

**WOMEN AS SAVIOURS OF NATURE: AN ECO-FEMINISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON
BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *PRODIGAL SUMMER***

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Abstract

Women were under the covertures of men for more than an eon. These covertures led men to act superior to women, and finally they started to dominate women in all aspects. This also led certain men to dominate the whole nature. This paper explicates how women avoid the covertures of men and protect nature from men's repression. Women and nature are pertinent in many aspects, so that correlation made women to extricate nature from calamities in many places. Kingsolver, through her tenacious female characters, avoided eco-catastrophe in *Prodigal Summer* (2001). There are several ecological crises in our society. Compared to all other crises, global warming is considered to be the most intimidated. The imbalanced ecosystem in the environment is the main reason behind all these calamities. This paper reveals how women balance the ecosystem and strive hard to avoid ecocide. *Every living creature in this universe possesses its own place to lead a peaceful life*, and no one should have supremacy over them. The environment ought to be bio-centric in nature rather than eco-centric or anthropogenic.

Keywords: Androcentric; anthropogenic; eco-catastrophe; ecocide; genocide.

Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* was published in 2001. Kingsolver's major works are concerned with the environment and biodiversity. A strong ecological accent is seen in all her works. In Kingsolver's novels, the women characters are very progressive and unique, and they are also interconnected with nature by saving nature in their surroundings. In *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver connects three women characters with natural elements. The three women characters are namely Deanna, Lusa and Nannie. These three women characters protect nature from men and help to balance the ecology. They are very different in traits, but their only aim is to save nature from its destruction. All three were affected by male chauvinism in every place, but they sustain hard in every situation to manage and to nurture nature. The present study explicates the theory of ecocriticism through ecofeminists lens.

In the patriarchal society, most of the men act superior to both the women and to the natural surroundings. Their primacy is spotted in many places. Nature as well as women remains taciturn in many circumstances. From ancient days, the dominance of men over nature and women voiced out in many places, but it still exists in some places in the modern era too. The world is filled with androcentric views, so this creates some ecological imbalances in society, such as deforestation, climate change, global warming, and industrialization. In some cases, men's activities lead the environment to ecocide. Women try their best to protect nature from its extinction. Women play an indispensable role in preserving the ecology. Thus, society should not be anthropocentric; it should be bio centric. "The inherent superiority of humans over other species was implicit in the Greek definition of man as a rational animal" (Taylor 135). Men show their male supremacy to each and every species, and so he is called a rational animal. Men has the power to destruct women and nature which has become a threat to the survival of millions of species.

In *Prodigal Summer*, the protagonists are in solitude, but they develop an interrelationship with nature. "But solitude is a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot "(Prodigal Summer 3). Deanna Wolfe is a forest service employee whose job is to look after the population of coyotes, which has become an endangered species. According to Deanna,

predators are more important than other creatures because they stand first in the ecosystem. "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 *their* food is good. If not, then something's missing from the chain"(Prodigal Summer17).

Deanna insists that the predators should stand at the top of the food chain. If predators start to diminish, then the total ecosystem will get collapse and it might get affected in the future. Deanna was leading a normal life in her small cabin by watching the existence of coyotes till she met Eddie Bondo. She becomes very close to Eddie in the course of time and they both develop their sexual intimacy. Finally, Deanna understands that she was completely under the control of Eddie and she also comes to know that Eddie was a hunter and he was hunting the coyotes, which she wants to save from extinction.

Lusa was an entomologist who moved to Cole's farm after her marriage. In the initial stage, she encountered some difficulties to acclimate herself to the farm life, later she gets adapted to it. All of a sudden Lusa's husband died in an accident which moved her to desperation. Later she found a way to survive on her husband's farm. Unlike other farmers in the area, she wants to inherit a new crop because she was not interested in growing tobacco, even though it gave her more profits. She wants to protect nature rather than earn money. Her sisters-in-law's husbands grudged this idea and tried to dominate her. She was strong in her chosen decision, so she tries to assimilate her idea.

Nannie Rawley was an old lady who wanted to grow apples in a natural way rather than using pesticides. But on the other hand, Garnett wants to preserve old chestnuts by using chemical pesticides. Both are involved in arguments regarding the use of pesticides. Later, she makes Garnett understand the bad effects of chemicals. In some places, the dominance of the male sex was seen through Garnett. Being a very old man, he follows the old patriarchal attitude in every place, especially towards Nannie. Nannie wants to protect nature in a natural way, so she always prefers organic farming. Through these three female characters, Kingsolver balances the ecology of their surroundings.

Kingsolver illuminates the novel through flora and fauna. She also connects them with the women characters in the novel. "Predators" is all about Deanna, a forest ranger who concerns more about coyotes. For a very long time she resided in the forest without any human contact. Her only companion is nature, so that she understands each and every activity of wildlife in that Zebulon Mountain. A woman develops an affinity with nature than that of men. "As one becomes more and more familiar with the organism and its behaviour, one becomes fully sensitive to the particular way it is living out its life cycle"(8). Here Deanna wants to protect coyotes because they are considered as the key predators of the society. "Especially significant if the coyote turned out to be what R. T. Paine called a keystone predator" (Prodigal Summer 63). If the predators start to extinct, then there will be an ecological imbalance. This imbalance intends to cause damage to the nature as well as to the environment. Through Deanna the author tries to maintain a strong ecological balance in the surroundings.

Lusa's story comes under "Moth Love." She was against tobacco planting and processed food. After the death of her husband, Lusa totally neglects the idea of tobacco planting. Even her in-law's husbands advised her about the profit of tobacco planting, but she refused their advice and stood firmly against tobacco planting. She even abhorred tobacco when Cole used to smoke it. Lusa was not interested in gaining money and adding profits to her life; she was concerned only about the environment and its surroundings.

"Old Chestnut" is all about Garnett and Rawley. Garnett was older than Rawley. Even though male chauvinism resembles in his thoughts and speech, he wants to protect his chestnuts from blight, so he used some chemicals, whereas Rawley grew an orchard without pesticides, so they get into an argument for the use of pesticides. Rawley wants to save nature from pesticides and make them grow in a chemical-free environment.

Kingsolver's women characters are strong enough to nurture nature. Three female characters protect nature in three different ways. Deanna tries to balance the ecosystem by protecting fauna (coyotes).

Our survival also requires that we maintain a certain ecological balance in our relations with other living things. It is a basic fact of the human condition that we are biologically dependent upon a sound, stable order in the Earth's natural ecosystems.

We share this aspect of reality with all nonhuman species (Taylor 48).

Paul W. Taylor says that human existence is completely dependent on ecological balance. Flora and fauna maintains a perfect ecosystem in the society. If men collapses the ecosystem by destroying its wealth then the whole livelihood will suffer a lot. In most cases, men, whether knowingly or unknowingly, become the destroyer of both women and nature.

Lusa decided to avoid tobacco and starts some other farming. Rawley rejected chemical pesticides in order to protect nature. Females are the vital saviours of nature. The three women characters are well educated; this is one of the main reasons for their strong progress in the novel. They strive hard to break the barriers created by men against them as well as against nature.

Male characters are very particular about their well being. Moreover the male characters in this novel are very self-centric. They don't even care for nature and its welfare. In order to enjoy their own pleasure, they use the environment and the women according to their wishes. In many cases, the male subjugates both nature and women in many ways. In *Prodigal Summer*, Eddie is very particular about hunting coyotes because he wants to save his own sheep from coyotes. He would lose all of his profits if coyotes hunt his sheep, so in order to make money; he decides to wipe out the entire coyote population in the Zebulon Mountains. This shows how a male is very much more concern in earning profits than that of saving nature from its destruction. "Ecofeminism was created in the face of the threat of environmental destruction as well as the threat of masculine violence against the natural world and against women" (Brisson 18). Brisson states that men's violence against nature and women paved the way for eco-feminism.

Lusa's sister-in-law's husbands are very specific about earning money through tobacco planting, even though it is harmful for both humans and nature. They didn't even care for others' welfare. Their only need is to earn and lead a happy life. Garnett, the oldest character in the novel, was also self-centric in nature. He wants to restore the old chestnuts and wants to earn pride in society. His idea of restoring the chestnuts from extermination was fine, but using pesticides for trees is not advisable. He also used many pesticides for the blight and also argued with Nanney about her "NO SPRAY ZONE" (*Prodigal Summer* 86).

In many places, women are linked to nature. Men are failing to protect nature; instead, they are wreaking havoc on it. If this continues, then the whole world will be destroyed one day. Thus, ecocide ultimately leads the whole society to genocide. Women try their best to safeguard nature from man's destruction. This article discusses how women save the environment from men by taking bold, proactive steps. Education helps women to act intrepidly.

Similarly, by damaging or destroying the ecological balance and integrity on which the well-being of an entire biotic community depends, harm is done to many of the species-populations that constitute the community. A great number of instances of violations of duty are thus involved (Taylor 285).

Kingsolver's female characters are distinct in some ways. Even in *Prodigal Summer*, Deanna remarks, "Well, then. I'm not most girls you know" (*Prodigal Summer* 6). Kingsolver wants to show that her female characters are not like other females. Deanna, after her divorce, lost the connection with man and resides in the forest and mingles with nature. She was very happy with nature. It also provides solace to her mind and body. Nature lends her lap to Deanna. Deanna also felt comfortable with the natural surroundings. The natural surroundings offer her peace of mind. Her peace of mind had not lasted for a long time. It was disturbed when Eddie appeared in her life. Eddie dominated Deanna, and later he left her, whereas she conceived Eddie's child. Deanna was very much interested

in protecting coyotes. So her pregnancy was compared with a coyote's life. Once a female coyote carries a young one, the other female coyotes take care of that coyote. Likewise, Nannie cares for Deanna very much after Eddie leaves her. Thus, a woman's peace and solace are disrupted when a man gets into her life.

Lusa is one of the strong female characters in *Prodigal Summer*. She takes a bold step in farming and, with the help of Garnett, she learns sheep farming. She wants to lend something useful to the people. She refused tobacco planting because it only spreads harm to those who use it. Lusa was not only concerned with the environment, she also cared for the people around her. Lusa grew some sheep to sell them for the religious feasts. Lusa was also ready to accept the ecological balance when coyotes approached her sheep to prey on them. To a certain extent, Deanna also experienced the same as Lusa. Deanna knows that the snake ruins her favourite bird's nest, but she believes that it's all part of the ecology. "This was her familiar, the same blacksnake that had lived on the roof all summer, the snake she had defended as a predator doing its job" (*Prodigal Summer* 317). They both accept the hard situation and remain acquiescent. This shows their commitment towards the natural environment.

Nannie is also concerned about natural resources. Nannie cares for even small insects. She informs Garnett that bees are killed by using fumigates, but instead they can avail of fire so that the bees move from that place safely. She refuses to use insecticides, even on bees. Nannie was very particular about saving natural resources. For Nannie, everything should be done in a natural way.

Down at the Full Gospel church, they've got themselves in a pickle from killing their bees. *Killing* them—they fumigated! Why didn't they call me *first*? I'd have smoked them and got the queen out so they'd all come out of the walls in time (*Prodigal Summer* 322).

Nannie's only aim is to save nature from chemical pesticides. The chemical pesticides inevitably harm plants, animals, and human beings. Strong pesticides can even harm the land and cause damage to further cultivation. Nannie told Garnett that some pesticides are known to cause cancer; if she got cancer, she would blame it on Garnett. Garnett suddenly thought of his wife, Ellen, who died of lung cancer. Ellen had never smoked; Garnett realises that his pesticides caused Ellen's cancer, and he feels terrible about his selfish behaviour.

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." Ellen had died of lung cancer, metastasized to the brain. People always remarked on the fact that she never had smoked...

It dawned on him with a deeper dread that it might possibly be true. He'd never read the fine print on the Sevin dust package, but he knew it got into your lungs like something evil (*Prodigal Summer* 260-261).

Androcentric views can be seen clearly in Garnett's thoughts and letters to Nannie. According to him, man is superior to everything. The whole creature is under man's control so that women and nature should act according to him. Bio-centric views can be seen in Nannie's thoughts and speech. According to her, every species has its own place in the universe and there is no one to control them. She stands as a fine example of eco-feminism. Kingsolver represents her thoughts and views through the character Nannie. "The principles behind ecofeminism are based around the fact that, in feminizing nature, and in natural-izing women, men are able more easily able to dominate both groups" (Brisson 16).

Being associated with nature, Kingsolver fills her novel with natural landscapes. She also describes how these natural things slowly get destroyed by men in society. Apart from globalisation and industrialisation, Kingsolver sheds light on endangered species and chemical pesticides through her portrayal of women characters.

It is quite true that if environmental pollution and degradation reach a certain point, or if damage to the Earth's biosphere goes beyond a certain limit, the physical conditions

for our continued existence will be irreversibly undermined and we will be doomed to extinction (Taylor 51).

The author suggests some alternate methods to protect nature in the *Prodigal Summer*. Her female characters' survival is different from other characters. They stand alone in society for their survival and to nurture nature. Male acts as a patriarchal figure and subjugates nature and women in many places.

In the words of Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel, ecofeminism suggests that "the domination of women by men reflects and reinforces the domination of the environment by society, and that the two are understood to be linked; patriarchal gender relations in society correspond to androcentric environmental ethics (Brisson 16).

Deanna Wolfe, Nannie Land Rawley, and Lusa Landwoski, even the names of each character, show how they are interconnected with nature. Kingsolver brings an eco-feministic view through their names. This article attempts to demonstrate how the male destroys nature and how the female protects it from them. "Theresa, an Anishinabek elder, there is a deep connection between women and the natural world that is rooted primarily in the ability to bring forth life" (Brisson 19). Women provide life to both nature and men.

To conclude this article, women are the saviours of nature. Women and nature should be protected by men instead; women are protecting nature from men's domination. "Nature and women are turned into passive objects; to be used and exploited for the uncontrolled and uncontrollable desires of alienated man" (Shiva 5). Men want to make society androcentric rather than bio-centric. If androcentric views continue in society, then the environment has to face ecocide. Women fight hard to maintain ecological balance by saving endangered species and avoiding chemicals. "Attempts to save endangered species, which have almost been exterminated by past human intrusions into nature, and attempts to restore ecological stability and balance to an ecosystem that has been damaged by past human activity" (Taylor 176). The prime duty of men is to safeguard both women and nature; if he can't safeguard them, then he should not exploit them for his own reasons. Their livelihood depends on nature and women, so he should act as a protective shield for them instead of proving his supremacy over them.

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