

Bridging the Divide Between Nature and Society: A Study of Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

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Abstract:

As things stand, ecocriticism is a concept that has historically fascinated and captivated phenomenal attention of some of the prominent, zealous monikers in the industry. In addition to the observation and study of the relationship between literature and the environment, ecocriticism highlights the interaction between humans and the various aspects of nature. Consequently, it can be said that the lives of humans are inextricably bound with those of non-humans as well as other fellow humans. This eminent concept is exceptionally explicated by American novelist laureate Barbara Kingsolver, alias the doyenne of ecofeminism. She is acclaimed and honored as a distinguished wordsmith who synthesizes her feminist concerns with ecological belief in her fictions. In one of her chronicled novels titled *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver communicates her profound, enduring love and deference for land and exhibits the interconnectedness of the flora, fauna, and human world. The essence of the fiction is the tale of three characters who reside near Egg Fork, a small town located in Zebulon Valley, in the Southern Appalachian mountain range. In the novel, women are portrayed as conservationist, protecting and preserving the environment and wildlife. Therein, the women discuss regarding the redemption of ecology with their judicious and prudent concepts and acts and recognize the intersectional reality of human and non-human lives. With that in mind, the present study aims at analyzing how the female members of *Prodigal Summer* sympathize or empathize with the environment and exhibits their relatively greater state of ecological awareness.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Ecology; Environment; Prodigal Summer; Barbara Kingsolver

Best described as an energetic branch of contemporary writing, ecocriticism has traditionally been recognized and explored by eminent questors and academicians as a prominent field of study, and consequently, considering its significance, it has been classified and associated with several related bifurcations. Ecocriticism has from a considerable period of time been seeking suitable ways to engage with various branches of philosophy, theory, educational applications, and the absolute minefield these issues engender for researchers. Singularly, ecocriticism is the new black, and the literature related to environmental content is making a comeback. In a nutshell, ecocriticism exposes critical writings that analyze the relationships between literature and the biological and physical environments and explores an acute awareness of ecology and the damage being wrought to the environment through human operations. Essentially, in contrary to all other forms of literary inquiry, ecocriticism, specifically, embodies nonhuman as well as human contexts, considerations, and state of affairs and therefore bases its challenge to the postmodern critical discourse as well as to the critical systems of the past. It is patently obvious that all creatures on the Earth are connected to the ecosystem, which is described in the novel as “Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot; every choice is a world made new for the chosen” (Kingsolver, 2000). Therefore, it can be affirmed that every choice that humans make affects the lives of those surviving creatures. In addition, emphasizing on the significance of nature, it is widely known that all living organisms on the Earth are made up of the five elements of nature, i.e., the Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Space; humans are known to be, physically and mentally, governed and controlled by these elements. Specially, these elements have different characteristics and also account for different faculties of human experience. Any disturbance in the harmony of natural ratio of the five elements may cause turmoil. Notably, environmental breakdown, such as natural hazards, climate change, global warming, floods, and other such draconian environmental issues, amends the Earth’s ecosystem. It can be assumed that nature sends us adequate messages regarding its degradation or detriment through calamities that can be attributed to illicit human activities. In addition, the presumptuous control and domination of nature leads to its destruction as well as the potential destruction of human life. Therefore, it can be said that nature calls for our attention and concern such that we protect and preserve it with due respect in order to protect and preserve our human species.

Owing to a mutual relationship between nature and humans, it can be said that nature affects humans, and in turn, humans also affect nature, sometimes even fatally, when they mistreat it. Consequently, it can therefore be affirmed that nature needs conservation in order to persist, and ultimately, safeguard humans and all life forms from extinction. The evidence regarding the health or the present state of nature is incontestable. The overexploitation and destruction of biodiversity and ecosystem by humans have reached historic levels that now threaten their wellbeing. Human activities are destroying nature at an unprecedented rate, threatening the survival of a million species as well as their own future. The degree of such destruction and its after-effects are quite evident from the unfavorable changes currently caused by it in the environment. Notably, the loss of species, ecosystems, and genetic diversity as well as a breach of the consortial links already pose a global and generational threat to human wellbeing. It is believed that even at this present state, nature can be conserved, restored, and used sustainably while simultaneously meeting other global societal goals through urgent and concerted efforts fostering transformative change. Therefore, the present, imperative necessity of the Earth is to undergo a transmutative change if life on the planet is to be preserved and for the humans and non-human beings to continually experience the provision of services and benefits of nature. From the studies conducted on nature and its components throughout generations, it is quite evident that literature demands nature for inspiration, and in turn, nature needs literature as a tool for its conservation. It is with the help of such reports and environmental literature that one can ultimately understand the current state of the planet and the immediate steps that need to be adopted in order to protect and preserve it.

The assertion that precisely describes the essence of American novelist laureate Barbara Kingsolver is enunciated by Professor Serenella Iovino, who, in *Ecocriticism, Ecology of Mind, and Narrative Ethics: A Theoretical Ground of Ecocriticism as Educational Practice*, exclaims, “When I think of ecocritical theories, a statement of Fichte . . . comes to my mind. He said: ‘The kind of philosophy one chooses depends upon the kind of person one is.’ These words easily apply to ecocriticism” (Iovino, 2010). Kingsolver, alias 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 one of her most acclaimed novels titled *Prodigal Summer*, published in 2000. In addition, as known, each and every thing or entity in nature is either directly or

indirectly connected with each other. Therefore, any sort of imbalance in any one of such entities might cause an unevenness in the entire system. Though humans, knowingly or unknowingly, disrupt this balance or are a sort of hindrance to maintaining this balance, nature has however attempted to take its course in maintaining it. Moreover, unlike other life forms, humans often exhibit a peculiar characteristic of always being worried about, anxious, jittered, stressed, or even trepidated about certain things or affairs around them. Analogously, it is evident from the novel that Kingsolver also possesses such a characteristic apropos of the issue of degradation or detriment of the environment. The novel highlights the difference in the treatment of nature by men and by women as well as the difference in their expectations from nature. Particularly, the novel elaborates about how women are relatively more inclined towards the development and preservation of the Earth and portrays an intense and perennial love for land as well as the interconnectedness of nature, humans, and non-human beings.

The novel *Prodigal Summer* covers an expanse of one summer in the lives of several people living in a remote location near Egg Fork, a small town located in Zebulon Valley at the base of Zebulon Mountain in Southern Appalachia. In the novel, Kingsolver describes a season experienced by the denizens of an Appalachian farming community and chronicles the tales of three prime characters, Deanna, Lusa, and Garnett. The novel portrays three narratives, Deanna's perspective in "Predators," Lusa's perspective in "Moth Love," and Garnett's perspective in "Old Chestnuts." All the three characters spent much time in studying and mulling over the environment. At the beginning of the fiction, Kingsolver meticulously explains about the various flora and fauna that surround the characters.

In the pioneering novel, in addition to safeguarding the flora and fauna, women characters exhibit a significant amount of reverence and understanding towards the world that surrounds them. They are portrayed as being frightfully sensitive towards Mother Earth. However, whenever women are viewed as being closer to nature, it also leads them to be easily subordinated, similar to the manner in which nature itself is devalued and subordinated. In addition, Sarah Milner-Barry argues,

The term 'Mother Nature,' then, although it arose from spiritually rich traditions, has come to represent the twinned exploitation of all that patriarchal society considers to be inferior to men. As such, both are expected to be perpetually available to them, and to

be accepting and accommodating of their desires. As long as the reason for gendered oppression is rooted in women's apparent closeness to nature, this kind of rhetoric provides another reason to view both women and the Earth as existing on an unequal plane with men. (Milner-Barry, 2015)

Deanna Wolfe, the character in "Predators," is a divorced woman who is exploited by her husband. The husband does not understand Deanna's perspectives and consistently dissuades her. Consequently, she lives on her own in Zebulon National Forest, isolating herself from interpersonal relationships to the extent that "She'd forgotten how to talk with people . . . how to sidestep a question and hide what was necessary" (Kingsolver, 2000). Employed as a forest ranger, Deanna is ecstatic with her job and also works on her college thesis with respect to the protection of wildlife. She makes sincere attempts in discovering and protecting a group of Coyote that had earlier relocated up into the mountain from the edges of the town. With a sense of exhilaration, Deanna describes the carnivores there as being at "the top of the food chain" (Kingsolver, 2000) and further adds, "If they're good, then their prey is good, and its food is good. If not, then something's missing from the chain" (Kingsolver, 2000). She meets a young hunter named Eddie Bondo at the forest and believes that his hunting dexterity is a threat to the population of Coyotes. It is at the forest that she feels relatively more comfortable, being surrounded by plants, flowers, and animals at the Zebulon Mountain. She has also developed the talent of being able to easily track animals by their scents. Especially, she is entranced by the melodious singing of birds, such as Carolina Chickadees and Vireos.

Taking cognizance of the world around her, Deanna exhibits a genuine love for nature since her childhood and takes good care of the Coyotes. She is agitated by the fact that the Coyotes are being killed by local farmers as a measure of protecting their livestock, and consequently, the population of the Coyotes is gradually declining, which, in turn, creates a sort of disturbance and asymmetry in ecological balance. Apropos of the role of humans in nature, Deanna exposes the issue of the farmers' erroneous attitude towards the Coyotes. In addition, the Americans hold a belief that the presence of Coyotes is detrimental to their crops, and therefore, as a measure of precaution, they kill the animal. It is an established fact that the elimination of such predators from a biotic community will result in immeasurable ecological disasters. Deanna highlights,

The main predator of the endangered shellfish 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. (Kingsolver, 2000)

In the above context, on one hand, the overpopulation of muskrats becomes a threat to the lives of shellfish, while on the other hand, hungry dogs eat the muskrats and restore stability. Herein, Deanna explains the natural principle of interdependence that maintains a kind of balance in the biosphere and highlights the antithetical issues of the extinction of species and overpopulation. Kingsolver conveys that the ecological system follows its own path and procedure and is not meant to be interfered with, especially by humans. As known, all species depend on the food chain principle. In the same vein, Coyotes also face natural challenges as well as the threat of being hunted and ousted. In the novel, Kingsolver brings to light the significance of the existence of Coyotes in the ecological system.

Kingsolver portrays that all and any human, flora and fauna, as well as other such life forms naturally possess equal rights to live on Earth. Indubitably, among all life forms, humans tend to exhibit an insatiable hunger for reaching a dominating stature. In this sense, although all life forms or organisms are generally classified as natural beings, yet it is only humans who have become notorious in focusing themselves towards making all attempts to repudiate and dominate nature. In the novel, Deanna scrupulously observes the diversity in forest transition. She claims,

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. (Kingsolver, 2000)

Here, Deanna's environmental consciousness exposes her ethical relationship with animals. As humans are a significant part of the society, plants and animals are also integral parts of our lives. From an ethical standpoint, plants and animals also have the right to live tranquilly on the Earth as equal life forms in a healthy environment and have access to the basic services provided by nature.

In the narrative titled "Moth Love," the tale of Lusa Maluf Landowski's life conveys an ethical sense towards the natural surroundings. Although being raised in the city of Lexington, she dreams of the countryside and is unhappy with her confined lawn at the outset. Lusa's grandparents on both sides of the family are land owners, but they have lost their lands in Palestine and Poland during the Second World War. Consequently, it is at such moment that they express their interest towards the country life. Particularly, this induces in her a desire to live on a farm in the countryside. She therefore quits her job as an entomologist and marries a farmer named Cole from the Southern Appalachian mountain range. She resides on a farm several miles down the mountain, but unfortunately, after her husband's sad and untimely demise, she finds herself unexpectedly marooned in a strange new place wherein she initially failed to discover any sort of attachment with the land.

Lusa exhibits a unique sense of love towards moth and insects and is strongly aware of the value of non-human beings. Her love for the natural environment and her environmental awareness to preserve and protect are exposed through the following 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" (Kingsolver, 2000). As a farmer, she takes interest in growing and selling products that are truly utilitarian and salubrious for mankind. As a result, she resists growing tobacco in the field as it has deleterious effects on humans. When Herb and Ricky insist on growing tobacco, she expounds that although it awards profit, its effects are detrimental to humans and forewarns that the consumption of tobacco and its products causes cancer. Therefore, she believes that it is in the best interest of humans that the government bans the growth and sale of tobacco. She claims, "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" (Kingsolver, 2000). Lusa rather recommends the

farmers to grow and promote the growth of sweet corn instead of tobacco. Notably, she gleanes barley and sorghum as she prefers energetic food.

In the novel, Kingsolver demonstrates Lusa's ingress into the web of life, the concept that the natural world is intertwined in a sophisticated and fragile manner. In particular, farming is the means through which she becomes intertwined in both the natural and communal worlds of Zebulon County. Strikingly, Ricky, Cole's nephew, also joins her to work in the farm and states, "You like the country, then. You like farming. You were meant for it" (Kingsolver, 2000). Lusa admits that even though she "was born into such a different life, with these scholarly parents, [she] did the best [she] could with it" (Kingsolver, 2000). Surprisingly, the place and the farm have captivated her longstanding interest in flora and fauna.

Kingsolver advocates that good farming always requires flexibility, meaning the ability to adapt to local conditions and needs. Notably, Lusa learns about goat farming and thereby meets Garnett to acquire additional knowledge regarding it. Her preference of raising goats for religious feasts reflects her desire of providing people with healthy stuff. She catches wind of the government's drive of encouraging farmers for cultivating cash crops and driving out traditional crops. The fact that the government is ultimately regarded a dominant class empowers it to marginalize the ecological knowledge of women. In addition, the government encourages the farmers to utilize herbicides on cash crops, irrespective of being aware of the fact that such herbicides destroy the beneficial pollinators and grasses that are used by women to create baskets and mats. Unfortunately, government experts consider the grass as nugatory. In this novel, the activities of women beyond a shadow of doubt prove that women are extraordinarily active in supporting their community and environment. They produce disparate types of crops and exhibit the possession of thorough knowledge about farming. In addition, women possess outstanding knowledge of energetic and nutritious food and are ingenious apropos of goat farming.

The prime characters in the "Old Chestnuts" narrative include Garnett Walker and Nannie Land Rawley. Garnett, an old man who attempts to revive American chestnut trees, brings to light the environmental issues arising due to the utilization of pesticides and herbicides. Nevertheless, Garnett uses pesticides and herbicides to keep his land tidy and protect his saplings. As Garnett utilizes chemicals, he often engages in disputes with his

neighbor, Nannie Rawley, who is a devotee of cultivating organic fruits and vegetables. She, time and again, notices that Garnett sprays Sevin Dust package on his farm at the end of every week. The chemicals not only destroy Nannie's organic apple farm but also affect the health of songbirds. In addition, the health of Nannie's child is said to be adversely affected because of the use of Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), which is a crystalline chemical compound, an organochlorine, that was basically developed as an insecticide. The novel states,

He [Garnett] suspected a connection between that 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 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. The woman had probably been normal once. That child had launched her off the deep end. (Kingsolver, 2000)

Unsurprisingly, when sprayed, the chemical not only hits the particular target but also destroys the nearby flora and fauna. Nannie stringently 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" (Kingsolver, 2000). Describing about the notion of the extinction of bees, she resists Garnett's action to fumigate the hives on the wall of the church. Garnett desires to collect honey from the hives, but he utilizes chemicals to kill the bees. Nannie reminds him that in the past, the natural method followed for driving off bees from their hives was by blowing smoke into the hives. She informs people regarding the significance of the bees in this environment and their role in maintaining ecological balance. Therefore, every human is obligated to protect all species of bees from extinction. Moreover, in addition to making attempts to save salamanders from extinction, Nannie claims, "there were ten or fifteen kinds of salamanders in Zebulon that were endangered species, and [I] was doing [my] part to save the environment" (Kingsolver, 2000). It is evident from the literature to date that men and women utilize natural resources differently. Therefore, when considering the nature of Garnett, it can be elucidated that from men's point of view, nature is just a tool for agriculture. On the other hand, women treat nature as a living life form. The relationship between nature and women is such that the hatred of women and the hatred of nature are both tenderly connected and reciprocally reinforcing. In addition, for generations, women are

prominently associated with nature, metaphorically, as in “Mother Earth.” Nevertheless, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno exclaim,

[Woman] became the embodiment of biological function, an image of nature, the subjugation of which constituted that civilization’s title to fame. For millennia men dreamed of acquiring absolute mastery over nature, of converting the cosmos into one immense hunting ground. It was to this that the idea of man was geared in a male-dominated society. This was the significance of reason, his proudest boast. (Adorno *et* Horkheimer, 1997)

History has recorded all kinds of man-made theories about the Earth. Much of the literature has presented nature as pulchritudinous and supportive of human life. The term "nature" is derived from the Latin word "natura", which means “birth or character.” In addition, the Ancient Greece are known to have personified the Earth as a goddess. Moreover, several others in the literature have personified the Earth as a deity, most frequently as a mother goddess. At the outset, when humans entirely depended on nature for their daily needs, the Earth acted as a mother to them. The Earth displays significant qualities of nurturing and providing humans with basic survival necessities, including a nitrogen, oxygen, and carbon-dioxide rich atmosphere, one's daily bread, shelter, and so on, that create favourable conditions for the survival of life on the planet. The literature states that the Earth holds us like a mother, nurtures us like a mother does, provides us with survival necessities, and answers our every need in a seemingly omnipotent way, which is similar to the vision an infant has of its all-powerful mother until it has grown enough to fend for itself. Significantly, this inimitable combination of factors is remarkable all on its own. Similarly, it is also said that a person springs forth from the womb of Mother Earth. Mother Nature or Mother Earth is therefore regarded a personification of nature that focuses on its life-giving and nurturing features by embodying it in the form of a mother. Owing to its abilities of nurturing, providing survival necessities, and protecting, among other things, the Earth (from which life springs forth) is regarded feminine. Particularly, women are depicted as relatively more closely associated with nature because of their abilities of bringing of life or giving birth, kindness, nurturing, and at the same time, also being chaotic, uncontrollable, or even unpredictable, all of which are the exact same characters that the Earth exhibits. Also, the voice of women is compared with the symphony of nature. It is thus said that women have been equated with nature from a time out of mind.

Women are generally regarded as playing an essential role in the management of natural resources while also exhibiting a profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the natural world that surrounds them. The effects of the degradation of the natural environment on lives of women are polymorphous. Particularly, the role of women needs to be highlighted with regard to acting as the agents of change in mitigation and adaptation to the ever-changing environment. Remarkably, the novel *Prodigal Summer* also establishes an intense connection or relationship between women and nature.

Through the above three narratives, Kingsolver explains the distinct environmental issues associated with the lives of Appalachians. From an ecocritical view, these protagonists' love for the environment and their ethical relationship with the natural surroundings are clearly traced. In *Prodigal Summer*, the women characters are independent and take active part in business life. Although the patriarchal culture has tried to suppress women, they have resisted it and have risen to serve and protect Mother Earth. In harmony with humans, nature is also identified based on gender. In recent times, certain researchers have exposed the feminized genre of nature. In this respect, Denis Diderot quotes, "Nature is like a woman who enjoys disguising herself, and whose different disguises, revealing now one part of her and now another, permit those who study her and assiduously to hope that one day they may know the whole of her person." To make the world a better place to survive, all life forms, especially humans, are obliged to preserve and respect nature. It would be considered a preposterous state for humans to live in a world, or in fact imagine a world, without nature. If humans desire that nature hear their cry, then at the outset, humans for their part need to first scrupulously listen to the voice of nature, its lament and its hope, and honor it, and in turn, determine what is truly needed for nature as well as people with regard to building a harmonious relationship through mutual understanding. Consequently, through the fiction, Kingsolver inculcates in her readers an understanding of opening their eyes and hearts to observe and admire the manifold creations around them and advises them to honor and pursue the laws of nature for a better living.

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