traditional narrative hierarchies and mirrors the distributed, non-hierarchical intelligence of the forest itself. Powers masterfully weaves together the scientific and the literary, creating a narrative that is both intellectually rigorous and emotionally resonant. He writes, "Something marvelous is happening underground, something we're just learning how to see. Mats of mycorrhizal cabling link trees into gigantic, smart communities" (Powers 2018: 423). This sense of wonder, or what Jeloud and Jadwe (2020) rightly call as sublime, grounded in scientific fact, is what allows the human characters to begin to see the world differently, to recognize that they are part of a story much larger than their own individual lives.

In direct contrast, *The Bleeding of the Stone* presents a symbiosis that is spiritual, mythical, and intensely personal. The central relationship is between Asouf, the last true Bedouin of the desert, and the *waddan*, or moufflon, a species

of wild sheep. Their bond is not based on scientific understanding but on a shared spiritual essence and a parallel existence. Both are solitary, reclusive beings, the last of their kind, clinging to an ancient way of life in a world that seeks to destroy them. Asouf sees the moufflon not as an animal to be hunted or dominated, but as spiritual kin, a brother in the harsh, sacred landscape of the desert. Al-Koni portrays this sacred bond through Asouf's internal monologue:

> He had learned from his father that the waddan was a creature of the jinn, a spirit of the desert. To kill one was to kill a part of the desert's soul, and to kill a part of the desert's soul was to kill a part of oneself. The waddan was not a beast of the earth, but a fleeting embodiment of the desert's untamable spirit, a spirit that Asouf himself shared. Their bond was not of this world, but of a world of spirits, a world where the desert was not a wasteland but a living, breathing entity (Al-Koni 2002: 45).

This is the world that Asouf and the moufflon share. It is a world where the spiritual and the physical are one. The symbiosis here is a form of sacred ecology, where the boundary between human and animal is dissolved through a shared spiritual struggle for survival. The moufflon becomes a potent symbol of the desert's soul, and Asouf's desperate attempt to protect it is an attempt to preserve his own spiritual integrity and the sacredness of the land itself. The narrative functions as a modern-day fable, a cautionary tale about the consequences of betraying the sacred covenant between humanity and nature. As one character says, "That is why, when we kill a waddan, we harm ourselves" (Al-Koni 2002: 112). The gendering of the desert in the novel is symptomatic of this primordial entanglement of the living and non-living that carries echoes of the postmodern parodic discourse. This is essentially similar to the gendered politics of postmodern parody of constructed primitivism that precedes the birth of nature\culture binary (Jadwe 2021).

Both novels are committed to representing nonhuman agency, but they face the inherent challenge of giving voice to the voiceless without resorting to simplistic anthropomorphism. In *The Overstory*, trees "speak" through the language of science. Their agency is revealed through Patricia Westerford's research: they release chemical signals, they share nutrients, they recognize their kin. Their voice is the data that Patricia painstakingly collects. Powers avoids giving the trees human-like consciousness, instead showing their agency as a distributed, collective intelligence, a form of being that is radically different from our own. This aligns with posthumanist and material ecocritical perspectives that seek to recognize agency beyond the human subject (Iovino and Oppermann 2014). The narrative allows us to perceive the world from a tree's perspective not through interior monologue, but through descriptions of its slow, patient processes of growth, communication, and decay. As one character reflects, "Trees fall with spectacular crashes. But planting is silent and growth is invisible" (Powers 2018: 89). It is this silent, invisible world that the novel makes visible, not by making trees human, but by making humans more attentive to the nonhuman.

In *The Bleeding of the Stone*, nonhuman agency is represented through myth and spiritual vision. The desert in al-Koni's narrative is not a passive backdrop but an active ontological force: it marshals sandstorms, withholds and discloses water, and subjects every human presence within it to a sustained moral and physical ordeal. The moufflon acts with a cunning and wisdom that seem more than merely instinctual; it is a creature of immense spiritual power, a totem animal. Asouf is able to understand the nonhuman world not through scientific instruments but through a deep, intuitive empathy, a form of interspecies communication that is mystical rather than informational. Al-Koni does not shy away from a form of anthropomorphism, but it is one rooted in an animist worldview where the boundaries between human and animal spirits are fluid. The voice of the nonhuman is not translated into human language but is felt as a powerful, silent presence, a moral force that judges the actions of the human protagonist. The bleeding stone of the title represents the wounded earth, the suffering of nature under the assault of human greed. The earth itself becomes a character, its pain made manifest in the bleeding stone.

Furthermore, both novels employ considerably different temporal scales to cultivate ecological consciousness. *The Overstory* is a profound meditation on deep time. It contrasts the fleeting lifespan of its human characters with the ancient, slow temporality of the trees. The novel forces the reader to confront the immense timescale of ecological processes, a perspective that dwarfs the concerns of individual human lives and highlights the long-term consequences of environmental destruction. This engagement with deep time is a powerful strategy for challenging the short-term thinking that drives the climate crisis (Mertens and Craps 2018). Powers employs a narrative technique that juxtaposes the rapid pace of human life—with its immediate crises, personal dramas, and political struggles—against the glacial pace of arboreal existence. A single tree in the novel may witness multiple human generations, their stories unfolding beneath its branches like brief flickers of light. This temporal disjunction creates a profound sense of humility in the reader, a recognition that human concerns, however urgent they may seem, are but momentary disturbances in the vast continuum of ecological time. The novel thus enacts what Rob Nixon (2011) terms "slow violence," the gradual, often invisible environmental destruction that unfolds across decades and centuries, demanding a narrative form capable of representing processes that exceed the human lifespan.

In contrast, *The Bleeding of the Stone* operates within a more cyclical, mythic temporality. Asouf's story is not a linear progression but a ritualistic reenactment of an ancient struggle between humanity and nature, tradition and modernity. The desert's time is not the linear time of progress but the cyclical time of seasons, of life and death, of spiritual renewal. This cyclical perspective offers a different kind of ecological wisdom, one that emphasizes the importance of tradition, ritual, and the enduring patterns of the natural world. The novel's temporal structure mirrors the rhythms of nomadic life, where time is measured not by clocks or calendars but by the movements of animals, the availability of water, and the cycles of drought and rain. This indigenous conception of time challenges the Western notion of

progress and development, suggesting instead that true ecological wisdom lies in attuning oneself to the eternal rhythms of the land. The mythic quality of the narrative—with its archetypal characters, its symbolic landscapes, and its timeless moral struggles—places the story outside of historical time, transforming it into a parable that speaks to all eras and all peoples.

The representation of ecological violence and resistance in both novels is used to illuminate their distinct approaches to symbiotic storytelling. In *The Overstory*, environmental destruction is depicted with scientific precision and moral outrage. The clear-cutting of ancient forests is portrayed not merely as an economic activity but as an act of profound violence against sentient, communicating beings. The novel's activists engage in direct action, from tree-sitting to eco-sabotage, their resistance grounded in both scientific understanding and ethical conviction. Their struggle is explicitly political, aimed at changing laws, influencing public opinion, and confronting the corporate and governmental forces that drive deforestation. The narrative does not shy away from the costs of this resistance—imprisonment, injury, and even death—but presents it as a necessary response to an ongoing ecological catastrophe. This aligns with contemporary environmental justice movements that frame ecological destruction as a form of violence requiring active resistance (Plumwood 2002).

In *The Bleeding of the Stone*, resistance takes a different form. Asouf's protection of the moufflon is not a political act but a spiritual imperative, a matter of preserving the sacred order of the desert. His struggle is solitary, personal, and ultimately tragic. He does not seek to change society or influence policy; rather, he seeks to maintain his own integrity and honor the ancient covenant between his people and the land. The novel presents a vision of ecological violence that is both physical—the hunting and killing of the moufflon—and spiritual—the desecration of the desert's sacred essence. Asouf's resistance is thus a form of witness, a refusal to participate in the profanation of the natural world, even when such refusal leads to his own destruction. This mode of resistance resembles the patterns of indigenous struggles worldwide, where the defense of land is inseparable from the defense of cultural identity, spiritual practice, and ancestral knowledge.

Finally, both novels are deeply rooted in the particularity of place, demonstrating the principles of place-based ecocriticism and bioregionalism (Filipova 2021; Wyse 2021). The specific ecosystems of the North American forest and the Saharan desert are not mere backdrops but active agents that shape the narratives and the forms of symbiosis that emerge. *The Overstory* is a love letter to the temperate rainforests of the Pacific Northwest, its narrative deeply informed by the specific biology of redwood trees, their complex ecosystems, and the history of their destruction. The novel's ecological ethic is inseparable from this specific bioregion, with its unique climate, its particular species assemblages, and its distinctive cultural and political history. The redwood forests are portrayed as irreplaceable, their value residing not in their timber or their economic potential but in their sheer existence, their ancient lineage, and their role in the larger web of life.

Similarly, *The Bleeding of the Stone* is a story that could only happen in the Sahara. The desert's harshness, its emptiness, its unique spiritual resonance—all of

these are central to the novel's vision of a sacred ecology. Al-Koni's work is a powerful example of how a deep, culturally specific "sense of place" can generate a profound environmental ethic. The Sahara is not simply a physical landscape but a spiritual realm, a place where the divine and the earthly intersect, where the boundaries between the material and the immaterial dissolve. The novel's bioregional specificity extends to its engagement with Tuareg culture, language, and cosmology, demonstrating that ecological knowledge is always embedded in particular cultural contexts and cannot be separated from the histories, practices, and beliefs of the people who inhabit a place.

In spite of their distinct cultural and literary contexts, both novels employ symbiotic storytelling in an interliterary way (N. Jadwe, M. Jadwe and Ali 2026) to arrive at a shared ecological ethic. They both argue that a true understanding of the world requires a shift in perspective from a human-centered to a biocentric one. In *The Overstory*, this shift is driven by scientific discovery and leads to political activism. The characters' commitment to protecting the forest is a rational, if radical, response to the ecological crisis. As one character puts it, "A forest deserves protection regardless of its value to humans" (Powers 2018: 391). In *The Bleeding of the Stone*, the ethical imperative is a spiritual one, a matter of preserving a sacred covenant with the land. Asouf's resistance is not political but personal, a matter of spiritual integrity. Yet, in both cases, the novels suggest that our survival, both as individuals and as a species, depends on our ability to recognize our profound interdependence with the more-than-human world. They remind us that we are not the masters of nature, but participants in a complex, symbiotic web of life, and that our stories are inextricably linked to the stories of the trees, the animals, and the land itself.

6. Conclusion

This comparative analysis of Richard Powers' *The Overstory* and Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone* has sought to illuminate the practice of symbiotic storytelling as a vital mode of contemporary environmental narrative. The analysis demonstrates that while both novels powerfully challenge anthropocentrism and advocate for a world of profound ecological interconnectedness, they arrive at this shared ethical standpoint from vastly different cultural, geographical, and narrative origins. *The Overstory* constructs a symbiosis rooted in the language of Western science, modeling its narrative on the complex, communicative networks of forest ecosystems. Its polyphonic and rhizomatic structure formally embodies the principle of interconnectedness, presenting a vision of ecological consciousness that emerges from scientific discovery and political activism. In stark contrast, *The Bleeding of the Stone* offers a vision of symbiosis grounded in a sacred, pre-modern desert ethic. Through a focused, allegorical narrative steeped in Tuareg animism and Sufi mysticism, al-Koni portrays a spiritual kinship between human and animal, one that stands in defiant resistance to the profane logic of modernization and resource extraction.

Moreover, the convergence of these two novels on the central theme of symbiosis, despite their divergent paths, is a testament to the global nature of the

environmental crisis and the planetary search for new, more sustainable ways of being. Both Powers and al-Koni dismantle the illusion of human exceptionalism, revealing that our destinies are inextricably woven into the lives of the more-than-human world. They perform the crucial cultural work of shifting the dominant narrative from one of competition and domination to one of cooperation and mutual dependence. The comparison enriches the field of ecocriticism by moving beyond a singular, often Western-centric, model of environmental literature. It shows that the resources for imagining a symbiotic future are culturally diverse, found as much in the scientific understanding of mycorrhizal networks as in the ancient spiritual wisdom of the desert.

This study also highlights important implications for the field of ecocriticism and the environmental humanities more broadly. First, it underscores the necessity of a truly global and comparative approach to environmental literature. The environmental crisis is planetary in scope, yet the cultural resources for responding to it are diverse and locally situated. By bringing together texts from different linguistic, cultural, and geographical traditions, comparative ecocriticism can reveal both universal patterns and culturally specific innovations in environmental storytelling. Second, the study demonstrates that there is no single, correct way to narrate ecological interconnectedness. The scientific realism of Powers and the mythic allegory of al-Koni are equally valid and powerful approaches, each with its own strengths and limitations. This pluralism is essential, as different audiences and contexts may require different narrative strategies. Finally, the concept of symbiotic storytelling offers a productive framework for future research, one that can be applied to a wide range of texts and media, from indigenous oral narratives to contemporary climate fiction, from documentary film to digital storytelling.

Future research might explore how symbiotic storytelling manifests in other literary traditions, such as Indigenous literatures of the Americas, African oral epics, or South Asian environmental writing. It might also investigate how this narrative mode translates across different media, examining how film, visual art, or interactive digital narratives can represent symbiotic relationships. Additionally, scholars might consider the pedagogical implications of symbiotic storytelling, exploring how these texts can be used in educational settings to foster ecological literacy and empathy for the more-than-human world. As the environmental crisis deepens, the need for stories that can help us reimagine our relationship with nature becomes ever more urgent. The works of Powers and al-Koni remind us that literature is not an escape from reality but a vital tool for transforming it, offering us new ways of seeing, feeling, and being in a world that is always already symbiotic.

Based on the findings of the comparative analysis, it is recommended that ecocritical scholarship expand its linguistic and cultural scope to include Arabic, Berber, and other non-Anglophone literary traditions in the ecocritical canon. The absence of these literary traditions results in a structurally impoverished understanding of how human cultures have imagined and narrated their ecological relationships. The study also recommends the development of genuinely multilingual comparative frameworks in ecocriticism. The case of Powers and al-

Koni proves, beyond doubt, that the same ecological can be expressed through radically different epistemological and aesthetic modes. This can be a solid ground for future ecocritical research to challenge the monolithic research practice of translating non-Western ecological visions into the conceptual vocabulary of Western ecocriticism and posthumanism. Finally, the study recommends the pedagogical applications of symbiotic storytelling in environmental education because it is capable of affecting profound shifts in readers' ecological consciousness. The shifts would be greater if the reading curricula was comparative in scope because pairing texts from different cultures and geographies could foster a more globally informed and ecologically sophisticated readers and citizens.

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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