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European Eco-consciousness and Eco-anxiety in the Context of Marx's False-consciousness as Reflected in Literary Fiction

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Abstract

*This paper explores the behavioural and social dimensions of false consciousness and climate anxiety in European contexts. Building on Marxist theory of false consciousness, it examines how dominant ideologist and capitalist structures foster denial and dismissiveness toward climate change, thus delaying or preventing necessary action to address it. As the realities of climate crisis become harder to ignore, individuals and societies experience climate anxiety characterized by a sense of helplessness and dread. Recent studies by Panu Pihkala on the concept of climate anxiety help us understand how false consciousness can prevent climate awareness but also exacerbate climate anxiety once it breaks down. By analyzing literary representations in *The Overstory* and *The Ministry for the Future* along with European policy responses, this study sheds light on the environmental distress caused by breaking down of the false consciousness and awakening to the reality of climate change. This interdisciplinary study unpacks the behavioural impact of climate awareness in the society and also highlights the need to address the root causes of climate change denial to foster a more proactive response to environmental concerns in European policymaking.*

Keywords: False Consciousness, Climate Anxiety, European Climate Policy, Capitalist Ideologies, Environmental Preservation, *The Overstory*, *The Ministry for the Future*

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Introduction

The bottom line is that we are all inclined to denial when the truth is too costly – whether emotionally, intellectually, or financially. Naomi Klein¹

Europe's approach to the climate crisis reveals a puzzling contradiction: the continent leads in environmental policy-making, yet deep-rooted belief systems hinder real progress. This issue isn't limited to Europe, but it carries extra weight due to the continent's key role in global environmental leadership. The ideas that shape public and political talks often encourage people to ignore or minimize the crisis slowing down needed action. This article looks at the idea of false consciousness, which comes from Marxist theories, to grasp how these beliefs shaped by business interests twist how society sees the climate emergency. Marx once said that false consciousness happens when "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force."² When it comes to climate change false consciousness shows up as people not knowing, denying, or downplaying environmental damage. This slows down any real action. As the climate problem gets worse so does climate anxiety. People start to feel a deep sense of fear and powerlessness as they face the true scale of environmental breakdown. In Europe, the rising climate anxiety that leads to the breakdown of false consciousness is evident in this psychological burden.

As we move from denial to awareness we often get hit with a profound sense of psychological distress. Fear, guilt, and a sense of urgency become the norm as the reality of environmental destruction becomes impossible to ignore. Panu Pihkala calls this the "vicious circle of anxiety and denial... anxiety can breed denial, which in turn breeds more (repressed) anxiety"³. This vicious cycle, therefore, shows the connection between ideological manipulations at the hands of capitalist elites and the emotional response of an individual facing this uncertainty about his situation. This raises a need to address both ideological and behavioural obstacles a society faced

¹ Naomi Klein. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 46.

² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 67.

³ Panu Pihkala, "Anxiety and the Ecological Crisis: An Analysis of Eco-Anxiety and Climate Anxiety", *Sustainability* 12, No. 19 (2020): 7.

towards more effective climate action. This study claimed that false consciousness, a product of capitalist ideology, delays the collective response needed in society toward climate crisis and also worsens the climate anxiety experienced by individuals. Moreover, the paper will look at this problem through the European lens to inquire how Europe's past and present influence our viewpoint of the climate crisis. This understanding will show us ways to better climate policies around the globe.

The concept of false consciousness of Karl Marx from his book *German Ideology* and the idea of climate anxiety by Panu Pihkala from his book of the same title are being consulted, to understand the multifaceted connection between false consciousness and climate anxiety. Marx explains that false consciousness in society arises as the ruling or dominant powers in the society impose their worldview on the working class and make them believe in a reality that is different from their own best interests. In the modern day, we see this concept can be applied to the climate crisis as dominant economic and political structures in society promote propaganda that denies or downplays the severity of the climate crisis. This encourages a sense of complacency and inaction in the face of crisis among the public. Ultimately, authors has applied Marx's theory to explore how these narratives propelled by the capitalist forces contribute to a widespread lack of awareness or denial about the environmental crisis and the delays in the collective action needed to address it. Simultaneously, Panu Pihkala's work on climate anxiety provides critical insights into how individuals psychologically respond to the awareness of the true magnitude of the climate crisis. He further studies that as individuals realize the extent of environmental degradation around the planet and the potential of it leading to future catastrophes, they fall into profound psychological distress that turns out as anxiety, fear, and even depression in some cases. Building on these two theoretical insights, I will further analyze how false consciousness leads to climate anxiety. The article thus, integrate Marx's critique of ideological manipulation by dominant structures with Pihkala's comprehension of the psychological and emotional impacts of crisis awareness.

Under the interdisciplinary framework the two contemporary American novels are selected, *The Overstory* by Powers Richards and *The Ministry for the Future* by Kim Stanley Robinson, and explore how different characters in both novels experience and react to the breaking down of false consciousness and rise of climate anxiety in their society. It enlighten the

readers to get understand how European intellectuals influenced literature across the continent.

The Overstory and *The Ministry for the Future* are two contemporary novels. Both of these novels are diverse in style and narrative, yet they share the themes of climate change, false consciousness, and climate anxiety. *The Overstory* by Richard Powers is a rich narrative that explores the interconnectedness of human life with its environment and hazardous impact of human activities on its environment. It is a multi-faceted narrative in which lives of different characters are intertwined and each of whom experiences an awakening to the interconnectedness of all life and environment that sustains it, particularly humans and forests. Initially most of these characters live in a state of false consciousness as they are indulged in their consumerist lives and are unaware or dismissive of the ecological devastation happening around them. However, as the narrative progresses, their encounters with nature and gradual breakdown of societal and ideological barriers lead them to a profound realization of the inevitable ecological collapse. This triggers intense feelings of climate anxiety in the characters. In *The Ministry for the Future* Kim Stanley Robinson presents a broader and more global perspective on the climate crisis by focusing on the systemic and institutional response to the environmental degradation. The novel is set in the near future in which as the climate crisis worsens its consequences become harder to ignore. The novel is centered on an international organization, "The Ministry for the Future", after which the novel is named. The organization is tasked with addressing the issue of climate change through innovative means that often turn out to be controversial. Both novels serve as powerful narrative case studies that reflect and critique the real-world processes by which societies come to terms with the environmental realities. Ultimately, this analysis will shed light on how these novels portray the journey of individuals and societies from denial and ignorance to awareness and action.

Literature Review and Theoretical Lens

The Marxist concept of false consciousness is foundational to understanding the reality of ideological structures orchestrated by the dominant powers of the capitalist society when they have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. According to Marx, false consciousness occurs when the working class internalizes the ideas perpetuated by the ruling class and these very

ideas serve to oppress them.⁴ John Bellamy Foster, in his work *Marx's Ecology*, argues that the same forces of capitalism that exploit labor also exploit nature, leading to a dual form of false consciousness where the working class is alienated from both their labor and the natural world. He explains that "Marx's notion of the alienation of nature, which he saw arising out of human practical life, was no more abstract at its core than his notion of the alienation of labor."⁵ He further suggests that this alienation contributes to a lack of environmental awareness among the common folk by hiding behind layers of economic and ideological mystification.

In his book *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ecology*, Timothy W. Luke discusses ecological modernization and its ideological implications. He examines how the rhetoric of "sustainable development" and "environmental security", managed by a global bloc of professional-technical experts and developed by the local and global capital, serves to perpetuate false consciousness by giving the illusion of environmental responsibility but in hindsight allowing the continued exploitation of the natural resources.⁶ According to him this type of false consciousness is particularly treacherous as it co-opts the language of environmentalism, thus offering a superficial commitment to sustainability. We see a similar concept being explored in the European context by Almeida et al who see the contemporary European Green Deal reproducing "a colonial and capitalist ecology by deepening the hegemony of resource imperialism and in greening a historically Euro-centered empire."⁷ Another scholar named Andre Biro has also explored how false consciousness in the environmental contexts is maintained through what he calls "eco-politica."⁸ Eco-Politics can be defined as a political strategy that divert the responsibility of environmental crisis toward individual action and significantly talk down role of the systemic factors. In *Denaturalizing Ecological Politics*, he argues that these political strategies wielded by the dominant powers reinforce false consciousness as they focus on individual efforts like recycling and reducing energy and divert attention from a

⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, 64.

⁵ John Bellamy Foster. *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 73.

⁶ Timothy W. Luke. *Capitalism Democracy and Ecology: Departing from Marx* (Urbana: University of Illinois press, 1999), 33.

⁷ Diana Vela Almeida et al. "The 'Greening' of Empire: The European Green Deal as EU First Agenda," *Political Geography* 105 (2023): 3.

⁸ Andre Biro. *Denaturalizing Ecological Politics: Alienation from Nature from Rousseau to the Frankfurt School and Beyond* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 197.

broader systemic change. Precisely, this approach than shifts the burden of environmental responsibility on individuals rather than the bigger structures. These concepts help us understand mechanisms through which ideological control is exerted and false consciousness is maintained, setting a stage for exploring the breakdown of this false consciousness leading to climate anxiety.

Panu Pihkala is a leading scholar in the emerging field of climate anxiety and he defines and explores its various dimensions and its effects on individuals and societies living in an era of ecological crisis. In his article, "Anxiety and the Ecological Crisis: An Analysis of Eco-Anxiety and Climate Anxiety," he claims that climate anxiety is a type of "pre-traumatic stress disorder".⁹ This means that individuals do not just experience this anxiety through fist-hand encounters with environmental disasters but through the anticipation of what may happen next. This anticipatory anxiety occurs from a feeling of helplessness and despair as they perceive a lack of adequate global response to climate change emergency. We can witness this anticipatory anxiety in the contemporary European landscape as some 75000 people attend Fridays for Future protests in Germany on September 20th, 2024 as they refuse to "remain passive in the face of the escalating climate crisis"¹⁰. Fridays for Future is a pro-climate movement that originated in Sweden and getting traction all around the globe. This heightened anxiety has prompted European institutions like "European Climate and Health Observatory"¹¹ to study and address the mental health impacts of climate change. Pihkala also explores the existential aspects of climate anxiety. He informs that people can get distressed due to heightened awareness of climate change disasters, especially those who relate the concept of mortality to climate change. In his seminal work "Eco-Anxiety, Tragedy, and Hope: Psychological and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change," he notes that these people "end (up) resort(ing) to psychological defenses, especially if they are confronted with fear-generating environmental communication."¹² According to him, these

⁹ Panu Pihkala, "Anxiety and the Ecological Crisis," 10.

¹⁰ "Fridays for Future Protests Draw 75,000 in Germany," (20 September 2024), at <https://www.dw.com/en/fridays-for-future-protests-draw-75000-in-germany/a-70287782>.

¹¹ Visit European Climate and Health Observatory, Climate Adapt at <https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en/observatory>, (accessed September 29, 2024).

¹² Panu Pihkala. "Eco-Anxiety Tragedy and Hope: Psychological and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change," *Journal of Religion and Science* (15 May 2018): 563. Visit at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/zygo.12407>.

emotions are not individual but they originate from broader social and cultural dynamics. In addition to mortality, he also explores the impact of education on climate awareness and anxiety. In his study “Eco-Anxiety and Environmental Education” he posits that environmental educators need peer and organizational support to reflect on their climate anxiety and “Educators should first practice self-reflection about eco-anxiety, after which they have many possibilities to help their audiences to develop emotional resilience”.¹³ He addresses the need for recognizing and engaging with the concept of climate anxiety in climate education so that acknowledging these emotions would help individuals work their way from despair to empowerment. His analysis of psychological and social dimensions of climate anxiety and how it affects individuals and communities is crucial in understanding the emotional landscapes within the literature.

Timothy Clark contributes to this discussion of the intersection of false consciousness and eco-anxiety through his book *Ecocriticism on the Edge*. He argues that climate change posits a “radical disjunction between the level of environmental destruction and the capacity of existing ideological frameworks to address it.”¹⁴ Thus he explains the false consciousness in this context as a type of cognitive dissonance as individuals cling to outdated and comforting narratives that obscure the severity of the climate change and the destruction it entails. A notable contribution to the aspect of the impact of societal norms and cultural practices on a collective false consciousness comes from a Norwegian scholar Kari Marie Norgaard. In her ethnographic study named *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*, she reveals how the Norwegian community systematizes a “socially organized denial”¹⁵ to actively suppress or rationalize the knowledge of climate change to avoid confronting implications of this phenomenon. According to her, climate change is a type of protective mechanism that shields individuals from the guilt and shame that comes with acknowledging their roles in this phenomenon. This denial for her is a psychological and social phenomenon that is reinforced by community norms and political

¹³ Panu Pihkala. “Eco-Anxiety and Environmental Education,” *Sustainability* 12, No. 23 (2020): 1.

¹⁴ Timothy Clark. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 78.

¹⁵ Kari Marie Norgaard. *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 24.

rhetoric but easily collapses on encounter with the harsh reality of sudden and severe climate destruction. It is important here to note that European responses to climate change present a complex duality, as it positions itself as a leader in climate change policy through initiatives like the “Paris Agreement” on one hand, and contributes to global capitalism more than ever on the other hand. These works thus give us an insight into how the denial and false consciousness about climate change are constructed and maintained throughout society. Also, when this false consciousness is eventually dismantled it leads to a precarious sense of dread for climate crisis.

The Marxist concept of false consciousness serves as a foundational theoretical lens to understand how ideologies perpetuated by the dominant structures of power, obscure the realities of climate change, and thus prevent the proletariat from realizing the extent of the climate crisis and addressing the problem timely and effectively. False consciousness was originally developed in the context of class struggle. It refers to a condition in which the proletariat or the working class accepts a distorted view of reality by adopting the ideology of the bourgeoisie or the ruling class. This distorted worldview aligns with the interests of those in power while being detrimental to the interests of the common folk. The ruling class controls all means of production which includes the production of ideas. This allows them to cause this distortion of ideas, by shaping societal beliefs in a way that perpetuates their dominance while suppressing any revolutionary consciousness. In the context of climate change, we witness this false consciousness manifesting as a widespread denial or curtailing of the environmental crisis. This denial and mitigation is driven by economic and political systems that prioritize short-term economic benefits over long-term environmental sustainability. This ideological manipulation is perpetuated by various mechanisms like media narratives, political rhetoric, and corporate messaging. These mechanisms are exercised to downplay the severity of climate change or frame it as a distant and abstract problem instead of an immediate existential threat. This results in individuals and societies internalizing these distorted perceptions. They remain complacent or in some cases even resist the changes needed to mitigate environmental destruction. Ultimately, in this paper, I use Marx’s concept of false consciousness to explore how these ideological distortions are reflected in literature.

Marx and Friedrich Engels argue that false consciousness is maintained by the dominant class through what they call "ideological hegemony"—the control over cultural institutions, including education, religion, and the media, which disseminate the ruling class's worldview as the natural and inevitable order of things.¹⁶ In the environmental context, this hegemony is evident in the way capitalist ideologies promote consumerism, economic growth, and technological optimism as the primary pathways to societal progress while marginalizing or dismissing ecological concerns. Building on Marx's theory, Antonio Gramsci's concept of "cultural hegemony" further elucidates how false consciousness is sustained in contemporary societies. Gramsci extends Marx's ideas by emphasizing the role of cultural and intellectual leadership in maintaining the consent of the masses to the status quo. In the context of climate change, cultural hegemony manifests in the normalization of environmentally harmful practices, such as excessive consumption, reliance on fossil fuels, and deforestation, which are portrayed as necessary for economic growth and human progress. Thus the knowledge that is truly beneficial for a person to understand the climate reality is prevented and false ideas and allegations against the climate agenda are spread. Extending on Marx Ron Eyerman states, "Such ideologies either helped the working class understand its situation or deflected its understanding. In this sense, both the 'bourgeois' and the reformist explanations of reality were equally dangerous."¹⁷ Thus this analysis of novels to depict the interplay between ideology and consciousness in the context of the climate crisis is carried in the light of the concept of "False Consciousness" explored by Karl Marx and aided by Gramsci and Eyerman. This helps me create a nexus between the psychological and social processes involved in breaking down of false consciousness and the climate anxiety that results from it.

I explore this climate anxiety experienced by different characters in both novels in light of Panu Pihkalas's theory.

Panu Pihkala's work on climate anxiety provides an essential psychological framework for understanding the emotional and cognitive impacts of confronting the realities of climate change, particularly after the collapse of false consciousness. He uses climate anxiety to "describe various difficult

¹⁶ Ibid, 86.

¹⁷ Ron Eyerman. "False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory," *Acta Sociologica* 24, No. 1–2 (January 1981): 43–56, at <https://doi.org/10.1177/000169938102400104>, 45.

emotions and mental states arising from environmental conditions and knowledge about them.”¹⁸ Individuals may feel fear, helplessness, and grief as they grapple with the magnitude of the environmental crisis. They feel anxious as they perceive themselves unable to effect meaningful change. Thus, reading climate anxiety in light of Pihakla’s insights is crucial for this study as they help us analyze the psychological journey of various characters in both novels as they move from false consciousness to awareness. He states that anxiety can be both direct and indirect, and argues that climate change is not merely a pathological condition but a rational response to the existential threats posed by climate change.¹⁹ He further adds that climate anxiety can be overwhelming but if individuals are supported in their emotional journey of processing these fears, it has the potential to drive collective and constructive action.²⁰ In his framework of climate anxiety, he also includes “pre-traumatic stress disorder”.²¹ This type of anxiety is not a result of current environmental collapse but also stems from an anticipation of future crises. It is then further exacerbated by the unpredictability and uncertainty of climate. This makes it a persistent and pervasive form of anxiety. By deploying this framework by Pihkala, I will analyze how different characters from *The Overstory* and *The Ministry for the Future* experience and respond to this climate anxiety. My analysis of the novels helps us explore how literature reflects the psychological complexities of confronting climate change. The characters’ experiences of climate anxiety, shaped by their gradual awakening to environmental realities, illustrate the broader emotional and cognitive challenges individuals face in the real world. Pihkala’s insights into the dual nature of climate anxiety, as both a source of distress and a potential catalyst for action, provide a nuanced understanding of how people respond to the collapse of false consciousness and the subsequent realization of the climate crisis.

Analysis

In *The Overstory*, Richard Powers portrays through his characters the false consciousness in our society where we are either unaware or dismissive of the climate catastrophe unfolding around us. It reflects on how these characters have their ideologies and worldviews shaped by dominant capitalist institutions to prioritize personal economic growth and

¹⁸ Panu Pihkala. *Eco-anxiety Tragedy and Hope*: 546

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Panu Pihkala. *Eco-Anxiety and Environmental Education*, 1.

²¹ Pihkala. *Anxiety and Ecological Crisis*, 10.

consumerism. Like many other characters whose lives are characterized by this ideological mindset, Ray and Dorothy Cozaly live their lives in a state of unawareness. They are depicted as living a conventional middle-class life always seeking material comfort and their connection with nature is superficial as they “can’t tell an oak from a linden”.²² It would not be a false claim to make that their detachment from the natural world is a result of capitalist ideology. They are entrenched in consumerism and individual economic success, and this is not unique to the couple as this false consciousness is a broader social phenomenon maintained by societal norms. Marx explains that this worldview is actually lent and actively spread by the ruling class who produce ideas and values while controlling all means of production.²³

Powers showcases another example of initial false consciousness through the character of Adam Appich, a psychology student. His worldview is influenced by his academic training as he is interested in studying human behaviors through science and reductionist lenses. This reductionist approach also presents a kind of false consciousness as he puts more value on quantifiable psychological phenomena over complex relations between humans and nature. He, however, gets a kind of awareness “something so different from human intelligence that intelligence thinks it’s nothing.”²⁴ Adam’s initial detachment from nature is not due to his intentional neglect but lack of educational perspective in that societal framework that he operates. Through Patricia Westerford’s experience, Powers shed more light onto how false consciousness operates within scientific and academic communities. She is a botanist that dedicated her life to study trees and yet her groundbreaking research on tree communication is ridiculed and dismissed by her peers and even big literary academics in her field. Powers describes the situation as “The men say that her methods are flawed and her statistics problematic”.²⁵ Amna Siddique and Khamsa Qasim address this ridicule and shame and call for “stand(ing) against the atrocities of others by recognizing and redefining their identities.”²⁶ They emphasize the

²² Richard Powers. *The Overstory* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 66.

²³ Marx and Engels. *The German Ideology*, 86.

²⁴ Richard Powers. *The Overstory*, 56.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 124.

²⁶ Amna Siddique and Khamsa Qasim. “Wound is the Place Where Light Enters You’: En-Visioning Speaking Shame and Shame Resilience in Muhammad Hanif’s *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*,” *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies* 24, No. 2 (2024): 41.

“importance of recognizing one’s status in society”,²⁷ which echoes Michel Foucault’s idea that for one to resist the dominant hegemonic discourses; it is crucial to revive the counter version.²⁸ As Patricia will eventually come to resist these hegemonic figures by recognizing and redefining her identity, this dismissal of Patricia’s research reflects a broader societal false consciousness that prioritizes scientific knowledge that aligns with economic and industrial interests while marginalizing or rejecting knowledge that threatens these interests. It also establishes that “image of a bad woman gives them more liberty to show disrespect to the established norms of dominant behavior.”²⁹

Nicholas Hoel, and the Hoel family in general, are examples of how false consciousness is reinforced through social environments. Nicholas is an artist and the Hoels are farmers, yet their relation with their environment was only that of a consumer. Powers iterates, “Hoels were farmers, feed store owners, and farm equipment salesman like his father, violently practical people in the logic of land and driven to work long, relentless days, year after year, without even asking why”³⁰ This explains the societal norms and capitalist ideologies ingrained in their minds as they are not even aware of the reason of their consumer-driven economic pursuits. It is only Nicholas, however, who breaks form this false consciousness as he becomes more involved in environmental activism and understand the intrinsic value of environment.

The initial false consciousness of these characters is crucial to the novels narration as they move from denial or dismissiveness towards awareness and activism. It sheds light on the psychological and social shifts in perception to move towards climate awareness, and that this is not an individual but social phenomenon. This shift in the narrative aligns with Marx who suggests that there is a fundamental need for breaking this false consciousness to go through a revolutionary change.³¹ Powers suggests that

²⁷ Ibid, 42.

²⁸ Khamsa Qasim and Munazza Yaqoob. “Fear of Small Numbers: Re-Visioning History in Broken Verses,” *Pakistan Journal of Women’s Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* 29, No. 1 (June 22, 2022): 71–84, at <https://doi.org/10.46521/pjws.029.01.0112>.

²⁹ Khamsa Qasim. “A Bad Woman’s Poetry and Her Reclamation for an Authentic Self in Gendered Spaces: The Poetics of Pain, Identity, and Resistance in Kishwar Naheed’s Poems,” *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies* 23, No. 2 (2023): 70.

³⁰ Richard Powers. *The Overstory*, 23.

³¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, 72

in the context of environmental awareness, there is a need to rethink humanity's relationship with our environment. He therefore weaves meticulous stories to give us insight into characters' awakening and how these pivotal moments represent the breaking down of ideological barriers. Olivia Vandergriff is a great example of a sudden awakening to the reality of her environment. She is a college student and lives a carefree life usually disconnected with a broader understanding of her surroundings. She goes through a near death experience that jolts her back to reality of her environment. Just out from shower, she tries one day to switch on the lamp with damp hands. "All the current in the sub-code house enters her limbs and pours into her body."³² After this incident she begins hearing the trees talking. This experience jolts her out of her previous condition of false consciousness as she feels the interconnectedness of humans and trees and the need to protect them.

In *The Ministry for the Future*, Kim Stanley Robinson illustrates how society's false consciousness about the climate crisis persists and eventually falls apart. In this context, the societal false consciousness means people delude themselves into underestimating the severity of climate change and avoid facing the broader and systemic change needed to address and confront it. Big economic, political, and cultural forces maintain this false consciousness as they care more about quick gains than long-term survival, which diverts the attention of people from seeing how climate change could end everything. In the book, he looks at how this false consciousness gets challenged and ultimately dismantled by a series of catastrophic events, leading to the whole world facing up to what climate change means. At the beginning of the novel, you see this false consciousness of how world leaders and common people are too relaxed thinking small changes and some technological fixes will be enough to deal with climate change. This false sense of safety gets smashed by what happens in the novel's opening event—a killer heatwave in India that wipes out millions making it impossible to ignore the immediate and lethal impacts of climate change.³³ The heatwave wakes everyone up, breaking the idea that we have loads of time to act or that we can handle this crisis without giving up much. This sudden realization is evident in one of the protagonists Frank May's experiences as he finds himself as the lone survivor of the heatwave out of the whole town. Frank wakes up as "The air was still hotter than the water . . . Balancing his

³² Richard Powers, *The Overstory*, 148.

³³ Kim Stanley Robinson. *The Ministry for the Future* (New York: Orbit, 2020), 15.

head carefully on the spin, he surveyed the scene. Everyone was dead.”³⁴ This event starts to break down false consciousness all over the world forcing countries, companies, and people to face how their old ways of dealing with climate change were just inadequate.

Robinson shows how society's false ideas fall apart in a painful way but it was a much-needed process. The Indian heat wave and later climate disasters serve as a turning point. Years of ignored warnings and piled up scientific proof becoming too much to deny. This event marked the beginning of a new era where people can't hide how urgent the climate crisis is behind money or politics. The novel portrays a world where inaction in the face of an imminent climate crisis leads to awful results forcing people to rethink what's important and how to deal with climate change. As false ideas crumble, the narrative reveals deep fears that were suppressed now coming up as people face how big the scale of the threat is. One of the most compelling aspects of Robinson's work is how he portrays the connection of breaking down false consciousness with shifting global power dynamics. As countries start to realize the severity of the climate crisis, power moves from old money and political elites who maintained the status quo, to new players ready for big changes. “The Ministry for the Future”, with Mary Murphy in charge, becomes a key player in this new world. They push for rules that put humanity and the planet's long-term survival before quick profits. According to her, the ministry is “trying to set things up so that in the future, over the long haul, something like justice will get created.”³⁵ However, this shift from false consciousness would still be a long journey as Mary's stance on climate change is ridiculed by many. This is explained by Khamsa Qasim and Farhan E. Y. Khan as how women in certain positions of authority have limited power for their role as prescribed by societal stereotypes.³⁶ This is a false consciousness related to climate context in a way that women are equal proponents for change in society. Regardless, led by Mary, the Ministry's rise to prominence symbolizes the growing recognition that the old ways of doing things are no longer viable and that new, more sustainable approaches are urgently needed.

³⁴ Ibid, 22.

³⁵ Ibid. 43.

³⁶ Khamsa Qasim and Farhan Ebadat Yar Khan. “Toni Morrison's Politics of Feminist and European Literary Tradition: Discerning Feminist Matricentric Streaks in Morrison's Work.” *Journal of European Studies* 39, No. 1 (January 2, 2023): 59, at <https://doi.org/10.56384/jes.v39i1.289>.

Robinson uses the Ministry to show how different people react when their false beliefs crumble. The Ministry knows the risks of sticking to old ideas and ways in the face of a rapidly changing world. Mary Murphy leads the Ministry to push for bold policies, like “the Carbon Coin (that) was time independent”, which rethinks how economic growth and protecting the environment can work together.³⁷ The Carbon Coin, a world currency linked to storing carbon, breaks from old economic models. It challenges the deep-rooted false belief that economic success must harm the environment. The Ministry's work shows the book's main point: to tackle climate change, we need more than new tech. We need to change the big ideas that have guided global growth for hundreds of years. The book also shows how companies and governments change their views. At first, many fought against the Ministry's plans. They thought they could keep doing business as usual with just small tweaks. Mary analyzed these people as “Because money ruled the world, these people ruled the world. . . Even if they understood an idea, even if they liked an idea, they wouldn't necessarily act on it.”³⁸ But as climate change gets worse and people demand action, these groups must face that their old ways don't work. Robinson shows this change through global meetings and talks where old leaders give way to new ones ready to take bold actions. These scenes highlight the book's theme: false beliefs must fall before real change can happen. This clears the path for new ideas that people used to ignore or push aside.

Along with changes in institutions and governments, the author looks at how false consciousness breaks down across society. The novel shows growing public awareness and action on climate issues driven by clear proof of environmental disaster. This change in thinking shows up in the growth of grassroots movements, eco-terrorism, and other direct actions, as people get more frustrated with slow responses from governments and companies. He doesn't avoid showing the darker sides of this shift noting that when false consciousness falls apart, it can lead to fear, anger, and even violence as people and groups deal with huge challenges. Mary discusses this with Badim that those who are extremely anxious about the climate change and the destruction it entails go through variety of emotions, “Fear, grief, anger, revenge, all that.”³⁹ But Robinson also presents these reactions as part of a bigger wake-up process where societies start to take charge of the crisis and

³⁷ Kim Stanley Robinson. *The Ministry for the Future*, 173.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 187.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 118.

demand bigger and faster actions. The book's look at the breakdown of false consciousness also digs into how it affects people. As people start to see how big the climate crisis is, many feel deep climate anxiety, a theme explored by the writer through different characters. This anxiety, while very upsetting, is shown as something that needs to happen to cause change pushing people to rethink their lifestyles, jobs, and values. Characters like Frank May, who at first reacts with anger and hopelessness, end up finding a new purpose in helping fight climate change, showing how people can change when they face false consciousness.⁴⁰ Robinson suggests that while the breakdown of false consciousness can be traumatic, it also creates new chances for people and groups to act, as they have to face realities they've long ignored.

One of the book's main ideas is that climate worry when handled right, can lead to good changes. The author thinks this worry can push societies to take bolder and newer steps to fight the climate crisis breaking free from the slow and careless efforts of the past. The Ministry's work its support for the Carbon Coin—a world money backed by stored carbon—shows how worry about the future can spark new money and social systems that work better with nature.⁴¹ The Carbon Coin is a fresh way to think about money rewards pushing people to catch and store carbon by linking money value to taking care of nature. This new idea comes from seeing that old money systems didn't count the real costs of hurting nature, which is tied to more people worrying about climate. The shared wake-up call shown in *The Ministry for the Future* also points out how climate worry can help countries work together better. As countries start to see how the climate crisis affects everyone, the book shows how they begin to work more knowing that no single country can fix the problem alone.⁴² This move towards working together worldwide is shown as a needed change when facing a shared big threat. The Ministry plays a big part in helping this teamwork acting as a go-between and speaking up for plans that put long-term survival first instead of short-term country interests. Robinson suggests that the fear and worry caused by the climate crisis can be used to build a more united and organized world response; one that can tackle the many sides of the challenge. But he also sees the hard parts and dangers that come with climate worry. The book shows a world where the emotional and mental strain of living in a climate-changed world can cause social unrest, more control by the government, and

⁴⁰ Ibid, 135.

⁴¹ Ibid, 350.

⁴² Ibid, 275.

even the rise of eco-fascism as some groups try to force harsh measures to protect nature at the cost of human rights.⁴³ There are also these darker aspects of collective awareness that suggest a careful management of this climate anxiety as it can also lead to destructive and divisive outcomes.

This novel presents climate anxiety as both a challenge and an opportunity. The collective awakening though initially painful can lead individuals and societies to break free from false consciousness by confronting their fears and anxieties.

Conclusion

Ultimately, *The Overstory* by Richard Powers and *The Ministry for the Future* by Kim Stanley Robinson portray an intricate connection between the climate crisis false consciousness, and climate anxiety. An in-depth analysis of these novels reveals how the dominant power structures perpetuate and stress a false consciousness that equates success and progress with economic gains. These ideologies are progressive and consumerist in nature, as they downplay and disregard the environmental destruction caused by humanity's relentless pursuit of economic gains. Initially, the characters in both novels live in their varied versions of false consciousness, but ultimately, they awaken to the realities of climate change. The moments of awakening for the characters are both sudden and gradual, but they manifest as guilt, frustration, and a deep sense of hopelessness. Some of the characters react with anger over these profound feelings of dread, while some are driven to collective action to address the problem and critique the systemic structures to demand responsibility, environmental protection, and sustainable living.

Moreover, in this article, we studied the intricate connection between false consciousness and climate anxiety particularly in European contexts. Building on Marxist theory of false consciousness we further explored the way capitalist ideologies obscure the realities of climate crisis by downplaying or straightforwardly denying the immediacy of the matter. These obstructions hinder the way of meaningful action for environmental preservation. However, as the reality of these ideologies unravels, we witnessed climate anxiety taking root in various characters and driving them to fear and urgency to demand change. By looking at this in the context of

⁴³ Ibid, 245.

Europe's social and political scene, we've shown how ideological manipulation and psychological distress hinder the ways to effectively address and respond to environmental degradation. In the end, to get more decisive climate action and big changes in how things work, we need to address these intertwined ideological and social dimensions of climate change. This aligns our argument with broader debates on global environmental challenges.