



ECO-FEMINISM IN BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *PRODIGAL SUMMER*

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ABSTRACT

Barbara Kingsolver is an American novelist, essayist and poet. She is also a freelance journalist and political activist. Her work often focuses on topics such as social justice, biodiversity and the interaction between humans and their communities and environments. Kingsolver was born in Annapolis, Maryland, in 1955 and grew up in Carlisle, Kentucky. Kingsolver's literary subjects are varied, but she often writes about places and situations with which she is familiar; many of her stories are based in places she has lived in, such as central Africa and Arizona. Feminism is a philosophy advocating equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities for women. Eco-feminism as a social, political and academic movement focuses on the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature as being interconnected. It asserts the fundamental interconnectedness of all life. The novel focuses on environmental challenges like climate change, animal/species extinction and loss of biodiversity, use of pesticides etc. and the female protagonists' 'struggle with patriarchal system in society. Eco-feminism basically studies the interconnection of feminist and ecological issues, such as misogyny and deforestation in third world countries. Ecological and Feminist issues do in fact overlap quite often; both are results of a male-dominant (or patriarchal) society.

Keywords: *Eco-feminism, Barbara Kingsolver, Prodigal Summer*

INTRODUCTION

American novelist and social activist Barbara Kingsolver positions herself variously as an environmentalist, liberal, communitarian, feminist and agrarian. Kingsolver's fictions tell stories of rural American women struggling against environmental, political and personal injustice. Her fifth novel, *Prodigal Summer* is a hymn to wildness that celebrates the prodigal spirit of human nature, and of nature itself.

Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*:

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Prodigal Summer weaves together three stories of human love within a larger tapestry of lives amid the mountains and farms of southern Appalachia. Over the course of one humid summer, this novel's intriguing protagonists face disparate predicaments but find connections to one another and to the flora and fauna with which they necessarily share a place. The novel tells three stories of love, loss and connections in rural Virginia. The constant hum of the forest permeates every page of Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *Prodigal Summer*. With insects incessantly buzzing, twigs snapping, animals scurrying, leaves whispering, birds squalling, moths mating, it's as if hundreds of different languages are being spoken all at once. The novel tells the story of a small town in Appalachia during a single, humid summer, when three interweaving stories of love, loss and family unfold against the backdrop of the lush wildness of Virginia mountains. The narrative follows Deanna, a solitary woman working as a park ranger, Lusa, a recently widowed entomologist at odds with her late farmer husband's tight-knit family, and Garnett, an old man who dreams of restoring the lineage of the extinct American Chestnut tree.

Eco-feminism In *Prodigal Summer*:

Eco-feminism is an important part of eco-literature with its focus on domination of women and nature. *Prodigal Summer* heavily emphasizes ecological themes and features separate but interconnected plots. Ecofeminists argue that the ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature is the same as that which authorizes oppression based on race, class and gender. In exploring gender difference in relation to nature, *Prodigal Summer* exposes the dichotomy of nature vs. civilization in which "nature is coded nonwhite and female while civilization denotes white and male," while recognizing the origins of this duality and exploring its historical usefulness in explaining human/nature relationships.

Kingsolver explores beauty and wildness of nature in *Prodigal Summer*. The stories of three progressive female characters – Deanna Wolfe, Nannie Rawley and Lusa Landowski – and Garnett Walker, its main male character, unfold through the pages of *Prodigal Summer*. The novel has three interchanging parts, each given a title to indicate which characters are in focus. 'Predators' focuses on Deanna Wolfe, a forest ranger on Zebulon Mountain. 'Old Chestnuts' is about Garnett Walker, a retired teacher and his neighbour Nannie Rawley, another retiree who runs an organic orchard on her piece of land. Finally, 'Moth Love' tells Lusa Landowski's struggle to change the direction of the farm business she inherits after Cole's death. In depicting the fictional Zebulon County, Kingsolver imagines a place in which human-environment relations are central, in part to achieve her aim of delivering ecological lessons about contemporary rural space. She gives the details of natural change with different seasonal cycles.



Kingsolver elucidates the novel's maxim of environmental interrelatedness. The novel details the interwoven structure of the narrative. "Old Chestnuts" explores the relationship between cantankerous old landowner Garnett Walker and his organic-apple-growing neighbour Nannie Rawley. The titular "Old Chestnuts" refer explicitly to the American Chestnut which suffered such a blight during the early 1900s that few were left standing and the valley's fortunes (and those of its inhabitants) were changed forever. Nannie and Garnett personify the few American Chestnut trees left standing and, like these trees which struggle to survive, they strive to maintain smallholdings on their own. "Predators" tells the story of government-employed forest warden Deanna Wolfe who has lived alone for two years in a small cabin made from the logs of blighted chestnut trees high up on Walker Mountain, itself named after Garnett's great grandfather. Deanna spends her days protecting the wildlife from hunters (in particular her beloved coyotes), but her life changes when she begins a relationship with a young hunter, Eddie Bondo. Young, newlywed and equally quickly widowed, biologist Lusa Landowski adopts her dead husband Cole's surname, Widener, as she adapts to her role as a landowner and farmer in the "Moth Love" chapters. Inheriting Cole's Appalachian tobacco farm when he dies in a lorry accident, she tries to come to terms with grief and love, for her husband and for the land. The "Moth Love" chapters, therefore, are structured according to Lusa's attempts to balance her in-laws' expectations with a more sustainable way of using the land. Deanna's chapters are dominated by her coming to terms with herself as part of the environment, subject to its cycles and seasons. Lusa and Nannie's chapters meanwhile place more emphasis on a familial sense of interrelatedness and agricultural compromise. The final untitled chapter emphasises the novel's central theme of interrelatedness as developed through the interweaving of the three other narrative strands, which reveal not only the links between human characters and attitudes towards the environment, but also the community's relationship with the environment. The omniscient narrator of this final "coyote" chapter appears, somewhat problematically, to be nature itself, developing the "eyes in the trees".

The lives of the characters wonder in orbit of wildlife, organic farming and climatic change in Appalachia Mountain. Kingsolver's isolated heroin Deanna lives in the Zebulon National Forest. Her deep love for animals and plants makes her more pleasant in forest among the wildlife without a single touch of humans. She has spent twenty five months among the flora and fauna that surrounded her on Zebulon Mountain. Deanna has a keen eye regarding the identification of animals and birds. She can easily identify the difference between the carnivores by their tracks and the scent of their urine. Wildlife becomes so habitual for her that she can easily identify the birds by their sounds. The interconnected web of life where all living being is connected with each other in their natural environment has been expressed in this beautiful line about the continuous cycles of life:

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Solitude is a human presumption. 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. (Prodigal Summer444)

Kingsolver focuses on Garnett Walker and Nannie Rawley through the chapters titled 'Old Chestnuts.' Nannie Rawley who emphasizes on organic farming enforces a "no-spray zone" around her organic farm, opposite of this Garnett who believes in pesticides. Nannie Rawley raises her voice against pesticides that increase pest populations by killing off the bugs that prey on them. Lusa, one of the prominent characters of novel resists growing tobacco in the field instead of that she suggests to grow sweet corn in the field Lusa gives important to such crops which are good for the health of human being. Though tobacco crops give her big profit, she avoid it grow as she knows the harmful effects of tobacco on human body.

Her female characters take initiative part to maintain ecological balance as well as human health. Lusa with the help of Garnett learns about goat farming. She emphasizes on raising the goats for religious feasts. It not only reflects her strong will to provide people something useful but also good for them. Female characters in *Prodigal Summer* think to maintain the balance in ecology. They are more connected with nature compare to male characters. Women in *Prodigal Summer* play a vital role in protecting the animals and crops. They first think about the well fair of community rather that their own selfish thought of increasing their bank balance. Their devotion to save crops, trees and animals somewhere make them outstanding in their lives.

CONCLUSIONS

Prodigal Summer celebrates the marriage of humans, nature, local environments and global influences. It is purely eco-feminist novel. The three storylines --- Deanna's search for the elusive coyote, Lusa's for a home, and Garnett's for his beloved chestnuts --- stream together side by side, sometimes skimming each other's boundaries. A chair in Deanna's chestnut cabin used to be in Lusa's home. Nanny once loved Deanna's father, and Garnett has a secret of his own that connects him to Lusa. Pheromones fly, coyotes howl, moths mate, humans bleed their emotions all over the tracts of land and forest during Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*.

The protagonists in her writing portray resilient, sensitive females successfully surviving typical day-to-day struggles. Kingsolver's lyricism transforms settings, scenes, characters, and actions into patterns of imagery, indirectly appealing to her readers' senses. The three main characters in this story spend much of their time studying and thinking about the nature



that surrounds them. The author begins the book by giving detailed descriptions of the various flora and fauna that surround the characters during the rebirth and renewal taking place in an Appalachian mountain spring season. She then continues with the same amount of detail and analysis of the natural world throughout the rest of the seasonal cycle.

The characters make different choices regarding the nature that surrounds them in Zebulon Valley or on Zebulon Mountain, but they all show a great amount of respect and understanding for the world around them. Their lives revolve around the crops, wildlife, and weather of this small space of Appalachia.

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