

EXPLORING FEMALE IDENTITY: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *PRODIGAL SUMMER*

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Abstract

Barbara Kingsolver is an American novelist, essayist and a short story writer. Kingsolver's works often focus on topics such as social justice, biodiversity and the interaction and conflict between humans and the ecosystems in which they live. She infuses her writings with a strong sense of family, relationships and community. The novel titled *Prodigal Summer* was published in the year 2000. It tells the story of a small town in Appalachia during a single, humid summer. It weaves three stories of love, loss and family that unfold against the backdrop of lush wilderness of Kentucky mountains. The protagonists in the novel often face predicaments, but find connections to one another and to the flora and fauna with which they necessarily share a place. The paper intends to explore an ecofeminist reading of the novel, *Prodigal Summer*. It makes an attempt to perceive the mutual connection between women and nature as the writer portrays. It also enquires into the presence of interconnection between human and non-human in the novel. Discussions on coyotes, moths and chestnuts invariably take place in the story. Kingsolver conveys the need for preserving all these species through the different stories in the novel. She attempts to establish the fact that every living and nonliving thing is interconnected.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Environmental Awareness, Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*

Introduction

Barbara Kingsolver is a contemporary American novelist and environmentalist. The novel *Prodigal Summer* unfolds the predicaments faced by the natural world and its effect on human and non-human beings and the female characters who take initiative to maintain ecological balance as well as human health. The novel throws light on environmental challenges like climate change, animal/species extinction and loss of biodiversity. It is the story of a small town in southern Appalachia during a single, humid summer. It weaves three stories of love, loss and family that unfold against the backdrop of lush wilderness of Kentucky

mountains. Though the protagonists in the novel initially seeming quite disparate, slowly reveal their connections to one another and also to the flora and fauna with which they live. The novel combines three stories titled "Predators", "Moth Love" and "Old Chestnuts" of which the protagonists are Deanna Wolf, a forest ranger, Lusa, a newly-married but widowed girl and Nannie Rawley, who stands for organic farming respectively.

Ecofeminism or ecological feminism is an umbrella term widely used since the late 1980s to name a growing political, cultural and intellectual movement. It is the combination of ecology and feminism which questions the

patriarchal oppression of women and the capitalistic exploitation of nature. Ecofeminism as the term itself indicates, proclaims the power of women in ecological revolution. It advocates harmony with nature and stands for the 'feminine principle' of loving and caring. This paper makes an attempt to study the female characters in the novel with an ecofeminist perspective.

Methodology and Analysis

The domination and supremacy that man employs over women, dates back to ancient times. For a long time, women felt utterly helpless, remained silent, and followed blindly the rules and customs put forward by the men folk which actually satisfied the patriarchal needs and interests. The same dominance can be observed in man's relation with nature. In short, both women and nature were crushed down under the weight of patriarchal oppression. Gradually the injustice that men imposed upon them began to be questioned by those who wished for an eco-friendly world where equal treatment was meted out to both human and nonhuman beings. The unequal treatment enjoyed by men over women based on a number of irrelevant factors such as gender, race, colour, caste and creed became a debatable argument and asked for a rethinking among those who demanded equality. They observed that the dominance of men was applied not only to women but to nature as well. From this realisation, emerged the New Age Feminists, called the eco-feminists. Maria Mies' in *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* states:

Women are not only victims of capitalist patriarchy, they are also, in varying degrees and qualitatively different forms, collaborators with this system. This is particularly true for middle-class women worldwide, and for the white women in

industrialised countries. If we want to regain autonomy over our bodies and over life in general, we must start by renouncing this complicity with patriarchy. (224)

Through 'ecofeminism,' its supporters try to highlight and eradicate the prevailing patriarchal domination upon women and nature. Ecofeminism rejects androcentrism and the so-called dualism (male/female, culture/nature etc.) which favours the first over the second. Instead of seeking equality with men, it aims for liberation of women as women.

According to Ariel Salleh, "Ecofeminism is about engendering a discourse where not only nature is a subject to be emancipated, but women and men- as nature- are too". (29)

In the novel, *Prodigal Summer*, the author Barbara Kingsolver presents three female characters who uphold the 'loving and caring' principle towards nature. The three female protagonists - Deanna Wolfe, Lusa Landowski and Nannie Rawley are rendered as the feminine symbols struggling to lead a life which will cause no harm to nature and the environment. The novel puts forth a unique picture of the need for animal preservation, organic farming and the inevitability of trees for a balanced ecosystem. Nature is always equated with women as both share a number of common characteristics. Though it is unnecessary to state that nature is something that must be given utmost care, the truth is that nature is exploited to the maximum. Women are also treated similarly. In such a crucial situation, the ecofeminist theory which emphasises the treatment of women and nature holds a prime position.

Deanna Wolfe, one of the three protagonists comes in the first story of the novel, 'Predators'. She is a forest range officer of the Zebulon National Forest, situated in the Appalachian region. She is a

wildlife biologist and attempts to preserve the endangered species especially coyotes and maintain the ecological balance of that forest. Despite being a woman, Deanna is appointed as the forest guard. Since then she hardly maintains any contact with the outside world. She is very content with her life and work in the wilderness. Each and every corner of the forest is familiar to her. Her keen observation, deep knowledge and sincere love towards them are evident from the fact that she could distinguish one animal from the other from their foot tracks. She also enjoys the sweet songs sung by different birds around her in the forest and she could identify them by their voice. As a result of Deanna's services as the forest ranger, one of the most heavily poached ranges of Southern Appalachia was becoming an intact ecosystem again. This again refers to Deanna's sincere love towards wildlife, which she will not sell at any cost. Her acute love towards nature keeps her away from bribery which has solely helped to maintain the ecosystem in that area.

The appearance of the hunter Eddie Bondo, who has come to hunt the coyotes in the forest, can be identified as the representation of a patriarchal figure. The difference in attitude between Deanna and Eddie is explicit as Eddie is the hunter of coyotes and Deanna, their protector. In spite of their disagreement in the case of hunting, Eddie successfully wins the heart of Deanna. In this context, Eddie Bondo is twice the representation of the usual patriarchal figure as he has come to hunt, but also entices Deanna. He exclaims thus: "Miracle of miracles, I do believe I am in bed with an animal lover" (178).

The patriarchal domain is again highlighted by Deanna's accidental pregnancy for which Eddie is responsible. Hence Eddie again represents that

patriarchal figure who rules over a woman's body as well as nature. Eddie is not at all bothered about the coyotes which are on the verge of extinction and he ultimately abandons Deanna leaving a letter for her. His intention is simply to invade the nature as well as the woman. "Nature is both the generative source, but also the potential spouse of science, to be wooed, won and if necessary, forced to submit to intercourse" (Coupe 141).

Eddie has come to hunt coyotes as they have killed his sheep. The ironical comments of Deanna make one aware how much she wants to preserve those wild animals. "A coyote is just something you can blame. He is nobody's pet; he doesn't belong to anybody but himself. So, great, put a bullet in him" (178). These lines clearly demonstrate man's indifference to the living things around him. Somehow or the other, man believes that nature exists solely for him, and that it is his right to make the maximum use of it. Eddie is also ruled by a similar notion which drives him to kill the wild coyotes. In *Literature & Environment*, Timothy Clark mentions that shooting all the wolves in order to increase the deer population for hunters will lead to overgrazing and collapse of the ecosystem. Clark goes on with the limited scope of human thoughts which will ultimately lead to the destruction of the entire ecosystem.

Kingsolver's second story, the 'Moth Love' is also largely based on the theme of eco-feminism. The entire focus of the story is on the confinement of women by men. Despite being a moth scientist, Lusa is compelled to stay in her husband Cole's house, helping him in his tobacco farming. The conversations between Lusa and Cole are indicative of the wide disparity between them regarding their attitudes and opinions on nature and environment. Lusa is always being isolated in that big family

and is prevented from reading and writing. Despite being a moth scientist, she is not offered any job in that area, and the duty assigned to her is cooking, washing and so on. Lusa's education also comes to a halt when Cole marries her. She had her research work on moths in the half way and she could not continue it since she got married. Lusa is from Lexington and Cole always makes fun of her background. Cole's presumption is that the people from that area are ignorant of farming. Cole's discrimination against Lusa operates on two levels: based on gender, and on geographical region. Cole and Lusa represent diametrically opposite viewpoints. Cole stands for the oppressor, and Lusa, the oppressed. Given the situation, the story can be read in the light of ecofeminist theories.

When Lusa curses cigarettes for their stink, Cole reminds her that the last year's tobacco crop had brought her new washer and dryer. Cole's patriarchal mind is disclosed here as he thinks that women are only meant for household chores. Their narrow mindedness makes them think that women are happy with whatever they are provided. Again, Cole's affinity for tobacco farming denotes man's greed for money in general.

In both the stories coyote becomes a topic of discussion and women always support them and men do not. This forces us to consider a number of factors—Women are more conscious about environment and the need to protect it, they have a softer face towards nature, they show empathy and they want to maintain the ecosystem as it is or as it ought to be.

"Old Chestnuts" is the third story Kingsolver deals with in her novel. This story introduces Garnett Walker, a widower nearly eighty years old, and Nannie Rawley, an old lady. Both of them are

neighbours but their views regarding farming oppose each other. Compared to the other two women in the novel, Nannie Rawley is more determined and courageous. She dares to live without a husband and earns her living from her own organic farming. While Nannie is against using herbicide, Garnett Walker heavily depends on them. For him, "it took only one good dose of Two-Four-D herbicide every month to shrivel these leafy weeds to a nice, withered stand of rusty-brown stalks, easily raked down afterward to show the world a tidy frontage" (87). His greed implores him to earn profit by means of illogical methods of farming.

Garnett considers Nannie as an ignorant woman for not using any chemicals in her farm. He gives extra care to his own seedling trees to keep them from being swallowed whole by the Japanese beetles camped out on Nannie's unsprayed pastures. In Garnett's opinion, "she was the sworn friend and protector of all creatures great and small, right down to the ticks, fleas, and corn maggots, evidently" (88). Man has the pre-destined thinking that they are right, and women are wrong when it comes to making decisions. Man always underestimates woman and consider them their subordinates. Garnett Walker also thinks the same, and he never misses any opportunity to ridicule Nannie and her organic farming.

Walker remembers how Nannie Rawley gave birth to a deformed child, and he suspects that the use of chemicals may have caused the deformity. This must be one of the reasons why Rawley is terrorised of chemicals.

The troubles had been evident at birth, the Mongol features and so forth, and Nannie had named it Rachel Carson Rawley, after that lady scientist who cried wolf about DDT. Everything in Nannie's

life since seemed to turn on the birth of that child, now that he looked back. (138)

The above lines by Kingsolver are very essential for an ecocritical and ecofeminist reading of the novel, *Prodigal Summer*. Rachel Carson and her very famous work are mentioned in meditate over the hazardous use of chemicals in the form of pesticides, insecticides, herbicides etc.

Nannie patented some trees under the name Rachel Carson. This act of Nannie proves how much she agrees with the ideology of Rachel Carson, and it also depicts her concern towards the environment. In the story, 'Old Chestnuts,' the chestnut tree represents Garnett Walker while the chemical-free apples represent Nannie Rawley. Chestnut tree struggles to establish its position with the help of high-power chemicals; the apple trees try their best to produce sweet and healthy apples keeping aside the pesticides.

Conclusion

Kingsolver successfully relates the connection between women and nature and how they struggle to establish their identity in a male dominated society. She is successful in conveying the necessity for an eco-centered world where unity and harmony permeates everywhere. Discussions on coyotes, moths and chestnuts invariably take place in *Prodigal Summer*. Kingsolver conveys the need for preserving all these species through the different stories in the novel. Through her female characters, she attempts to establish the fact that every living and non-living thing is interconnected. The three stories and the characters are skillfully weaved together. Though the characters do not articulate their emotions explicitly, the readers can relate to them easily. All the instances contributed by the various

characters cater to a fine ecofeminist reading of the novel. The novel *Prodigal Summer* ends on a positive note as it proposes a radical change in the thought process of humanity. It also serves to undermine and deconstruct the patriarchal worldview. Instead of becoming an 'environmental destroyer,' the novel advises the whole humanity, to don the role of an 'environmental sustainer'. (Murphy 184).

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