

The Feminine Voice in Ecocriticism: Women's Perspectives on Nature in *Prodigal Summer*

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Abstract

*The interconnection between women and nature is revealed in many forms of art such as painting, sculpture, literature, architecture, cinema, and music. Literature is one of the forms of art that brings the highest amount of details and clarifications about the bond women have with nature. In literature, there is a branch called ecocriticism in which the sub-branch ecofeminism deals mainly with the relationship between women and nature. Women are closely connected to nature. Ecofeminism considers the same values as feminism does such as gender equality, non-patriarchal structure, holistic approach and organic cultivation. It also affirms the commitment and awareness women have for preserving the flora and fauna of nature. It specifically emphasizes how patriarchal society treats both nature and women. Women's passion for the conservation of nature through organic farming, caring for the Luna moths and safeguarding the predator Coyotes from the hands of hunters and self-centred people are highlighted in the novel *Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingsolver. The intersection of three stories in one single book denotes that human life cannot be independent and that life on earth should be interconnected with each species. This paper aims to highlight the coyote lover Deanna Wolfe, the entomologist Lusa Maluf Landowski and the intrinsic and evolutionary organic cultivator Nannie Rawley through the lens of ecofeminism and it focuses on the ecosystem of Zebulun forest through coyotes, moths, and chestnut trees which are also important for the revival of the environment. The main objective of this paper is to instruct the world from the perspective of women not to use pesticides or herbicides to kill insects which are also part of the environmental network and to inculcate humanity to march towards an ecologically conscious person.*

Keywords: Interconnection, Ecofeminism, Organic Farming, Environment, Pesticides, Ecological Consciousness, Ecosystem,

Introduction

Women's relationship with nature is known as ecofeminism and it highlights how women associate their lives with the natural world. "Ecofeminist theory", as introduced in *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals & the Earth* Adams and Gruen, "...helps us imagine relationships; stresses the need to attend to context over universal judgements; and argues for the importance of care as well as justice, emotion as well as rationality, in working to undo the logic of domination and its material and practical implications." (Adams and Gruen). Gaard similarly asserts that "Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry, it needs to use a lingua franca if it is to communicate with all those interested in the struggles on behalf of women, animals, and earth. Ecofeminism requires us to make connections" (Gaard). This interrelationship

between women and nature is particularly evident in an Indian context, where the earth is revered as “Mother Earth” and rivers are given feminine names, such as the Ganges and Yamuna. Similar perspectives exist globally, reinforcing the notion that women intimately understand the hardships, suppression, and suffering that nature endures. As Warren argues, ecofeminists recognize significant parallels between the treatment of marginalized human groups and the exploitation of nonhuman nature (Warren 3). Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* serves as a literary model of ecofeminism, demonstrating how women’s perspectives on nature nurture ecological consciousness. Through the narratives of Deanna Wolfe, Lusa Maluf Landowski, and Nannie Rawley, Kingsolver portrays women as caretakers of the nature, challenging destructive practices and encouraging for ecological balance. The novel’s rejection of pesticides, and its emphasis on coexistence with nature align with key ecofeminist principles. By centering the perspectives of female protagonists, *Prodigal Summer* not only analyses the anthropocentric and patriarchal exploitation of nature but also offers a vision of ecological harmony through women’s engagement with the land.

Barbara Kingsolver and Ecofeminism

Barbara Kingsolver, an American novelist, political activist, environmentalist, biologist, feminist, and agrarian is a living author who cultivates her own farm by being a role model to this generation. Her focus in the novels is mainly on the places she visited and the places where she lived. Being a biologist, Kingsolver has much concern for the environment. Her characters are the mouthpiece of Barbara Kingsolver herself. Her novels project the rural setup and bring out the environmental issues, human-nature relationships, and especially the women-nature association.

Barbara Kingsolver emphasizes women-nature relationships through the significance of the female characters and their connection with nature. All of her women characters share in one way or the other their relationship with the natural world. For example, Kingsolver’s Cli-fi novel *Flight Behaviour* projects the climate issues and having a setting in the rural area of Tennessee, the story highlights the migration

of monarch butterflies. The protagonist of the novel is Dellarobia, who struggles with poverty and works to prevent the monarch butterfly migration. The *Poisonwood Bible* is told by the four daughters of Nathan Price and his wife Orleanna Price and has its settings in Congo, Africa. The story is about the migrated Christian missionaries, whose life is hard when the Congolese fight for their freedom from Belgium and the US. The environmental background proposed by Kingsolver makes the readers to have a profound understanding of the Belgium Congo. Her *Animal Dreams* explores the theme of safeguarding the River Grace from the pollution caused by the Black Mountain Mining Company. Women fighting against the corporate company is the main point underlined in the novel. Kingsolver’s sequel novels, *The Bean Trees* and *The Pigs in Heaven* narrate the plot of Taylor and her adopted daughter Turtle with the perfect ecological rural settings and perspectives.

Prodigal Summer is Kingsolver’s fifth novel and it centres on the theme of saving the ecosystem by protecting nature. It sets in the farms and mountains of the Southern Appalachian area, known as the Zebulon forest. It interweaves the stories of three women who are closely connected to nature. The three major titles in the novel *Predators*, *Moth Love*, and *Old Chestnuts* denote how the author is extremely prominent enough to have concern and love for nature. Through the subtitles in the novel, the author also conveys the theme of love for nature, respect for the environment, and the wildness and soft side of nature. The former wildness represents the wild nature of the coyotes, who are known as predators and the latter softness represents the soft nature of the coyotes, who care about their pub is extremely applicable to the soft side of nature. “We need to recognize the rights of Mother Earth and therefore the intrinsic value of her species and living processes” (Mies and Shiva 21). Mies and Shiva’s above lines are accurate when compared to Kingsolver’s writings. Kingsolver does justice to her fiction by creating awareness in society through her *Prodigal Summer* in which she claims that any environmental change could be possible for women who interconnect themselves with nature. The major themes of the novel are love, loss, organic cultivation, interconnection with nature, and

ecological consciousness. Jones with in the article states “With her most recent novel *Prodigal Summer* (2000), Kingsolver returns to her home region and her academic roots to explore both the crucial ecological issues that most interest the South’s environmentalist writers and some of the transnational questions that currently preoccupy literary critics” (Jones). This novel, as per the above statement of Suzanne is a revelation of the conservationist’s idea of protecting nature from environmental disasters and women in the novel play a vital role in safeguarding the ecosystem.

The interconnection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature is reflected and emphasized in any form of literary art that is defined as ecofeminism. In *Prodigal Summer* women are very determined and courageous. The characters in the novel are predominantly female and they relate to each other. The female characters through whom the whole novel intertwined are Deanna Wolfe, Luza Landowski, and Nannie Rawley. These female characters strongly believe in connection with nature. Their oneness with nature makes them understand the reality of nature and it kindles their spirit to be an ecologically conscious person. All of these female characters recognize and value the inherent virtues of their surroundings. Few scholarly articles published are discussing the subject of women’s consciousness towards nature and nature-related issues. Fraser says, “These three women – Lusa, Deanna, and Nannie encounter and find ways of managing problematic processes shaping the rural spaces they help constitute. Among other issues, they confront: numerous forms of environmental change; the power of agribusiness relative to small-scale farmers; the over-use of agri- chemicals and concomitant worries about pollution and contamination; the challenges facing organic production;.....” (Fraser 144). Leder demonstrates in her article about the garden ethic in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*. Magee affirms in the article, that the novelist Kingsolver is a living ecofeminist model. He says, “The symbolic weight that these three women carry points toward the difficulty Kingsolver faces in her attempt to construct an ecofeminist model. With no significant exceptions, the men in the novel remain obstinately wedded to industrial agriculture and the modern

chemical industrial complex that infuses large-scale farming. The essentialist juxtaposition of caring earth mother with a toxic man quickly becomes a parody of itself.” (Magee 18)

This article attempts to bring out the elements of the interconnection that women have with nature in *Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingsolver and it also draws out that environmental changes can be attained through any women who are closely connected with nature.

***Prodigal Summer* and Women-Nature Interconnection**

Women find harmony in nature when all the species interconnected between themselves, whereas men fail to notice their harmony and they consider predators are meant to be hunted to safeguard their farmlands and other species. Women are more sensitive to the needs of nature than men in the novel. They understand the reason for the extinction of the rare species, they sense the footprint of the animals, and they even identify the animal’s existence by smelling the footprint of the animal. Women in *Prodigal Summer* are aware that a balanced ecosystem could be attained only through the protection of all species. “It means seeing ourselves as members of the Earth family, with a responsibility to care for other species and life on earth in all its diversity, from the tiniest microbe to the largest mammal” (Mies and Shiva 22). Women understand the diversity of nature, especially the ecosystem. Their ability to fight against their conventional tradition comes from their understanding of diversity in nature.

Deanna, a highly educated forest ranger is a loner living in the Zebulon forest to safeguard the predators from the killers. She is passionate about ecology and generally disgusted by how the human race tends to disturb and harm the environment. She says, “I believe we’re on National Forest land, inside of a game-protection area where there’s no hunting” (Kingsolver 7). To save the wildlife from hunters she stays alone in the small cabin made out of logs for two years in Walker Mountain which bears the name of Garnett Walker, who passionately preserves American Chestnut trees in the novel. Deanna spends her days defending the wildlife from hunters

(especially, her beloved coyotes), but when she starts dating a young hunter named Eddie Bondo, her life changes. Being a wildlife biologist, Deanna Wolfe carefully checks the population of coyotes which are considered an endangered species on the earth. She knows the value of the coyotes and their absence will threaten the wildlife and ecosystem. She isolates herself from the rest of the world for her deep love for plants and animals, especially coyotes. Two years of her oneness with the flora and fauna of the Zebulon forest brings her a keen eye for the smallest details of animals and plants. She understands the value of a balanced ecosystem which is possible only if all the animals and plants are interconnected. When Eddie Bondo ridiculously blames her by saying "...there's gals like you that like to watch meat eaters" (Kingsolver 12). For his declaration, "They're the top of the food chain, that's the reason, she said coldly. If they're good, then their prey is good, and its food is good. If not, then something is missing from the chain" (Kingsolver 13). She can distinguish between the different carnivores by looking at their tracks and smelling their urine. "She squatted, steadied herself by placing her fingertips in the moss at the foot of the stump, and pressed her face to the musky old wood. Inhaled. Cat, she said softly, to nobody" (Kingsolver 5). Her familiarity with wildlife has made it easy for her to recognise the sounds of various birds. All living things are related to one another in their natural environments, and this is the expression of the interconnected web of life. Her association with nature and her quest for saving the environment though she is paid less by the government for her job, she is a passionate nature lover who uncompromisingly works for the perfect ecosystem. She not only fights for the protection of coyotes but she unceasingly observes creatures in the waterbodies, birds, herbivores, carnivores, omnivores and plants. The extinction of every species is clearly detected by Deanna through the experiments and her connection with the natural world. "We can look at the destructive impact our species has had on the planet's biodiversity, ecosystems and climate systems and prevent it" (Mies and Shiva 21). Deanna thus does the same to safeguard biodiversity of Zebulon forest by being guardian of forest for two years to protect against the extinction of the Coyotes.

Barbara Kingsolver's second protagonist Lusa is a young lepidopterist, newlywed but unexpectedly widowed, and a city girl who finds herself in charge of her late husband's property which is located in the fictional Zebulon County in the Appalachian mountain. After the death of her husband, Lusa inherits the farming land of her husband Cole and Cole's family members are waiting for what Lusa is going to do with the farming land. She tries to cope with her grief and love for her husband and the land while inheriting Cole's Appalachian tobacco plantation after he dies in a truck accident. She is in contradiction of planting tobacco in the field and is convinced to plant sweet corn instead. Lusa places importance on crops that are beneficial to human health. She is more conscious about organic cultivation. Wenz in his article affirms this by supporting Lusa's organic farming, "She is familiar with both Jewish and Muslim traditions and knows that their feast holidays which feature eating pure (organically grown) goats will coincide in several months. So she attempts to save the farm by growing organically fed goats" (Wenz 118). Lusa, therefore, respects nature's systems while acknowledging the reality of human needs. Even though she makes a lot of money from her tobacco crops, she doesn't cultivate any because she is aware of how bad tobacco is for the human body. Lusa says, "I am being stupid, I guess. Farm economics, what do I know? But half the world's starving, Jewel, we're sitting on some of the richest dirt on this planet, and I am going to grow drugs instead of food? I feel like a hypocrite. I nagged Cole to quit smoking every day of our marriage" (Kingsolver 122). Lusa's oneness with the Zebulon mountain area is visible in the following lines, "She had come to think of Zebulon as another man in her life, larger and steadier than any other companion she had known" (Kingsolver 34). Lusa is more concerned about the honeysuckle plant and she doesn't let Cole cut it. She says, "The world will not end if you let the honeysuckle have the side of your barn" (Kingsolver 48). She never fails to raise her voice for the honeysuckle. She is also against cutting down trees for logging. She is an eco-friendly person who has a unique love for moths, insects, plants and especially coyotes. Thus, the chapters of "Moth Love" are organized by Lusa's attempts

to strike a compromise between her in-laws' expectations and a more environmentally friendly method of managing the land.

The relationship between unbearable elderly landowner Garnett Walker and his organic apple-growing neighbour Nannie Rawley is examined in the title "Old Chestnuts". The phrase "Old Chestnut" alludes to the persistence of the extinct American Chestnut tree and connects it to the lives of Nannie and Garnett, the two retired people still living arguing about matters related to the environment. In these chapters titled "Old Chestnut", Kingsolver concentrates on Garnett Walker and Nannie Rawley. Garnett is an old man who dreams of restoring the lineage of the extinct American Chestnut tree. Contrary to Garnett, who favours pesticides, Nannie Rawley places an emphasis on organic farming and enforces a spray-less zone around her property. In opposition to pesticides that boost pest populations by eradicating the insects that feed on them, Nannie Rawley raises her voice. The phrase "Old Chestnuts" in the title refers specifically to American chestnuts. The few remaining American Chestnut trees are represented by Nannie and Garnett, who work hard to preserve smallholdings on their own like these struggling trees. Nannie Rawley embodies the novel's core philosophy of interconnection, stating in her letter to Garnett, "Everything alive is connected to every other by fine, invisible threads" (Kingsolver 218). This idea reflects *Prodigal Summer*'s central ecofeminist message that just as species in nature rely on one another, human relationships must also embrace coexistence and mutual care. Through its female characters, the novel highlights how true environmental and social change comes from recognizing and nurturing these vital connections.

Men in *Prodigal Summer*

In *Prodigal Summer*, Barbara Kingsolver depicts male characters through different models, underlining a binary between masculine dominance and feminine ecological wisdom. Garnett Walker, the elderly chestnut farmer, clings to chemical farming and patriarchal ideals, often clashing with his independent, organic-farming neighbor, Nannie Rawley. He opposes when Nannie tells him, "insecticide spraying actually drives up the number

of bugs you're trying to kill" (Kingsolver 216), and he remains reluctant to accept ecological balance. Similarly, Eddie Bondo, the wandering coyote hunter and Deanna Wolfe's lover, views nature through a lens of control rather than coexistence. In contrast, Cole, Lusa Landowski Widener's late husband, offers a rare example of a man who supports a woman's ecological vision, but his early death prevents further exploration of how men can engage in eco-friendly action. Deanna's admiration for deep ecological knowledge is evident when she tells Eddie, "If you spent a hundred years in Zebulon County just watching every plant and animal that lived in the woods and the fields, you still wouldn't know as much as [my dad] did when he died" (Kingsolver 170), emphasizing a connection to nature that many male characters lack. By primarily presenting men as obstacles or passive observers of ecological change, Kingsolver risks reinforcing a gendered divide in environmental consciousness. A more balanced portrayal could include men who challenge their inherited beliefs and evolve toward a shared ecological vision, fostering a more inclusive and holistic perspective on sustainability.

Conclusion

Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* serves as a compelling ecofeminist narrative, illustrating the deep interconnection between women and nature while challenging patriarchal attitudes toward the environment. Through its richly interwoven stories, the novel highlights how female characters embody ecological wisdom and resilience, reinforcing Mies and Shiva's assertion that "We are part of nature, not her masters and owners" (21). The novel's Appalachian setting, where species are bound together in an elaborate food chain, mirrors the relationships among women, culminating in a collective recognition of interdependence. Nannie Rawley's words to Garnett Walker "It's glory to be part of a bigger something. The glory of an evolving world" emphasize Kingsolver's vision of harmony between human beings and the natural world. Ultimately, *Prodigal Summer* stands as a powerful model for ecofeminism, advocating for a world where women's voices lead the way in ecological awareness and sustainability. In the

context of contemporary environmental and feminist movements, Kingsolver's work remains profoundly relevant, reminding us that true ecological change can only be achieved through collaboration, inclusivity, and a renewed respect for the interconnected web of life.

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