

Eco-Criticism in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

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Abstract

Prodigal Summer is a story of a small town in Appalachia, during a single, humid summer specifically focusing on the lives of Deanna Wolfe, Lusa Landowski, and Garnett walker. These main characters are introverted and solitary individuals who have unique and strong views about their natural surroundings. Throughout the course of a spring and summer, their lives change drastically, and they realize that they, like other creatures, are not solitary. The characters are connected with all living things like a complex web.

Keywords: Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*, eco-criticism, natural surroundings, literature and environment.

Introduction

Barbara Kingsolver is a contemporary American author of best-selling novels, non-fiction, and poetry. Kingsolver is widely recognized for crafting strong, working class female protagonists concerned with such social and political issues as poverty, environmental issues and human rights. Kingsolver fiction presents a strong opinion on contemporary American and its problems. Her major works are *The Bean Tress*, *Homeland and other Stories*, *Animal Dreams*, *Pigs in Heaven*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Prodigal Summer*, *The Lacuna*. In 2000, she was awarded the National Humanities Medal by U.S President Clinton. In 1998 Best seller *The Poisonwood Bible* was chosen as an orphan's book club selection. *The Lacuna* won the 2010 orange prize for fiction. In 2011 she awarded the Dayton Literary Peace Prize Richard C. Holbrooke Distinguished Achievement Award.

Eco-Criticism

Eco-Criticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the environment situation. Eco-criticism was coined by William Ruckerts. Eco means earth, so eco criticism is to study the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It is not anthropocentric but deals with ecology. Environmental implication is dealt in eco centric of any literary text. And human interest is not only legitimate interest. Human being must show accountability to nature. And Book must show nature as a process green cultural studies, is another name for eco criticism.

Kingsolver has been acclaimed as an ecofriendly writer and her extensive education in biology is on display in her book *Prodigal Summer*, laden with ecological concept and biological facts. The novel covers the expanse of one summer in the lives of several people in a remote area of Southern Appalachian. She describes a season experienced by the inhabitants of an Appalachian farming community. *Prodigal Summer* weaves together three stories of human life.

Each chapter in the novel *Prodigal Summer* deals with the three main characters and the story lines are named “Predators”, “Moth Love”, “Old Chestnuts”. Deanna's chapters are called *Predators*, Lusa's *Moth Love*, and Garnett's are *Old Chestnuts*. In this novel the reader learns about animals, insects, forests, and the intertwining ecological system in which they coexist by staying in a cabin in the lush Appalachian Mountains or by living on a family farm in Kentucky. Kingsolver tries to show the importance of biodiversity through Deanna’s love of the coyote. Though sheep farms are at risk economically if there are coyotes in the area, the biodiversity of the Appalachia may be restored only through the addition of a top predator. This is hammered over and over through Deanna’s stream of consciousness. Yet the idea that species balance is essential to a healthy ecosystem is ultimately Kingsolver’s idea, because her characters Lusa, Deanna, and Garnett work hard to preserve species from the dangers. The work begins as three separate stories of humans in their Appalachian environments of Zebulon County, dealing with the ups and downs of life. In the end, all three stories come together, displaying how everything is, once again, interconnected. “Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot, a tug of impalpable thread on the web pulling mate to mate and predator to prey, a beginning or an end. Every choice is a world made new for the chosen” (PS, 257). Even though humans are a different species than coyotes and moths and trees, all deserve a place in the world since we depend on each other for different functions. In the end, Kingsolver states that humans are not independent from their environment.

Christopher Manes writes

Nature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies in general) in the sense that the status of a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative. ...The language we speak today, the idiom of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism, veils the processes of nature with its own cultural obsessions, directionalities, and motifs that have no analogies in the natural world. As Max Oelschlaeger puts it, "we are people who presumably must think of the world in terms of the learned categorical scheme of Modernism." It is as if we have compressed the entire buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of epistemology. (Manes 1996: 15.)

Concerning the human role in nature, Deanna exposes the problem of the farmer’s ‘wrong’ attitude toward the coyote. As a matter of fact, A coyote could eat nearly anything: mice, voles, grasshoppers, frogs. Human garbage, a house cat. The coyote plays a vital role in the ecological balance. Thus, eliminating such a predator from a biotic community will result in an ecological disaster.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019

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In *Prodigal Summer*, the novel is set in the mountain area and mountain filled with various creatures. The author is very specific and gives a great deal of scientific explanation for the flora and fauna of this forest. She is very knowledgeable on what the various creatures look like, as well as how they behave and grow in their natural setting.

This story explains the things that happen to the main character of the story throughout the course of a spring and summer, Deanna Wolfe, Lusa Landowski, and Garnett Walker's lives change drastically and they realize that they, like other creatures are not solitary. And the spring is one of the four temperate seasons following winter and preceding summer. Spring and "springtime" refer to the season, and also to ideas of rebirth, rejuvenation, renewal, resurrection, and regrowth. Kingsolver explores this eco-centric theme by showing the successful case of Lusa's struggle against patriarchal dominance and her contribution to the local economy. Lusa bears the image of being an eco-warrior who espouses environmental justice and rejects the planting of tobacco on her farm. The Wideners believed that the girl from Lexington should go back to "Where she belongs because the Wideners feel that "Lusa was occupying a place she didn't deserve" (PS, 38). Lusa's case shows that the true sense of place comes from the ability of serving and giving.

One of the most serious challenges to Lusa's marriage was her sense of belonging. Lusa finds herself belonging to the place, but not to the community. After Cole's fatal accident, Lusa feels her body drifting, "as if it belonged to someone else" (38). In her dream, the mountain in the form of a man speaks to her, asserting: "Lusa . . . I know the shape of your body. . . I've always known you that well" (42). In the natural world, she finds her niche and consolation.

Nature is not an abstract idea. There is a close relationship, but not a dualistic conflict between nature and humans. Humans live in the natural environment as parts of nature and share the same dynamic process. The female characters in *Prodigal Summer* demonstrate the lifestyle of nature-lovers.

Garnett laments the historic values of American chestnut trees, yet he damages the land by using herbicides to protect his plants. Even worse, the local government also spreads "Two-Four D" herbicide to "shrivel these leafy weeds" (85). When humans evaluate those 'weeds' on an instrumental scale, the 'weeds' seem 'useless' and should be killed. Nannie emphasizes on the importance of equality, right to exist, and ecological interconnectedness. To illustrate the theme of interconnectedness, Kingsolver has connected the novel's characters in a web of kinship. Deanna will go down from the ranger cabin to her father's girl-friend Nannie. Lusa learns goat ranching skills from Mr. Walker, who is her sister's father-in-law. Still, there are some invisible threads connecting all the species together in the biosphere. Some of the threads and their functions are still unknown to humans, yet all species contribute to the balance of the biosphere.

These various characters play out the conflicts regarding man versus nature in this small-backwoods country in Appalachia. It can be understood how the author feels about this conflict, but

she is gives various viewpoints, allowing the reader to decide what should be done in regard to the relationship between man and nature.

All creatures in nature are connected in a delicate ecosystem. Only humans have a concept in solitude, and they are wrong in believing they are alone. Every choice that creatures make, including humans, affects the lives of those surviving creatures.

Conclusion

The book ends in a perfect circle, bringing into focus again one of the paragraphs from the beginning. It is a beautiful ending, and even though none of the stories are fully closed, there is hope for better things to come. It leaves the readers wanting to know more about the lives of the people in the story.

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