

The Colors of the World: An Ecocritical Analysis of Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

¹Aashi Baynes Cynth R B and ²Dr. J. Chitta

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar (Reg. No.19213164012035)

Department of English and Research Centre, Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil - 3.
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli-627 012.

²Assistant Professor,

Department of English and Research Centre, Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil - 3.
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli-627 012

¹Corresponding author: baynesashy@gmail.com

Abstract

The term Eco-criticism is obviously used for the observation and learning the relationship between the literature and the environment. Human beings interact with various aspects of the nature and so their lives are inextricably bound with non-human beings and other fellow human beings. The American writer Barbara Kingsolver the doyenne of ecofeminism synthesizes her feminist concerns with ecological belief in her fiction. In *Prodigal Summer* Kingsolver communicates a deep and abiding love and regards for the land. The interconnectedness of the flora, fauna and human world are presented in this fiction. The fiction centers around the story of three characters, who live near Egg Fork in the Sothern Appalachian mountain range. Women in the novel are portrayed as conservationist, who protect and preserve the environment and wildlife. Comparatively the contribution of women to nature is far better than the males. Men treat the land as a tool for agriculture and symbol of status, and they often consider that it is under their control and they can utilize it without giving much concern of the consequences. Whereas, the women characters in the fiction discuss on how to redeem their ecology with their tactful ideas and deeds. The women recognize the intersectional reality of human and non-human lives, whereas the males often fail to recognize that fact and perpetuate patriarchal, exploitive practice. The present paper aims at analysing how the female members of *Prodigal Summer* sympathize or empathize with the environment and show their greater state of ecological awareness.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Doyenne, Conservationist, Ecological

The critical writings of Eco-criticism indicate the analyse of the relationship between literature, the biological and physical environment. It explores an acute awareness of ecology and the damage being wrought to the environment by human activities. Creatures in nature and earth are connected to ecosystem “Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot; every choice is a world made new for the chosen” (*Prodigal* 1) therefore every choice that human beings create affects the lives of those surviving creatures. Environmental breakdown such as natural hazards, climate changes, global warming, floods and many other considerable environmental issues changes earth’s ecosystem. The historian, Donald Worster, explains, “we are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical system functions” (27). Mother Earth seeks our attention and concern to preserve and protect the natural surroundings.

American author Barbara Kingsolver, the doyenne of ecofeminism synthesizes her feminist concerns with ecological belief, environmental ethics, wildlife extinction, ecological preservation, natural sustainability, flora and fauna and environmental justice in her most acclaimed novel *Prodigal Summer* (2000). Barry Commoner’s first law “Everything is connected to everything else” (25) can be applied in this novel. The novel communicates a deep and abiding love for the land, the interconnectedness of nature, animals and human world.

Prodigal Summer covers the sweep of one summer in the lives of many people in a remote area of Southern Appalachian. Kingsolver describes a season experienced by the denizens of an Appalachian farming community. It describes the stories of three main characters who live near Egg Fork in the Southern Appalachian mountain range. The novel portrays three narratives, Deanna’s perspective in “Predators”, Lusa’s perspective in “Moth Love” and Garnett’s perspective in “Old Chestnuts”. Deanna, Lusa and Garnett spent much time in studying and thinking about the environment. In the beginning of the fiction Kingsolver explains exact narration of the various flora and fauna that surround the characters.

The women characters convey a great amount of respect and understanding for the mother earth around them. They protect the flora and fauna. They are very sensitive towards Mother Earth. The character in “Predators” Deanna Wolfe is divorced and exploited by her husband. He does not understand her views and always discourages her. She segregates herself from the contact of human beings and lives alone in Zebulon National Forest. She works as a

forest ranger and she is happy with her job. She works for her college thesis on protecting wildlife, and she is trying to find and protect a group of coyote that relocated up into the mountain from the edges of the town. Deanna is excited and explains the carnivores “They’re the top of the food chain” (*Prodigal* 12) and if the carnivores are “good, then their prey is good, and its food is good. If not, then something’s missing from the chain” (*Prodigal* 13). She meets Eddie Bondo, the young hunter in the forest and suspects he will threaten the population of coyotes. In forest she is more enjoyable around the plants and flowers and she love animals of the Zebulon Mountain. She easily tracks by the scents of animals. The melodious singing of the birds such as Carolina chickadees and vireo make her more charmed in forest. Deanna articulates her love for birds:

It was nothing but heady cacophony unless you paid attention to the individual entries: a rose –breasted grosbeak with his sweet, complicated little sonnet; a vireo with his repetitious bursts of eighth notes and triplets. And then came the wood thrush, with his tone poem of birdsong. The wood thrush defined these woods for Deanna, providing background music for her thoughts and naming her place in the forest. The dawn chorus would subside in another hour, but the wood would persist for a long time into the morning, then pick up again in early evening or even at midday if it was cloudy. Nannie has asked her once in a letter how she could live up here alone with all the quiet, and that was Deanna’s answer: when human conversation stopped, the world was anything but quiet. She lived with wood thrushes for company. (*Prodigal* 54)

From Deanna’s childhood she has a love for nature and also, she takes care of the coyotes. She is distressed about coyotes because the local farmers kill the coyotes to protect their livestock and the coyote are gradually vanished. Concerning the human role in nature, she exposes the problem of the farmer’s wrong attitude towards the coyote. The coyote plays a vital role in the ecological balance. The people in America believe that coyote are harmful to their crops therefore they kill the coyote. The elimination of such predator from a biotic community will result in an ecological disaster. Deanna points out that:

The main predator of the endangered shell fish was the muskrat, which had overpopulated to pestilence along the riverbanks over the last fifty years. What had kept muskrats in check, historically, was the mink (now mostly coats), the river otter (also

nearly gone), and, surely, the red wolf. There was no telling how the return of a large, hungry dog might work to restore stability, even after an absence of two hundred years. (*Prodigal 65*)

Deanna explains the natural principle of interdependence that maintains balance in the biosphere. She points out the problems of the species' extinction and of overpopulation. The overpopulated muskrats put the shellfish in danger, but hungry dogs eat the muskrats and restore stability. By this Kingsolver conveys that the ecological system goes in its own way but human beings interrupts in this system. All the species depend on the food chain principle. Coyotes also face the natural challenges as well as treat of the hunting. Therefore Kingsolver illustrates to the human beings that the existence of coyotes is very important in the ecological system.

According to Kingsolver each and every human beings, flora and fauna have equal rights to live in this Mother Earth. Deanna observes carefully the variation in forest transition. As she knows the significance of biological diversity in every place:

Plenty of people had watched and recorded the disaster of eliminating a predator from a system. They were watching it here in her own beloved mountains, where North America's richest biological home was losing its richness to one extinction after another, of plants and birds, fish, mammals, moths and stoneflies, ... There were hundreds of reasons for each death – pesticide runoff, silt from tilling, cattle in the creek – but for Deanna each one was also a piece in the puzzle she'd spent years working out. (*Prodigal 65*)

Deanna's environmental consciousness here shows her ethical relationship with the non-human animals. As human beings are parts of the society, plant and non-human animals also an integral part of our lives. In ethical point of view they also have the rights to live.

In the "Moth Love" narrative, the story of Lusa Maluf Landowski's life conveys the ethical sense towards natural surroundings. She grows up in the city of Lexington. She dreams of the countryside and is not happy with her confined lawn at the starting. Lusa's families both side grandparents are land owners but they have already lost their family land in Palestine and Poland in the Second World War. They express their interest towards the country life. This

makes her a desire to live on the farm in the countryside. She has left her job as an entomologist and marries a farmer named Cole from the Southern Appalachians. She reside in a farm several miles down from the mountain, but after her husband Cole's sudden death Lusa finds herself unexpectedly marooned in a strange new place where she initially cannot find any attachment to the land.

Lusa has unique sense of love for moth, insects and also, she is very much aware of the value of non-human being. Her love for natural environment and her environmental awareness to preserve and protect the environment reflects in these lines "I will not cut down those trees. I don't care if there's a hundred thousand dollars' worth of lumber on the back of this farm, I'm not selling it. It's what I love best about this place" (*Prodigal* 125). As a farmer, she has a great interest to grow and sell something that is truly useful and healthy to mankind. She is against of growing tobacco in the field which is harmful to human beings. When Herb and Ricky insist on growing the crop of tobacco, Lusa explains to them that though it gives profit, its effects are harmful to the human beings. She conveys that tobacco causes cancer. Therefore, she thinks that the government should ban the crop of tobacco. She insists: "why plant more tobacco when everybody's trying to quit smoking? Or should be trying to, if they're not already. The government's officially down on it, now that word's finally out that cancer's killing people. And everybody's blaming us" (*Prodigal* 108). Lusa recommends to the farmers to grow the sweet corn instead of tobacco. She also domesticates barley and sorghum. She prefers energetic food.

Kingsolver has manifest that Lusa has entered into the web of life, the idea that the natural world is complicatedly and delicately intertwined. Farming is the means by which she becomes twisted in both the natural and communal world of Zebulon County. Ricky, Cole's nephew joins her to work in the farm. He says, "You like the country then. You like farming. You were meant for it" (*Prodigal* 414). Lusa admits that even though she "was born into such a different life, with these scholarly parents and I did the best I could with it" (414). The place and the farm have taken hold on her long time interest in flora and fauna.

Kingsolver advocates that good farming always requires flexibility. It means the ability to adapt to local conditions and needs. Lusa absorbs about goat farming and she meets Garnett to get more knowledge about it. Her choice in raising the goats for religious feasts reflects on

her desire to provide people with something that are good for them, both physically and spiritually. She comes to know that the government has encouraged the farmers for cash crops and driving out the traditional crops. The government is ultimately a dominant class and marginalizes the ecological knowledge of women. It motivates the farmers to use herbicides on the cash crops. Herbicides kill the beneficial pollinators and grasses that are used by women to make basket and mats. The government experts consider the grass as worthless. The activities of women in this novel prove that women are very active in supporting their community and environment. They produce different types of crops and have good knowledge about farming. It also proves that women have a very good knowledge of energetic and nutritious food. They are clever in goat farming as well.

Garnett Walker and Nannie Land Rawley occupy the “Old Chestnuts” narrative. The environmental issues of using the pesticides and herbicide are portrayed through the character Garnett, an old man who attempts to revive the American chestnut trees. He utilizes pesticides and herbicides to keep his land tidy and protect his saplings. Because of Garnett’s utilization of chemicals, he often disputes with his neighbor, Nannie Rawley, who is a devotee of cultivating organic fruits and vegetables. She spots that Garnett sprays Sevin dust package on his farm at end of every week. It not only destroys Nannie’s organic apple farm but also songbirds. If any of the species removed from the Mother Earth it would affect the total ecological system. It is said that Dichloro Diphenyl Trichloroethane (DDT) has made the harmful effect on Nannie’s child. He understands the side effect:

He suspects a connection between long-ago birth of a deformed child and her terror of chemicals. The troubles had been evident at birth, the Mongol features and so forth, and Nannie had named it Rachek 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. The woman had probably been normal once. That child had launched her off the deep end. (138)

The chemical does not work to hit the particular target when sprayed; it kills the nearby flora and fauna. Nannie strictly warns Garnett: “. . . your poison has been coming down on me, and I don’t just mean my property, my apples, I mean me. I have to breathe it. If I get lung cancer, it will be on your conscience” (*Prodigal* 275). She gives awareness about how the bees are

going to be extinct. She resists Garnett's action to fumigate the hives on the wall of the church. Garnett wants to collect honey from the hives but he uses chemicals to kill the bees. Nannie remembers him the natural method of smoking from the hives. She tells people that bees are the main part of this environment. Bees also work to maintain the ecological balance. Therefore, it is the duty of every human being to protect bees and not to kill them. She also tries to save salamanders from extinction. She claims that: "there were ten or fifteen kinds of salamanders in Zebulon that were endangered species, and said she was doing her part to save the environment" (*Prodigal* 140). From Garnett 'Men's' point of view nature is just a tool for agriculture. But women treat nature as a living creature.

Through the above three narratives Kingsolver explains the different environmental issues and problems associated with lives of Appalachians. In eco-critical view, these protagonists' environmental love and their ethical relationship with natural surroundings are clearly traced. In *Prodigal Summer* the women characters are independent and they take active part in business life. The patriarchal culture has tried to suppress women but they have resisted it. Women rise to save their Mother Earth. Through this fiction Kingsolver inculcates her readers to open their eyes and hearts to the multiple worlds that surround them.

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